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Memory in St. Bonaventure and the Moment of Coming to Be As a Human Being

by

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Bonaventure's work on memory is drawn from his work on the *Soul's Journey to God*. In the third chapter he writes "on Contemplating God through His Image stamped upon our Natural Powers" (Bonaventure, 79). Contemplation requires that the heart leads and the intellect follows. In this way a growth in understanding may lead us to a greater love than we had ever dreamed of achieving (Bonaventure, 56. Prologue to SJG). Bonaventure's intent, and mine, is that we may learn from ourselves as images of God in our human nature. Thence our relationship with our Creator may become more secure and peaceful for realizing the moment of our creation in its memorized actuality.

In order to encourage depth to our thinking, I have presented material from John McDowell on the contact and involvement of the human mind with the world in which we live. This work, though from an adult perspective, throws light on the condition of babes in the womb and children in their development. Gopnik et al. draw our attention to the computational state of children's minds, which is quite clear from their research. Their work admonishes us to respect the developing *conceptus* more than past generations did in this regard. The human being is a great person from conception to adulthood and beyond.

There are eight headings under which I aim to unfold some appreciation of this greatness.

I. Memory — A Power of the Soul and Its Activities

Bonaventure nominates the three great powers of the soul as memory, intellectuality, and will (Bonaventure, 81). The first named is the most important for the present discussion. He invites a self-reflection to see that the soul loves herself, and this could not be unless she knew herself, which she could not do unless she remembered herself. (Loc. cit., 81).

Memory acts in three ways:

A: By holding and displaying items “present, corporeal and temporal” as well as “successive, simple and eternal things.”

Immediately we can see that the past is a recall while the present is received and the future is held in foresight. Memory presents as an Image of Eternity by recalling the past, present and the future, which three require an eternity definition “whose indivisible presence extends to all times” (Ibid.). Thus the created instant of temporality shows us the instantaneous reality of eternity, which is simple and without division, endless and without beginning, by virtue of its qualitative value when measured against the temporal. A quantitative argument is inconclusive, to say the least.

B. We hold also simple principles from memory.

Otherwise, we could not remember the things we do. These include the instant from and for time, the point from and for the line and the unit which is from and for quantity (Ibid.). Our memory, as we reflect, shows us holding such clear matters as the discrete and the continuous, with these being of spiritual derivation since they do not enter through the portals of the senses by images from the senses. Bonaventure reckons this knowledge as being “from above.” What he means by this is found in harmony with his thought of the immutable light that shines on our memory.

C. There are also principles and axioms from our sciences that are “everlasting truths held everlastingly.”

As, for instance, the whole is greater than the part, or something cannot actually be and not actually be at the same time, the principle of contradiction. When these are first heard they are instantly recognized, not as something new or as something to be memorized, but as something obvious as if innate and necessary. Thus we may see that these unchangeable truths are caused to be remembered by an immutable light (Ibid.).

Without memory we would know nothing and would be unable to develop a second nature.

II. Second Nature and the Moment of Coming to Be

As the very name suggests, nature in its self-reflection in a being capable of consciousness of herself, requires a second nature by self-development. It is the moment of conception when this begins. The spiritual and material components meet in the mutuality of need. The creation of soul takes place when the gametes fuse and then instantly the soul embraces the material given for bodily formation. This is the moment of coming to be which is the event marking the beginning of a new human life. The mutual destruction of the gametes as living identities by their gametic fusion provides the material (Gillian, 39).

The soul has the qualities of being integrated within itself and also of being able to integrate other aspects of life to itself. These are required so as to bring life and order into the dead material which is the remnants of the two gametes. These gametes are destroyed in their one-cell status of being alive by their coming together in fusion. Their individuality is destroyed. The new human soul is both modified and enabled to develop by the experience in which it becomes a new human being by embracing and animating the material from the fused gametes. The soul's communicating capacity, the spirit, is active from conception (Loc. cit. 33).

So, too, must be the intellectual spiritual capacities that the soul possesses, especially the memory capacity which will be considered presently. The new soul's experience involves a minimal empiricism through its immediate contact with the bodily material. In the soul's case the creative moment for her also involves light, as is clear.

III. Living Spiritual Communication

This communication is a living one and is part of experiencing life and developing the self in relationships from its inception. Spirit is not simply a presence, which can imply non-communicative activity. Rather, spirit is an active presence from conception, touching others and the world. The continuity of a human being's existence and, concomitantly, her reality and contact with the world as real, begins in the mother's womb. She is also in contact with her mother and with other humans as being recognizably similar human beings. Should we choose to ignore the reality of our first moment of existence as being less active than any other moment of our living, our self-continuity would be undermined to the point of genuine and frightening uncertainty.

What is being touched on here is the fascinating question of the moment of coming to be in the human experience of life. This entails recognition that the beginning of life is an experience both within the spiritual actuality of the integrated and integrating soul herself and, at the

same time, empirical in the coming together of the spiritual and material in a new human being.

What is buried in the spiritual memory is not some hopeful speculation of a simple pietistic outlook, but something strongly suggested by the work done by Gopnik et al. presented in their book, *How Babies Think*. At birth we possess certain abilities, amongst which is the “drive to explore and experiment” upon the totality of creation and its hidden wonders and ways. In lieu of a tabula rasa, babies possess their own mind content, and the mind’s own workings (Gopnik, 3).

We are born with “innate knowledge, powerful learning abilities, and unconscious tuition from adults.” Gopnik asserts that these three powers are important in exploring the difficulty met in understanding the minds of other people and that this process is in train prior to birth (Ibid., 25). Bonaventure strongly supports innate knowledge (Bonaventure, 81).

The spiritual communication amongst parents, unborn children and previously born siblings has the capacity to bring about a speedy recognition after the birth. The newborn and siblings do have a prior spiritual experience of each other and build on this. Early recognition by siblings was simply deemed by “experts” as wishful thinking in previous generations (Gopnik, 26). New developmental research, beginning c. 1970 (Op. cit., vii), shows that “babies and young children think, observe and reason (Op. cit., 13).

IV. Considering the Adult Mind and Wondering About the Unborn Conceived Ones

Just pause for a moment and consider that adult operations are to make up your mind, change your mind and continue to reflect. Then, hopefully, we grow in wisdom, which simply means putting things together in good order. Then we may see that this whole process must have been generated and governed by the ongoing being that is integrated and integrating. Objecting that the brain takes time to form in the womb does not render the activity of the soul, engaged in its unified and further developing activity with the gametic material, as being entirely outside empiricism. Babies feel the womb and experience spirituality. John McDowell’s theoretical work on concepts is of some depth and a stimulus to our consideration of what life in the womb may be for the developing youngsters.

It must happen that a judgment made about things that impact on us in our experience can tell us whether or not we know the real (McDowell, 11). How this judgment is made is a different concern. Such things as parallax error and light refractive properties remind us of faults in our perceptions. Experience itself is of the passive order whether or not we

may be active in the experience. We are "saddled with content" in our receiving what the experience presents to us. Experience of the self, in which existence is palpable and self proclaiming, is a case in point. A conceptus reacts as a living being and so is spiritually in contact with all being. As the child develops in the womb its reactions will become stronger and its learning clearer.

McDowell's position intimates that all experience is passive and this passivity activates our conceptual capacities (Ibid.). He arrives at this position by accepting the Kantian endeavor that would dispense with the pendulum effect that follows from a twofold view of our interaction with the world. In this twofold view, on the one hand, there is an unconceptualized content for us to wrestle with, which McDowell describes as the "Myth of the Given." On the other hand, the mind is required to authenticate its content against some mysterious presentation of the empirical world (Op. cit., 114). Kant's insight limps since it is without "a seriously exploitable notion of second nature" (Loc. cit., 104).

McDowell wishes to build on Kant's genius by clinching the connection of our living selves to our world, with "exercises of capacities that belong to spontaneity as elements in the course of life" (Ibid., 111). Such spontaneity is peculiarly human as it involves our human freedom. Without spontaneity, your own self is not in view, and you know it is in your view. Neither would our world be in view while your experience tells you that it is in your view (Ibid., 114).

Our experience mediates to us as to how things are by acting as a testing judge for our thought. Hindsight illustrates this ability. This is necessary if our cogitating is to be valued as reflecting the real inasmuch as this is available to us. We must at least begin here and this is what McDowell means as a "minimal empiricism" (Op. cit., xii). Spontaneity, then, reacting to the event of experience, stimulates our spiritual capacities. These include our freedom, memory and intellectuality which would include conceptualization.

V. Our Freedom and Our Will

There is the important distinction that clarifies our freedom as human beings, which is *the distinction that differentiates between free choice and free will*. This must be taken into account. Free choice is in the spiritual realm and is defined as "a distinctive and habitual spirit that frees a man" (Bernard, 24), while the will is a "rational movement that governs the senses and the appetites" (Ibid., 25). Without a free choice we could be neither just nor unjust. Our conceptual capacities are brought into play by what experience presents to us, so that conceptual content is automatic and not a matter of choice (McDowell, 10). By way of clarification we may

look upon free choice as a spiritual necessity even like window-shopping the creation, while free will is concerned with our moral responsibility. Bernard is more concerned with our internal freedoms than with mind formation but our living freedom, our loving in life and mind formation are all involved. Loving and being loved is Bernard's paramount concern. "I love because I love; I love in order to love" (2 Bernard, 205*)

McDowell is in concert with this approach. He recognizes that "responsible freedom" provides the context for the exercise of the conceptualizing abilities that are part of spontaneity. The interlocking mesh that provides the conclusions of our thinking to present them to us is not beyond our control in terms of further self-development or simple correction (McDowell, 12). McDowell is certainly concerned with the operation of concepts as mediating the relationship that exists between the human mind and the world and the various relations involved (Loc. Cit., 1). This distinction, within freedom, of an habitual free choice operating from within us on creation should help us to grasp the beginnings of life and living.

VI. Intellectuality and Its Work in Reflection

Intellectuality's function is to "understand the meaning of terms, propositions and inferences" (Bonaventure, 81). For the present we may reflect that we build our understanding by using universal terms, then more universal terms and finally the most universal terms, such as dog, animal, and living thing or being. More deeply or prior to this it is most necessary that we understand what a being is and then what is "being per se" (Ibid.). Just as we need to know the most universal term so as to understand the least universal, as in dog, animal and living thing, so without a knowledge of being per se we cannot know any substance at all. We also must know the properties of being, which are the three convertibles, One, true and Good. Existence is the most basic good since without it there is nothing at all. Good in turn must be one or is incomplete and so less than good. Good also must be true or else it is not simply good. Similarly Truth must be One to be true. This leads us to further considerations.

We are invited to consider whether or not we can know anything defective without knowing what is completely and absolutely perfect. Of course, without anything perfect our knowledge of the imperfect or defective would not stand, since we could not measure it without a standard. Being in potency, for instance, is known against the reality of being in act. To see being itself as an abstract concept standing alone is not the place to stop thinking, for to do that would make thought the completion of a circle and so fail to reach a standard in actuality.

Being in potency is known against being in act. Hence any analysis would not be complete without knowing Being that is most pure, most complete and absolute, totally reliable and beyond dispute, or simply Pure Act. In all knowing and understanding, therefore, we are actually knowing God. This is necessary, and important for us to realize, because God would then be seen to be underwriting everything and would answer to being One, True and Good.

VII. Reflection and the Power of Memory

When we reflect within ourselves on our coming to be, given the power of memory, there should be found some evidence within the self of the moment of this happening. Such evidence suggests light and is an immediate knowledge of the self, which is not something that a fellow human being can give to another but which is an intuition that is quite certain since it is based on the self's own experience of herself. The buildup of evidence results in the greater certitude of a person's self-establishment and offers a source to which a person may return. It is like returning to reengage with the light that shines on the memory and to wonder about this light and what it implies. This is no mean implication. Remember that the "very idea of experience is the idea of something natural and that empirical thinking is answerable to experience" (McDowell xix).

VIII. Conclusion: Seeing God Obscurely as in a Mirror

Reflecting on the moment of coming to be yourself as yourself requires simple attention to the moment which should be found in your spiritual memory. That recall, in Bonaventure's exposition, puts yourself at the source of your life. This does not seem to be a traumatic memory, but rather a gentle recall of something incomplete as a beginning would suggest. The memory has a light present to it (Bonaventure, 81). He invites us to see ourselves, "and you will be able to see God through yourself as through an image" as "through a mirror" somewhat obscurely (Op. cit., 80).

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