The shifting explananda of philosophical theories of remembering

Las explananda cambiantes de las teorías filosóficas del recuerdo

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Abstract

The philosophy of memory has grown significantly and very rapidly in the past decade. In this commentary, we draw on critical remarks that we have individually articulated in previous work to suggest that future research in the area would benefit from (i) making differences of theoretical projects more explicit, revealing diverse assumptions and methodological commitments, and (ii) identifying where disagreements at this level have been mistaken for univocal, first-order disputes about 'the nature of remembering'. Zooming out at this stage of the philosophy of memory will give us a clearer idea of where we are, how far we have come, and where we ought to go from here.

Keywords: memory, philosophy of memory, theories of remembering, explanation, metaphilosophy

Resumen

La filosofía de la memoria ha crecido rápida y significativamente en la última década. En este comentario, nos basamos en observaciones críticas que hemos articulado individualmente en trabajos previos para sugerir que la investigación futura en el área se beneficiaría (i) de hacer más explícitas las diferencias entre los proyectos teóricos, revelando diversas suposiciones y compromisos metodológicos, y (ii) de identificar dónde los desacuerdos a este nivel han sido erróneamente tomados como disputas unívocas y de primer orden sobre "la naturaleza del recuerdo". Ampliar la perspectiva en esta etapa de la filosofía de la memoria nos dará una idea más clara de dónde estamos, cuánto hemos avanzado y hacia dónde deberíamos dirigirnos.

Palabras clave: memoria, filosofía de la memoria, teorías del recuerdo, explicación, metafilosofía

1. Introduction

The question 'What is remembering?' is arguably the central question that has driven research in philosophy of memory. For many years, theorizing on the matter was dominated by two opposing sides. On the one hand, proponents of causal theories insisted on the necessity (in one sense or another) of an appropriate causal connection, in particular one sustained by a memory trace, to explain the nature of remembering (e.g., Martin & Deutscher, 1966; Perrin, 2018, 2021; Bernecker, 2010; Werning, 2020; Sutton & O'Brien, 2023). On the other hand, proponents of epistemic theories questioned the need for such mechanistic/psychologistic accounts, suggesting instead that remembering is fundamentally a form of knowledge (e.g., Malcolm, 1963; Squires, 1969; Soteriou, 2008; Hoerl, 2001; 2022). In the last decade, however, several theories have been developed as alternatives to the causal and epistemic theories. One such alternative is simulation theories, according to which remembering is (in one sense or another) just a form of imagining the past (De Brigard, 2014; Michaelian, 2016). Another such alternative is functionalist theories, which hold that remembering is to be defined in terms of the functional role it plays in the subject's cognitive economy (Fernández, 2019; Langland-Hassan, 2021), or perhaps in terms of the proper functioning of a memory system.

In this short commentary, we shall discuss what we think is an implicit and widespread assumption in the field that has not received the focused attention it deserves. This is the assumption that existing theories of remembering are theories of the *same* phenomenon, operating according to the same rules of engagement and a similar set of motivations and *desiderata*. There is, to put it differently, a tendency in the recent literature to overlook the distinct

projects in which the theorists advocating these and other theories of remembering are engaged. As a consequence of this, many of the disputes in the philosophy of memory are unstable and, on occasion, perhaps even verbal in character. We thus suggest that future research in the area would benefit from (i) making differences of theoretical project more explicit, revealing diverse assumptions and methodological commitments, and (ii) identifying where disagreements at this level have been mistaken for univocal, first-order disputes about 'the nature of remembering'.

2. The theoretical ambiguity of 'remembering'

Although not articulated in these precise terms, we have both individually raised concerns about potential ambiguities in how philosophers of memory understand 'remembering' in their respective projects and the significant dialectical and theoretical confusions that result from it.

Openshaw (2023) argues that existing theories can helpfully be seen to have addressed three different questions or tasks. The first concerns the *neuropsychological underpinnings of remembering*, prompting attempts to identify some system(s), mechanism(s), or natural kind(s) responsible for producing occurrences of remembering. This contrasts, e.g., with projects aimed at understanding the nature of some form of cognitive success. The second question concerns the conditions under which remembering *succeeds in representing some particular event(s)* in the subject's personal past, prompting answers that offer a metasemantic story about how remembering secures reference. This concern is most explicit in work that demarcates its subject matter as constitutively referential. Finally, the third question concerns whether (and in what sense) remembering *accurately represents that to which it refers*, prompting answers that attempt to specify the accuracy conditions of remembering. This concern is most explicit in work that demarcates its subject matter as constitutively accurate ('factive') or even as a species of knowledge. Openshaw argues that these three questions correspond to interlocking but conceptually distinct levels of inquiry, with potentially distinct motivations and desiderata. He contends that failure to keep track of these different levels has resulted in some confusion about the dialectical rules of engagement that drive theorizing in the field.

In a similar vein, Sant'Anna (2023) argues that recent attempts to answer the question of whether remembering is a form of imagining have overlooked the fact that different theories of remembering employ different definitions of the term. More specifically, Sant'Anna argues that existing discussions have focused on definitions of remembering that take it to be an unconscious process of information retrieval, which have motivated arguments to the effect that remembering is just a form of imagining. However, Sant'Anna notes that several philosophers find this definition too strict, for it does not do justice to the fact that remembering is, at least in part, a conscious process. More importantly, Sant'Anna holds that, once definitions that take this conscious dimension into account are considered, there is a strong case to be made for the claim that remembering is not a form of imagining. Thus, Sant'Anna

(2023) emphasizes the need for more clarity on the issue of how 'remembering' is defined in the relevant projects to avoid dialectical confusions and cross-talk.

3. Four explananda of a 'theory of remembering'

Building on these critical remarks, we want to suggest that there are at least four general kinds of explanatory target to which the term 'remembering' has been applied in the recent philosophical literature.

The first kind of target, which is *phenomenological* in character, has to do with the conscious nature of the experiences we characteristically have in situations of remembering. This is reflected in approaches that give centrality to the experiential dimension of remembering, such as those that take it to be an experience of 'reliving' the past (Barkasi & Rosen, 2020), of representing past relational awareness (Martin, 2019), or of activating knowledge of what it was like to undergo a particular experience in one's past (Soteriou, 2008; Hoerl, 2018; 2022). Thus, the explanatory target of such theorists is what it is to enjoy mnemic occurrences with a particular experiential character or nature. To say that one 'remembers' in the phenomenological sense is to say —perhaps among other things— that one's experience has the right sort of experiential character or nature.

The second kind of target, which is *epistemological* in character, emphasizes that epistemic properties of a certain kind are fundamental to characterize remembering. Such an understanding of remembering can be found in approaches that focus not only on the accuracy conditions of remembering (Dings et al., 2023), but also on its capacity to justify our beliefs, rationalize our actions, constitute a skill, and provide knowledge of the past (Miyazono & Tooming, 2023; Goldwasser, 2023; Frise, 2023). Thus, the explanatory target of such theorists is what it is to occupy mnemic states of mind with a certain epistemic or normative character. To say that one 'remembers' in the epistemological sense is to say —perhaps among other things— that one occupies a mental state with the right kind of epistemic or normative features.

The third kind of target, which is *semantic* in character, focuses on the intentional properties of remembering. This concern is at the core of approaches that concentrate on its capacity to refer to past events and to in some sense ground our thinking about the past (Campbell, 2002; Debus, 2008; Sant'Anna, 2020; Aranyosi, 2021; Openshaw & Michaelian, 2024). Thus, the explanatory target of such theorists is what it is to occupy mnemic states of mind that succeed in singling out particular entities as their subject matter. To say that one 'remembers' in the semantic sense is to say —perhaps among other things— that one occupies a mental state with the right kind of semantic features.

Finally, the fourth kind of target, which is *psychological* in character, highlights the underlying mechanisms or processes responsible for producing (or perhaps constituting) states of

remembering. This use of the notion is, for instance, found in approaches that take remembering to be a neurocognitive process that involves encoding information obtained via experience, storing that information in the form of an engram or memory trace, and constructively retrieving it to produce states of remembering in the present (Perrin, 2018; 2021; Robins 2020; Werning, 2020; Sutton & O'Brien, 2023; cf. De Brigard, 2014; Michaelian, 2016). Thus, the explanatory target of such theorists is what it is to occupy mnemic states of mind in terms of their underlying basis or psychological profile. To say that one 'remembers' in the cognitive sense is —perhaps among other things— to say that one occupies a mental state that was produced by the right kind of psychological processes.

4. The importance of distinguishing the four explananda

The reason we believe it is important to distinguish between these different theoretical explananda or senses of 'remembering' is not that they are mutually exclusive. Indeed, they are often combined to individuate the phenomenon that theories of remembering target.

For instance, it is not uncommon to think that, for remembering to have relevant epistemic properties, such as justifying certain beliefs about the personal past, it must involve a specific kind of conscious experience. Likewise, a common thought is that for a subject to refer to some particular event(s) in their personal past, remembering must involve psychological processes partly constituted by an 'appropriate' causal relation between the subject's state of remembering and the past event(s) in question.

Our concern is not the mere fact that different theorists are engaged in different projects. This is obviously a good thing for a growing domain of inquiry. Rather, the concern is that this fact is often *lost sight* of, and so some disputes that are putatively about 'the correct theory of remembering' are in fact relatively trivial manifestations of underlying differences in theoretical assumptions, ambitions, or methodological commitments.

Thus, for instance, considerations aiming to establish that instances of remembering are produced by psychological processes of fundamentally the same kind as states of imagining (in some sense of the term) are unlikely to move theorists whose principal explanandum is the class of experiences with a certain phenomenological character or nature itself partly constituted by success in the semantic sense. For instance, Michaelian (2016, pp. 116–117) criticizes Debus (2014) for positing 'a fundamental asymmetry between remembering the past and imagining the future', on the grounds that this introduces 'a distinction between kinds of states or processes that does not correspond to a psychologically real difference'. Yet the 'distinction' drawn is arguably best understood as the targeting of a putative form of experiential awareness of particular past events, a form of awareness that is not semantically available with respect to future events. Whether there are strong grounds for thinking such forms exist is a good question (see, e.g., Rey 2005; Campbell & Cassam 2014). But, for all that has been said, it might be possible to combine much of the simulationist picture about the psychological basis of remembering with a view on which the experiential character of

states of remembering that succeed in referring to particular past events does make for a distinctive form of awareness. Conversely, it might be that remembering is psychologically distinct in kind from imagining and from confabulation, but that the form of experience it makes available is not distinct in kind from either. At any rate, if it is indeed the case that remembering is produced by psychological processes of the same fundamental kind as states of imagining, pointing out that states of imagining fail to exhibit the same semantic, phenomenological, or epistemic features as states of remembering is not going to move a theorist who is either uninterested in such issues or inclined towards eliminativism about the corresponding features.

5. Our proposal

Thus, the recommendation we want to put forward is that, rather than focusing on iterated formulations of 'theories of remembering', philosophers of memory would benefit from taking a step back and candidly articulating the aims, assumptions, and commitments of their theoretical projects.[1] The benefit of adding focus in this way is that it helps bring to the surface the underlying assumptions and commitments that are the sources of the confusions and cross-talk we have criticized elsewhere. Instead of disputing whether an 'appropriate' causal connection is 'necessary' for remembering, a more fruitful approach would be to focus on why we should take there to be a distinctive explanatory target that possesses the kind of epistemic and semantic properties the causal connections are meant to explain, and whether causal connections are the best candidates to explain those properties. Similarly, instead of focusing on whether remembering is just a form of 'imagining' the past, a more fruitful approach might be to focus on why we should define remembering as being first and foremost, or even in some exhaustive sense, a psychological process, and whether the kind of psychological process favored by the relevant theory is the best option available. To put it differently, we believe that zooming out at this stage of the philosophy of memory will give us a clearer idea of where we are, how far we have come, and where we ought to go from here.[2]

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[1] See Craver (2020), Schirmer dos Santos et al. (2023), and McCarroll et al. (2024) for metatheoretical approaches that are similar in spirit to our own.

[2] Both authors contributed equally to this work.

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