



# News, Memory, & Truth

Memory is badly misunderstood.

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*“Life can only be understood backwards, but it can only be lived forwards.”*— **Søren Kierkegaard**

News, memory, and truth have little to do with each other. None of them stand up to scrutiny.

Our language fails to distinguish between the two radically different meanings of memory. We equate the meaning of the entirely different phrases, “Can you describe your feelings?” and “Can you recall how you felt?”

Requesting a description asks for a summary in terms of signs and signifiers. In contrast, asking you to recall how you felt could mean asking you to re-experience a past feeling, or to create in us what you felt. A description bears no more resemblance to a feeling than a label can be equated with a sensation.

A description is a communication made of things and actions. A sensation is a phenomenon that is experienced. It’s understandable that we should ask for a description to facilitate communication, but

this doesn't recreate the sensation. Partly because of this confusion we allow the feelings that other people create in us to define the signifiers we assign to them. For example, we might equate feeling proud with nationalism, or feeling hate with being at a disadvantage.

When you say that something was red, we accept that since we think red is a relatively constant thing. But when you say you felt angry, that is not something that anyone even attempts to either qualify or quantify. Aside from distinguishing between slightly angry and very angry, we have little clues as to its meaning.

There has been a rash of random, public shootings recently. If those shooters told us that they were "very angry," would we have even the slightest understanding of what they were talking about? We would not.

## News

There has lately been a fuss about the quality of the news. Low quality news annoys everyone who is trying to figure things out. We like to think that if the news is correct, then we can combine this with what we know to arrive at the truth. And with this truth we can navigate the future. People seem to think that if we were better informed about the present we'd be able to figure everything out.

We want to know the facts in order to record events properly. The facts are the events that caused things to happen and which, in a similar context, will cause the same things to happen again. I wonder if people would be as upset with their own memories if they understood how poorly we remember things.

In the 2017 article "The Influences of Emotion on Learning and Memory," Chai Meei Tyng and colleagues report, "Emotional experiences/stimuli appear to be remembered vividly and accurately, with great resilience over time."

I understand what vivid and resilient means with regard to memory, but what does "accurately" mean? It does not mean what you might suspect. It does not mean factually accurate, it means recollectively accurate. That is, you can better recall thoughts that triggered emotions than you can thoughts that did not. That does not imply these thoughts were accurate at the time or ever.



## Memory

In the 2012 BBC Viewpoint piece titled “His Dark Charisma,” Laurence Rees quotes Emil Klein, who heard Hitler speak in the 1920s, as saying, “The man gave off such a charisma that people believed whatever he said.”

*“I use emotion for the many and reserve reason for the few.”*

— **Adolf Hitler**

In the 2004 article “Emotion and Memory Research: A Grumpy Overview,” Linda Levine and David Pizarro note that, “The vividness and detail that often characterize memories for emotional events do not necessarily imply accuracy.” They conclude:

*“The types of situations that evoke emotions such as fear, anger, and sadness vary dramatically with respect to the responses required of the individual. Once evoked, these emotions appear to trigger selective processing, encoding, and retrieval of information that is important for responding to these differing emotion-eliciting situations. The selective encoding and retrieval of motivationally relevant information would typically be adaptive, but depression and anxiety disorders remind us that this is not always the case.”*

We don’t remember the truth and we don’t remember the facts for the simple reason that neither exist. Like the cat who jumps on a hot stove, we remember what appears to be useful based on what we do or don’t want. We don’t have to think about this, and it’s not reasonable. Remembering on the basis of reason is little more than programming for comfort.

I drag my son through mathematics. He's 11, and he thinks mathematical reasoning is pointless. I don't think he'll remember much of what I've told him. I drag him through modern history, and I tell him why certain events and attitudes were important, but they're not important to him. He has no "reason" to remember them. But by "reason" he does not mean compelling argument, he means future reward.

When I say, "Time is not really a fourth dimension because it does not behave like the other three," my son's eyelids sag. But when Hitler said, "The doom of a nation can be averted only by a storm of flowing passion, but only those who are passionate themselves can arouse passion in others," his audience woke up.

Levine and Pizarro note that, "Fearful individuals display enhanced memory for threat-related information and poorer memory for threat-irrelevant details." As with Hitler's audience, so also did Donald Trump's audience hear redemption when he said:

*"From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be only America first, America first."*

— **Donald Trump**

You don't remember the truth, you remember what emotionally rewards you. A leader is not someone who clarifies what's true as much as a person who confuses everyone to conformity.

*"My definition of a leader in a free country is a man who can persuade people to do what they don't want to do and like it... The truth is all I want for history."*

— **Harry S. Truman**



## Truth

In a 2001 paper, Levine and Prohaska report, “Memory for past emotions changes over time and ... the changes are systematically related to current appraisals of the emotion-eliciting event.” That is, your memory of past feelings is influenced by your current feelings.

Unless you question how you feel, your feelings will bias and exaggerate what you now remember, and distort what you learned from the past. If you’re currently afraid, you’ll exaggerate your fearful memories. If you’re currently in love, you’ll exaggerate your loving memories.

I went to relationship counseling with my last partner after she expressed no further interest in being part of our family. The counselor asked her to recall how she originally felt when our relationship began. She responded, “I never had any positive feelings for him.”

This would have been offensive if it were not pathological. It was an extreme case of the distortion of recalled reality, which clearly furthered the new direction she was taking. This was a fantastic, demonic reconstruction. It highlights a tendency that we accept as normal, and where our language continues to fail. We do not recognize the difference between labels and the feelings that are labeled.

We don't recognize the role of bias in memory. This twisting of truth supports the persistence of grudges, feuds, and prejudice. It means that errors of the past can be made worse by your attachment to them, and to your investment going forward. How can we “learn from the past” if we can’t remember it?

This is the crux of the issue: what is true in memory? If it is true, as have been observed, that “memories for the emotional significance of events are stored permanently [in] and mediated by

different brain circuits, than memories for events themselves” (LeDoux, 1992), and these two memories fail to agree, what then?

If we’re going to get our heads straight, then we must do more than remember, because recollections are not accurate. Our recollections do not recall how we felt in the past, even when they retrieve the labels we attached to those feelings. Nor do our memories accurately reflect the important aspects of what happened in the past, though they will recall aspects of the past pertinent to how we feel today.

Clear thinking—if there can be such a thing—requires recalling multiple memories: what we thought, what we saw, how we felt, our circumstances in the past, and perhaps most importantly, the connections between the present and the past. If this burden seems unwieldy in forging future decisions, then reflect on the German experience from the 1920s: what are you really trying to achieve?

“A memory without the emotional charge is called wisdom.”

— Joe Dispenza

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