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Oliver Sacks and the Neurology of the Self

In August of 2015, the neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks published a short paper, simply entitled “Sabbath,” in which he wrote, “I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one’s life as well, when one can feel that one’s work is done, and one may, in good conscience, rest” (45). Just a few weeks later, after a long battle with a rare form of melanoma in his eye, identified a decade earlier, which had subsequently undergone a cancerous metastasis in his liver, Sacks died. The loss of Sacks, a man renowned for his gentleness and his goodness, left a wound sunken deep into the flesh of the public consciousness, one which elicited grief both from his fellow neurologists and from his readers. In an obituary appearing several months after Sacks’ death, the cognitive neuroscientist Mike Gazzaniga wrote, “Sacks’ contribution to the public’s understanding of brain and mind are now legendary” (Gazzaniga 1531). Indeed, he was considered a popular writer, but his approach to neurology was not only intended to render in more accessible. Sacks wrote to correct an error in the neurology of his time, which neglected the centrality of the self in the interface between the brain and the mind. The medicine in which he was instructed separated symptoms from the men and women who suffered from them, and ignored the insights to be found in their testimonies. Sacks found his own approach, and revived

a method for which he is now remembered, one which made extensive use of case studies, and focused on the structure of the self.

In his case studies, Sacks showed a rare reverence for the narrative form. He writes of himself as, “both a physician and a storyteller” (*The Mind’s Eye* ix.). Sacks’ interest in storytelling emerged when he was a young neurologist, seeing patients in a migraine clinic, beginning in the summer of 1966. Sacks was taken aback by the complexity of the symptoms he witnessed, and the depth of the influence the migraines had on the lives of his patients. He struggled to find written case studies which did justice to the richness of the experiences described to him by his patients, and pored further and further back into the archives. However, finally, Sacks writes, “I found a hefty volume on migraine entitled *On Megrim*,” written by the nineteenth-century physician Edward Liveing (*Hallucinations* 119). The narratives in that book inspired Sacks to write his book *Migraine*, and to revive the lost practice of storytelling in medicine, which he inherited from the early neurologists of the nineteenth century. Sacks sought to dissolve some of the division between the physical and psychical, to introduce, through the most curious of conditions, the neglected topic of the self, the “essential being” of the person, into science (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* viii.).

Sacks, as a storyteller, was perfectly disposed to document the self as it changes over time, the self in its plasticity. The self, for Sacks, was never a static entity, but was better understood as a fluid force, with an immense capacity to adapt to shifting circumstances, to find new methods of commerce with the world. Indeed, it was with this recognition that Sacks, while continuing to be exquisitely sensitive to the suffering endured by his subjects, left behind the necessity of discussing deficits and disorders. Sacks recognized in every loss a possible gain, in every disorder of the self a possibility for its reconstitution, frequently by means of creativity.

Sacks writes, “a disease is never a mere loss or excess . . . there is always a reaction on the part of the affected organism or individual, to restore, to replace, to compensate for and to preserve its identity” (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 6). Sacks wrote about the case of an artist who, following an automobile accident, became completely colorblind, in a rare case of achromatopsia. The man was, of course, emotionally devastated by the event, since color had been at the center of his life and work. Yet, slowly, the artist both accepted his condition as a presence in his existence, and modified his lifestyle to meet the needs of his colorblindness, even shifting his artistic style, so that where he once painted with a palette of reds, oranges, blues, and blacks, he converted to the use of shades of black and gray, reflecting his new view of the world. Sacks writes, “He feels he has been given ‘a whole new world,’ which the rest of us, distracted by color, are insensitive to” (*An Anthropologist on Mars* pp. 38-39).

Yet, for Sacks, the self was not merely froth, but was undergirded by a continuity, an integrity, and a unity through time. Indeed, some of the neurological conditions which most interested Sacks were those in which the order of the self was disrupted or disturbed, as in Tourette’s syndrome. In most of the men and women with Tourette’s encountered by Sacks, the ego held onto much of its strength, but, in a small number of cases, it seemed as if the ego was overwhelmed by the effects of the disorder. In one such case, both comedic and tragic, Sacks writes about a former grocer with extreme Tourette’s syndrome, and little to no short-term memory. The ex-grocer lived entirely in the present, effortlessly bridging each consecutive moment with a fantastic array of fleeting beliefs and guesses. Sacks writes, “He would whirl, fluently, from one guess, one hypothesis, one belief, to the next, without any appearance of uncertainty at any point” (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 109). Sacks compares the self of people like the ex-grocer to the view of the self held by Hume, who writes, “I may

venture to affirm . . . that [we] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different sensations, succeeding one another with inconceivable rapidity, and in a perpetual flux and movement” (qtd. in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 124). However, while perhaps true for the self with Tourette’s, Sacks held a different view of the normal self. Sacks believed that the self lay not in the many, but in the one, in an identity which persists through and within time and flux. He writes, “To be ourselves we must *have* ourselves — possess, if need be re-possess, our life-stories” (*The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* 111). Thus, for Sacks, the true self is not the one described by Hume, an unending sequence of successive sense-perceptions, but is closer to the self as it was understood by Heidegger, who stressed the continuity, the comportment with respect to both past and present, intrinsic to our mode of being.

Sacks seems sometimes to suggest an even more radical idea, that the unity of the self is not limited to the mind, but exists most fully in the meeting of mind and world. Sacks, though raised Jewish, was an atheist, but he often wrote of the world in terms of a harmonious order, which he sometimes compared with God. However, he identified the order he observed most often with Nature. Sacks says, “My religion is nature. That’s what arouses those feelings of wonder and mysticism and gratitude in me” (qtd. in Colman). He, furthermore, found our connection with this order most intense in feelings and emotions, the aspects of our experience least studied by neurology, even to this day, and he found it most especially in music. The meaning of music is belittled by many cognitive neuroscientists, like Steven Pinker, who has referred to music as, “auditory cheesecake.” Yet, for Sacks, the subtle elegance, the ineffable wonder of music was the fullest embodiment of his conception of the self as both unity and change. Sacks writes that, when we listen to music, “We recall one tone at a time and each tone entirely fills our consciousness, yet simultaneously it relates to the whole” (*Musicophilia* 212).

Sacks believed, as well, that with music we access a basic characteristic of what it means to be human, of what it means to live as we do in this world, one that is alive in patients with even the most severe of disorders. Sacks writes, “I have seen deeply demented patients weep or shiver as they listen to music they have never heard before, and I think that they can experience the entire range of feelings the rest of us can . . . Once one has seen such responses, one knows that there is still a self to be called upon, even if music, and only music, can do the calling” (*Musicophilia* 346).

How, then, should we respond to the loss of Sacks, and what should the future of neurology look like in his absence? The correct attitude is one that honors Sacks, both his memory and his method. Sacks insisted that a neurological disorder is never merely a disorder, but always opened up new opportunities for experience and expression, as well. So, we must also understand the wound left by his death as a wound which also heals. It is our task to affirm the value of his insights, and to perpetuate their application, both by appreciating the relevance of stories, and by researching the neuroscientific prerequisites of selfhood. The time has come to complete the work that Sacks started, to found a modern neurology of the self.

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