

What the Soul Remembers: Intellectual Memory in Descartes.

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In a letter seeking to give Huygens strength following the death of a brother, Descartes voiced his conviction that the human soul outlives the body and is born “for pleasures far greater than those enjoyed in this lifetime.” Not only do the departed accede to “a sweeter life” but “we will go find them there some day, even with a remembrance of the past: *for I recognize in us an intellectual memory that is most certainly independent of the body.*”¹ Did Descartes believe in a spiritual reunion in the afterlife?

We cannot dismiss the content of Descartes’s letter to Huygens as a purely conventional expression of religious faith dictated by circumstance. On the contrary, Descartes makes a point of telling his friend (and fellow scientist) that his belief in the soul’s afterlife and memory is based on “very evident natural reasons,” not on religious doctrine. Descartes admits that, “like most men,” he is typically “more powerfully affected by rational arguments than by religious teaching.”² According to Descartes, then, one of the things that the soul is able rationally to ascertain in *this* life is that it will remember the past in the *next* life. Our question is thus double: what does Descartes believe about spiritual memory and why does he believe it?

Although Descartes may have planned to discuss intellectual memory in a treatise on the rational soul,³ nowhere in the existing Cartesian corpus does he give a satisfactory account of his doctrine. We are forced to patch disconnected fragments together.⁴ In the famous letter to “Hyperaspistes,” Descartes begins a discussion of intellectual memory only to cut it short: “There is much to be said on this subject, but this is not the place for a more thorough examination.”⁵ Where, then, is the appropriate place? Curiously, despite the firm belief expressed to Huygens in 1642, Descartes himself almost never initiates a discussion of intellectual memory. The topic is raised, for the most part, by opponents, or friends, who challenge the Cartesian claim that, since the soul is by its nature a thinking substance, it thinks even in the womb, before birth. If this is true, why does the adult have no memory of prenatal thoughts?

Descartes’s argument that we remember nothing from the womb because the brain at this stage is incapable of receiving impressed traces⁶ does not hold, Descartes’s critics argue, if we admit a purely intellectual memory. Now, Descartes is as committed as anyone to the position that there are in human beings two very distinct types of memory: a material memory that we share with

¹ Letter to Huygens, October 10, 1642, in C. Adam and P. Tannery, *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1964–76), [henceforth AT], III, 580: “Nous les irons trouver quelque jour, même avec la souvenance du passé; car je reconnais en nous une mémoire intellectuelle, qui est assurément indépendante du corps.”

² *Ibid.*: “J’avoue en moi une infirmité qui est, ce me semble, commune à la plupart des hommes, à savoir que, quoique nous veuillons croire et même que nous pensions croire fort fermement ce que la religion nous apprend, nous n’avons pas toutefois coutume d’en être si touchés que de ce qui nous est persuadé par des raisons naturelles fort évidentes.”

³ See the *Discourse on Method*, Part V, AT VI, 59.

⁴ Two pioneering efforts in this regard are P. Landormy, *La mémoire corporelle et la mémoire intellectuelle dans la philosophie de Descartes*, Congrès international de philosophie (1900), vol. IV, 295–296; and Geneviève Lewis, *L’individualité selon Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1950), 208–218.

⁵ *Responsio ad Hyperaspistes*, August 1641, AT III, 425: “Sed et alia multa hac in re sunt notanda, quae accuratius explicare non est huius loci.”

⁶ See the Fifth Answers appended to the *Meditationes*, AT VII, 356–357: “In order for the mind to remember thoughts that it once conceived while joined to the body, there must be traces impressed in the brain, towards which the mind turns and, applying its thought to them, comes to remember; what marvel is there that the brain of an infant or of someone in a coma is not suited to receive such impressions? ”

brutes and a purely intellectual memory.⁷ Whereas the memory that we share with animals depends on physical traces or “vestiges” that remain in the brain, the distinctly human memory that we have of intellectual things depends on vestiges that remain “in thought itself,” and which cannot be explained by analogy to anything physical.⁸ Descartes, then, cannot avoid the objection. Since the immaterial soul possesses an immaterial memory, and since the soul thinks in the womb because thinking is its very essence, why does the soul not remember prenatal thoughts?

Let us examine three different answers given by Descartes. First, in the succinct and combative answer given to “Hyperaspistes,” Descartes denies that there is any remembrance (*recordatio*), properly speaking, of purely intellectual things.⁹ Descartes’s argument is that the very first time that we think something purely intelligible, we think it “just as well” (*aeque bene*) as the second time. What he means is that intelligible things are *understood* rather than *learned*. There are no physical “grooves” traced in the brain that facilitate the pure intellection of truths in the same way that repeated practice facilitates riding a bicycle or recognizing familiar situations. Descartes’s response to Hyperaspistes does not tell us much about the soul’s immaterial memory, since we are told only that intellection does not depend on *recordatio*, in contrast to empirical knowledge, which proceeds by means of the material memory and is a type of reflex conditioning. Yet, in Meditation V, where the separate soul grasps purely intelligible mathematical truths, Descartes conspicuously describes the experience of grasping a mathematical truth for the first time as *reminiscence*: “I do not seem to learn anything new, but rather to remember (*reminisci*) what I already knew before.”¹⁰ Are we to conclude that *recordatio* is not involved in intellection because intellection already *is*, as such, a form of spiritual reminiscence?

Descartes, moreover, concludes his answer to Hyperaspistes with an interesting qualification. To the extent that intelligible things are often joined to something material, for example to words, we remember the intelligible truth itself whenever we remember what the words mean.¹¹ Descartes presumably has in mind something like the following: suppose that I understand that two added to three sums up to five through a purely mental process involving no signs or images. If, subsequently, someone writes the proposition “ $2 + 3 = 5$ ” and I know what the signs mean, I will be reminded – I will understand *afresh* (no more and no less than the first time) – that two added to three sums up to five. Descartes’s point, once again Platonic in feeling, is that material signs at best “trigger” spiritual reminiscence, which cannot, therefore, be assimilated to ordinary learning by repetition and rote. A truth is each time recognized as true, not “memorized.”

Descartes’s short discussion of material signs raises a new question: how do I remember that the material scratches on my paper “ $2 + 3 = 5$ ” *mean* the purely intelligible truth that “two added to three sum up to five”? The remark to Hyperaspistes brings us to the role played, more generally, by immaterial memory in language. This should shed valuable light since, according to Descartes, language testifies empirically that there is a rational soul in us, an immaterial principle of freedom – which is to say, a distinctive capacity to originate events that are neither deterministic nor random.¹² Descartes’s clearest statement about the role of intellectual memory in language is reported in the Conversation with Berman. Like Hyperaspistes, Berman objected to Descartes that the soul should be able to remember its thoughts in the womb since it possesses, “like angels and separate souls,” a

⁷ See *Regulae*, XII, AT X, 416.

⁸ Letter to Mesland, May 2, 1644, AT IV, 114.

⁹ AT III, 425: “De rebus vero pure intellectualibus, nulla proprie recordatio est.”

¹⁰ *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, AT VII, 64: “non tam videar aliquid novi addiscere, quam eorum quae jam ante sciebam reminisci.”

¹¹ *Ibid* and 426: “nisi quod soleant nominibus quibusdam alligari, quae cum corporea sint, de ipsis etiam recordamur.”

¹² See *Discours de la Methode*, Part V, AT VI, 57–59; for a modern champion of Descartes’s argument and the source of the phrase “neither deterministic nor random,” see N. Chomsky, *Language and Thought* (Wakefield, R.I. and London: Moyer Bill, 1993).

purely spiritual memory, in addition to brutish memory.¹³ Descartes, in response, first confirms that we indeed have a purely intellectual memory: *memoriam intellectualem non nego; ea enim datur*. He decides actually to defend the claim by providing an example in which a purely intellectual memory must be admitted. Descartes's example is human language and runs as follows: "hearing that the sound "R-E-X" signifies the supreme power, I entrust this to memory and later by means of memory signify the same thing again. Since there is no affinity between those three letters and their meaning, from which the meaning can be derived, all of this must certainly be done thanks to a purely intellectual memory. Only by means of intellectual memory do I remember what these letters signify."¹⁴ Descartes's argument is that, unlike the case of natural signs, which result from empirical conditioning ("smoke signifies fire"), human language is a free creation through which material signs are imbued with meaning and used meaningfully. Language thus presupposes the possibility of symbol-formation as such, taken universally. Language-acquisition, in turn, is a spiritual journey of the intellect into meaning, not a material (behaviorist) training of blind utterances in exchange for rewards.

The role of intellectual memory in language is subtle: what intellectual memory is entrusted to remember is precisely the *intelligibility* of sounds – the way in which they have been appropriated by human creativity to be bearers of meaning. Language is not acquired piecemeal and by rote. Rather, the universal possibility of intelligibility as such is presupposed and exemplified by each and every meaningful case, such as the case of the sound R-E-X. Thus I could not "entrust" the meaning of the three letters R-E-X to memory if I did not possess a memory prepared for meaningfulness generally, ahead of any particular meaning. Language is the power to speak of things by means of universals. Intellectual memory, on this view, is both the source and the depository of semiotic trans-particularism.

Descartes goes on to explain to Berman that intellectual memory "is, in truth, more a memory of universals than of particulars, which is why we cannot, by means of intellectual memory, remember all of our own particular facts."¹⁵ In order for this last statement to answer Berman's objection, Descartes must mean that, because intellectual memory remembers what is purely intelligible, abstracted from the accidents of time and place, it is unsuitable to remember the "confused" sensations that are experienced in the womb. The soul in the womb is too exclusively preoccupied with sensations (of warm and cold, hunger and satisfaction) to enjoy the use of intellectual memory.¹⁶ Descartes statement implies that *some* personal facts (the exact nature of which is yet to be determined) are suitable to be remembered by intellectual memory, just not those facts that are experienced in the womb and are entirely empirical.

Are we, then, to interpret the soul's "remembrance of the past" in the afterlife as a memory without particulars? When Huygens meets his brother spiritually in the afterlife, will each soul "live and move and have its being" in God with a universal remembrance of the past but no memory of the *particular* facts of its past life, and no memory, therefore, of each other? Or does the soul's intellectual memory allow *some* personal facts of temporal life to be remembered in eternity? Descartes's correspondence with Arnauld in the summer of 1648 provides a new point of departure. Once again, Descartes was asked why the soul does not remember prenatal thoughts when it possesses a purely spiritual memory.¹⁷ Arnauld's first letter states the formal doctrine of

¹³ AT V, 150: "Datur tamen memoria intellectualis, ut in angelis et animabus separatis, et sic per eam mesn suarum cogitationum recordaretur."

¹⁴ Conversation with Berman, AT V, 150: "Ut cum, audiens vocem R-E-X significare supremam potestatem, illud memoriae mando, et deinceps per memoriam repeto illam significationem, illud certe fit per memoriam intellectualem, cum nulla sit affinitas inter tres litteras et earum significationem."

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: "Verum haec memoria intellectualis magis est universalium quam singularium, et sic per eam omnium singularium factorum nostrorum recordari non possumus."

¹⁶ Cf. To Hyperaspistes, AT III, 423-4.

¹⁷ Descartes and Arnauld exchanged letters in June and July 1648, during a time of controversy for Arnauld because of his connection with Port-Royal. See AT V, 184-197, 211-215, 219-224.

the two memories, one spiritual (*mere spiritualis*), the other requiring the physical brain, and Descartes endorses it *verbatim*: "I concede that the force of memory is double."¹⁸ But Descartes now goes on to equate intellectual memory with the intellect's reflexivity: *reflexio intellectus sive memoria intellectualis*.¹⁹ Descartes's new argument, in effect, is that intellectual memory separates human *recordatio* from animal conditioning. In the human case, the organism does not simply respond to stimuli. As a human subject, I actually *re*-cognize the sensation that I have because I recognize that it is the same *kind* of sensation that I experienced yesterday. Once again, there is a Platonic flavor to the notion that the intellect supplies the universal notion of "sameness" to experience rather than derives it from experience. Descartes's theory implies that the intellectual capacity to identify *kinds* gives human beings a rational leverage over reflex conditioning that animals lack.

Arnauld, visibly excited, asked for more details regarding intellectual memory defined as intellectual *reflexio*: "It remains to be explained (1) what this *reflexio* is in which, according to you, intellectual memory consists; (2) how it differs from the simple reflexion that is natural to every thought, and (3) why we cannot use it in the womb."²⁰ Descartes's elaboration centers on a precise puzzle: when I recognize that the sensation that I experience today is of the same kind as the sensation that I experienced yesterday, part of what I perceive is that I experience a certain kind of sensation *for the second time*. How do I know this? I must implicitly keep track of the *novelty* of each kind of sensation when I first experience of it. But how? According to Descartes, human beings have the ability *re*-cognize events (as "different but the same") thanks to intellectual reflexivity/intellectual memory.

Material things that are known in sensation do not include as a feature their novelty relative to the mind: there is nothing in the patch of red that impinges on my retina that says that I have or have not experienced it before. Consequently, the intellect itself must supply the index of "novelty" to any sensation that I experience for the first time. This implies, in turn, that the intellect is able to recognize that what impinges on it the first time in sensation is alien to it. But this implies that the soul "remembers itself" reflexively in its immaterial purity. Intellectual memory is thus able to keep a record of what *enters* the mind from outside and *does not belong to the mind's essence*. The first experience of a given sensation is remembered as first and used to categorize subsequent sensations based on similar features. But, as we know, intellectual memory has a predilection for universals: what intellectual memory records the first time that I experience a red patch is the universal "red," which now belongs to my repertory of concepts. Thanks to this implicit memory, I am able subsequently to recognize that I see a "red" patch whenever I see a red patch. By the same token, I am able to speak about it and communicate this concept to another person through language.

Intellectual memory works the way it does because it is, first and foremost, the soul's pure memory of itself. As we know from Meditation III, Descartes admits three types of ideas: "adventitious" ideas that impinge on the soul from outside, fictions of the soul's own making, and innate ideas.²¹ Intellectual memory is thus precisely the faculty that allows the soul to distinguish between "adventitious" ideas on the one hand, and innate ideas on the other. Only because the pure immaterial *mens* remembers itself as a pure immaterial *mens* is it able to recognize "adventitious" ideas precisely as "adventitious." The soul keeps track of what invades it through sensation because

¹⁸ AT V, 192: "Duplicem memoriae vim admitto."

¹⁹ AT V, 192–3. Since the letter is in Latin, I translate: "I admit that the power of memory is double; but I am persuaded that the soul of an infant never has pure concepts, but only confused sensations; and although these confused sensations leave a few vestiges in the brain, which remain there for the rest of life, these vestiges are not sufficient for us to recognize that the sensations that impinge on us as adults are similar to those that we experienced in the womb, nor, therefore, can we remember them. The cause is that this depends on a reflexion of the intellect or intellectual memory, of which we do not yet have the usage in the womb."

²⁰ Letter to Descartes, July 1648, AT V, 213.

²¹ AT VII, 37–38.

the soul knows and remembers its own pure essence. Conversely, when the soul discovers mathematical truths by reasoning about innate ideas, the soul experiences nothing *new* but seems simply to remember (*reminisci*) what it already knows.

What help does this theory of intellectual memory provide with regard to remembering loved ones in the after life? According to Descartes, whenever the intellect presents the soul with a clear and distinct good, the will “infallibly but freely” embraces it and unites the soul with it.²² There are basically two clear and distinct goods that the will embraces “infallibly but freely”: truth and virtue. Virtue is really the resolve to love God. The resolve to love God, moreover, is a special kind of volition, namely an action that originates in the soul and terminates in the soul.²³ Since nothing material is involved, the soul remembers its resolve to love God by means of intellectual memory. But part of the resolve to love God is the resolve to love other spiritual beings for God’s sake. Once again, this resolve must be remembered by means of intellectual memory.

In a letter to Newcastle, Descartes wrote that we “cannot doubt” that souls in the afterlife have intuitive knowledge of God, “because they are detached from the body, or because the glorified body no longer acts as an impediment” to the immediate intuition of purely intelligible beings.²⁴ Can we doubt, then, that Huygens, when he accedes to the afterlife, will not only remember and recognize his brother spiritually but will know his brother’s soul, for the first time, by immediate intuition?

²² See e.g., Second Series of Answers, Axiom VII, AT VII, 166: “rei cogitantis voluntas fertur, voluntarie quidem et libere (hoc enim est de essentia voluntatis), sed nihilominus infalliniliter, in bonum sibi clare cognitum.”

²³ See *Passions of the Soul*, Part I, Art. XVIII, AT XI, 342–343: “Nos volontés sont de deux sortes. Les unes sont des actions de l’âme, qui se terminent en l’âme même, comme lorsque nous volons aymer Dieu.”

²⁴ Letter to Newcastle, March or April 1648, AT V, 137: “or, que nostre esprit, lors qu’il sera détaché du corps, ou que ce coprs glorifié ne luy ffera plus d’empeschement, ne pusise recevoir de telles illustrations directes, en pouvez-vous douter, puisque, dans ce corps mesme, les sens lyu en donnet des choses corporelles et sensibles, et que nostre ame en a desia quelques unes de la beneficence de son Createur?”