

Mind's past, present and future

The idea that the past is fixed but the future is unfixed, or "open", is always appealing. But it is hard to see how you could use it to explain the fact that we can be conscious of past objects but not future objects.

SUPPOSE SOMEONE IS TRYING to jog your memory about your life as a child. 'Remember the window in your childhood bedroom', she says. 'It was circular, with spokes running out from the centre, like the wheel of a ship.' As your sister keeps talking, you begin to form a vivid mental image of that window, and, since your sister was there at the time, her description of the window is absolutely accurate. So the image you form of the window is correct in every detail. Still, you cannot yet be said to remember the window. All you have done is to form an image in response to her description. Any of us in this room could do the same, particularly if I carried on and gave a vivid and detailed description.

But suppose now that as my sister talks, finally she succeeds in jogging my memory, and I say: 'Aha! Now I remember it!'. The change here need not be a change in the pictorial qualities of the image. Now that I do remember it, my image of the window might be exactly the same as it was when I was relying on my sister. The important change at the 'Aha!' moment is not a pictorial change. Nor need it be a change in how reliable my image is. It might be that my sister is at least as reliable as I am, so that my image of the window is no more reliable after the 'Aha!' than it was before. Still, even though it is not obvious how to describe the value of the change, there has been an important shift. After the change, I could be said to be conscious of the past window; I consciously recollect it. Before the change, I was

not conscious of the past window; I was simply relying on someone else's description of it.

To put the point a bit more generally, we can say that there is the notion of someone being conscious of an object. The most obvious case of being conscious of an object is when you can perceive it. The thing is right in front of you, in good light, and so on. But tomorrow, when the thing is gone, you can still be conscious of it. You can be conscious of it in the sense that you can consciously recollect it. And what I have just been saying is that consciousness of a past object can be analysed into two parts. There is, first, the formation of an image of the past object, an image which is reasonably accurate and reliable. And secondly, there is the 'Aha!' factor, the non-pictorial factor I just indicated. In the example I gave these two factors come one after the other: first there is the formation of the image, then there is the 'Aha!'. In an ordinary case of memory, these two would often come together. But the two factors, the image formation and the 'Aha!' factor, are two different factors, even if they appear at the same time.

Suppose now that we consider how it goes for future objects: that is, objects you have not yet encountered, or objects as they are at times which have yet to come. Can you be conscious of a future object? Suppose, for example, that you are going to introduce me to a colleague of yours who I have never met. So this is someone I am going to encounter. Before the meeting, you might give me a vivid and detailed description of this person so I myself can form as vivid and detailed an image of this

person as you like; and the image may be accurate and reliable. So here, just as in the case of the window in my childhood bedroom, I can accomplish the image-formation stage.

What is so striking about the case of the future object, the future person, is that there is nothing corresponding to the 'Aha!' stage. There seems to be nothing I could do that would correspond to the 'Aha! Now I remember!' non-pictorial shift. We don't have any word for the analogue of memory for the future object, because there is no such phenomenon. In the case of future objects, we are immovably stuck at the image-formation stage. We cannot make the further step to consciousness of the future object. Why is that? Why can we be conscious of the past object, but not conscious of the future object? It seems absolutely evident that I can be conscious of the window in my childhood bedroom, whereas I cannot now be conscious of the person you plan to introduce me to. But what is the explanation of this difference between consciousness of the past and consciousness of the future?

I want now to review what seem to be the most natural ways of explaining the asymmetry, and say why they seem to be problematic. A natural thought is that you cannot be conscious of the future object, because there is some sense in which the future object does not exist for you to be conscious of it. The future is not real, as the past is. The problem with this is that there does not seem to be any sense in which future objects do not exist. Of course, a future object may not exist now; but the same is true of a past object.

You might say that there is nonetheless a sense in which the past is fixed and the future is not fixed; namely, that we can act intentionally so as to change the future, but it hardly makes sense to suppose that you might try to change the past. But why does that matter? Suppose I plan to make myself a cup of tea, and I have a vivid image of the steaming cup before me, motivating me as I boil the kettle. Why can't this constitute consciousness of the future cup? Since this aspect of the future, as any rate, is under my control, it will always be possible that I change my mind and abort the operation half-way through, I decide not to make the tea after all.

Can you be conscious of a future object?

In that case, my image will not have constituted consciousness of the future cup. But so far there seems to be a parallel between the case of the future and the case of the past. Whether my image of the future can constitute consciousness of the future depends on what happens later; but just so, whether my image of the past can constitute consciousness of the past depends on what

happened earlier. I can think that I consciously recollect a past object, but I might just be making a mistake about that. In the case of the future, the factors that can prevent my image from constituting consciousness of an object include my own actions, whereas in the case of the past they do not. But all this shows is that in forming my image of the future object, I have to take my knowledge of my own intentions into account. It does not explain why I cannot be said to be conscious of the future object.

The idea that the past is fixed but the future is unfixed, or 'open', is always appealing. But it is hard to see how you could use it to explain the fact that we can be conscious of past objects but not future objects. The future objects will exist, just as the past objects have existed. And while I can act with respect to future objects but not with respect to past objects, that shows only that in forming my images of future objects I have to take my own current intentions into account. It does not explain why I cannot be conscious of the future objects at all.

Another natural line of thought is that the reason for the difference between consciousness of the past and consciousness of the future is that the direction of causation is always from earlier to later, from past to future. If A causes B, then A must have happened before B. Maybe you can only be conscious of an object if the object causally affects you in some way. You can be causally affected by objects you perceive, and you are causally affected by objects you remember. But it hardly makes sense to suppose that you might be causally affected by future objects. So maybe that explains why you can't be conscious of future objects.

Your suspicion that this is the right line of thought might be reinforced by reflecting on folk stories about prophets who can 'see into the future', individuals who have 'second sight' and really are conscious of future objects. It is never very clear whether these stories make sense; but perhaps the reason is that they depend on a reverse causal chain, running from the future objects to the present conscious states of the prophet. And it is easy to be unsure about whether there could be such a reverse causal chain, whether the thing makes sense.

The appeal to causation strikes me as a much better

answer to our problem than the appeal to the idea that the past is fixed while the future is open. Suppose we go back to the case in which you are trying to remind me of the window in my childhood bedroom. I said there are two stages here, the image-formation stage and the 'Aha!' stage. The present suggestion is that the shift that happens at the 'Aha!' stage is a shift in the way the image



is caused. Before the 'Aha!' the image was caused by your remarks; the image had the pictorial characteristics it did because of your description of the window. After the 'Aha!', the image has the pictorial characteristics it does because of the way the window was, not because of your descriptions. It may be just the same pictorial characteristics both times; the non-pictorial shift is in the way the image is caused. But when you are describing to me the person I am about to meet, my image is caused by your description, and I cannot shift to having it caused by the way the person will be later on, when I do finally meet him. That is why there cannot be an 'Aha!' stage in this case.

There is something quite satisfying about this account, but there are two immediate problems with it that we have to clear up. One is that when you are telling me about the window, there is a causal link there too, back to the window. So we have to say that in memory it is not just that there is a causal link, but that the causal link goes back through my own previous experiences of the object.

The second immediate problem is that the shift from just having an image of the past object, to actually remembering the past object, seems to be a shift in the nature of your experience; it is a shift in the way the state feels to you. But when we introduce talk about causes here, we seem to be introducing something that is external to the experience itself. Surely the very same experience can be caused in many different ways. A shift in the cause of my experience need not itself be something that is experienced by me. I think the right reaction to

this point is to acknowledge it, and to say finally that what is responsible for the 'Aha!' is that I experience a shift in the causation of my conscious image. I might actually make a mistake, when I feel that you have jogged my memory; I might think there has been a shift in causation when there has not been any change. But sometimes there is a shift in causation and I do experience it, and that is the case of ordinary memory.

The real difficulties in this account of the difference between experience of the past and experience of the future, explaining it in terms of the direction of causation, come when we consider why it matters that we do have experience of the past.

Why does it matter that we have experience of the past? One reason is that it is only because we have experience of the past that we have knowledge of the past. I think it helps here to consider a remark made by Russell. Russell said that there is no way of refuting the hypothesis that the whole world, with all its fossils, buildings, paintings and old newspapers sprang into existence just five minutes ago. The entire human race, with all its apparent memories of the past, was, like everything else, created just five minutes ago.

To see why this matters, in understanding how we can have knowledge of the past, suppose you consider the following scenario. You and I walk into a physics laboratory. I know nothing of physics, but I want to impress you. So I seize on an instrument and say, 'Look, it's a voltmeter. It's measuring the voltage through that

wire. Now it's 9 volts, now it's 9.5....' Now suppose that, just by luck, what I have stumbled upon is indeed a voltmeter, though I haven't any reason to think it is. In that case I am using a reliable way of finding out about the voltage in the wire, the numbers I call out are causally dependent on the voltage in the wire. But for all that I don't have knowledge here of the current in the wire; I am only bluffing.

The question Russell's remark raises is whether we aren't in the same condition with regard to our reliance on memory and other evidence to tell us about the past. That is, it may be that we are indeed lucky, and that all the systems we rely on to tell us about the past are functioning in just the way we would hope. But that really is a matter of luck — we don't have any way of telling whether this is what is happening rather than everything springing into existence five minutes ago, just as in my example I don't have any way of telling whether this is a voltmeter rather than some other kind of device. And, in that case, we really can't be said to have knowledge of the past.

Suppose we built a robot, a machine which has no consciousness at all, and programmed it so that it could reliably produce representations of past events in which it was involved; say, a chess computer which could recount for you its earlier exploits. It seems to me that this computer could not be said to have knowledge of the past, however reliable it actually was, for just this reason; it has no conception of why it is right to think that its current states really are telling it about the past rather than having all sprung into existence five minutes ago.

What makes the difference for humans, and what makes it the case that we really do have knowledge of the past, is that memory provides us with consciousness of the past. It is the fact that we are directly linked to past objects in experience that means we are not simply in the dark as to what we are doing when we rely on memory. Russell's sceptical remark is shocking, because we ordinarily do take it that our experience of the past provides us with a justification for thinking we know about the past. In contrast, we would not be shocked very much by someone who said that one can never have knowledge of the future. We take it for granted that our judgements about the future are generally tentative and uncertain. And part of the reason for that is that we have no experience of future objects.

The trouble now is that this response to Russell, which I think does give the common sense reaction, is hard to square with the analysis we have so far of the asymmetry between experience of the past and experience of the future. The analysis was that consciousness of a past object is a matter of having (a) a conscious image of the object, plus (b) a feeling that the image was caused in a

particular way. But if that is all that experience of the past object comes to, it is hard to see how it could help in responding to Russell. The question is why we should think that our memory images are causally linked up, in the right kind of way, to the past. The answer being suggested is that we have a feeling that they do. But the sceptic will reply that he wasn't questioning whether we have that feeling; his starting-point is that we do. In the voltmeter case, I may well have a 'feeling' that this is a voltmeter. The problem is that these feelings cannot be what mean we have knowledge of the past.

If experience of past objects is to do the work that we would like it to do, in explaining how we have knowledge of the past, we have to think of it in a much simpler way. We have to think of it as a direct relation between the present person and the past object, which is not mediated by images or feelings of causation. So we have to reject the two-part analysis. But then our question: why can we be conscious of past objects but not conscious of future objects? simply recurs.

There is a final, connected question that I want to raise and not answer. This has to do with the role of consciousness in our understanding of concepts. I can indicate the kind of connection I want to make by looking at the analogy with colours. It seems to be a datum that somebody born blind cannot understand colour concepts. Such a person might learn to use the colour words to a certain extent, and by relying on other people, might even come to know which colour words apply to which objects. But, since he has no experience of the colours, all this is just empty talk. Since he has no experience of the colours, he cannot understand the colour concepts.

The question is whether consciousness of past objects is similarly needed if you are to have the concept of the past. Russell was quite clear that it was. He said: 'But for the fact of memory in this sense, we should not know that there ever was a past at all, nor should we be able to understand the word "past" any more than a man born blind can understand the word "light"'. This does seem persuasive. Someone who had no experience of the past might be able to make some use of the words for the past, and to repeat stories told by other people. But there is a sense in which this would just be empty talk. This person would not know what he was talking about when he said 'past', or used the past tense.

The puzzling thing is that we seem to understand talk about the future perfectly well even though we have no experience of future objects. But if we can do it in the case of the future, why can we not do it in the case of the past? And if experience of past objects is needed for the concept of the past, why is experience of future objects not needed for the concept of the future?

And on that interrogative note, I must end. ◇