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Some Reflective Analysis of Recollecting

ABSTRACT: Phenomenologists have usually focused on perceiving as a source of cognition, but what about recollecting? What is it? How does it work? And can it also be a source of cognition? Answers are attempted here with some help from Dorion Cairns.

In recollection my attention goes back to some past experience that has been dropped and I grasp it anew. I recollect not simply the *thing* I experienced in the past but the whole context—the past-presented and appresented background, and *myself* as past perceiver.¹

INTRODUCTION

While searching for something else in the Dorion Cairns Nachlass, I noticed many references to recollection. While “memory” occurs fewer times and “to remember” or transforms of it, especially “I remember,” occur many more times, “to recollect” or transforms of it occur frequently. Further study showed that “recollecting” is the subject of the most significant remarks by Cairns, e.g., “recollecting is recollecting *something*” (037936), and for that reason, among others, it will be used to name the theme of this analysis.

Cairns’s scattered remarks about recollecting are usually made in passing and nearly always brief. The epigraph above is the most comprehensive statement. In the exposition below there will be page citations from the Nachlass to show significant debts, but only one other quotation from the Nachlass and two references to publications by Cairns will occur. It should be emphasized, however, that what I am expressing here is what I have accepted from my teacher phenomenologically. This is how he related to his teacher, Edmund Husserl, i.e., not by expressing interpretations of texts, but by expressing what, with the help

¹ Nachlass of Dorion Cairns, 037275. Hereafter cited with six-digit embedded page numbers.

of his teacher's writings, he was able himself reflectively to observe, confirm, correct, and extend.²

A running example will be useful and can first of all help clarify a central concept. Here I can recollect something that happened when I was about nine years old. It happened a few months after I got a handsome shelter dog about two-years old who was already named Skipper, who quickly accepted that we were his new family, and who could be let loose in the neighborhood and be expected to come home by supper time, but who tended to remain in front of our house and, as my mother put it, "watch the world go by."

One thing I recollect especially vividly was the time that Skipper saw me walking up the street from school, rushed toward me yipping, whining, and wagging his long tail so hard he was almost falling over first to one side and then to the other, and finally almost knocked me over in the attempt to lick my face. Of course I had a family that loved me, but this has always been the clearest expression of unconditional love that I can recollect. He and I were pals for a decade until, while I was away in the Marine Corps, he was hit by a car. I have recollected many times how I was greeted that afternoon on the way home from school some 65 years ago.

In his scattered remarks about recollecting, my teacher Cairns would take such an example and restrict it to the recollecting of a sensuous perceiving of a physical thing (011120, cf. 011066). That certainly simplifies the case, but I believe it important to make clear that what we first find when we reflect on our mental lives is better called "the encountering of a cultural thing" (and in my example, it is a matter of an animate cultural thing, a beloved dog). Although I will also

² Cf. Lester Embree, *Reflective Analysis* (Bucharest: Zeta Books, 2006).

sometimes speak of “intentional processes,” Cairns’s ultimately preferred English equivalent for Husserl’s *“Erlebnisse,”* it should not be forgotten that “encounterings,” which I prefer, include not only experiencing (of which sensuous perceiving is the most significant species), but alsothetic or positional components that can be called, in broad significations, “believing,” “valuing,” and “willing” and can furthermore be said to be “doxic,” “pathic,” and “praxic.” Much is thus abstracted from if one speaks with Cairns of just sensuous perceiving of physical things.

Physical things are correlatively abstracted by Cairns in his analyses from what we originally encounter as concrete cultural objects. These are things that as such essentially include intrinsic and extrinsic uses, values, and belief characteristics, all correlative with the pertinent positing components in the encounterings of them. Accordingly, what are recollected concretely are encounterings that are, technically speaking, intentional to things and things-as-encountered. And if one reflects on the recollecting of something-as-recollected, one can recognize that it too is an encountering and that the thing recollected is also a thing-as-encountered, in this case an especially delightful memory.

Encounterings in what follows will nevertheless usually be distinguished by the type of experiencings in their foundations, i.e., perceptual, recollective, or expectational in broad significations, the perceiving of animate things or so-called “empathy” included, but the entire concrete encounterings that such types of experiencing components specify are always implied in such abstract references. My teacher was well aware of all that I try to capture with the concept I express with “encountering” (e.g., 013065), but offers no word for it himself unless it be “intending,” which he does not clarify to this effect.

Turning again to the greeting of me by Skipper long ago, certainly he was visually perceiving me as he came running, but he was also motivated by positive valuing to strive to do what he did upon reaching me. I can also recollect the delight I felt with his approach and how he was correlatively delightful for me. Moreover, whenever I recollect what happened that afternoon on a street in San Francisco long ago, I certainly believe in it, but what predominates in my recollecting is more the delight, i.e., the intense positive valuing. In short, there is a recollecting of the long past encounter with Skipper. (What is recollected cannot be called a “recollect” like what is perceived is called a “percept,” but if need be one could speak of a “recollectum” and “recollecta.”)

The epistemological significance of the analysis below will be shown at the end of this essay, but most of what follows is a series of verifiable distinctions making up an analysis. First, however, what I call a Zombie theory needs to be attacked in order to clear the ground. This is the theory of so-called memory images. They are part of the representationalism by which centuries of modern philosophy and psychology have been stymied. By this theory, there is an image or representation allegedly occurring at the same time as the act of recollecting and standing for the past event. To be sure, there can be what can be called “representational experiencing,” e.g., the experiencing I have of my dog when I look at a photo of him, which photo is also in the now with my looking at it, and plainly there can be recollecting of cases of past representational experiencing, but it is a grave error to believe that all experiencing is representational.

I cannot explain the attraction of this widely held false theory, but I suspect that it includes accepting that a verbal expression, picture, or other representation is able to refer to things distant in space and/or time but that the

mental processes phenomenologists focus on are oddly considered unable to be attentive to things not here and now. Perhaps it relies on the “thingly thinking” whereby mental processes are mistaken for the somatic processes intimately accompanying them in sensuous perceiving and reference is somehow reduced to causal connections, although, interestingly, recollecting is not embodied like sensuous perceiving is, e.g., I do not need to have my eyes open (or closed) to recollect encountering Skipper. And perhaps the so-called memory image also somehow arises in part from an alleged incompatibility of things as perceived and things as mathematically understood in physics.³

The problems with this theory that has been killed and then risen from the dead many times is first of all that of how one can tell that the memory image corresponds to the past event accurately or not if one does not have independent access to that event? Then again, when I recollect the loving encounter with Skipper 65 years ago and some 3,000 miles from where I am composing this text, there is nothing like a brief film that plays “in my head,” as some say, simultaneously with the operation of recollecting. Phenomenologically, I cannot find any memory images in the now, in my head, or anywhere else.

SOME REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS

Phenomenological accounts are typically not structured logically with assumptions and conclusions and phenomenological method is also not

³ Probably the preoccupation of many colleagues with language plays a role in some way as well. Certainly one can recollect operations of expressing and comprehending and also various sorts of syntactical operations involved in them, but exploring such would extend the present analysis excessively and thus the task can be left for another day and/or other investigators. In the latter connection, cf. Dorion Cairns, “Syntactical Acts and Syntactical Objects,” *Husserl and the Logic of Experience*, ed. Gary Banham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 104-130, which includes some typical passing references to recollecting.

argumentative but instead descriptive. This is to say it suffices that a series of distinctions are clarified regarding something that one has a common-sense understanding of to begin with and, if need be, corrected so that in the end one has a deeper understanding of the thing in question. Seven points can be made.

In the first place, recollecting can be *straightforward* or *reflective*. If it is straightforward, one observes that which was previously encountered, e.g., Skipper running down the street at me, to the disregard of the past encountering of it, which is always already there as well. In reflective recollecting, however, one not only includes the earlier encountering in one's theme but also that which is encountered as-it-is-encountered. In that case there is much to discern and describe, e.g., how the visual appearance of the dog grew larger and the auditory appearance of his joyful sounds grew louder as he approached, but also the positive value he had for me while I was encountering him.

Husserlians speak of noetico-noematic analysis in this connection and it is in this respect especially that the present analysis as has been illustrated initially with the clarification of the concepts of encountering and things-as-encountered. Incidentally, while it may for some reason be factually impossible to recollect something that was earlier encountered, it is ideally possible to do so. Always bearing in mind the possibility of reflection, it is often nevertheless convenient to emphasize straightforward recollecting. Interesting, perhaps, is how "a memory" in contrast with expressions like "a thing recollected" can foster the overlooking of the operation of recollecting itself. The same holds when one speaks of "futures" and "pasts" while overlooking the expectings and recollectings correlatively intensitive to them.

In the second place, like all encountering of realities, recollecting can be *serious* or *fictive* (“fictive intending” is, following Cairns, preferable to “imagination” because there is not even a verbal hint of images in it). As for ideal objects, being atemporal, they cannot be recollected, but the processes intensive to them, evidencing included, are in time and can be recollected. I do seriously recollect my encounter with Skipper but can also readily feign a neighbor across the street witnessing what happened from the side and thus from a different standpoint than mine and through different appearances. I can also fictively enhance what is recollected seriously, e.g., pretend that Skipper wore a bell that tinkled as he approached.

In the third place, Cairns remarks that the concrete sequence of events can only be recollected seriously in the concrete order in which it occurred and thus not backwards, as it were, although separated parts can be discontinuously recollected out of their original order (037279), e.g., Skipper jumping on me recollected first and then him noticing me and starting his run recollected second and separately. I would add that it is often worth comparing the recollected with the expected and that an expected series of events, e.g., climbing a staircase, can be expected concretely in either order, especially if feigned (but one can expect blindly but still seriously). A past can, of course, be feigned occurring in either direction. Moreover, one can recollect expecting, expect recollecting, expect expecting, recollect recollecting, feign recollecting a serious perceiving, etc., etc. Indeed, with every operation of recollecting there is always a horizon of previously actualized and future actualizable recollectings of the same “recollectum.”

In the fourth place, while things in the past fade as they continually get “paster and paster,” things expected from the future may be said to get “sooner and sooner” before they happen. This is a difference in what Husserl calls the “manner of givenness” between things in the past and future that can be reflectively discerned. It is possible to continue uninterruptedly observing reflectively something right after it stopped happening, i.e., was no longer “impressional,” and began to be immediately past, but recollecting is what happens after the previously encountered thing has been let go of or dropped and is then picked up again. This can happen many times, such as I have done over the years with respect to Skipper’s greeting of me that day. In Husserl’s terms, recollection is not primary but secondary memory. Without special effort, what is recollected the first time is clearer and more extensive than it will be later (016486). And episodes as recollected typically go faster than they originally did.

In the fifth place, Husserl distinguished between primary and secondary passivity and, in contrast, mental activities that have the ego or I engaged in them. Cairns preferred to call passivity “automaticity” and I accept that and go further and speak of “operations” rather than acts, which makes a further distinction between active and passive or receptive operations easier to refer to. In operational recollecting, a great deal is always already pre-given automatically, and similarities and contrasts with what is perceptually encountered passively often affects operations of recollecting, as can the original prominence of the event (037280), e.g., my encounter with Skipper. Things are more easily forgotten, i.e., uncollectable, that did not stand out to begin with, e.g., my likely brushing of my teeth the morning of the day of the encounter with my dog. (Much can be learned through experimental observation in this connection, as

well as about such things as short- and long-term recollection). It was an active operation of recollecting when I once tried to recollect how and when I acquired and what eventually happened to the many automobiles I have owned since I was 15. There is thus a difference between recollectings that are searching or exploring one's past, on the one hand, and memories, on the other hand, that "come to mind," i.e., are received by the ego or I, and evoke operations.

In the sixth place, what is recollected is recollected in a cultural setting with underlying spatial, temporal, and causal dimensions. One experiences things not only as having presented themselves but also as appresenting much more, including times, places, and causes beyond what one previously encountered and thus cannot recollect as well as the touches and sounds of things that were only seen, sights of things only heard, etc. There is a similarity between locating things in relation to other things in space and dating things in relation to what is recollected as simultaneous, earlier, and later immediately and mediatedly. I date and locate the encounter with Skipper by when I attended primary school and by where I lived at the time.

In the seventh place, while primarily automatic processes cannot be engaged in and secondarily automatic habitual and traditional processes can be engaged in but do not need to be, operations such as recollecting are active or receptive and do have the I engaged in them actively or passively. The I is transcendent of mental life, but on the inward rather than the outward side. She is reflectively recollectable seriously and also fictively. Rendering *Erlebnis* as "awareness," whereas I would of course use "encountering," Cairns writes,

The identity of the ego is not merely an identity in *retention*, a matter of habitual evidence. In so far as a past awareness is recollected, it is given in

present awareness as evidently an awareness in which an ego, now given as “past,” actually or potentially lived when the recollected awareness was impressional. The present recollection is intrinsically an awareness belonging to an ego, the “present” or impressionally given ego. In the present awareness, the impressionally given ego and the recollectively given, retained ego, are paired to form an evident synthesis of identification. The I who now remembers is the same I who then perceived. This founded, identical, and enduring ego may be reflectively grasped in evidence (018091).⁴

In short, the whole field of recollection is thus structured, in Husserlian terms, as ego-cogito-cogitatum.

EPISTEMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Dorion Cairns’s definition, which I agree with, has epistemology as a philosophical subdiscipline about critically justified believings in things (axiology and praxiology are parallel disciplines devoted to valuings and willings of things). The question of justification here presupposes an understanding of the believing involved and for recollecting the above analysis is perhaps a good start. Cairns’s remarks also often usefully compare and contrast recollecting and perceiving. Thus, both include direct experiencing of the things intended to in them, but perceiving is original and recollecting derivative. Moreover, both are “protodoxic,” which is to say that just as perceiving is believing so too is recollecting believing. In yet other words, the awareness of what appears

⁴ Concerning intensive synthesis, cf. Dorion Cairns: “The Theory of Intentionality in Husserl,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 32 (1999): 116-24. Reprinted in *Phenomenology: Critical Concepts in Philosophy*, eds. Dermot Moran and Lester Embree, (London: Routledge, 2004), Vol. I, 184-192.

immediately founds and motivates simple positive believing that holds unless somehow modalized into doubting or disbelief. Absent such modalization, this protodoxic thesis, which is founded on and motivated by the awareness of appearances adumbrating the thing, is *prima facie* justified.

To go beyond *prima facie* justification, i.e., to confirm, first of all, the justification or unjustifiability of something recollected, one can appeal to more and better recollecting and in some cases also perceiving (011151). Examination or criticism requires maximal clarity and distinctness. Because he later wore a bell, I might erroneously believe in vague recollection that I heard it in that special encounter, but careful critical recollecting should overcome that error.

There is always striving to make the obscure clearer. A great deal of error is due to confusion and obscurity in recollection. Repeated recollecting, even years later, is confirmatory. This is like how what is expected is confirmed or cancelled when the thing expected becomes impressional or is later clearly and distinctly recollected. The originally presented in perception outweighs the recollected when they conflict, but the recollected seems to outweigh the appresented (010946). When believing in a past is canceled, there is still believing in something that was otherwise back then.

Illusions are possible in recollection just as they are in perception, but things are initially accepted as veridical and only recognized as illusory on the basis of subsequent recollecting or perceptual encountering. In the latter respect, Skipper might have been perceptually encountered at first as coming to greet me, but then ran past me to greet his former owner who was behind me. As for an illusions in recollection, I have not been able to think of one involving the Skipper's greeting me, but if one had recollected putting a \$100 bill in the money

belt that one continually wore and then found no such bill there, the recollection could be denounced as illusory such that I was recollecting an intention as an action and had never put the bill there, although I might also suspect that the bill had been stolen, a suspicion that other bills being still there would discourage. Absent illusions and other problems, recollecting is critically justified by more and more clearer and more distinct confirmatory recollecting and even perceiving, e.g., the bill I recollect putting in the belt is seen to still be there, and even in some cases recollecting is intersubjectively confirmed and thus objectively justified. If there had been seriously a witnessing neighbor across the street and the next day she had said, "Wow! You were certainly pleased yesterday at how your dog greeted you!" what I recollected would have gained some intersubjective weight.

Serious recollecting justifies believing in previously actual particulars, e.g., Skipper's behavior on that unforgettable afternoon, and fictive recollecting, e.g., of the feigned neighbor across the street, justifies believing in a possibility, the recollected actuality also justifying the possibility of the past actual thing. Clear and distinct serious and fictive recollectings are then evidencings of the actuality and/or possibility of the things intended to in them and on that basis there can be empirical or factual propositional truths about them.

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