

Book reviews

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André Sant'Anna, Christopher Jude McCarroll and Kourken Michaelian (eds.). *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Memory*. New York: Routledge, 2023, 274 pp., USD \$130. ISBN: 9780367432751.

Reviewed by: Marta Caravà, *Purdue University, USA*

Current Controversies in Philosophy of Memory is a specialist book that aims to offer to researchers, teachers and students an ‘up-to-date discussion of some of the main theories, arguments, and problems’ in the philosophy of memory (p. 3). To this end, the editors have selected only contributions on *episodic memory*, that is, the ability to remember past events or experiences. In my view, this selective focus is reasonable and justified. There is increasing interest in episodic memory in philosophy, but several important questions have not received enough attention in the growing literature on the topic. This book investigates some of these previously underexplored questions, each addressed by two authors offering different perspectives on them. In addition to the editors’ introduction, which carefully contextualises these questions in the broader literature, the book has six parts, each including two chapters, a list of further readings and a final section with study questions.

Part 1 of the volume addresses the question: What is the relationship between memory and imagination? This question is central to the debate between two prominent theories of memory: the causal theory and the simulation theory. The causal theory holds that remembering requires a causal connection to a past event via a memory trace – a brain modification caused by an experience – while the simulation theory claims that this requirement is not necessary. Because of their different takes on this causal requirement, the causal theory is usually associated with the idea that memory and imagination are two different things, while the simulation theory is associated with the idea that remembering is a form of imagining. Part I evaluates whether this presentation of this debate is accurate. In chapter 1, Peter Langland-Hassan uses the notion of constructive imagination to investigate the constraints that different types of memory traces impose on remembering. He explains how, by adopting the prop theory of memory traces, we can explain remembering as a form of constructive imagination while endorsing the causal theory. César Schirmer dos Santos, Christopher McCarroll and André Sant’Anna take a different stance on this debate (chapter 2). They claim that it is not all about *descriptions* of the mechanisms of remembering but is rather *prescriptive* in character: it is about the right concepts we should use to track memory and imagination. According to the authors, whether memory and imagination are the same thing depends on the prescriptive concepts of memory and imagination we endorse. These chapters do not solve the current debate on the relationship between memory and imagination but certainly advance it. They show that so far it has implied too sharp distinctions between the causal theory and the simulation theory and that, with proper conceptual analysis, we can identify what is at stake in this debate more clearly.

Memory traces are central in most theories of memory, either because they are fundamental explanatory posits or because their status is questioned. One central issue is about whether memory traces have content, which is the question of Part II. In chapter 3, Daniel Hutto provides a thorough critique of Markus Werning's (2020) recent attempt to combine the causal theory with the idea that memory traces do not store content. Hutto argues that Werning's notion of a minimal memory trace still implies content implicitly and it does not do the explanatory job it is supposed to do. Hence, he suggests, we should not appeal to memory traces in our explanations of remembering. In contrast with Hutto's proposal, John Sutton and Gerard O'Brien offer a positive view on contentful memory traces (chapter 4). Building on their previous work, the authors explain why distributed memory traces are representational and contentful, evaluate different ways in which their view meets the requirements of the causal theory and show how it enriches this theory while explaining the generative features of memory. Part II offers an excellent overview of some of the ongoing heated debates on memory traces. Considering that the authors of the two chapters endorse different versions of the situated approach to memory, namely the idea that our bodies and the environment play an important role in memory processes, these chapters are also a useful resource for researchers who work on this approach, where the problem of memory traces is becoming central.

Questions about confabulation (i.e. false memories believed to be true) are important because they tell us something more about memory by explaining cases in which it goes wrong (p. 7). Part III takes steps in this direction, responding to the question 'What is the nature of mnemonic confabulation?' In chapter 5, Sven Bernecker argues that the current debate is problematic. It is circular because extant explanations of confabulation rely on the very theory of confabulation that they are supposed to defend. Moreover, it looks like a proxy of other unsolved debates between the causal theory and the simulation theory. Hence, he suggests reinterpreting it through a new model that focuses on the similarities rather than on the differences between the two theories. In this model, the causal theory and the simulation theory are just two 'ways of spelling out the explanation relation constitutive of remembering' (p. 121): this helps uncover core issues of the debate on confabulation. To address the problems identified by Bernecker, Kourken Michaelian takes a different route (chapter 6). He develops a new account of confabulation on which successful remembering, misremembering, veridical confabulation and falsidical confabulation can all be explained by evaluating whether they meet two conditions – accuracy and reliability – and how they do so – due to luck or not. According to Michaelian, this account is not at odds with the naturalistic commitments of his simulation theory. However, he acknowledges that further work on this aspect should be done. In addition to clarifying and pushing forward the debate on false memory, these chapters are an excellent introduction to current methods in philosophy memory: they exemplify the tendency to investigate individual problems by going beyond the boundaries of particular areas, epistemology and empirically informed philosophy of mind in this case.

Part IV interprets the question 'What is the function of episodic memory?' in two ways (pp. 8–9): Why did evolution provide us with the episodic memory system we have? What is the role of episodic memory in our cognitive economy, that is, what is its causal role? In chapter 7, Johannes Mahr adopts an evolutionary approach. Based on the idea that to individuate functions we should study forms, Mahr investigates the forms of memory representations involved in remembering and explains how they have been selected in evolution. Building on this investigation, he argues that episodic memory is not for the past or for the future but is for communication. By allowing us to track and evaluate the sources of our knowledge, it helps us communicate our beliefs to others and coordinate 'what we take to be true in the social world' (p. 160). In chapter 8, Sarah Robins focuses on the second sense of 'function'. She evaluates a central claim advanced by those who interpret episodic memory as mental time travel: that episodic memory is not for remembering the past but for imagining the future. Robins argues that this claim is false. Even if memory and imagination

are underpinned by the same neural system, draw from the same informational pool, and are both constructive processes, they are constructive in different ways. These differences, she claims, show that episodic memory is not for the future. While the two chapters focus on just three possible ways to identify the functions of episodic memory – they discuss the preservation of the past, communication and future-oriented simulation, but not other relevant operations, such as forgetting – they offer a novel view of the debate and certainly advance it, especially considering their thorough engagement with empirical studies.

Part V addresses the question of whether non-human animals have episodic memory – a question relevant in its own right but also important to addressing general questions about of episodic memory (p. 10). In chapter 9, Alexandria Boyle argues that whether we can claim that non-human animals have episodic memory depends on ‘what the term “episodic memory” *really* denotes’ (p. 198). This is not to say that the concept of episodic memory is empty but rather is a call for a pluralistic approach: we may answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the question depending on the projects we engage in and on the job that episodic memory does in particular philosophical and scientific projects. Nazim Keven’s answer is sharper (chapter 10). In line with other works on this question, he reasons about the similarities and differences between human and non-human memory. After analysing different types of mental representations, he argues that non-human animals can produce event representations but not episodic representations. Hence, he suggests, they do not have episodic memory. Part V advances work on the question whether episodic memory is uniquely human, a question that so far received more attention in psychology than in philosophy. Moreover, it offers new ways of understanding foundational issues about the nature and the mechanisms of episodic memory, which can promote a better understanding human memory both from a philosophical and applicative perspective.

Part VI focuses on the question of whether episodic memory gives us knowledge of the past. Considering current studies on episodic memory in philosophy and psychology, such as those on the conflation of memory and imagination and on the error-prone character of human memory, this is a timely question to ask. To answer it, Thomas Senor develops a new account of the epistemology of episodic memory (chapter 11). In his account, we can form justified beliefs based on episodic memory but whether episodic memory gives us knowledge of the past depends on additional conditions (such as truth), which will need further exploration. Matthew Frise’s answer to the question is less positive (chapter 12). His argument is as follows. First, even if typical subjects can generate true and justified memory-based beliefs, they usually do so based on a falsehood, that is, the idea that episodic memory is an archive of the past. Second, episodic memory often misinterprets the past. This entails a puzzle. If subjects have evidence of this fact, then they have some reason to doubt their own memory-based beliefs. If subjects do not have evidence of this fact, then their memory-based beliefs will depend on something false. According to Friese, this argument suggests that ‘we might know much less than we thought’ (p. 245): episodic memory does not give us knowledge of the past. These chapters leave us with a ‘maybe’ and a ‘no’ in response to the final question of the book. These answers are important for the epistemology of memory but can also stimulate further work on the other questions discussed in the book, in particular those about the function of episodic memory. For example, let’s suppose that Friese is right. Do claims about the communicative and mnemonic functions of episodic memory hold true considering this finding? Could Friese’s view support other claims about episodic memory, such as that it is for the future?

In keeping with the spirit of genuine doubt that animates the book, I will leave these questions open for future discussion. If I had to identify the key message of *Current Controversies in Philosophy of Memory*, it would be this: the questions we are currently asking in philosophy of memory rarely receive uncontroversial answers, and probably they will not receive them in the future either. This may sound disappointing, but it is indeed good news. It is a sign of serious engagement with empirical research on memory, which is fast developing and open to different

interpretations. This book exemplifies this research approach excellently. Moreover, despite its relatively narrow focus, it is a perfect example of the syncretic nature of current philosophical research on memory, where philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, cognitive science, epistemology, and other fields not covered in the book (such as the affective sciences and ethics) are joining their forces to understand such an important human (and maybe also non-human) capacity.

References

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Author biography

Marta Caravà is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Purdue University. She works in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science. Her current research focuses on the mechanisms, functions and benefits of forgetting and on situated explanations of episodic memory.

Anja Berninger and Ingrid Vendrell Ferran (eds.). *Philosophical Perspectives on Memory and Imagination* (Routledge Studies in Contemporary Philosophy). New York: Routledge, 2023, 310 pp., \$160. ISBN: 9780367708771.

Reviewed by: José Carlos Camillo, *Universidade Federal de Goiás, Brazil*

The relationship between memory and imagination has been discussed throughout the history of philosophy. Discussion of the difference between these two mental phenomena already can be found in Plato and Aristotle, and the debate continues today, with a new emphasis on empirical findings. Two positions have emerged in the debate: continuism and discontinuism (Perrin, 2016). Continuists maintain that memory and imagination are mental states of the same kind, while discontinuists argue that they belong to different kinds. This book approaches the (dis)continuist debate from a variety of angles. As an edited volume, it brings together a broad range of contributions to the debate (with some chapters, nonetheless, discussing the relationship between memory and imagination without reference to mental kinds).

The volume is divided into four parts. Part 1, Memory and Imagination: Ontological Questions, deals directly with the (dis)continuism debate, giving new answers to well-known questions and proposing new questions as well. In chapter 1, Peter Langland-Hassan discusses the attitudinal version of (dis)continuism. After defining what he takes to be relevant forms of memory (episodic memory) and imagination (constructive imagining), setting the stage for future discussion, he argues that some instances of constructive imagining involve the same attitude as remembering, in that they aim at truth. In chapter 2, Christopher Jude McCarroll discusses the directions of fit of memory and imagination and reviews cases in which memory and imagination have different directions of fit, concluding that these mental states can be continuous in some aspects and discontinuous in others.

In chapter 3, Alma Barner deals with the problem of collective mental time travel. She argues that, while success in collective memory requires collaborative effort, imagination does not require such collaboration. If one considers the process responsible for the formation of a mental state as what defines it as belonging to a given kind, then collective memory and imagination should be taken to belong to different kinds. In chapter 4, Kourken Michaelian responds to a criticism concerning the ability of simulationist and continuist views to explain forgetting. If one holds that memory and imagination are underwritten by the same processes, it is unclear how one might