ERLING ENG

A HISTORY OF THE IDEA OF ORGANIC MEMORY

As there is a geometry in space, so there is a psychology in time, in which the calculations of a plane psychology would no longer be accurate because we should not be taking account of time, and of the forms that it assumes, forgetting

Proust, *The Fugitive*, III, 568

ABSTRACT

“Organic memory” means that I – more exactly me – am (or is) by memory remembered. Not I but the organic, namely that which has become differentiated in and through my own vital activity, and this must include the differentiated world, this memory remembers *me*. It is different from the way in which we ordinarily experience memory, namely as *its users*, hence the difficulty of conceptualizing it. Such memory involves the world as its medium, whether of our own body taken as part of the world, or of various parts of the world which emerge as something like “found objects”. In and through my own activity I am as it were remembered by my body and by parts of the world. “Organism” holds both the meaning of being remembered by its past, as well as meaning of the world construed in my “dismembering” of it, in and through my own activity. While I as it were dismember the organic, the organic is remembering me. My usual experience of the organic is that of waking consciousness, while the condition in which the organic remembers me lie outside consciousness, rather more like dreaming or trance awareness.

Transformation of the relatively undifferentiated embryo into the differentiated organism with its complementary envelope is that of a constantly enlarging and ever more complexly articulated sphere. Throughout however it retains the possibility of regression as well as of progression in organization. “Organic memories” are involuntary memories, memories mediated by, and touched off


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by concrete particulars in our surroundings. Here the classical observations have been made by both Freud and Proust.

“Birth” stands for the assumption of the use of our organs. This assumption of our effectors obscures that memory which is constitutive of them. The medium of the world eclipses the memory character of their apparent mechanism. Our organism construes the world it requires, not only to make up for its losses, but first of all to actualize still unrealized possibilities. Here needs emerge out of gratifications.

The human infant, of all creatures, is perhaps the most helpless on its entry into the world. For many months, perhaps a year, its condition is fetal, compared with the postnatal competency of other animals. This is the idea of human “foetalization”, as advanced by the Dutch physiologist Bolk, in the 1920’s. This also implies that the newly born infant human is involved with the world in a far more prenatal fashion than other animals. The human being is a prematurely born animal. To the extent of this interpenetration of prenatality with our postnatal world, we are never finished with our birth. Thus it is that human visions of death can so frequently refer to a completion of birth, in and through which identity will finally be realized. For the human the meanings of womb and tomb are commingled, and reversible. Pascal says: “Sleep, you say, is the image of death; for my part I say that it is rather the image of life (Pensees, #5, 358, Penguin ed.)” Identity remains, if interminable, as a constantly fruitful task, if considered in the context of persisting prenatality. A pre- and perinatal psychology is one of identity as open, realized in and through the body within the world. This openness is no less apparent in the non-seasonal character of human sexuality.

The presocratic physician philosopher Alcmaeon observed that “human beings pass away because they cannot join the end to the beginning.” If we start from our present life, then to “pass away” can only mean loss. But if our prenatality, i.e. our biological openness, is taken as starting point, then to “pass away” reveals its hidden sense as birth. We “pass away” only because – out of forgetfulness and limitation of understanding – we make absolute the distinction between beginning and end, rather than realize the way in which they are reciprocally related in the figure of a life.

Insofar as our memory is organic, that is, implicit in the use of our organs, it is as if we are remembered by the world. Birth remains the most obscure event of human experience. Often our idea of it has taken the form of a vision of a life after death. In Plato’s recital of the myth of Er at the end of The Republic, life after death passes over into the life before birth, the division marked by the soul’s passage through the river Lethe, in which it loses the memory of its earlier life.