

The Body as a Medium of Memory

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Summary, 300 words

When attributing human actions and abilities to either the body or the mind, memory seems to fall neatly within the range of the mind. It certainly is one of the mental functions par excellence. Still, the act of memorizing often seems to have more to do with the body than with the mind, a fact strongly emphasized by, and reflected upon, in East Asian methodologies of cultivation. Furthermore, one need not look to Proust's famous Madeleine to notice the fact that memories are more often than not evoked by sensual, corporeal experiences. And thirdly, the case of brain-dead patient shows how the body serves as a subject and object of memories in the absence of all intellectual activities.

An explanation of such phenomena is possible when viewing the mind-body problem in the light of E. Cassirer's theory of expression. The body ('Leib') experienced in a first or second person's perspective may then be defined as 'that which is an expression of my (your) actual presence'. As an expression, it is the external reality that signifies a (non-spatial) 'internal' state. Differentiations of body and mind originate from that point. Once expression has evolved into the abstract level of language, the body can be grasped in a more formal and neutral manner, as a spatio-temporal object. It can even be studied without any reference to subjectivity. However, any such theorizing presupposes the ongoing performance of expressive activity and understanding, which are mediated by the body while at the same time informing its actual state. If we analyse the correlation of body and mind accordingly, we may also understand that, and how, the body functions as a primary medium of memory.

150 words

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Introduction

Almost by definition, memory concerns something which is not physically present. Remember, if you please, Shakespeare's Hamlet: As we see Hamlet contemplating a skull, we hear him remember Yorick, whose skull it is he is looking at. A lifeless skull is what is there, but to Hamlet, it conjures up a vivid image of the living person:

"I knew him, Horatio; a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times. ... Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? ..."

Because memory presents what is physically absent, or has even ceased to exist, it is small wonder that it counts as one of the mental functions par excellence. It might even be one of the critical points from whence our distinction between the mental and the physical starts.

However, my following presentation will be mostly concerned with the body and its function as a medium of memory. In this, I do not mean to deny the intimate relationship of memory and mind. My point will rather be that our usual identification of the body with the physical, and its separation from mind, is not fully adequate. Analysing the body and its connection to memory may help us to clarify the meaning of this proposition, and to correct the naturalist misconception of the human body. But I have been jumping to conclusions. Let me first illustrate what I mean by talking about the body as a "medium of memory", and then present my analysis, before I come back to the more general picture (???). I shall give two examples from divergent fields of human experience, which may help to illuminate the scope of meaning involved in this formula, "the body as a medium of memory".

Examples

[Recognising & Commemorating persons]

My first example is taken from the field of modern biomedicine, and it will already be known to the ardent readers of KronoScope. It concerns the case

of a young man in Japan, who fell into a state of persistent coma after an attempt at suicide. His condition deteriorated, and he was diagnosed as clinically brain-dead after five days. By the definition employed for this diagnosis, this meant that all parts of his brain had permanently ceased to function. At that point in time (1994), brain death criteria had not yet been accepted into Japanese legislation. He was therefore treated as a terminally ill, but living patient.

The father of this young man, Yanagida Kunio, happened to be a renowned non-fiction writer on books about science. He published his observations and reflections in an article for the widely read monthly magazine *Bungei shunjû*, and later in a book. Two aspects of his report concern us here.¹

The first one is that even after the diagnosis of brain death, cardiovascular functions in Yanagida's son invariably stabilize whenever the father or brother are present. As the attending physician confirms, the patient's blood pressure and pulse rate regularly rise to a level closer to normal, whenever relatives come to visit him.² This fact, which remains without a medical explanation³, is interpreted by Yanagida and the attending nurses to mean that the patient "recognizes" his kin.⁴ Such an interpretation runs contrary to the theory of brain death, which is based on the assumption that all functions of memory and cognition are exclusively performed by the brain⁵. Still, if we do not deny what has been reported by Yanagida and others, we may consider the alternative interpretation that memory involves the body as a whole. A conservative assumption would not attribute intellectual capacities to a human body with a dysfunctional brain. But the body as a whole should be allowed its part in mediating memories, because it is

¹ Yanagida Kunio: *Sakurifaisu: waga musuko nôshi no 11nichi*. In: *Bungei shunjû* 72 (May 1994), pp. 126-151; Yanagida Kunio: *Sakurifaisu: waga musuko nôshi no 11nichi*. Tokyo: Bungei shunjû, 1999.

² Yanagida, *Sakurifaisu* ... (fn. 1), pp. 183-184.

³ Yanagida, *Sakurifaisu* ... (fn. 1), p. 201.

⁴ Yanagida, *Sakurifaisu* ... (fn. 1), pp. 184.

⁵ See Steineck, Christian: "Brain Death," Death, and Personal Identity. In: *KronoScope* vol.3 no. 2, 2003, pp. 226-249 for details.

structured in its shape and function by experience. The physiological reactions witnessed in the Yanagida case may thus be the result of the history of personal relationships he held with his brother and father, which is, in part, a history of physico-physiological states influenced by their communicative exchange. Even without being capable of conscious recognition, the brain-dead patient's reaction would mirror, and actualise to the remaining possible extent, his individual past and personal life history. The second aspect of Yanagida's report important to our topic is the fact that in the face of his comatose, and later, brain-dead son Yanagida is incited to delve into memories of the past. As the Japanese bioethicist Morioka Masahiro has pointed out, this is a common reaction of relatives and friends confronted with a brain-dead body.⁶ In Morioka's view, it is the combination of an apparently living body and the absence of those channels of communication to which we normally pay most attention, which provokes such powerful waves of reminiscence.⁷ While the breathing, pulsating body continues to present the patient as a living person, she lacks the ability to transmit distinctive thoughts and intentions. Precisely because of this absence of a limited, actual content, her personality presents itself in its totality. In this situation, the patient's body is not a white screen on which memories are projected. As long as it is perceived as an individual, living body, it continues to be part of an intercorporeal exchange, to which we cannot but attach communicative meaning, and thus, the flow of memories will be influenced and mediated by the living presence of the brain-dead body.⁸

To summarize what can be gained from this example of the brain-dead, we found the brain-dead human body to function as a medium of memory that is shaped in its reactions by personal life history. And we found that contact with the brain-dead body provokes memories in others, who have shared in a close relationship with the brain-dead person, and influences their course.

⁶ Morioka Masahiro (2001): *Seimeigaku ni nani ga dekiru ka*. Tokyo: Keisô shobô, p. 74-77.

⁷ Morioka (fn. 1), p. 76.

⁸ Morioka (fn. 1), p. 76.

The human body appears to be a medium to memorize other persons and the relations we had with them in both ways - for oneself and for others.

[Memorizing virtue]

The second example takes us again to Japan, but this time we add some temporal to the spatial distance. At the beginning of the 17th Century, after a period of prolonged internal wars and strife, the Tokugawa dynasty unified the country and established a feudal and bureaucratic system that was to last for 250 years. The Tokugawa Shogunate fostered a school of Neo-Confucianism that taught a theory of correspondence between the natural order of the universe, and that of society. In such a system, emphasis was placed on insight into the principles that governed the cosmic order, and scholars concentrated on studying the grand systems of philosophers like Zhu Xi or Hayashi Razan, on meditation and speculation to achieve virtue. However, the emphasis on words also led to a new emphasis on philology, which motivated some scholars to criticize Neo-Confucianists for their neglect and misrepresentation of the old, primary Confucian sources.⁹ These scholars called themselves the school of "old learning" (*kogaku*), but in fact, they established a new way of thinking. One of the most revolutionary thinkers in this school was Ogyû Sorai, who was born in 1666 and died in 1728: he did away with the time honoured idea of the "heaven", or nature, as a source of moral virtue, and separated the cultural world of man from that of nature.¹⁰

The way as taught by Confucius, Sorai said, was not to contemplate the universe, and study philosophical systems; it was a way that was meant to bring peace and harmony to human society, by studying ancient models of virtue, and, even more importantly, by practicing the rituals and ways of life they established. Sorai saw personal cultivation as the root source of all virtue, and this, to him, meant cultivation of and with the body, as is evident from the following quotes:

⁹ Ogyu Sorai (author.), Olof G. Lidin (tr.): *Distinguishing the Way [Bendô]*. Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970, p. 8, 9 (Japanese text on the odd-numbered pages).

¹⁰ Ogyu Sorai (fn. 9), p. 24: "The Way of the Early Kings is that which the Early Kings created. It is not the natural Way of Heaven and Earth."

"To take lightly that which is on the outside and end up attaching importance to that which is within is contrary to the ancient Way of the Early Kings and Confucius."

"When bringing peace and contentment to the world, to cultivate one's bodily self is the fundamental basis."¹¹

To Sorai, the human body does not possess any innate virtue that will express itself naturally if one reaches proper insight into one's nature – a theory held by Daoists and East Asian Mahâyâna Buddhists. But it can, and has to be, employed to realize what has been established as human virtue, most eminently through the combination of rites and music. Sorai offerst the following explanation for this possibility (and necessity): "When cutting wood in order to build a palace, one must follow the nature of the wood and only thus does one accomplish it. But how could wood in its nature be a palace?"¹²

The aspect of rites and music most emphasized by Sorai is the embodiment of harmony: social harmony in the adherence to ritual, and emotional attunement in the performance of music. Thus, rites and music create an environment that enables people to live together in peace and contentment. However, there is another aspect to his theory which remains largely implicit, but connects it to our theme of time and memory: it is apparent in his saying that "Benevolence is the Way of nourishing."¹³ In other words, moral cultivation is a way of memorizing and habitualizing virtuous conduct. This, of course, is a line of thought that has been pursued by classical European authors, such as Aristotle or Descartes, as well; however, we rarely find an emphasis, as with Ogyû Sorai, on bodily performance as a way of realizing virtue, which is why I strayed into the distant realm of Japanese history.

My emphasis is not on Confucian concepts of social harmony and proper conduct – there is much room for doubt whether these specific ideas can

¹¹ Ogyu Sorai (fn. 9), p. 14, 15; 13 (p. 13: translation from the Japanese *kanbun* [= Sinojapanese style] by the author).

¹² Ogyu Sorai (fn. 9), p. 26.

¹³ Ogyu Sorai (fn. 9), p. 54.

really bring "peace and contentment" to the world. What I want to bring to your attention is only Sorai's reasoning that the body can, and should be used as a medium of moral cultivation. I say "medium of moral cultivation" in order to distinguish it from an "object of discipline".¹⁴ The body can become such a medium that in itself helps to generate a virtuous personality, however virtue may be defined. My hypothesis in this regard is, that one of the central functions of the body at play here is precisely its capacity to accumulate and store habits of perception and action. Virtues have to be memorized in order that we can intuitively, without much reflection, know "what it was to be good" in a given situation. This is a necessity in human life, where in many instances there is no time for reflection when virtuous conduct is required.¹⁵ Cultivating the body is a primary means to habitualize virtuous conduct, because the body's structure and functions are shaped by what we do. The body continues our past into the present and future without depending on conscious acts of remembrance. This is why we can then find in the body what we want to remember, once we need it. Further instances of the body functioning as a medium of memory may easily be added – the capacity of olfactory and gustatory experiences to invoke powerful memories being just one example. Instead of presenting more such material, let me now systematize my findings in a theoretical conclusion.

A theoretical framework

What we found in our examples was that, within various fields of human existence, the human body serves as a medium that communicates past experiences, actions, and emotions into the present. It does so in both a passive and an active manner. In other words, the body serves as a symbol, but as a living symbol, one that contributes to the meaning communicated

¹⁴ Consider Sorai's argument against discipline, Ogyu Sorai (fn. 9), p. 56

¹⁵ This is not to denigrate moral reflection and discussion: it is simply an exigency caused by the structure of human existence. To put it simply, while we should reflect on and argue about moral principles while there is still time to do so – and doing so is a realization of the virtue of perspicacity – we should then strive to cultivate ourselves through bodily performance, so that we will be able to act according to our principles

through it.

To be more exact, I think the symbolic function that is first and foremost at play in our examples is that of expression. Let me give you a short characterisation of what is implied by this term. In Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms¹⁶, expression is the first, and most fundamental of all symbolic functions, in comparison to the more abstract ones of representation and purely notional meaning. On the level of expression, we can already distinguish between the symbol and its meaning, but the perceptual form of the symbol is still closely correlated to its meaning. In symbolic representation, there is the possibility of translation, of using different signs to refer to the same meaning. In expression, a slight difference of shape, timing, or tone can mark a significant variance in what is communicated. Other features of expression are incorrigibility, indeterminacy, and openness. You may say, "I didn't mean to frown or look bored", but people will still impute that your expression conveyed what you really felt. On the other hand, the frown on the face of a scientist may sum up his theoretical outlook – this is what I mean by indeterminacy, or openness.

This feature of expression, its openness for multiple layers of meaning, which may include those dependent on the more abstract forms of language, or science, is most important in explaining our examples. In this world we live in, even the most abstract forms of meaning have to be produced in some "here and now", in spatio-temporal existence. Every representation needs a presentation, through some form of expression. The body is what provides for this "here and now", it determines where the present is. Conversely, as a medium of expression it is shaped by the meaning it has to convey. This is not magic, but simply the way expression works. You have to smile to communicate your kind feelings, to talk or write to convince somebody of your theories. In doing so, nervous impulses are put to use,

¹⁶ Cassirer, Ernst: *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, 3 vols., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1964. See esp. vol. 3, pp. 68-121.

muscles have to work, and so on. All this happens on the physical-physiological level, according to that which we have come to call "the laws of nature". Still, if the movements do not follow the rules of articulation, there will be no smile, or no words. Thus, like Sorai's timber becoming a palace, the body partakes of the "world of meaning", which has its own rules – be they those of grammar, manners, mathematics, or morality. And as it is continuously used and shaped by our communicative or deliberative actions, it becomes a memorial of our past emotions, predilections, and activities.

Why is all this important? Because it may be able to change our attitude to a various important subjects. Let me go back to the first example, the example of brain death, to explain this.

The classical theory of brain death, as it informs legislation in Europe and North America, is based on the assumption that the cognitive and psychological personality has its basis exclusively in the brain. In this view, the brain-dead body therefore is nothing more than a "left-over body"¹⁷ of an already departed person. Accordingly, suggestions have been made that it be used at liberty for explantation, medical experimentation etc. If we accept, on the contrary, that the body is a memorial continuing a person's past into the present, the living body of a human person will command the respect that we are obliged to show for all fellow human beings. Furthermore, remembering the body's role in storing memories, we may be more ready to take seriously the experience of organ transplant recipients, some of whom report a strong feeling of the presence of someone else in their own body, which may result in new tastes and / or dislikes and so forth¹⁸. Such feelings have hitherto been mostly taken to be merely a symptom of psychological distress caused by organ transplantation; however, in the light of the theory of the body in its entirety as an

¹⁷ See e.g. Spittler, Johann Friedrich: *Gehirn, Tod und Menschenbild: Neuropsychiatrie, Neurophilosophie, Ethik und Metaphysik*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2003, who makes a habit of speaking about the "restlichen übrigen Körper" of the brain-dead.

¹⁸ See e.g. Lock, Margaret: *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death (Public Anthropology)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

expression of a human person with her habits and preferences, a structural basis may well exist for such experiences. Thus, this theory may have a serious impact on the ethical decisions we take in treating human bodies, and the research we feel it reasonable to conduct.

