

The Drowning Mind: On the Continuing Relevance of Bergson for Psychology

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In October 1991, the renowned cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus travelled back from Atlanta airport with a companion. During the course of their conversation, Loftus speculated on the design of an experiment that might demonstrate the existence of the phenomenon of suggestibility in memory recall. Two weeks later the experiment was attempted informally, at a party. Next came a classroom exercise. Eventually the procedure was formally conducted, with the appropriate ethical approvals in place, and finally published as *The formation of false memories* (Loftus & Pickerell, 1995)¹.

The experiment became known as the 'lost in the shopping mall' study. It goes something like this: the researcher (Loftus) recruits a confederate (Jim) who has a younger sibling (Chris). Jim interacts with Chris in the course of which he asks Chris 'Do you remember the time when you got lost in that shopping mall?'; an event that, according to Jim (and Jim's and Chris's mother; and thus Loftus) never occurred. Eventually, after more interactions, Chris agrees that he did indeed get lost in the mall; moreover, he elaborates on the details. In the final stage Chris is debriefed and becomes disappointed and doubtful on learning that the memories he has recollected are 'false'.

The 'lost in the mall' study has been a crucial intervention in the controversy around the existence of 'recovered memories', or, alternatively, of 'false memories'. This controversy is sometimes referred to as the 'memory wars' (Campbell, 2002). The central object of the controversy is the testimony given by adults who recall in later life earlier episodes of sexual violence and abuse inflicted upon them in their childhood despite having not clearly recalled these episodes previously. For one side, mostly made up of clinical psychologists, therapists, and survivor activist groups, 'recovered memories' are brought about by the psychic dissociation suffered by victims in the course of abuse. This decoupling of mental and emotional processes is a drastic strategy that allows

the victim to cope with the trauma of betrayal and abuse, but results in severe disruption to the storage and retrieval aspects of memory (Freyd, 1996). For the other side, dominated by experimental psychologists and activist groups of accused parents and survivors who have 'retracted' their previous testimony, 'false memories' are created under the influence of therapists who use 'child sexual abuse' as master narrative to interpret even the most mundane of symptoms reported by clients during the course of therapy. Therapists are viewed as having a self-interested stake in assisting victims to secure legal and financial recompense from their abusers, which is presumed to fund yet further therapy (Ofshe & Watters, 1994).

There is a great deal which has been said and which could be said now about the recovered/false memory debate (one of the most compelling and lucid analysis comes from Sue Campbell (2002; 2014), whose untimely passing was an enormous loss to memory studies). But the key issue of us here is the extent to which debates that turn on contested ontologies of memory have perhaps a greater pertinence and social relevance today than at the time of *Matter and Memory* and Bergson's subsequent reflections on memory in the 1911 Oxford lectures on *The Perception of Change*. The problems that Bergson so incisively identified with the psychological thinking of his contemporaries – namely their inability to distinguish between perception and representation – remain our problems. Indeed the communities who share in the struggle around the ontology of memory now stretches far beyond the audience Bergson might have anticipated. The questions that Bergson addresses in may be primarily metaphysical matters but they are matters in which a great many of us now have a real practical stake.

Let's take one of the problems that Bergson deals with extensively in *Matter and Memory* and revisits in *The Perception of Change*. The psychology of memory has from its very inception depended on the logic of separating memory into a series of distinct processes. One process involves the retention and conversion of ongoing perception into stored memories – i.e. storage. The reverse process concerns the recollection of stored memories into cognitions that then have a

role in structuring perception and action – i.e. retrieval. What unites these processes into a dynamic system is a central set of executive processes – sometimes called ‘working memory’, sometimes more ambitiously ‘the self’ – that have the role of coordinating the downward stream of memorialisation and the upward stream of recollection.

Experimental investigation of storage and retrieval classically takes the form of presenting participants with stimuli that they are then asked to recall at a later point. Manipulating the conditions under which storage and retrieval occur can reveal some of the dynamic properties of the cognitive system. The intelligibility of the experiment depends upon being able to clearly demarcate time such that the point of storage (t1) is clearly distinct from the point of retrieval (t2).

However this tends to encourage the view that at t1 and t2 the cognitive system is engaged in very different states – it is ‘storing’ at one point and ‘retrieving’ at another. Yet if perception is being continuously stored as memory then t1 and t2 are not really separate processes. If memory is ‘always on’ then this implies that we are recollecting as we store and storing as we recollect (Lansdale, 2005).

More problematically it also implies that each of these mixed psychic events is also being stored. There ought, logically, to be a memory of each perceptual event infused by memory (t1n) and of each recollection surging into perception (t2n) – ‘I remember when I first recollected that his eyes were a vivid blue’.

These ‘second order’ memories would, of course, be subject to a further set of memorializing and recollecting processes, and so on ad infinitum.

We can recognize this as having family resemblance to the category of problems that Bergson relates to Zeno of Elea’s Paradoxes. These Bergson glosses as involving ‘the confusion of movement with the space covered, or at least the conviction that one can treat movement as one treats space, divide it without taking account of its articulations’ (1992: 144). In the present case the confusion here is between the dynamics of recollection and a spatialized conception of the temporal envelope in which it is taken to occur. This confusion is further compounded when the cognitive system is itself divided into a spatial order that makes the separation between the moment of storage and the

moment of retrieval into a set of distinct entities (i.e. components of the same system). It suffices to recall here the lyrical turns of phrase at the start of the second lecture with which Bergson shows mock incredulity at the errors of thought which follow from reducing time to space – ‘How can the movement be applied upon the space it traverses? How can something moving coincide with something immobile? How could the moving object be in a point of its trajectory passage?’ (1992: 143). Experimental studies of memory assume that there is a thing – the cognitive system – that is ‘in’ time, here understood as a succession of instants. The experimental problem is to index the state of the system at each desired instant and relate it to successive instants. In this way changes in state are applied to a spatialized time in the hope that properties of the cognitive system will be clarified, despite the tendency of this procedure to produce a Cantor Dust of intervening states which make the apparent line between perception and recollection infinitely convoluted. The arrow will never reach its target. Or as Bergson has it ‘we argue about movement as though it were made of immobilities and, when we look at it, it with immobilities that we reconstitute it. Movement for us is a position, then another position, and so on indefinitely’ (1992: 145).

Such confusion would be deeply amusing were the stakes not quite so high. Both sides in the memory wars controversy are locked into a debate about the putative spatial properties of memory that would render plausible their view of the accuracy or not of recollection of child sexual abuse. For example, Bessel van der Kolk (2014) has argued that traumatic memories are stored in a different way to other kinds of memories. Trauma is encoded as a series of sensations that are juxtaposed with one another rather than as an episodic memory with a clear narrative structure. Traumatic memories are therefore better characterized as ‘body memories’ that are stored in a different manner and in a different place by cognitive and neurological processes². Speaking from the opposed side, cognitive psychologists such as Loftus have poured scorn on the idea that there are ‘special’ unique processes involved in traumatic memories. There is a single overarching management of memory within the cognitive system (and hence within the brain

itself), and this management structure is the sole referent that is worthy of debate.

The rival sides here follow in a longstanding tradition within psychology to identify processes with distinct structures that are ultimately reducible to spatially organized brain states. One of the earliest conjectures in the psychology of memory is that it is possible to study the organization of memories as 'engrams' that are archived within the brain (see Sutton, 1998 for an account of the broader philosophical backdrop). The 'misplaced concreteness' involved in this conjecture is readily apparent. What spatial form would these engrams take? What kind of capacity would the brain require to be capable of a continuous self-archiving and administration of perception in this way? These kinds of questions echoed through the development of the psychology of memory in the twentieth century. The cognitive system was taken to be under constant threat of being overwhelmed the sheer volume of perceptual data it was considered to have to manage. The mind of cognitive psychology was treated as continuously at risk of drowning in the 'torrent-like flow of things' (p.150) that it encounters through perception. The 'standard model' of cognition is then built around the dual assumptions of the limited capacity of mind and the necessity of abstracting concepts from perception as a defence against the tsunami of perception. Mind must convert the world into concepts or else risk a swamping of its capacity to self-archive.

Let's look further at the way Bergson anticipates these problems in *The Perception of Change*. Speaking of a 'doctrinal position' at work in the psychology of his time, Bergson attributes the influence of a 'certain metaphysics'. It would not be incorrect to assert that contemporary psychology certainly remains under the influence to this day. Bergson's argument against the storage or self-archiving view of memory first invokes the problem of capacity – a problem he considers to 'postpone' the overarching paradox of approaching mind through spatial categories. He leaves us with the image of the projectionist inside the screening room who is being buried under the weight of endless spools of 'cinematographic film' that they are desperately attempting to organize. A truly

pointless exercise – ‘Let us suppose all those images are stored up; what good will they serve? Which one shall we use? Let us grant that we have our reasons for choosing one of them, why, and how, shall we throw it back into the past when we perceive it?’ (p.154).

The bite in Bergson’s argumentative switch from a metaphysical to a pragmatic argument is worth noting. One year later, in 1912, John Broadus Watson would publish his manifesto for operationalism – ‘Psychology as a Behaviorist views it’, which would promote a kind of economic rationalization as the ‘doctrinal position’ for the analysis of psychological problems. Whilst this form of psychology would certainly have no truck with the image of a ‘theatre of perception’, it would nevertheless reproduce the storage problem in terms of the retention within the organism of the enormous patterns of stimulus-response that shape behaviour. Bergson’s argument emphasizes that thinking this process in spatial terms is incoherent with respect to the utility-maximisation because it again implies the weight of the past needs to be amassed in some place (or other).

Bergson does of course allow psychologists the dignity of their illusions. Nothing could be more natural than to reduce the perception-remembering circuit to spatial terms, since fitting a process to a mobile, to a thing which changes is a tendency that is supported by vision as the sense ‘par excellence’ (p.147). Memory would then consist of a set of states which mind, considered as a thing, enters into. However, as Takuya Nagano (this volume) observes, collapsing the psychological with material in this way is antithetical to Bergson’s project. He very clearly saw the difference between physical vibration and psychological memory, although, as Nagano observes, from a mereological perspective, it is possible to posit a linkage through conceptualising a continuant which traverses matter and memory treated as occurrents.

From a psychological perspective, much turns on how memorial ‘states’ are conceived. In *Cosmopolitics*, Isabelle Stengers offers an incisive critique of the loose-limbed way of defining a state that we find in the greater part of the psychology of memory. Mathematically, the notion of a state has some utility

when it is operationalised as a 'state function' that describes a system, along with the possibility of deducing future changes in state. But to use the notion to simply refer to a set of measurements amongst which there is no clear relationship, in other words as a garbage can into which are poured all of the phenomenon currently amenable to measurement in the hope that some kind of conceptual unity is thereby implied is, Stengers observes, clearly nonsensical. We might say that this vice of attributing states to psychological processes repeats the error Bergson identifies of unwarranted spatialisation creating entities or mobiles whose qualities end up becoming more complex and byzantine than the phenomenon they have been created to explain. We see this in the 'boxology' of cognitive models of memory, where the failure of a model to explain a given dataset is corrected by inventing further 'boxes' of processes, such that the model becomes more complex than the world it is supposed to explain – the map is enlarged to become bigger than the territory.

Bergson's argument throughout *Matter & Memory* is that this tendency towards entitative or 'state' thinking reflects at one level what is most natural in our thinking when we are driven by the need to secure a foothold in the world. The abstraction of change and process in the form of a thing that changes has some purpose in co-ordinating and securing the grounds on which we act – 'At a certain point I realized that the mood in the room was turning against me'. In *The Perception of Change*, Bergson is slightly more generous and allows that it is not merely a matter of our baser instincts that leads to misplaced condescension, but also the progressive development of scientificity that will give us the courage to give up on the desire to fit mobility to a mobile as we become increasingly aware of the complexity of the physical world. I fear that the history of psychology in the intervening years has proved that his generosity was misplaced. When debate in the memory wars comes down to a question of where in the brain we ought best to place trauma it is surely time to admit the progressive capacity to measure more things will not be the route to our salvation.

Ought we then to conclude that Bergson has no relevance for contemporary Psychology? On the contrary, I would argue strongly that the problems that

Bergson identified are now becoming particularly acute within the discipline. Let me risk the cliché that now, more than ever, Bergsonism is entirely what is needed to renew the psychology of memory. Let me offer three brief illustrations:

1. There is now a shared consensus around the idea that all psychological memory is reconstruction (see Conway & Loveday, 2015). Whilst this represents a colossal shift from the storage-retrieval model that has hitherto dominated the psychology of memory, it opens up a whole series of questions which psychologists are singularly ill-equipped to address. Is 'the psychological' then principally concerned with current matters at hand, in such a way that memory consists of purely projecting the demands of present actions into the past? What is the status of what is reconstructed – can we make of the past whatever we like based on our current needs? How can a past that is irreversibly 'gone' remain part of the present? It is here that Bergson's unique qualitative formulation of duration in relation to spatiality is crucial – the past may no longer directly 'act' on the present, but it has not really passed. So the question for psychologists is not around interpretation or a semiotic reconstruction of the past, but rather of the ways in which duration affords a topological re-organisation of matter. As Anne Lefebvre (this volume) demonstrates in her discussion of Gilbert Simondon, the psychological is best articulated as a concern with individuation within a field rather than some notion of progressive states attributed to a given entity.
2. The clarity with which Bergson demonstrates that perception and memory cannot be understood in a representational framework in any straightforward way is clearly challenging for a discipline that has set its conceptual roots in just such a framework. Nevertheless, whilst it would be premature to claim that psychology is susceptible to 'non-representational' arguments (although see Brown & Stenner, 2009), there is an increasing concern with the 'function' or 'action-orientation' of memory that is shared across experimental and

qualitative/phenomenological approaches within the discipline (see Brown & Reavey, 2018). Remembering is an activity that expands and transforms our 'foothold' in the present rather than an attempt at the preservation of the past. But this shift towards a pragmatic conception of memory raises some uncomfortable psychological questions – what then is the relationship between the temporal, as the source of identity and continuity in being, and the spatial, as the immediate causal nexus in which our actions are embedded? The responses usually involve recourse to one of the many dualisms that psychologists rely upon – mind/body; person/social; long term memory/working memory etc. A better starting point might perhaps be in the tension that Frederic Worms (this volume) identifies between the vital and the critical in Bergson, that is, between the liberty of invention, and the grounding in oppositions and relations. In work with Paula Reavey, we have explored how ambiguity is a powerful resource in remembering (see Brown & Reavey, 2015). Persons who have experienced difficult or traumatic events often have recollections that do not make sense to them, things do not really 'add up'. For example, events may be recollected out of sequence, actions may seem lacking in intentionality. But at the same time, they often feel a pull to resolve and make sense of their memories. It is this tension between felt experience and meaning – the vital and the critical – that defines living with a difficult past. We try to start our analyses in the middle of that tension rather than apportion it to one pole or the other.

3. Psychologists have often opposed their approach to memory to social approaches. The latter are usually identified with Maurice Halbwachs' classic work on collective memory (1980; 1992). Halbwachs has been much misunderstood with the Anglophone world, with the interpretation of collective memory as equivalent to some kind of 'group mind' having taken root long ago. This has been compounded by an introductory essay by Mary Douglas (1980) that stresses the opposition between Halbwachs and Bergson as a difference between a sociological functionalism and a psychological mysticism. Together with David Middleton, we have tried to argue to the contrary that the notion of experience which is developed in

Halbwachs work cuts across any straightforward distinction between the individual and the collective, and that, moreover, when this is understood in relation to Bergsonian *durée*, the link between individual and collective experiences of the past, and the interdependency between our memory and that of others, becomes clearer (Middleton & Brown, 2005). Rather than study remembering as an isolated act, our attention should be drawn to the 'polyrhythms' formed by intersecting duration, in the way that Yasuhiko Murakami (this volume) has suggested. We see Halbwachs and Bergson as united in a productive tension, as thinkers who together set a revised agenda for the psychology of memory.

Let me conclude by returning to the question of false memory. Bergson's description of a 'state' in *The Perception of Change* remains instructive – 'when the two changes, that of the object and that of the subject take place under particular conditions, they produced the particular appearance that we call a 'state'. And once in possession of 'states', our mind recomposes change with them' (p.146). A state, that is to say an abstraction or a patterning of the relationship, is what holds between subject and object. It is not produced by the subject, nor is it inherent in the object. We might say that insofar as the psychology of memory has to do with states then these are arrangements of subjects and objects, emergent effects of certain kinds of patternings. Now we can understand perfectly well how, as Bergson claims, these states can be elevated to a higher order of abstraction by a subject who claims or lives out the state as though it were reality itself. This is akin to the passenger on the train who reaches out their hand to a fellow passenger on a passing train in the false belief that the trains are not moving at the same speed but are actually stationary. What deserves to be called a 'psychological state' is then this movement where one duration grasps another such that an apparent stability is created. This coming together of durations can be used as means of turning around on one's own duration but this does not render it as a personal property or as the product of a bounded subjectivity.

Returning now to Lost in the Mall, Jim persuades his brother that he was once lost in the shopping mall as a child. Chris comes, apparently, to believe this. LIM predicts that Chris will include the false event suggested to him by Jim to produce a different story about their joint past. But it does so without taking into account anything about their relationship so far, other than the effects of the suggestion procedure itself, as though this were something like a chemical reaction rather than one interaction situated with respect to the broad and deep history shared by two brothers. The experiment hypothesises that a given state of affairs will come about (the participant will recall something that did not happen), irrespective of the particular circumstances in which the experiment is conducted (a party, a classroom, a laboratory) and the specific unfolding of the interaction between the confederate and the participant. LIM seeks to abolish time and place in the name of predicting a determinate change in the subjective qualities of its target participant – Chris will develop a false belief.

But time and place are entirely what is at stake here in the constitution of a psychological state that implicates the durations of the two brothers. In asking his brother to recall an event from their shared history, Jim asks Chris to turn around on his own past from the 'state' that is formed by their respective durations being co-ordinated through the time of the experiment. It is the peculiar timing of the experiment – being asked 'do you remember?' and then being invited to fit ones duration into the intelligibility of the sequence of questions that follows – that brings the two brothers together like the passengers on moving trains.

Jim and Chris are hooked into one another's duration. Each depends upon the time of the other. Jim is made to wait until Chris comes to affirm the false memory. Chris is made to wait in whatever he is doing by Jim's insistence that they discuss this particular episode from their childhood. What is in fact crucial to LIM is this simple fact of Jim & Chris's shared childhood. It is because Jim's duration, his lived time, includes that of Chris that he is able to discuss the childhood episode. It is less that they share a common duration, than that their durations are overlapping, interdependent with one another. But Jim's folding of

Chris's duration into his own is not a greeting, like the train passengers, a mutual envelopment of one duration by another. It is a form of betrayal. Jim is attempting to discredit Chris's relationship to his own past.

LIM is then an extremely important experiment for the psychology of memory, and for the 'memory wars' themselves. It tells us about the complexities of relations and the ways in which memory, as duration comes to be 'inserted' into the present. Our foothold in the present is always limited, selective. As such it is structured by the relations we have to others and the forms of mediation that allow us to extract or abstract the bits of the world that appear most useful to us. This is accomplished relationally in tandem with others. Chris struggles to make sense of the peculiar circumstances in which he finds himself through interaction with his brother, and with the setting itself. Both of them turn around on their past, on their individual durations, which overlap and envelop one another. Again, this is a relational matter – how does our past show up when it is juxtaposed with that of another, when my experience becomes folded into yours and yours into mine, in a kind of grasping, enveloping, intensifying and unfolding?

I propose that this kind of attention to the relational constitution of memory through co-ordinating mutual, overlapping durations offers a way forward through some of the self-made paradoxes in the psychology of memory that came so dramatically to the fore in the memory wars. How is it that someone can remember something in therapy that did not remember in the same way previously? How can such emergent memories be treated by the legal system? Following Bergson, we may define the psychological states involved in memory as the constitution of apparent stability from the overlapping of durations, such that a selective turning around on a jointly produced manifold of pasts becomes possible. The turning around or mobilization of memory accomplished in therapy is not then reducible to personal reflection or the exploration of a subjectively defined past. It is rather a jointly accomplished work of holding together several different durations, which expand and overlap with one another, including the time of the therapeutic encounter. When the client is asked to offer

testimony in court based on what may have occurred during therapy, what happens is not the repetition of the process but rather a holding together of a very different set of durations, with different timings and relations. Hence the psychological state jointly produced in therapy is not the same as that produced in court. The error is to consider it possible to abstract the state from the relations and durations in which it is constituted and to seek an equivalence between states across settings (see Brown & Reavey, 2019 for an extended argument). Now it may be that to think the relations between these setting-specific psychological states requires a more complex image than that of passing trains, but in restoring a sense of mobility inherent to any version of the psychological, Bergson makes it possible to hope still for a psychology that could overcome the limitations he so acutely identified in 1911.

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¹ For a fuller analysis of this episode, see Ashmore, Brown & MacMillan, 2005, and for a broader discussion of false memory research see Brown & Reavey, 2017.

² The idea of 'body memory' has been taken up in an entirely different way by the phenomenologist Thomas Fuchs, who has provided an extensive treatment of how habits and bodily practices structure memory within an enactive cognition framework (see Fuchs, 2012; 2017)