Douwe Draaisma


Forgetting may be thought of as the opposite, maybe even the enemy, of memory, but, Draaisma says, it is not. It is an essential aspect of memory, a weeding out, that gives memory a focus. His method, as in his earlier work, The Nostalgia Factory, is similar: stories, studies, case histories, events, and examples are put before us in order for us to try to discover what it is we forget, and why. Sometimes this lends an “I read something interesting lately” air to the book, but all of it adds something to the view, if not always to the analysis.

The chapters in the book cover a broad range—our first memories, why we forget dreams, damaged brain areas, repression and myths of total recall, and the effects of technologies and communication on our memories and our views of memory. One of the striking observations that emerges from such a broad perspective is the extent to which individual memory is influenced by, is part and parcel with, social experience and memory. This becomes clearer as the examples in the book pile up.

We tend to think of memory, Draaisma says, as an aspect of conservation, storage, and recovery. But, he says, this is a problem “[b]ecause in truth memory is dominated by forgetting” (2). We absorb environmental stimuli through the five senses but retain only a small part. Erasure is necessary to “make room” (“decide” what is useful and what is not) for what comes next. Emotion plays a significant role in what survives as a first memory. For visual memory, first memories of images date, on average, from two years and ten months; of scenes, from three years and two months; and of episodes, from four years and three months. Memories of touch, taste, sound, or smell are earlier (averaging two and a half years). These memories are largely independent of language—they don’t originate from family stories.

But what has happened, Draaisma asks, to earlier memories? In their early years, babies have all kinds of stimuli, and they have memory—they know, for example, persons they like. The early brain is undeveloped, and lack of storage capacity explains some of the lack of memory. But brain stabilization happens in a far narrower range of variation than the age of first memory. An ego, a rudimentary self-consciousness, is needed for autobiographical memory to begin to form. This can be gradual or sudden, but first memories tend to coincide with the development of language. When this happens, children start to process and store memories in the form of language. Recollections become stories, and revival tends to rely on verbal association. Linguistic skill develops at astonishing speed, but there is a downside—children no longer have the
need to develop a new code to retain pre-linguistic memories and keep them accessible. They disappear. This forgetting continues, Draaisma goes on, with the development of “scripts,” the ordering of experience into routines or fixed sequences. The norm becomes normal, less memorable as unique experience. Then what tends to be remembered is the deviation, the surprise, that departs from the preconception. We do not choose. Scripts absorb memories where the details are no longer useful. Evolution, says Draaisma, has its own plans for memory: “It is intended to keep us out of trouble and therefore has priorities of its own” (31).

Why do we forget dreams? They are often combinations of long ago associations and the residues of daily experience. The “long agos” must be retained somewhere, but, except when they are recurring, we tend to forget dreams. Dreaming, Draaisma suggests, is related to the management of memory, where daily trivia is sorted and discarded, or perhaps transferred to a more permanent storage space in the unconscious, where it circumvents the confinements of language. Dreams confuse chronology—we remember backwards, going from effect to cause. Research shows that dreams have no one-to-one relationship to REM sleep. Nor are dreams solely a function of one brain hemisphere—left or right. Various theories account for the random associations: discharges from primitive parts of the brain, or images that pop up because undirected by external stimuli. Whatever the function of dreams, Draaisma suggests, they are forgotten because they do not fit the linguistic criteria we have developed for memory retention.

Draaisma considers examples of damaged brains (a lobotomy that destroyed the ability to form new memories but not retain old ones, a disorder in which faces cannot be remembered, Alzheimer’s disease) and different kinds of memory loss (inability to form new memories, retrograde amnesia in long or short terms). He considers the evolutionary basis for unconscious (or subliminal) plagiarism: it is more useful to remember a good idea than the exact individual from whom you heard it. Semantic memory (knowledge) will generally have broader application than autobiographical memory.

Draaisma considers repressed memories, starting with Freud’s view of repression induced by (often sexual) trauma or guilt and transitioning to more recent debates concerning the reliability of recovered memory in sexual abuse cases. He considers memories people would like to repress but cannot, as with the flashbacks of war veterans, showing that the relationship between trauma, repression, and forgetting has been interpreted in many, often conflicting, ways during the last century.

Total recall, Draaisma says, is a myth. Not only do we not retain everything, but later memories are piled on top of earlier ones, resulting in reinterpretation.