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Philosophy of memory / Articles

Remembering *Memory*[1]

Recordando La memoria

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Abstract

I reconstruct how my interest in the philosophy of memory emerged from my engagement with privileged self-knowledge and explore parallels between my positions on self-knowledge and memory.

Keywords: self-knowledge, externalism, first-person authority, anti-luminosity, memory marker

Resumen

En este artículo, reconstruyo cómo surgió mi interés por la filosofía de la memoria a partir de mi compromiso con el autoconocimiento privilegiado y exploro los paralelismos entre mis posiciones sobre el autoconocimiento y la memoria.

[1]The title of this paper alludes to Max Deutscher's 1989 paper, "Remembering 'Remembering,'" in which he reflects on the seminal essay "Remembering," co-authored with C.B. Martin. Similarly, I engage in a reflection on Bernecker (2010).

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Palabras clave: autoconocimiento, externalismo, autoridad de la primera persona, antiluminosidad, marcador de memoria

1. Knowing One's Own Mind

My interest in the philosophy of memory grew out of my dissertation on externalism and privileged self-knowledge, supervised by Fred Dretske. The dissertation explored whether externalism about thought content aligns with the idea that individuals have epistemically privileged access to their own present, conscious thoughts.

Externalism about mental content (also known as *semantic externalism* and *anti-individualism*) is the view that the contents of many of our thoughts are determined at least in part by conditions which do not supervene on our nervous system. Prima facie, externalism undermines the natural and intuitively compelling idea that we possess authoritative and privileged knowledge of our thought contents. For if mental content is determined by affairs outside the brain, it seems that we must first acquire knowledge of the relevant environmental features before we can know the contents of our thoughts. If this reasoning is correct, externalism is problematic, as it conflicts with the strong intuition that we frequently have authoritative first-person knowledge of our own thoughts. We seem to be able to know the contents of our thoughts independently of acquiring knowledge about any particular external object, and, apart from special cases, we possess authority over our own mental states.

The leading externalist account of privileged self-knowledge is the *inclusion theory of self-knowledge*, which originates with Tyler Burge (1988; 1996). The inclusion theory maintains that knowledge of my conscious and occurrent first-order intentional states does not require knowledge of relational facts concerning the physical or social environment even though it is those relational facts that determine the content of the intentional states. To know that I am thinking, for example, that water is wet, I do not need to first acquire knowledge of either how experts in my community use the term "water" (as in Burge-style anti-individualism) or of the kind of substance I was in contact with when I learned "water" (as in Putnam-style causal-essentialist externalism). The very fact that I am able to think the thought that water is wet shows that the relevant external conditions are fulfilled. Since the ability to think this thought is a necessary condition for knowing that I am thinking this thought, my capacity to know that I am thinking that water is wet shows that the external conditions do in fact obtain. Burge's insight is that the content of the first-order thought is automatically included in, or

contained within, the content of the second-order thought. Self-knowledge is epistemically privileged because it is contextually self-verifying: my thoughts about what I am currently thinking are made true simply by being thought and are thus immune to brute error (see Bernecker 2010, pp. 192-194).

The dissertation argues that externalism and privileged self-knowledge are compatible only if the Cartesian thesis of first-person authority is weakened. The concept of privileged self-knowledge that aligns with semantic externalism differs from the Cartesian conception in two respects.

First, while on the Cartesian conception we have privileged knowledge of both the contents and the attitudinal components of our occurrent thoughts, externalism countenances only privileged self-knowledge of thought contents. Given externalism, self-ascriptions of attitudinal components are epistemologically on a par with other-ascriptions (Bernecker 1996)

The second difference between the Cartesian conception of self-knowledge and the notion of privileged self-knowledge compatible with externalism concerns the closure principle. According to Cartesianism, we know of our thoughts *qua* propositional states. If I know that I am thinking that water is wet, I thereby know that I am not Swampman, that is, a being who is physically identical to us but lacks thoughts and meaningful language (Davidson 1987). This is why Descartes takes first-person authority as an argument for mind-body dualism. By contrast, the externalist concept of privileged self-knowledge does not license the self-ascription of propositional states. First-person authority is neither a criterion of the mental nor a privilege unique to mental organisms (Bernecker 2000).

Only under the assumption that my brain states are propositional in nature and that my propositional attitude is one of belief can I, according to semantic externalism, authoritatively know that I am believing that water is wet. Just as I cannot rule out, based on introspection, the possibility that I am *considering* or *hoping* that water is wet rather than *believing* it, I cannot rule out that I am a Swampman. What I *can* authoritatively know though is that the content of my thought is *water is wet* rather than, say, *the cat is on the mat* or *snow is white*. Thus, the privileged self-knowledge pertains only to the particular content of one's thinking. Given this restricted conception of self-knowledge, any a priori refutation of external-world skepticism or ontological solipsism on the basis of externalism is bound to fail. Moreover, the restricted notion of authoritative self-knowledge lends support to the higher-order thought theory of introspection.

2. From Cogito-like Judgments to Memories

Even while working on my dissertation, I was troubled by the fact that the inclusion theory explains only privileged knowledge of our *occurrent* first-order intentional states. The inclusion theory is limited to what Tyler Burge calls *cogito-like judgments*.[2] For only when the first-order thought and the second-order thought occur simultaneously can the latter include the former and, in this way, be self-verifying. However, I was searching for a theory that could also account for how we come to know about our past thoughts and experiences. For this reason, I developed an interest in the epistemology of memory. What is the right model of memory to account for the fact that our memories can yield knowledge of the past? Is memory to be thought of as a form of delayed perception or introspection, as proposed by Jordi Fernández?[3] Or should memory be understood as a form of delayed testimony, as discussed (but ultimately dismissed) by David James Barnett (2015)? It soon dawned on me that these explanatory models are inadequate because memory is far more complex and cannot simply be modeled after other sources of knowledge. It is crucial to understand the intricate nature of memory in order to explain how we can know about past events and thoughts.

In the meantime, I had accepted an Assistant Professor position at the University of Munich. Although it was not a tenure-track position, its generous six-year duration allowed me to dedicate two years (1997-1999) to studying psychological and philosophical literature on memory. In the case of philosophical literature, it was immediately noticeable that, although the engagement with the concept of memory has long been an integral part of the history of philosophy, there have been scarcely any recent studies on the subject. The most recent books on this topic were already a decade old (Casey 1987; Warnock 1987) and the majority of books by analytical philosophers were published in the 1950s through the 1970s and were out of print.[4]

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[2]Falvey & Owens (1994), Peacocke (1996), Shoemaker (1994), and Wright (1991) broaden the scope of the inclusion theory by applying it not only to cogito-like judgments, but also to standing states, in particular to externally determined, conscious, and occurrent beliefs.

[3]According to Fernández's self-referential view, the content of episodic memory consists of two components. One component is the same content as that of the previous perceptual experience from which the memory causally derives. The other component is a representation of the memory state itself as caused by the veridical past experience. Fernández maintains that "episodic memories represent themselves as having a certain causal history, namely, they represent themselves as coming from past perceptions of objective facts" (Fernández 2016: 636-7).

[4]Furlong (1951), Leyden (1961), Locke (1971), Malcolm (1977), Munsat (1967), and Smith (1966). Moreover, there are two books by philosophers during this time that address niche issues: Sutton (1998) draws parallels

After it seemed to me that I had acquired sufficient knowledge of the science of memory and gained an overview of the fundamental approaches in the philosophy of memory, I began working on a Habilitation thesis on the subject. The core of the thesis is a three-stage analysis of the causal process of memory: the encoding of information, its storage, and its retrieval. I argue that memory cannot occur without at least minimal traces. Yet memory is by no means a passive process; rather it is an active and constructive cognitive achievement. I critique the so-called *xerox model of memory* and outline a contextualist account of the truth conditions of memory using tools from the philosophy of language. Given that memory reports (as illustrated by Frederick Bartlett's (1932) *War of the Ghosts* example) are not particularly reliable, the challenge —at least within a causal framework— is to ensure the coherence and continuity of memory traces. I address this issue through a set of criteria based on semantic similarity, though these are presented only in outline form and not developed in detail. The Habilitation thesis was submitted to the University of Munich in January 2002.

After completing the Habilitation, I devoted several years to other topics before resuming my work on the philosophy of memory in late 2006. I subsequently revised the habilitation thesis into a monograph, which was published by Springer in 2008. Two years later, a second monograph on memory was published by Oxford University Press.

The second monograph investigates the defining characteristics of memory and the issues essential to understanding it. The standard conception in philosophy has it that the function of memory is to preserve knowledge from one time to another. To remember something is to know it, where this knowledge was previously acquired and preserved. The book, however, paints a very different picture. It argues that memory does not imply knowledge (or its components, belief and justification). Rather than defining memory in terms of knowledge, memory is defined in terms of the appropriate causal connection between the past and the present representation. One of the advantages of his approach is that it allows for the fact that memory has the function to not only store but also process the incoming information. A memory content must not be identical with, but only similar to, the content of the relevant past representation. I explicate the notion of content similarity in terms of the entailment relation. By defining memory in causal rather than epistemic terms, an account of memory emerges that can be integrated with perspectives from cognitive science and psychology. Another advantage of the approach is that it can countenance the epistemic generativity of

between connectionist theories of memory and the early modern doctrine of animal spirits, and Hacking (1995) examines the debates about multiple personality disorder and false memories to analyze the moral and political climate of the 1990s.

memory. Given that memory does not entail justification, it follows that memory can generate justified output beliefs solely from unjustified input beliefs (Bernecker & Grundmann (2019). Moreover, the proposed view of memory has important ramifications for the debate over false memories (Bernecker, 2017).

The Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association held an author-meets-critics session on the Oxford monograph with Fred Adams (2011), Sandy Goldberg (2011), and Marya Schechtman (2011), and the papers from this session were published in *Philosophical Studies*. The book symposium may have helped draw philosophers' attention to the topic of memory. Another factor that may have contributed to the growing interest of philosophers in memory was the publication of the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory* in 2017 and the inaugural *Issues in the Philosophy of Memory* Conference, which took place in the same year in Cologne and had close to seventy delegates.

Following this brief biographical retrospective on the early developments of the philosophy of memory in this millennium, I do not intend to continue in the same vein by tracing its rapid progress over the past decade. Undoubtedly, others in the monographic section will undertake this task. Nor do I intend to make predictions about how the philosophy of memory will or should evolve, or what the next pressing topics in this field will be. I have already argued elsewhere that it is time to bring the ethics of remembering and forgetting to the same level of development that the metaphysics and epistemology of memory have already reached (Bernecker 2020; forthcoming). Instead, in the remainder of this paper, the focus will be on comparing my positions on self-knowledge and memory.

3. The Bounds of Memory and Self-knowledge

As was explained in section 1, my position on self-knowledge can be characterized as a weak form of *compatibilism*. Weak compatibilism integrates elements of incompatibilism and traditional compatibilism. Incompatibilists are correct in asserting that the thesis of privileged self-knowledge, in its Cartesian form, is incompatible with externalism. Traditional compatibilists, on the other hand, are right to claim that externalism is, in principle, compatible with first-person authority. However, they seem to assume —alongside Cartesians— that both the attitudes and the propositional nature of one's own mental states fall within the scope of privileged self-knowledge. Against this, I have argued that only under the assumption that I have thoughts and that my attitude is a belief can I authoritatively know that, say, I believe that water is wet. The threat externalism poses to first-person authority does not, as is commonly assumed, stem from the consequent of the implication but rather from the two antecedent conditions.

Just as I can authoritatively know the specific contents of my current thoughts but cannot, in the same way, know my propositional attitudes toward these contents or be certain that I am not merely a propositional zombie, memory provides me with representations but does not, by reflection alone, reveal whether their source is memory or another cognitive faculty, such as perception or imagination. In other words, skepticism about privileged self-knowledge regarding attitudes and propositional zombies finds its counterpart in skepticism about *memory markers* (Bernecker 2008, pp. 81–136; 2010, pp. 33- 34).

The term "memory marker" refers to low-level metacognitive features that designate mental content as a memory. They are a priori knowable properties of memory representations by which they can be distinguished from other mental phenomena, such as imaginings and dreams. Among the metacognitive feelings philosophers have maintained are characteristic of remembering are the feeling of warmth and intimacy (James 1890: i. 650), the feeling of familiarity and pastness (Brandt 1955: 80; Broad 1925: 271; Plantinga 1993: 59; Russell 1995: 163), the force and vivacity of the representations (Harrod 1942: 5; Hume 2000a: 12–13, 59–60; Jacoby & Whitehouse 1989), their embeddedness (Johnson 1988), and their spontaneity and involuntariness (Furlong 1951: 98).

The problem with various proposals of memory markers is two-fold. First, there are instances where these markers lead us astray. For instance, we may genuinely remember something that appears unfamiliar and may only ostensibly remember something that once formed part of our common experience. What is more, the metacognitive feelings characteristic of remembering do not bear their explanation upon their face. The association between mental imagery that strikes us as familiar, on the one hand, and memory, on the other, is not an epistemic reason for anything. For the mere fact, if it is one, that we are inclined to make this association does not imply that we are entitled to make it. To be so entitled, we would need independent evidence suggesting that genuine memories appear familiar more often than fantasies. If such evidence exists at all, it cannot be accessed by reflection alone.

Since memory do not come with their own authentication, memories are not transparent to the mind in the sense that we can identify them and discriminate them from other states in any possible situation. Whether I genuinely remember p or whether it only seems to me that I remember p, I cannot tell just by reflection. Incidentally, this is the reason there is no logical impossibility in Bertrand Russell's (1995: 159) hypothesis that the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that seemed to remember a wholly unreal past.

Given that metacognition does not allow us to tell apart memories from other mental states such as dreams and imaginings, how else can we tell the difference? Building on the

work of James Opie Urmson (1967; 1971), I argue that memory is distinguished from dreams and imaginings by its aiming at truth. Memory is underwritten by a cognitive mechanism that has the proper function of tracking the truth.

Urmson's idea is that memory images can be distinguished from the products of imagination by the criteria of success one chooses to apply to one's efforts. We are remembering if agreement with the facts matters but imagining if only such criteria as general verisimilitude or interestingness are the relevant ones. Urmson writes:

> If one produces 'a mental picture of a three-legged, eleven-eyed monster' it will be a case of imagination if the picture can be criticized on the ground that the eyes do not look very like eyes or that some of the legs look more like arms but cannot be criticized on the ground that [one] has never seen anything like that (Urmson 1971, p. 607).

The advantage of Urmson's proposal over the metacognitive approach is that self-imposed success conditions do not require interpretation or explanation in the way that metacognitive feelings do. I can tell memory imaginings from imaginings on the basis of, say, the feeling of familiarity, only if I have independent evidence for believing that memory imaginings appear familiar more often than fantasies. By contrast, when I classify a given imagining as a memory state because agreement with the facts matter, no evidence is needed. "Evidence is unnecessary because I know straight off whether I am, say, daydreaming or storytelling on the one hand or recollecting (well or ill) on the other" (Urmson, 1967, p. 86). Following Urmson, Stanley Munsat maintains that, in the case of imagining, "a person cannot be mistaken about what he is imagining (unless this is a mistake about what that which he is imagining is called)" (Munsat 1967, p. 95).

Urmson's normative criterion for individuating memories allows for two readings. On the internalist interpretation, a state of representing aims at truth if the subject intentionally aims at the truth in forming or maintaining it. On the externalist interpretation, which I subscribe to, a state of representing aims at the truth in the sense that the underlying mechanism has the proper function of tracking the truth (Bernecker 2024, pp 253-255).

The externalist interpretation of the normative criterion has it that a state of representing aims at the truth in the sense that the underlying mechanism has the proper function of tracking the truth. This conception of the distinctive feature of memory squares with the various accounts of the evolutionary function of (episodic) memory. Some claim that episodic memory evolved to help humans avoid the detrimental consequences of hyperbolic discounting (Boyer 2008). Others argue that episodic memory evolved as a way of ascertaining epistemic authority over some issues that can then be offered as reasons to others (Mahr & Csibra, 2018). Finally, some have maintained that episodic memory makes it possible to

learn something from experiential sources that have long passed (Boyle 2019). No matter which of these explanations is correct, they all presuppose that it is the proper function of memory to track the truth.

Of course, just because a cognitive mechanism aims at truth does not mean that it delivers the truth all the time; it may in fact never deliver the truth. Given that memory is factive, as I claim, knowing that the cognitive mechanism that generates a given datum aims at truth does not allow me to know that the datum qualifies as a memory. How then does the normative criterion for distinguishing memory representations from, say, dreams align with the thesis that veridicality is a necessary condition for a datum to qualify as a memory? The normative criterion gives us conditional knowledge: we know whether a given representation is a memory as opposed to a dream, given that it is veridical.[5] The normative criterion is necessary but not sufficient to identify one's memories from the first-person perspective.

Just as self-knowledge and memory are, in a crucial sense, opaque to the mind, so too is knowledge more broadly. To say that knowledge is not luminous is to acknowledge that one can know something without being in a position to know that one knows it. In response to this insight, I have developed a novel externalist account of knowledge, according to which knowledge is a true belief formed in a manner that is locally safe and attuned to the circumstances of belief-formation as well as the thought content (Bernecker MS). This concludes the comparison of the positions I have defended on self-knowledge, memory, and knowledge.

[5]Furlong (1970: 138) essentially makes the same point when he argues that Urmson's normative criterion only tells me whether I am trying to remember, not whether I actually remember. Sinhababu (2013) also criticizes Urmson's proposal.

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