



Review article

Looking the past in the eye: Distortion in memory and the costs and benefits of recalling from an observer perspective



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ABSTRACT

Jordi Fernández (2015) discusses the possible benefits of two types of allegedly distorted memories: observer memories and fabricated memories. Fernández argues that even when memory does not preserve the past, some memories can still provide an adaptive benefit for the subject. I explore Fernández's claims focussing on the case of observer perspective memories. For Fernández, observer perspectives are distorted memories because they do not preserve past experience. In contrast, I suggest that observer perspectives *can* accurately reflect past experience: observer perspectives are not necessarily distorted memories. By looking at the complexity of the relation between remembering trauma from an observer perspective and emotional closure, I also sound a note of caution against Fernández's assertion that observer memories of trauma can be adaptively beneficial. Finally, I suggest that because observer perspectives are not necessarily distorted, but involve a distinct way of thinking about one's past, such memories can be epistemically beneficial.

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1. Introduction¹

In a thoughtfully argued and thought-provoking paper, Jordi Fernández (2015) discusses the possible benefits of two types of allegedly distorted memories—observer memories and fabricated memories.² Although not stated explicitly, Fernández's discussion centres on episodic or autobiographical memory: those memories of events in one's personal past. Fernández claims that even when memory does not properly preserve the past, some memories can still provide an adaptive benefit for the subject, in that they allow 'the subject to form a belief about the past which has a certain instrumental value for her' (Fernández, 2015: 537). In this paper I explore Fernández's claims about the benefits of distorted memories, paying particular attention to the case of observer memories.³

Observer memories, or better observer perspectives (Sutton, 2010), are memories in which one views the remembered scene from an external point of view, seeing oneself from the outside. Such memories are contrasted with 'field perspectives', which present the remembered scene from one's original visual point of view (Nigro & Neisser, 1983). Empirical evidence also shows that when remembering a particular event the perspective need not be fixed: a single episode of retrieval may involve adopting both perspectives, either by rapidly switching or perhaps holding both perspectives simultaneously (Rice & Rubin, 2009).

For Fernández, because observer perspectives present the remembered scene from a perspective that one did not have at the time of the original experience, such memories are distorted (see also De Brigard, 2014). Nonetheless, even though such memories are distorted, remembering from an observer perspective can still be beneficial for the subject in cases of memories of traumatic events. This benefit occurs because observer perspective memories are, for Fernández, 'phenomenally dry', in that they lack sensory and affective detail (2015: 541). As such, remembering from an observer perspective helps blunt the emotional impact of trauma memories.

In this paper I examine Fernández's claims in more detail. I first summarise Fernández's account of the functions of episodic memory, the types of benefits memory bestows, and the types of memory distortion that can occur (Section 2). I then suggest that Fernández's construal of observer perspectives as distorted memories is mistaken (Section 3). In Section 4 I look at the complexity of the relation between visual perspective in memory and symptoms of trauma. I sound a note of caution against Fernández's claim that observer perspective memories of traumatic events may be adaptively beneficial. Finally, I depart from the specific case of trauma memories, and suggest that because remembering from an observer perspective involves a distinct way of thinking about a past event, such memories can be potentially epistemically beneficial for the subject (Section 5).

2. Episodic memory: functions, benefits, and distortions

Fernández outlines a functionally dualistic account of memory. Episodic memory has two functions, and these two functions correspond to two conceptions of how memory works. On a 'storage' conception, the function of memory is to *preserve* past perceptual content. On this view memory must draw on, indeed preserve, information that was available at the time of the original event. On the 'narrative' conception, memory 'is not meant to represent the past as we experienced it to be the case. Instead, the function of memory is to *reconstruct* the past in order to help us build a smooth and robust narrative of our lives' (Fernández, 2015: 540, emphasis added). Fernández adopts an 'inclusive' approach such that memory performs, and is meant to perform, both functions.

Corresponding to these two functions of memory are two related notions of distortion in memory. On the storage conception, 'a subject's faculty of memory has produced a distorted memory when the content of that memory does not match the content of the subject's past experience on which the memory originates' (Fernández, 2015: 539). While on the narrative conception, the memory is distorted when it does not fit well with 'the contents of the subject's beliefs about herself and her past and, for that reason, it does not fit into the subject's narrative of her life' (Fernández, 2015: 540).

There are also two distinct benefits for the individual when a particular memory is properly generated (non-distorted). When memory performs its preservative function adequately it generates memories that provide an epistemic benefit for the subject (Fernández, 2015: 539). A memory provides this epistemic benefit by providing the subject 'with knowledge of, or at least justification for a belief about, the past' (Fernández, 2015: 536). The memory places the subject in 'cognitive contact' with the past, meaning that it 'puts the subject in a position to think about, and refer to that event' (Fernández, 2015: 537; see also Byrne, 2010). Hence the memory provides 'the subject with evidence, or grounds, for a certain belief; a belief in the content of the memory or, more precisely, in part of that content' (Fernández, 2015: 536–537). Memories that provide an epistemic benefit are likely to be *accurate* when appropriately produced (Fernández, 2015: 537). In order to provide an

¹ The title of this paper is inspired by a phrase from Sutton (2010) on observer perspective memory. See Section 4 below.

² Fernández's paper was part of a special issue of this journal on Imperfect Cognitions. See also <http://imperfectcognitions.blogspot.com.au/>.

³ See Otgaar, Howe, Clark, Wang, and Merckelbach (2015) for a further discussion of a number of issues with Fernández's account. Their approach is quite distinct from mine, however. Otgaar et al. do not discuss observer perspectives, whereas this is the explicit focus of this paper. Rather, they focus on problems with Fernández's claims about beneficial fabricated memories (as well as problems with his use of the terms 'memory' and 'belief'). For example, criticising Fernández's example of beneficial fabricated memory, these authors tell us that they find no evidence 'to support the view that a traumatic event that has fallen prey to infantile amnesia may still later on guide behaviour due to implicit evaluations' (2015: 288). My approach is to call into question Fernández's claim that observer perspectives are distorted memories, and to complicate his notion that such memories can be adaptively beneficial.

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