



## What are the benefits of memory distortion? ☆



Jordi Fernández\*

University of Adelaide, Australia

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### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to determine whether memories can have any benefit for their subjects while being distorted.<sup>1</sup> There are a number of things that one may have in mind by ‘benefit’ while referring to memory. For that reason, the formulation of the issue that will occupy us here admits several possible readings. It will therefore make for clarity if we begin our discussion by specifying, in Section 1, the types of benefits with which we will be concerned in this discussion. One may also have different things in mind by ‘distortion,’ depending on one’s views about the function of memory. Thus, in order to formulate the topic of our discussion precisely, I will distinguish, in Section 2, two pictures of what memory is supposed to do, and two associated notions of distortion. Next, I will put forward two types of memories that, I will argue, can qualify as cases of beneficial distortion under very specific circumstances. In Section 3, I will discuss the case of so-called ‘observer memories’ and, in Section 4, I will discuss the case of so-called ‘fabricated memories.’ My contention will be that, in both cases, some of those memories can, on the one hand, be advantageous for the subject to have while, on the other hand, her faculty of memory has failed to perform its proper function by producing them. The significance of this claim for the two pictures of what memory is supposed to do will be explored in Section 5.

### 2. Epistemic benefits and adaptive benefits

There are at least two ways in which having a memory can be beneficial for a subject. One of them is epistemic. Having a memory may provide the subject with knowledge of, or at least justification for a belief about, the past. The memory does this by supplying the subject with evidence, or grounds, for a certain belief; a belief in the content of the memory or, more

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\* Address: School of Humanities, University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia.

E-mail address: [jorge.fernandez@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:jorge.fernandez@adelaide.edu.au)

<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I will use ‘a memory’ and the plural ‘memories’ to refer to memory experiences, and I will use ‘memory’ to refer to the faculty that produces memory experiences. Hopefully the context will help to avoid confusion. The discussion of the various types of benefits that memory experiences can carry will assume that those experiences have propositional content. With that exception, nothing in the discussion that follows will hinge on precisely how one construes the notion of a memory experience.

precisely, in part of that content.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the memory allows the subject to be in ‘cognitive contact’ with an event in her past: It puts the subject in a position to think about, and refer to, that event. When the evidence provided by the memory is good evidence, it is beneficial for the subject to be in that position. For the belief that the subject can form on the basis of her memory will, in that case, be justified. Why is that good for the subject? Beliefs are the sort of mental state which can be true or false. They are in some sense normatively governed by, or aimed at, truth. From the point of view of achieving truth, it is good for the subject to have justified beliefs rather than unjustified beliefs because the former, unlike the latter, tend to be true. Furthermore, when justified beliefs are true, they are such that they could not have easily been false. This is because, when justified beliefs are true, they are not accidentally true, or true by luck. This feature of justified beliefs confers a certain stability upon them: Whereas merely true beliefs are fleeting in that they are easy to undermine, justified beliefs are more likely to remain fast in response to conflicting information.<sup>3</sup>

Notice that, in order for the subject to enjoy this type of benefit from her memories, the subject’s faculty of memory must be trustworthy in the following sense. It must deliver memories that are likely to be accurate when they have been appropriately produced.<sup>4</sup> Imagine that, for any memory of a subject, the fact that the memory in question was properly generated makes no difference as to whether the content of that memory is likely to be case or not. Suppose, now, that the subject has a particular memory. It is hard to see why the subject would be justified in believing the content of it. After all, on the scenario that we are considering, any of the memories that the subject is having could easily be misinforming her about her past. Thus, the belief that the subject would form by taking the content of her memory at face value is not likely to achieve truth. Suppose, however, that it does. Still, it does not seem that the belief in question would be justified. For if the fact that the memory was properly generated makes no difference as to whether its content is likely to be the case or not, then it seems that the belief in question could have easily been false. It turned out to be true, but the fact that the memory on the basis of which the belief was formed was properly generated did not contribute to that outcome. It seems, therefore, that in order for the subject to be in a position to form justified beliefs on the basis of her memories (and thus benefit from them epistemically), those memories must have the property of being such that if they have been properly generated, then they are likely to be accurate.<sup>5</sup>

Another way in which having a memory can be beneficial for the subject is by being adaptive. Having a memory may allow the subject to form a belief about the past which has a certain instrumental value for her. The belief may serve to represent the past in the way in which the subject needs to represent it in order for her to achieve one of her goals.<sup>6</sup> Oftentimes, the relevant goal involves experiencing a certain type of emotion. In this scenario, the memory plays the role of supplying the subject with a representation of her past that is conducive to experiencing the emotion that is being sought by the subject; typically a positive emotion. When the memory allows the subject to represent her past in the way in which she is seeking to represent it from an emotional point of view, it is beneficial for the subject to have that memory. (We could call this type of adaptive benefit, an ‘affectively adaptive’ type of benefit.) Other times, the relevant goal involves making sense of one’s own behaviour towards, and one’s own thoughts about, some particular person or situation. In that scenario, the memory plays the role of supplying the subject with a representation of her past which makes her current behaviour towards some person or situation intelligible to herself, and it allows her to explain why she has certain thoughts towards the relevant person or

<sup>2</sup> Why the qualification? By taking one of her memories at face value, a subject may form a number of different beliefs depending on which aspect of its content she is assenting to. Thus, it is possible that the subject forms a belief in, strictly speaking, the content of her memory but, more commonly, she will form a belief in some part of that content. Since the content of a memory may contain some accurate details while containing, at the same time, other details which are inaccurate, this means that the very same memory can provide good evidence for one of the beliefs that the subject may form on its basis while not providing good evidence for another. As a result, a memory can deliver an epistemic benefit for one of the subject’s beliefs while not delivering an epistemic benefit for another.

<sup>3</sup> In addition, if knowledge has an intrinsic value, then it will be beneficial for a subject to have memories that justify her in believing some things about her past when those justified beliefs qualify as knowledge. However, we do not need to commit ourselves to the view that knowledge has an intrinsic value for memories to have an epistemic benefit for the subject. On the idea that knowledge has an intrinsic value, see (Pritchard, Millar, & Haddock, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the requirement should be relativised to the type of belief that the subject is forming when she is epistemically benefiting from one of her memories. Otherwise, the requirement is clearly too strong: Our memories are not trustworthy in the sense that their whole contents are likely to be accurate when those memories have been properly generated. For the most part, they are bound to contain some inaccuracies even if they have been properly generated. Thus, the trustworthiness requirement, as formulated above, yields the result that we are never justified in forming beliefs on the basis of our memories, which is highly counter-intuitive. Instead, the requirement needs to be that if a subject is justified in forming a certain belief on the basis of one of her memories, then that memory must be trustworthy with regards to the subject matter of the belief being formed. And that feature of the memory may vary depending on which belief is being formed, since the subject may form a variety of beliefs on the basis of the same memory. (See note 2.) Suppose, for example, that my memory is totally unreliable with regards to colours but it is very reliable with regards to shapes. Then, I may be justified in forming a belief about what the phone number written in some piece of paper which I saw days ago was on the basis of a memory that originates in that perceptual experience of mine. But I would not be justified in forming, on the basis of the very same memory, a belief about the colour of the ink in which the phone number was written. For ease of exposition, though, I will continue to talk of trustworthiness as a requirement on memories, as opposed to a requirement on specific aspects of their contents (which would be more precise, but also more cumbersome talk).

<sup>5</sup> Notice that the claim is not that trustworthiness is the only property of memories that may put the subject in a position to form justified beliefs on the basis of her memories. It is the weaker claim that memories must have that property in order to put the subject in that position. For that reason, it is consistent with the view that other properties of memories may also contribute to the justification of memory beliefs. In particular, it is consistent with the claim that those memories which cohere well with the rest of the subject’s mental states put the subject in a better position to form justified beliefs on the basis of them than those memories which do not.

<sup>6</sup> Strictly speaking, then, adaptive benefits are not monadic properties of memories. In other words, it actually makes no sense to say that, from an adaptive point of view, a subject’s memory is, or is not, beneficial *simpliciter*. Not only can a subject form a number of different beliefs on the basis of a single memory, but also a subject can pursue a number of different goals while she has each of those beliefs. For that reason, adaptive benefits are best seen as relations between a memory that the subject has, and one of her goals. Thus, a memory may carry an adaptive benefit for one of the subject’s goals while not carrying an adaptive benefit for another.

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