Chapter 3
The Neighbour

ABSTRACT

This chapter considers various aspects of the self, from the cognitive ones related to contents of the mind to more relational ones connecting us to the world and others. Concepts such as memory and representation are relevant for both views of the self – focused on the inner states and our relationship with the outside, respectively. We look at what psychologists like Steven Pinker, Howard Rachlin, Oliver Sacks, and Israel Rosenfield have to say about the self in an attempt to test the neuroscientists’ views.

INTRODUCTION

Before she became a patient in a neurology hospital, my mother was a neighbour and a friend. She was known to people, at home and in her local community, and they occupied an important place in her life and sense of herself in the world. They all recognized her as the same person, after the stroke – even when she could not talk or communicate with them in any way. So, it is only natural that we should look to psychology, psychiatry, and social sciences more generally, to see what they can tell us about consciousness and the self. By contrast to neuroscience, these disciplines are concerned with the contents of mental activity (cognitive – memory, perception etc., as well as emotional), and their impact on people’s personality and behaviour. It is the second stage between the neurological brain-activity and the qualia (or the ‘what is it like’) of personal experience – the cognitive mind. Let us see what we can learn about it, from psychologists.

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Memory is a good starting point, for it plays a key role in determining both the level of recovery, and the sense of a self (or what we call self-identity). But what is also important to recognize is the likely presence of false memories as well, which can skew both our inner perception (of ourselves, our past, and who we are), and our relationship with others and the world. Why and how do these false memories arise? Do they come from our mind, are they somehow the product of our cognitive thought? Or the body – as a result of certain neuronal functions? And what is their rapport with consciousness?

One of the sections of the States of Mind exhibition at the Wellcome Trust in London in Autumn 2016 was dedicated to “Language and Memory” (see Faherty, 2016). In it, we find a series of works, which are the outcome of artist A. R. Hopwood’s collaboration with experts and the public, exploring the nature and impact of false memories. The resulting “False Memory Archive” includes submissions from lay people ‘testifying’ for things that never happened, such as: “For years I was convinced as a child that I had visited Russia with my family. It turned out I had actually been on holiday in Overstrand, Norfolk”; or a more detailed one: “I remember having chickenpox when I was little. It was horrible, itching, I just hated it. My parents treated it with some white solution that came in a brown glass bottle; I remember exactly how it looked. Also, I remember going to the doctor and looking at all the red itching spots I had. My parents told me that it never happened, I never actually had chickenpox.” What happens in the mind – or between the few billion neurons of our brain, that causes such vivid and yet false memories of oneself? Another submission reads: “I distinctly remember as a child playing on my dad’s lorry in the desert. He was a driver in the RAF and was posted in Aden. There is no way this memory can be true as my father returned from Aden over ten years before I was born” (Hopwood, 2016). Two of these quotes have something to do with the parent-child relationship. This may be telling us something about what happens in our mind, when we ‘remember’ things that never happened. Namely, it might actually be the relationship between self and the world (in particular, one’s parents – arguably the most important reference point the child has in the world), which causes such imagined memories to occur. In other words, it is not the false memory itself, that matters; rather, it is what it signals about some key element(s) in our relationship with the world. Interpreted in this way, false memories could actually confirm neuro-philosopher Georg Northoff’s (2016) theory about the
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