

UNIQUENESS OF EPISODIC EXPERIENCE

(UNIKÁTNOST EPIZODICKÉHO PROŽÍVÁNÍ)

Ivan M. Havel
Centrum pro teoretická studia
při Univerzitě Karlově a Akademii věd ČR, Praha
havel@cts.cuni.cz

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Abstrakt:

Práce se zabývá otázkou, zda člověku lze přisoudit něco, co by bylo možno nazvat „smyslem pro unikátnost“ (pro jedinečnost v numerickém smyslu). Unikátnost se může primárně vztahovat k individuálnímu prožitku nějaké epizodické situace vsazené do aktuálního kontextu. Teprve z takové zkušenosti by bylo lze odvozovat i objektivní (či intersubjektívni) pojetí unikátnosti či jedinečnosti konkrétních věcí a událostí. Smysl pro unikátnost je příbuzný smyslu pro časoprostorovou přítomnost, smyslu pro „já“ a smyslu pro stejnost reálně prožitých epizod a vzpomínek na ně. V otázce je povaha této příbuznosti.

Keywords:

experience, uniqueness, first-person perspective, episodic situation, episodic memory

Abstract:

In the paper a question is explored whether human person possess something that may be called “a sense of uniqueness” (uniqueness in numerical sense). Uniqueness may be primarily related to individual experience of an episodic situation in an actual context. Only from such an experience one could derive an objective (or intersubjective) notion of uniqueness of concrete things and events. The sense of uniqueness is connected to the sense of spatiotemporal presence, sense of Self, and sense of sameness of episodes really lived through and their recollections. A question is posed of the nature of such connections.¹

¹ An earlier version of this study was presented at international workshop *The Challenge of Uniqueness* organized by CTS in April 2009; see also [4]. The research was sponsored by the Research Program CTS MSM 021620845.

1 Various Concepts of Uniqueness

In everyday communication we often use the adjective “unique” in various senses of the word and in various contexts without any danger of misunderstanding. Thus we talk of a unique opportunity, a unique piece of art, a unique historical event, a unique specimen, a unique copy of a book, a unique concern, a unique specification, a unique solution, a unique style, a unique meaning, a unique feature, etc.

There are many more or less synonymous adjectives (rare, unusual, single, odd, exceptional, unparalleled, unrepeatable, singular, remarkable, outstanding, superb, peculiar, irreplaceable, etc.) stressing different facets of uniqueness and it is natural to pose a question of a general, or “pure” *concept of uniqueness* – uniqueness *per se*, independent on the nature of a thing, person, event, or state of affairs it is, or may be, attributed to. Would such a concept be more a product of social interaction, depending on our individual or cultural attitudes or habits, or should it be rather understood as a natural kind, an essential feature of certain entities in our world?

Undoubtedly, any generalizing approach would be hindered by the diversity of uses of the term “uniqueness” in everyday life. Once we use it to emphasize an exceptional quality, preciousness or superiority of something (a unique wine, unique opportunity, unique selection), other times we stress the property of something being only one of a (given) kind (a unique specimen of a class, a unique token of a type), still other times it points to a characteristic pertaining to a whole category, namely that each its member is different from all others (uniqueness of fingerprints, uniqueness of snowflakes). There are, of course, other senses of “uniqueness”, mostly vague and mutually overlapping.

In this essay I will content myself with the *numerical sense* of uniqueness—oneness in the sense of having no equal or equivalent in the world. Such numerical or logical sense of uniqueness does not imply any evaluating bias (like superiority or scarcity) or a deviation from anything usual or ordinary, as other uses of the word normally suggest. Seemingly such understanding of uniqueness makes it a rather trivial and useless concept. As American Heritage Dictionary suggests (in the usage note to the word “unique”):

If we were to use *unique* only according to the strictest criteria of logic, after all, we might freely apply the term to anything in the world since nothing is wholly equivalent to anything else.

One of the aims of this study is to show that precisely the numerical sense of uniqueness may have some philosophical relevance.

For this, let us point to an important distinction that will be essential for the present study. On the one hand, a certain notion (in our case the notion of uniqueness) may be approached from the perspective of external observer; on the other hand, the “same” notion may be approached from the perspective of the experiencing subject. In current debates of philosophers and cognitive scientists the former option is routinely called the *third-person perspective*, while the latter option is called the *first-person perspective* (the term “person” hints at its grammatical sense). So far as human experience is concerned, the first-person perspective is typical for the phenomenologist's concern while the psychologist (as a scientist) as well as the mainstream cognitive scientist would typically prefer the third-person approach (cf. [2, 7], [9]).

To illustrate the difference consider the following quotation from [3] (quoted by [6, 150]):

Every insignificant tick of my watch is a unique event, for no two ticks can be simultaneous with a given third event. [...] Every individual is unique by virtue of being a distinctive assemblage of characteristics not precisely duplicated in any other individual.

This is typically third-person formulation in which uniqueness (in its numerical sense) is ascribed to objectively observable entities (ticks, individuals).²

As noted, the third-person approach is preferred by psychologists, even when they deal with human subjective experience. For instance, there exist psychological studies concerned with human sense of special type of uniqueness, namely self-distinctiveness (how persons perceive their similarity or dissimilarity to others). It appears that perceptions of either extreme similarity or extreme dissimilarity to others are experienced as being unpleasant. The central dogma (of the so called uniqueness theory in psychology) is that everyone has a need (or desire) to be moderately dissimilar to others. [8, 396]. Note that here the concept of uniqueness is linked to (objectively recordable) dissimilarity to others. However interesting scientifically, these studies are not directly related to our present theme for three reasons: first, uniqueness is there conceptually linked merely with dissimilarity, second, the focus is on human esteem for

² Note that the validity of quoted statements (which is not my issue here), is based on (1) the Euclidean principle that “two things equal to the same thing are equal to each other”, (2) the usual conception of linearly ordered time, and (3) the very meaning of the term “individual”.

uniqueness rather than on the “feel” of something being unique (see below), and third, the research is aimed to preferably obtain third-person empirical data.³

The strategy I pursue here tries to take seriously the first-person approach and discuss, somewhat speculatively, the experiential aspect of the phenomenon of uniqueness. In other words, ‘what it is like’ or what it ‘feels’ like for me (for us) to apprehend (grasp or cognize or feel) uniqueness *as such* and uniqueness *of* something—which may be a situation, an event, a thing, a person that happens to be myself.⁴ How to understand subjective experience of uniqueness in terms of the meaning it may have for the experiencing subject.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is important to emphasize that the difference between the first-person and third-person approaches, as presented here, is more or less methodological, indicating two different research orientations. Importantly, the same difference is also meaningful in relation to our everyday life. There the first-person and second-person approaches may be understood as two extreme perspectival poles or tendencies in our cognitive reception of the world. Experientially we may, or have to, “oscillate” between them (either pre-reflectively or even reflectively).

2 Uniqueness in the Numerical and Experiential Sense

After quoting Grünbaum (see above) Joynt and Rescher continue as follows [6, 150-151]:

[It] would seem to be an elemental fact about the universe that all events whatsoever are unique. Every concrete natural occurrence is unique, even the occurrence of a so-called “recurrent” phenomenon like a sunrise or of “repeatable” events like the melting of a lump of sugar in a teacup.

Events are rendered non-unique *in thought only*, by choosing to use them as examples of a type or class. [...] Whether an event is selected for treatment as a unique, concrete particular, or is treated as the non-unique exemplar of a class of events, is essentially a matter of human interest and perspective.

³ By no means this comment should indicate a certain opposition to the mentioned research. I only try to ask somewhat different questions and approach them in different manner.

⁴ Phenomenologists often use first-person-plural pronouns (we, us, ourselves) when they have a single human subject on mind. In such cases I occasionally prefer the singular (I, me, myself) to emphasize the first-person view; the context should disclose when it is merely the author's I (like in this sentence). Psychologists, on the other hand, routinely call their objects of study “subjects” (or respondents).

Evidently the quoted passage, like the previous one, is formulated on the background of the third-person approach (offering “a fact about the universe”, talking about “all events whatsoever” etc.). However, since it exemplifies the numerical sense of the term “uniqueness” it may well serve as a point of departure for our study.

From the logical viewpoint the primitive concepts are individuals (here: events and their occurrences) and properties (here understood extensionally, as types or classes of events). In the quoted passage uniqueness is claimed to be a necessary property of *all* events. Only we (humans) are bringing into play, somewhat contingently, our specific ability to discern non-unique events “in thought only”.

It is not my aim to analyze various implicit presuppositions of what is said in the above passage.⁵ I will just point to one aspect that turns out to be relevant for our study. Let us consider the seemingly unproblematic concept of “event”. If it is introduced as a primitive concept then uniqueness of all events would have to be postulated, either explicitly or implicitly, as is usual, say, in theoretical physics (except for some interpretations of quantum mechanics). Then uniqueness of any given event is just an analytical truth.

Our authors apparently had on mind something less abstract. The “universe” may be understood as the entire physical world, complete in the cosmological sense and as such necessarily unique. Such a universe is composed of, or passing through, myriads of particular events (or their occurrences?), where each individual event is by itself composed of, or passing through, an arbitrary number of smaller events with some specific properties and mutual relations (imagine a sunrise or a melting lump of sugar).

But this scenario is hardly imaginable without the assumption of existence of real or imagined observers, each with an individual first-person perspective. (But notice the snag: *who* is making this assumption? Isn't it, after all, a third-person view of (many) first-person viewers?)

Why not reverse the scenario and start with the first-person subjective experience. Conscious subjects not only observe various events in the world, they actually participate in them, *live through* them (which is our notion of experience⁶). Who else could guarantee uniqueness of events if not someone who participates in or lives through them?

⁵ Just one example: the possibility, say, that the universe consisted of two or more parallel, identical but noninteracting sub-universes seems to be excluded here on logical rather than empirical grounds.

⁶ In distinction to the sense of experience as the long-term accumulation of knowledge or skill.

In the first-person account my every real experience of, say, a sunrise renders that concrete occurrence of sunrise a unique event. Only a multitude of such experiences entitles me to talk of a *recurrent* phenomenon of (the type) “sunrise”. In the same way I can talk of *repeatable* events like “the melting of a lump of sugar in a teacup” due to my real or imaginable experience of concrete cases of sugar melting.

So far so good, but now we can ask again about the essence of the concept of *uniqueness* (of events or other phenomena). Is this concept of the same breed as the just mentioned concepts of recurrence and repeatability? There are two presumable differences, one logical and one experiential. Logically, uniqueness (in our sense) is a necessary attribute of *all* events while recurrence and repeatability are contingent properties of *some* events (with respect to a certain conception of similarity).

The experiential difference is a more intricate issue. I will come to it later, after some preparatory considerations.

3 Episodic Experience

I have proposed another idea of events, namely as something *experienced* (lived through by somebody) and it would be proper now to say something more of the nature of such kind of events.⁷ For the purposes of our study let us give them a special name, viz. *episodic situations* (or in brief *episodes*⁸).

In general, episodes may be considered basic elements of our worlds of conscious experience. Each episode is inherently associated with a person (called its *subject*) who lives it through and for whom it may have more or less distinctive meaning. The subject may find such an episode worthy to be remembered, verbalized, reflected upon, and possibly narrated in the first-person singular. Every episode obtains a certain temporal and spatial architecture, its own micro-world, and it can be distinguished from other episodes as well as from less differentiated backgrounds. For better intuition let us assume that the temporal extent (duration) of episodes is typically short, but this doesn't exclude that they may be moderately long; one larger episode may often be broken up into partial episodes that can be thematized (recalled, narrated, imagined) separately. A characteristic general feature of episodes should be that they have a beginning and end

⁷ The topic discussed in this chapter will be elaborated in more detail in my book in progress, *Experience of Episodic Situations* (tentative title).

⁸ The word “episode” is here used more as a technical term, supressing the usual sense of something integral to (albeit separable from) a larger process. Correspondingly, “episodic situation” should not be understood as a subcategory of something called “situation” (cf. point 3 below).

(albeit mostly indistinct) and no substantial leaps in time, space, or in the flow of events.

Once an episode is presented (narrated, recalled, imagined) in a certain way, any such presentation (whether in words, pictures, mental images or otherwise) will be referred to as a *depiction* of the episode. The same episode may obtain different depictions and in certain cases (to be discussed later) the same depiction may be interpreted as representing different episodes.

The reader should notice that even in the brief outline of the concept both first-person and third-person perspectives are implicitly blended.

Our episodic memory (the psychological term, see Chapter 7) “stores” a great number of episodes from our past life, some easily and some hardly recallable, some greatly laden with meaning, some others quite banal. For theoretical purposes, for instance when we want to discuss inner structural characteristics of episodes, we do not have to restrict ourselves to examples of episodes from somebody's real life. We may equally well illustrate our ideas with (depictions of) unreal (invented or imaginary) episodes or dreams, as well as with excerpts from literary fiction. Consider, say, the last stanza of the well-known poem *The Raven* by Edgar Allan Poe:

And the Raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,
And the lamplight o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted — nevermore!

Leaving aside poetics and, for a while, the difference between reality and fiction, let us look closely at certain characteristic features of the episodic situation depicted in the above lines.

1. We can notice that both the above-mentioned perspectives can be applied. So if you tend, say, towards the third-person view you⁹ can easily extract from the passage (especially from its first four lines) an objective description of the scene (*the Raven sitting on the bust just above the door and throwing his shadow on the floor*). Further, you couldn't ignore the presence, at least physical, of the subject of the episode, in this case the narrator (who is partly implicit, partly explicit: *my door, my soul*). You

⁹ “Your” view represents here a view of an external observer of the episode.

might continue by inferring many further details of the episode, not explicitly mentioned in the narrative depiction. You may even unbridle your fantasy and freely fill in other data (as readers of literary fiction would normally do)—provided, of course, the new data do not yield (overt) contradictions.¹⁰

On the other hand, if you tend, in this case, towards the first-person perspective the best you could try is to put yourself, so to speak, in the shoes of the subject-narrator, or even to imagine his state of mind (*having your soul lifted from the shadow*).

Obviously, aiming to use the first-person perspective in episodic situations of *other* subjects (real or fictional) may be sticky and philosophically problematic (cf. [2, Chapter 9]). However, if *you* are living through *your own* episodic situation, you inherently experience it from the first-person perspective, at least pre-reflectively. You can, of course, also attend to your experience reflectively, by making it the theme or object of your attention. In doing it you will have to count with the fact, that in reflection the first-person perspective is always belated and directly or indirectly infected by the third-person perspective (and conversely). I will use the term *episodic experience* to refer to just described first-person (pre-reflective or reflective) experience of an episodic situation.

2. As the reader has probably realized, narrative depiction (and analogously recollection from memory and anticipatory imagination) never renders episodes in their absolute entirety. Thus in our example of the sitting raven only something (not too much) is explicitly mentioned in the text, something more could be read from the rest of the poem, further things can be inferred with the help of general knowledge of the world, still others freely imagined, etc.

Any episode, once depicted (in words or mental images), may be thought of as being *lifted out of its context*—or more precisely, out of a practically infinite number of *conceivable contexts*.¹¹ Admittedly, for specific theoretical purposes the absence of context may not be such a drawback as it helps to isolate a particular coherent episode from a plethora of factual or imaginable contextual connections. Indeed, even when we reflect our everyday episodic experiences we have to disregard most of their contextual details, only preserving a vague pre-reflective awareness of their factual existence.

¹⁰ The reader of fiction usually does not care too much for such contradictions.

¹¹ Needless to say, the word “context” is figuratively used in a wider, nonlinguistic sense.

Theoretically we can conceive of a *field of possible contexts* associated with any given depiction of an episodic situation. Surely, such a field is a rather abstract notion and we can never survey it in its entirety (and there is no reason for doing so). There are two natural binary relations between different contexts in the field, namely *inclusion* (one context is an extension or enlargement of a narrower context) and *incompatibility* (two contexts contradict each other). Note that inclusion cannot hold for incompatible contexts while compatibility may not entail inclusion.

From the phenomenological viewpoint, while all really lived-through episodic situations are endowed with a conceivably infinite (i.e. arbitrarily extendable) ultimate context, we can never count with it in its entirety. The larger context the less it is experientially accessible. We can formulate it as *the thesis of inherent horizontality of human experience*.

For episodic situations there is a conspicuous specific manifestation of such horizontality, which can be called the *episodic spatiotemporal horizon*. Consider a concrete depiction of an episode, for instance the above quoted stanza from Poe's poem. Even if there is only a vague implicit reference to temporality (*still is sitting*) and spatial emplacement (*my chamber*), the scope of the episode is more or less limited to its (extended) "here" and (extended) "now". This lends a certain prominent, even if not precisely determinable, spatiotemporal framework to the episode. Of course, we may know—or at least try to learn, infer, or guess—various happenings *before* or *after* or *outside* that framework but the distinction between "here and now" and "there and/or another time" is prominent. This distinction is a typical feature of the very concept of the episodic situation as proposed here, and moreover, it has a good, albeit slightly different, meaning for both first- and third-person perspectives. This entitles us to use the term (spatiotemporal) *horizon* of the episode.¹²

3. There are two important aspects of the concept of episodic situation, namely the *episodic* aspect and the *situational* aspect (my term "episodic situation" purposely hints at this dual aspect).¹³ The episodic aspect is closely related to the confinement of an episodic situation within its spatiotemporal horizon (and perhaps various others similar "horizons" of experience). Correspondingly it focuses on the concrete scene (emplacement) of the episode, its concrete story or plot, and on

¹² Or "horizontal fringe" for whoever wants to distinguish it from the Husserlian concept of horizon.

¹³ I owe to Michal Ajvaz for some ideas concerning episodic situations.

participating persons and objects. The unity of time, place, action, and subject within the episode is characteristic for the episodic aspect.

The situational aspect, on the other hand, is related to a wider background of everything that is relevant to the episodic situation in question and that endows it with specific *meaning* for the subject. This background is much less explicit than what is in the focus of the episodic aspect and may drag in even the entire life of the subject, his past experiences and future projects. However, the episodic and the situational aspects are intricately linked together. As Pavel Kouba [7] has put it:

Pursuing the inner “structure” of the situation reveals that in particular situations we experience our life in its wholeness, as it were, and it even reveals that episodocity as such provides an access to this whole. [my translation]

The phenomenologist would typically ask “how we are immersed in our everyday situations and projects, how we experience the world, relate to others, and engage in the kinds of actions and practices that define our lives.” [2, 26]. Compare also the following quote by Čapek [1]:

Every situation we encounter and in which we act, can be described as a tension: between what is given and what is possible, between motive and intention, between past and future, between what is and what we desire. It is only in the light of a certain project, of a certain desired goal, that given elements of our situation acquire the meaning of obstacles, opportunities or uninteresting aspects. The reason [for acting] itself makes part of the situation. If it does not, it has no sense, it is no longer a reason for acting.

4 Uniqueness of Episodic Situations

As I mentioned in the first chapter the terms “unique” and “uniqueness” are here used in their numerical sense—as indication that a given thing or event is assumed (or believed) to be the only one in the world. Hence we are more interested in concrete occurrences of things and events than in types or classes that things and events may instantiate. However, every concrete occurrence occurs *to a subject* in a certain *context*. In other words, they partake in a corresponding episodic situation.

I want to advance a tentative idea that uniqueness (in our numerical sense) could be attributed *primarily* to an episodic situation as a whole, while only *secondarily* to whichever thing or event may occur, or participate, in the episodic situation in question. Let us call this the *thesis of primacy of uniqueness of episodic situations*.

Consider for instance my current actual situation of writing this very paragraph on my laptop. There are no other laptops around and even if they were they would be *other* laptops, not *this* particular one. Hence, in a certain (preliminary) sense I pre-reflectively take uniqueness of this laptop for granted. But in one stroke, as it were, I can grant similar uniqueness to all other things around as well as to everything that happens “here and now”, within this concrete episodic situation. Now, what about the larger contexts?

In fact, there is no reason to deny uniqueness of anything that belongs to any larger context of the episode *actually* lived through. As a matter of fact, I may tacitly presume uniqueness of an *arbitrarily large* conceivable context disregarding the fact that technically I may have no direct access to its content. For instance, I have no doubts about uniqueness of every invisible event that is just now happening inside my laptop, independently on whether it is, in principle, detectable or not (recall also the quote by Grünbaum in Chapter 1).

This example suggests that the notion of primacy of uniqueness of episodic situations may be related to the idea of extendability of contexts.

To make this clear it is necessary to resort to the (till now somewhat incidental) first-person approach in a more explicit manner.¹⁴ Let us consider, say, the following different modes of givenness of an episodic situation as viewed from the first-person perspective:

- (1) My direct experience of an actual episode that I presently live through,
- (2) My recollection of an episode that I really lived through in the past,
- (3) My absorptive reading of an episode in literary fiction.
- (4) My imagination of an episode that I produced by play of free fantasy.

In the first two modes I can guarantee (only to myself, of course) the factual character of the episode in question, for which guaranty it is irrelevant whether I have or have not (in fact, I never have) access to all contextual details pertaining to the episode. (In case (2) it is also irrelevant whether the content of the episode has been distorted in my memory, provided I somehow know *which* particular episode I am trying to recall. For more about it see Chapter 7) Now, if I wanted to fill in some missing data, or enlarge the context, I have no other choice except to “consult reality”, so to speak, and I can only expect unique answers. This makes me “feel” or “perceive” the ultimate uniqueness of the episode.

¹⁴ To emphasize this, I use again first-person singular pronouns.

On the other hand, in the latter two modes of givenness I am bound to take for granted merely those facts that are included in, or implied by, the concrete depiction of the episode (in case (3)), or that have been already fixed in my fantasy (in case (4)). This time, due to the absolute absence of any larger imposed context, I can freely decide about further extensions of the context from a potentially infinite supply of different, perhaps even mutually incompatible options. In this case nothing makes me “feel” or “perceive” uniqueness of the episode like before.

This was just an illustration of how different modes of givenness of episodic situations may yield different subjective attributions of uniqueness. This brings us to a new, somewhat speculative line of thought concerning the phenomenal aspect of uniqueness.

5 Do We Have a Sense of Uniqueness?

In the previous chapter the question was posed whether there is something that it is like to have episodic experience of uniqueness. Do we have, or are we endowed with, a special capacity or disposition which may be called the *sense of uniqueness*?

To understand the question properly, let us first comment on the intended meaning, in this context, of the expression *having a sense of X* where *X* is a certain, typically abstract quality. First, such “sense” is something to be attributed to a person who is, so to speak, the possessor or owner of the said sense, rather than to some object or event as when one is *making* or *grasping* a sense of something.

Second, “having a sense of” here means one's possessing a *capacity* or *disposition*, rather than factual *employing* such capacity or disposition in a concrete case. Thus, “to have a sense of humor” refers to the capacity, perhaps idle or inactive, to appreciate or understand a humorous nature of anything, in distinction from “to have a sense of humorosity of such and such concrete situation or event”. In the same way “having a sense of responsibility” is not the same as “feeling oneself responsible for such and such thing”.

This subtle distinction is not always properly taken care of in the scientific literature, yet it is usually implied by the context.¹⁵ This distinction may turn out to be particularly relevant to cognitive science in which there are many claims of various “senses of *X*” or “feelings for *X*” attributed to conscious subjects. To quote just a few examples: having a

¹⁵ In the Czech language this distinction corresponds to the difference between „mít cit pro něco“ a „pocít'ovat něco“.

sense of personal Self, of subjective identity, of time, of place, of continuity, of ownership for one's body, of agency, of effort to act, of control over the movement, of freedom, of otherness (alterity), of coherence of one's own thinking, of difference, of incompleteness, of “something has to happen next”, of reality of the world—and (why not?) a “sense of a sense”.

In the following I shall call such subjective dispositions, or “senses of something”, simply *inner senses* (take it just as a technical term).

Some of the inner senses may be thought to be properties of some, not all persons (e.g. the sense of humor), while some others may be considered to be characteristic of all persons (e.g., the sense of Self). In the latter case there are, however, well documented neuro- and psychopathological disorders in which one or another inner sense is missing or impaired (sense of agency or bodily ownership in schizophrenia).

Most of the inner senses are implicit, pre-reflective features of our everyday experience even if sometimes we may subject them to conscious reflection.

It is worth noticing that there is a certain analogy between our meaning of the term “sense” (as inner sense) and its meaning as a sensory modality (sight, hearing, touch, etc.). In the latter case, for instance, there is a clear distinction between a disposition (sense of sight, sense of hearing, etc.) and its employment (seeing a thing, hearing a sound). Somewhat speculatively we may conceive of a conceptual or even experiential continuity between both meanings of “sense”. (After all, it is not accidental that many languages use for them the same word: *der Sinn*, *le sens*, *чувство*, *smysl*.)

Let us now return to the (inner) *sense of uniqueness*. One possible approach would be putting stress on the transitivity of uniqueness, i.e. what it is that we are appreciating uniqueness *of*. What does it mean having a sense of uniqueness *of something*? This may lead us to distinguish, for instance, object uniqueness, event uniqueness, uniqueness of episodic experience etc. Referring to the primacy thesis mentioned in Chapter 4, it seems that the sense of uniqueness of an episodic situation, being an originary source of other variants of transitive uniqueness, may suggest an idea of the sense of *uniqueness per se*.

Thus another approach would be to start with the idea of a minimal, pre-reflective sense of uniqueness as something already built into the very structure of experience. Such an idea seems to be sound provided we could test it against conceivability of episodic experience *without* the feel of

uniqueness. This could be hardly done for experience that is pre-reflective but there is no logical reason not to resort to reflective experience.

Is it ever thinkable to live through a certain real episode while having a reflective impression that the episode is *not* (numerically) unique? One candidate may be a strong feel of *déjà vu*. But this would not work quite well since the presence of that very feel of *déjà vu* would make a difference in reflection. Perhaps better example could be *déjà vu* experiences that occur in dreams. In fact, we cannot logically exclude the possibility of having exactly the same dream several times, each repetition accompanied with the same feeling of nonuniqueness. Now, the first-person experience *during* a (nonlucid) dream does not involve any sense of external spatiotemporal localization of the dream and thus, by combining the first- and third-person perspectives, we arrive at logical conceivability of episodic nonuniqueness.

The above line of thought is admittedly rather vague and speculative, but if nothing else, it at least opens the issue of nonuniversality and hence nontriviality of the sense of uniqueness of real episodic experience.

The situation is different in the case of irreal (fictional, imagined) episodic situations. As it follows from the discussions in Chapter 4, we can relate (the sense of) episodic uniqueness with lack of (the sense of) freedom to invent or choose a wider context that transcends all that is already mentioned in, or implied by, the depiction of a given episode.

For instance, assume that you are presented with the above quoted stanza from the Poe's poem, and (to make it simple) that it is the only available depiction of an envisaged fictitious episode. Moreover, try to read it in the first-person perspective *as if* it were *your* experience. Now you will feel a certain tension between (1) pretending that it is your *real* experience and (2) knowing that it is an *irreal* episode that you are just trying to live through. According to (1) your pretence entails a feeling of completeness of the situation to its tiniest detail (which does not imply that you know the details), and moreover, that the completion is necessarily unique. On the other hand, because of (2) you will have a sense of full freedom how to fill in, in your imagination, various details that are not directly mentioned in, or implied by, the depiction. The very existence of the tension indicates that there is a sort of phenomenal feel of the difference between uniqueness and nonuniqueness.

No such tension appears in the case of any *real* (factual) episodic experience (like your reading this sentence right now). Normally such experience is mostly pre-reflective but we can always submit it to

conscious reflection, and even more, extend it with the reflective attitude of it being unique.

To clarify matters further, let us say it otherwise. There is a phenomenal difference between practical *inaccessibility* of the full content or context in *real* episodes, and *absolute absence* of certain parts of the content and context in *irreal* (imagined, fictional) episodes. In the first case the sense of uniqueness covers, for instance, even hidden (unattended, unknown, unknowable) parts of episodes. In the second case there seems to be no place for proper sense of uniqueness.

I believe the above considerations give sufficient grounds for the positive answer to the question of the sense of uniqueness posed in the beginning of this chapter: indeed, we (humans) are endowed with an inherent pre-reflective (but open to reflection) sense of numerical uniqueness. Let us call this the *thesis of the sense of uniqueness*.

6 Possible Connections

The acceptance, at least tentative, of the above thesis may be a motivation to look for connections of the sense of uniqueness to some other inner senses. The reader may have noticed, for instance, the intimate connection of the sense of uniqueness with the sense of personal freedom. Granted, it concerns a rather special case of freedom, namely the relative freedom to conceive or fabricate larger contexts for incompletely depicted irreal (fictional or imagined) episodes.

We might expect a number of further possible links between the sense of uniqueness and other inner senses. Here I am not going to enter this intricate subject and I will restrict myself to a few sketchy hints at possible links to two inner senses: the sense of spatiotemporal presence and the sense of Self (selfhood). In the subsequent chapter I will also mention a link to the sense of sameness.

We experience time subjectively as a flow of events from the future through the present towards the past. This endows the episodes we live through with an essential polarity, and also yields the phenomenal difference between nonexistent, only remembered past, the existent present, and again nonexistent, only anticipated future. In this respect there are essential differences but also similarities between time and space. For instance, in time we cannot “move” forward or backward, while in space we can willingly move around, possibly returning to the original place. Time gives us, due to its openness to the future, a basic condition for our freedom to choose actions and anticipate their outcomes, while space

provides us with a room to act. The contact point of experienced time and space, and, metaphorically said, also the point of departure for our actions and projects, is placed in our closest “neighbourhood”: in the temporal “now” and spatial “here”, or to glue both into one concept, our *spatiotemporal presence*.

Every actual episode of my experience necessarily involves, as an integral part, my spatiotemporal presence. (In the case when several different episodes share my unique concrete presence, the episodes would differ in their other content, e.g., one episode could be a proper segment of another episode). In any case, my spatiotemporal presence may be considered to be a sufficient, if not necessary condition of the feel of uniqueness of any actual episode I am living through. This may suggest a more general thesis: the sense of uniqueness is reducible to the sense of spatiotemporal presence. This may be called *the thesis of primacy of the sense of spatiotemporal presence*.

Needless to say, germane to such a thesis is the *sense of Self* (or equivalently, the *sense of selfhood*)—awareness of one’s own presence and involvement in experience (cf., e.g., 10]). This is inherently a first-person type of inner sense. Accordingly, any episodic situation that I actually experience *belongs to me*, so to speak, and I can always say, “This is my situation.” When we are pre-reflectively absorbed in actual experience we are always at least marginally or peripherally aware of our experiencing Self. In reflection we can perhaps imagine an absence of our body, but we can hardly imagine an absence of our Self.

For our study one aspect of the sense of Self is essential: *the sense of Self-uniqueness*. As Nietzsche pointed out, “At bottom every man knows well enough that he is a unique being, only once on this earth.” Now we have two concepts: (1) the sense of uniqueness of an episodic situation experienced by a subject and (2) the sense of Self-uniqueness of the subject experiencing a situation. In our framework each of these two concepts may be thought to refer to a different type of inner sense. Then it may be natural to ask: which of them is primary and which is derived?

My tentative answer is: both. In fact, both concepts seem to be so closely related with one another that it would be philosophically wrong to tell them apart. Less crudely put, we may perhaps distinguish them heuristically, for the sake of theoretical analysis, but it seems doubtful to pose the above question of primacy.

7 Uniqueness and Memory¹⁶

The principal use of the term memory relates to human individual memory—part of our daily experience of keeping in mind various facts, general as well as concrete ones, and being able to recall our past experiences. Psychologists and cognitive scientists distinguish several types of memory systems like working memory, procedural memory, and declarative memory (it refers to memories that can be consciously discussed and possibly declared as true or likely true). Declarative memory is subdivided to semantic and episodic memory. Semantic memory deals with general, “encyclopedic” knowledge of objects, concepts, words and their meanings.

Episodic memory is much more relevant to our theme. Unlike semantic memory, it enables storing and recalling episodes that were actually lived through and experienced by a person. Thus it is not only specific to times and places, but also to the individual. Owing to episodic memory you can recall concrete episodes (episodic situations) from your past life. When you later recall such an episode, whether vividly or not, you in fact do not *repeat* your original living through it; your *present* experience is an experience of something else: an experience of the act of *recollection* of the past episode.

Imagine, say, your presently lived episode of reading this very paper, here and now. Let us call it *A*. You may pause for a moment and recall some episode *B* from your previous life. You can either superficially refer to it, say, by its name, or you can try to re-live it, re-experience it through intentional imagination. From the viewpoint of *A* the recalled episode *B* is a non-actual episode included in *A*—it is more a subordinate component of *A* than just its segment. To put it differently, the *act* of recalling should be counted as a higher-order event, while the *content* of the recollection is composed of lower-order events. In effect, you live in two times: the time of the present episode *A* and the virtual replayed time of the episode *B*.

With respect to the sense of uniqueness of a recalled episode we encounter a new type of tension, in a certain sense inverse or symmetrical to the tension mentioned in Chapter 5. It is the tension between (1) your imagination of re-living the recalled, already non-actual episode, almost as if it were a piece of fiction, and (2) your awareness of the fact that you once lived through the recalled episode and experienced it, then, as real. According to (1) you may feel yourself free to fabricate and fill in some

¹⁶ Part of the material of this chapter was elaborated in my previous paper [5].

details that you don't remember. According to (2) you perfectly know, independently on the extent in which you have forgotten its content, that it was genuinely *your real* experience. I propose the way out of this dilemma: to grant to the inner sense of uniqueness certain autonomy and greater power than to the inner sense of freedom of the type used in case (1).

An interesting issue, in this respect, is the involvement of the sense of Self in recollections of past episodes of our life. I normally take for granted the continuity of my Self between the presently lived episode and episodes retrieved from my memory: my Self is always the *same* Self; in my recollections I hardly doubt that it was *me* who experienced the recalled episodes.

There are several pertinent observations that can be stated as general properties of any act of recollection of episodic memories (to simplify the wording I resort, as elsewhere, to the first person singular):

(1) My past (remembered) Self is identical with my present (remembering) Self.

(2) My present experience of the past episode is imaginative.

(3) The orientation (but not the duration) of the experienced time of the past episode is preserved.¹⁷

(4) What is real (not imaginative) is not the content, but the act of recollection. It is a part of the present higher-order episode.

(5) The past episode may have a name and/or temporal tag (date). Sometimes the episode can be retrieved with the help of such a name or tag.

(6) While recollecting, I am aware that the recollected episode was real; now I may even know the “then-future” (or at least I know that I cannot affect it now). Hence my present “empathy” with my past Self may only be partial.

Thus we should make a conceptual distinction between (i) the *intended* original episode actually experienced in the past, and (ii) the same episode as it is later *recalled* from episodic memory. The episode of type (i) has a unique context that is presumed by, but not fully accessible to, the subject, while the episode of type (ii) is available only in the form of a fragmentary depiction, or even a distortion, of the original episode.

Imagine that one day in future you would recall your presently lived real episode A (say, of reading this paper). You will have forgotten many things, maybe your memory would have distorted the original episode A

¹⁷ I may perhaps recall it in reverse order, but I am aware of the reversal.

and, of course, even the meaning of the episode (its situational aspect, cf. Chapter 3) would be different.

Let us call the content of your recollection *C*. Since you *intend* to recall *A* you have a strong sense of *C* being *the same* episode as *A*. In spite of all omissions and distortions in *C* (with respect to *A*), and independently on whether you are aware of them or not, you perfectly know that you do *not* invent an entirely new, fictive episode. Hence there is something like having an *inner sense of sameness*.

The sense of sameness appears to be intrinsically connected to the sense of uniqueness; for instance, in the above case it is the uniqueness of the original episode *A* that allowed you to disregard omissions, distortions, as well as the change of situational aspect of *C*. Let us formulate the following thesis: Without the sense of uniqueness of episodic situations there would be no sense of their sameness.

The sense of sameness involves a tacit awareness of the uniqueness of original episode. Thus you can recall the original episode *A* (in the form *C*) with different attitude, different flavor of experience (either mistaken or influenced by later experiences), with different “aura of meaning”. But recalling *A* you also somehow implicitly or peripherally recall the (original) sense of uniqueness of *A*.

Quite another issue is the difference between sameness and identity (over time). The notion of identity (or a sense of identity) would be related, for instance, to an object occurring in different (nonoverlapping in time) real episodes of a subject who would take both occurrences as occurrences of an identical object. I will not enter this huge subject in the present study.

8 Conclusions

In this study I proposed a tentative conception of uniqueness as an essential pervasive and originary aspect of our lived experience. Such conception may serve as an alternative to the view of uniqueness as intersubjectively shared or negotiable accidental feature of certain, typically rare things or events. By no means I claim that my approach is the only or best attempt to treat the concept of uniqueness; I rather I tried to use this concept as a tool for better understanding of the structure of episodic experience.

It appeared that for such a purpose it is appropriate to pass from the concept of uniqueness as such to phenomenologically more challenging concept of “inner sense” of uniqueness. I presented my thoughts about this concept and about its relationship to other analogous “inner senses”, in the form of a number of theses, admittedly speculative. However, I hope that

they may stimulate further investigations in the area of phenomenologically inspired cognitive science.

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