

– Memories –

**I**t sounds a simple business. ‘I changed my mind.’ Subject, verb, object – a clear, clean action, without correcting or diminishing adjectives or adverbs. ‘No, I’m not doing that – I changed my mind’ is usually an irrefutable statement. It implies the presence of strong arguments which can be provided if necessary. The economist John Maynard Keynes, charged with inconsistency, famously replied, ‘When the facts change, I change my mind.’ So, he – and we – are happily and confidently in charge of this whole operation. The world may sadly incline to inconsistency, but not us.

And yet the phrase covers a great variety of mental activities, some seemingly rational and logical, others elemental and instinctive. There may be a simmering-away beneath the level of consciousness until the bursting realisation comes that, yes, you have changed your mind completely on this subject, that person, this theory, that world view. The Dadaist Francis Picabia once put it like this:

‘Our heads are round so that our thoughts can change direction.’ And I think this feels as close to a true accounting of our mental processes as does Maynard Keynes’s statement.

When I was growing up, adults of my parents’ generation used to say, ‘Changing her mind is a woman’s privilege.’ This was, according to your male point of view, either a charming or an infuriating characteristic. It was regarded as something essentially female, or feminine, sometimes mere whimsicality, sometimes deeply emotional and intuitively intelligent – again, intuition was back then a female speciality – and related to the very nature of the woman in question. So perhaps you could say men were Keynesian, and women Picabian.

You rarely hear that phrase about a woman’s privilege nowadays, and to many it sounds doubtless merely sexist and patronising. On the other hand, if you approach the matter from a philosophical or neuroscientific point of view, it looks a little different. ‘I changed my mind.’ Subject, verb, object, a simple transaction under our control. But where is this ‘I’ that is changing this ‘mind’, like some rider controlling a horse with their knees, or the driver of a tank guiding its progress? Certainly not very visible to the eye of the philosopher or

brain scientist. This ‘I’ we feel so confident about isn’t something beyond and separate from the mind, controlling it, but rather something inside the mind, and arising from it. In the words of one neuroscientist, ‘there is no self-stuff’ locatable within the brain. Far from being a horse-rider or tank-commander, we are at the wheel of a driver-less car of the near future. To the outside observer, there is a car, and a steering wheel, with someone sitting in front of it. And this is true – except that on this particular model the driver cannot switch from automatic to manual, because manual does not exist.

So if things are this way round – if it’s the brain, the mind that gives birth to what we think of as ‘I’, then the phrase ‘I changed my mind’ doesn’t make much sense. You might as well say, ‘My mind changed me.’ And if we see things this way round, then changing one’s mind is something we don’t necessarily understand ourselves. In which case, it’s not just a woman’s privilege, but a human privilege. Though perhaps ‘privilege’ isn’t quite the right word – better to say, characteristic, or oddity.

Sometimes in my life, I’ve been a logical Keynesian about the whole business, sometimes a Dadaist Picabian. But generally, in either case, I’ve

been confident that I was right to change my mind. This is another characteristic of the process. We never think, Oh, I've changed my mind and have now adopted a weaker or less plausible view than the one I held before, or a sillier or more sentimental view. We always believe that changing our mind is an improvement, bringing a greater truthfulness, or a greater sense of realism, to our dealings with the world and other people. It puts an end to vacillation, uncertainty, weak-mindedness. It seems to make us stronger and more mature; we have put away yet another childish thing. Well, we would think that, wouldn't we?

I remember the story of an Oxford undergraduate of literary aspirations visiting Garsington Manor in the 1920s where the artistic hostess Lady Ottoline Morrell presided. She asked him, 'Do you prefer spring or autumn, young man?' He replied spring. Her riposte was that when he got older he would probably prefer autumn. In the late 1970s I interviewed the novelist William Gerhardie, who was almost exactly half a century older than me. I was young and callow, he was extremely aged, indeed bed-ridden. He asked me if I believed in the afterlife. I said that I didn't. 'Well, you might when you get to my age,' he replied with a chuckle.