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# MEMORY KNOWLEDGE

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## Introduction

Knowledge can be subdivided according to the sources from which it arises. Among the basic sources of knowledge and justification are perception, testimony, reason, and inference. Whether memory is a basic source of knowledge is a controversial issue. Some philosophers maintain that memory only retains or preserves knowledge but doesn't generate new knowledge. Others insist that there are cases where a person first comes to know by remembering.

Section 1 explains the distinction between direct and representative realism about memory. Section 2 concerns the question of whether memory implies knowledge. Section 3 examines whether memory is merely a preservative source of justification and knowledge or whether it can also function as a generative source. Finally, section 4 discusses responses to skepticism about memory knowledge.

## 1. The Objects of Memory

Traditionally philosophers were concerned with the debate between representative (or indirect) and direct realism about memory. The discussion of memory closely followed the discussion of perception. Just as philosophers have debated the question whether perception is a direct awareness of objects or an inferential procedure, so it has been debated whether memory provides mediate or immediate awareness of the past.

*Representative realism* about memory claims that, though there is a past that causes us to have memory experiences, we are not directly or immediately aware of the past. What we are directly aware of are the effects the past has on us—representations or sense-data of things past. We remember something not by way of being directly aware of that thing, but rather a mediating representation of that thing. To remember is to undergo a certain sort of mental experience; it is to experience a mental representation which reproduces some past sense-experience. Among the advocates of the representative theory are Hume (1978: 8–10), James (1890: i. ch. 16), Locke (1975: 149–55), and Russell (1995a: ch. 9).

What speaks in favor of representative realism is the fact that, phenomenologically speaking, there might be no difference between veridical and illusory rememberings. There doesn't seem to be a subjective mark whereby we can distinguish between those rememberings in which the object as presently visualized is identical with the object as originally seen and those in which it is not. Why not, therefore, say that what is directly remembered in either case is something internal to us—a representation or

sense-datum? The representative realists claim that even in cases of veridical remembering the primary object of awareness is a representation of the past thing rather than the thing itself.

The most widely canvassed objection to representative realism about memory is that it makes the past unknowable. If all we are directly aware of are our representations about the past, how can we know that there is a past at all, much less that the past is the cause of our present representations? How can we discriminate memory representations from other representational states such as figments of the imagination? The need to discern memory representations from other kinds of representations is particularly pressing if one wants to base knowledge on ostensible memories. It seems that to come to know about the past on the basis of one's ostensible memories one would have to first establish what the past was like and then check one's ostensible memories against the past facts. But how can one do this if, as the representative realist insists, the direct objects of memory are internal representations? To discover whether something is a genuine memory representation, one would have to inspect it from an external point of view, but, according to the representative theory, the only way of finding out what happened in the past is via one's representations of the past. Thus the representative theorist finds himself imprisoned within his representations, with no way of confirming that the ostensible memory representations do, in fact, reveal the past, as they have to if he is to have memory knowledge.

Some advocates of representative realism have responded to this problem by maintaining that one can indeed tell, by reflection alone, whether a particular representation one is having stems from memory or one of the other faculties of the mind, such as perception or imagination. The feature of memory representations that distinguishes them from other kinds of representational states and that stamps them as authentic is the *memory marker*. Memory markers are defined as a priori knowable features of memory representations on the basis of which they can be distinguished from other mental phenomena. Memory markers have been described by representative realists in a number of ways, as the feeling of warmth and intimacy (James 1890: i. 650), the feeling of familiarity and pastness (Russell 1995a: 163), or as the force and vivacity of memory representations (Hume 1978: 9–10, 85–6).

The problem all the various proposals of memory markers have in common is that they don't offer a reliable mark. There are cases in which these alleged memory markers are present, but in which there is no inclination to speak of memory, and there are instances where memories lack these alleged markers. What is more, the features identified as memory markers don't bear their own explanation upon their face. The mere fact, if it is one, that we are inclined to associate representations that strike us as familiar with memory, doesn't imply that we are justified to make this association. The required justification could, of course, come from some independent evidence suggesting that memories appear familiar more often than fantasies. Yet if such evidence exists at all, it isn't available by reflection alone. Alternatively the required justification could be the result of a general principle whereby it is reasonable to trust our cognitive faculties (including our memories) even though we lack a non-question-begging assurance of their reliability. But if we are entitled to trust our cognitive faculties, including our memory, then memory markers are superfluous (cf. Bernecker 2008: chs. 5–6).

According to *direct realism*, we don't remember the past by virtue of being aware of a representation presenting the past to us, rather, our awareness of the past is direct. Although remembering something requires the having of representations and although

these representations determine the way the thing appears to us, there is no reason to suppose we are aware of these representations themselves. We are aware of the past thing by internally representing the thing, not by being aware of the internal representation of the thing. Representations, according to the direct realist, don't function as the objects of memory, but are merely the vehicle of memory. Direct realism about memory is defended by, among others, Laird (1920: 56), Reid (1997: essay 3), and Russell (1997: 114–15).

Direct realism derives some of its plausibility from the fact that when we remember something, what we are aware of is just that thing, and nothing further. As Reid (1997: 28) remarks, "upon the strictest examination, memory appears to me to have things that are past, and not present ideas, for its object." Since, on the realist view, what we are directly aware of in memory is the past event in *propria persona*, and not some representation of it, one of the difficulties of representative realism about memory disappears: the difficulty of explaining how we can be justified in inferring the occurrence of a past thing from a present memory representation. If what we are directly aware of is the past event itself, and not just a representation thereof, no such inference is required.

Though direct realism makes some problems disappear, it gives rise to others. One of the problems of direct realism is to explain our direct acquaintance with, or experience of past things. Another worry is that direct realism is incompatible with the highly intuitive causal theory of memory, that is, the view that for someone to remember something his representation of that thing must be suitably causally connected to his past representation of that same thing. Hume famously held that the relation between cause and effect is a metaphysical rather than a logical relation and that, therefore, causal relations cannot be known a priori. The only way in which a particular effect can be inferred from a given cause is on the basis of experience, in particular by observation of a regularity between events of the same type. Now, there is the worry that direct realism about memory is incompatible with the causal theory of memory because it violates the Humean requirement whereby a cause and its effect must be "independent existences" (1978: 79–80). For, given direct realism, if the effect is characterized as "S's having a memory representation of X," then it *is* possible to tell a priori that X occurred.

The Humean worry that if there is a logical relation between two events that supports an a priori inference from one to the other, then there is no room left for causal efficacy among them is misguided. We can always re-describe the effect in a way as to make it an entailment of the cause. But from this it doesn't follow that causation is a myth. For even if we chose to describe the effect-event in a different manner it would still follow the cause with the same regularity as before. Causation is a relation between events. Logical relations, however, hold between propositions and linguistic entities. And just because there is a logical relation between the descriptions of two events doesn't preclude that the events themselves stand in a causal relation. Thus there is no reason to suppose that direct realism conflicts with the causal theory of memory.

## 2. Memory and Knowledge

According to received wisdom in epistemology, remembering that p implies knowing that p. Propositional memory is thought to be long-standing or continuing knowledge. Audi (2003: 69), for example, says that "if you remember that we met, you know that we did. Similarly, if you remember me, you know me." Malcolm (1963: 223) defines propositional memory thus: "A person B remembers that p if and only if B knows that p

because he knew that p." And Margalit (2002: 14) writes: "To remember now is to know now what you knew in the past, without learning in-between what you know now. And to know is to believe something to be true. Memory, then, is knowing from the past."

Most philosophers hold that the concept of propositional knowledge has three necessary conditions: belief, truth, and justification (however construed). (I use the term "justification" to refer to any factor that transforms a true belief into knowledge.) Given that memory implies knowledge and given the transitivity of implication, memory implies belief, truth, and justification. Now it is beyond doubt that both knowledge and memory imply truth. Just as you can know that p only if p is true, so you can remember that p only if p is true. If not-p, then you might think you remember that p, but cannot actually remember that p. Truth is a component of both knowledge and memory. The task of evaluating the view whereupon memory is a form of knowledge is thus a matter of determining the tenability of the belief constraint and the justification constraint.

To see that one can remember that p without believing that p consider the following example adapted from Malcolm (1963: 213–14): S suddenly finds himself with the thought that he has been kidnapped when he was a small boy. The idea that he has been kidnapped just pops into his head; it seems to come "out of the blue." S can't make sense of this idea and takes it to be merely imaginary; after all the likelihood of being kidnapped is low. What is more, the idea in question is inferentially isolated from the large body of inferentially integrated beliefs to which S has access. Nothing of what S knows or believes about his past connects with the idea that he has been kidnapped. But now suppose that, unbeknown to S, it is in fact the case that he has been kidnapped. The flashbulb thought is an instance of propositional memory.

Believing that p involves holding p true yet it doesn't involve actively reflecting on p or an especially high degree of confidence with respect to p. Given that acceptance is a central component of both occurrent and dispositional belief, it would be wrong to say that S *believes* that he was kidnapped when he was a small boy. For only after he is presented with the police record and newspaper clippings about his kidnapping does he reluctantly consent to the thesis according to which the thought in question springs from his memory rather than his imagination. And when he finally accepts this thesis he acquires a novel belief rather than reviving a dormant one. Thus S not only remembers that p without believing that he remembers that p, but he remembers that p without believing that which he remembers, namely p. (Obviously, if knowledge didn't imply belief, as some argue, cases of memory without belief wouldn't count against the thesis that to remember that p is to know that p.)

The most compelling cases of memory without justification are ones where the subject remembers that p but where there is some defeating information such that, if he became aware of it, he would no longer be justified in believing p. Despite the dazzling number of different conceptions of epistemic justification, philosophers on both sides of the internalism/externalism divide sign up to the idea that justification is incompatible with undefeated defeaters. In the case of epistemic internalism, it is obvious that the presence of undefeated defeaters undermines justification. Given that what justifies a belief is a mentally accessible item (something that one can come to know whether it obtains just by reflecting on one's mental states), being justified in believing p excludes a person's having sufficient reasons for supposing either that p is false or that the belief that p is not grounded or produced in a way that is sufficiently truth-indicating. Moreover, the majority of externalists hold that although a subject need not be aware of the factors that justify his belief, he might not be aware of evidence that

undermines his belief. In addition to the reliabilist justification condition they adopt a no-defeater condition that ensures that a justified belief is not incoherent with the background information the subject possesses.

Consider the following case of memory without justification. In the past S learned that John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963. He came to know this fact. Today S's friends play a practical joke on him. They tell him that Kennedy wasn't assassinated until 1964 and present him with plausible yet misleading evidence to this effect. Given the incompatibility of justification with the presence of undefeated defeaters, S doesn't know anymore that Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, for he is unable to rule out the relevant alternative that he was not assassinated until 1964. He fails to know that Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, despite the fact that he still remembers this fact. This example is meant to show that one can know at $t_1$ that p, remember at $t_2$ everything one knew at $t_1$, and yet fail to know at $t_2$ that p—even though one continues to truly believe that p—for the reason that one isn't anymore justified in believing that p. The upshot is that memory doesn't imply knowledge since it implies neither belief nor justification. Not only is it possible to remember something one doesn't believe but also one might acquire some plausible yet misleading evidence that destroys the status as justified belief of the once-genuine justified belief that one still remembers (cf. Bernecker 2010: 65–94).

## 3. Memory and Justification

Even if memory doesn't imply justification and knowledge, memory beliefs can, of course, be justified and qualify as knowledge. And so the question arises whether memory is merely a preservative source of justification and knowledge or whether it can also function as a generative source.

The standard view, which may be called *preservationism*, has it that memory is nothing but a preservative source of justification and knowledge. Just as testimony is said to transmit knowledge from one person to another, memory is said to preserve knowledge from one time to another. Both in the case of memory knowledge and testimonial knowledge the proposition in question must have been known when it was originally acquired and a source other than memory or testimony, respectively, must have been responsible for its original acquisition (Plantinga 1993: 61n). If one justifiably believes that p on the basis of memory, then one must have acquired this justification in a non-memorial way at some earlier time. Memory cannot improve the epistemic status a belief has at the time of recall vis-à-vis the epistemic status it had at the time it was originally acquired. Memory is incapable of making an unknown proposition known, an unjustified belief justified, or an irrational belief rational—it can only preserve what is already known, justified, or rational.

How does memory preserve the positive epistemic status of the original belief? According to some preservationists (e.g., Conee and Feldman 2004: 60–1), epistemic justification is a matter of internal or conscious justifying factors. The obvious problem with internalist preservationism is that there are numerous justified memory beliefs for which there are no internal or conscious justifying factors because they are (irretrievably) forgotten. This is how Williamson (2007: 110–11) states the problem:

> Many of our factual memories come without any particular supporting phenomenology of memory images or feelings of familiarity. We cannot remember

> how we acquired the information, and it may be relatively isolated, but we still use it when the need arises. Although few if any memories stand in total isolation from the rest of our conscious lives, very many memories are too isolated to receive impressive justification from other internal elements.

Internalists seem to be stuck with the implausible result that retained beliefs are unjustified unless the past evidence is also recalled. In response to the problem of forgotten evidence, virtually all proponents of preservationism adopt the *principle of continuous justification*: at $t_2$, S's belief from $t_1$ that p is continuously justified if S continues to believe at $t_2$ that p—even if he lost his original knowledge-producing justification and has acquired no new justification in the meantime (Shoemaker 1967: 271–2). According to some preservationists (e.g., Pappas 1980), continuous justification is a kind of basic or foundational justification. According to others (Burge 1993: 458–9; Owens 2000: 153), the reason we are continuously justified in holding our memory beliefs is that we are entitled to believe what memory "serves up," in the absence of defeaters.

According to *generativism*, a memory belief can not only be *less* but also *more* justified than the original belief. A memory belief might be justified even if the original belief wasn't justified. How does memory generate justification? According to Audi (1995: 37) and Pollock (1974: 193), it is the phenomenology of recalling that generates justification for memory beliefs. They draw a parallel between memory and perception. In a standard case of perceptual belief, one is "appeared to" in a certain way and, on the basis of this appearance, comes to justifiably believe something about the perceptual surroundings. Similarly, when one remembers something one has a recollection and, on the basis of this phenomenal state, comes to justifiably believe something about the past. The idea is that if one bases one's belief that p on one's state of seeming to remember that p, and p is undefeated, then one is at least prima facie justified in believing p.

Even if we grant that there is a distinctive phenomenology that attends all the memory beliefs we are justified in holding and even if we grant that the experiential features of memory beliefs can do the epistemic work that Pollock and Audi assign to them, this version of generativism runs into problems. In the absence of defeating conditions, the epistemic status of a belief is said to improve simply in virtue of the belief being recalled. Every time a belief is retrieved from memory it receives an extra epistemic boost. But is it plausible to suppose that, everything else being equal, a belief that is retrieved often enjoys a better epistemic status than a belief that is retrieved infrequently? There doesn't seem to be a neat correlation between the positive epistemic status a belief has and the number of times it has been retrieved from memory. Following McGrath (2007: 19–22), we can call this the *epistemic boost problem*.

According to Audi's and Pollock's *radical generativism*, memory can generate new justificatory factors, new evidence. If, for instance, I came to justifiably believe at $t_1$ that p and if I remember at $t_2$ that p, then the memory belief inherits (some of) the justification the original belief had and there will be an additional justificatory element due to the process of remembering. The justification of the memory belief has two parts: there is a preserved component and a new component due to the act of recalling. *Moderate generativism* (cf. Bernecker 2010: 96–103; Lackey 2005: 640–4), by contrast, agrees with preservationism in that the memory process generates no new elements of justification or evidence. Memory cannot make justification and knowledge from nothing. Instead, the only way for memory to function as a generative source of justification is by removing defeaters and thereby unleashing the justificatory potential that was already present

at the time the belief was initially entertained. All the elements required for a memory belief to be justified must already have been present when the belief was encoded. If the original belief had no justificatory potential, then memory cannot turn it into a justified belief. Memory can generate justification only by lifting justificatory elements that were previously rebutted or undermined by defeating evidence.

## 4. Skepticism about Memory Knowledge

"S remembers that p" implies that p is the case. Though memory entails truth, we are frequently mistaken in thinking that we remember something. 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 we genuinely or ostensibly remember that p we cannot tell just by reflection. But we all trust our ostensible memories to a greater or lesser degree. What reasons, if any, do we have for believing that events we seem to remember actually happened? What kind of justification do we have for accepting (at least some of) our ostensible memories as reliable information about the past? Do we, for example, have any way of ruling out Russell's (1995a: 159) hypothesis whereupon the world sprang into being five minutes ago, exactly as it then was, with a population that seemed to remember a wholly unreal past?

As was shown above (section 1) there are no intrinsic features of memory experiences from which it can be read off that they are memory experiences rather than imaginary experiences. Given that there are no memory markers, is it possible to validate ostensible memories by checking them against the past events they are (purportedly) about? This isn't possible because the past events have ceased to exist and hence are not available for comparison. Could we then validate ostensible memories by means of diaries, photographs, testimony, and the like? The problem with this proposal is that it begs the question at issue: the employment of this kind of evidence assumes the trustworthiness of some ostensible memories (one's own or someone else's). Any inductive argument to the effect that ostensible memories are, in general, reliable depends on other memories. And however great the probability of an inductive generalization might be, its probability is based on (what we take to be) past observations; and we have only memory to confirm those past observations. But how else, then, should we validate our ostensible memories?

Lewis (1949: ch. 11) suggests that we can validate our ostensible memories by examining the degree to which they cohere. Such coherence (he calls it *congruence*) is said to raise the probability of what is remembered to the level of practical certainty in a way analogous to that in which agreement of independently given testimonies can convince us that what is being testified is true. The idea is that the degree of coherence of our ostensible memories is sufficiently high for rational and practical reliance. But coherence can play this amplifying role only if the states of ostensible memory have some positive degree of initial credibility. And one might think that our ostensible memories lack the required initial credibility due to systematic delusion or general unreliability. Lewis argues that these prima facie possibilities are not genuine possibilities since they are either incoherent or contradict our experience. However, the argument against the possibility of systematic delusion depends on the contentious verifiability criterion of meaning (whereby a statement is meaningful if and only if it is either analytic or empirically verifiable). And even if the verifiability criterion of meaning is conceded, Lewis seems to overestimate the power of coherence to amplify probability.

Malcolm (1963: 193–6) and Shoemaker (1963: 229–34) take a very different approach to the task of validating our ostensible memories. They argue that the general reliability of ostensible memories is an analytic truth. There are two main arguments to the effect that ostensible memories are necessarily reliable. According to the first argument, if someone were to consistently make wildly inaccurate claims about the past and seemed to remember things that never happened, we would have to say not that he was misremembering, but that he has lost his understanding of "to remember." The problem with this argument is that habitual mistakes about memory claims need not be mistakes of meaning rather than fact. Even if someone's memory claims were consistently wrong, he could still have a correct understanding of the verb "to remember." That he correctly understands the verb "to remember" could be established by the fact that he uses it to talk only about things that he believes did happen and not about things that he believes he imagined. The second argument to the effect that ostensible memory is necessarily reliable rests on the observation that one cannot help thinking that one's confident memory beliefs constitute knowledge. However, just because one cannot question one's own confident memory beliefs doesn't mean that one cannot question someone else's claim concerning his confident memory beliefs. Moreover, even if it is incoherent to question one's confident memory beliefs, this doesn't mean that one couldn't be consistently false. The skeptical problem actually gets worse because not only is it possible that one's memory beliefs are consistently false but also one might be incapable of coherently entertaining this possibility.

In the end, none of the strategies for validating ostensible memories seem to work. We don't seem to be able to put our reliance on memories in question and then demonstrate the reliability of a given ostensible memory. As Russell (1995b: 154) remarks, "no memory proposition is, strictly speaking, verifiable, since nothing in the present or future makes any proposition about the past necessary." At the same time, we cannot secure a connection with epistemic rationality unless we trust at least some of our ostensible memories. This has led some philosophers (e.g., Burge 1993) to work out a transcendental argument to the effect that we have an a priori entitlement to trust our ostensible memories, unless there are stronger reasons not to do so.

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