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Mental Time Travel in Episodic Recollection

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Some philosophers and psychologists suggest that the episodic recollection of some past event or action that you have witnessed or performed is analogous to traveling back in time. It is a form of ‘mental time travel.’ Some also suggest that just as episodic recollection can be regarded as a form of mental time travel, so too can episodes of imagining future events. For example, Thomas Suddendorf and Michael Corballis suggest we have a “general faculty of mental time travel that allows us not only to go back in time, but also to foresee, plan, and shape virtually any specific future event” (2007: 299).¹ However, it is not entirely clear how we are to understand and unpack this notion of mentally traveling backward and forward in time.

On first reflection there is something puzzling to the idea. One might think that all conscious mental acts fall within the subject’s experienced present and that the experienced present associated with any such mental act is tethered to the moment at which that conscious mental act occurs. Such conscious mental acts may be tensed thoughts about the past and future, but it is not at all clear that such tensed thoughts can themselves amount to anything like a form of mental time travel. Indeed I take it that part of the appeal of invoking the notion of mental time travel is to signal that certain ways of relating to the past and future (through episodic memory and imagination) are importantly different from merely thinking about the past and future by entertaining tensed thoughts about earlier and later times. So what sense can be made of the proposal that episodic recollection makes possible a form of mental time travel?

An answer to that question, I suggest, will be intimately bound up with the question of how we are to understand the role of imagery in episodic recollection. Moreover, one’s stance on the role of imagery in episodic recollection will in turn have a significant bearing on the position one adopts in debates about the similarities between, and differences between, episodic recollection and imagination.² So the question of how we should understand the proposal that episodic recollection provides for a capacity to travel mentally back in time is not without significance. In this chapter I shall start by introducing and drawing out the consequences of one way of accommodating the proposal. This “re-enactment” view, as I shall label

it, can be motivated by working through various puzzles associated with the suggestion that episodic recollection amounts to a form of mental time travel. However, while it is a view that is not obviously untenable, I think that there is a preferable alternative, and in the remainder of the chapter I shall work toward elaborating that alternative. That elaboration will explain and draw on connections between the notion that absence can be made present in perceptual imagination, and the notion that the past can be made present in episodic recollection.

1 The Re-enactment View of Mental Time Travel

Sometimes the gloss that is put on the idea that episodic recollection amounts to a form of mental time travel invokes a notion of being “mentally transported” to an episode or experience in one’s past. That idea is captured in John Sutton’s remark that “in remembering episodes or experiences in my personal past . . . I am mentally transported away from the social and physical setting in which I am currently embedded.”³ Sometimes the gloss that is put on the appeal to mental time travel invokes the idea that episodic recollection allows one to “re-experience” or “re-live” episodes or experiences in one’s past. For example, Endel Tulving famously claimed that episodic memory “makes possible mental time travel through subjective time, from the present to the past, thus allowing one to re-experience . . . one’s own previous experiences” (2002: 5). One way of connecting those two ideas (the idea of being mental transported across time, and the idea of re-experiencing past events) is as follows. The notion of time travel brings with it the idea of a form of transportation to another temporal location that can make that temporal destination *temporally present* to the time traveler. If episodic recollection can in some sense enable one to re-live or re-experience some past experience, then that past episode can thereby be made present to one in a way that is akin to being mentally transported to its temporal location. I take it that something like that idea lies behind a suggestion that Hopkins makes as to how we might unpack this talk of mental time travel. He writes,

[J]ust as travelling back in time would allow us to experience the events then occurring, so this form of memory gives us access to episodes from our past in a way that is like experiencing them. This distinguishes episodic memory from memory in factual (or ‘semantic’) form. Either might concern an event from one’s past, but, while entertaining factual memories of the event is to call to mind what one believes about it, summoning an episodic memory is something like living it anew.

(2014: 313–14)

What sense can be made of this idea that episodic recollection makes possible the “re-experiencing” of past events? One might think that it is the imagistic

elements of episodic recollection that provide for that distinctive way of “re-experiencing” past events. At its simplest the thought would be that our acts of perceptually imagining objects and events are phenomenologically similar to our conscious perceptual experiences of objects and events; and since imagining an event is somewhat like actually experiencing the event, the fact that episodic recollection involves imagery makes apt the suggestion that this is a form of memory that allows one to “re-experience” events from one’s past. In slightly more developed form, the proposal might be that when one recollects a past event, one reconstructs that past event with imagery, and one thereby simulates a past experience of the event. As the current act of recollection is something like the present simulation of a previous experience, it serves to make present the event recollected in a way that is akin to experiencing it now, and hence living through it, once again.⁴

A concern that might be raised for this proposal is the following. If an episode of recollection serves to make present a past event by simulating a *current* experience of that past event, then that conscious act of simulation will thereby represent that past event as concurrent with the episode of recollection. But this would be to misrepresent the temporal location of the recollected event, for of course the event recollected occurs earlier than the episode of recollecting it. The most straightforward reply to this worry is to say that when one simulates an experience in recollecting a past event, the past event is not itself represented as concurrent with the act of recollection. Rather, what happens is this. One imagines an event that is of the *same kind* as the event previously witnessed, and in so imagining, an event of that *kind* is thereby made present to one, and it is this imaginative act that simulates one’s past experience of the previously witnessed event.

A subsequent concern that might attend this way of defending the proposal is that it may end up making the imagery associated with episodic recollection a mere accompaniment of the act of remembering. The concern I have in mind here is connected with remarks that Russell made when outlining his early account of memory in *The Problems of Philosophy* and in his 1913 manuscript *Theory of Knowledge*.⁵ In *The Problems of Philosophy* he writes,

There is some danger of confusion as to the nature of memory, owing to the fact that memory of an object is apt to be accompanied by an image of the object, and yet the image cannot be what constitutes memory. This is easily seen by merely noticing that the image is in the present, whereas what is remembered is known to be in the past.
(1912: 114–5)

In the same vein, in *Theory of Knowledge* he writes,

In the first place, we must not confound true memory with present images of past things. I may call up now before my mind an image of a

man I saw yesterday; the image is not in the past, and I certainly experience it now, but the image itself is not memory. The remembering refers to something known to be in the past, to what I saw yesterday, not to the image which I call up now.

(1992: 9–10)

In response to this concern it can be said that the generation of imagery in episodic recollection can itself be regarded as an achievement of memory, and not merely an accompaniment of memory, if the generation of the imagery depends, in the right way, on the relevant past perception and is controlled by information that is retained as a result of that past perception. Compare the following example that Martin and Deutscher discuss in their seminal 1966 paper ‘Remembering’:

Suppose that someone asks a painter to paint an imaginary scene. The painter agrees to do this and, taking himself to be painting some purely imaginary scene, paints a detailed picture of a farmyard . . . His parents then recognize the picture as a very accurate representation of a scene which the painter saw just once in his childhood . . . Although the painter sincerely believes that his work is purely imaginary, and represents no real scene, the amazed observers have all the evidence needed to establish that in fact he is remembering a scene from childhood.

(1966: 167–8)

Here we are encouraged to acknowledge that this act of painting is an achievement of memory precisely because the act depends in the right way on the painter’s past perception, even though the painter hasn’t intentionally drawn on knowledge that he has retained as a result of that past perception. So likewise, we might have similar reasons for thinking that the generation of imagery in episodic recollection can itself be regarded as an achievement of memory, and not simply some mental activity that is the mere accompaniment of some other cognitive act that is the genuine act of remembering.

However, the comparison with Martin and Deutscher’s well-known example of the painter might give one pause to wonder whether the appeal to imagery in episodic recollection can itself be enough to secure the idea that this form of memory is akin to a form of mental time travel. It is not at all compelling to think that the painter is mentally transported to any past temporal location when he is painting the scene he previously witnessed. So why should we think that in a case in which the generation of imagery depends, in the right way, on some past perception, the effect is to mentally transport the subject to some earlier temporal location?

In response it could be conceded that the generation of imagery will not itself suffice to mentally transport one to an earlier time. For that would require a further act of imagining. In particular it would require the

cognitive act of imagining or supposing *that* one's current act of perceptual imagination is a past experience of an event.⁶ We might call the account that incorporates that idea a "re-enactment" view of the mental time travel involved in episodic recollection, for it offers a model of mental time travel that is comparable to activity engaged in by those who re-enact historical battles. Those who enjoy that hobby re-create past events by doing things now, and the things they now do are presented to them as temporally present. But they also pretend, or imagine or treat what they now do as some past event. So likewise, according to this "re-enactment" view of the mental time travel involved in episodic recollection, when you recollect some past event you generate some mental imagery, and that act is presented to you as present, but you also pretend or imagine or suppose that this present act is a past experience of an event. That proposal suggests that there is a direct correspondence between mental time travel in episodic recollection and mental time travel in the imagining of future events (or past events). In all cases one mentally transports oneself to another temporal location through imaginatively projecting oneself to that location, and one imaginatively projects oneself across time by imagining *that* one occupies the relevant temporal location as one engages in acts of perceptual imagination.⁷

A defender of this sort of account of episodic recollection might say the following in its favor. The proposal accommodates the idea that in acts of episodic recollection an event-kind is made present in perceptual imagination in a way that is akin to simulating a perceptual experience of that event-kind; and this accommodates the idea that episodic recollection is somewhat like experiencing, or living through, that event-kind once again. It also accommodates the idea that this is an achievement of memory. Moreover, it accommodates the idea that one is mentally transported to another temporal location; and since the mechanism of mental transportation is a cognitive act of *imagining* or *supposing that* the current act of perceptual imagination is a past experience of an event, the proposal avoids committing to the idea that episodic recollection invariably misrepresents the temporal location of the event recollected.

However, detractors of this sort of proposal may complain that the account falters in taking the sensory aspects of episodic recollection to concern the present, and in assuming that it takes a cognitive act of imagining and/or a belief in order to connect the episode of recollection with some past event. A related complaint might target the account's proposal that the sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern an event-kind, rather than a particular past event. Some argue that it is through relating one to a *particular* past event that the sensory aspects of episodic recollection afford one a means of re-apprehending that past event—a way of re-apprehending that past event that can account for one's ability to retain cognitive contact with that individual event, and demonstratively refer to it in a distinctive way.⁸ But that proposal seems difficult to accommodate if one holds that (a) the sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern an event-kind rather

than a particular past event and (b) it is only one's beliefs about particular events in one's past that makes it possible for one to cognitively relate those sensory aspects of recollection to particular past events.

These considerations may not tell decisively against what I have called the "re-enactment" account of episodic recollection. But if one is sympathetic to such complaints, one might think that the source of the account's error lies in the way that it takes too seriously this talk of mental time travel. In its attempt to accommodate that metaphor, it proposes that in episodic recollection an event is represented as temporally present. That proposal in turn leads to the suggestion that the sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern the present and the suggestion that the sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern an event-kind, rather than a particular past event. The most obvious way to avoid such results is to be skeptical of the metaphor. And indeed some have expressed such skepticism. For example, Alex Byrne writes,

[the] striking metaphor of "mental time travel" is misleading. Time travellers have no special experience of the past—when Dr. Who steps out of his TARDIS in the Silurean Period he experiences the events going on then as present. But in episodic recollection events appear as past.
(2010: 25)

And in a similar vein, Mohan Matthen writes,

It is phenomenologically inaccurate to claim, as Tulving (perhaps inadvertently) does, that the memory . . . presents itself as about the present . . . and must therefore be referred to the past by an accompanying belief. Yet that is the implication of the supposition that episodic memory presents itself in just the same way as the original experience. In an important respect, episodic memory is nothing like "time travel." If I literally travelled back in time to yesterday's lunch, I would not only have an experience that felt that it is about the present: in fact, it would be about the present.
(2010: 8)

In what follows I shall be arguing that these concerns with the re-enactment account of episodic recollection need not lead one to reject as inapt the metaphor of mental time travel. One need not retreat to a view on which episodic recollection is no more like mental time travel than is tensed thought about the past, for there is an alternative way of understanding the idea that there is a distinctive respect in which a past event is made present in episodic recollection. This alternative can accommodate the proposal that episodic recollection amounts to a form of mental time travel, but it can do so without committing to the re-enactment account and its problematic features.

I shall be suggesting that to make sense of the distinctive way in which the past is made present in episodic recollection we first need to address a related issue about perceptual imagination: we need to make sense of the distinctive way in which *absent* objects and events can be made present in perceptual imagination. Sartre's work, *The Imaginary*, offers important insights on that very issue. In following the trail of Sartre's insights, I shall develop a proposal about the representation of time in perceptual imagination. This will then be applied in an account of the representation of time in episodic recollection. As we shall see, that account offers a way of accommodating the proposal that episodic recollection amounts to a form a mental time travel, but without committing to a "re-enactment" view.

2 Absence Made Present in Perceptual Imagination

In *The Imaginary*, Sartre suggests that the act of perceptually imagining an object can have much in common with the perception of an image of an object—e.g., the experience of looking at a photo or caricature of someone you know. According to Sartre, "These various cases all act to 'make present' an object" (2005: 19). Looking at a photo of Pierre, and also imagining Pierre in sensory imagination can serve to 'make present' Pierre. However, in each case Pierre is not there and we know he is not there. That latter point is connected with a characteristic of imagination that Sartre discusses in a section of his book entitled *The imaging consciousness posits its object as a nothingness*. There Sartre suggests "The characteristic of the intentional object of the imaging consciousness is that the object is not there and is posited as such" (2005: 13). He writes that imagination "gives its object as not being"—as "absent to intuition" (2005: 14).

A question to which this naturally gives rise is the following. How are we to understand the respect in which the object of imagination is "made present" to one when one imagines it, granting that the object imagined is not literally made present, and is given as 'not there'? Consider first the experience of looking at a photograph of your friend. You see the absent friend in something that is present but not identical to your friend—i.e., the photograph. There may be a respect in which the absent object (your friend) is 'made present' by your looking at the photograph and seeing your friend in the photograph. But in this case, there are two objects you are aware of—the photo as well as your friend. One of them is present and one of them is absent. If we were to pursue too closely the similarity between the act of perceptually imagining your absent friend and the experience of looking at a photo of your absent friend, we run the risk of reifying mental images as objects of awareness in imagination, and that is something that Sartre warns against. He writes,

Whether I perceive or imagine that chair, the object of my perception and that of my [imagining] are identical: it is that straw-bottomed chair

on which I sit. It is simply that consciousness is related to this same chair in two different ways.

(2005: 7)

When discussing the notion of a mental image of Pierre as one imagines Pierre, he writes,

To tell the truth, the expression ‘mental image’ gives rise to confusion. It would be better to say ‘consciousness of Pierre-as-imagined’ or “imaging consciousness of Pierre.”

(2005: 7)

The imaging consciousness that I have of Pierre is not a consciousness of an image of Pierre: Pierre is directly reached, my attention is not directed at an image, but at an object.

(2005: 7)

If we follow Sartre in this rejection of the reification of mental images, we can qualify our question as follows. In the case of perceptual imagination, how might we accommodate the respect in which the imagined object is both ‘made present’ and ‘given as absent’ without reifying a mental image and positing two objects—e.g., as well as Pierre, “a certain portrait of Pierre in consciousness”? (2005: 6)

The solution to that puzzle, I think, lies in explaining what is correct in a further suggestion that Sartre makes. This is the suggestion that “the time of the object as imaged is an irreality” (2005: 129). Sartre suggests that in perceptual imagination, “There is an absenteeism of time as of space” (2005: 131). This involves denying that “the time of the flowing of the image consciousness is the same as the time of the imaged object” (2005: 129). The time of imagining and the imagined time are, Sartre says, “radically separated” (2005: 129). I think Sartre is on to something important here, and what I think is correct in Sartre’s proposal can be approached by considering two further characteristics of the phenomenology of perceptual imagination that Sartre points to. First, his suggestion that imagining consciousness is given to one as an act of ‘spontaneity,’⁹ and second, his suggestion that there is something perspectival in perceptual imagination that is connected with what is perspectival in perception.¹⁰ I shall now explore each of those suggestions in some detail, starting with the claim about the ‘spontaneity’ of imagination.

2.1 *The ‘Spontaneity’ of Imagination*

How should one go about characterizing the distinction between receptivity and spontaneity, if one thinks that perception is an act of receptivity, whereas imagination is an act of spontaneity? One shouldn’t simply say

this: perception is receptive in so far as it is passive, where ‘passive’ means the experience ‘occurs unbidden,’ and/or is ‘not subject to the will.’ That doesn’t suffice to capture the kind of passivity that is distinctive of a ‘receptive’ faculty, for acts of perceptual imagination can occur unbidden and be nonagential, and moreover, agency can be exercised over one’s receptive faculty. However, there is, nonetheless, a difference in the way we are able to exercise agency over each (perception and imagination) that does have to do with a distinctive respect in which receptive occurrence is passive. This in turn, I suggest, is connected with the distinctive temporal phenomenology of receptive occurrence in the stream of consciousness. In summary my proposal is this. (1) There is a respect in which the receptivity of perception is reflected in its phenomenology—and in particular in aspects of its temporal phenomenology. (2) This is relevant to a respect in which, from the subject’s point of view, distinctive constraints are operative on the way in which she can exercise agency over this ‘receptive’ aspect of mind. (3) The relevant constraints aren’t operative when it comes to the agency we are able to exercise over nonperceptual elements of the stream of consciousness, such as imagination. I shall now explain each of these claims in turn, starting with claim (1)—the suggestion that the receptivity of perception is reflected in aspects of its temporal phenomenology.

In the case of perception, it seems to one as though the temporal location of one’s perceptual experience depends on the temporal location of whatever it is that one’s experience is an experience of. This is connected with the following point: in the normal case, in explaining why the perception occurs when it occurs, one cites the temporal location of the object of experience. Contrast here the exercise of one’s ability to recollect facts or past events, imagine or think about things. In explaining why these mental acts occur when they occur one doesn’t cite the temporal locations of the intentional objects of the acts, unless one is explaining the occurrence of a particular kind of perceptually based thinking.¹¹ In general, when asking why a mental episode occurs when it occurs, in the case of receptive occurrence we cite the temporal location of the intentional object, and in the case of a nonreceptive occurrence we do not.

There is a respect in which the temporal location of one’s perception seems to one to be passive with respect to the temporal location of its object. So it is not just that in the case of perceptual experience a mental episode occurs unbidden, for this can equally be true of other mental acts, including conscious cognitive acts, such as conscious thoughts, as well as acts of perceptual imagination. In the case of perceptual experience, what is distinctive is this: from the subject’s point of view, the course taken by her experience depends on, and is determined by, how things are now with the object of experience. There is then a distinctive sense in which such perceptual occurrences are to be thought of as passive effects on us. In the normal case, perceptual experience of an object is causally sustained by its object. We don’t find an analogue of this in the case of conscious activity

that isn't perceptual, or perceptually based, such as conscious imagination, conscious recollection, or conscious calculation and deliberation.¹²

Let us now move to claim (2). This is the suggestion that the way the receptivity of perception is reflected in aspects of its temporal phenomenology is relevant to a respect in which, from the subject's point of view, distinctive constraints are operative on the way in which she can exercise agency over this 'receptive' aspect of mind.

From the subject's point of view, the only way in which she can exercise agency over the course taken by her perceptual experience is by exercising agency over the obtaining of a relation to the object of perception—by initiating and/or sustaining a relation to the object of experience—e.g., looking at it, watching it, attending to it. In so doing, the subject exercises agency over the course of her perceptual experience by determining which objects, features etc. now affect her—i.e., by determining which objects now determine the course taken by her perceptual experience. And from the subject's point of view it seems as if the following constraint operates on the way in which she can exercise agency over the obtaining of this relation: the temporal location of the obtaining of the relation depends on the temporal location of the object to which she is so related. From the subject's point of view, she can only be so related to what is now present (in the temporal sense). This is a distinctive constraint on the way in which agency can be exercised with respect to the receptive faculty, and doesn't apply to other aspects of mind.

Moving on the claim (3), we can see that this constraint isn't operative when it comes to the agency we are able to exercise over nonperceptual elements of the stream of consciousness, such as conscious thinking, imagining, and recollecting. In the case of conscious thinking, imagining, and recollecting, the temporal locations of the mental acts involved are not determined by the temporal locations of their intentional objects.¹³ For example, the course taken by one's conscious thinking is not determined by the temporal location of what one thinks about. One's thinking can range over the past, the future, and the atemporal, as well as the present.

In summary, the following phenomenological claim is being proposed about perception, or sensibility, as receptive faculty: from the subject's point of view, the domain of sensibility is restricted to items that fall within the bounds of the 'temporal present.' This constrains the way in which one can exercise agency over this receptive faculty. Spontaneity is not so restricted. In that respect, spontaneity is 'free and spontaneous' in a way that our receptive faculty of sensibility is not.

I now want to move on to Sartre's suggestion that there is something perspectival in perceptual imagination that is connected with what is perspectival in perception. Discussions of this idea usually focus on aspects of spatial representation, but I think we also need to consider the nature of *temporal* perspective in perception and its analogue in perceptual imagination. However, that will first require clarifying the respect in which perceptual experience is associated with a temporal point of view.

2.2 *Temporal Perspective in Perceptual Awareness*

There is a respect in which perceptual experience doesn't seem to be temporally perspectival in quite the way that some perceptual experience seems spatially perspectival—for example the way vision seems to be spatially perspectival. In the case of vision, the spatial point of view afforded by one's experience does phenomenologically seem to be perspectival in the following respect: it seems to involve the perception of X from Y, where X and Y are spatial locations, and where X is not identical to Y. Whereas, the temporal point of view that is afforded by perception does not phenomenologically seem to be perspectival in that way. That is to say, it doesn't seem to involve the perception of X from Y, where X and Y are temporal locations, and where X is not identical to Y. Perceptual experience does seem to feature objects of awareness that are non-instantaneous. So there is a respect in which perceptual experience does seem to afford conscious awareness of an interval of time. However, phenomenologically speaking, it doesn't seem as though it affords one a perceptual point of view on that interval of time from a temporal location that is distinct from that interval of time (e.g., from a temporal location that falls within that interval of time). How then should we understand the respect in which perceptual awareness of the relevant interval of time nonetheless brings with it something like a temporal perspective?

I suggest that the following two negative phenomenological points can be made about the interval of time one seems to be afforded conscious awareness of in perception. (i) The boundaries of the temporal interval do not seem to mark out for their subject the boundaries of time. This is connected with the Kantian claim that in vision, the region of space that you seem to be aware of is presented as a sub-region of a region of space; and likewise, the temporal interval you are consciously aware of is presented as a sub-interval of an interval of time. (ii) The boundaries of the temporal interval do not mark out for their subject the temporal boundaries of their experience—i.e., boundaries of the temporal interval do not mark out for their subject the beginning and endpoints of their perceptual experience. For example, if I am continuously watching a continuously moving object over some extended period of time, just as it doesn't seem to me as though the object stops moving at sub-intervals of that extended period of time, it doesn't seem to me as though my experience of the object stops occurring at sub-intervals of that extended period of time.

To these negative remarks about the phenomenology we can add the following more positive remarks about the interval of time one seems to be afforded conscious awareness of in perception. There is an asymmetry in one's psychological orientation to what falls on either side of the boundaries of the relevant interval of time. This asymmetry in one's psychological orientation to what falls on either side the boundaries of the relevant interval of time amounts to a tensed temporal orientation to the immediate past and

immediate future. That is to say, the boundaries of the relevant interval of time mark out for the subject of experience the boundaries between past and future. In consequence, everything that falls within the temporal interval is given as falling within an interval of time that intervenes between past and future. So everything that falls within the interval is thereby experienced by one as temporally present, insofar as it is experienced as falling within an interval of time that intervenes between what is given to one as past and future. It is this asymmetry in one's psychological orientation to what falls on either side of the interval—an asymmetry that constitutes a tensed temporal orientation to the past and future—provides for a sense in which perceptual awareness of an interval of time brings with it something like a temporal perspective.¹⁴

Now let us return to the idea that there is something perspectival in perceptual imagination that is connected with what is perspectival in perception—starting with some of the more familiar claims about spatial representation in perception and imagination.

2.3 Spatial and Temporal Perspectives in Perceptual Imagination

When a subject sensorily imagines a scene, she typically imagines a spatial point of view on objects within the imagined scene. For example, in visualizing an array of objects, some objects may be imagined as being to left, and others to the right, from an imagined point of view. In saying that the spatial point of view, and not just the array of objects, is itself imagined, I mean the following. The center of origin of the spatial point of view from which objects are visualized to the left and right is not determined by the actual spatial location and orientation of the subject who is visualizing. For example, suppose you are lying in bed on your back with your head facing toward the ceiling, and suppose that, so situated, you close your eyes and visualize a mountain range. You do not thereby imagine the mountain range as occupying a spatial location relative to your actual location—i.e., somewhere above the spatial location that is actually occupied by your bed. If you happen to move your head as you visualize that scene, you do not thereby imagine a change in the spatial location of the scene you visualize. As you visualize, any change in your actual spatial location is consistent with no change in the imagined spatial location of the scene you imagine, and consistent with no change in the spatial location of the origin of the imagined point of view from which aspects of the scene are imagined as being to the left and right. Suppose that you stop visualizing a mountain range and instead start visualizing a beach. In such a case there may be nothing to determine the represented spatial relations between these imagined scenes—i.e., the mountain range and the beach—at least not if that question is not settled by your intentions in so imagining.

These aspects of spatial representation in imagination can be explained by the following proposal: in imagining an object or event, one imagines (and

thereby represents) a *perceptual perspective* on that object or event. Suppose we agree with Sartre that an act of imagining is an act of spontaneity. What is now being suggested is this. When one imagines an object, that act of imagining is an act of spontaneity that represents a perceptual perspective on that object. So it is an act of spontaneity that represents a perspective on the intentional object that is afforded by an act of receptivity. As the act of imagining is an act of spontaneity, its temporal location is not determined by (and doesn't seem to its subject to be determined by) the temporal location of its intentional object. But by representing a perspective on the object that is afforded by an act of receptivity, it represents a temporal perspective on the object that is afforded by an act of receptivity. Which is to say, it represents a temporal perspective that presents that object as *temporally present*.

As the temporal location of the act of imagining is not determined by the temporal location of its intentional object, the temporal location of the represented perceptual perspective is also not determined by the temporal location of the act of imagining (and hence needn't be presented as coincident with the temporal location of the act of imagining). So in the case of imagination, the represented temporal location of the represented temporal present is not determined by (and hence needn't be presented as coincident with) the temporal location of the act of imagining. Putting all this together delivers the following proposal: The act of imagining is the representation of a temporal present, and the represented temporal location of that represented temporal present is not determined by the temporal location of the act of imagining.

For instance, when you visualize a friend walking toward you, there is a respect in which the successive temporal parts of her approach are each imagined as being temporally present—e.g., now she is walking toward the traffic light, now she stops at the traffic lights, now she is crossing the road, and so on. However, the temporal location of your act of imagining does not determine a represented temporal location of the event you imagine. That is to say, when you imagine your friend walking toward you, you needn't thereby be imagining that her approach occurs at the actual time of your act of imagining. You could be imagining a future encounter, or you could be imagining a past encounter you wished for, and indeed the question of the time of the imagined event could be left entirely open.

Note that the thesis being proposed is not that the represented temporal location of an intentional object of one's imagining cannot be determined by anything. Clearly this can be determined by one's intentions in so imagining. One can intend to imagine a future event, intend to imagine a past event, or intend to imagine a present event. But the key point for our purposes is this: the represented temporal location of the intentional object of imagination is not determined by anything that's independent of one's intentions in so imagining. In particular, it isn't determined by the temporal location of the act of imagining. This is what I take to be correct in Sartre's suggestion that

the “the time of the object as imaged is an irreality,” and what is correct in his proposal that we should deny that “the time of the flowing of the image consciousness is the same as the time of the imaged object.”¹⁵

We are now in a position to provide an answer to the Sartrean question I posed earlier about the way in which absence can be made present in perceptual imagination: in the case of perceptual imagination, how do we accommodate both ‘presence’ and ‘absence’—the respect in which the imagined object is both ‘made present’ and yet ‘given as absent,’ as ‘not there’—without reifying the mental image and positing two objects? First, consider what we are now in a position to say about the distinctive respect in which in perceptual imagination the intentional object is ‘made present.’ Imagination represents a temporal perspective on its intentional object. It represents the temporal perspective afforded by an act of receptivity. That represented temporal perspective is one that presents the intentional object of imagination as ‘temporally present.’ And it is in that respect that imagination provides one with a distinctive way of ‘making present’ its intentional object. Now consider what we can also say about the respect in which the intentional object that is ‘made present’ in imagination is nonetheless given as ‘not there.’ The temporal present that is represented in imagination isn’t presented as coincident with one’s actual present—i.e., the actual time of one’s act of imagining.

This answer to the Sartrean question about the way in which absence can be made present in perceptual imagination depends on a clarification of the way in which perceptual imagination can serve to represent a ‘here and now’ that is not presented to one as one’s actual here and now—i.e., that is not presented to one as the actual here and now that is determined by the place and time of the act of imagining. It depends on making sense of the idea that perceptual imagination offers a way of representing a ‘here and now’ that isn’t shackled to the spatiotemporal location of the mental act of representing. Let us now consider how we might apply that proposal in making sense of the notion that the *past* is ‘made present’ in episodic recollection, and in a way that can capture the idea that episodic recollection offers a form of mental time travel.

3 Mental Time Travel in Episodic Recollection

The account of perceptual imagination that I have sketched opens up the prospect of an account of the representation of time in episodic recollection that can accommodate the idea that such mental acts involve the representation of a past event as temporally present, and in a way that avoids the re-enactment view of episodic recollection. The proposal is this. When one episodically recollects a past event, one’s act of recollection is an act of spontaneity that represents a perceptual perspective on that past event—so it is an act of spontaneity that represents a perspective on that past event that is afforded by an act of receptivity.¹⁶ As the act of recollection is an act

of spontaneity, its temporal location is not determined by (and doesn't seem to its subject to be determined by) the temporal location of its intentional object. But by representing a perspective on the intentional object that is afforded by an act of receptivity, it represents a temporal perspective on the intentional object that is afforded by an act of receptivity. Which is to say, it represents a temporal perspective that presents that past event as temporally present. So the act of recollection involves the representation of a temporal present, and the represented temporal location of that represented temporal present is not determined by the temporal location of the act of recollection.

To say that much isn't yet to distinguish episodic recollection from an act of imagining a past event. So, assuming we want to respect that difference, what more can be added? I think we can find a way to respect a significant difference between episodic recollection and an act of imagining a past event by addressing the following question: In the case of episodic recollection, what determines the temporal location of the represented temporal present? In the case of perceptual imagination, the temporal location of the represented temporal present is determined, if at all, by the subject's intentions in so imagining. Nothing about the act of imagining determines that the represented event takes place in the subject's present, past, or future, independently of the subject's intentions in so imagining. Whereas, by contrast, in the case of episodic recollection, we can make the following set of claims. The temporal location of the represented temporal present is determined by the temporal location of the past event that is represented, and that which determines the temporal location of the past event that is represented is whatever it is that determines *which particular* past event is represented. This is because particular events, unlike particular objects, cannot continue to exist at different temporal locations. So that which determines the temporal location of the represented temporal present is whatever it is that determines which particular past event is represented. And in the case of episodic recollection (in contrast with imagination) the question of which particular past event is represented is *not* determined by the subject's imaginative intentions in so representing. It is determined by the causal ancestry of the memory.

At the outset I suggested that part of the appeal of invoking the notion of mental time travel is to signal that the way of relating to one's past and future that is afforded by episodic recollection and imagination is significantly different from merely entertaining tensed thoughts about earlier and later times. The account that I have offered of the representation of time in perceptual imagination and episodic recollection respects that difference. According to it, acts of perceptual imagination and episodic recollection allow one to slip the knot of one's actual present in a distinctive way, for they provide one with a distinctive way of representing entities as temporally present. In such acts the temporal location of the represented temporal present isn't shackled to the actual time of representing.

The way in which this account accommodates the notion of mental time travel in episodic recollection differs in some significant respects from the

“re-enactment” view that I sketched in Section 1. Recall that on the re-enactment view, sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern the subject’s *actual* present—which is to say they concern the time of recollecting. It is this aspect of the account that leads to its proposal that sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern event-kinds, rather than a particular past event. For proponents of the view will likely want to avoid committing to the claim that episodic recollection invariably misrepresents the temporal location of the event recollected, and by saying that sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern event-kinds, rather than a particular past event, that commitment is avoided. On the re-enactment view, the generation of imagery may offer a way of simulating the *kind* of perceptual experience one previously underwent, but the generation of imagery and consequent simulation of that kind of perceptual experience will not suffice to mentally transport one to another temporal location. So on the re-enactment view, in all cases, in order to mentally transport oneself to another temporal location, one needs to imaginatively project oneself across time by imagining or supposing *that* one occupies the relevant temporal location as one engages in acts of perceptual imagination.

By contrast, according to the alternative account I have just been outlining, sensory aspects of episodic recollection are not tied to the subject’s actual present. The represented temporal present associated with such imagistic episodes does not coincide with the time of recollecting. The temporal location of the represented temporal present is, rather, determined by the temporal location of the particular past event that is recollected. So this alternative account of episodic recollection can accommodate the idea that sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern past temporal locations, rather than the time of recollecting, and it can accommodate the idea that sensory aspects of episodic recollection concern particular past events, rather than merely concerning event-kinds. It can accommodate the idea that those past events and their temporal locations are ‘made temporally present’ to you in episodic recollection in a way that transports you to their temporal location, rather than transporting those past events to your current temporal location as you recollect. Moreover, the means by which this is achieved doesn’t require any cognitive act of imagining or supposing on your part. Indeed the account I have proposed allows that one might episodically recollect a past event even if one is unsure whether one is genuinely remembering anything. Even in this instance, there is a respect in which one is mentally transported to a past location whether one realizes it or not. For in that act of episodic recollection an actual past event is represented as temporally present, and the temporal present that is thereby represented is the past time at which the event took place.¹⁷

Notes

1 See also Schacter et al., 2007.

2 For examples of discussions of these debates, see Debus, 2014, and Hopkins, 2014 and Hopkins (forthcoming).

- 3 Sutton, 2009, p. 217
- 4 It should be said that there are a variety of different simulation approaches to episodic recollection that I am not here distinguishing. See for example, Schacter, Addis, & Buckner, 2008; Mullally & Maguire, 2014; Shanton & Goldman, 2010; and Michaelian, 2016.
- 5 Some have suggested that Russell's account of memory changed by the time he began work on *Theory of Knowledge*. For discussion of that debate, see Martin, 2015.
- 6 Arguably, a 'feeling of familiarity' accompanying the imagery would not suffice for transporting one to another temporal location, for it would only suffice for the sense that an event of the same kind had been previously experienced. An appeal to a feeling of familiarity is made in Russell's later (1921) account of memory, and also Broad's (1925) account. Matthen (2010) presents an account in which a feeling of familiarity plays a rather different role.
- 7 According to the re-enactment view I have in mind, in the case of episodic recollection, the act of mentally transporting oneself to another temporal location will likely be grounded in knowledge and beliefs one has about particular events in one's past. Imagination, or supposition, nonetheless has a crucial role to play in the account, because the account attempts to accommodate the notion that something present (i.e., the simulated experience, which occurs at the time of recollection) is represented as occupying an earlier temporal location; and imagining or supposing that what is now present occupies an earlier temporal location is the obvious way to avoid the charge that this involves a problematic form of misrepresentation of the temporal location of that which is now present.
- 8 Different proposals about the way in which episodic recollection can provide for a distinctive form of cognitive contact with a particular past events can be found in McDowell, 1978, Campbell, 2001, Hoerl, 2001, Martin, 2001, and Debus, 2008. For a discussion of puzzles associated with certain ways of accommodating that proposal by way of the claim that the past event is a constituent of the episode of recollection, see Martin, 2015.
- 9 Sartre, 2005, p. 14.
- 10 This is a characteristic of imaging that Sartre refers to as 'The Phenomenon of Quasi-Observation' (2005, pp. 8–11).
- 11 In the case of episodic recollection, the event recollected will of course be earlier than the act of recollection. However, that fact does not itself explain why an act of recollection occurs when it occurs. For example, that I just now recollected a particular event in my childhood (rather than, say, fifteen minutes earlier) cannot be explained by appeal to the fact that the past event I recollected is earlier than my act of recollection.
- 12 Compare again the case of episodic recollection. When one tries to recollect some past event and one mentally reaches for some patch of the past, that past event cannot initiate and causally sustain, and hence determine the course of, some current episode of recollecting what happened. This is connected with the fact that if one so chooses one can recollect the different temporal stages of an earlier sequence of events in an order that differs from the order in which they occurred.
- 13 It might be suggested that in the case of episodic recollection, when one recollects a past event one initiates an epistemic relation of 'acquaintance' with that past event; and so in recollecting, one exercises agency over the obtaining of that relation. However, even if one accepts that proposal, the important point of contrast with perception is this: in the case of episodic recollection the temporal locations of the mental acts that are involved in the exercise of that agency are not determined by the temporal locations of the intentional objects of those acts. See footnotes 11 and 12.

- 14 The proposal I have just sketched has affinities with aspects of Husserl's account of time-consciousness. Husserl (1905) appeals to asymmetrical psychological orientations that are temporal—both retention and protention—in his account of the way in which the 'now' in perception is the hub of orientations to 'temporal fringes' of the 'now.' If consciousness did not transcend the 'now' there would no awareness of the present as such. One finds similar ideas in Brian O'Shaughnessy's discussion of temporal experience, where he suggests that there is an irreducible 'co-presence' of past and future in the experienced present. He says at one point, "Close up the past, wall off the future, and you cover over the present too" (O'Shaughnessy, 2000, p. 62).
- 15 Sartre, 2005, p. 129.
- 16 Note that to accept this much is not to commit to the claim that episodic recollection necessarily involves the recollection of a particular past perceptual experience one had. I do not have the space here to consider whether there are adequate grounds for accepting that further claim.
- 17 I am very grateful to the editors of this volume, to two anonymous referees, and to Bill Brewer for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

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