The politics of remembering

Book review
Hacking, Ian (1995) **Rewriting the soul: Multiple personality and the sciences of memory.** Princeton: Princeton University Press (hbk).

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Although this book is a history written by a philosopher, it is an important work for anyone with an interest in psychotherapies based on the retrieval of repressed memory. Hacking's book emerges in the context of a growing battle in the United States between feminist and other groups wishing to expose the widespread incidence of child sexual abuse, and an opposing camp, organised around the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, which has mobilised legal action against psychotherapists for destroying families by producing false memories of incest and sexual abuse. The aim of this book is not to support one of these positions and attack the other, or even to evaluate their competing arguments, but something rather more subtle and interesting: to try and uncover how ways of thinking about memory and the self developed historically to our current situation where this conflict could occur at all.

The value of this investigation is that it unsettles our unreflective confidence in basic concepts such as trauma, memory, personality, and the self. It challenges one of the legitimating claims of clinical psychology's categories: that they are scientific in the sense that they represent timeless universal truths about the nature of reality, by showing how these ideas emerge historically, not so much in a scientific process of conjecture and refutation, but through shifting institutional practices and changing systems of thought. This is not to say that these ideas are simply arbitrary fictions, and Hacking is at pains to identify himself as a scientific realist who distances himself from both deconstructionists simply wanting to undermine all truth claims, and from sloppy thinking about social construction. He cautions us that "it can hardly be of interest that the concept of child abuse is a social construct (if 'social construct' means anything at all). What will be of interest is the successive stages in which this concept has interacted with ... a larger sense of what it is to be a human being" (p67). The exploration of the historical conditions of emergence of these concepts is thus not aimed at dismissing them as untrue (although one can already predict that critics on both sides will make this claim),

but at exploring the complexity of the way in which these ideas function in contemporary thought, and to draw attention to specific problems that they generate and the possibility of alternative conceptualizations.

Hacking's work is an example of Michel Foucault's method of genealogy, in which particular conventions are explored by tracing a detailed history of their emergence through the interplay of changing social practices, institutions, and systems of thought. From Foucault's earlier work, specifically **The archaeology of knowledge**, Hacking takes the distinction between different types of knowledge captured in the French words *savoir* and *connaisance*. *Connaisance* refers to the facts and theories that make up the content of a discipline, the explicit claims in that domain of knowledge. *Savoir* is something less conscious and more structural: the tacit background rules and practices that determine what is considered as possible knowledge within the discipline. *Savoir* cannot necessarily be articulated as discrete rules by anyone, but structures what is taken as competence in the field. Hacking loosely compares *savoir* to the notion of a grammar: the rules followed by all speakers of a language in order to make themselves intelligible, but of which the speakers are not themselves consciously aware. *Connaisance* then refers to the particular statements made, which may be contested as true or false by other speakers. The importance of Foucault's early work is the shift of enquiry from the normal scientific procedures for assessing facts or theories, to asking how a claim comes to be recognised as a serious part of a given area of knowledge, how it comes to be up for grabs as true or false at all. Why, for example, clinical psychology has come to accept claims about early sexual experiences as more worthy of serious investigation than, say, claims about the alignment of the planets.

This distinction is important in understanding Hacking's project, for he states that "my concern is not, directly, with uncovering a fundamental timeless truth about personality or the relationship of fragmentation to psychic pain. I want to know how this configuration of ideas came into being, and how it has made and moulded our life, our customs, our science" (p16). What is in question is not any specific claims about multiple personality or sexual abuse within clinical psychology, but rather the very way in which these types of claims have come to be formulated and contested at all. Hacking's interest is in how the "sciences of memory" emerged as ways of thinking about the self, and multiple personality is chosen simply as a very good illustration of this problem.

Multiple personality is interesting both because it is controversial and because it has undergone rapid changes as a clinical category. In the 1960s the main thing that was known about it was that it was extremely rare. **The three faces of Eve** was the first popular psychological multobiography, and in 1973, **Sybil**, which was also made into a film, became the prototype of a clinical profile which soon began increasing rapidly. By the end of the eighties the multiple personality was a major psychiatric category in the United States, with a professional organisation (The International Society for the Study of Multiple Personality and Dissociation), a journal (**Dissociation**) and several dedicated research and treatment centres. By then professionals in the field were claiming that up to 5% of psychiatric inpatients were suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder.

Hacking shows that the rise of MPD was linked to child abuse as a new object of scientific knowledge. Until recently, the notion of child abuse simply did not exist

in its current form. There was instead the very different notion of cruelty to children, which emerged in the late nineteenth century, and addressed child labour and exploitation. It was a philanthropic concern for the plight of the lower classes and did not have the associations of incest and sexual abuse that colour the contemporary notion of child abuse as not simply a type of cruelty, but an absolute evil. Child abuse begins to emerge only in 1961 with the battered baby syndrome, a medical discovery of physical violence against infants. This medical finding was taken up by the media and seized the public imagination as a new social evil and horror. The battered baby syndrome also created the medicalized category of child abusers, and posited a cycle of abuse that has become basic to our thinking about the subject.

It was not until the seventies and the rise of feminism and the critique of patriarchal gender relations that sexual abuse, and then sexual abuse in the home, became significant in the question of child abuse. By the end of the seventies incest was the ultimate psychological evil. Compare this with the notable absence of scandal surrounding Kinsey's evidence in 1953 that 24% of female subjects experience sexual attention from adults, an experience that Kinsey seemed to think might have been good for girls.

This focus on child sexual abuse provided an important scientific legitimator for the category of MPD: a cause. Soon MPD had a clear established aetiology in severe and repeated sexual abuse in early childhood. MPD became a form of dissociation in response to childhood trauma, a way of containing traumatic experiences or memories of abuse by establishing separate personalities to manage them.

Prior to the interest in sexual abuse the question of multiple personality already relied on specific notions of memory and personality. Hacking explores these ideas in a detailed examination of the late nineteenth century case of Louis Vivet, reported by doctors Bourru and Burot, which he takes as the first medical case of full blown multiple personality. Vivet exhibited a range of different hysterical symptoms, some of which were linked to specific patterns of memory and amnesia concerning his past. The doctors treated his symptoms through the application of magnetised metals to parts of his body, with sufficient success to be able to formalise a taxonomy linking patterns of metallic compounds, hysterical symptoms, and memories. Following John Locke's accepted idea that a person is constituted by memory and consciousness, they argued that "the comparison of previous states of consciousness with the present states is the relation that unites the former psychic life with the present one. This is the foundation of personality. A consciousness that compares itself to a former one is a true personality" (p180). Vivet could thus be said to have multiple personalities, as his displays of differing symptoms and temperament were correlated with different patterns of memory. Bourru and Burot had formalised a condition that might previously have passed under general notions of somnambulism or double consciousness into the category of multiple personality.

The other concept crucial to the contemporary idea of multiple personality is that of trauma. It had to shift from its original medical meaning as physical harm, to an unpleasant and damaging psychological experience. Hacking traces this to the mid-

nineteenth century with the advent of claims relating to railway accidents, and the discovery that accident victims exhibited symptoms similar to those of female hysterics. The idea that hysteria was linked to negative psychological experiences was then taken up by both Janet and Charcot, which later provided the basis for Breuer and Freud's work.

These shifts were part of a larger transformation. As science became the ascendant form of knowledge, medical science was faced with the problem of mapping the soul. These ideas of trauma and personality allowed for the secularization of the soul through the creation of a science of memory. By making memory the criterion of personal identity, it was possible to investigate the soul scientifically. New objects of knowledge were formed: beneath the facts of memory a new structure of knowledge emerged which allowed for the idea that there are facts of memory to be found out at all. This factual knowledge then became the substance of the current debates.

The significance of this analysis is not simply in showing the current notion of Multiple Personality Disorder came into existence, but to explore the effects that this way of thinking has for us today. Hacking argues that the ways of thinking about memory, personality, sexuality and trauma that so clearly form the basis for the concept of multiple personality, also shape the way in which people are able to think about themselves:

"A disturbed type of behaviour has been joined to events in early childhood that may surface in memory. Cynics about the multiple movements argue that both the behaviour and the memories are cultivated by therapists. That is not my argument. I am pursuing a far more profound concern, namely, the way in which the very idea of cause was forged. Once we have that idea, we have a very powerful tool for making up people, or, indeed, for making up ourselves. The soul that we are constantly constructing we construct according to an explanatory model of how we came to be the way we are." (p94)

What is significant here is that individual personality is not simply a spontaneous reflection of some true inner nature, but rather that the ways in which people are able to experience themselves is mediated by the available concepts and explanations in their culture. Our self-understandings and ways of representing our experiences to ourselves are negotiated through these meanings. This means that the emergence of these particular ideas of memory and trauma do not simply describe a type of experience, but in some sense also produce a type of experience. This must not be taken to mean that the ideas are untrue, or that they distort peoples "true" experiences into something other than what they "really" are. They simply produce something different from what another system of explanations would have produced. This system, with its focus on certain aspects of memory, serves specifically to help produce certain kinds of pasts. Hacking argues that "a new past comes into being once events are recalled and described within a new structure of causation and explanation. It need not be a false past ... The past becomes rewritten in memory, with new kinds of descriptions, new words, new ways of feeling, such as those grouped under the general heading of child abuse" (p94). This makes possible an important set of ethical questions: what are the advantages and costs of identities and memories conceived in this way?

At the beginning of the eighties all was well with the multiple movement. Professional interests were being served by a growing body of scientific knowledge and welfare services. Patients were discovering the hidden secrets of their unhappiness in a supportive professional environment. But problems began to arise. The reports of trauma suffered by multiples had from the outset been deeply shocking, indeed, it was the very severity of the abuses that marked MPD. The more shocking stories circulated, the more scandalous the new ones became. Not simply repeated violent sexual assaults for early childhood, but widespread ritual satanic abuse involving sexual torture, human and foetal sacrifice, forced breeding, cannibalism and international cults. Then also reports of alien abduction and elaborate CIA mind-control and programming experiments. The popular press thrived on each scandalous new horror story, but independent investigation failed to find evidence for a single incident. A crisis of credibility was looming that threatened to cast a shadow over on the established work exposing sexual abuse. Then in a separate development, the first lawsuits were instituted by parents claiming that their families had been ruined by the false memories created in their children by irresponsible therapists. The business of professional memory retrieval began showing signs of crisis.

It is here that the force of Hacking's philosophical background is brought to the matter. The usual way to solve the debates around memory is to resort to empirical investigation. Quite simply, the events either happened or they did not. But Hacking shows that the matter is not so simple. There is a certain way in which the past is indeterminate, particularly when one is thinking of human actions and experiences. This is because actions are always under description, that is, they take place in a context. If the context changes, the meaning changes, and the action in some sense changes. Hacking illustrates this process with an example from philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. "A man was moving a lever up and down. He was manually pumping water into the cistern of a house. He was pumping poisoned water into the country house where evil men met for planning sessions. He was poisoning the men in the house" (p234). Here it is clear that the question "What was the man doing?" cannot be answered in a simple and straightforward way, because of changing the contextual limit changes the action.

This indeterminacy creates a problem for any attempt to discover the truth of the past, especially when the categories of the investigation as susceptible to change. Thus when the notion of child abuse is in the process of expanding to include more and more situations, certain changes in the past are produced. Hacking expresses this as follows: "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 action 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 opinion about what was done, but that in a certain logical sense what was done itself was 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" (p250). We need to beware of misreading this as meaning that the events in question never "really" happened, and that they can thus

safely be trivialised. To imagine that one can pose the question of what really happened in terms of bare historical events stripped of meaning and context is a mistake in itself. The challenge is rather to understand properly the ways in which they come to have happened, and how they came to be significant. The issue is to understand how psychology is implicated in the production of that significance, with all its positive and negative implications.

It is not only the past which is in question, but also the present. As new descriptions become available and circulate, they make possible new ways of being. It becomes possible to exist in terms of the new descriptions. Thus Hacking argues that Multiple Personality provided a new way of being an unhappy person, a culturally sanctioned way of expressing distress. The intersection of specific discourses of the self, memory, and trauma allowed a way of conceptualizing and expressing anguish that caught the public and professional imagination, growing through a circular feedback of description and experience into the current drama of Multiple Personality Disorder, or, in the latest DSM IV categorization: Dissociative Identity Disorder.

While Hacking's study injects a vigorous critique into the complacent acceptance of clinical categories, it leaves certain questions unanswered. As a philosopher, his interest in truth may have a slightly different bent from that of a psychologist. The clinical practitioner may ask a more pragmatic set of questions. Rather than asking about the truth of memory, it might be asked how and why memory retrieval can produce relief in the therapeutic process. This type of question is not Hacking's concern, but it certainly relates to the broader issue of discourse and identity, and the politics of memory that he wishes to explore. The significant contribution he makes is to prevent us from falling back on simplistic ideas of the relation between memory, trauma and historical events.

This work also presents another concern, which is in one sense no fault of its own: one can predict that it will be misread as trivializing child abuse. South Africa is not yet as inundated with the pop psychology of sexual abuse as the United States, and sexual violence is certainly alive and well, so the critique of the notion of trauma could play into the continuing mystification of sexual violence. Of course it is never Hacking's claim than sexual abuse of children does not occur, or that it is a figment of the person's imagination, or that it is an artifact of the therapist's power of suggestion. His analysis, on the contrary, shows that the relation between discourse and experience is much more complex than that. But in showing how sexual abuse has come to dominate psychological thinking about trauma, he opens the way to asking what this way of thinking conceals. He mentions in passing that sexual abuse became an official cause of concern in the US in the late seventies and eighties at precisely the time when social welfare services were being cut back. This suggests that the emergence of sexual abuse as the prototype of psychological harm may be a screen that keeps the analysis of trauma at the level of individual acts rather than pursuing a deeper analysis of the social forces impinging on psychological development.

The current psychological ways of thinking about childhood sexual abuse, trauma and memory may serve not only to produce certain identities, pathologies, and pasts, but to do so to the exclusion of other considerations. The dominance of the

discourse of sexual abuse conceals a serious inadequacy in psychology's theoretical language for addressing the harm caused by other overwhelmingly present forms of violence, especially structural violence: poverty in all its banal horrors - hunger, cold, hopelessness, humiliation - racism, urban overcrowding, violent crime, unemployment, sexism, lack of medical resources and welfare, lack of education opportunities, powerlessness, just to begin a random list of urgent concerns that clinical psychology seems constitutionally unable to think through in any serious depth.

The historical investigation of the emergence of psychological categories is thus a refreshing opportunity to reconsider what has been marginalised by the dominance of the specific way of thinking that constitute the current state of the discipline. To this end, Hacking's book can be strongly recommended to anyone wanting to reflect more critically on the current practice of psychology.