
17.9 DIFFERENT SPANS OF MEMORIES

Everyone can master a grief but he who has it.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Consider the plight of a mother with a new infant. Her baby will demand her time for many years. Sometimes she must wonder, "How does this baby justify such sacrifice?" Various answers come to mind: "Because I love it." "Because someday it will care for me." "Because it's here to carry on our line." But reasoning rarely brings answers to such questions. Usually, those questions simply fade away as parents continue to nurture their children as though they were parts of their own bodies. Sometimes, though, strains may overwhelm the mechanisms that protect each child from harm, and this results in tragedies.

These complex parent-to-child and child-to-parent bonds must be based on certain types of memory. Some memories are less changeable than others, and I suspect that attachment-bonds involve memory-records of a type that can be rapidly formed but then become peculiarly slow to change. On the child's side, perhaps these bonds are descended from the forms of learning called "imprinting," with which many kinds of infant animals quickly learn to recognize their parents. On the parents' side, the adult animals of many species will reject infants not involved in bonding shortly after birth; then foster-parenting becomes impossible. Why should bonding memories be so hard to change? In animals, there usually are evolutionary disadvantages to raising the offspring of unrelated individuals. Human infants must develop under the additional constraint of requiring constant adult models as a basis for their personalities. Similar goal-affecting bonds could explain the often irresistible force of "peer pressure" in later life. Perhaps all such attachment-bonds exploit the same machinery.

Many animals form other kinds of social bonds as well, like those in which an individual selects a mate and then remains attached to it for life. Many people do this, too, and a number of the ones who don't have been observed to select, instead, from among alternatives of seemingly similar appearance or character—as though those persons were attached, if not to individuals, to certain constant prototypes. Other people frequently find themselves enslaved by infatuations that some parts of their minds find unwelcome but cannot prevent or overcome; once formed, those memory-bonds will only slowly fade away. The time spans of our different sorts of memories evolved to suit, not our own needs, but those of our ancestors.

We all know the seemingly inexorable time span of mourning, in which it often takes so long to accept the loss of those we love. Perhaps this, too, reflects the slowness of attachment-change, though it is only one factor. This could also be partially responsible for the prolonged psychological disability that can follow the experience of a physical, emotional, or sexual assault upon a person. One might ask, since there are so many other devastating aspects of such an experience, why it should involve any connection with attachment memory. I suspect that any form of intimacy, however unwelcome, has effects upon machinery shared by both attachment and sexuality, and is liable to disturb or disrupt the machinery with which we make relationships in ordinary life. No matter how brief that violent episode, it may lead to long derangements in our usual relationships, in part because those agencies are slow to change. It doesn't help very much for the victim to try to view the situation neutrally, because the rest of the mind cannot control those agencies; only time can reconstruct their normal functioning. It is an injury more terrible than loss of sight or limb, to lose the normal use of the agencies with which one builds one's own identity.

17.10 INTELLECTUAL TRAUMA

One of Freud's conceptions was that the growth of many individuals is shaped by unsuspected fears that lurk in our unconscious minds. These powerful anxieties include the dread of punishment or injury or helplessness or, worst of all, the loss of the esteem of those to whom we are attached. Whether this is true or not, most psychologists who hold this view apply it only to the social realm, assuming that the world of intellect is too straightforward and impersonal to be involved with such feelings. But intellectual development can depend equally upon attachments to other persons and can be similarly involved with buried fears and dreads.

Later, when we discuss the nature of humor and jokes, we'll see that many of the consequences of both social and intellectual failures are rather similar. A major difference is that in the social world, only other persons can inform us about our violations of taboos—whereas within the realm of intellect, we can often detect our own deficiencies. A tower-building child needs no teacher to complain when a misplaced block spoils all the work. Nor does a thinking child's mind need anyone to tell it when some paradox engulfs and whirls it into a frightening cyclone. By itself, the failure to achieve a goal can cause anxiety. For example, surely every child must once have thought along this line:

Hmmm. Ten is nearly eleven. And eleven is nearly twelve. So ten is nearly twelve. And so on. If I keep on reasoning this way, then ten must be nearly a hundred!

To an adult, this is just a stupid joke. But earlier in life, such an incident could have produced a crisis of self-confidence and helplessness. To put it in more grown-up terms, the child might think, *I can't see anything wrong with my reasoning—and yet it led to bad results. I merely used the obvious fact that if A is near B, and B is near C, then A must be near C. I see no way that could be wrong—so there must be something wrong with my mind.* Whether or not we can recollect it, we must once have felt some distress at being made to sketch the nonexistent boundaries between the oceans and the seas. What was it like to first consider “Which came first, the chicken or the egg?” What came before the start of time; what lies beyond the edge of space? And what of sentences like “This statement is false,” which can throw the mind into a spin? I don't know anyone who recalls such incidents as frightening. But then, as Freud might say, this very fact could be a hint that the area is subject to censorship.

If people bear the scars of scary thoughts, why don't these lead, as our emotion-traumas are supposed to do, to phobias, compulsions, and the like? I suspect the answer is that they do—but disguised in forms we don't perceive as pathological. Every teacher knows and loathes how certain children turn away from learning things they believe they cannot learn: “I simply can't. I'm just no good at that.” Sometimes this might represent only a learned way to avoid the shame and stress that came from social censure of failures in the past. But it might equally represent a reaction to the nonsocial stress that came from having been unable to deal with certain ideas themselves. Today, we generally regard emotional incompetence as an illness to be remedied. However, we generally accept incompetence of intellect as a normal, if unfortunate, deficiency in “talents,” “aptitudes,” and “gifts.” Accordingly, we say things like “That child isn't very bright,” as though that person's poverty of thought were part of some predestined fate—and, therefore, isn't anyone's fault.

17.11 INTELLECTUAL IDEALS

If the mind were an ego-personality, it could do this and that as it would determine, but the mind often flies from what it knows is right and chases after evil reluctantly. Still, nothing seems to happen exactly as its ego desires. It is simply the mind clouded over by impure desires, and impervious to wisdom, which stubbornly persists in thinking of "me" and "mine."

—BUDDHA

How do we deal with thoughts that lead to frightening results? What should one think about the “nearly” paradox that threatens to imply that all things, large and small, might be the same size? One strategy would be to constrain that kind of reasoning, by learning never to chain together more than two or three such *nearness* links. Then, perhaps, one might proceed to generalize that strategy, in fear that it’s unsafe to chain together too many instances of *any* form of inference.

But what could the phrase “*too many*” mean? There is no universal answer. Just as in the case of *More*, we have to learn this separately in each important realm of thought: *what are the limitations of each type and style of reasoning?* Human thought is not based on any single and uniform kind of “logic,” but upon myriad processes, scripts, stereotypes, critics and censors, analogies and metaphors. Some are acquired through the operation of our genes, others are learned from our environments, and yet others we construct for ourselves. But even inside the mind, no one really learns alone, since every step employs many things we’ve learned before, from language, family, and friends—as well as from our former Selves. Without each stage to teach the next, no one could construct anything as complex as a mind.

There is another way our intellectual growth is not so different from our emotional development: we can make *intellectual* attachments, too, and want to *think* the way certain persons do. These intellectual ideals may stem from parents, teachers, and friends; from persons one has never met, such as writers; even from legendary heroes who did not exist. I suspect we depend as much on images of how we ought to think as we do on images of how we ought to feel. Some of our most persistent memories are about certain teachers, but not about what was taught. (At the moment I’m writing this, I feel as though my hero Warren McCulloch were watching disapprovingly; he would not have liked these neo-Freudian ideas.) No matter how emotionally neutral an enterprise may seem, there’s no such thing as being “purely rational.” One must always approach each situation with *some* personal style and disposition. Even scientists have to make stylistic choices:

*Is there enough evidence yet, or should I seek more?
Is it time to make a uniframe—or should I accumulate more examples?
Can I rely on older theories here, or should I trust my latest guess?
Should I try to be Reductionist or Novelist?*

At every step, the choices we make depend on what we have become. Our sciences, arts, and moral skills do not originate from detached ideals of truth, beauty, or virtue but stem partly from our endeavors to placate or please the images established in earlier years. Our adult dispositions thus evolve from impulses so infantile that we would surely censure them, if they were not by now transformed, disguised, or—as Freud said—“sublimated.”