




Recognition and Selfhood

EDUARD CLAPARÈDE*

Translated by Anne-Marie Bonnel, Laboratoire Neuroscientifique Cognitive Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique, Marseilles and Bernard J. Baars, The Wright Institute, Berkeley, California


At the end of the preceding study Mr. Katzaroff sketched one conception of recognition that is almost identical to the one I reached myself following several experiments on a hypnotic subject and a woman who was affected by Korsakoff Syndrome. I would like to add a few words on this theory of "selfhood" which both of us were led to, but which we expressed with more or less precision, and which is very similar to James' conception. 

Let us recall first of all that the *psychological* problem of recognition implies nothing at all about the subject's consciousness of past events. For the logician, or the man in the street, or for the psychologist who regards mental activity from an external point of view, "recognition" doubtless means that the object one recognizes was already known at a previous time. But subjectively, is this consciousness of past occurrence, or more exactly of "once again," really contained in the most immediate experience of recognition, that is, in the subjective feeling of *familiarity*? It does not seem so: when we are shown a pattern which has been presented to us at a previous time, the impression of familiarity, knownness, similarity, emerges well before the awareness of its pre-existence, and may even stand alone. This is what introspection shows. It is true that in everyday life, we tend to attribute whatever we recognize to the past, and this can happen so rapidly that it seems integral to the immediate process of recognition. But this is merely an illusion! 

If one considers the evolutionary origins of  psyche, one can clearly observe how recognition appears long before the ability to locate an experience in the past. In animals we can observe implicit recognition (of a certain prey, its gait, etc.) even when nothing in their behavior indicates that they have any conception of past time, nor any ability to date events. In the lives of children, the ability to recognize events appears long before any conception of the past.

Furthermore, we have cases where a feeling of familiarity accompanies the perceptions of objects which the person is certain he has never had before: thus for instance

* E. Claparède. (1911), "Recognition et moiété," *Archives de Psychologie*, **11**, 79–90.

¹ The theory that claims that recognition is a consequence of localization in the past (i.e., explicit source attribution) has scarcely any advocates any more. It is obvious, indeed, that localization in the past cannot explain recognition since it implies previous recognition: in order to know that one has accurately located an event in the past, in order to retrieve in a series of past events the precise locus where one's memory should be located, one must first recognize this series and its various elements. On the other hand, in order to assert that one event has already been experienced it is necessary to refer to the series of past events; however, the use of this series presupposes, as we just mentioned, its recognition. 

it is sometimes characteristic of paramnesia (false recollection) that in it a feeling of familiarity is accompanied by that of *non-déjà vu* ("not having seen before").² The same holds for the phenomenon of *premonition* and *immediate prediction*: for example, a lady sees for the first time a speaker who is discussing a certain unknown topic, but it seems to her that she knows exactly what he is going to say. This is indeed a kind of feeling of familiarity that does not imply the past, quite the opposite, since it refers to a future event.³

In terms of other feelings of the same kind, more or less neighbors of feelings of familiarity, and which, like it, are only meaningful in a world in which things unfold over time, they do not imply, however, in themselves, intrinsically a notion of the past: for example, a *feeling of the habitual*, which should be distinguished from the feeling of familiarity. We experience the feeling of the habitual when we live in stable circumstances, circumstances to which our body, our reflexes, our senses themselves have adjusted but without our clear awareness. This impression is more subjective and more corporeal than the feeling of familiarity.

According to our theory, an object is recognized because it evokes a feeling of "selfhood" ("moiiété") to which it is tied by virtue of its previous presentations to the subject's consciousness. Does this conception contrast with those that equate recognition with consciousness of the habitual, or consciousness of associations surrounding any repeated impression? Could we not claim that it is only a linguistic difference, and that at bottom this "selfhood" that is characteristic of the "already perceived" exists because it can only be based on the association of the perception with the other representations (of which the backbone is the self); that it is only a label for the feeling triggered by this associative network?

No, because we can find in our mental life innumerable cases in which these associative networks are excited, or subexcited, without giving us the impression of the familiar. We can even, when a group of associations is abruptly evoked, get a very different feeling; for example, the feeling of "Aha, that's it!" and "That's the point!" Sometimes in my library I walk to a shelf in order to find a book, and when I am ready to grasp it I don't recall any more which book I was intending to select; I then start looking sequentially at all the books on the shelf toward which my legs carried me automatically, and when my eyes reach the title of the book I was looking for, I get the feeling of "That's the one! That's it!" It is a feeling that is certainly like the feeling of familiarity, though quite distinct from it. There is no doubt that this impression of "That's it!" has a physiological basis in the stimulation, by means of a perception, of a group of associations or reactions that are momentarily suspended.

It has been said that recognition consists in triggering an appropriate attitude;

² In paramnesia, the feeling is generally described, as I know very well, as a feeling of *déjà-vu* (already seen). But I think that the feeling of "déjà" (already) is secondary, it is an interpretation of the feeling of familiarity. As far as I can judge from my personal experience, the *immediate* feeling in paramnesia is a feeling of familiarity. And this is precisely because this impression does not refer to any past event that it seems so bizarre and paradoxical, and that subjects sometimes have the feeling of having lived this feeling "in a previous existence."

³ Fairbanks, *Note on a phenomenon of immediate prediction*. *Archives de Psychologie*, I, p. 95.

“to recognize” would be to behave adequately towards this object. This is true in large measure. However, if this appropriate attitude is not also accompanied by the feeling that this attitude, or the object that the attitude has reference to, is familiar, it is not really *recognition* but only *comprehension*. This process of comprehension is mostly based on the adoption of an adequate pragmatic attitude. As close as this phenomenon would seem to be to recognition it is however very distinct from it.

We shall soon see, in connection with a case of Korsakoff Syndrome, that a chain of fitting associations does not suffice to produce recognition. Instead, those associations which do play a role are not just any kind, but those that exist between the perception and the feeling of selfhood; it is not just any arbitrary network of associations.

But what is this feeling of “selfhood”? What are its physiological bases? It is not relevant here. I take this as a fact of observation. If I have experienced a thing I have the feeling that it is mine, belongs to my experience. This feeling manifests itself even after a few moments of observing a new object: As the object is considered and (ap)perceived, it becomes progressively familiar, appears more and more intimate, and finally attains the character of being “my object.” It is not surprising then if on reappearing, after some time has elapsed, it again evokes that feeling.⁴

Thus the theory of “selfhood” differs from that of associative stimulation and habit in assuming that it is not the aura of associations which makes for recognition, but the feeling of “selfhood.”

But is this theory of selfhood just another statement of the problem? This theory states that when the objects come to consciousness they get the characteristic coloring of this consciousness of self, a little like a wooden bench that has just been varnished gives its colors to anyone who sits on it. So that when this consciousness finds them later it carries its imprint. But how does it recognize this imprint as being its own? Don’t we reintroduce here all the problems of recognition?


No, because this new way of asking the question has allowed it to progress in cancelling one of the unknowns, which is the past. It is no longer a question of determining the mystery by which an actual present impression can be known as being the repetition of a past impression, but only what are the characteristics surrounding an image which reappears to consciousness so that at first sight it possesses the characteristic of being “mine.” This amounts to asking, what are the characteristics of selfhood?

Do these characteristics reside in the ease of motor reactions or intellectual reactions, triggered by this familiar perception? No, since, as we saw, habit is distinct from recognition, and the habitual from the familiar. Besides, if recognition could be explained by habit, it would be necessary to explain how the former can come from the latter, how a given process by the mere fact that it has been repeated gives us the impression that it belongs to us. How indeed could this conscious belonging to

⁴ See Wm. James, *Psychology*, tr. fr. p. 264. “The representation of any object will get the same characteristics (warmth and intimacy) as those that are connected to myself in the present.” In his recent work *Erkenntnistheorie*, Dürk explains analogously that “any conscious event is associated to the act by its being ‘grasped in consciousness’: when the event comes to mind again this grasp of consciousness recurs. The subject experiences then that he already experienced this event in the past.”



the self, which underlies the feeling of familiarity, well up from the very qualitatively different impression of ease?

This leads us to a very difficult question, indeed an insoluble one. The continuity and personal quality of consciousness are for the psychologist, basic facts which he takes as a given. The fact that consciousness considers as "mine," as a given, its own states, the objects which it perceives, and what it considers also immediately as "mine," as belonging to its experience, objects are previous states which when they recur trigger immediately this impression of selfhood which colored them in the past. This is probably the manifestation of a primitive function that we can take as a given, because if it was not, any mental life would be impossible and psychology would have no object.  That states of consciousness have the ability to be assimilated into a stable self, which feels itself to be unchanged over time, is one of the postulates of psychology, as much as space is a postulate of geometry.


But does this remark not render illusory any attempt to explain familiarity?

No, because this unity, this continuity, and this selfhood of consciousness are a *sine qua non* of recognition; they are also for the psychologist a basic fact that has to be taken as a given. *But is this recognition a direct consequence of this fundamental continuity and unity of consciousness, or on the contrary, is there between this fundamental fact and the feeling of familiarity a link, a bridge that can be known by empirical science? This is the question.*

If one considers the circumstances in which recognition is abnormal or is abolished, the answer without doubt is: yes, there is in the mechanism of the experience of familiarity something that is accessible to empirical science, and the proof is that it can be destroyed in isolation, while the other parts of the mental apparatus continue to function more or less normally.

The cases in which such isolated destruction or change can be seen are those mentioned already by Mr. Katzaroff: Korsakoff Syndrome and the post-hypnotic state. I should like to dwell at some length on the memory function of a Korsakoff case which I examined on various occasions.

The patient was a woman hospitalized at Asile de Bel-Air. She was 47 at the time of the first experiment, 1906. Her illness had started around 1900. Her old memories remained intact: she could correctly name the capitals of Europe, make mental calculations, and so on. But she did not know where she was, though she had been at the asylum five years. She did not recognize the doctors whom she saw every day, nor her nurse who had been with her for six months. When the latter asked the patient whether she knew her, the patient said, "No, Madame, with whom have I the honor of speaking?" She forgot from one minute to the next what she was told, or the events that took place. She did not know what year, month, and day it was, though she was being told constantly. She did not know her age, but could figure it out if told the date.

I was able to show, by means of learning experiments done by the savings method, that not all ability of mnemonic registration was lost in this person.  That is worthy of our attention here was her inability to evoke recent memories voluntarily, while they did arise automatically, by chance, as recognitions.

When one told her a little story, or read various items of a newspaper to her, three

minutes later she remembered nothing, not even the fact that someone had read to her; but with certain questions one could elicit in a reflex fashion some of the details of those items. It when she found these details in her consciousness, she did not recognize them as memories but believed them to be something "that went through her mind" by chance, an idea she had "without knowing why," a product of her imagination of the moment, or even the result of reflection.

I carried out the following curious experiment on her: to see whether she would better retain an intense impression involving affectivity, I stuck her hand with a pin hidden between my fingers. The light pain was forgotten as quickly as neutral perceptions; a few minutes later she no longer remembered it. But when I again reached out for her hand, she pulled it back in a reflex fashion, not knowing why. When I asked for the reason, she said in a flurry, "Doesn't one have the right to withdraw her hand?" and when I insisted, she said, "Is there perhaps a pin hidden in your hand?" To the question, "What makes you suspect me of wanting to stick you?" she would repeat her old statement, "That was an idea that went through my mind," or she would explain, "Sometimes pins are hidden in people's hands." But never would she recognize the idea of sticking as a "memory."

What does a case like this teach us about recognition? It is clear from these experiments (which I repeated a number of times and in various ways) that if the patient did not recognize the memories or the objects, it was not because the objects evoked no associations or adaptive reactions in her. On the contrary: in the very halls of the institution which she claimed not to recognize (though she had now been there six years), she walked around without getting lost; she knew how to find the toilet without being able to say where it was, describe it, or have a conscious memory of it. When the nurse came she did not know who she was ("With whom have I the honor of talking?") but soon after would ask her whether dinner time was near, or some other domestic question. These facts prove that her habits were very well-retained and active, and if she did not recognize her room, her nurse, or the man who had just stuck her with a pin, it was not because these objects were not tied up with associations or adaptive reactions.

If one examines the behavior of such a patient, one finds that everything happens as though the various events of life, however well associated with *each other* in the mind, were incapable of integration with the *self* itself. The patient is alive and conscious. But the images which he perceives in the course of that life, which penetrate and become more or less fixated in his organic memory, lodge there like strange bodies; and if by chance they cross the threshold of consciousness, they do not evoke the feeling of "selfhood" which alone can turn them into "memories."

We must distinguish between two sorts of mental connections: those established *mutually between representations*, and those established between *representations* and *the self*, the personality. In the case of purely passive associations or idea-reflexes, solely the first kind of connection operates; in the case of voluntary recall and recognition, where the *self* plays a role, the second kind of connection enters.

In relation to the *self* as center, the connections of the second kind may be called *egocentric functions*, those of the first *peripheral*. In recognition, the action of these egocentric connections is centripetal—that is, the perception or representation given


evokes a feeling of "selfhood." In voluntary recall, the action of the egocentric connections is centrifugal. "Voluntary" here means only that the *self* is involved in determining the phenomenon, but the manner of its intervention is not relevant.

This hypothesis concerns the intervention of processes that constitute the self, which only translates the facts of observation into a mechanism that gives a good account of the fact that loss of recognition is generally accompanied by loss of voluntary recall.

Similarly, we may assume that the post-hypnotic state (i.e., post-hypnotic amnesia) is a suspending of the activity of the egocentric associations, which at once blocks recognition as well as voluntary recall (of the amnesic period), whereas marginal associations continue in the form of automatisms, automatic writing, or automatic recall. These the subject does not recognize as memories, but takes to be "inspirations" or casts into an hallucinatory form. The difference between post-hypnotic state and Korsakoff Syndrome resides in the fact that there is a pathology in the function of egocentric connection, whereas in the hypnotic and post-hypnotic state there would only be temporary inhibition of this function. This assumption is in good agreement with the lack of initiative that characterizes hypnotic subjects. In the wake of that inhibition, the images presented in hypnosis do not unite with the normal self, and when they emerge later, they appear to the self as something foreign, never before experienced.

Thus we understand the relation between the feeling of familiarity and voluntary recall: both imply the existence of "selfhood." Voluntary acts imply processes which we call "self." If for one reason or another some presentations are not associated with a feeling of "selfhood," the subject does not have the impression of possessing them and thus cannot recall them—as one cannot at will move one's ears unless the muscles have first revealed themselves through certain inner sensations. The first prerequisite of recalling a memory is the impression that we possess it. It is thus understandable that if the impression of "selfhood" is destroyed, the absence of recognition which follows is coupled with an absence of voluntary recall.

The feeling of selfhood is, so to speak, the link between an imaged memory and ourself: The link by which we hold it and thanks to which we can retrieve it from the depths of the subconscious. When this link is broken we lose at the same time the possibility of recalling it at will. This relationship between recognition and voluntary recall seems to me to be supported by the analysis of the biological significance of the feeling of familiarity. What purpose is served by this feeling of familiarity as a distinct and conscious phenomenon? Lower animals behave as if they can recognize food, enemies, and so on. But this is an implicit recognition, which can be explained in a completely mechanical and reflexive manner, by the existence of innate or acquired connections between some impressions and some appropriate reactions. Here there is no need of the feeling of familiarity. Why did the process of implicit recognition become explicit, or mental? It became mental for the same reason as other physiological processes. Our processes become conscious (or, if you like, cortical) when they must control new reactions or those that are not sufficiently closely tied to the impressions that evoke them, and they fall back into the unconscious as soon as the habit is strong enough. The feeling of familiarity thus appeared when its presence

as a mental phenomenon became necessary to an adequate reaction; that is to say, when the recognized object does not evoke immediately the appropriate reaction 

When we meet a friend in the street we greet him without a conscious feeling of familiarity; in this case, implicit reflex recognition suffices. But when someone looks familiar and we cannot at once tell when and where we met him, whether or not we have been introduced, and consequently should greet him—there the feeling of familiarity is useful to prod our attention into *searching* our memory (voluntary recall), in order to form an adequate reaction. Furthermore, the circumstances of intellectual and social life made it necessary to abstract to isolate the notion of familiarity, which is so very useful outside of the concrete facts which underlie them. It is easily understood that the process of recognition, though present very early in its simplest objective form, became gradually mental, as well as, and for the same reason, most of the other relational processes.

These pages do not pretend to have greatly illumined the problem of the feeling of familiarity! They are meant to show that the problem is easily accessible to psychological investigation, which is overlooked by the discouraging and sterile opinion that considers the feeling of familiarity as based on an irreducible and unanalyzable characteristic of consciousness. Since the feeling of familiarity implies the intervention of the self, that is, those factors that constitute the personality, the analysis of the conditions of existence is rendered very obscured by the fact that we are far from being clear about the nature and the mechanisms of the components which constitute the self. It may well be the most fruitful result of the study of recognition that it gives us a new angle from which to regard the problems of the self and the mechanisms of "selfhood."

APPENDIX

Recognition in Spite of Distorted Mental Images

All those who made experiments on the stimuli in which you have to describe from memory an image that has been observed for a certain time have noticed the astonishment of the subject when he is confronted after having described it with the original stimulus that was used for the test; although he recognizes it immediately, he declares that he did not think it was like this. He thought that this character of the stimulus was transformed in some way, that it was bigger, or of another color, but nonetheless he still affirms with high certainty that the stimulus which we present to him is exactly what he saw before. Recognition thus does not imply the presence of a mental image that would be compared to the original, or which would fuse with perception. If this was true the distortion of the mental image should prevent recognition. These are a few little experiments done with students. I just cite two or three, because they are really easy to replicate, and demonstrate quite well the independence of recognition and mental image.

A series of 8 painted scenes is presented for 30 seconds. Immediately he must describe them on paper. After this the scenes are presented again, but mixed with similar ones, and the subjects must select which ones he recognizes, and indicate the impression which he gets from them. These experiments always gave perfect results,

meaning that in all cases the recognized scenes were the previously presented ones. But if we analyze the descriptions and the remarks of the subjects, we notice they have little in common with the real scenes.

1. The scene is an oval basket full of fruits, and the subject describes a big basket with flowers, and comments orally: "I thought they were flowers, and I see they were fruits. I thought the basket was square, but now I remember I saw apples and pears."

2. A parrot on its perch. He said, "A parrot on a street lamp." He says after that, "This is not a street lamp."

3. A woman who has a sprinkling can. She said, "It seems to me bigger than that. I thought she was sprinkling the flowers." (But the absence of flowers did not prevent her from recognizing the picture with certainty.)

4. Two children on a sledge. Orally, the subject comments, "I did not think they were in this position, I thought they were mounted on the back of the sledge." And the subject added, "It is not from the mental image that I can recognize this. This mental image comes after the fact, and helps me to say that I am certain."

These few examples, which it would be superfluous to multiply, support some of Mr. Katzaroff's conclusions, which is why I mention them here.