

Paul Cobley

The Outsourcing of Memory

It is true that if you want to know who Charlemagne was or where Kuala Lumpur is, you can press the button and immediately learn everything from the Internet. Do that when you want, but help yourself; try to remember the fact so that you do not need to seek it a second time whenever you need this knowledge in school, for example. The bad news is that your realization that a computer can answer your question at any time discourages your desire to remember information. This phenomenon can result in something like the following: to learn that one street can be reached from another by bus or metro – which is very convenient in case of haste – the person decides that it is no longer necessary to go on foot. But if you stop walking you turn into someone who is forced to move around in a wheelchair. (Caro nipotino, *studies memoria*, 2014).

Among the most crass proposals put forth by Western politicians and policy-makers, in a field crowded by knee-jerk absurdity, has been the idea that universities could suitably be replaced by hand-held, internet-connected devices (see, among a cavalcade of others, Rivzi and Donnelly 2013, Ferenstein 2013). In this scenario, ‘knowledge’ is easily accessed by way of a mobile phone or a tablet that allows the user to retrieve the wealth and splendour of the world wide web. Gone would be the need for expensive university buildings or the less expensive remaining academics who have not been ‘casualized’. And the whole messy business of interaction between humans hell-bent on enriching experience and deploying sentience to further the species could be despatched. Of course, there is a slight problem in this glorious projection. Universities, although they often improve the levels of knowledge of individuals, actually (should) aspire to trade in what Nicholas Maxwell (2007, 2014) calls ‘wisdom’. Where ‘wisdom’ principally differs from ‘knowledge’ is in its imbrication with what is of *value* – both for oneself and others – in the broadest possible scheme. It is likely to involve know-how and skills in processes rather than mere fact. Indeed, there is an even more serious problem in this scenario and it does not just lurk in the projected fate of the institutions of higher learning. It is the very real threat that humans everywhere may wittingly or unwittingly allow one of the faculties that defines them as humans to atrophy.

That faculty is memory. Not just the internal mnemonic devices of humans or their distribution in technical, material and cognitive extensions; but the faculty which enables humans to progress, to move on from one state to another, to negotiate new challenges and contexts as the environments of humans change. In his

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last major theoretical work, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, translated into English in 2014, Eco emphasized the importance of memory in the process of looking forward by emphasizing its obverse: forgetting. He refers to the ‘Vertigo of the Labyrinth’, where the human cannot remain stable because of the sheer potentiality in all that there is to remember. The problem of forgetting, he states, has been present since classical antiquity, developing contemporaneously with the evolution of mnemonic techniques by which to commit to memory the maximum possible amount of information (especially in the centuries in which information was not as readily obtainable and transportable as it has since become, with the invention first of printing and subsequently of electronic devices) (2014: 74). In conclusion, Eco (2014: 93) states that:

... if cultures survive, one reason is because they have succeeded in reducing the weight of their encyclopedic baggage by placing so many notions in abeyance, thus guaranteeing their members a sort of vaccination against the Vertigo of the Labyrinth and the Themistocles/Funes complex [referring to characters with prodigious but unmanageable memories, created by Cicero and Borges, respectively].

The real problem, however, is not the fact that cultures pare down their encyclopedias (which is, in any case, a physiological phenomenon), but rather that what has been placed in abeyance can always be recovered. As such, then, Eco suggests that cultures need to rely on a ‘Maximal Encyclopedia’, a regulation of what is to be remembered, presumably along the lines not of pure knowledge but of wisdom. Crucially, though, he insists that the Vertigo of the Labyrinth is “often the price we must pay for calling into question the laziest of our ontologies” (2014: 93).

From the Tree to the Labyrinth is, to be sure, a book of high theory and Eco has certainly never been slavish to the division of theoretical and more popular concerns (see Cobley 2016a). However, his more stark warning in respect of memory is presented in appropriate and timely fashion within a non-academic text and demonstrates the extreme danger of culture’s forgetting as opposed to the compromises of remembering. In a letter to his grandson, published in *L’Espresso* (2014), Eco warns that humans’ reliance on internet-connected devices is causing memory loss; he advises his grandson to start memorizing things for himself from the arts and culture so that he will be fulfilled, as if he had “lived a thousand lives” rather than lived a life “monotonous and devoid of great emotion” (my translation, here and in subsequent quotes).

The observation on memory that Eco makes in this letter is twofold. The first part seems to be apocalyptic in the analogy between seemingly discrete somatic and cognitive realms as outlined in the quote that prompts the current essay. The atrophy of memory produces the same kind of results as the atrophy of other parts

of the body. By constantly returning to an externalized mechanical repository of knowledge – and the statement of Eco, here, does not go into the extent to which this repository is an endlessly corrupted encyclopedia – humans run the risk of simply losing their memory or running it down to an extremely low level of functionality. In this scenario, they become like the humans in *Wall-E* (2008), moving round only in their hover chairs, navigating the *Axiom* and relying only minimally on their bodies and equally so on their minds, the latter being stimulated by screens showing mainly drinks advertisements.

The second part of the observation in the letter is equally important but also requires some further comment to emphasize its ramifications. Immediately after warning his grandson about the threat of atrophy, Eco then adds: “Oh, I know that you are into sport and know how to control your body; but let us return to your brain”. He then suggests that his grandson should learn a short poem every morning, or the line-ups of football teams, or have a competition with friends to remember who was on board the *Hispaniola* when it went in search of *Treasure Island*, or the servants of the Three Musketeers. The list is revealing because it not only demonstrates Eco’s eclecticism, ranging over popular culture and more valorized forms, but that he employs this range – as always in his work – in the pursuit of answers to questions about cognition. The brain, for Eco, is capable of avoiding atrophy in a manner that makes it far superior to the hardware of the computer, designed with the brain as a model, but considerably more limited and susceptible of decay.

Yet it is not only with reference to quotidian recall that Eco has concerns about the outsourcing of memory to the world wide web. He is also worried about historical memory, explaining that humans in every society are *in media res*, relating to history like the viewer who begins to spectate a film from the middle, having arrived at the cinema early. Just because the earlier events in the film have passed, it does not mean that there is no need to reconstruct them for the purposes of understanding what is happening in the present. This is not a challenging argument and it is one that is deployed regularly and targeted, especially, at children who are learning history at school. However, what Eco signals gently to his grandson should also be a genuine warning to adults regarding the current sleepwalking to disaster that is embodied in cultural policy responses to communication technology.

Although culture is always ‘in crisis’, there are cogent reasons to assume that humans are at a critical point in the early decades of the 21st century. Social formations are preparing to organize themselves for a future where technology will transform traditional forms of culture. Some of this is apparently presaged in the first couple of decades of widespread use of the internet and, especially, in mobile communication. Organization for the future, however, has repeatedly consisted

of the crass economic instrumentalism that calls for the dismantling of the arts – and the humanities that study them – at the very moment when technologies are emerging that instrumentalists can reference in their myopic cost-cutting exercises. To state the matter in this way does not amount to Luddism and it is clear in Eco's words to his grandson that he, too, knows the perils of seeming like an old fuddy-duddy. As is ever the case, technology *per se* is not the enemy. Clearly, what is the enemy is instrumentalism – in this case, instrumentalism cancels the pursuit of knowledge in all but the most mechanical ways and thus limits enhancement of memory.

In favour of what, then, does the cancellation occur? The only answer that can be given is a very general one to do with the putative economic rationality that underpins the capitalist mode of production. Leaving memory to the vagaries of the internet amounts to just one cog in a high-tech capitalist dream where the cost of education at all levels is reduced, where customers have more opportunities to be exposed to advertising and chances for consumption, and left by the wayside is the kind of wisdom (in Maxwell's sense) that might foment even the slightest dissent. As can be seen, it is difficult, in this scenario, not to resort to knee-jerk Trotskyism, an impoverished position that Eco would have been loath to encourage. In Eco's letter to his grandson, as in all his work on the heritage of knowledge as exemplified by the encyclopedia and humans' semiotic trawls through it in successive ages of evolution, there is a yet more challenging concern with the quality of human life. The acts of memory that he sees as integral to human cognition are exercises in superlative differentiation. The almost ineffably extensive cognitive performance in which semioses are separated from, and related to, each other marks the human *Umwelt* as special (Cobley 2016b). Impeding the process of differentiation through the outsourcing of memory and experience promises to reduce human learning to a level where it no longer enriches existence. Indeed, considering this, it is possible to make a case for the pursuit of 'knowledge' – as opposed to 'wisdom' – as a means to enhance the *Umwelt*. Yet, the dilemma of regulating the encyclopedia remains and, indeed, the problem is now not so much the regulation as the falling into disuse of the encyclopedia, rendering it a mere supplementary utility rather than central to human semiosis. Eco does not go so far as to suggest that humans will be turned into zombies. This would be facile. However, he does predict lives that will be "monotonous and devoid of great emotion".

What will humans be like without culture and the arts? What will they be like without the habit of dramatizing the nooks and crannies of experience? What will people be like when they only do things that will make money for someone or some system? What will human experience be when it is restricted to a few prescribed penurious behaviours, avoiding other, proscribed but enriching behav-

iours? The answer, of course, is that it will never happen. Humans will always search out the nether regions of their *Umwelt*, they will always venture to the furthest places of the imagination, like players in *Minecraft*, creating worlds even as they step into them. But, if the current climate prevails, they will do this slowly, with constraints, venturing tentatively, making progress in a manner that is too jaded to engender a spirit of innovation in either the humanities or the sciences. Above all, the encyclopedia will be degraded and memory will serve only the needs of ... well, certainly not cognition. Possibly, human society will reach a stage where nobody is left to argue that living a half-life – or less – is not desirable when the fiscal savings are so great.