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Philosophy of memory / Articles

A trip down philosophy of memory lane

Un paseo por el sendero de la filosofía de la memoria

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Abstract

The past ten years have seen an explosion of research in the philosophy of memory. Prior to that, however, hardly any philosopher would consider themselves as philosophers of memory. In this invited contribution, I reflect on my own history prior to the publication of the article *"Is Memory for Remembering?"* (De Brigard 2014) as well as on the developments in the philosophy of memory since.

Keywords: Memory, Mental Simulation, Philosophy of Mind.

Resumen

Los últimos diez años han presenciado un auge en la investigación en la filosofía de la memoria. Sin embargo, antes de eso, casi ningún filósofo se consideraba filósofo de la memoria. En esta contribución, reflexiono sobre mi propia historia antes de la publicación del artículo *"Is memory for remembering?"* (De Brigard, 2014), así como sobre los avances en la filosofía de la memoria desde entonces.

Palabras clave: Memoria, Simulación mental, Filosofía de la mente.

I like to say that I have been interested in memory for as long as I can remember. As a teenager, I devoured novels and short stories featuring memory as a protagonist, including Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, and Borges' *Funes the Memorious*. Then, as an undergraduate

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student in the Philosophy Department at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, I "concentrated"—roughly the equivalent of a "minor" in the US system— in neuropsychology, which involved, among other things, working with patients at the Military Hospital in Bogotá. My mentor, Dr. Patricia Montañés, was one of the main neuropsychologists at the Clínica de la Memoria, a weekly clinic specialized in the diagnosis and treatment of individuals with acquired memory deficits. The difficulties in the patients that sought help at the Clínica de la Memoria comprised all sorts of etiologies, including strokes, tumors, dementia and, critically, traumatic head injuries, owing to the fact that the clinic operated in a military hospital in a country consumed by a violent internal conflict. As a philosopher studying neuropsychology, I learned many valuable lessons there. For instance, I learned that the once prevailing view —likely popularized by the fantastically entertaining books of Oliver Sacks— which saw the mind as a sort of circuit-breaker and a brain accident as the equivalent of a burned fuse, affecting only a limited and circumscribed section of the mind while leaving the rest unscathed, was largely wrong. In reality, the effects of brain accidents are extraordinarily complex, and the apparent simplicity of several neuropsychological disorders is often due to the limitations of the tests employed to delineate neuropsychological profiles.

Nowhere did I see this more clearly than in the field of memory. A patient with a severe deficit in their capacity to remember past personal events may nevertheless be able to recite a long string of words presented to them only a few seconds before, just as a patient incapable of remembering the words for different objects may nonetheless perform at ceiling when tasked with recognizing those objects among many. I even saw patients who were utterly unaware of their own memory deficits, just as I found some that complained about their memory failures even when, by every measure, they performed just fine. Memory, whatever it was, did not seem to be a simple "fuse"; it did not seem to be a unified process associated with a single brain structure. What is memory, then? How are memories stored in our brains? And what sort of brain processes are required to retrieve encoded information? The questions started to brew in my mind, but the path to trying to answer them was getting cloudier thanks to a second lesson I learned while shadowing at the hospital: I realized that I did not want to be a clinician. Unfortunately, back then —we are talking 1999 or 2000— and back *there* —meaning Bogotá, Colombia— the nascent field of cognitive neuroscience was nonexistent, so the only path to continue studying how the brain relates to the mind was by way of becoming a neurologist or a neuropsychologist, which would have forced me to focus on the clinical practice while leaving any theoretical musings for the occasional free time.

However, a somewhat clandestine route in my philosophical education revealed what I thought of as the next best strategy to studying the relationship between mind and brain, coming not from the practical side of the brain sciences, but from the conceptual one of philosophy of mind. Twenty-five years ago, the philosophy curriculum at the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá comprised mainly history of philosophy, as well as what some may call "continental philosophy." I even had to study two semesters of Ancient Greek to graduate with a degree in philosophy. There were almost no classes in "analytic philosophy," and the

few that were offered were meant to portray it as an all but dead fad slain by the likes of Wittgenstein and Rorty. Moreover, back then and there, one had the impression that the best shot we had at becoming professional philosophers was to dedicate our lives to researching a notable but somewhat obscure figure in the history of philosophy, in the hopes that one could, eventually, publish a tedious academic monograph, hopefully ahead of some *real* philosopher from a big name university, such as Oxford, Cambridge or La Sorbonne. No offense to Roberto Grosseteste, whose work I may one day go back to, but that path did not seem to be the most direct way to tackle the questions that were brewing in my mind. Thankfully, one of my phenomenology teachers, Juan José Botero, who had studied under Francisco Varela, quietly talked about a group of philosophers that were hoping to "naturalize phenomenology." These philosophers were not only friendly toward empirically oriented philosophers of mind, such as Jerry Fodor and Fred Dretkse, but also saw their project as that of trying to understand how our rich mental life could be continuous with the beautiful natural world studied by the sciences. Although other prominent Husserl scholars in the department made it very clear that such a project was fringe and misguided, the surreptitious references to this "naturalized phenomenology" led me to read Varela, Andy Clark, and Evan Thomson, and eventually Pat Churchland, Ruth Millikan, and Dan Dennett. I saw then the naturalistic approach to philosophy of mind as the best alternative to study how the mind and the brain were related.

I was very lucky to be accepted as a master's student at Tufts University and even luckier to have been mentored by Dan Dennett himself. The interdisciplinary approach to philosophy that he fostered at the Center for Cognitive Studies was exactly what I was looking for, as it helped me to rid myself of the methodological dogma that philosophy and science were *non-overlapping magisteria* under which I had been so assiduously indoctrinated. But despite being par for the course at the Center, Dennett's empirical approach to philosophy of mind was far from the norm in the early 2000s. Furthermore, even among those who were amicable to it, the set of issues for which empirical approaches were deemed appropriate was rather limited. Back then, empirically oriented philosophy of mind was confined to a handful of traditional topics —primarily perception and consciousness. A few renegades were working on riskier issues, such as concepts, mental representation, and free-will, but the list of "allowed" topics for empirically oriented philosophers of mind was severely limited and judiciously supervised by hiring committees and journal editors. As a result, I put my interests on memory in the back burner and focused instead on the more acceptable problem of consciousness —the topic on which I wrote the writing sample that helped me to secure a position in the PhD program at UNC, Chapel Hill.

It did not take long for my passion for memory to be rekindled. In my first year as a PhD student in the Philosophy Department at UNC, I took a few elective classes in the psychology department —including a survey course on memory and aging taught by a new assistant professor, Dr. Kelly Giovanello. Little did I know that class would transform the rest of my career, not only because I loved it, but also because Kelly became my mentor by generously

allowing me to join her lab as her graduate student, which effectively enabled me to continue my work as a PhD student both in philosophy as well as in psychology and neuroscience. Curiously, even though I was able to seamlessly go back and forth between my life as a graduate student in philosophy and my life as a graduate student in psychology and neuroscience, for at least the first three years of grad school, my research in the two areas did not really interface. While I was wearing my psychology-and-neuroscience-hat, I was acquiring skills in behavioral and neuroimaging methods and was conducting research on relational memory in normal and pathological aging. By contrast, while I was wearing my philosophy-hat, I was doing research on attention, consciousness, and propositional attitudes —in particular, I was working toward a very conservative project in the philosophy of mind that roughly consisted in applying constructive empiricism to folk psychology. By the time I wrote my MA thesis —which I eventually revised and published (De Brigard 2015)— it seemed fairly obvious, both to me and to my committee, that my dissertation could simply be an extension of that project.

But to be honest, I was not having fun. My heart was not in the metaphysics or in the semantics of propositional attitude reports, nor in the constant talking past one another that plagued the many articles in the philosophy of consciousness I was reading, and there was something that felt rather empty about doing "philosophy of mind" at a level of abstraction that seemed so far removed from the object of study that it was hard to shake off the constant feeling that I was losing track of the phenomena. I felt as if philosophers of mind were not really talking about the mind, but rather about some sort of idealized way in which they would have liked us all to talk about the mind —in English, of course. At the same time, while I was energized by my research in psychology and neuroscience, I could not help but feel that there were fundamental and serious problems with the scientific research on memory —issues that, to my naïve mind, were squarely philosophical. The year was 2007, and I was trying to start my own research project on false recognition of relational information—an offshoot of the work I did when I joined Kelly's lab (e.g., Giovanello et al, 2012). I was fascinated by the fact that memory errors, while frequent, were also surprisingly systematic. If memory was for reproducing past experiences with fidelity, why would we have a cognitive system that so frequently malfunctions? And, moreover, why wouldn't such memory errors be haphazard? I mentioned the year —2007— because anyone working in this area would recognize it as the *annus mirabilis* in the research of episodic future thinking and mental time travel. Three foundational papers —by Addis et al, (2007), Hassabis et al, (2007) and Szpunar et al, (2007)— were published that year and shook the field of episodic memory to the core, enticing us to seriously consider that the function of memory may not be primarily for remembering the past but for anticipating the future.

These were exciting times to be a graduate student working in the psychology and neuroscience of episodic memory, no doubt, but to me the core issues that these research findings spoke to were paradigmatically philosophical: what is the function of memory? If memory is reconstructive rather than reproductive, how are we to understand accuracy? If remembering

and imagining a personal future are sub-processes of a single system, what does that say about the basic taxonomy of mental faculties? Unfortunately, as I mentioned, there was no one who really worked on these philosophical questions from an empirical point of view. At that time, except for a few authors —e.g., John Sutton and Marya Schechtman— there were almost no philosophers of mind interested in memory. Indeed, the little philosophical work on memory happening at the time was entirely confined to very traditional analytic epistemology, whereby the rich and complex psychological phenomenon of remembering was confined to the overly simplistic propositional attitude formula "S remembers that p", and by then, after years of working on propositional attitudes myself, I was already convinced that characterizing mental states as relations between subjects and propositions —whatever that means— was a philosopher's game that had little explanatory power in either folk or scientific psychology. If philosophy of memory were to become a useful and bona-fide field in empirically oriented philosophy of mind, it needed to be couched in terms other than those used by analytic epistemologists.

The fantastic results coming from the cognitive psychology and neuroscience of episodic memory and future thinking, along with exciting new developments in computational modeling of episodic memory distortions —particularly those from Hemmer and Steyvers, 2009— quickly convinced me that the old philosophical view of memory as a mental faculty whose function is to reproduce past experiences with absolute fidelity, was deeply wrong, and that philosophy should instead take seriously the cognitive psychologists' view of memory, according to which remembering is a constructive process, sharing common computational mechanisms with those engaged in the generation of some episodic simulations that are often thought of as being produced by our imagination. From this standpoint, the frequent memory errors that fascinated me were no longer seen as defective outputs of a malfunctioning reproductive system but as the natural byproduct of a series of reconstructive processes that were not optimized to reproduce past mental contents with blind fidelity. Instead, these processes flexibly recombine mnemonic information into mental simulations of hypothetical scenarios that could help individuals hedge future uncertainty. Moreover, the systematicity of such apparent memory errors offered a window into the probabilistic computations that guide and constrain the process of reconstruction during retrieval.

By the fall of 2009, when I was required to defend a dissertation proposal, I was determined to abandon my work on propositional attitudes and to pursue instead a project squarely in what we call today, unproblematically, the philosophy of memory. Yet, the project was received with some hesitation, not so much because the committee members did not appreciate the seriousness of the questions I wanted to answer (they did), but rather because it did not seem to easily connect with the "allowed" topics in empirically oriented philosophy of mind, such as consciousness or perception. Moreover, by rejecting the analytic framework suggested by the contemporaneous work produced by epistemologists of memory —particularly Bernecker (2008; 2009)— some of my professors worried that my project could "fall through the cracks," as search committees would not see it as either philosophy of mind or

as epistemology. The risk of not getting a job in philosophy was a real concern for some of my teachers who, meaning well, advised me to either pursue a different project or, at the very least, to relate it to more "traditional" philosophical approaches to memory. I actually followed their advice, and the last chapter of my dissertation, which would become my writing sample when I first went on the market in 2011, started with a long section on Bertrand Russell's conception of memory. I polished that paper as much as I could and sent it off late in the fall of 2010, not only to dozens of search committees, but also to *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research,* with the cryptically controversial title: "Is Memory for Remembering?"

The year 2011 came, and with it at least two signs that, maybe, the faculty members who worried about the "fit" of my project for philosophy departments might have been right. The first sign came when, right as I finished giving my "practice job-talk" in front of the faculty members of my own department, an old professor, with whom I had never spoken before, raised their hand and, in disgust, spouted, "Why do you expect to be hired by a philosophy department?" A rant followed, lecturing me on why what I was doing was not philosophy at all, and reminding me to never even question the deep-rooted dogma that science and philosophy are not to be mixed. This was not a fun experience, and it invited me to seriously consider leaving academic philosophy for good and to fully embrace cognitive neuroscience instead. After all, that side of my professional life was going very well. Dan Schacter had offered me a post-doctoral position in his lab at Harvard, and far from feeling rejected, I constantly felt —and continue to feel— welcomed by cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists of memory. As a result, I accepted Dan's generous offer and moved to Cambridge, MA, in the summer of 2011. But then, a few months later, the second sign came: my paper was rejected. Not only that, but the rejection —which I remember thinking seemed to have been written by Roderick Chisholm reincarnated— was almost entirely based on (drum-roll) my take on Bertrand Russell's account of memory, which constituted less than the first 10% of the manuscript. I had been told to add that section because I needed to relate my project to "traditional" philosophy, but, ultimately, it was completely disposable given the actual point of the paper. I was disheartened. Maybe the worries were real, and it was too late for me to "sell" myself as a more conventional philosopher of mind.

A number of factors persuaded me to not fully give up on academic philosophy though, despite the fact that during my time at Harvard I was essentially a full-time cognitive neuroscientist. For instance, both Dan Schacter, my post-doc advisor, and Dan Dennett, whom I saw regularly while in Cambridge, were generously supportive of my interdisciplinary approach to memory research. Another event I fondly remember was an unexpected conversation I had with Pat Churchland, the first time I ever met her, at a conference organized by my friend and now colleague Walter Sinnott-Armstrong. At lunch time, we were provided with little lunchboxes, which we were supposed to grab to then find a table and eat. Most tables were full, but there was a chair available next to Pat. Being my intellectual hero, I was rather nervous to ask if I could sit next to her. Thankfully, seeing my hesitation, she beckoned me to sit by her side and proceeded to ask me about my research. I do not know what got

into me that day, but I told her about my practice-job talk experience, about how hard it was to be a philosopher of mind that actually cares about the science, and how insular and boring many discussions in traditional academic philosophy of mind were becoming. So, I told her that I was likely going to jump ship and switch completely to cognitive neuroscience. But then she proceeded to tell me about some of the many (and worse!) difficulties she faced in the 70s and 80s, how she also felt the same about traditional philosophy of mind, and how she, too, wanted things to change. And then, she said something I will never forget: "If you want to change the way philosophers think about memory, they won't listen to you if you are just another scientist. You can be another memory scientist, or you can be the one philosopher that works on memory the way you think it should be done." So, I gave my paper a second go. I removed all references to Russell and those rhetorical maneuvers I was advised to employ to make it sound more "mainstream," turned it into the piece of scientifically informed philosophy of memory I wanted it to be to begin with, and submitted it, later that year, to *Synthese's* yearly special issue in philosophy of neuroscience. Happily, I received an amicable, albeit rather long, revise and resubmit, and by early 2013 the manuscript was accepted for publication (De Brigard 2014).

Over a decade has passed since that paper saw the light, and I have seen the field of philosophy of memory blossom in ways that I never anticipated. Around the same time, other philosophers began to reflect on recent advances in the cognitive psychology and neuroscience of memory and started to produce their own views, some of which were closer to mine (e.g., Michaelian 2011; 2016) and some of which were diametrically opposed (Robins, 2016a; 2016b). In 2017, thanks to Sven Bernecker's efforts, the first meeting of what was then christened as the *Philosophy of Memory Organization,* took place in Cologne, Germany, at a now biennial meeting that goes by the title of *Issues in the Philosophy of Memory* (IPM). Last year it took place in Geneva, and it gathered more than one hundred participants, mostly philosophers but also some scientists and scholars in adjacent areas working on memory and eager to learn from each other. We have seen, too, the creation of the *Center for Philosophy of Memory* at the University of Grenoble Alpes, which under the direction of Kirk Michaelian and Denis Perrin has become one of the leading places to work in the philosophy of memory. We have witnessed an explosion in publications as well, with new articles, books and special issues on philosophy of memory seeing the light basically every day. Far from being the obscure and fringe area in philosophy that it was ten years ago, the philosophy of memory has now established itself as, well, mainstream.

Of course, as it happens when a field becomes mainstream in philosophy, it changes in ways that are somewhat predictable. Some discussions have become rather niche and slow, there are more and more articles making relatively small and barely incremental points, and then there is the proliferation of "-isms", the *sine qua non* for a philosophical area that has reached such an accepted status that each participant strives to colonize their own piece of territory with a cute little moniker —myself included. However, when I reflect on the status of the field today, it is not this predictable dialectic that gets me most excited, but rather the

young, pioneer philosophers of memory that are themselves breaking the mold, finding connections with other areas of research, opening their own paths, and uncovering new possibilities for fruitful research. Here is a partial list. One such philosopher I eagerly look forward to reading the work of is Em Walsh, at the University of Central Florida, whose work straddling the philosophy of memory, psychiatry, and phenomenology beautifully illuminates, for instance, the mnemonic components of the experience of trauma (e.g., Walsh, 2024). Likewise, the work of Andrea Blomkvist, now at the University of Glasgow, has opened my eyes regarding the profound relationship between aphantasia, imagistic cognition, and memory (e.g., Blomkvist 2023). The insights of Andrea Rivadulla-Duró (2024) on the phenomenology of remembering offer invaluable and important challenges for any theory of memory that takes remembering and imagining as sharing common underlying processes. Similarly, I find the work of Sara Aranowitz (University of Toronto) and Ali Boyle (London School of Economics) profoundly inspiring, as it constantly invites me to reflect on the nature and function of episodic memory, not only relative to the rest of our rational mind, but also in relation to non-human agents (e.g., Aranowitz, forthcoming; Boyle 2022). More recently, I have been enjoying the insights of Marta Caravà (Purdue University), Marina Trakas (COCINET), and Katherine Puddifoot (Durham University) on the social aspects of forgetting and mnemonic injustice (e.g., Caravà 2024; Trakas and Puddifoot 2024). There are obviously many other young scholars working on exciting new avenues of research in the philosophy of memory such that listing them all would be impossible. Nevertheless, I hope that this partial selection can help to convey the feeling that the field is growing and evolving in promising ways. Personally, as I reminisce on both the pre-history and the now history of philosophy of memory, I can't help but smile with gratitude at the generous, thoughtful and sage advice I received from Pat Churchland so many years ago, as well as the inestimable amount of good fortune for having found a community of philosophers that continue to think of memory as a central research topic in the philosophy of mind.

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