

The Epistemological Role of Episodic Recollection

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Abstract

In what respects is episodic recollection active, and subject to the will, like perceptual imagination, and in what respects is it passive, like perception, and how do these matters relate to its epistemological role? I present an account of the ontology of episodic recollection that provides answers to these questions. According the account I recommend, an act of episodic recollection is not subject to epistemic evaluation – it is neither justified nor unjustified – but it can provide one with a distinctive source of warrant for judgements about the past when it is accompanied by knowledge that one is recollecting, as well as knowledge of what one is recollecting. While the account concedes that when one recollects one's attitude to what is recollected cannot be one of observation, it nevertheless accommodates the notion that episodic recollection involves a form of mental time-travel – a case of re-visiting, or re-acquaintance with, some past episode.

Wittgenstein and Sartre on Imaging

Wittgenstein suggests that the fact that imaging is subject to the will in a way that perception is not, is related to the fact that there is an epistemological role that perception can play that imaging cannot play.

It is just because forming images is a voluntary activity that it does not instruct us about the external world. (1967; 621)

In brief, the thought seems to be that when one imagines an object one's attitude to the image cannot be one of observation, whereas, when one perceives an object one's attitude to the object perceived can be one of observation.

A principal mark that distinguishes image from sense-impression and from hallucination is that the one who has the image does not behave as an observer in relation to the image. (1980; 885).

When we form an image of something we are not observing. The coming and going of the pictures is not something that *happens* to us. We are not surprised by these pictures, saying 'Look!' (Contrast with e.g. after-images). (1967; 632).

The claim that one's attitude to the image cannot be one of observation is linked to the claim that imaging is active – a voluntary act, subject to the will.

If one says 'Imagination has to do with the will' then the same connection is meant as with the sentence 'Imaging has nothing to do with observation' (1980; 131).

Observing an object is a way of finding out about it, acquiring knowledge about it, discovering new facts about it. So, according to Wittgenstein, as this observational attitude is not possible in the case of imaging, it cannot instruct us about the world in the way perception can.

In *The Psychology of Imagination*, Sartre makes some similar remarks. He claims that, "Nothing can be learned from an image that is not already known... no observation, no matter how prolonged, will yield the knowledge I lack" (p. 11). According to Sartre this is because, "No matter how long I may look at an image, I shall never find anything in it but what I put there". He adds, "It is in this fact that we

find the distinction between an image and a perception” (p. 10). Sartre notes that there are important structural similarities between images and perceptions (“it is organized exactly like the objects that do produce knowledge”), and it is in virtue of these similarities that he labels our attitude to the object of the image one of “quasi-observation”. But the attitude is not one of genuine observation, for “it is an observation that teaches nothing” (p. 12).

One might object to these claims by arguing that (a) we can discover new things about objects by imagining them¹, and by arguing that (b) just as imagining an object is an activity subject to the will – an activity one can choose to engage in – so too is observing an object. In response to the first line of objection, one might concede that Wittgenstein and Sartre overstate their case.² One can make discoveries, acquire new knowledge, by imagining, and the act of imagining an object can warrant judgements one makes about it. But still, if Sartre and Wittgenstein are right in their claim that one’s attitude to the object imagined cannot be one of observation, this might mark an important epistemological (as well as phenomenological) difference between imagining something and perceiving it, and as a consequence, our accounts of the epistemological role of each may need to reflect this fact. The way in which an episode of imagining something can warrant judgements one makes about its object may be importantly different from the way in which a perceptual experience of an object can warrant judgements one makes about it. In response to the second line of objection, one might concede that observing something is an activity one can choose to engage in, but still, the point holds that imagining something is an activity that is subject to the will in a way that observing something isn’t, because the activity of

¹ See Kosslyn 1996.

² See McGinn 2004, p. 19 ff.

observing depends on the occurrence of perceptual events that are not subject to the will in the way that mental acts of imagining are.

It is natural to think that perceptual imagination exploits perceptual memory. For example, if I perceptually imagine George Bush playing Beethoven's Fifth on a harmonica, although I am imagining an event of a kind that I have never witnessed, in doing so I am exploiting perceptual memories of things that I have witnessed – e.g. a perceptual memory of the appearance of George Bush, a perceptual memory of the sound of a harmonica, a perceptual memory of the tune of Beethoven's Fifth. So the kinds of considerations that Wittgenstein and Sartre raise regarding the epistemological role of perceptual imagination may prompt similar concerns regarding the epistemological role of perceptual recollection. In this paper I shall be focusing on the question of the epistemological role of episodic recollection, which I am taking to be a variety of perceptual recollection. In the case of episodic recollection that which one recollects is a particular event one has witnessed. Applying to the case of episodic recollection the concerns that Wittgenstein and Sartre raise regarding perceptual imagination, we might ask, in what respects is episodic recollection active and subject to the will, like perceptual imagination, and in what respects is it passive, like perception, and how do these matters relate to its epistemological role?

Episodic Recollection – The Active and Passive Ingredients

Let us consider the respects in which the inception, course and termination of an act of episodic recollection are all subject to the will, and subject to the will in a way observation is not. An event of episodic recollection (or perceptual imagination) is not

causally sustained by its object in the way that perception is.³ What I mean by this is that although one can explain why a perceptual event occurs when it occurs by reference to the time at which events involving the object perceived occur, this form of explanation is not available in the case of episodic recollection. We cannot explain why an episode of recollection occurs when it occurs by appealing to the time at which events involving the object of recollection occurred. So when one tries to recollect some past event, and one mentally reaches for some patch of the past, that past episode cannot causally sustain some *current* episode of one's discovering what *was* there (although it did in the past causally sustain the past perceptual apprehension of it, and this may be crucial to explaining the nature of the episode of recollection).⁴ This may then suggest that *I* am causally responsible for my current episode of recollecting. That is to say, when I mentally reach for the past with a question, no past event will causally sustain some current mental episode that provides me with an answer to the question. Only *I* can provide an answer to my question, and my act of recollection is my act of providing such an answer. So in this respect one might think that an act of episodic recollection is more like an act of judging than a perception. Hence Sartre's claim that "Nothing can be learnt from an image that is not already known... I shall never find anything in the image but what I put there". "An image could not exist without a knowledge that constitutes it".

³ Of course, not all perceptual experiences are causally sustained by their objects, but this is what makes such experiences misleading.

⁴ One aspect of the phenomenology of episodic recollection is the current absence of its object. Although the event may strike one as the kind of event that cannot occur without the past occurrence of its object, it does not strike one as the kind of event that cannot occur without the *current presence* of its object. Furthermore, if the object of the act of recollection is a past occurrence it cannot be the kind of thing that one conjures into existence in order to causally sustain the current episode of recollection. So although the *act* of episodic recollection may strike one as something one has conjured into existence, its *object* does not.

These points apply both to acts of perceptual imagination and acts of episodic recollection. But surely, one might think, acts of recollection are not subject to the will in the way acts of imagining are. There's a sense in which one is not free to choose what to recollect, in the way that one is free to choose what to imagine.⁵ For example, although I may be free to choose to recollect what I had for lunch yesterday, or, alternatively, what I had for dinner, I cannot choose to recollect my having lobster for dinner yesterday, as opposed to beans on toast, whereas I am quite free to imagine that yesterday I was tucking in to lobster while quaffing the finest champagne, and I can perceptually imagine my doing so. Does this make an act of episodic recollection passive in a way in which an act of perceptual imagining is not?

Compare the following remarks Velleman and Shah (2005) make concerning the difference between an act of judging and an act of propositional imagining or supposition:

One can mentally affirm that p arbitrarily... What prevents one from judging... arbitrarily is, not that one cannot arbitrarily engage in the affirmative mental act..., but rather that one cannot do so arbitrarily while also doing so in a way that amounts to a judgement... (p. 11-12)

An affirmation that p qualifies as a judgement, rather than a mental fiction or hypothesis, only when it is aimed at getting the truth-value of p right – aimed, that is, at presenting that p as true only if it really is true... (p. 12)

⁵ See Ryle 1949, p. 261 ff.

The obstacle to arbitrarily judging that *p* is that one can judge that *p* only by making an affirmation aimed at giving the right answer to the question of *whether p*, and an affirmation cannot be arbitrarily made if it is to have that aim. (p. 13)

One's aim in imagining or supposition is rather different to one's aim in judging, and this difference in aim marks a constitutive difference between the acts. But this difference in aim does not make the one act more passive than the other. We don't tend to think that the more constraints one imposes on an activity the more passive it becomes. So likewise, although the aim of an act of perceptual imagination may be rather different from the aim of an act of episodic recollection⁶, which allows that one is free to choose what to imagine in a way in which one is not free to choose what to recollect, it does not follow that the one is more passive than the other.

So far I have been emphasising the active ingredient in acts of episodic recollection. This suggests that an act of episodic recollection is more like an act of judging than an observation. Some argue that episodic memory is a form of 'mental time-travel', a case of re-visiting, or acquaintance with, some past episode.⁷ Presumably, for those who claim that an act of episodic recollection is a form of acquaintance with some past event, part of the idea is to emphasise the respects in which an act of recollection is not like one of judging some proposition about that past event. This might then suggest that the act of episodic recollection can play the same kind of epistemic role as a perceptual apprehension of a particular. That is to say, just as a perception of an event is not a judgement and so not subject to epistemic evaluation, an act of episodic

⁶ See Urmson 1967, and Hoerl 2001.

⁷ See Martin (2001, p. 259), Russell (1912, p. 26; 1913, p. 70 ff, and p. 171 ff.), Tulving (1982, p. 331), Campbell (2001, p. 171-4), McDowell (1978, p. 306), Hoerl 2001, p. 329).

recollection is not a judgement and so not subject to epistemic evaluation. This might then allow that an episode of recollection can act as a justifier that is not itself justified.

If we are to take this idea seriously, then we need to accommodate the idea that episodic recollection shares, perhaps inherits, something of the passivity of an episode of perceptual apprehension. There is, however, a puzzle as to how we are to accommodate both the active and the passive ingredients. If an intentional act of episodic recollection involves knowledge of some past event, akin to an act of judging, then doesn't it follow that it is, after all, subject to epistemic evaluation? Doesn't it follow that it is a justifier only if it is justified? So doesn't this undermine the thought that an act of episodic recollection is a form of *acquaintance* with a past occurrence? For an episode of apprehension or acquaintance is not subject to epistemic evaluation.

To think of an act of episodic recollection as like an act of judging about the past suggests an account that assimilates episodic recollection to a variety of factual, or semantic recollection. I now want to compare and contrast episodic memory and semantic memory in order to assess whether such assimilation is appropriate. We can compare and contrast (i) the nature of the episodes of recollection involved in each case, and (ii) that which is retained in memory in each case.

Semantic Memory and Episodic Memory

(i)

Budd, following Wittgenstein, notes, “images and sensations (sense-impressions or sense-experiences) are united by their common possession of genuine duration” (1989, p. 102). Geach remarks, in *God and the Soul*, “I think Norman Malcolm was right when he said that a mental image could be before one’s mind’s eye for just as long as a beetle took to crawl across a table” (p. 64). Geach goes on to claim, “but I think it would be nonsense to say that I ‘was thinking’ a given thought for the period of a beetle’s crawl – the continuous past of ‘think’ has no such use” (p. 64). He offers the following reason for this claim: “Each thought has a content that cannot pass over by a gradual transition to another content... Even if a thought has a complex content, this does not mean that the elements in this complex can occur separately and successively” (p. 34). In *Mental Acts*, Geach writes,

Spoken words last so long in physical time... – one could sensibly say that the utterance of the words was simultaneous with the movement of a body... from one place to another. The same would go for the duration of mental images of words, or any other mental images...

With a thought it is quite different. Even if we accepted the view... that a judgement is a complex of Ideas, we could hardly suppose that in a thought the Ideas occur successively, as the words do in a sentence; it seems reasonable to say that unless the whole complex content is grasped all together - unless the Ideas ... are all simultaneously present - the thought or judgement just does not exist at all. (p. 104)⁸

⁸ Compare also Mouton (1969) who writes, “The occurrence of a thought is not a durational event. It is impossible in principle for one to get halfway through a thought and stop. This is because thoughts are individuated by their content and hence every change in the content of one’s thinking is a change of thought and every such content which comes before one’s mind is a complete thought. There is, therefore, no such thing as a partial thought” (p. 64).

This leads Geach to label an act of judging a ‘non-successive unity’. His remarks can be applied to mark a distinction between the nature of an act of episodic recollection and an act of semantic recollection. The event of recollecting a proposition is not something that can occur in stages, although one’s attempt to recollect the proposition can. Acts with temporal duration can *manifest* the fact that one remembers the proposition – e.g. an act of saying something out loud, or in inner speech. But that which is manifested in such an act is not an event – the act of recollection – but rather a state – one’s knowledge of the proposition. So we have reason to think that the episode of recollecting the proposition is a non-successive unity. An act of episodic recollection, on the other hand, is a durational event. So this gives us reason to think that that which is recollected cannot simply be some proposition. How does this relate to the question of what is retained in memory in each case – episodic memory and semantic memory?

If that which is retained over time is simply knowledge of some proposition, then that which is recollected is the proposition known. If that which is recollected is some proposition known, then the act of recollecting that proposition must be a non-successive unity. In the case of episodic memory the act of recollection is a durational event and not a non-successive unity. So in the case of episodic memory, that which is retained over time cannot simply be knowledge of some proposition. What then is recollected and what is retained over time in the case of episodic memory?

(ii)

Martin has argued that, “we cannot conceive of such remembering as the preservation of *knowledge*, for one cannot know what one now recollects in episodic memory” (2001, p. 264). That which is recollected is a particular past event.

In such cases as ‘Mary remembers John falling asleep in the talk’, where the derived nominal here picks out an event or episode which is being recalled, there is no well-formed substitution using a term for knowledge. ‘Mary knows / knew John falling asleep in the talk’ is simply not English. (p. 264)

As Martin remarks, we are reluctant to talk of knowing events or episodes. He offers the following explanation of why this is so:

Apprehension is episodic: seeing, feeling, tasting something are all events or occurrences. Knowledge itself is a standing condition – although one can know something at a particular time, knowledge itself is not episodic. Nevertheless, the state of knowledge is closely linked to episodes of apprehension: one must have apprehended an individual at some time to know them, and to continue knowing them one must have the possibility of further apprehensions of them. Now, while we can apprehend events through perceiving them, in general we do not take ourselves to be in a position to re-apprehend them. Hence, apprehension of an event is not a precursor to a standing condition of cognitive contact with what is apprehended, and so does not lead to knowing the event, although one will, of course, tend to acquire knowledge of the event. (p. 267)

Martin goes on to suggest that this gives us reason to think of apprehension and knowledge as closely connected – the former being the episodic counterpart of the latter standing condition – and both involving forms of cognitive contact with an object. Martin then proposes that we state the general condition on memory as that of preserving *either* knowledge *or* past apprehension:

When we turn to episodic memory, if we are to ask what it is that is retained in such memory, the answer would seem to be past apprehension of the event now recalled. One's memory of the episode is simply the retained apprehension or acquaintance with a past happening. (p. 267)

A general concern one might have with this proposal is how we are to make sense of the idea of *retained* apprehension. An apprehension, as Martin notes, is “episodic” – an “event or occurrence”. However, it is not clear how a past apprehension can be retained, given that it is an occurrence – something episodic. Occurrences that have duration are not “retained”, or “preserved”. They have temporal parts. Knowledge of them can be retained or preserved, but such knowledge is a state – a standing condition. I suggest that what is retained in the case of episodic memory is knowledge of an apprehension of a past event, and in particular, knowledge of what it was like to apprehend the particular event now recollected. Is this to assimilate episodic memory to semantic memory?

If one's knowledge of what it was like to apprehend some event is simply knowledge of some proposition concerning that event, then an act of recollecting will simply be one of recollecting that proposition – a non-successive unity, as we have seen. Since an act of episodic recollection is not a non-successive unity, we should deny that the

knowledge retained in the case of episodic memory is simply knowledge of some proposition. So if we are to maintain the claim that in the case of episodic memory knowledge of what it was like to apprehend some past event is the knowledge retained, we need to deny that one's knowledge of what it was like to apprehend some past event is simply knowledge of some proposition. But surely 'know what' is propositional knowledge.

I think it may help to compare the case of 'know how'. It has been argued that 'know how', like 'know what', should be thought of as a variety of propositional knowledge. 'S knows how to Φ ', contains an embedded question: 'how does one Φ ?' just as 'S knows what to do' contains an embedded question: 'what should one do?'. In each case to ascribe such knowledge to a subject is to ascribe to the subject knowledge of an answer to the question, and in each case the answer the subject knows is propositional in form. So, the idea is that in the case of know how, what one knows when one knows how to Φ is a proposition of the form 'This is a way of Φ -ing', where the way of Φ -ing is presented under a practical mode of presentation.⁹ Many, I think, share the intuition that there is something unsatisfactory in assimilating know how to straightforward propositional knowledge. Remembering how to do something should not be assimilated to semantic memory – remembering some fact. What is retained in the case of remembering how to do something should not be assimilated to retained propositional knowledge. Procedural memory is to be contrasted with semantic memory.

⁹ See Stanley and Williamson 2001, and see also Snowdon 2003.

In the case of ‘know how’, is the proposition one knows that is an answer to the question ‘how does one Φ ?’ (i.e. the proposition ‘this is a way to Φ ’) the propositional content of a state of knowledge retained over time? As the way of Φ -ing is presented under a practical mode of presentation, one might argue that this state of propositional knowledge lasts only so long as one’s act of Φ -ing. So what then is retained over time? As long as one is able to Φ (or perhaps recollect Φ -ing), one has an ability to do something that puts one in a state of knowledge whose propositional content is a distinctive kind of answer to the question ‘how does one Φ ?’. For one’s ability to Φ makes possible one’s knowing a way of Φ -ing under a practical mode of presentation. So in the case of know how, that which is retained over time is an ability to do something that can put one in a state of knowledge whose propositional content is a distinctive kind of answer to the question, ‘how does one Φ ?’.

I suggest that there is something similar going on in the case of episodic memory. One knows what it was like to apprehend some past event in the sense that one has an ability to do something that can put oneself in a state of knowledge whose propositional content is a distinctive kind of answer to the question, ‘what was it like to apprehend that event?’. The state of knowledge whose propositional content is an answer to the question (the propositional knowledge that ‘this is what it was like to apprehend that event’) obtains in virtue of the occurrence of a phenomenally conscious mental act of recollecting the event and lasts only so long as the phenomenally conscious mental act of recollecting. The obtaining of this state of propositional knowledge requires the occurrence of the act.

We can now understand what is right in Sartre's claim that "nothing can be learned from the image that is not already known", without assimilating episodic memory to semantic memory. What I already know is what it was like to apprehend a particular past event. This knowledge is retained in memory. But this is not to say that this knowledge has been stored as propositional knowledge – and so this is not to say that my act of recollection is simply an act of recollecting some proposition stored in memory. Rather, my retained knowledge of what it was like to apprehend the event is a retained ability to do something that puts me in a state of propositional knowledge whose propositional content is a distinctive kind of answer to the question, 'what was it like to apprehend that event?'. The answer is propositional in form, but the act of recollecting is not an act of recollecting the proposition. It is, rather, an act the occurrence of which is required for the obtaining of the state of knowing that proposition.

These points are relevant to the earlier claim that an act of semantic recollection is a non-successive unity, whereas an act of episodic recollection is an event with duration – with temporal parts. Let us compare the case of 'know how'. The state of one's knowledge that 'this is a way to Φ ' (where the way of Φ -ing is presented under a practical mode of presentation), as a psychological *state*, does not have temporal parts, but the state requires for its obtaining an occurrence that does have temporal parts. Without the occurrence of events with duration, the state does not obtain. So likewise, in the case of episodic recollection the state of one's knowledge that 'this is what it was like to apprehend that event' does not have temporal parts, but this state of knowledge does require for its obtaining an event with temporal parts. This account accommodates the facts that in the case of episodic memory, the act of recollection is

an event with duration, that which is recollected is an event with duration, but that which is retained in memory is knowledge, a standing condition, and not an event with duration.

With this account of the ontology of episodic memory in mind let us return to the issue of the respects in which episodic recollection is like a judgement about the past, and the respects in which it is like an episode of acquaintance with the past.

The Ontology of Episodic Recollection and its Epistemic Status

Although I have argued that episodic recollection is not to be assimilated to a variety of semantic recollection, and so is not a case of judging a proposition about some past event, we can still concede to Sartre a sense in which it is true to say that I cannot recollect what I don't already know. For an act of episodic recollection manifests my knowledge of what it was like to apprehend a particular past occurrence, and this knowledge is retained in memory prior to the act of recollection. However, this retained knowledge is not to be thought of as retained propositional knowledge, but rather a retained ability to do something that puts one in a state of propositional knowledge whose propositional content is a distinctive kind of answer to the question ‘what was it like to apprehend that particular?’ So there is also a sense in which Sartre is right to claim that my act of episodic recollection is constituted by my knowledge. Furthermore, I cannot attend more closely to whatever it is I am recollecting in order to discover more about what happened in the past, I can only perform an act that manifests a richer state of knowledge – knowledge I already possess.¹⁰ So, again,

¹⁰ By talking here of an act manifesting knowledge I already possess, I mean that the act manifests an ability that I already possess and which is defined in terms of knowledge – i.e. the ability to do something that puts one in a state of propositional knowledge – a state of propositional knowledge that requires for its obtaining the occurrence of the act. I am grateful here for the comments of an

Sartre is right in his claim that, “It is true that occasionally a memory image does remain unidentified... But this is simply a determination that lacks an image, and no observation, no matter how prolonged, will yield the knowledge I lack” (p. 13). I discover new things about a past event, not by observing and attending more closely to the events that occurred, but, rather, by doing something that manifests a richer state of knowledge.

What about the question of the respects in which an act of episodic recollection is like an episode of acquaintance with some past event? We need to re-consider the idea that episodic recollection involves a form of mental time-travel. The knowledge that obtains in virtue of the occurrence of an act of episodic recollection is of the form ‘this is what it was like to apprehend that event’, where the demonstrative ‘that event’ refers to the event recollected, and where the demonstrative ‘this’ refers to the phenomenal character of a past event of apprehending that event. That which is recollected is a *particular*, past event – an unrepeatable occurrence – and so something one cannot re-apprehend.¹¹ So the mental act of recollection manifests knowledge of the phenomenal character of a *particular*, past, unrepeatable apprehension of the event, and not simply knowledge of the phenomenal character of a *kind* of apprehension – i.e., it does not simply manifest knowledge of the phenomenal character of the sort of thing that is repeatable. The demonstrative ‘that

anonymous referee who pointed out this need not involve a commitment to the claim that the act manifests the state of propositional knowledge that can only so obtain.

¹¹ There are two types of potential counterexample to this claim: (i) One can re-apprehend an event by, for example, watching it on video, and (ii) One can re-apprehend an event with mirrors suitably placed. In the first case one is not re-apprehending the event. One is, rather, apprehending a distinct event that represents the earlier event. So there is nothing illusory about one’s apprehension. It doesn’t seem to one as if the event one is watching is occurring at a time at which it did not, in fact, occur. In the second kind of case, there is an illusion. It seems to one as if the event one is watching is occurring at the time of apprehension, which it is not. Just as mirrors can give one an illusory experience of the spatial position of an object or event, they can give one an illusory experience of the temporal position of an event.

event' can only refer to a particular, past, unrepeatable occurrence if the act of recollection manifests knowledge of the phenomenal character of a particular, past, unrepeatable apprehension. If the act simply manifests knowledge of the phenomenal character of a *kind* of apprehension, as opposed to knowledge of the phenomenal character of a particular, unrepeatable, past apprehension, then the demonstrative 'that' refers to a *kind* of event, as opposed to a particular, past, unrepeatable event. A mental act that simply manifests one's knowledge of the phenomenal character of a kind of apprehension will be an act that manifests one's knowledge that 'this is what *is* like to apprehend an event of *that kind*'. Therefore, in the case of an act of episodic recollection, a particular, past, unrepeatable, apprehension of an event is represented by the state of knowledge the act manifests. An act that manifests such knowledge will therefore have the phenomenology of an episode of *re-living a particular, past, unrepeatable* apprehension. This gives us the notion of mental time-travel. The phenomenology of the current episode of recollecting is one of now re-living an unrepeatable past episode of apprehending.

Now to the question of the epistemic status of an act of episodic recollection: Is it an event that is either justified or unjustified, like a judgement, or is it neither justified nor unjustified, like an episode of perceptual apprehension? Consider the case of know how once again: The durational events whose occurrence is required for the obtaining of the state of propositional knowledge that 'this is a way to Φ ' (i.e. the events that constitute one's Φ -ing) are not subject to epistemic evaluation, although the state of propositional knowledge the events manifest is subject to epistemic evaluation. So, likewise, an act of episodic recollection is not subject to epistemic evaluation, unlike an act of semantic recollection, although the state the episode

manifests is subject to epistemic evaluation, for it manifests a state of propositional knowledge.¹² In light of this account of the ontology of episodic memory, let us now consider the epistemic role of the act of episodic recollection. How can an act of episodic recollection play a role in justifying judgements one makes about what happened?

The Epistemological Role of Episodic Recollection

If an act of episodic recollection is not subject to epistemic evaluation how then do we explain its epistemological role? I suggest that an act of episodic recollection puts one in a position to make warranted judgements about the past when it is accompanied by knowledge *that* one is recollecting (as opposed to, say, imagining) and knowledge of *what* one is recollecting. First I shall consider the question of how it is that one knows *that* one is recollecting when one intentionally recollects, and in particular I want to focus on the epistemological role of one's intention to recollect.

Velleman contrasts, what he calls, “receptive” knowledge with “directive” knowledge in order to help elucidate the kind of knowledge a subject has of his own intentional actions. To make sense of the distinction, we need to distinguish between a mental state's direction of fit and its direction of guidance. Velleman argues that these two aspects of a mental state have traditionally, and mistakenly, been conflated. This conflation obscures the fact that a subject can attempt to accept what's true by accepting something so as to make it true, and so obscures the fact that knowledge can be directive as well as receptive.

¹² In contrast, an act of semantic recollection inherits its justificatory status from the mental state retained over time that it manifests – the belief with the propositional content recollected. The justificatory status of the belief manifested in an act of semantic recollection can change over time as one acquires or loses defeating counterevidence.

Velleman claims that when a subject chooses to act, the intention to act she thereby acquires has the same direction of fit as belief and not desire. Choosing to act does not simply consist in regarding something as to be arranged. Once a subject has chosen to act, a question has been settled in her mind. As far as she is concerned, she is going to act. Things have been arranged. The proposition that she is going to act is represented by her as true. Although intention has the same direction of fit as ordinary belief, it differs in its direction of guidance. According to Velleman, an attitude's direction of guidance "consists in whether the attitude causes or is caused by what it represents" (2000, p. 25).

Roughly, the idea is that your belief about what you're doing can count as knowledge by being the cause of your doing it. When you choose to do something you form a belief about what you're going to do. The intention you thereby acquire is a kind of self-fulfilling expectation. Your choosing to φ moves you to φ , according to Velleman, because knowing what you are doing is a sub-agential aim regulating your behaviour. You may have a number of motives for doing various things on a particular occasion, but as your behaviour is guided by this sub-agential aim of knowing what you are doing, in the standard case you will be inhibited from doing anything that you do not expect you are going to do, and so your expectation that you are going to do one of them - your choosing to φ - will result in an additional inclination to φ rather than anything else.

This account of how we know what we are doing when we perform various actions is appealing for a number of reasons. It captures the intuitive thought that our

knowledge of what we are doing is not usually a discovery, “because doing it was our idea to begin with” (Velleman, 1989, p. 47). The belief is not reached by observation or inference – it is not prompted by prior evidence – but neither is it entirely unconstrained by evidence. It is not prompted by prior evidence, because your choosing to φ is what makes it true that you φ rather than anything else, and so, as Velleman puts it, “Although the agent’s expectation of acting is a conclusion to which he jumps before the evidence is complete, he jumps with the assurance that the conclusion will achieve verity even as he lands” (1989). The belief is not entirely unconstrained by evidence, because although directive belief is not prompted by prior evidence, it can be defeated by evidence.

Given that your choosing to φ is reliably connected with your φ -ing, the belief about what you’re going to do is usually self-fulfilling, and so, in a sense, self-justifying, but without being infallible. You may choose to φ and it may turn out, for any number of reasons, that you do not end up φ -ing. Choosing to φ does not in itself entail that you will φ , and so the belief that you will φ , which results from your choosing to φ , is not infallible. However, a belief does not need to be infallible in order to be knowledge. If a subject’s choosing to φ is reliably connected with his φ -ing, then when he chooses to φ and this choice is the appropriate cause of his φ -ing, and there are no background beliefs defeating his belief that he is φ -ing, then it may be knowledge. The subject knows what he is about to start doing and so knows what he is doing as he starts the action.

To say that a subject knows what he is doing when he performs a particular action is not to say that the subject makes a series of conscious judgements that accompany the

action as it proceeds. The forming of the choice (or the acquisition of the intention) may be an event – it may be a conscious event – but once the choice has been made, once the intention has been acquired, a subject's thought about what he is doing need not be consciously entertained by him in order for it to be true of him that he knows what he is doing. The subject's belief about what he is doing is a non-occurrent mental state causing his behaviour, guiding his action.

Applying this account of one's knowledge of one's actions to the case of episodic recollection, the idea is that when one chooses to recollect some past event, or when one decides to try to recall what happened on some past occasion, if one can recollect the event, the intention one forms brings about the act of recollection, and thereby constitutes a species of knowledge – directive knowledge – of what it is that one is doing. This knowledge is not grounded in evidence, but it is rationally constrained by one's evidence. For example, the belief that one is recollecting can be undermined by counterevidence one may possess to the effect that no such event took place, or to the effect that one's memory on such matters is unreliable. So although one's directive belief that one is recollecting is not grounded in evidence, it is not infallible and it can be unjustified.

Now to the question of one's knowledge of *what* one is recollecting when one recollects some past event. My intention to recollect constitutes a form knowledge – directive knowledge – of the fact *that* I am recollecting, but how do I know which particular past event I am recollecting? We have said that this knowledge is not acquired via an observational attitude. My identification of that which is recollected is not grounded in the deliverances of an observational attitude. Rather, in virtue of the

occurrence of the act of recollection there obtains a state of knowledge concerning what it is that I am recollecting, and this state of knowledge presents the particular event recollected under a demonstrative mode of presentation. So the act of recollection thereby puts me in a position to make demonstrative judgements targeted on the particular event and individuals recollected.¹³

So let us summarize epistemological role of the various components of this account: I form an intention to recollect and this intention brings about the act of recollection and is thereby a form of directive knowledge of the act. I know what I am doing when the intention to recollect brings about the act of recollecting. This knowledge is not grounded in evidence, but it is rationally constrained by evidence and is subject to epistemic evaluation. The act of recollecting is *not* subject to epistemic evaluation. It is neither justified nor unjustified. It is, however, the object of my directive belief, which is either justified or unjustified, and it is an act that manifests a belief, which is also subject to epistemic evaluation. The belief manifested in the act of recollecting concerns what it was like to apprehend that which is recollected, and the particular recollected is presented under a demonstrative mode of presentation. These two beliefs can together constitute knowledge *that* I am recollecting, and knowledge of *what* I am recollecting.

¹³ An anonymous referee raised the following question: why isn't it the case that one's intention constitutes knowledge not just that one is recollecting, but also of which event one is recollecting? Under the account I am suggesting when one recollects a particular past event one is in a state in which the particular past event is presented under a certain demonstrative mode of presentation – a state involving a mode of presentation of the event that is not available to one without the occurrence of the act of recollection. So one's intention to recollect prior to the act of recollection cannot involve the presentation of the particular event under the same demonstrative mode.

So although the act of episodic recollection is not itself subject to epistemic evaluation, in performing the mental act I know *that* I am recollecting, for the act of recollecting is brought about by my belief that I am recollecting, and I know *what* I am recollecting, for in virtue of the occurrence of the act there obtains a belief about the past event recollected in which the event recollected is presented under a demonstrative mode of presentation. This knowledge that I am recollecting, and of what I am recollecting, puts me in a position to make warranted judgements about the past – in particular, demonstrative judgements about particular past occurrences and the individuals involved in them. So the act of episodic recollection provides me with a distinctive source of warrant for judgements about the past, judgements whose contents can be retained over time in the form of semantic memory.

This is an account of the epistemological role of an act of episodic recollection when all is going well, but I now want to consider the possibility of certain forms of failure of self-knowledge in this domain.

Episodic Recollection and Self-Knowledge

The account of the epistemological role of episodic recollection I have outlined rests heavily on the idea that such acts can put one in a position to make warranted judgements about the past when accompanied self-knowledge – knowledge of what one is doing. And the account of self-knowledge I have outlined depends on the epistemological role of intention. But why think that such phenomenally conscious mental acts cannot occur without a prior intention to recollect? An act of episodic recollection can be brought about by the prior intention to recollect, and when it is caused in this way, the intention can be a form of directive knowledge concerning

what it is that one is doing. However, we have seen no reason to think that this is the only way in which such an act can be caused. What would happen if such an act were not caused by a prior intention? What would be one's epistemic state? Compare the two following passages, the first in which William James describes the phenomenology of an act of intentional recollection – trying to recollect something, and the second in which Nabakov describes an episode of unbidden recollection:

Suppose we try to recall a forgotten name. The state of our consciousness is peculiar. There is a gap therein; but no mere gap. It is a gap that is intensely active. A sort of wraith of the name is in it, beckoning us in a given direction, making us at moments tingle with the sense of our closeness, and then letting us sink back without the longed-for term... Everyone must know the tantalizing effect of the blank rhythm of some forgotten verse, restlessly dancing in one's mind, striving to be filled out with words." (James 1890, p. 243-44)

In casual flash, for no reason at all, he recollected a way Olga had of lifting her left eyebrow when she looked at herself in the mirror. Do all people have that? A face, a phrase, a landscape, an air bubble from the past suddenly floating up as if released by the head warden's child from a cell in the brain while the mind is at work on some totally different matter? Something of the sort occurs just before falling asleep when what you think you are thinking is not at all what you think. Or two parallel passenger trains of thought, one overtaking the other. (Nabakov, *Bend Sinister*, p. 179)

When an episodic recollection occurs unbidden, a phenomenally conscious mental act occurs, and in virtue of the occurrence of this mental act there obtains a state of knowledge of the phenomenal character of an apprehension of a particular past event. There's a sense in which the unbidden act of recollection offers a form of cognitive contact with the particular recollected, for in virtue of the occurrence of the act there obtains a belief about that particular presented under a demonstrative mode of presentation, which thereby puts one in a position to make demonstrative judgements about that particular. But one lacks directive knowledge of what it is that one is doing, at least initially, and perhaps only for a fraction of a second. What happens when the question of what one was doing occurs to one? In attempting to answer the question, does one simply let one's mental activity continue and attend to what is going on? To quote James, this would be like trying to "seize the spinning top to catch its motion", simultaneously adopting attitude of both agent and observer of the mental act.¹⁴ Attending more closely to the mental act is not a possible source of knowledge here. One cannot observe one's own phenomenally conscious mental act, and one cannot attend more closely to it. One can, however, attempt to interpret the act, and hence draw conclusions about what it was that one was doing, and the route to interpretative self-knowledge here may be the quick and easy one of instantaneous recognition of the object recollected, as in the case described by Nabakov. But the route to self-knowledge here is not one of observation, and it is not grounded in directive knowledge. And note that when the route to interpretative self-knowledge is not so quick and easy (was I recollecting something, or just imagining?), one cannot try to discover what one was doing by trying to do the same thing again. In order to attempt

¹⁴ William James makes the following remarks concerning the attempt to introspect the stream of one's conscious thoughts: "If they are but flights to a conclusion, stopping them to look at them before the conclusion is reached is really annihilating them... The attempt at introspective analysis in these cases is in fact like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks." (p. 236-7)

the same thing again, one will have to already know what it was that one was doing. One can intentionally recollect the mental act, but this will not provide one with directive knowledge of whatever it was that one *was* doing. Rather, it provides one with directive knowledge concerning what one *is* doing, namely recollecting the mental act. This can provide one with a source of evidence about that act of recollection, but again, interpretation is ultimately the route to such knowledge.

Once one knows (via the interpretative route to self-knowledge) that one was recollecting a past occurrence, presumably one is then in a position to recollect intentionally that past occurrence at will, and these intentional acts of recollection are a source of warrant for judgements about the past. So once one knows (perhaps via interpretation of the unbidden act of imagery) that one was recollecting a past occurrence, one has available a distinctive kind of source of warrant for judgements about the past – a source of warrant one was previously lacking. This is to re-emphasize the idea that in the case of episodic recollection, directive knowledge of what one is doing plays a fundamental explanatory role. So, for instance, a skeptical argument targeted specifically at episodic recollection would have to challenge the idea that one really does know what one is doing when one takes oneself to be recollecting some past event. As such directive knowledge is not grounded in evidence, although rationally constrained by one's evidence, such an argument would have to take a rather different form from one targeted at perception as a source of knowledge.¹⁵

¹⁵ One can misremember past events, and one can have apparent memories of things that didn't actually happen. So can this fact be exploited in order to generate something akin to the argument from illusion and thereby motivate a form of 'consequent' scepticism? What happens when we try to apply something like Robinson's causal argument (see Robinson 1994) in order to generate the generalising move of the argument from illusion? Consider a case of genuine recollection. Now consider a situation in which one stimulates the same subject's brain directly in order to induce the same kind of proximate

Conclusion

To summarize the account of the epistemological role of episodic recollection I have been recommending: On the question of whether, in the case of episodic recollection, one already knows what one recollects, I have suggested that while what one recollects is a particular past event, what one already knows prior to the act of recollection is what it was like to apprehend that particular event. This retained knowledge, however, is not retained propositional knowledge, but rather the retained ability to do something that puts one in a state of propositional knowledge whose propositional content is a distinctive kind of answer to the question ‘what was it like to apprehend that particular event?’ The act of episodic recollection is, therefore, not to be assimilated to a variety of semantic recollection, and so the act of episodic recollection is not subject to epistemic evaluation, which is to say, it is neither justified nor unjustified. The act of episodic recollection provides one with a distinctive source of warrant for judgements about the past when it is accompanied by knowledge that one is recollecting, as well as knowledge of what one is recollecting. One’s knowledge that one is recollecting is directive knowledge – it is not grounded in evidence, but it is rationally constrained by one’s evidence. One’s knowledge of what one is recollecting is provided by one’s knowledge of what it was like to apprehend the particular now recollected that obtains in virtue of the occurrence of the act of episodic recollection, and which presents the particular recollected under a demonstrative mode of presentation.

cause. Can one do this in the absence of the apparent object recollected? Only if one has the power to change history. Whenever one directly induces the same kind of proximate cause one will have no reason to think that the subject isn’t still genuinely recollecting that past event.

This account, I've suggested, is in agreement with Wittgenstein and Sartre's claim that when one recollects, one's attitude to that which is recollected cannot be one of observation. I cannot attend more closely to whatever it is I am recollecting in order to discover more about what happened in the past, I can only perform an act that manifests a richer state of knowledge – knowledge I already possess. However, I have also suggested that the account can accommodate the notion that episodic recollection involves a form of mental time-travel, for the phenomenally conscious act of recollection manifests one's knowledge of the phenomenal character of a *particular, past, unrepeatable* episode of apprehension. As a particular, past, unrepeatable, apprehension of an event is represented by the state of knowledge the act manifests, the mental act that manifests such knowledge will have the phenomenology of an episode of re-living a particular, past, unrepeatable apprehension.

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