

Philosophy and memory traces

Descartes to connectionism

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521591942

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First published 1998

This digitally printed version 2007

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Sutton, John.

Philosophy and memory traces:

Descartes to Connectionism / John Sutton.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 59194 5 (hardback)

1. Memory (Philosophy) – History. 2. Autobiographical memory.

3. Connectionism. I. Title.

BD181.7.S88 1997

128'.3–dc21 97–8909 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-59194-2 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-03937-6 paperback

For Doris

One day the soul did not exist,
neither did the mind,
as for consciousness,
no-one had ever thought of it,
but where, for that matter, was thought,
in a world made up solely of warring elements
no sooner destroyed than recomposed,
for thought is a luxury of peacetime.
(Antonin Artaud, 'Van Gogh, The Man Suicided by Society')

Cognitive science is a body of research . . .
pathetically out of contact with its own history.
(Jerry Fodor, 'The Modularity of Mind')

Each memory is many memories . . .
(Matt Keoki Matsuda, *The Memory of the Modern*)

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Preface

This book describes and defends a set of theories of autobiographical memory, both historical and contemporary, which view memories as dynamic patterns rather than static archives, fragmentary traces to be reconstructed rather than coherent things to be reproduced. It adds historical and philosophical flavour to clichés about the fragility of memory by telling odd tales of the motions and disappearance of fleeting animal spirits, by revivifying fears of ‘the phantasmal chaos of association’, and by defending distributed models of memory against critics’ complaints about loss of cognitive discipline. Although I do not here move far in contributing to broader models in cognitive science which are sensitive to context and culture, I clear the ground for so doing by demonstrating that theories of memory do not have to be blind to society and history.

Readers can easily pursue independent, interest-driven routes through the book. After an introductory chapter, it falls into four parts. Parts I and II are primarily historical, part III deals with historical and contemporary problems about associationism together, and part IV is primarily about modern theories of memory. Each part begins with a brief introduction which outlines its contents and motivations.

The shape of the book is historically heavy: it is anchored in part I by a long rereading of Descartes’ dynamic physiology of memory, which exemplifies the range of questions about mechanism, self, and body taken up in other contexts in the rest of the book. But this is not an exhaustive or even continuous narrative history: my studies of neglected early modern neurophilosophical controversies end with Reid and Coleridge, and I deal neither with traditions outside France and England nor with theories of memory between 1817 and the 1980s. I rely on authority throughout, citing experts extensively. The detailed historical studies are my own: but they inevitably build on and twist existing research.

Contemporary debates about interference and order in connectionist models of memory traces, which I sketch in the introduction, are taken up again in detail only in parts III and IV. But those attuned to current concerns about the catastrophic effects of superposition, about truth in memory, and about the difficulties of cognitive control over mental contents will find surprisingly clear resonances in forgotten older contexts. The bizarre detail of historical schemes in moral physiology for the disciplining of the neural fluids which roam the body is quite alien to us: this distance allows sharper vision of

the way theories of memory are inevitably entangled in wider problems of self, society, and the past.

I wrote the penultimate draft as an Ahmanson/Getty Fellow in the UCLA Center for Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Studies. I am grateful to Peter Reill and the Clark Library staff for making me welcome. The book was finished under the Australian Research Council's postdoctoral fellowship scheme.

Many people have engaged closely with this work over a number of years, and I am delighted to be able to thank some of them. Doris McIlwain has seen it through from inception, providing incalculable help in theory and practice as we have carried it round for so long. Her exuberant science, her moral physiology, her easy ability to take time seriously, and many of her choice phrases have improved it immensely: I dedicate the product to her with love.

Gerard O'Brien sparked my interest in philosophy of psychology and has often talked over the implications of distributed representation with me. For his own work and his careful attention to mine, Stephen Gaukroger deserves many thanks. Jamie Kassler discussed her views on historical topics close to my own, and provided important feedback. I have been encouraged tremendously by the enthusiasm of John Yolton, and spurred by his detailed comments. Keith Campbell, Frank Jackson, and two anonymous readers for Cambridge University Press also read the whole typescript and made many useful suggestions.

Audiences at various seminars and conferences in philosophy, history, cognitive science, history and philosophy of science, and psychology have commented, criticised, and often provoked new thoughts on this material, as did the students in two Honours courses on memory at Macquarie University. My thanks to them, and especially to the following people who through example, specific suggestions, help, or goodwill have guided and improved my work: Peter Anstey, David Armstrong, Kim Atkins, Michael Ayers, Judith Ayling, Maggie Boden, Derek Brookes, John Campbell, Betsy Colwill, Max Deutscher, Ros Diprose, Antony Duff, Lisabeth During, Brian Ellis, Robyn Ferrell, Robin Lane Fox, Jim Franklin, Hilary Gaskin, Jonathan Glover, Catherine Hunt, Keith Lehrer, Genevieve Lloyd, Tony Lynch, J. J. MacIntosh, Catriona Mackenzie, Sandra Marshall, Charlie Martin, Michael Mascuch, Joel Michell, Graham Nerlich, Marguerite Nesling, David Oldroyd, Agnes Petocz, Ross Poole, Huw Price, David Raynor, Tim Reiss, Julius Rocca, Dory Scaltsas, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, Roland Smith, Daniel Stoljar, Steve Straker, Will Sutton, Mary Terrall, Udo Thiel, Elizabeth Wilson, and John Wright.

Abbreviations

Quotations retain original spelling

- A René Descartes, *Descartes: oeuvres philosophiques*, vol. 1: 1618–1637, ed. F. Alquié (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1963). Reference to editorial notes by page number, e.g. A 479.
- AA Henry More, *An Antidote against Atheism* (first published 1653), in *More, A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings* (1662; repr. New York and London: Garland, 1978), vol. 1, with book, chapter, paragraph, and page number, e.g. AA I.II.2: 33.
- AAA Henry More, *An Appendix to the foregoing Antidote against Atheism*, in *More, A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings* (1662; repr. New York and London: Garland, 1978), vol. 1, with chapter, paragraph, and page number, e.g. AAA 10.2: 169.
- AT René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. C. Adam and P. Tannery (12 vols., repr. Paris: Vrin, 1996).
- BL Samuel T. Coleridge. *Biographia literaria* (first published 1817), in H. J. Jackson (ed.), *Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 155–482. References are to chapter and page number, e.g. BL VII: 218.
- CSM René Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (2 vols., Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- CSM-K *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. III: *Correspondence*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch, and A. Kenny (Cambridge University Press, 1991) (incorporating K with amendments).
- EACP Joseph Glanvill, *Essay against Confidence in Philosophy*, in *Essays on Several Important Subjects in Philosophy and Religion* (London: John Baker & Henry Mortlock, 1676); repr. in Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, edited with an introduction by Stephen Medcalf (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1970).
- Essay John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (first published 1690), ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975). References are to book, chapter, and paragraph number, e.g. Essay IV.21.4.
- Essays Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), in *The Works of Thomas Reid*, ed. W. Hamilton (Edinburgh: MacLachlan,

- Stewart, & Co., 1849). References are to essay, chapter, page, and column number, e.g. *Essays* 111.7: 354a.
- H René Descartes, *Treatise of Man: René Descartes* (first published 1662), trans. T. S. Hall (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972). Reference to editorial notes by page number, e.g. H 87.
- IS Henry More, *The Immortality of the Soul* (first published 1659), in *A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings* (1662: repr. New York and London: Garland 1978), vol. 11, with book, chapter, paragraph, and page number, e.g. IS 11.2.7: 68.
- K René Descartes, *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, trans. A. Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970).
- L'Homme René Descartes, *L'Homme* (first published 1662 (Latin) and 1664 (French)). References are to page numbers of AT, of the English translation in H and (for the small portion included in CSM 1) of CSM, e.g. AT xi.120, H 4, CSM 1.99.
- LL Robert Hooke, *Lectures of Light*, in *The Posthumous Works of Robert Hooke*, ed. Richard Waller (London, 1705). I use the reprint with an introduction by T. M. Brown (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1971). The lecture on memory is lecture 7, pp. 138–48. Reference is to lecture, paragraph, and page number, e.g. LL 7.1: 140.
- LO Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search After Truth* (first published 1674), 6th edn (1712), trans. T. M. Lennon and P. J. Olscamp (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press). References are to page number, book, part, chapter, and section number, e.g. LO 93, 11.1.2.iii. The structure of the books in LO varies considerably: in books I and v there is only one 'part', so references are to book and chapter numbers, with section numbers where they existed within chapters, e.g. LO 49, 1.10.ii.
- OM David Hartley, *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (first published London, 1749; repr. New York: Garland, 1971). References are to page, part, chapter, section, and proposition number, e.g. OM 7, 1.1.2, prop. 11.
- Passions René Descartes, *Passions of the Soul* (first published 1649). References are to part and paragraph number, and to AT and CSM, e.g. *Passions* 1.32, AT xi.352, CSM 1.340.
- Principles René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (first published 1644). References are to part and paragraph number, and to AT and CSM, e.g. *Principles* 1.74, AT viii(a).38, CSM 1.221.
- SS Joseph Glanvill, *Scep sis scientifica* (London: Henry Eversden, 1665); repr. in Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, edited with an introduction by Stephen Medcalf (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1970).
- Treatise David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (first published 1739), ed.

- L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978). References are to book, part, and section numbers, followed by page number, e.g. *Treatise* 1.vi.6: 259.
- Tristram Shandy Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (first published 1759), ed. I. C. Ross (Oxford University Press, 1983). References are to volume, chapter, and page number, e.g. *Tristram Shandy* 1.1: 5.
- TT Kenelm Digby, *Two Treatises: in the one of which, the nature of bodies; in the other, the nature of mans soule; is looked into; in way of discovery, of the immortality of Reasonable Soules* (Paris: Gilles Blaizot, 1644; repr. New York and London: Garland, 1978). All references are to book 1 ('Of Bodies'), and include chapter and page number, e.g. TT 32: 282.
- VOD Joseph Glanvill, *The Vanity of Dogmatizing* (London: Henry Eversden, 1661); repr. edited with an introduction by Stephen Medcalf (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1970). References are to page number, e.g. VOD: 35.