Commentary on Jonardon Ganeri’s "Mental Time Travel and Attention"

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Mental Time Travel and Joint Reminiscing

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Abstract: In joint episodic memory—or joint reminiscing—two or more individuals retrieve together an experience that they had previously encoded while socially engaged with one another. In this commentary, I focus on the question of how Ganeri’s analysis of individual episodic memory might be applicable to joint reminiscing. I explore three topics that are of relevance for answering this question: intersubjectivity, attention, and the phenomenology of reminiscing.

Keywords: episodic memory; mental time travel; joint reminiscing; intersubjectivity; attention; phenomenology

1. Introduction


Put briefly, the requirement is based on the observation that just as there can be no travel without a traveller, there can’t be episodic memory without a self that relives a past experience by transporting itself mentally to it [Ganeri 2018: 355]. In episodic memory, one focuses on an experience one has had before by reliving or re-experiencing it. Although a specific form of self-involvement is taken by Ganeri [2018: 353] and Tulving [1993] to be distinctive of episodic memory with respect to semantic memory (remembering facts, e.g. that

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1 Research on mental time travel has suggested that it can be either past- or future-oriented [Tulving 1985: 5; Michaelian and Sutton 2017a]. I will focus throughout on past-oriented mental time travel.
Copenhagen is the capital of Denmark, or that I was born in 1984) and procedural memory (remembering how to do something, e.g. how to swim), the task of clarifying the specificity of self-involvement in cases of episodic memory invites further consideration.2

Although the target article offers rich material for exploring this issue, in the following commentary I would like to explore a different aspect of the self-involvement requirement. It arises from consideration of cases of joint episodic memory or—as I will also call it—joint reminiscing (see Hoerl and McCormack [2005]). These are cases in which a plurality of individuals retrieve together an experience that they had previously encoded while interacting with each other, such as a group of friends remembering through conversation a trip they did together [Michaelian and Sutton 2017b]. Joint reminiscing goes beyond cases in which individuals retrieve together an experience that they each had in parallel (i.e. non-interactively) in the past. It also goes beyond cases in which individuals retrieve in parallel an experience had originally by them while socially engaged with one other [Ibid.]. The phenomenon of joint reminiscing is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, some research indicates that joint reminiscing, at least in the context of some types of groups, often takes the form of a collaborative remembering that may not be reducible to what each individual can achieve on his or her own [Harris et al. 2011; Sutton et al. 2010]. Other fellow mental travellers are importantly involved in joint reminiscing, and this not merely in the sense that other subjects are part of the remembered content (as in Reid’s example mentioned by Ganeri [2018: 353]), but rather in the sense that the process of remembering may itself qualify as a joint activity, in which the remembering subjects relocate themselves in a shared past.3

Secondly, it has been argued that ‘establishing a past that can be travelled through [in one’s mind] depends on socially shared remembering’ [Nelson 1988: 266], and that the capacity for individual episodic memory depends ontogenetically on the socially enabled development of a sensitivity to the self in time [Nelson 2007: 188]. If individual episodic memory has amongst its developmental preconditions some—perhaps rudimentary—forms of joint reminiscing, bringing into focus the topic of joint reminiscing appears to be relevant for investigating the phenomenon that Ganeri discusses in the target article. Thirdly, it seems plausible to hold that a full theory of episodic memory has to take into account, or in some way illuminate the relation between individual and joint cases of it.

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2 In the context of the target article, this is particularly pertinent given the Buddhist denial of the self [Ganeri 2018: 357].

3 A question that I leave aside here is whether such a joint activity of remembering would necessarily presuppose a shared intention.
Taken together, these observations suggest that joint reminiscing ought to be taken seriously. As a prefatory remark, it is worth noting that Ganeri’s favoured characterization of episodic memory is prima facie consistent with the possibility of joint reminiscing. According to Ganeri, episodic memory is an embodied and attentional process of reliving or re-experiencing a past experience. It is qualified as embodied insofar as, at least in some cases, it is a bottom-up process triggered by suitable perceptual cues present in a perceiver’s current environment [Ganeri 2018: 360]. It is attentional because it involves a specific form of reflective attention [Ibid.: 359]. Moreover, it is a form of reliving or re-experiencing because it involves a proprietary phenomenology of ‘as-if-ness’, ‘in which the remembered event is as if happening before one once again’ [Ibid.: 360]. This characterization could in principle be extended to cases in which the physical encounter with another subject and with a suitable object of perception triggers an instance of episodic memory, by means of reflectively attending to a past experience that was shared with that subject, and in which the past experience is relived as if happening to us once again, as our relived experience. My aim in the following will be to highlight three topics that are of relevance for exploring connections between Ganeri’s discussion of individual episodic memory and the phenomenon of joint reminiscing: intersubjectivity, attention, and the phenomenology of reminiscing.

2. Intersubjectivity

Joint reminiscing presupposes the conceivability, existence, and understanding of other subjects with whom one can engage in episodic memory. Ganeri doesn’t say much about intersubjectivity in the target article, apart from noting that Buddhaghosa’s theory, which he favours, ‘lends itself to a unified account of memory (mental travel in subjective time) and empathy (mental travel in social space)’ [Ibid.: 360]. It would be interesting to see the details of such a unified account, and this would be a welcome development of the discussion carried out in the target article.

Ganeri suggests, more critically, that Buddhaghosa’s theory is preferable to ‘reflexivism’ (i.e. the view that mental states have both an intentional aspect and a self-specifying aspect), insofar as this view would have difficulties with the topic of intersubjectivity. He writes that ‘[a] reflexivist account of the subjectivity of conscious experience appears to leave it mysterious how we can have access to the subjective lives of others’ [Ibid.: 370. Why would reflexivism have this problematic consequence? Although the topic is not addressed in the target article, Ganeri articulates his criticism to reflexivism more
assertively and extensively in an earlier publication [Ganeri 2012]. He states there that a basic problem with reflexivism is that it wouldn’t have the tools for accounting for the individuation of the experiences of different subjects. Suppose that mental states are reflexively self-aware, and that consciousness is a ‘sequence of discrete momentary conscious events’ [Ibid: 205]. According to the reflexivist position that Ganeri criticizes, mental states are not necessarily tagged to one mind rather than to another: ‘thoughts do not identify themselves specifically as “belonging to me” or “belonging to you”—nothing in the content or internal form (aspect, image) of a thought, even if reflexively self-aware, tags it to one mind rather than another’ [Ibid.: 204]. Consequently, this reflexivist view presumably wouldn’t have resources to pick out the uniqueness of the first person: ‘it is not enough to make my thoughts mine that I think of them as “mine”: we all do that’ [Ibid.: 204]. To put it differently, even if the reflexivist holds that mental states are characterized by mineness, mineness wouldn’t be enough for individuating different subjectivities. As a consequence, reflexivism would fall short in accounting for genuinely first-personal phenomena.

According to Ganeri [Ibid.: 212], the problem with reflexivism is more radical, in that it could entail conceptual solipsism:

The strongest argument against reflexivism is . . . that it leads either to an Attenuated account of subjectivity (an account in which the question ‘Which one is me?’ can receive no answer) or else to the conceptual problem of other minds [Ibid: 181].

Insofar as the reflexivist wouldn’t have resources to draw a boundary between different subjects of experience, or explain how the experiences of other subjects could be presented in one’s own consciousness (see Chakrabarti [2012]), she wouldn’t have resources for explaining how one could form a conception of other subjects as such. However, Ganeri’s reservations against reflexivism are far from conclusive. In particular, there are varieties of reflexivism that are certainly not committed to conceptual solipsism, in that they reject the presupposition that the only way in which an experience can be given is first-personally (see Zahavi [2018]). Leaving this point aside, Ganeri’s positive account of the individuation of consciousness is not very clear. On Ganeri’s reconstruction, a non-reflexivist position like Asanga’s and Vasubandhu’s could appeal to ‘mineness-markers’, and thus have ‘good prospects of being able to draw a distinction between the experiences in the stream which are marked as one’s own and those which are marked as another’s’ [Ganeri 2012: 205]. How are
‘mineness-markers’ supposed to differ in their individuating function from the self-reflexivity of mental states that the reflexivist has in mind? On the assumption that a suitable account of intersubjectivity is a precondition for making sense of the phenomenon of joint reminiscing, the question of how is consciousness individuated demands careful consideration.

3. Attention

Accounting for the individuation of consciousness is of course not sufficient to clarify the phenomenon of joint reminiscing. I now move to the topic of attention, which plays an important role in Ganeri’s discussion of episodic memory in the target article. On his reconstruction of Buddhaghosa’s theory, episodic memory is attention to objects from past perceptual encounters . . . The stored percept is directly available because it has been perceived before; it literally re-presents itself. In memory it is as if (viya) one is perceiving again. This encapsulates the key idea of mental time travel, a reliving of past experience, and claims that the phenomenon in question is attentional in nature [Ganeri 2018: 359].

Ganeri elaborates on the role of attention by referring to work by Chun and collaborators, who distinguish between a form of internally oriented or ‘reflective’ attention, and an externally oriented ‘perceptual’ attention. While storage of information would involve the latter, memory retrieval would require the former [Ibid.]. Ganeri combines the proposal that episodic memory involves an internally oriented form of attention with another claim. Episodic memory does not merely involve attending to the past, but rather the ‘reactivation of a past perception’ [Ibid.]. As he puts it, ‘in episodic memory, a retrieved experience is selected for re-experiencing in simulation’ [Ibid.: 360]. Thus, from this perspective, attention would be instrumental for simulation or re-experiencing, in that attention would be involved in the selection of an experience for re-experiencing.

It isn’t clear, though, what precisely the object of reflective attention is supposed to be. While Ganeri’s initial suggestion, drawn from Buddhaghosa, is that ‘episodic memory is attention to objects from past perceptual encounters’ [Ibid.: 359], the later suggestion is that attention is not directed to previously experienced objects, but to previous experiences of those objects. Although it might be possible to combine both ideas, further elaboration on the putative objects of reflective attention would be welcome. Suppose, however, that episodic memory can be understood as a form of reflective attention to past experiences of objects. If
the relieving of a past experience is attentional in nature, there would be good prospects for providing a unified account of individual and joint episodic memory, on the premise that joint episodic memory could also be understood as an attentional process. The idea that joint reminiscing can be understood as a form of joint attention to the past has been explored, as a developmental claim, by Hoerl and McCormack [2005]. They propose that when young children attend jointly to the past with adults, children gain a form of understanding of certain events as temporally situated and causally linked with each other. In this way, they get a grasp of how the past affects the present. Ganeri’s suggestion that episodic memory involves attention to past experiences appears to be consistent with this proposal.

4. Phenomenology of Reminiscing

I will conclude with some brief comments on the phenomenology of reminiscing. To what extent can Ganeri’s reflections on the phenomenology of individual reminiscing be applied to cases of joint reminiscing? The relevance of phenomenology for distinguishing episodic memory from other types of memory has been acknowledged by different authors. Michaelian and Sutton [2017a: 5] remark in this regard that

[a]ccording to contemporary phenomenological definitions, episodic memory is distinguished from semantic memory by the fact that, when one episodically remembers an event, one necessarily has a subjective sense of re-experiencing it, a sense that is absent when one merely semantically remembers facts about it. This sense of the self in subjective time, which maps roughly onto the philosophical notion of a feeling of familiarity or pastness, has come to be known as autonoetic consciousness.

Interestingly, according to Ganeri, the phenomenology of episodic memory involves more than a feeling of pastness. It is characterized by an ‘as-if-ness, in which the remembered event is as if happening before one once again’ [Ganeri 2018: 360]. The phenomenology of episodic memory is in this sense a phenomenology of ‘reliving’ [Ibid.: 366]. Ganeri makes reference to the case of the patient R.B., who as a result of a neurological condition appeared to show intact episodic memory but an inability to feel that his memories belonged to him. According to Ganeri [Ibid.], R.B.’s memory doesn’t count as episodic because it doesn’t have ‘the right proprietary phenomenology’.
One question that remains open is whether a proprietary phenomenology of reliving can occur not only in individual, but also in joint cases of episodic memory. Might an event be remembered by a plurality of individuals as if happening before us once again, in a way that differs from how the event could be remembered by each individual on his or her own? Consideration of shared emotions can provide potential resources to tackle this issue, insofar as one agrees with the idea that shared emotions are not just an aggregation of individual emotions, but require both a preservation of interpersonal differences and an overarching integration that makes emotions be felt as ours (see León, Szanto and Zahavi [2017]).

Examining potential interconnections between memory and affectivity may provide routes for exploring the idea that the phenomenology of reliving can have a first-personal character in the plural form.

In this commentary, I have focused on the topics of intersubjectivity, attention, and the phenomenology of reminiscing, in order to explore connections between the target article and the phenomenon of joint reminiscing. Needless to say, these topics hardly exhaust the aspects of episodic memory that are worth of consideration.

References


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