Rewriting the Soul

MULTIPLE PERSONALITY AND THE SCIENCES OF MEMORY

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

1995

(continued on back flap)
An Indeterminacy in the Past

It will be good to conclude in a more analytic vein. Multiple personality, I argued, has nothing to teach philosophers about mind and body. But philosophical analysis, of an almost grammatical sort, may help us with memory and multiplicity. The title of the present chapter means what it says, which is hard, because we think of the past as fixed, final, and determined. I am not about to address that banal topic, the indeterminacy of memory. I mean an indeterminacy about what people actually did, not about what we remember them doing. I mean an indeterminacy about past human actions, where it is something about our actions, not our memories of them, that is indeterminate. The memories that most affect us are memories of scenes and episodes in which we or others do something other. The repressed memories that have so fascinated psychiatrists have commonly been memories of sexual actions or of cruel actions. In recent times, they have been cruel sexual actions, whose epitome is sadistic sexual abuse of children. But actions are not simply activities, movements that show up on video. We are primarily concerned with intentional actions, things that a person intended to do.

Intentional actions are actions "under a description." The philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe gave this example. A man was moving a lever up and down. He was manually pumping water into the cistern of the house. He was pumping poisoned water into the country house where evil men met for planning sessions. He was poisoning the men who met in the house. 1 Certainly there were not distinct physical sequences of activities, moving the lever, pumping the water, poisoning the men. Should we, however, say that there was a number of distinct actions, pumping water, on the one hand, and poisoning the men, on the other? Anscombe argued that there was just one action, under various descriptions. Each successive description of the action involves a larger range of circumstances, but only one intentional action is being described. Since the publication, in 1959, of Anscombe's slim monograph on these topics, there has developed an entire academic discipline called "action theory." Some philosophers argue that although there was only one physical activity, only one sequence of relevant events that would show up on a video record, the man performed two distinct actions, pumping and poisoning. The idea is, in part, that since there are two different descriptions, and action is always "under a description," there are two distinct actions. Here I shall follow Anscombe: there is indeed more than one true answer to the question "What was he doing?" (or, asked of the man at the pump, "What are you doing?"). But there was just one action, under several descriptions.

Intention introduces another set of issues. I shall soon show how they bear on memory and multiplicity, but it is very important not to fix on sensational examples without being clear about very ordinary events, events in which we know perfectly well what's going on. Imagine, says Anscombe, that I am sawing a board. My board is on top of your table. Inadvertently, I not only saw my board but also, simultaneously and without noticing, saw into your table. I did not do so intentionally. My action of sawing my board was identical with my action of sawing into your table. There was just one action, but I did two things, saw my board and saw into your table. I intended to do only one of these things.

To generalize: we can distinguish acting with an intention, acting intentionally, and intending to act. 2 Acting intentionally is acting with some intention—that is, performing an action under some description, such that one intends to act, under that description. But one may act intentionally, under description A, and also perform an action under description B, without intending to act under description B. On Anscombe's theory, in order for one's action to be an intentional action there must be some description A, such that one intended to act under A, but in doing A, one may also have been doing B, though not intentionally. I should also say that Anscombe, much influenced by Wittgenstein, crisply argues that an intentional action is not, for example, an organized sequence of doings plus an inner, private, mental, intention. 3 The intention under which an event is done does not refer to some entity in the mind.

The thesis that action is action under a description has logical consequences for the future and for the past. When I decide to do something, and do it, I am acting intentionally. There may be many kinds of actions with which I am unacquainted, and of which I have no description. It seems to follow from the thesis that I cannot intend to perform those actions. I cannot choose to do those things. I could of course choose to do something A, to which a subsequently constructed new description B applies; then by choosing to do A, and doing it, I did indeed do B, but I did not intend to do B. The limitation is not a physical
constraint or a moral prohibition. It is a trivial, logical fact that I cannot form those intentions. This fact cannot make me feel confined, or make me regret my lack of power. I cannot feel limited by lacking a description, for if I did, in a self-aware way, feel limited, then I would have at least a glimmering of the description of the action and so could think of choosing it.

Anselm’s theses about action seem to have an unexpected corollary. When new descriptions become available, when they come into circulation, or when they become the sorts of things that it is all right to say, to think, then there are new things to choose to do. When new intentions become open to me, because new descriptions, new concepts, become available to me. I live in a new world of opportunities. Almost the opening words of my first chapter were “a multiple personality epidemic.” We have had plenty of “epidemics” in the course of this book: child abuse, ritual abuse, recovered memories, recantings of recovered memories. Cynics about one or another of these say the epidemics are made by copycats. But even if there was a lot of copying, there is also a logical aspect to “epidemics” of this type. In each case, even with an illness such as multiple personality, new possibilities for action, actions under new descriptions, come into being or become current. Multiple personality provided a new way to be an unhappy person. Even many supporters of the multiple personality diagnosis are willing to agree that it has become, to use one popular phrasing, a culturally sanctioned way of expressing distress.

Consider the new terminology, which, if not quite part of everyday English, has become familiar to anyone interested in multiple personality: “switching,” “alter,” “personality fragment,” “coming out,” “going to another place,” and even the use of the first person plural, “we.” A hundred years ago there was a more parsimonious set of new phrases such as condition secondae. It is often observed, by cynics, that during all the waves of doubling or multiplicity, one of the ways in which alters became solidified was by being named. A certain range of behaviors, feelings, attitudes, and memories became invested with a proper name and then glued together to form a partial personality. Another solidifying agent behind this practice has been less noticed. The new descriptive vocabulary of alters, such as switching, provided new options for being and acting. Instead of mood swings there was something much more specific that a person could be doing, namely, switching to a persecutor alter; a persecutor alter could be taking executive control. I do not mean that doubles could not switch, or that an alter could not come out, before these words were available. Mary Reynolds switched; her vivacious alter came out. We are content to apply such descriptions retroactively to times when the descriptions were not available, were not part of the conceptual space of the day. But it is not clear that the vivacious alter could intentionally come out, could choose to come out, in 1816.

This example brings out a certain vagueness around the edges of the thesis that all intentional action is action under a description. Anselm was interested in the intentions of whole people, responsible moral agents. Now under one account of what is happening in multiplicity, the switch is not intentional but involuntary. This may be the account that will be favored if the diagnosis and the name dissociative identity disorder succeeds. We have in effect “less than one person”; we have no well-organized person to form intentions. Contrast an account that was widespread during the 1980s and is still current among the rank and file of the multiple movement. When Esther switches to Stan, Stan comes out, takes over, dominates Esther and other alters of Daphne, the host personality. Stan is an agent; Stan is the personality who is responsible for the switch. The switch was not one of Esther’s or Daphne’s intentional actions, but it was one of Stan’s. Stan has decided to come out. Until the new language and conceptions of multiple personality came into use, this was not an option for a personality fragment, not as something like an intentional action. But it was described in the manner of an intentional action, Stan’s action, at least in the 1980s. As dissociative identity disorder becomes the official diagnosis, and personalities become less distinct in theory and practice, these opportunities for intentional action may fade away.

This puts quite a strain on Anselm’s theses about intention and action. One has to have a certain integrity, a certain wholeness, to have intentions at all. The language of alters was providing descriptions in which dissociated actions could be said to have centers, personalities, or at any rate personality fragments, which had enough of the features of a person that actions could be ascribed to them, fragment by fragment. Consider the famous law cases, not only the murderers and rapists, but also the South Carolinian woman who claims that she did not commit adultery and hence is entitled to alimony, even if an alter did commit adultery. Say Daphne was like her, and that Esther was Daphne’s adulterous alter. Esther has an affair, of which Daphne has no knowledge. What could be a clearer case of attributing intentional action to an alter, to Esther? I am suggesting that with the new forms of description, new kinds of intentional action came into being, intentional actions that were not open to an agent lacking something like those descriptions.

Of the “epidemics” that I have mentioned, the least controversial is
child abuse. It is a familiar fact that child abuse statistics keep growing and growing. No one can help but wonder if, in addition to better and better reporting, there is also more and more child abuse. That would be an appalling conclusion, given the immense amount of effort, money, publicity, and goodwill that has gone into the control of child abuse. The variety of activities covered by the description "child abuse" has radically expanded during the past three decades. Some types of behavior that previously passed almost unnoticed came to be seen as abusive. New ways to be abusive came into being. Adults who want to abuse, but who, thanks to well-instituted inhibitions, recoil from the more overt kinds of abuse, can now perform acts that they themselves could describe as abusive. And then of course they might move on to actions that previously they would have hardly dared to contemplate. There may be what I shall call semantic contagion. When we think of an action as of a certain kind, our mind runs to other acts of that kind. Thus, classifying an act in a new way may lead us on to others. Few people reason like this: "Now that I am doing things of this kind—child abuse—I may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb." But once certain barriers are gone because many things have been lumped under one semantic heading, "child abuse," some previously repulsive acts may become less forbidding. One should not dismiss the possibility that some of the increase in child abuse is due to the publicity itself, in that it makes available new descriptions under which to act and then, by semantic contagion, leads on to yet worse actions. Opening new possibilities for a person to do something; that sounds wonderful. It is not always so great. Lead me not into temptation. One can open possibilities for evil just as one can open possibilities for good.

But may not the increased incidence have been due simply to a copycat effect? There is no way to draw a sharp line between copying behavior and acquiring a new concept of a kind of behavior. Each case must be examined on its own. Sensational suicide pacts, whether of Heinrich von Kleist in the Wannsee in 1811 or of a group of teenagers in the Middle West in 1991, apparently produce imitators. I would not say they were creating a new concept or making available a new description. Their imitators are, one thinks, simply inspired to imitate. But in the case of child abuse we should build into our understanding the way in which new kinds of actions opened up, became opportunities for evil, as new concepts and new descriptions became distributed by a massive drive to disseminate information and to catch or prevent child abuse.

In passing we should note how this idea bears on the censorship of egregious pornography. There are of course deontological arguments that distributing pornography is bad in itself, intrinsically wicked. Close to this is the argument that the availability of pornography is in itself insulting to women or even creates a self-image of worthlessness. And there is the argument that photographed (as opposed to written) pornography requires exploiting some women and children. But most arguments are utilitarian, consequential. Disseminating pornography encourages men to demean women and may lead to acts of violence and cruelty. Pornography of the vilest and most sadistic sort, it is argued, invites imitation. The evidence for this claim is poor, but it may be the wrong claim to examine closely. The real evil may lurk one stage higher up. Distributing pornography is distributing knowledge of new kinds of action. Most men, including many cruel and abusive men, are remarkably innocent, being simply unacquainted with the range of possible de-meaning actions. One thing that some pornography does is to disseminate new modes of action, new descriptions, verbal or visual. This is assuredly a very abstract thought about wickedness, but wicked actions should be addressed with logical rigor as well as pious moralizing.

I have from time to time spoken of the looping effect of human kinds—that is, the interactions between people, on the one hand, and ways of classifying people and their behavior on the other. Being seen to be a certain kind of person, or to do a certain kind of act, may affect someone. A new or modified mode of classification may systematically affect the people who are so classified, or the people themselves may rebel against the knowers, the classifiers, the science that classifies them. Such interactions may lead to changes in the people who are classified, and hence in what is known about them. That is what I call a feedback effect. Now I am adding a further parameter. Inventing or molding a new kind, a new classification, of people or of behavior may create new ways to be a person, new choices to make, for good or evil. There are new descriptions, and hence new actions under a description. It is not that people change, substantively, but that as a point of logic new opportunities for action are open to them.

Thus far I have been discussing a person's choosing or deciding what to do or be. Now let us turn to the actions of other people. There is more reporting of child abuse now than there was twenty years ago, because there are more reporting agencies, and because authorities and lay people are more assiduous. That is a far more obvious effect of the making and molding of the concept of child abuse than the hypothetical effects on future abusers that I have been discussing. It is almost
unproblematic. We describe, and hence report, more actions as instances of child abuse. As the concept of child abuse expands, more and more situations fall under the description “child abuse.” So there is more child abuse to report. That is plain enough. We move on to more difficult territory when we think about what children themselves see and experience. After about 1978 there was a concerted effort to educate children about child abuse. Once upon a time, the generic warning was “Don’t take candy from strangers; never go for a walk or take a ride with someone you do not know.” Then children were educated, for example, about good touches and bad touches. They were presented with vignettes, scenarios, and video clips to teach them about such differences—and to furnish them with a new vocabulary, a new mode of describing. There is some debate among psychologists as to whether the children could grasp what they were taught. The state of California radically cut back on child abuse education because some experts argued, on developmental grounds, that six-year-old children were not yet sufficiently mature to understand. Now whatever be the merits and defects of this kind of education, the developmental criticism is suspect. It is a good maxim that, absent compelling evidence to the contrary, young children are very smart and know very well what’s going on, even if they are sometimes confused (or simply shy, or sensibly distrustful of adults) when it comes to talking about such things.

Children may end up being more aware than adults. Take less heinous forms of abuse. I quoted some of Cornelia Wilbur’s kinds of sexual abuse. They included an adult’s bathing or showering with a nine-year-old child, arranging for children to sleep in the parent’s bedroom, as well as various kinds of washing of children after infancy. A child might be educated to see these actions as abusive, even though the parent would never categorize them that way. What did the father do? He showered with his nine-year-old daughter. The daughter not only felt uncomfortable, she felt abused. Asked what her father did, she could reply that he abused her. Such issues become inhumane; in real life one hopes that if the daughter is uncomfortable, the father will realize it. We do not have to categorize. If the father insists on showering with his daughter, knowing she is uncomfortable at some level of her being, then he is being abusive. Whether the abuse counts as psychological or sexual is too fine a point to worry about except in an adversarial courtroom. Nevertheless, the conceptual question “What was he doing?” remains perplexing. Even more puzzling is the case of today’s adult, who did not have these descriptions when she was a child, but who now looks at her past and recalls episodes that, she now thinks, fall under those descriptions. She was abused, although not flagrantly, as a child. Even so, when she was a child, neither she nor adults around her were well able to conceptualize what was happening in the way that today’s five-year-old can. The retroactive redescription and reexperiencing of human actions is the most difficult of topics. We need a little more spadework before addressing it directly.

Matters become less personal and less pressing when we go back into history. Since we can be disinterested about historical figures, in a way that we cannot be with the father and daughter in the shower, the logical difficulties may be seen more clearly. Here is perhaps the simplest possible example of a nontrivial retroactive redescription. The British parliament has a private member’s bill before it, pardoning some 307 young British and Canadian soldiers who were court-martialed and shot during the Great War, 1914–1918. The most common charge was desertion during a military engagement, or refusal to obey orders and go to the front. Details of these secret trials were finally published in 1990; few of us now can feel much sympathy for the officers who conducted the courts-martial. The author of the private member’s bill states that today the men would be judged to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, and to be in need of psychiatric help, not execution. This is retroactive redescription with a vengeance. Even this example is not at all straightforward. It pathologizes old behavior. Does that matter? The bill is symbolic. It is part of an antifascist politics and is indeed modeled on a previous bill connected with Anglo-Irish politics, concerning 24 Irish volunteers who were executed during the same war. The bill also has personal meaning for a few descendants. If one of my forebears had been shot for desertion during that long-ago war, I’m far from sure I would be happy with this private member’s bill. I think I might be proud that my ancestor had the wit and the guts to try to desert, the most rational thing to do, under the circumstances. From a logical point of view this proposed retroactive redescription is interesting because it does not increase the number of things that the soldiers might have done intentionally. It decreases them. The men are no longer said to have deserted, or at any rate, not said to have deserted “in the first degree.” This is because if they were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, they were not, strictly speaking, acting voluntarily.

The bill before parliament is intended to save reputations; more often we encounter proposals to destroy or diminish historical figures. Such retroactive redescription, using modern judgments to vilify someone,
can sometimes seem misguided. A famous Scottish explorer, Alexander Mackenzie (1755–1820), has been called not just a child abuser but a child molester. Mackenzie was the first European to navigate the Mackenzie River north to the Arctic Ocean, and the first European to cross the Rocky Mountains to reach the Pacific Ocean. No saint he, and surely a racist, yet I still wonder if he should be called a child abuser or child molester on the sole ground that he married a fourteen-year-old girl when he was forty-eight years of age. The marriage was neither illegal nor totally exceptional in 1802. When a forty-eight-year-old man has any sexual contact with a fourteen-year-old today, that is child abuse. (Nabokov’s Lolita reminds us that even now the label “child abuse” could be a trifle simplistic and moralistic, but that is not the issue for Mackenzie, whose life seems to have been, in the relevant senses, rather simple.) Should we retroactively apply terms such as child abuse so generously? Luckily we do not have to prosecute, for the question is purely conceptual.

Nevertheless, great passions can be aroused by just such questions. Philippe Ariès had a vision of earlier centuries of childhood as providing a freer, franker, less sexually cluttered life for humans before and shortly after puberty. There was not much of an idea of the child, and still less of abusing. Humans in that age group were not harmed, were not conceptually capable of being harmed, in ways that we now harm children. The psychohistorian Lloyd DeMause considers that to be rubbish. He says that the history of at least Western civilization is the history of child abuse. Things get worse and worse the further back in time we go. Ariès used the constant public playing with the genitals of the infant and child Louis XIII (1601–1663, king of France from 1610) as evidence of an absence of oppressive conceptualization. A royal physician provided ample description of the fun. DeMause takes the story as evidence of rampant child sexual abuse. So too, for his purposes, were ancient Greek pederasty and the so-called Children’s Crusade of 1212. In the same vein Denis Donovan argues that Freud missed the boat on the Oedipus complex. It is as if Freud did not even notice that Sophocles’ Jocasta had maimed Oedipus and handed him over to a shepherd to be killed. Donovan would like us to see Oedipus Rex as a story of child abuse and its sequelae. Well, it is certainly a story about attempted infanticide. That crime is often captured by child abuse statutes today. Does it follow that we should describe the antique legend as a story that begins with child abuse? There are clearly problems about retroactive attribution of modern moral concepts.

To take a trite example, imagine some plain, but not entirely gross, case of sexual harassment that took place in 1950, behavior that contravened no law or custom of 1950, and which hardly even infringed the canons of taste then current, in the social milieu where the event took place. If you tell me about the episode in 1950 terms, you certainly will not use the expression “sexual harassment.” What was the man doing? You answer by identifying the action, telling me what the man said to his secretary, perhaps, and the way in which he said it. But now you can also answer the question “What was the man doing?” with “He was sexually harassing his secretary.” This is the same action as the one you first presented in a more neutral way, but it is that action under a new description. On the other hand, when we ask whether the man intended to harass his secretary, most of us are less sure what to say. Today, in many milieus, we hold in contempt the man who says he did not realize he was harassing. And if he will not stop behaving that way, he is finished. But when we reflect on the 1950s man, there is a certain diminishment to the accusation if the very idea of harassment was not available to him.

As a cautious philosopher, I am inclined to say that many retroactive redescriptions are neither definitely correct nor definitely incorrect. As political tactics it is nevertheless useful to impose new descriptions and awarenesses on the past. That is what DeMause and Donovan are doing. We should realize the logical consequences of their tactic. It is almost as if retroactive redescription changes the past. That is too paradoxical a turn of phrase, for sure. But if we describe past actions in ways in which they could not have been described at the time, we derive a curious result. For all intentional actions are actions under a description. If a description did not exist, or was not available, at an earlier time, then at that time one could not act intentionally under that description. Only later did it become true that, at that time, one performed an action under that description. At the very least, we rewrite the past, not because we find out more about it, but because we present actions under new descriptions.

Perhaps we should best think of past human actions as being to a certain extent indeterminate. Let us begin with that too easy example of sexual harassment. I do not think it was determined, in 1950, that there would come into being a pivotal American concept of sexual harassment. I asked you to imagine some plain, but not entirely gross, example of sexual harassment that took place in 1950. I am not at all sure that it was determinate, in 1950, that this was an intentional act of sexual harassment. Indeed some people, with whom I strongly disagree, will say
that it definitely was not sexual harassment, then. Others will insist that of course it was. In this case I do judge that it was intentional sexual harassment in 1950. I stop short of saying that Mackenzie was a child molester because he married a fourteen-year-old. Others will adamantly insist that he was, and I can understand what they mean. We will all draw our lines differently here, which I take to be a hint of indeterminacy. It is not a question of "say whatever you like," but of "understand why we are pulled in different directions." When it comes to retroactive redescription of the past, political rhetoric will influence many people more than argument and reflection will. I do not want to convince anyone to draw the line, in retroactive redescription, at any particular place. Rather I would urge that it may simply not have been very determinate, in the past, that certain future descriptions of past intentional action would apply or could be applied.

Now let us swing back and ask a related question about multiple personality. Earlier in this chapter I had a story of one Daphne whose alter Esther, unbeknownst to placidly and properly married Daphne, had a male lover. I described the case in the 1980s language of multiplicity. How well can we use such descriptions retroactively? In any age a Daphne could have had regular trysts with her lover, and yet have segregated the meetings and the emotions they called forth from her daily life. Suppose that she was not really conscious of that side of her world while engaged in her life as wife and mother. She did not notice the perfume and the undergarments she kept in a private place. She had, as the old penny novelists used to say, two lives, and she kept them totally apart, even to the point of deluding herself. She and her lover used the private name Esther during their secret encounters. When they parted she gruffly adopted the role of a disagreeable man, "Stan."

Daphne, we imagine, had her illicit affair in the antebellum South, rather than the 1980s Carolinas. Double consciousness was unknown at that time and place. On hearing her story, can we not, nevertheless, say what was really happening, even if she could not describe herself that way? Was she not a multiple who would switch to alter Esther during romantic interludes away from her tedious husband? Her father, we find, not content with abusing the children of his slaves, took up with his own daughter at a very early age. Does that not clinch the matter? I believe many advocates of the multiple personality diagnosis would urge that Daphne was a multiple. I do not want to take issue with that. It is the next step that counts. For if she was a multiple, all the language of multiplicity can be applied to her retroactively, can it not? No.

For example, during the 1980s, as I said above, Esther chose to come out on certain occasions, taking executive control from Daphne. But this was simply not possible for an "Esther" in 1855. There was no solidified alter; there was not even the self-conception of an alter; there was no Esther-as-alter. Likewise there was no description of an action, "coming out," for any personality or fragment. I repeat, this is a logical point about action, but it may cast a different, if perplexing, light on the effect of introducing new descriptions of kinds of behavior, of kinds of people.

I may seem shortsighted: after all, if Daphne had undergone 1980s treatment, then she might well have developed full-blown multiplicity. Esther and Stan would have been among her alters. Did she not have the alter "in her"? This is a new consideration. Daphne had (it might be urged) what philosophers call a "disposition" to develop into fully-fledged multiplicity, just as a fragile teacup has a disposition to shatter when dropped. The disposition is part of or results from Daphne's internal makeup, just as the fragility of the teacup results from its internal structure. So can we not sensibly talk about Esther as an alter?

To see why not, consider an actual case, H. H. Goddard's patient Bernice R., of 1921. I have argued that she definitely fit the criteria of DSM-III. She was a multiple. She had one child alter, Polly, and I do not hesitate to say, on the basis of Goddard's reports, that Polly came out and took over Bernice. (I am not so sure, however, that Polly was acting intentionally when she did so.) I think it very likely that if Bernice had been treated in 1991, in a clinic for multiple personality and dissociation, she would have developed a substantial number of alters. There was certainly plenty of trauma in the family. Yet I believe it is wrong to project back onto the historical Bernice a personality structure that she (probably) would have developed under a certain kind of treatment. It is not simply that we do not know for sure what would have happened. It is not true that when Bernice entered therapy in 1921, she had a personality structure with more than one or two alters. It is true that she had at least one alter in September 1921, namely, Polly. It is also likely that if she had undergone a 1991 course of treatment, she would have evinced a number of alters. Maybe multiples like Bernice have a nature that has the potentiality to evolve in that way, if suitably reinforced. But there is no "actuality" in Bernice except this potentiality. The only relevant determinate fact about Bernice is that she had one alter, and the hint of another, one Louise.

Compare this with another fact about Bernice. She repeatedly told
Goddard that her father had sex with her. Goddard was convinced this was a fantasy, which Bernice had picked up after spending some time in a home for wayward girls. He did not think this false memory was connected with Bernice’s multiplicity. Like Janet, he thought he should make the incest-memory go away. He says that he convinced her it never happened. My guess, after reading Goddard and doing a little family history which has to be regarded as confidential, is that Bernice was recalling genuine incest (which, in her day, meant vaginal sexual intercourse) or, what I think may be more likely, sodomy. I believe she had an essentially true memory. I may be completely wrong. I may be half wrong; there may have been what we now call flagrant sexual abuse but without penetration. But there is a definite fact of the matter. Either Bernice’s father had sexual intercourse with her, or he did not. That is an “actuality,” although we shall never know for sure what was the truth of the matter. But there is no truth of the matter as to the real number of Bernice’s alters, something in her inner nature like the physical structure of a teacup. That is not determinate. To repeat, the only determinate fact is that Bernice had a child alter, Polly.

Thus far we have discussed retroactive application of new descriptions to past people or past actions. I shall end by turning to the most difficult case of all, the coming to terms with our own past. The recovered memory people and the false memory people may seem completely at loggerheads, but they share a common assumption: either certain events occurred, and were experienced, or they did not and were not. The past itself is determinate. A true memory recalls those events as experienced, while a false one involves things that never happened. The objects to be remembered are definite and determinate, a reality prior to memory. Even traditional psychoanalysis tends not to question the underlying definiteness of the past. The analyst will be indifferent as to whether a recollected event really occurred. The present emotional meaning of the recollection is what counts. Nevertheless, the past itself, and how it was experienced at the time, is usually regarded as determinate enough.

Of course many of the events that are disputed between the two sides (recovered memory versus false memory) are determinate, in the banal sense that they would have shown up if there had been a camcorder there to make a video of the disputed scene. Either the man sodomized his five-year-old stepson, or he did not. That is a determinate part of the past. Either Bernice’s memory of incest was fairly accurate, or it was not. Every case that has gone to court using evidence from recovered memories has been tried on allegations about completely determinate past events, usually monstrous, that either did occur or did not occur. Many other events recovered in memory are equally determinate. Notoriously, however, the vast amount of memory work does not end with such plainly cut-and-dried facts—or-falsehoods. Perhaps even Bernice’s memory, had it been probed critically, might have yielded a shady feeling of sexual discomfort about her father but nothing as dramatic as the incest she first reported, using the old-fashioned sense of the word. Maybe Goddard was half right. Bernice’s father did sexually abuse her, but in less flagrant ways than Bernice seemed to remember; when she acquired a set of new descriptions in the form of horror stories at the home for wayward girls, semantic contagion went to work. That is, on acquiring new ideas, she applied them to old actions.

Most people now accept the commonplace that memory is not itself like a camcorder, creating, when it works, a faithful record. We do not reproduce in memory a sequence of events that we have experienced. Instead we rearrange and modify elements that we remember into something that makes sense, or, sometimes, that has just enough structure to be puzzling or even incoherent. (Even incoherence demands enough organization for elements to be discordant.) We touch up, supplement, delete, combine, interpret, shade. There is still the conception that the past is the sort of thing of which a faithful record could have been made, had there existed an array of hidden cameras. But suppose I see (or remember) two people shaking hands to conclude a deal, and that I, on another occasion, see (or remember) two strangers meeting each other for the first time. The camera images of these two different scenes could well be indistinguishable, separable only when the full story came on the screen. The activities are recorded, but not the actions—under-a-description. Some theorists say that we interpret the scenes differently, but I do not find that helpful. We need considerable social savvy to know it is two entrepreneurs concluding a deal, but with that knowledge we do not, in the standard case, interpret what we see. We just see two men greets each other, or two men concluding a deal. But for those who prefer an analysis in terms of interpretation, then what I see (or remember) is an “interpreted” scene, a meaningful episode. At any rate an image, whether it is in the mind or on the video screen, is not enough to furnish an answer to the question “What were the two men doing?”

The remembered past that interests us psychologically is precisely this world of human action, of greeting, or of agreeing to a deal. Thus the imaginary camcorder in the sky, which records everything that happens in a particular scene, does not of itself suffice to record what people were
doing. Perhaps this bears on trauma research. There is at present something of an industry of interviewing, at intervals of time, victims of dreadful accidents. The recent earthquakes in California, the Buffalo Creek Dam disaster, the Oakland fire, the work of Scottish policemen sorting out the corpses from an oil rig disaster, or the episode in which some louts who were my former neighbors hijacked a school bus from Chowchilla, in the California desert, and buried the bus filled with children for a day and more. Only the last is even close to human action, although the relevant trauma was less the kidnaping, which, though scary, was also a bit of a lark, than the burial. Trauma experts are fascinated by these events and study the victims’ memories (as well as the symptoms of post-traumatic stress) at various times. Pioneer in this field Lenore Terr, who studied the Chowchilla kidnaping, holds that victims of what she calls single-event trauma retain clear memories of what happened."13 That would apply to most natural disasters as well as being buried alive. Yet I would point to another difference between such cases and recovered memories. The essential feature of the traumas was not human action. The traumatic events were what they were, and intention or acting under a description do not arise.

Thus I am urging caution in projecting results of trauma produced by impersonal conditions onto trauma produced by human actions. This is not because some different kind of memory is involved, but because of a logical difference between the events remembered. We describe earthquakes, but it makes little sense to talk about an earthquake under a description. It is just an earthquake. Of course Terr’s difference (single-event as opposed to repeated trauma) and mine (impersonal as opposed to intentional human action) are not so much at odds as they may seem. For one of the ways in which human action falls under descriptions is in terms of the way the action fits into a larger scene. The man’s hand on the pump is going up and down. Enlarge the scene. He is pumping water. Enlarge the scene. He is poisoning the men in the villa. As Anscombe makes so plain, the intentionality of an action is not a private mental event added on to what is done, but is the doing in context.

I have been speaking of redescribing old actions, especially with newly coined forms of description. There is something else that happens in recollection. The action-packed traumatic scenes of what people did may be invested with different meanings at different times. This phenomenon was well known to Freud, from quite early in his career. Before he had allowed full rein to infant sexuality, he was inclined to say that the primal scene, in which the infant or child witnesses parental intercourse, need not have had any sexual meaning at the time it was experienced. In adolescence or later, however, the same old scene became intensely sexual. Thanks to Freud and others, the nineteen-century idea that children are asexual is no longer well entrenched—although it is partially retained in theories of child development, in the idea that certain experiences are “inappropriate” at a certain stage of development, and hence in the clinical diagnosis of child abuse on the basis of excessive interest in sex. Freud probably bought into the asexuality of infants and children more than many of his contemporaries, and hence his retraction was the more pronounced.14 We can separate matters of Freud-history and Freud-exegesis from his initial insight. The idea, that the primal scene has a different meaning when experienced by the child from what it means when remembered or repressed by the adolescent, is of fundamental importance, even if founded on misleading presuppositions. We may think of it at the level of interpreting given events, or of acquiring new levels of feeling for what happened. I propose to go further.

Old actions under new descriptions may be reexperienced in memory. And if these are genuinely new descriptions, descriptions not available or perhaps nonexistent at the time of the episodes remembered, then something is experienced now, in memory, that in a certain sense did not exist before. The action took place, but not the action under the new description. Moreover, it was not determinate that these events would be experienced in these new ways, for it was not determinate, at the time that the events occurred, that in the future new descriptions would come into being. I should repeat that there are also lots of straightforward memories, suppressed or repressed, of perfectly determinate and thoroughly awful events. I am exploring memories that are on the fringe of these, memories that arise by mental mechanisms different from more straightforward recollection, whatever that may be.

Thus I am suggesting a very difficult view about memories of intentional human actions. What matters to us may not have been quite so definite as it now seems. When we remember what we did, or what other people did, we may also rethink, redescribe, and refeel the past. These redescriptions may be perfectly true of the past, that is, they are truths that we now assert about the past. And yet, paradoxically, they may not have been true in the past, that is, not truths about intentional actions that made sense when the actions were performed. That is why I say that the past is revised retroactively. I do not mean only that we change our opinions about what was done, but that in a certain logical sense what
was done itself is modified. As we change our understanding and sensibility, the past becomes filled with intentional actions that, in a certain sense, were not there when they were performed.

There are people to whom such a preposterous conclusion is perfectly obvious, people who delight in dispensing with the old categories of fact, of truth, of reason, and of logic. I regret that what I say may appeal to such people. It will be evident from the way I have written this book, and from what I have already said in this chapter, that I myself take for granted that the ideas of truth and fact are both basic and relatively unproblematic. My paradoxical claims about a certain indeterminacy in some past human actions are serious precisely because they are set against a background of truth and falsehood. Theorists who write as if everything were indeterminate, and a matter of texts and descriptions, usefully shake up our preconceptions. Their examples often teach a great deal, but their general thesis does not tell us much. To cite an old adage, if all flesh is straw, then kings and cardinals are straw—but so is everyone else, and we have not learned much about kings and cardinals.

We had best put the idea of indeterminacy of the past together with two commonplaces about memory. One I have mentioned already. Memory is not like a video record. It does not need images, and images are never enough; moreover, our memories shade and patch and combine and delete. This thought leads to the second one: the best analogy to remembering is storytelling. The metaphor for memory is narrative. Novelists probably do better at these themes than any theoretician. In The Good Terrorist (from which I quoted at the end of chapter 5) Doris Lessing’s protagonist Alice “was struggling to bring her memory to heel,” but when her mind started to dazzle and to puzzle, frantically trying to lay hold of something stable, then she always at once allowed herself—as she did now—to slide back into her childhood, where she dwelt pleasurably on some scene or other that she had smoothed and polished and painted over and over again with fresh color until it was like walking into a story that began, “Once upon a time there was a little girl called Alice with her mother, Dorothy. . . .”

The doctrine that memory should be thought of as narrative is an aspect of memoro-politics. We constitute our souls by making up our lives, that is, by weaving stories about our past, by what we call memories. The tales we tell of ourselves and to ourselves are not a matter of recording what we have done and how we have felt. They must mesh with the rest of the world and with other people’s stories, at least in externals, but their real role is in the creation of a life, a character, a self. This vision of memory as narrative is usually presented as humane, humanistic, antiscientific. It is certainly at odds with the neurological program of understanding memory. That has been anatomical in character—different types of memory are to be located in different parts of the body, that is, different parts of the brain. The opposition between memory as anatomy and memory as narrative need not be complete. Thus the neurologist Israel Rosenfeld, in his book The Invention of Memory, traces the anatomical program of localization of brain function but urges something far more like a narrative analysis of the role of memory in the life of human beings. There remains no doubt, however, that memory-as-narrative is often part of an antiscientific ideology. Yet it should never be forgotten that memoro-politics emerges precisely in the scientific context of positive psychology. It is part of the secular drive to replace the soul with something of which we have knowledge. Poets do not care for secular and scientific knowledge, but even they could not stand still. The humanistic reaction was to try an alternative: capture the soul not as science but as narrative. Proust’s A la recherche du temps perdu is a response to the first wave of French scientific memoro-politics. He wrote book after book of rewriting memories, retelling the same stories transformed. Proust is more Bergson than Janet, certainly, but the matrix is the same. A case described by Marcel’s father will appear equally in A la recherche and in several different studies by Pierre Janet. Bergson drew repeatedly on Janet, his exact contemporary, fellow student, and finally lifetime colleague. Memory as narrative and the sciences of memory are branches of the same stem, the secularization of the soul.

How strongly should we adhere to the picture of memory as narrative? Lessing, vividly connecting memory and storytelling, nevertheless writes of dwelling on a scene. I think that’s right. I want briefly to suggest the merits of a vulgar point of view: memory is in some ways comparable to perception, so long as we do not demand images. I want, for a moment, to direct our attention away from narrative. Despite my insistence that action is action under a description, I am suspicious of our incessant verbalizing of the human condition. Gilbert Ryle, the doyen of postwar Oxford philosophy, was already connecting remembering and narrating in his discussion of memory at the end of his classic 1949 contribution to the philosophy of mind. “Being good at recalling is being good at presenting. . . . It is a narrative skill.” “Reminiscing, then, can take the form of a faithful verbal narration.”

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of the ways that we remember, recall, and reminisce is by narrating. It
does not follow that remembering is narrating. Although Ryle usually
wrote of recalling episodes, he, like Lessing, also spoke of scenes. To say
that remembering is often of scenes, views, and feelings is not to imply
that we remember in images or reproduce, internally, an image of a
scene or an afterimage or interpretation of a feeling. We may do so, but
we need not. Empirical psychology teaches that people are very different
in the extent to which they (say they) visualize or form images.

The metaphor of the scene makes good sense of the experiences re-
ported in the sudden recovery of painful memories. The most common
expression now used is “flashback,” a term taken from the movies. It is
a scene or episode recalled, perhaps without provocation, unexpectedly.
Sometimes it is only a glimpse, or a flooding with feeling. Yet there is
a danger here. Theoricians of repressed memories often urge that there
is a difference between conventional memories on the one hand and
flashbacks or sudden bursts of feeling on the other. They grant that our
memories of the past are like stories, rearranged, repainted, full of inven-
tion and rife with omission. When memories result in straightforward
narratives, they are often wrong in detail, tone, or substance. But the
flashback and restored feelings—those are genuine reexperienceings.
They are somehow privileged, or so it is implied.

Where does this supposed privilege come from? Undoubtedly from
the sheer horror associated with a clear flashback, and the terrible mis-
givings and angst associated with a cloudy one. How can there be these
oppressive floodings from the past, if they do not point to something
that really happened? David Hume distinguished our immediate perceptions
from our memory images on the ground that the former are more
“lively” or “vivacious.” Nothing, alas, is more lively than a fearful flash-
back, which may be felt more intensely than the original trauma. But in
fact flashbacks are not so secure as all that. Recent memory therapy rein-
forces flashbacks, and they become stabilized. Janet and Goddard de-
stabilized them and removed them, sometimes with a few words of hypn-
notic suggestion.

I do not intend to diminish the sheer reality-feeling of frightening
flashbacks, but I would like to suggest a quite different element behind
the idea that flashbacks of emotion or feeling point inexorably to the
truth. The popular entrenchment of the idea of memory as narrative has
something to do with it. The logical structure of the reasoning may be
as follows. We agree that memory of type X has gaps and inventions. But
there is a memory of type Y that is different in kind, spontaneous, un-
controlled. There is no reason to infer from the fact that X is prone to
error that Y is prone to error. So, since memory of type Y is so power-
fully experienced, we may assume that Y is not erroneous. Set out ab-
tractly like that, the conclusion manifestly does not follow. But I would
not let matters rest there. For the argument relies on a sharp distinction
between X and Y. It already grants, as I do not, that there is a wide class
of remembering best compared to narrative. That I deny, even though
I agree with Ryle that recalling is a narrative skill—being good at recall-
ing is being good at presenting. I suggest that our common conception
of remembering, as encoded in grammar, is remembering of scenes, a
remembering that is presented, often, by narrating but is nevertheless a
memory of scenes and episodes. The flashback is no more than an unu-
usually jolting scene. It is not peculiarly different from memory in gen-
eral—and hence, not especially privileged.

Thus those who describe remembering as narrative often intend to
undercut any privilege of memory as a means of getting at the truth
about the past. But in fact they create a space for another kind of mem-
ory, a special kind of memory, which is then, by its advocates, given spe-
cial rights. My approach says that the logical error begins when one
identifies remembering with narration. That makes a flashback some-
thing whose very nature is different from other memory. But if recollec-
tion is to be compared to thinking of scenes and episodes (and describ-
ing or narrating them on occasion), then it is not intrinsically different
from other remembering. There is no reason to believe that the flash-
back experience is better at getting at the unvarnished truth than any
other type of remembering.

Flashbacks may be unusual because they are painful, terrifying, un-
controllable. But they are not very unusual. Many ordinarily recalled
scenes are also painful, terrifying, and one wishes they would go away,
but they won’t. Nor should we forget the completely insignificant
scenes that recur throughout our lives of remembering; they are annoy-
ing because they will recur, and the very act of trying to make them go
away seems to make them more ineradicable. Finally, a great many
flashbacks are not painful at all. A few days ago I was at a spot where I
have not been for years; a whole scene came back to me; I was speaking
with someone whom I do not know well, but for whom I care a good
deal; the flashback was suffused with feeling, mostly good, a little sad-
ness. This was above all an ordinary experience. It happens to every
adult, to every reader of this page. We should not let the ordinary be
stolen away from us by ideologues of any stripe.
The old, and valuable, Freudian insight is that scenes that are recovered, whether it is in flashbacks, or through memory therapy, or through more ordinary reflective but unassisted recollection, become invested with meanings that they did not have at the time that they were experienced. Let me add that in our days of inflated psychological verbiage, the human actions which occur in those scenes are very often retroactively redescribed. That is, they become actions under descriptions that were not available at the time the actions were first performed. This is particularly true of the memories involved in the recent flurry of distressing accusations and counteraccusations. Our prototype is a woman in her thirties who recalls dreadful scenes from the age of five. If she was thirty in 1990, she was five years old in 1965, when the recognition of child abuse as battering babies had only barely got under way. Lessing spoke of smoothing and polishing and painting over and over again with fresh color until the memory of a scene was like walking into a story. That happens all the time, but at this moment in history there is an added feature. The colors with which we paint often did not exist when the episodes occurring in the scenes actually occurred.

I am determined not to be misunderstood. I have already said that I have little problem about applying present moral categories, such as child abuse, in the present meaning of the term, at least to events that occurred in the past generation or two. As we recede into the past, culture and norms become increasingly different, and I develop qualms about retroactive application. I also resist applying modern terms to old stories on the ground that the person in the story would have behaved or developed in a certain way today. In the case of a human action or condition, I will use modern epithets only for old actualities, not for old potentialities. I am not here preoccupied by the customary question, which in each case of importance must be settled by corroboration, of whether a memory accurately represents the past. I am concerned with the phenomenon of indeterminacy of human action in the past. In various ways it may not have been determinate, then, that an action fell under certain present-day descriptions. Thus the question of accuracy may not arise, at least not in any direct and simplistic version.

Next there is the phenomenon of contagion by words. Let a scene be recalled, an uncomfortable scene now recalled in terms of abuse. Although the scene may have some prominences, it is also clouded; it has long been buried. There is no conscious structure in which to encode it. But there is one generic description under which to categorize the central action of whoever created the discomfort: child abuse. How shall the scene be continued? The rubric is set out by the generic description. There is a retinue of possible events with which to flesh out (rather literally) the scene. This does not require overt suggestion on the part of a therapist, as is often alleged by the false memory movement. The spreading of the phrase “child abuse” upon the scene stems from deeper and more semantic mechanisms, ultimately linked to the notion of human action under a description. The scene is not merely “smoothed and polished and painted over,” as happens in all memory of important events; it is painted from a particular palette, and that palette is called child abuse.

Semantic contagion is an effect that tends to go to extremes. If some events are described as of type A, then they may be redescribed yet again as extremely bad, or extremely good, events of type A. The fantasies of Doris Lessing’s Alice made life with mother all glowing. Accusatory memories make the past horrible. There may also be a thoroughly nonlogical element driving semantic contagion, namely, the recent popularity, among middle-class people who can afford therapists, of seeing oneself as victim. In conversation one African-American psychiatrist unkindly called this me-tooism; at a time when consciousness is being raised about real oppression, the confused and depressed take comfort in saying, “Me too.”

The current (1994) wisdom in the multiple personality and recovered memory movements is that therapists must ensure that they do not suggest memories to their clients. Not only must there be no suggestion, but it must be seen that there is no suggestion. If necessary, tapes and even witnesses must be used as a safeguard against later lawsuits. (Alas, the public discussions that I have heard are over and over again about how to prevent lawsuits, not about how to avoid harming clients or their families.) I fear this is simplistic. We have very little grasp of the workings of “suggestion,” a word that, as Nietzsche said of “psychological pain,” so often stands for a question mark rather than for a clear idea. Many clients in therapy belong to numerous self-help groups or at least read the self-help books. After you have filled in the questionnaires and proved that you satisfy at least the minimum requirements for disorder X, it requires a certain robustness of mind not to suspect that you do have disorder X. The best cure is to complete all the questionnaires for every disorder. When you discover that you suffer from every dysfunction, a certain skepticism may set in. Few have the stamina for that type of cure.

Many more types of suggestion come from the milieu than from the
therapist. The most difficult type of suggestion to grasp or grapple with is the type of internally prompted suggestion that I have called semantic contagion. Having recalled a scene, you begin to paint it, using the palette of the generic but retroactive redescription that came with the first intimations of memory, for example, of being abused. Multiple personality furnishes an especially interesting example, because of the way it links scenes with narrative. Someone who is severely depressed, incapable of forming stable friendships, and sexually troubled may turn to self-help or therapy, and may find solace after recovering memories and working through them. But there is no specific etiology. Freud's first forays into the psyche aimed at specific etiologies for hysteria, neurasthenia, anxiety neuroses, and the like. The current state of multiple personality theory resembles the earliest Freud. Stories call for causes. We weary of chroniclers: this happened, then that. The Bible's "begats" may make a found poem, but as narration are a deadly bore. Fairy tales create fairy causes; Cinderella's coach did not change back into a pumpkin by chance. In real life the tighter the chain of causation—the more specific the etiology—the better the narrative. Multiple personality provides the best available narrative frame for recovered memory.

Early in the book I showed how the modern multiple movement has thrived in a milieu of heightened consciousness about child abuse. I have even ungraciously compared it to a parasite living upon a host, child abuse. But as ecologists teach us, parasitism is always a two-way relationship with the host. Aside from workers with a close affinity to psychoanalysis, clinicians who work with recovered memories are very receptive to signs of multiple personality. The intimate relationship connecting recovery of traumatic memories of child abuse with multiple personality is no accident. For although I fall short of saying memory simply is narrative, I agree with Ryle that one becomes good at recalling the critical part of one's past when one acquires the skill to cast it into a coherent narrative. That is precisely what is provided by the causal lore of multiple personality, for good stories use explanations. Dissociation is explained as a coping mechanism. The multiple comes to understand that she is as she is now because of the way she deployed coping mechanisms in the past. A narrative structure is available that can then be filled in with the appropriate scenes.

The models of suggestion and iatrogenesis are cavalierly invoked by skeptics about multiplicity. They are confidently rejected by advocates. I am urging that the models are skimpy and superficial. The multiple personality phenomenon directs us to phenomena that students of the human mind have hardly begun to address. One of them I call semantic, for lack of a better word. "Semantic" at least has the virtue of making plain that I am speaking more from the space of logic than from that overtillled country called "social construction." The semantic effect arises from the way in which we can apply present descriptions retroactively to actions in one's long-ago, less than determinate, past. Another semantic phenomenon, which feeds on the first, is semantic contagion. More actions come into memory, actions described by more and more specific descriptions that fall under the generic head of the first description. A third semantic—phenomenon has to do with the way in which memory is most satisfying when it provides a narrative, and narrative is most tight when it has a clear causal structure. Multiple personality has succeeded, at least for the nonce, where Freud abandoned ship: in the realm of a specific etiology of a neurosis. The distressed person, casting about for self-understanding, becomes satisfied by a specific causal structure whose chief obligation is to be faithful to the memories that arise from the first two semantic phenomena. What must count first is whether she becomes happier, better able to live with friends and family, more confident, less terrified. That granted, and imaging that no one at all is harmed by any elements of falsehood or fantasy that may have crept into the cure, does it matter whether her reconstructed soul remembers her past and her self with some accuracy? Throughout this book difficult moral questions have been in the background. Now I want to bring one of them to the fore.