

## QUOTATION

### PLOTINUS ON PERCEPTION AND MEMORY

1. Perceptions are not imprints, we have said, are not to be thought of as seal-impressions on soul or mind: accepting this statement, there is one theory of memory which must be definitely rejected.

Memory is not to be explained as the retaining of information in virtue of the lingering of an impression which in fact was never made; the two things stand or fall together; either an impression is made upon the mind and lingers when there is remembrance, or, denying the impression, we cannot hold that memory is its lingering. Since we reject equally the impression and the retention we are obliged to seek for another explanation of perception and memory, one excluding the notions that the sensible object striking upon soul or mind makes a mark upon it, and that the retention of this mark is memory.

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2. But if perception does not go by impression, what is the process?

The mind affirms something not contained within it: this is precisely the characteristic of a power—not to accept impression but, within its allotted sphere, to act.

Besides, the very condition of the mind being able to exercise discrimination upon what it is to see and hear is not, of course, that these objects be equally impressions made upon it; on the contrary, there must be no impressions, nothing to which the mind is passive; there can be only acts of that in which the objects become known.

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3. With this prologue we come to our discussion of Memory.

That the soul, or mind, having taken no imprint, yet achieves perception of what it in no way contains need not surprise us; or rather, surprising though it is, we cannot refuse to believe in this remarkable power.

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Now, if memory were a matter of seal-impressions retained, the multiplicity of objects would have no weakening effect on the memory. Further, on the same hypothesis, we would have no need of thinking back to revive remembrance; nor would we be subject to forgetting and recalling; all would lie engraved within.

The very fact that we train ourselves to remember shows that what we get by the process is a strengthening of the mind: just so, exercises for feet and hands enable us to do easily acts which are in no sense contained or laid up in those members, but to which they may be fitted by persevering effort.

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Sensation and memory, then, are not passivity but power.

And, once it is admitted that sensations are not impressions, the memory of a sensation cannot consist in the retention of an impression that was never made.

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And—one general reflection—it is not extraordinary that everything concerning soul should proceed in quite other ways than appears to people who either have never enquired, or have hastily adopted delusive analogies from the phenomena of sense, and persist in thinking of perception and remembrance in terms of characters inscribed on plates or tablets; the impossibilities that beset this theory escape those that make the soul incorporeal equally with those to whom it is corporeal.

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*From:* Plotinus. (1952). *The Six Enneads* (Trans. by S. MacKenna and B. S. Page). Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, pp. 189–191.

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