

*The Persistence of the Past*¹¹

To sum up briefly the preceding chapters: we have distinguished three processes, pure memory, memory-image and perception, of which none of them, in fact, occurs apart from the others. Perception is never a mere contact of the mind with the object present; it is impregnated with memory-images which complete it as they interpret it. The memory-image, in its turn, partakes of the 'pure memory,' which it begins to materialize, and of the perception in which it tends to embody itself: regarded from the latter point of view, it might be defined as a nascent perception. Lastly, pure memory, though independent in theory, manifests itself as a rule only in the coloured and living image which reveals it. Symbolizing these three terms by the consecutive segments AB, BC, CD, of the same straight line AD, we may say that our thought describes this line in a single movement, which goes from A to D, and that it is impossible to say precisely where one of the terms ends and another begins.

In fact, this is just what consciousness bears witness to whenever, in order to analyse memory, it follows the movement of memory at work. Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first, in the past in general, then, in a

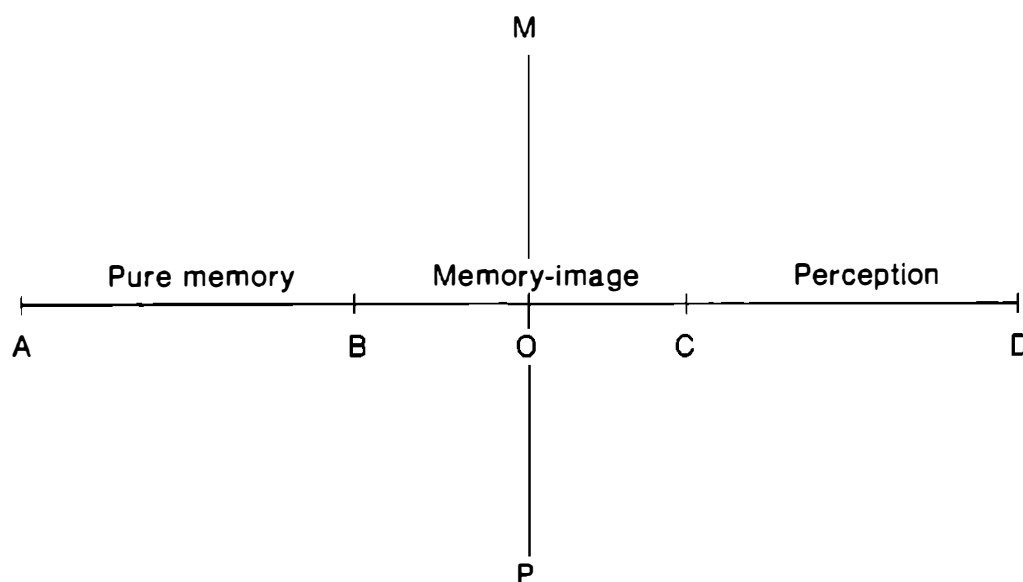


Figure 1

certain region of the past – a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception. But it remains attached to the past by its deepest roots, and if, when once realized, it did not retain something of its original virtuality, if, being a present state, it were not also something which stands out distinct from the present, we should never know it for a memory.

The capital error of associationism is that it substitutes for this continuity of becoming, which is the living reality, a discontinuous multiplicity of elements, inert and juxtaposed. Just because each of the elements so constituted contains, by reason of its origin, something of what precedes and also of what follows, it must take to our eyes the form of a mixed and, so to speak, impure state. But the principle of associationism requires that each psychical state should be a kind of atom, a simple element. Hence the necessity for sacrificing, in each of the phases we have distinguished, the unstable to the stable, that is to say, the beginning to the end. If we are dealing with perception, we are asked to see in it nothing but the agglomerated sensations which colour it and to overlook the remembered images which form its dim nucleus. If it is the remembered image that we are considering, we are bidden to take it already made, realized in a weak perception, and to shut our eyes to the pure memory which this image has progressively developed. In the rivalry which associationism thus sets up between the stable and the unstable, perception is bound to expel the memory-image, and the memory-image to expel pure memory. And thus the pure memory disappears altogether. Associationism, cutting in two, by a line MO, the totality of the progress AD, sees, in the part OD, only the sensations which terminate it and which have been supposed to constitute the whole of perception; yet it also reduces the part AO to the realized image which pure memory attains to as it expands. Psychical life, then, is entirely summed up in these two elements, sensation and image. And as, on the one hand, this theory drowns in the image the pure memory, which makes the image into an original state, and, on the other hand, brings the image yet closer to perception by putting into perception, in advance, something of the image itself, it ends up by finding between these two states only a difference of degree, or of intensity. Hence the distinction between *strong states* and *weak states*, of which the first are supposed to be set up by us as perceptions of the present, and the second (why, no man knows) as representations of the past. But the truth is that we shall never reach the past unless we frankly place ourselves within it. Essentially virtual, it cannot be known as something past unless we follow and adopt the movement by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day. In vain do we seek its trace in anything actual and already

realized: we might as well look for darkness beneath the light. This is, in fact, the error of associationism: placed in the actual, it exhausts itself in vain attempts to discover in a realized and present state the mark of its past origin, to distinguish memory from perception, and to erect into a difference in kind that which it condemned in advance to be but a difference of magnitude.

To *picture* is not to *remember*. No doubt a recollection, as it becomes actual, tends to live in an image; however, the converse is not true, and the image, pure and simple, will not be referred to the past unless, indeed, it was in the past that I sought it, thus following the continuous progress which brought it from darkness into light. This is what psychologists too often forget when they conclude, from the fact that a remembered sensation becomes more actual the more we dwell upon it, that the memory of the sensation is the sensation itself beginning to be. The fact which they allege is undoubtedly true: the more I strive to recall a past pain, the nearer I come to feeling it in reality. But this is easy to understand, since the progress of a memory precisely consists, as we have said, in its becoming materialized. The question is: was the memory of a pain, when it began, really pain? Because the hypnotized subject ends by feeling hot when he is repeatedly told that he is hot, it does not follow that the words of the suggestion were themselves hot. Neither must we conclude that, because the memory of a sensation prolongs itself into that very sensation, the memory was a nascent sensation: perhaps, indeed, this memory plays, with regard to the sensation which follows it, precisely the part of the hypnotiser who makes the suggestion. The argument we are criticizing, presented in this form, is then already of no value as proof; still, it is not yet a vicious argument, because it profits by the incontestable truth that memory passes into something else by becoming actual. The absurdity becomes patent when the argument is inverted (although this ought to be legitimate on the hypothesis adopted), that is to say, when the intensity of the sensation is decreased instead of the intensity of pure memory being increased. For then, if the two states differ merely in degree, there should be a given moment at which the sensation changed into a memory. If the memory of an acute pain, for instance, is but a slight pain, inversely, an intense pain which I feel, will end, as it grows less, by being an acute pain remembered. Now the moment will come, undoubtedly, when it is impossible for me to say whether what I feel is a slight sensation, which I experience, or a slight sensation, which I imagine (and this is natural, because the memory-image is already partly sensation), but never will this weak state appear to me to be the memory of a strong state. Memory, then, is something quite different.

But the illusion which consists in establishing only a difference of degree between memory and perception is more than a mere consequence of associationism, more than an accident in the history of philosophy. Its roots lie deep. It rests, in the last analysis, on a false idea of the nature and of the object of external perception. We are bent on regarding perception as only

an instruction addressed to a pure spirit, as having a purely speculative interest. Then, as memory is itself essentially a knowledge of this kind, since its object is no longer present, we can only find between perception and memory a difference of degree – perceptions being then supposed to throw memories back into the past, and thus to reserve to themselves the present simply because right is might. But there is much more between past and present than a mere difference of degree. My present is that which interests me, which lives for me, and in a word, that which summons me to action; in contrast, my past is essentially powerless. We must dwell further on this point. By contrasting it with present perception we shall better understand the nature of what we call ‘pure memory.’

For we should endeavour in vain to characterize the memory of a past state unless we began by defining the concrete note, accepted by consciousness, of present reality. What is, for me, the present moment? The essence of time is that it goes by; time already gone by is the past, and we call the present the instant in which it goes by. But there can be no question here of a mathematical instant. No doubt there is an ideal present – a pure conception, the indivisible limit which separates past from future. But the real, concrete, live present – that of which I speak when I speak of my present perception – that present necessarily occupies a duration. Where then is this duration placed? Is it on the nearer or on the further side of the mathematical point which I determine ideally when I think of the present instant? Quite evidently, it is both on this side and on that, and what I call ‘my present’ has one foot in my past and another in my future. In my past, first, because ‘the moment in which I am speaking is already far from me’; in my future, next, because this moment is impending over the future: it is to the future that I am tending, and could I fix this indivisible present, this infinitesimal element of the curve of time, it is the direction of the future that it would indicate. The psychical state, then, that I call ‘my present,’ must be both a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future. Now the immediate past, in so far as it is perceived, is, as we shall see, sensation, since every sensation translates a very long succession of elementary vibrations, and the immediate future, in so far as it is being determined, is action or movement. My present, then, is both sensation and movement; since my present forms an undivided whole, then the movement must be linked with the sensation, must prolong it in action. Whence I conclude that my present consists in a joint system of sensations and movements. My present is, in its essence, sensori-motor.

This is to say that my present consists in the consciousness I have of my body. Having extension in space, my body experiences sensations and at the same time executes movements. Sensations and movements being localized at determined points of this extended body, there can only be, at a given moment, a single system of movements and sensations. That is why my present appears to me to be a thing absolutely determined, and contrasting

with my past. Situated between the matter which influences it and that on which it has influence, my body is a centre of action, the place where the impressions received choose intelligently the path they will follow to transform themselves into movements accomplished. Thus it, indeed, represents the actual state of my becoming, that part of my duration which is in process of growth. More generally, in that continuity of becoming which is reality itself, the present moment is constituted by the quasi-instantaneous section effected by our perception in the flowing mass, and this section is precisely that which we call the material world. Our body occupies its centre; it is, in this material world, that part of which we directly feel the flux; in its actual state the actuality of our present lies. If matter, so far as extended in space, is to be defined (as we believe it must) as a present which is always beginning again, inversely, our present is the very materiality of our existence, that is to say, a system of sensations and movements and nothing else. And this system is determined, unique for each moment of duration, just because sensations and movements occupy space, and because there cannot be in the same place several things at the same time. Why is it that it has been possible to misunderstand so simple, so evident a truth, one which is, moreover, the very idea of common sense?

The reason lies simply in the fact that philosophers insist on regarding the difference between actual sensations and pure memory as a mere difference in degree, and not in kind. In our view the difference is radical. My actual sensations occupy definite portions of the surface of my body; pure memory, on the other hand, interests no part of my body. No doubt, it will beget sensations as it materializes, but at that very moment it will cease to be a memory and pass into the state of a present thing, something actually lived. I shall then only restore to it its character of memory by carrying myself back to the process by which I called it up, as it was virtual, from the depths of my past. It is just because I made it active that it has become actual, that is to say, a sensation capable of provoking movements. But most psychologists see in pure memory only a weakened perception, an assembly of nascent sensations. Having thus effaced, to begin with, all difference in kind between sensation and memory, they are led by the logic of their hypothesis to materialize memory and to idealize sensation. They perceive memory only in the form of an image, that is to say, already embodied in nascent sensations. Having thus attributed to it that which is essential to sensation, and refusing to see in the ideality of memory something distinct, something contrasted with sensation itself, they are forced, when they come back to pure sensation, to leave to it that ideality with which they have thus implicitly endowed nascent sensations. For if the past, which by hypothesis is no longer active, can subsist in the form of a weak sensation, there must be sensations that are powerless. If pure memory, which by hypothesis interests no definite part of the body, is a nascent sensation, then sensation is not essentially localized in any point of the body. Hence the illusion that consists in regarding sensation

as an ethereal and unextended state which acquires extension and consolidates in the body by mere accident: an illusion which vitiates profoundly, as we have seen, the theory of external perception and raises a great number of the questions at issue between the various metaphysics of matter. We must make up our minds to it: sensation is, in its essence, extended and localized; it is a source of movement. Pure memory, being inextensive and powerless, does not in any degree share the nature of sensation.

That which I call my present is my attitude with regard to the immediate future; it is my impending action. My present is, then, sensori-motor. Of my past, that alone becomes image and, consequently, sensation, at least nascent, which can collaborate in that action, insert itself in that attitude, in a word make itself useful; but, from the moment that it becomes image, the past leaves the state of pure memory and coincides with a certain part of my present. Memory actualised in an image differs, then, profoundly from pure memory. The image is a present state, and its sole share in the past is the memory from which it arose. Memory, on the contrary, powerless as long as it remains without utility, is pure from all admixture of sensation, is without attachment to the present, and is, consequently, unextended.

This radical powerlessness of pure memory is just what will enable us to understand how it is preserved in a latent state. Without as yet going to the heart of the matter, we will confine ourselves to the remark that our unwillingness to conceive *unconscious psychical states* is due, above all, to the fact that we hold consciousness to be the essential property of psychical states: so a psychical state cannot, it seems, cease to be conscious without ceasing to exist. But if consciousness is but the characteristic note of the *present*, that is to say, of the actually lived, in short, of the *active*, then that which does not act may cease to belong to consciousness without therefore ceasing to exist in some manner. In other words, in the psychological domain, consciousness may not be the synonym of existence, but only of real action or of immediate efficacy; limiting thus the meaning of the term, we shall have less difficulty in representing to ourselves a psychical state which is unconscious, that is to say, ineffective. Whatever idea we may frame of consciousness in itself, such as it would be if it could work untrammelled, we cannot deny that, in a being which has bodily functions, the chief office of consciousness is to preside over action and to enlighten choice. Therefore, it throws light on the immediate antecedents of the decision, and on those past recollections which can usefully combine with it; all else remains in shadow.

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But we are so much accustomed to reverse, for the sake of action, the real order of things, we are so strongly obsessed by images drawn from space, that we cannot hinder ourselves from asking *where* memories are stored up. We understand that physico-chemical phenomena take place *in* the brain, that the brain is *in* the body, the body *in* the air which surrounds it, etc.; but the past, once achieved, if it is retained, where is it? To locate it in the

cerebral substance, in the state of molecular modification, seems clear and simple enough because then we have a receptacle, actually given, which we have only to open in order to let the latent images flow into consciousness. But if the brain cannot serve such a purpose, in what warehouse shall we store the accumulated images? We forget that the relation of container to content borrows its apparent clearness and universality from the necessity laid upon us of always opening out space in front of us and of always closing duration behind us. Because it has been shown that one thing is within another, the phenomenon of its preservation is not thereby made any clearer. We may even go further: let us admit for a moment that the past survives in the form of a memory stored in the brain; it is then necessary that the brain, in order to preserve the memory, should preserve itself. But the brain, insofar as it is an image extended in space, never occupies more than the present moment: it constitutes, with all the rest of the material universe, an ever-renewed section of universal becoming. Either, then, you must suppose that this universe dies and is born again miraculously at each moment of duration, or you must attribute to it that continuity of existence which you deny to consciousness, and make of its past a reality which endures and is prolonged into its present. So that you have gained nothing by depositing the memories in matter, and you find yourself, on the contrary, compelled to extend to the totality of the states of the material world that complete and independent survival of the past which you have just refused to psychical states. This survival of the past *per se* forces itself upon philosophers, then, under one form or another; the difficulty that we have in conceiving it comes simply from the fact that we extend to the series of memories, in time, that obligation of *containing* and *being contained* which applies only to the collection of bodies instantaneously perceived in space. The fundamental illusion consists in transferring to duration itself, in its continuous flow, the form of the instantaneous sections which we make in it.

But how can the past, which, by hypothesis, has ceased to be, preserve itself? Have we not here a real contradiction? We reply that the question is just whether the past has ceased to exist or whether it has simply ceased to be useful. You define the present in an arbitrary manner as *that which is*, whereas the present is simply *what is being made*. Nothing *is* less than the present moment, if you understand by that the indivisible limit which divides the past from the future. When we think this present as going to be, it exists not yet, and when we think it as existing, it is already past. If, on the other hand, what you are considering is the concrete present such as it is actually lived by consciousness, we may say that this present consists, in large measure, in the immediate past. In the fraction of a second which covers the briefest possible perception of light, billions of vibrations have taken place, of which the first is separated from the last by an interval which is enormously divided. Your perception, however instantaneous, consists then in an incalculable multitude of remembered elements; in truth, every

perception is already memory. *Practically, we perceive only the past*, the pure present being the invisible progress of the past gnawing into the future.

Consciousness, then, illumines, at each moment of time, that immediate part of the past which, impending over the future, seeks to realize and to associate with it. Solely preoccupied in thus determining an undetermined future, consciousness may shed a little of its light on those of our states, more remote in the past, which can be usefully combined with our present state, that is to say, with our immediate past: the rest remains in the dark. It is in this illuminated part of our history that we remain seated, in virtue of the fundamental law of life, which is a law of action: hence the difficulty we experience in conceiving memories which are preserved in the shadow. Our reluctance to admit the integral survival of the past has its origin, then, in the very bent of our psychical life – an unfolding of states wherein our interest prompts us to look at that which is unrolling, and not at that which is entirely unrolled.

So we return, after a long digression, to our point of departure. There are, we have said, two memories which are profoundly distinct: the one, fixed in the organism, is nothing else but the complete set of intelligently constructed mechanisms which ensure the appropriate reply to the various possible demands. This memory enables us to adapt ourselves to the present situation; through it the actions to which we are subject prolong themselves into reactions that are sometimes accomplished, sometimes merely nascent, but always more or less appropriate. Habit rather than memory, it acts our past experience but does not call up its image. The other is the true memory. Coextensive with consciousness, it retains and ranges alongside of each other all our states in the order in which they occur, leaving to each fact its place and, consequently, marking its date, truly moving in the past and not, like the first, in an ever renewed present. But, in marking the profound distinction between these two forms of memory, we have not shown their connecting link. Above the body, with its mechanisms which symbolize the accumulated effort of past actions, the memory which imagines and repeats has been left to hang, as it were, suspended in the void. Now, if it be true that we never perceive anything but our immediate past, if our consciousness of the present is already memory, the two terms which had been separated to begin with cohere closely together. Seen from this new point of view, indeed, our body is nothing but that part of our representation which is ever being born again, the part always present, or rather that which, at each moment, is just past. Itself an image, the body cannot store up images, since it forms a part of the images, and this is why it is a chimerical enterprise to seek to localize past or even present perceptions in the brain: they are not in it; it is the brain that is in them. But this special image which persists in the midst of the others, and which I call my body, constitutes at every moment, as we have said, a section of the universal becoming. It is then the *place of passage* of the movements received and thrown back, a hyphen, a connecting

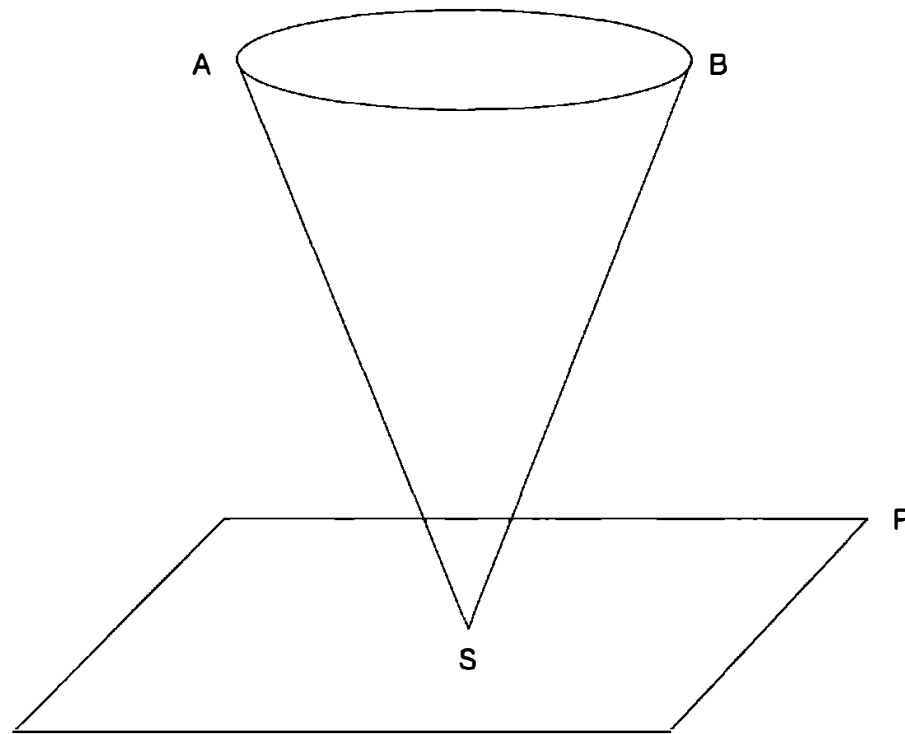


Figure 2

link between the things which act upon me and the things upon which I act – the seat, in a word, of the sensori-motor phenomena. If I represent by a cone SAB, the totality of the recollections accumulated in my memory, the base AB, situated in the past, remains motionless, while the summit S, which indicates at all times my present, moves forward unceasingly, and unceasingly also touches the moving plane P of my actual representation of the universe. At S, the image of the body is concentrated, and, since it belongs to the plane P, this image does but receive and restore actions emanating from all the images of which the plane is composed.

The bodily memory, made up of the sum of the sensori-motor systems organized by habit, is then a quasi-instantaneous memory to which the true memory of the past serves as base. Since they are not two separate things, since the first is only, as we have said, the pointed end, ever moving, inserted by the second in the shifting plane of experience, it is natural that the two functions should lend each other a mutual support. So, on the one hand, the memory of the past offers to the sensori-motor mechanisms all the recollections capable of guiding them in their task and of giving to the motor reaction the direction suggested by the lessons of experience. It is in just this that the associations of contiguity and likeness consist. But, on the other hand, the sensori-motor apparatus furnish to ineffective, that is unconscious, memories, the means of taking on a body, of materializing themselves, in short of becoming present. For, that a recollection should reappear in consciousness, it is necessary that it should descend from the heights of pure memory down to the precise point where *action* is taking place. In other

words, it is from the present that the appeal to which memory responds comes, and it is from the sensori-motor elements of present action that a memory borrows the warmth which gives it life.

Is it not by the constancy of this agreement, by the precision with which these two complementary memories insert themselves each into the other, that we recognize a 'well-balanced' mind, that is to say, in fact, a man nicely adapted to life? The characteristic of the man of action is the promptitude with which he summons to the help of a given situation all the memories which have reference to it; yet it is also the insurmountable barrier which encounters, when they present themselves on the threshold of his consciousness, memories that are useless or indifferent. To live only in the present, to respond to a stimulus by the immediate reaction which prolongs it, is the mark of the lower animals: the man who proceeds in this way is a man of *impulse*. But he who lives in the past for the mere pleasure of living there, and in whom recollections emerge into the light of consciousness without any advantage for the present situation, is hardly better fitted for action: here we have no man of impulse, but a *dreamer*. Between these two extremes lives the happy disposition of memory docile enough to follow with precision all the outlines of the present situation, but energetic enough to resist all other appeal. Good sense, or practical sense, is probably nothing but this.

The extraordinary development of spontaneous memory in most children is due to the fact that they have not yet persuaded their memory to remain bound up with their conduct. They usually follow the impression of the moment, and as with them action does not bow to the suggestions of memory, so neither are their recollections limited to the necessities of action. They seem to retain with greater facility only because they remember with less discernment. The apparent diminution of memory, as intellect develops, is then due to the growing organization of recollections with acts. Thus conscious memory loses in range what it gains in force of penetration: it had at first the facility of the memory of dreams, but then it was actually dreaming. Indeed we observe this same exaggeration of spontaneous memory in men whose intellectual development hardly goes beyond that of childhood. A missionary, after preaching a long sermon to some African savages, heard one of them repeat it textually, with the same gestures, from beginning to end.¹²

But, if almost the whole of our past is hidden from us because it is inhibited by the necessities of present action, it will find strength to cross the threshold of consciousness in all cases where we renounce the interests of effective action to replace ourselves, so to speak, in the life of dreams. Sleep, natural or artificial, brings about an indifference of just this kind. It has been recently suggested that in sleep there is an interruption of the contact between the nervous elements, motor and sensory.¹³ Even if we do not accept this ingenious hypothesis, it is impossible not to see in sleep a relaxing, even if

only functional, of the tension of the nervous system, ever ready, during waking hours, to prolong by an appropriate reaction the stimulation received. Now the exaltation of the memory in certain dreams and in certain somnambulistic states is well known. Memories, which we believed abolished, then reappear with striking completeness; we live over again, in all their detail, forgotten scenes of childhood; we speak languages which we no longer even remember to have learned. But there is nothing more instructive in this regard than what happens in cases of sudden suffocation, in men drowned or hanged. Such a man, when brought to life again, states that he saw, in a very short time, all the forgotten events of his life passing before him with great rapidity, with their smallest circumstances and in the very order in which they occurred.¹⁴

A human being who should *dream* his life instead of living it would no doubt thus keep before his eyes at each moment the infinite multitude of the details of his past history. And, conversely, the man who should repudiate this memory with all that it begets would be continually acting his life instead of truly representing it to himself: a conscious automaton, he would follow the lead of useful habits which prolong into an appropriate reaction the stimulation received. The first would never rise above the particular, or even above the individual; leaving to each image its date in time and its position in space, he would see wherein it *differs* from others and not how it resembles them. The other, always swayed by habit, would only distinguish in any situation that aspect in which it practically *resembles* former situations; incapable, doubtless, of *thinking* universals, since every general idea implies the representation, at least virtual, of a number of remembered images, he would, nevertheless, move in the universal, habit being to action what generality is to thought. But these two extreme states, the one of an entirely contemplative memory which apprehends only the singular in its *vision*, the other of a purely motor memory which stamps the note of generality on its *action*, are really separate and are fully visible only in exceptional cases. In normal life they are interpenetrating, so that each has to abandon some part of its original purity. The first reveals itself in the recollection of differences, the second in the perception of resemblances: at the meeting of the two currents appears the general idea.

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The essence of the general idea, in fact, is to be unceasingly going backwards and forwards between the plane of action and that of pure memory. Let us refer once more to the diagram we traced above. At S is the present perception which I have of my body, that is to say, of a certain sensori-motor equilibrium. Over the surface of the base AB are spread, we may say, my recollections in their totality. Within the cone so determined, the general idea oscillates continually between the summit S and the base AB. In S, it would take the clearly defined form of a bodily attitude or of an uttered word; at AB, it would wear the aspect, no less defined, of the

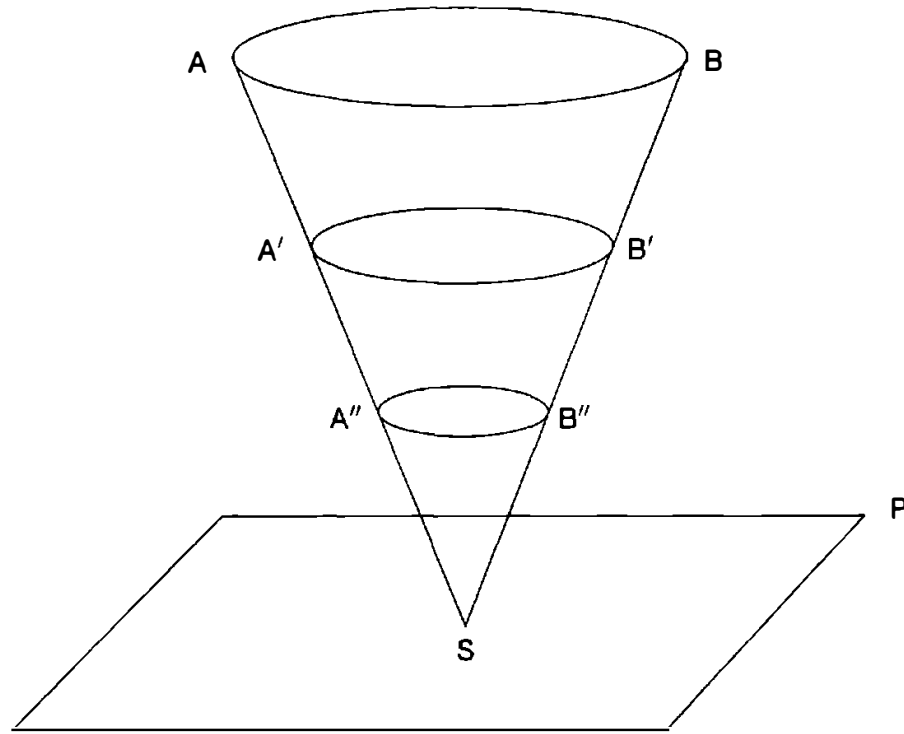


Figure 3

thousand individual images into which its fragile unity would break up. And that is why a psychology which abides by the *already done*, which considers only that which is made and ignores that which is in the making, will never perceive in this movement anything more than the two extremities between which it oscillates; it makes the general idea coincide sometimes with the action which manifests it or the word which expresses it and at other times with the multitudinous images, unlimited in number, which are its equivalent in memory. But the truth is that the general idea escapes us as soon as we try to fix it at either of the two extremities. It consists in the double current which goes from the one to the other – always ready either to crystallize into uttered words or to evaporate into memories.

This amounts to saying that between the sensori-motor mechanisms figured by the point *S* and the totality of the memories disposed in *AB* there is room, as we indicated in the preceding chapter, for a thousand repetitions of our psychical life, figured by as many sections *A'B'*, *A''B''*, etc., of the same cone. We tend to scatter ourselves over *AB* in the measure that we detach ourselves from our sensory and motor state to live in the life of dreams; we tend to concentrate ourselves in *S* in the measure that we attach ourselves more firmly to the present reality, responding by motor reactions to sensory stimulation. In point of fact, the normal self never stays in either of these extreme positions; it moves between them, adopts in turn the positions corresponding to the intermediate sections, or, in other words, gives to its representations just enough image and just enough idea for them to be able to lend useful aid to the present action.