

CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF  
*MEMORY ASSEMBLAGES*  
TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHICAL CONCEPT OF  
EDUCATION

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**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to appropriate the most important concepts from Hilan Bensusan's *Memory Assemblages* in order to revise my philosophical concept of education. To this end, emphasis will be placed on the concepts of addition, retention, and retrieval. But it will also be considered the broader perspective from which Hilan Bensusan conceives *Memory Assemblages*. Rather than representing another kind of metaphysics, his doctrine of memory assemblages stems from what Bensusan calls *ultrametaphysics*. Unlike metaphysics, ultrametaphysics—here's the difference—does not assume any single, primordial principle for everything. Thus, I will attempt to show how the concepts of *Memory Assemblages* renew my concept of experience—a fundamental aspect of my philosophical concept of education. Finally, I will point out a question which Bensusan does not develop in *Memory Assemblages* regarding the concept of force—which is frequently mentioned in his text, but without adequate consideration.

**KEYWORDS:** Education; Experience; Addiction; Retention; Retrieval; Ultrametaphysics.

INTRODUCTION

What I intend to present here, in this article, is an appropriation of the most important concepts from Bensusan's *Memory Assemblages* in order to rethink my philosophical concept of education. Before showing how I appropriate these concepts, I need to justify why I consider as philosophical my concept of education. I name it this way to contrast it with another conception, quite common in philosophy of education, which I call the school or pedagogical concept of education. The difference between the two lies in the way each answers the question what is education. For a school or pedagogical concept, education would be a professional activity carried out in educational institutions;

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an activity in which someone recognized as a teacher takes on the task of teaching something to someone recognized as a student. The task of philosophy of education would be to identify the practical problems of such a pedagogical relationship and contribute some diagnosis to solve them.

On the contrary I defend a philosophical concept of education. Philosophical, because it is a conception in which education manifests itself as universally as possible; and universally in two complementary senses. First, conceived philosophically, education is not restricted to a professional activity. It becomes an experience that, as such, occurs in any sphere of existence—hence its universality. Second, education concerns the essence of the human being. And essence is the deepest definition of a thing what accompanies it from any perspective—hence its universality—through which the thing can be seen. Finally, conceived philosophically, education consists of a succession of experiences through which, each time, I can become different from who I have been.<sup>1</sup>

Memory assemblages inspires me to think of education, in its philosophical sense, as the experience through which one adds aspects to what one has retained until now. In other words, I am what I have retained until now, and I become different from who I have been by exposing myself to the risk of adding new aspects to what I have been. In short, education, in its philosophical sense, I repeat, will be thought as memory assemblages. It is not simply a matter of conceptually recycling a concept. Memory assemblages offers me the opportunity to philosophically rethink education within the framework of an ultrametaphysics. As I understand it, ultrametaphysics is a way of thinking about anything and its relationship to its surrounding world without presupposing the search for ultimate foundations. Rather than a previously established foundation which rests on an originary past, the things conceived in ultrametaphysics owe what they are to what comes from an unknown and, therefore, unfounded future.

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<sup>1</sup> It would not be possible to develop my philosophical concept of education in more detail, a task already carried out in another article. Rainri Back, Por uma concepção filosófica de educação, *Revista educação e pesquisa*, São Paulo, vol. 45, 2019.

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## ADDITION, RETENTION AND RETRIEVAL

My interpretation of Memory assemblages will be organized around the pan-nemist doctrine, as Bensusan<sup>2</sup> somewhat reticently calls it. "Diachronic phenomena of memory are ubiquitous", he asserts. And I draw attention to the choice of the word 'ubiquitous', which is not random and, equally important, serves as an adjective for a plural noun. Memory assemblages—in plural, I emphasize—are "defective universals", as Bensusan defines them in the introduction. To put it more clearly, they constitute a "non-grounding principle",<sup>3</sup> as I aim to show. To understand the extent of their ubiquity, memory assemblages, according to Bensusan,<sup>4</sup> are what determines the very being of things; something is only what it is insofar as it is memory assemblages. Understanding this doctrine is my challenge, in order to make it resonate in my philosophical concept of education.

First, I have to express some perplexity regarding Bensusan's doctrine. In the first section of Book A of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle<sup>5</sup> derives memory from the capacity of feeling. In other words, for having memory, one must be endowed with sensations. Now, since only animals can feel, plants would be devoid of memory. However, even in the animal kingdom, Aristotle continues, only in some does memory originate from sensation. Hence, they would be more intelligent, because they are more apt to learn. Therefore, memory would be an aspect of animal intelligence. And thus, since Ancient Greece, I suppose, the presupposition of philosophy to understand memory was established. So, how could it be such a ubiquitous phenomenon as to determine the very being of anything? And thus, I formulate the motivating question of this section.

To answer it, I chose a statement by Bensusan whose analysis reveals, I suppose, the omnipresence of memory assemblages. "The past does not persist as it was", says Bensusan.<sup>6</sup> At least a superficial reason, still based on a common understanding of memory, clarifies its meaning. The circumstances of an event don't return when I recall them. But, according to Bensusan, there is another, more decisive reason. To bring it back, you need to add something to the past.

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<sup>2</sup> Hilan Bensusan, *Memory assemblages*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>5</sup> Aristóteles, *Metafísica*, vol. II, 2. ed., São Paulo, Edições Loyola, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

This is why memory takes the form of assemblages. One thing added to another, which, in turn, will result from further additions—this operation, in short, defines reality as such. And, by thus introducing the interrelationship between the two central concepts of Memory Assemblages—memory and addition—questions arise. Ultimately, I ask myself: what does addition mean? What adds what to what? And how does it do it?

Everything is exposed to the outside world, or, to use an expression Bensusan borrows from Quentin Meillassoux, to the Great Outdoors. Such exposure cannot be avoided; it is a risk to which everything is exposed. For something to become immune to additions, it would be necessary to extinguish the outside world. And it is precisely from there, from the outside world, that comes what can be added to what has become past. Bensusan's example of preparing a vegan adafina is especially instructive. A bunch of spinach, as it comes into existence, is exposed to the possibility of someone chopping it with a knife; it is exposed to the possibility of altering its flavor when combined with boiled oil, lightly fried garlic, onion, and cooked chickpeas. And vegetables, as they become ingredients in a recipe, are subject to producing a distinct flavor together, depending on the order in which they are combined in the preparation of the adafina.

Obviously, addition is not a mathematical operation because, unlike arithmetic addition, it is irreversible. Once the radio broadcasting of information is established, as Bensusan<sup>7</sup> gives another example, its extinction would not erase its traces. Other technologies would merely render it superfluous, whose traces, however, cannot be completely eliminated nor retrieved in their original value. Therefore, the irreversibility of addition implies asymmetry, since what emerges after something is added to something else alters what existed before. In the relationship between before and after, two other aspects are revealed: irruption and continuation, since the passage of time erupts when something that comes into existence later can be added to something that already existed before. Finally, addition is anachronic, since, although it alters the past, it does not alter it in a linear order, but rather multifocally, disseminating in different directions.

Therefore, addition is what makes memory assemblages mutable.<sup>8</sup> "The past

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

does not persist as it was", I emphasize. So, what remains? Only the spectrum—a vestige, a trace of what returns, multiple, anachronistic, and asymmetrically altered, based on what the external world adds to what had been. Given its asymmetry, the spectrum is not equivalent to what had been, and yet, at the same time, it does not cease to be so after having been the focus of addenda. Spectra are like the resonances produced when a string emits a note with a certain frequency. —How can we investigate them? Well, by forming a spectrographic image resulting from speculation committed to making visible the multiple invisible resonances of the spectrum. And what are its limits? In principle, none, for, should speculation deviate or encounter better arguments, deviations and counterarguments would themselves be equally speculative.

Finally, speculation moves between two other moments implied in the relationship between memory and addition, namely: retention and retrieval. The fact that something is what it has been imposes on it the condition of something retained for future retrieval. And retrieving it is nothing more than an exercise in addition, since it is impossible to recover it as it was without revealing certain aspects and concealing others. However, would there be something indeterminately retained and thus never retrieved? The problem lies in the adverb "never". Never recovered does not mean irretrievable. The possibility of recovery, Bensusan argues,<sup>9</sup> is an indefinite promise called iterability. A text, Bensusan observes, based on Derrida, must be legible to be considered a text, because if it is not structurally legible, it is not even a text. Similarly, something retained is something retrievable, since otherwise it would not even be anything.

This is why speculation finds no pre-established limits, for it is nothing more than an exercise in retrieval, in adding something to something retained. — "Where there's a will, there's a way", says Gary Dove, a character in Jonathan Glazer's film *Sexy Beast*. Now, if there are no pre-defined limits to speculation, would there then be a starting point? No single addition possesses sufficient force to assume the position of a principle of a sum of additions, the position of an arché. Originating from the external world, any addition can be randomly substituted in its claim to found something. It is no coincidence, as I said, that memory assemblages, in their ubiquity, are defective universals, non-founding

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

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principles, resulting in an an-archaic doctrine. Addition is never completed in a fully present substance, in an οὐσία that is itself founding. The strength of something retained in the past inevitably comes from the possibility of something recovering it in the future.

Rather than representing yet another metaphysics, the doctrine of memory assemblages results in an ultrametaphysics. Both Heidegger's tale of Two Beginnings and Bensusan's fable of the Irrelevant Principle are an-archaic endeavors. However, Heidegger's tale still appeals to a commanding force, since it insists on seeking a beginning prior to another beginning—though, admittedly, without founding it. Bensusan's fable denies the very importance of seeking an even more primordial principle. Memory assemblages are structurally open to any possible addendum whose grounding force is nothing more than a provisional claim. They, the memory assemblages, do not point to a more originary past, but always and necessarily to a random future. Thus, by moving in the opposite direction, Bensusan envisions the possibility of overcoming the typical nostalgia of metaphysics.

To conclude this topic, two final questions. Why does everything I have just discussed concern with memory? Isn't it an accessory faculty of animal intelligence, especially of human intelligence? Memory Assemblages starts from the premise, I suppose, that memory is not a specifically human phenomenon. Rather, it is a determination inherent to everything that is. And so I move from the first to the second question—memory as the condition by virtue of which things are what they are. Being means to materially configure oneself through the conversion of time into space, so that the past is recorded somewhere.<sup>10</sup> In other words, being is memory. Sedimentary rocks, glacial layers, oceans, tree rings, genetic codes, digital archives—all are diverse examples of recording. Therefore, human memory is one among many configurations of a ubiquitous phenomenon in an indefinite process of multifocal assemblages.

#### EDUCATION AS MEMORY ASSEMBLAGES

Once I have developed my understanding, I intend to appropriate the concepts

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

presented in *Memory Assemblages* to retrieve my philosophical concept of education. What could the doctrine of memory assemblages add? A fundamental aspect of the philosophical concept of education, defended here, is experience. After all, it—education—is defined, I believe, by the successive experiences through which someone, anyone, becomes different from who they have been. What is worth emphasizing in such a definition is experience as a process by which someone develops and propagates their difference. Now, if addition, as an iterative operation, is what "forges difference", as Bensusan argues,<sup>11</sup> then the doctrine of memory assemblages should be of my interest. In the following exposition, first I intend to summarize the most strategic points of what I have retained from the experience and then retrieve it.

First, in *Memory Assemblages*, Bensusan<sup>12</sup> suggests presupposing an understanding of experience based on empiricism, more specifically, on John Locke. Bensusan does not properly develop a concept of experience, so that, occasionally, I find only the suggestion that experience is related to perception. For empiricist philosophy, in short, experience consists of the concentration of attention on something whose stimulus would form something else called an idea. Like Gadamer, I am guided, in turn, by Hegel's point of view, especially with an emphasis on the speculative concept of experience. Unlike empiricist philosophers, experience, according to Hegel, is not reduced to the susceptibility of attention to being stimulated by the thing observed. Rather, it consists of the nuanced relationship between consciousness and the thing of which it is conscious.

Originally, experience is based on two aspects of consciousness, which maintain an inextricable relationship with each other. "Consciousness, on the one hand, is consciousness of the object", says Hegel;<sup>13</sup> "on the other hand, [it is] consciousness of itself". More specifically, "consciousness distinguishes something from itself" and determines it as something independent of itself, being In-Itself. This is the aspect called truth.<sup>14</sup> However, consciousness seeks to know what it considers to be In-Itself and thus maintains a relationship with it. Therefore,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5-6, 17.

<sup>13</sup> Hegel, *Fenomenologia do Espírito*, 2 ed., Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo, Editora Vozes e Editora Universitária São Francisco, 2003, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

simultaneously, it is in itself for consciousness. This is the aspect called knowledge.<sup>15</sup> Now, both truth and knowledge are rooted in consciousness, says Hegel.<sup>16</sup> Thus, it is up to consciousness to compare its knowledge with its object to verify whether the former, its knowledge, truly corresponds to the latter, its object.

More important is the emergence of a new object for consciousness. If both aspects, truth and knowledge, do not correspond, consciousness must change its knowledge. In other words, what consciousness assumed to be something In-Itself was, in reality, something existing only for it. However, here is the point: by changing its knowledge, its object necessarily changes as well. After all, the object "belonged essentially" to knowledge, Hegel notes.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the verification of consciousness involves both its knowledge and its "standard of measurement", its object.<sup>18</sup> Indeed! It only makes sense to change what I know about a thing if it, the thing, can also be distinguished from what I knew about it. This is so because being In-Itself, as something distinct from consciousness, is not reducible to what it, consciousness, knows about it.

But the change in question here does not consist of completely negating one object to affirm another; it is not simply annulling something to replace it with another, without any relation to the previous object. Yes, experience implies progression. But, at the same time, it is concatenation, as Marcos Nobre rightly points out.<sup>19</sup> This is what Hegel understands by the "dialectical movement" of experience. Dialectical, because the affirmation of a new object synthesizes in itself the negation of the truth of the previous object. In other words, the new object, rather than a simple negation, is rather a "renewal of the previously posited object"; "it contains within itself the history of its renewal, the truth of the previous object", adds Nobre.<sup>20</sup> "Now we know something different, and we know it better", in Gadamer's words.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Marcos Nobre, *Como nasce o novo*, São Paulo, Todavia, 2018, p. 209.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>21</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Verdade e método*, 5 ed., Rio de Janeiro e São Paulo, Editora Vozes e Editora Universitária São Francisco, 2003, p. 464.

Experience, in short, consists of the successive changes through which consciousness denies what it thought it knew in order to renew itself in new objects. For the purposes of this article, it is worth emphasizing its universal significance for human existence. Experience, as Jean Hyppolite<sup>22</sup> so aptly points out, is not a specific relationship in which consciousness knows this or that object. Rather, it concerns the very life of consciousness in its entirety. As Hyppolite remarks,<sup>23</sup> consciousness can experience an "ethical, legal, religious experience," etc. When a new object emerges, it "not only loses what, from a theoretical point of view, it took as truth"; consciousness "also loses its own vision of life and being, its intuition of the world".<sup>24</sup>

It is no coincidence that, rather than defining it as the "path of doubt", Hegel<sup>25</sup> prefers to more dramatically consider experience as the "path of despair". Because it is the path of the very life of consciousness, experience is absolutely essential to a philosophical concept of education. —It, education, is primarily experience. Indeed, as Hyppolite points out,<sup>26</sup> Bildungsroman of his time profoundly influenced Hegel. He, Hyppolite, even considers *The Phenomenology of Spirit* as a kind of "philosophical Bildungsroman". After all, Hegel, in fact, narrates the story of the experiences of consciousness. As occurs in a Bildungsroman, consciousness successively abandons certain convictions that, in the course of experience, have revealed themselves to be illusory.

Perhaps my understanding could be considered controversial because, I suppose, experience is in fact a configuration of memory assemblages. What makes such an understanding possible is the independence of the In-Itself from consciousness. On the one hand, it, the In-Itself, is that external and surrounding realm through which the plasticity of knowledge retained in consciousness is revealed. On the other hand, the modifications of retained knowledge reveal the phenomenological plasticity of the In-Itself in its Truth. The relationship between knowledge and the thing known is in fact a relationship of retention and retrieval. The thing, being In-Itself, adds addendums to what consciousness has retained

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<sup>22</sup> Jean Hyppolite, *Gênese e estrutura da Fenomenologia do Espírito de Hegel*, 2 ed., São Paulo, Discurso Editorial, 1999, p. 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

about itself and disturbs what it knew. Knowledge, in turn, under the need to modify itself, adds something to the very phenomenology of the thing, which begins to manifest itself in a different way. Neither persists as it had been throughout the course of experience.

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer<sup>27</sup> opposes Hegel by rejecting the possibility of overcoming experience through the science of Absolute Knowledge. Yes, as Gadamer<sup>28</sup> emphasizes, "experience is first and foremost always an experience of negativity (Nichtigkeit)". Once experience is made, consciousness knows "something else". "The object "does not hold itself", Gadamer continues, and "the new object contains the truth of the previous one". Thus, "the truth of experience always contains the reference to new experiences".<sup>29</sup> Consequently, an "experienced" person is not characterized by the variety of experiences they have undergone, but rather by being open to other experiences. Rather than culminating in conclusive wisdom, openness is what defines experience—as it is also envisaged, I suppose, in a doctrine of memory assemblages.

However, Gadamer does not question the metaphysical assumptions to which, I believe, Hegel is committed—the need to assume something more original, something fully present. This is precisely what Bensusan's ultrametaphysics adds to a philosophical concept of education. The experience of becoming someone other than who I have been bids farewell to the nostalgic metaphysics of a pre-existing arché that merely awaits, patiently, the changes of consciousness. In *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel narrates the experience of consciousness from the perspective of the philosopher, of one who already knows absolutely what natural consciousness only knows provisionally. From an ultrametaphysical perspective, the point of view of one who knows absolutely could not exist, for no one can be immune to the risk of exposing themselves to possible additions. Rather, the speculative relationship between knowledge and thing is under the flux of the negativity of experience and cannot even find shelter in the methodical domain of verification.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 464.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 464.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 465.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, some brief considerations on memory assemblages and force. Bensusan uses the word force in numerous expressions,<sup>30</sup> without, however, giving it the attention it deserves in his doctrine. In particular, for a philosophical concept of education, the concept of force discussed in the passage where Bensusan dialogues with Jane Bennett is of interest. In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett<sup>31</sup> presupposes, according to Bensusan, a vital force for each element that makes up a material compound. In *Memory Assemblages*, on the contrary, there would be no need to presuppose any vital force internal to the elements of the assemblages. For example, what drives the reading of a text, Bensusan argues,<sup>32</sup> is not the internal force of the reader, but the text's very readability. Nothing subsists by itself, relying on its own force—this is Bensusan's point. To perform any activity, each thing must establish relationships with others. This is his reason for rejecting the assumption of internal forces.

Well, for a philosophical conception of education, force is a constitutive factor of experience, because, to become different from oneself, one must mobilize one's forces. – In other words, difference, to be realized, requires force. This is precisely what the doctrine of memory compounds presupposes when it states: “addition forges difference”.<sup>33</sup> It remains to be seen, however, whether such forces are inherent to the one who experiences becoming different or whether they only occur when one establishes a relationship with other things. And, to outline a possible answer to this question, it is worth considering the distinction between the ontological and ontic aspects of force in Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. After all, Heidegger<sup>34</sup> seems to disregard or even pay attention to Bensusan's concern: to deny the presupposition of a force inherent in each element of the assemblages.

Ontologically, according to Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation, force, considered in itself, is the relationship between two kinds of force. To illustrate this, Heidegger considers the manufacture of an axe. To manufacture

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, ‘archaic force’ (ibid., p. 21), ‘force of addition’ (ibid., p. 24), ‘force of command’ (ibid., p. 28), ‘force of addendums’ (ibid., p. 38), ‘messianic force’ (ibid., p. 40) etc.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Metafísica de Aristóteles* *Θ 1-3*, Rio de Janeiro, Vozes, 2007.

its blade, it is necessary to consider raw materials whose strength can support the shape required to produce a blade. Thus, the craftsman's force to manufacture must consider the force to bearing of things capable of assuming the form of the blade. Certain metals and rocks are capable of becoming a blade, while liquids, sand, or wood are not. In its ontological sense, force is the conjunction of the force to manufacture with the force to bear in the production of the axe blade. In its ontic sense, force refers to only one of the two: either the strength of the craftsman or the strength of the raw material.

Yes, Heidegger argues for the overlapping of the two senses of force, since the force to produce implies the force expressed in the producibility of the material used in manufacturing. Similarly, to use Bensusan's example, the force of someone reading a text can only be expressed if it is implied in the force expressed in the text's legibility. However, Heidegger's example implies another phenomenon: non-force. It is not possible to demand that a portion of water lend itself to the production of an axe blade. In other words, the ontic concept of force points to the presupposition that each being possesses its own force. This, its own force, cannot be disregarded in the relationship between forces, so that each being possesses, indeed, an inherent, internal force. In conclusion, shouldn't the doctrine of memory assemblages presuppose it? Shouldn't it also consider what this body can do?

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