

Book analysis

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Rewriting the Soul by Ian Hacking In which way is memory related to the formation of Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD)? According to Ian Hacking, memory plays a pivotal role in the creation of our personality or our idea of 'self'. We are just the compounding of our 'collected describable memories'. The word 'describable' is the key here, for it suggests that memory does not exist outside of verbal description. This is especially true vis-à-vis identity or personality formation. One might argue of the verifiable phenomena of visual memory, as in those occurring in vivid dreams. But upon careful analysis we realize how these imageries are triggered by labels and descriptions of psycho-emotive import for the subject. Those individuals who have a compulsion to erase most painful memories from recall are the most vulnerable to become MPD.

2. What is the psychological mechanism that nudges a susceptible individual toward acquiring MPD?

Those individuals who have been subject to abuse or trauma as a child have a strong incentive to discard remnants of those experiences. The trouble is that memory is a physiological-neurological construct as opposed to being purely a facet of the mind. Moreover, even this tendency toward partial amnesia is promoted by a 'self' that is in itself conditioned by early traumatic experience. Hence the subject is twice challenged to relieve himself/herself from the conflicted mental makeup. The outcome of this churning is the compromised solution of a MPD, whereby, the subject swings between the original composite personality and the forced-aspiring personality. The former is the personality as it is, whereas the latter is the personality desired.

3. What are the uses of descriptions or labels in human experience of an

event?

The interesting thing about memory is how it is tagged with verbal identifiers. These identifiers are culturally determined and are usually dependent upon the prevalent ideas, norms and fashions attached to the particular cultural milieu. In this context, memory is an extension of the language faculty in humans. Usually, it is the most emotive experience which is also the most memorable. Emotions arise out of subjective feelings. They are also fleeting and replicable in various similar situations. Hence our psyches crave for a method in which the valued experience is concretized. Words and set-phrases that were earlier acquired from the cultural environment are perused for this purpose. Hence, to answer a famous literary poser, calling a Rose by any other name, changes everything about the object and its associations.

4. How does 'semantic contagion' affect human cognition and behaviour?

As Hacking observes in the book, the process of acquisition of memory and even the development of intelligence has a strong basis in semantics. Yet, the obvious danger is that the semantics might 'justify' apparently perverse or unfair actions by individuals. Take, say, the term 'child sex abuse'. The very fact that it has been coined and has been in currency contains within it the rationale for why the phenomenon exists. The answer may only underscore the fact that some people have a tendency to act in abhorrent ways towards children. But the mere fact and categorization of the concept, curiously enough, perpetrates the phenomenon. Herein is the danger of semantic contagion.

Work Cited:

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Hacking, Ian (1998), *Rewriting the Soul: Multiple Personality and the Sciences of Memory*, Princeton University Press