

The Memory

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Electronic memories undoubtedly will have implications that cannot yet be clearly discerned. Two of them, however, can be anticipated rather definitely: They will shape the structure of future history (if history is understood to imply a continuous storage of information acquired), as they permit a more disciplined storage, recombination, and easy retrieval of what has been stored. And they will entail quite an outburst of creativity as they relieve us of the need to store information. Revolutionary as these two probable consequences of electronic memories may be, these memories hold other even more revolutionary virtualities. Here we want to discuss one of these not quite so obvious consequences of electronic memories:

The concept "memory" is one of the fundamentals of Western civilization (and probably of all civilizations), as it implies the specificity (the "dignity") of the human being. Unlike the other creatures, we do not only pass on inherited but also acquired information, we do not only have a genetic but also a cultural memory. This faculty of storing acquired information and of thus making it available (retrievable) to others is almost weird, as it is contrary to our natural condition. In accordance with the second law of thermodynamics all information within a closed system (as for instance human society) must decay in time and yet the sum total of all cultural information available to us is continuously increasing. According to the principles of biology, acquired information cannot be passed on, and yet each human generation inherits a sum of cultural information exceeding that of its parents. Putting it differently: thanks to the cultural memory we are anti-natural beings. This almost uncanny (mysterious, "sacred") capacity of ours of storing information has been reified in some way or other in all cultures, just as if this capacity were a "thing". Within our own culture this reification of the capacity of memorizing has resulted in such concepts as the "soul", the "mind" or the "self", and coherently also the concept of "immortality".

Electronic memories actually are simulations of the memory function of the brain. This function is transferred to the outside from within the skull, as it were. We thus acquire a critical distance to the memory function: we can observe it from the outside, we can interfere, we can control it. Owing to this distance we can differentiate more clearly between the function of the memory as such (between software) and its aid (hardware). We thus avoid the former reification of the memory function. Due to our use of the computer, we recognize that the memory function is a "mode" and not a "thing". Our traditional concepts like that of the "soul", the "mind" or "immortality" become subject of a new criticism (a criticism of the practice). Owing to such a criticism some of the pillars on which our value systems are based can be expected to tumble and we shall have to develop new values. The critical distance imposed on us by the electronic memories probably will not do away with the weirdness of the memory function, it will, on the contrary, become even more mysterious. We shall perceive what is contrary to the natural more distinctly from the distance. What it will imply for future philosophical thinking and religious experience, cannot yet be foreseen.