

Episodic Memory, Imagination and the Notion of a Memory Trace

According to the ‘Same Content thesis’, which can be traced back to the Humean tradition, states of perception, imagination and episodic memory can well have the same content. Remembering seeing Vincenne castle, imagining seeing a castle (one that, by chance, is identical to Vincenne castle), or looking to Vincenne castle, in other words, can share exactly the same representational content. If this is true, then, the difference between episodic memory and imagination must be individuated in some other condition.

At a first sight, memory seems to differ from imagination for the fact that it is *episode-entailing* in the sense that, if I recall seeing a castle, then there is – or, at least, there was – a castle that I am recalling, and if I remember that I visited that castle, then I visited that castle.

Byrne (2010), however has convincingly criticized this identifying condition. One, he argues, could veridically imagine seeing a castle and that castle really exists, or one could imagine an event (visiting a castle) and that event really happened (I really visited that castle but I no more remember it): in these cases, then, my imagination would be episode-entailing without being a true case of recollection.

Of course one could object that, when we say that memory is episode-entailing, we want to say, not only that what we remember exists or existed and that we had an experience of that fact, but rather, that we had some *knowledge* of that fact and it is this knowledge that explains – at least partially – my present memory. In this case, then, memory would differ from imagination for the fact of *preserving knowledge*.

Byrne, however, anticipates this objection and, following Martin (2001), reasons as follows. Imagine a man who got drunk at a party; the day after, when he recalls the party, he misremembers practically everything: he thinks he was sober and the party he recalls is completely different from the one he participated into. In this case, according to Byrne, the man is remembering, and still, his memory is not preserving his previous knowledge of the event, that has completely vanished. So, if it is not the knowledge of the event that is preserved in remembering, what else can it be?

According to Byrne it is rather the *cognitive contact* with objects and events that is preserved and that distinguishes episodic memory from imagination: “In recollecting the party”, he says, “one may not now know anything one used to know about the party, but recollection puts one in a position to talk and think about that very event” (2010: 21). In other words, in remembering an event, I could be wrong on every detail, but I would be anyway remembering that event in virtue of the fact that I had a cognitive contact with it. What Byrne proposes thus seems to be that memory preserves at least the *acquaintance* with the object: even if there is no preserved information about a certain party, still, I can have *de re* memories about it.

I will claim that this conclusion cannot be true. First, Byrne’s argument seems to confuse episodic with semantic memory. According to Byrne, in fact, even if there is no single detail of the party that the drunk man can recall, still, we can say that he remembers, of the party, that “*it* occurred”. This kind of knowledge, however, is no more of the episodic kind: it is rather a piece of semantic knowledge, that even a person who did not participate in the party might possess.

Byrne could still object that, even if all my episodic “memories” are false, nevertheless, they are memories of *that* event insofar as they have been caused by that event through a certain causal chain. In this sense, then, the distinction between memory and imagination should be identified in the fact that memory, contrary to imagination, is caused by a *memory trace*, even if this trace produces states whose contents are completely different from the contents of the states that generated this trace.

This objection, however, poses at least two important problems. First, also imagination presupposes the existence of a memory trace. As it is shown by several experimental data (cf. e.g. Currie and Ravenscroft 1997), in fact, certain kinds of imagery, such as motor imagery, are based on simulative processes, and thus on “traces” such as motor schema.

Second, it is not clear at all whether a trace that “produces states whose contents are completely

different from the contents of the states that generated this trace” still counts as a memory trace.

References

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