

A DEVILS'S- ADVOCATE'S- EYE-VIEW OF MEMORY

Introduction :

The aim of this paper is to examine some neo-Wittgensteinian criticisms of traditional conceptions of memory to see how far these criticisms can be denied by a tenacious adherent of traditional views. In other words I shall attempt to separate those arguments which seek to reveal fallacies and inconsistencies in traditional conceptions of memory from those that accuse traditional views of being not so much untenable as uninteresting. Having done this I shall see how many arguments of the former class can be refuted without having to change one's point of view. The assumption is that the strongest criticisms of traditional conceptions of memory are those that impute sterility and lack of interest rather than those that impute inconsistencies. Accordingly this essay will be not so much a genuine defense of traditional views as an exercise, or mock defense.

Let me first introduce the *dramatis Personae*. By "traditional conceptions, or views of memory" I shall mean various versions of the so called *representative theory*. The defining property of this theory (which is more important than the differences between different versions of it) is that remembering something from the past consists of apprehending something that exists in the present, something that is a representation of that which is remembered. The representation may be called the *objective constituent* of the memory situation and that which is remembered may be called the *Epistemological object*. The different versions of the Representative Theory (hence for word RT) differ in their conception of the objective constituent of memory.

There are some important implications of recognizing a difference between the objective constituent and the epistemological object of memory. First of all it is implied that remembering is independent of the past. Consequently if it is shown that this is not so, then one reason for subscribing to the RT vanishes. Secondly, recognizing an objective constituent implies that remembering is an *occurrence*. In other words, remembering is believed to consist of *something happening*. Accordingly if this is demonstrated to be false, then RT loses a good chunk of its

foundation. Thirdly, given that there is an objective constituent of memory, something which occurs, then it is believed to have a discoverable neurophysiological basis. Strictly speaking this is not an *implication* of the defining property of RT. On the contrary it constitutes a certain typical view of the mind-body problem which *leads* one to look for an objective constituent in remembering (cf. Goldberg, 1968). Once again, if it is shown that this view of the mind-body problem is not viable then a large part of the foundation of RT is removed.

I have noted the most important features of the RT, and also some of the potential ways of refuting it. Actually our separation of these features is an artifact of analysis, based primarily on those aspects of the RT which are singled out for criticism. It would be more accurate to say that the whole bundle—an imputed neurophysiological basis, independence from the past, and positing of an occurrence that constitutes an objective constituent distinct from the epistemological object—defines the RT. RT, as defined by these features, appears to be the only possible answer to the questions: 1) How does one know that one *remembers* that *p* (as opposed to imagining, supposing, expecting, believing, etc.)? and 2) How does one know that *what* one remembers is *that p*?

Let us now recapitulate some of the more important arguments against the RT. These arguments can be grouped into three classes on the basis of what they try to prove. These three main theses are: 1) there is no *need* for the RT, the “problems” that it seeks to solve being merely pseudo-problems; 2) it is obvious *why* this need is, in fact, felt—a case of “bewitchment of the intellect by language”; and 3) assuming that there *is* a need to posit an objective constituent—i.e. a representation—there is no viable conception of the representation that can satisfy the need. These three groups of arguments are interdependent and can be presented in any order. Let us begin with the last one.

Discussions belonging to this group have been concerned with the Memory Trace which rivals the Abominable Snowman in terms of mystification, notoriety, and resistance to discovery. Critics of RT have attacked the notion of a memory trace on two scores: 1) “What must the content of a thought be like for it to be something with which a brain state could be correlated?” (Goldberg,

1968, p. 445); and 2) how could the content be *stored* in the brain?

Thoughts are what words are supposed to denote. Now it is pointed out that not all words denote, to begin with. Then there is the problem of individuating the content of a thought. Doesn't that presuppose absolute simples, absolute standards of "same" and "different", it is asked. But it is clear that there are no such objects and if there aren't any, can there be "pictures" that "show their own sense"? Hence it is not possible to discover any correspondence between a memory trace in the brain and the epistemological object of that memory. Besides what could a memory trace be like itself? Could it be composed of cells in the brain? But how then could it be retained in the face of constant wear and tear of brain cells? We cannot but conclude, it is argued, that there cannot be a neurophysiological basis for the objective constituent or representation of a memory situation, even if we have to recognize such a representation.

But do we *have* to recognize that there has to be an objective constituent or a representation? Is there really any need for the RT? These are the questions asked in the first group of arguments mentioned above. The main reason, it is contended, why we are led to posit a presently existing objective constituent in remembering is a horror of causal connections existing across temporal gaps. Our memories (or our reports of our memories, to be more precise) cannot possibly be based on something that is no longer there. In fact they need not have anything to do with the past, and must be based on something happening in the present. The most striking manifestation of this view is in Bertrand Russell's writings. But powerful arguments have been levelled against this skeptical view (cf. Malcolm, 1963, pp. 187-202) and this crucial assumption of RT has been challenged. It is pointed out that incorrect memory is conceivable only within a context of correct memory and therefore the notion of delusive memory—memory that is totally independent of the past—is an unintelligible one. Besides the notion that there is a *logical* possibility of all memory being totally independent of the past is against our conception of evidence, proof and possibility itself.

Is their, first of all, some one "thing" that occurs when we remember? For if there isn't, what is the justification or

need for RT? Memory is not an activity because it is not clockable unlike genuine activities like *jabbing* or *striking*. Nor is it an accomplishment like *clicking shut a cigarette case* because we can unlike in that case, remember something for a week before forgetting it. Besides if memory was an occurrence, then subsequent evidence can not prove it false whereas in fact remembering is often proved false. We can not deny, it is argued, that when we ask what memory is we seem to be asking about some one thing and the answer is supposed to tell us what *any* memory is; but there is no such one thing, something that can be defined by a rule or exemplified, that would cover all cases of remembering. All these arguments seek to prove that there is no need for the RT.

Why then do we feel like there is a need for RT? Isn't it likely that we have been bewitched by language? These are questions that the third group of arguments against the RT ask. They seek to destroy RT by showing that it is based on a mistake. First of all, it is pointed out as we have already seen, that the RT is based on a commitment to an indefensible view of the mind body problem. Secondly, the eminently reasonable looking question "What is memory?" which calls forth the RT as an answer is a case of "disguised nonsense." For, this question resembles question like "what is stealing?" or "what is pusillanimity?" or "what is a music box?" or "what is a praying mantis?" but is fundamentally different from those. It can not be answered either by citing a rule, or a simpler synonym, or by suggesting a likely location to look for it, or by showing an instance that would be representative and "... a question which has no sensible answer is itself a senseless question, which ought not to be asked to start with, and which need not seriously concern us." (Nelson, 1951 p. 244)

Our résumé of the most important arguments against the RT is now over. My next task is to don the Devil's Advocate's Hat and to see how many of these arguments can be met, and in what manner. A word of caution is in order. Except where the anti-RT arguments are *fallacious*, our counter arguments will involve questioning two of the most important tenets in the philosophy underlying the anti-RT arguments: the nature of meaning and of philosophical method. This is obviously biting off much more than can be chewed, especially so in a paper of such limited

scope. Consequently some arguments will only be hinted at and most will be rather sketchy. No exegesis of modern philosophers will be attempted.

Let us begin by examining one of Nelson's arguments to prove that memory cannot be an occurrence or a "click" (Nelson, 1951, pp. 222-223). He claims that in the case of veridical memory one would not call someone's remembering remembering, if it is later proved that the remembered event or situation had never taken place. Whereas if remembering invokes a "click" it can never be sub-sequently proved to be something other than remembering, since the "click" is a sufficient condition to call it remembering. This argument is patently absurd. It is based on a confusion between veridical and ostensive memory. If remembering is veridical then one knows (in the strong sense, cf. Malcolm, 1963, pp. 58-72) that the event or situation remembered *did* take place. It would be contradiction in terms to assert that a *veridical* memory was completely false.

The question "What is a memory trace a trace of?" is distinct from the question "If there is something of which there can be a memory trace, what would the trace look like?". The methods of answering each would consequently differ. The second question is more mundane and steps can be taken to answer it without having to answer the first one. It seems that given a "coding" for "storage", the holographic model offers an adequate conception of storage. It avoids the most commonly pointed out shortcomings of neurophysiological-basis theories and offers a basis for non-localized, insult resistant storage (cf. Pribram, 1969).

As for the first question, viz. "what is a memory trace a trace of?", several powerful objections have to be answered. First of all it has to be shown that there are grounds for positing an objective constituent at least in some cases of remembering. Secondly, that a "coding" which "shows its own sense" is a notion that can be retrieved from abrasive criticism levelled at it.

Positing an objective constituent would be invalid if it is proved that there are no cases of remembering where anything "happens". But this, it would seem, has not been proved. First of all the argument that there is no single 'thing' called memory (cf. Nelson 1951 pp. 227 ff.) can be met by asking why, in that case, can there not be a taxonomy of types of remembering e.g.

ostensive / veridical / personal / event / factual / habit / perceptual memories etc. That there are different characteristic types of remembering and that at least some of them are activities is obvious when Nelson claims e. g. on p. 220 and following, that memory is not an occurrence because it is not clockable and also that it is not a "click" because it *can* last for periods of time.

Now, it might be held, it has not been proved why some instances of remembering should not involve an activity. Nelson argues (on p. 249) that the assertion 'since we would not now be remembering something if we neither spoke, nor had images, nor make gestures, remembering has to be an occurrence', does not prove that remembering is an occurrence just as the fact that since writing down a mathematical answer is an occurrence, it does not follow that the mathematical answer is an occurrence. There is here a confusion between the substantive and the participial senses of 'a mathematical answer'. And it remains to be shown that there is some reason to believe that remembering is not an occurrence. It might be held without proof, but it has not been proved. And if remembering is not a single 'thing', what do these arguments apply to? I submit that observing our use in language of words like 'remember' does not *prove* anything about remembering, even if what it claims to prove can be held independently. But then you cannot show one who persists in believing, e. g. that recalling and reminiscing involve an occurrence that he is *wrong*, even if you may be able to convince him that it is fruitless or uninteresting to believe so.

One thing that is characteristic of anti-RT arguments is preoccupation with language use. This was obvious in the arguments seeking to prove that there is no single thing called memory and that remembering never involved an occurrence. But both the inference from language and the arguments can be challenged. We can argue, as we have already suggested, that a taxonomy of types of remembering can be set up, where each type is such as can be exemplified by a paradigm case. Arguments from use of language can also be a double-edged sword. But I shall not elaborate upon these questions of method. It suffices to say that conclusions from language use might be difficult both to arrive at, and justify.

The arguments that maintain that there can be nothing that

a memory trace can be a trace of, are based on the claim that there is no locus of meaning (cf. Goldberg, 1968), no "pictures" that "determine their own interpretation." It seems that this claim is restricted only to meaning termini for words (cf. Hallett, 1967). And it might be mentioned that this does not preclude the possibility of positing a level of un verbalized meanings which are not uniquely "mapped" on words.

The arguments sketched here are not likely to appeal to critics of RT. The aim of the arguments is only to claim that alternative points of view might also be viable. And, further, that the point of view represented by critics of RT suffers from what can be called The Way to Winchester Fallacy. Given below is a quotation from Nelson. It is followed by an anecdote of Bertrand Russell. The target and the allegations, it is hoped, are clear.

"If we no longer take the questions, "What is memory?" and "What does memory consist in?" seriously and attempt to answer them, a powerful source of confusion and perplexity in our thinking concerning memory is removed." (Nelson, 1951, p. 245)

"...What does it mean by this assertion? And in what sense, if any, is the assertion true? The philosophers with whom I am concerned will consider the first of these questions, but will say that the second is none of their business. I agree entirely that...a discussion as to what is meant is important and highly necessary as a preliminary to a consideration of the substantial question, but if nothing can be said on the substantial question, it seems a waste of time to discuss what it means. These philosophers remind me of the shopkeeper of whom I once asked the shortest way to Winchester. He called to a man in the back premises:

'Gentleman wants to know the shortest way to Winchester'.

'Winchester?' an unseen voice replied.

'Aye'.

'Way to Winchester?'

'Aye.'

'Shortest way?'

'Aye.'

'Dunno.' " (Russell, 1956, pp. 169-170)

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