

The Desire for Memory and the Resurgence of the Individual

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Abstract: The social dimension of memory research has gradually compressed the space for individual memory, posing a crisis for the existence of individual memory. This article attempts to graft Jacques Lacan's theory onto the issue of memory, proposing three theoretical formulations: the Real of Memory, the Imaginary of Memory, and the Symbolic of Memory. Through these formulations, the article aims to explore the mechanisms of memory operation with the individual as the central focus of discussion and theoretical anchor. Furthermore, it reconsiders why the "capitalized memory" actively retreats and concedes through the operation of desire or lack, ultimately attaining a recognition-based satisfaction.

Keywords: memory, three realms of memory, desire

1. Introduction

Since the concept of "collective memory" was proposed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, the social dimension of memory research has entered the academic field both domestically and internationally. According to Maurice Halbwachs, "people usually obtain their memories within society. It is within society that they can recall, recognize, and locate memories." [1] The research path of Maurice Halbwachs has been expanded in subsequent memory studies to a broader scope, giving rise to many concepts such as social memory, national memory, and collective memory. These concepts metaphorically transfer the memory processes occurring in individual brains to the social level, thus depersonalizing the aforementioned memory concepts. Within this framework, the collective, social, national, and ethnic realms seem to have become self-evident subjects of memory, replacing the position of the individual/subject. The concept of memory, continuously represented by the capitalized memory of the collective/social/national/ethnic realms, has overshadowed discussions on individual memory. As a result, the theoretical possibilities of examining individual memory have been compressed, and such discussions have been exiled to the outdated ruins of history.

However, as German scholar Astrid Erll points out, "there is no collective memory that exists detached from individuals, only embodied in media and institutions." [2] The essence of memory lies in its belonging to and being an integral part of individuals, it is "mine," and "memory, along with forgetting...is not only fundamentally individual, but also essentially individual." [3] In other

words, memory is inherently linked to individuals, and individuals shape their own memories. To reestablish the fundamental connection between memories and individuals, one must first return to a traumatic past that cannot be reversed - the Real of Memory.

2. The Original Loss: The Real of Memory

In Jacques Lacan's theoretical framework, the Real is the primordial place of irretrievable loss for the "unconscious subject." It is the traumatic core of the subject, the domain that signifiers/language always attempt to reach but continuously miss. In other words, attempting to describe the Real itself through signifiers/language is a paradox because the Real "is fundamentally just a 'nothing,' a substantial non-existence, an impossible possibility, something that can only appear in language but cannot truly be articulated by language. It is a traumatic core of existence." [4] In this sense, this paper establishes a connection between the "Real" and the issue of memory to obtain a theoretical formulation called the "Real of Memory." The aim is to describe a state of individual memory: individuals possess a desire to return to the past, but since the original scenes that generate individual memory are unreproducible and irretrievable, the original scenes of memory become a state of trauma that individuals constantly attempt to capture through signifiers/language but always struggle to grasp. This state of memory emphasizes that there never exists an objective and static past; there are only ever-changing configurations and endless "frustrating" representations of the original scenes. These representations may manifest as conscious acts of recollection or as unconscious references for understanding the present, as Paul Ricoeur states, "We experience the world in a context of causal connections to past events and things" [5]. However, whenever individuals try to retrace and reproduce memories that have fallen into the Real, they not only experience a fantasy-like false satisfaction but also serve as reminders of the existence of the traumatic core, deepening the trauma of the irretrievability of memories in the Real. Thus, individuals will always cycle back and forth in this Sisyphean effort.

On the other hand, the theoretical formulation of the "Real of Memory" aims to emphasize a "real" memory based on the presence and lived experience of the individual, rather than a "non-real" memory based on social construction and imaginative experiences. The former type of memory always possesses a priority of reality compared to the latter. The concept of the "Real of Memory" attempts to provide theoretical priority to individual memory based on temporal and spatial presence, as this type of memory always exhibits more vividness and a greater range of meaningful interpretations compared to other forms of "memory."

3. The Reproduction of Mirroring: The Imaginary of Memory

For Jacques Lacan, the various issues of the Imaginary originate from the infant who has not yet acquired language, projecting their physical image in the mirror during the mirror stage. In this projection, the infant, in a fragmented state of perceiving bodily experiences, "integrates their immature, uncoordinated, fragmented body into a unified and coordinated whole through the imaginary image in the mirror in an anticipated manner, thereby forming an illusion of an ideal unity of the self." [6] Under the influence of this illusion, the structure of narcissism begins to form in individuals, and throughout their lives, individuals endure the tearing and pain of pursuing an idealized self that can never be fully realized. The mismatch between this idealized self-image and lived experience causes an "infinite distress in the circuit from the inner world to the outer world, bringing endless torment to self-verification." [7]

When the "Imaginary" is juxtaposed with the issue of memory to form the expression of the "Imaginary of Memory," it refers to an internal process that occurs in the individual's act of recollection: the mirroring reproduction of memories that can no longer be returned to and have

fallen into the Real. This mirroring reproduction that occurs in the act of recollection forms a paradoxical relationship: the reproduced scenes and the original scenes to which the memories belong are both a mirrored relationship on the surface of representation and a false relationship that has been unconsciously modified and rewritten by the individual. The reason it is a duplicative mirroring relationship is that the individual's consciousness retains the elements of the original memory scene, and the act of recollection is the reactivation of these elements. However, the problem lies in the fact that this mirroring reproduction is mixed with elements of falsehood and illusion. This stems from a tendency of "shaping" in the individual's act of recollection—a tendency to rework and reconstruct the original memory scene, turning it into an idealized, illusory memory scene. It is worth noting that this shaping tendency is particularly important for those original scenes that individuals unconsciously avoid and that possess a certain traumatic quality. Individuals must "control this part of memory to balance the relationship between the traumatic past and reality, adapting to the intervention of traumatic experiences in their daily lives through various means such as repression, release, sorting, or analysis." [8] The shaping tendency in the imaginary of memory precisely aims to repair and adjust traumatic scenes, allowing individuals to ultimately obtain imaginative solace and false healing.

4. The Emergence of the Father's Law: The Symbolic Realm of Memory

The moment an individual acquires language is the moment they enter the symbolic realm. As Jacques Lacan stated, "Through words - which are constituted by absence - absence itself is named at an original moment," [9] and the symbolic realm of memory primarily refers to the description and manifestation of memory in terms of speech/language. However, as discussed earlier, the manifestation of the real realm of memory through speech/language can only be a missed opportunity, a "slip of the tongue," and each missed opportunity and "slip of the tongue" leaves behind remnants that have not yet been manifested by speech/language, repeatedly encountering frustration and trauma in their inability to reach the real realm of memory. It is precisely in this experience of frustration that the prohibition of the "paternal law" in the symbolic realm gains the possibility of entering the individual's inner world. For the individual, the operation of the symbolic realm is the "subject's recognition of the paternal function, the paternal law, or the 'name of the father' belonging to the symbolic order and the field of the Other, and primarily the recognition of the prohibition of the paternal law, the 'no' of the father." [10] The "paternal law" and the "prohibition of the father" as hidden social entities without a tangible form evoke the individual's symbolic identification, a form of recognition of the Other through the gaze of others.

Therefore, the theoretical expression of the symbolic realm of memory not only refers to the individual's use of speech/language to manifest the real realm of memory but also refers to the inscription of the individual by others in the name of the "capitalized memory." This inscription is achieved through the construction of cognition/knowledge/common sense, leading to the creation and revision of individual memory, and subsequently completing the subconscious internalization and identification of the "paternal law" by the individual. As a form of cognition/knowledge/common sense, the "capitalized memory" threatens both the nominal and existential aspects of the "individual memory" that is based on the real realm of memory. The "capitalized memory" does not have to possess the real realm of memory, nor does it have access to it, but it can inscribe the individual through the powerful mechanisms of social power structures, dominant ideologies, mainstream value systems, and so on, thereby dwelling within the individual and acquiring a long-lasting and stable existence. In this process, the individual internalizes the "paternal law" and the "prohibition of the father" as a strict superego, and under the operation of this superego, the self becomes an effective social existence. This is an inevitable and unavoidable supra-historical outcome of the intrusion of the "capitalized memory" into the individual's inner

world.

5. Desire's Loop: Scarcity and Fulfillment

The realms of memory, imagination, and symbolism do not follow a linear sequence but rather constitute three mechanisms of individual memory that coexist and interact with each other. From a logical perspective, it is the imagination and symbolism of memory that drive the logical existence of the realm of memory. However, within the intertwined nature of these three realms of memory, there exists a more fundamental element: desire. It is desire itself that allows us to understand the operation of the three realms of memory and the interaction between the individual and memory from a more fundamental level.

The desire to return to the past and the irreversibility of trauma become a kind of scarcity that constantly seeks fulfillment. The realms of imagination and symbolism in memory only serve as symbolic compensations for this scarcity. When the subject enters the realm of symbolism, which is permeated by the “paternal law,” the subject continuously responds to the call of the “paternal law” in order to obtain a stable social position. In the state of identification with the “paternal law” and the anxious response to the call of the “father’s prohibition,” the subject’s alienated desire is trapped in an endless loop of “fulfillment-scarcity-renewed fulfillment.” In this sense, when we return to the question of memory, and when we revisit the narratives of “capitalized memory” that surpass individual memory and are named after collectives/social groups/nations/states, we gain a new insight. It is precisely within these “capitalized memories” that the subject derives a perverse pleasure from the internalization of the “paternal law,” which compensates for the subject’s scarcity, satisfies the subject’s unfulfilled desires, stabilizes a state of perpetual anxiety, and acknowledges an unequal master-slave relationship with the “paternal law.”

Therefore, individual memory begins to present another level of extreme importance and urgency. As Jacques Lacan said, “Do not give way on your desire.” When we do not give way to desire, we begin to confront our scarcity. When we become self-aware of and accept our scarcity and desires in a self-reflective manner, we can free ourselves from being summoned by the big Other, from obtaining false satisfaction and recognition that are perpetually delayed and exiled, and we return to individual memory. It is a type of memory that is severed from desire, the paternal law, and recognition to the maximum extent. It is at this moment that individual memory opens itself up to the true meaning of its existence – the moment when we do not give way to desire is also the moment we return to individual memory.

6. Conclusion

The realm of memory is the foundation of memory, the source that allows individual memory to be memory, and the basis for distinguishing individual memory from other types of memory concepts. Only the realm of memory can lay the foundation for individual memory. Only by grounding ourselves in the realm of memory can our discourse, discussion, and judgment about memory be “rooted” in memory. Without the realm of memory, “memory” becomes a form of imaginative or socially constructed “memory.” The realms of imagination and symbolism in memory are connected to the operation of mirroring, shaping, self-idealization, the paternal law, and desire, revealing a certain truth about individual scarcity and hinting at the intrusiveness carried by “capitalized memory” of collectives/social groups/nations/states. The concept of the “three realms of memory” attempts to bridge the oppositions, conflicts, and gaps between different memory concepts in a different way and make them into a whole. When the question of memory returns to the individual, it may be precisely the moment when memory belongs to us again and regains the dual value of reality and history. It will also be the moment when humans truly become themselves – humans are

not mere hosts or containers of “capitalized memory,” but individuals who possess their own memories and ultimately become themselves.

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