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INTRODUCTION

Reference and remembering: editorial introduction

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Abstract

This topical collection brings together papers that address memory and aboutness. Focal points of the contributions concern relationships between episodic memory, reference (or singular thought), the content of remembering, and the accuracy conditions of remembering. Though there has been increasing work on these particular issues in recent years, continued progress demands theorising that can address these phenomena with an eye to exploring, examining, and explaining their systematic interrelations. The principal aim of this topical collection was to prompt such conversations by bringing researchers specialising on these topics within one forum for the first time. The result is 15 papers that push the boundaries of this area of inquiry into new and exciting directions.

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In this editorial introduction, we briefly provide some context to the topical collection (Sect. 1), before summarising the contributions grouped by theme (Sect. 2). We end with some open questions for future research in the area (Sect. 3).

1 Context

As the philosophy of memory has come to flourish as a prominent sub-discipline, some of the central emerging issues can be fruitfully seen as issues about *reference*. Examples include the role of episodic memory traces, disputes about the importance of 'appropriate' or 'discriminating' causal links, variation in the potential objects of remembering, and the evaluation of memories for accuracy. Meanwhile, philosophical work on memory today offers substantially greater insights and challenges for general theories of reference and mental content than it did when the most prominent theories of these phenomena were proposed. Our conviction that specialists working in and across these areas have much to say to one another is what motivated this topical collection.

The idea for a collection on this theme began from early conversations between the guest editors and several of its contributors. We felt it was important to begin with dialogue between researchers focused on either memory or reference, and so a conference was held at the Université Grenoble Alpes from June 30th to July 2nd 2022. Many but not all of the paper in this collection began as talks at this conference. We owe our thanks to several funding bodies for supporting that event (see acknowledgements).

2 Article summaries by theme

Reference is the relation between a thought, or an expression, and some particular thing(s) in the world which that thought or expression is in some sense *directly about*. Questions of reference lie at the heart of the philosophy of memory. Indeed, it is natural to think of remembering as a *mode* of referential thinking (or singular thought). When it is successful, remembering is directly about events (objects, etc.) experienced in the subject's personal past. Insofar as remembering can be construed as an intentional state in this sense, understanding its referentiality is at the heart of understanding remembering itself.

While the philosophy of memory has matured as a bona fide sub-discipline in recent years, it is difficult to see how this pace of work can be maintained without tackling the range of questions connected to reference that the thematic summaries below attempt to contain.

Yet just as ideas from the study of reference and singular thought can inform recent work on memory, the reverse is no less true. Memory is undeniably the conduit of much of our singular thought about objects and events. Yet the majority of theorists have taken *perception*- or *communication*-based thoughts as their paradigms, saying little about the distinctive issues raised by memory-based singular thought [exceptions include Campbell (2002) and Recanati (2007)]. Some have suggested that the

capacity to recognise objects upon re-encountering them is what constitutes the basis of memory-based singular thoughts about objects (Evans, 1982).[1] But the capacity to recognise is known to be distinct from the capacity to remember. The suggestion is also incomplete, for it is unclear how to extend it from things which persist through time and may be re-encountered to past events which may not. In general, it is arguably still the case that most theorising about referential or singular thought has taken place prior to, or independently of, several decades' worth of advances in memory science and a good deal of corresponding philosophical progress. Much as theories of perceptual reference have matured thanks to engagement with work in vision science, we anticipate that similar developments will come to shape theories of mnemic reference in the coming years.

In short, while the philosophy of memory will benefit from attending to questions, tools and approaches from inquiry about reference, researchers focused on the latter will benefit from attending the questions, tools and empirically-oriented methodology that characterises recent philosophy of memory. We think the papers below give testament to this and will spur future work in the area(s).

2.1 Theories of mnemic reference-fixing

Granted that there are facts concerning what successful cases of remembering are about (i.e., which events, objects, or places they have as their subject matter), what makes it the case that such rememberings are about the things they are in fact about? In other words, what metasemantic facts 'fix' reference in remembering? The three papers most squarely focused on this question caution against simplistic over-reliance on causalist theories and take new steps toward richer accounts of mnemic reference-fixing.

In his contribution, Barkasi (2024) emphasises the threat posed by 'promiscuous' (Langland-Hassan, 2022; Robins, 2016) conceptions of memory traces. On such views, traces do not properly or typically bear the mark of only one discrete experienced event and, as such, lack a pre-determined, 'baked in' referent. Given the increasing dominance of such conceptions, causal-aetiological facts about traces ('producer-side factors') are unlikely to provide a full story of mnemic reference-fixing. Barkasi argues that we must also attend to how and for what purpose traces are retrieved on a given occasion ('consumer-side factors'). While the viability of 'hybrid' theories appealing to both producer- and consumer-side factors is worthy of further investigation, Barkasi suggests that pure consumer-side theories of mnemic reference may also be viable. In particular, a Dickie-inspired epistemic approach and a Millikan-style teleosemantic approach each have their distinctive attractions. Whether these approaches will ultimately boil down to something 'hybrid' in character, and whether they can circumvent the initial concerns Barkasi raises, remains an

[1] It is worth mentioning that Evans's (1982) rationale for supposing that memory-based singular thoughts require certain *present* discriminatory capacities (as against anything in the spirit of what he calls the 'photograph model') arguably rests on dubious epistemological convictions: namely, that modes of presentation must be *transparent* in the demanding sense that a subject who understands two singular propositions p and p' partly constituted by object-dependent modes of presentation M and M' must be in a position to know whether p and p' are identical (Openshaw 2018).

open question. (Openshaw & Michaelian's contribution attempts, in part, to address Barkasi's concern about the epistemic approach. Entwistle's contribution in some ways perhaps heightens Barkasi's concern about the teleosemantic approach.)

Murez and Strickland's (2024) contribution surveys a range of potential theories of mnemic reference, evaluated specifically with respect to their ability to accommodate instances of remembering that involve 'event completion' (Strickland & Keil, 2011). Event completion involves perceptual and memory systems' construction of event representations at retrieval, compression at consolidation, and addition of new content at retrieval, such that an event with a longer duration than was originally experienced by the subject is (perhaps accurately) remembered.[2] Some analogous issues arise in connection with phenomena such as boundary extension [e.g., Michaelian (2013)]. Murez & Strickland, however, are specifically interested in the implications of claiming that it is possible to *achieve reference* to such 'completed' events (events some temporal parts of which were not experienced). They argue that purely descriptive and purely causal theories struggle to accommodate such cases, and that hybrid approaches of various sorts do better. As well as providing a valuable map of the theoretical landscape, Murez & Strickland introduce the notion of *simulated acquaintance* [drawing on Recanati (2012)] from the mental files literature to the philosophy of memory, suggesting that event representations as a type may be understood as subject to a *file*-like *de jure* previous experience constraint that can (for some tokens) enable successful reference to 'completed' events when the underlying construction processes are in some (perhaps evidentialist sense) well-grounded. Like the other papers in this section, Murez & Strickland's framework may mesh nicely with certain 'post-causalist' theories of remembering [e.g., Michaelian (2016)].

Openshaw and Michaelian (2024) ask what they call the '(mnemic) reference question': when a subject is remembering an event, what facts make it the case that they are remembering *that* event? Like the aforementioned contributions, they point out that while traditional causalist theories of remembering may seem to have a simple answer, there are strong grounds to doubt that things are quite so simple. Openshaw & Michaelian take the opportunity to consider what 'post-causal' theories of remembering might say in response to the reference question. They explore a reliabilist answer that draws on ideas in Dickie (2015). Roughly, an episodic memory representation R is about the actual past event(s) (if any) the salient properties of which R suitably matches across nearby possible worlds, given the specific way in which R was constructed. It might be that multiple (or promiscuous) traces, perceptual schemata, scripts, or general knowledge all play an important role in constructive remembering, and that reference is achieved because these factors enable R to reliably 'home in' on a particular event in the subject's personal past, even though no privileged 'engram-like' ingredient with that event as its unique origin is available. They suggest that simulationists, in particular, could profit from an account of mnemic reference with this approximate shape, and that reference to future events might be simultaneously explicable. Finally, they argue that there are cases of mnemic confabulation that appear to involve mnemic reference. Though this warrants

[2] On epistemic issues raised by this phenomenon, see Miyazono & Tooming (2024).

further investigation, it may provide additional grounds to doubt that causalists have the upper hand.

2.2 Memory and mental files

Several papers in the collection explore links between memory and the theoretical notion of *mental files*. Talk of mental files has featured in philosophical theorising about language and the mind since around the 1970s [see Goodman (2024) for a recent overview]. While it has become common in recent years to think of the vehicles of singular thought as mental files, doing so can reflect a number of distinct commitments and projects. The papers in this collection reflect this heterogeneity, developing the connection between memory and files in different ways.

On one sort of project, mental files correspond to subjects' *mode of presentation*, or way of thinking, about particular entities. In his contribution, Recanati (2024) looks to further extend his (2012) influential mental files framework to diachronic cases in which, in particular, we might wish to say that a memory-based mode of presentation is identical to the perceptual mode of presentation from which it in some sense derives. Suppose a subject who successfully tracks a particular object infers from the thoughts that *that* (perceived at *t1)* is *F* and that *that* (currently perceived at *t2)* is *G* that *some* thing is both *F* and *G*. Call this inference pattern 'trading on identity'. According to Campbell's (1987) criterion, the modes of presentation associated with the two demonstratives must be identical. What is this single mode of presentation that licenses such an inference at *t2*? We could say that one 'dynamic' mode of presentation *persists* from *t1* to *t2*, despite changes in the epistemically rewarding relation on which it is based, thanks to tracking. Recanati's first insight is that we need not say this. Instead, we can think of modes of presentation as being potentially *composite*: the subject who infers in this way at *t2* makes use of a mode of presentation (not available at *t1)* based on *both* a perceptual link at *t2* to the object and a memory link at *t2* to the object. Nevertheless, the memory-based mode of presentation at *t2* bears some important relation to the earlier perceptual mode of presentation at *t1*. If this requires us to introduce the notion of dynamic modes of presentation after all, what does it take for one mode of presentation to persist in this way? Recanati's second insight is that we can use the mental files framework to model what goes on in such cases. He suggests that one dynamic mode of presentation spans the transition from a past perception-based singular thought to memory-based singular thought when the memory in question is *anchored*. An anchored memory is a memory that is recognizably associated with *the original mental file*, transmitted from the time of the original perception (and, when this is the case, the subject is afforded the informationally rich and spatiotemporally contextualised sort of remembering characteristic of episodic memory).

It is interesting to consider what, in a psychological sense, it might take for a mental file to be transmitted across time. According to some theorists, talk of 'mental files' manifests a commitment to taking singular thought as an object of empirical inquiry, tracked or constituted by the deployment of certain cognitive vehicles. Mental files are, on this approach, neither a metaphor nor a surface description. They are empirical hypotheses about real cognitive particulars (Murez et al., 2020). A particu-

larly ambitious version of this project would view mental files as a uniform natural kind, constitutive of singular thought in all its modes (from perception-based thought to forms of memory-based thought, etc.). Alternatively, however, there might be several classes of representations each exhibiting core properties of mental files, but in importantly distinct ways and in the service of distinct tasks.

Andonovski's (2024) contribution makes progress in this direction, extracting core functional properties of mental files from the existing philosophical literature and arguing, by surveying relevant work in contemporary psychology and neuroscience, that *engrams* (or memory traces) exhibit these signature properties (within the functional profile of the episodic memory system). In particular, current memory science appears to centrally posit discrete neural structures resulting from, and carrying information about, specific, past, experienced events. These 'engrams' also appear to involve a file-like structural complexity, securing referential continuity via a hippocampal 'index' component, as distinct from the cortical representation of event-feature descriptions. As such, Andonovski boldly suggests, the retrieval and deployment of engrams is constitutive of the capacity for reference to such specific events in episodic remembering. One might wonder what the strength of such a constitution claim is or ought to be. Much as some have questioned whether tracking via a visual object-file is necessary for either seeing or vision-based singular thought, we might anticipate pressure on the analogous claim about engram-deployment. However, the moral Andonovski draws is that we can be cautiously optimistic about the prospects for causalist theories where appropriate causation via a memory trace (engram) is construed not as strictly necessary or sufficient but, rather, as part of the proper functioning of the episodic system that underwrites remembering.

In contrast, Goodman and Gray (2024) seek to clarify and consolidate their (2022) scepticism concerning the explanatory purchase offered by positing file-like cognitive particulars. Importantly, the focus of their (2022) is the use of files to explain and underpin the *rational permissibility* of inferences *at a time* that 'trade on identity' in the sense above, i.e. the cognitive analogue of transitions of the form '*a* is *F'*, '*a* is *G'*, 'Therefore, something is both *F* & *G'*. Goodman & Gray call the relation between attitudes that licenses such inferences 'coordination'. When Recanati (2012) claims that a subject can trade on the identity of information if and only if it is contained in the same mental file, Goodman & Gray instead suggest that what matters is just that object-representations (which may well lack containment structure) carry *coordinated* content in virtue of occupying a particular functional role. In other words, it requires only that a certain representational relation hold between token attitudes, one not determined by any representational feature that either possesses in isolation. We need not posit 'implementationally privileged' collections of monadic predicates to which a subject is doxastically committed. The positive face of Goodman & Gray's scepticism is that what the mental file theorist seeks to explain can be explained by a process: *mental filing*. In this contribution, they consider whether explaining the rational permissibility of inferences *across time* that trade on identity provides any additional support for positing mental files. While their alternative 'mental filing' story introduces new and interesting complications about the individuation of object-directed update processes (the details of which are left for future work), they conclude that the diachronic case provides no substantive obstacles to their scepticism.

2.3 Content and accuracy in memory

Several contributions explore issues relating to the content and accuracy-conditions of remembering. There is a deep relationship between what a memory *represents as having been the case* and the conditions under which the memory is *accurate*. In particular, when a memory refers to a particular event, its accuracy will depend on whether the event had the relevant features attributed by the memory representation. The first pair of contributions under this general theme is primarily concerned with what it takes for an instance of remembering to be accurate, though this is seen to have implications on what we should say about the content of remembering. The second pair of contributions considers features of the content of remembering, in particular its apparent *de se* character and its apparent capacity to concern event-*types* (rather than event-tokens).

Dings et al. (2023) paper contributes to the ongoing debate on whether past experiences should be considered among the accuracy conditions of memory, specifically as so-called 'authenticity' conditions. Opponents sometimes argue that, since most memories exhibit some degree of inaccuracy concerning the original experience of the event—such as in the case of observer memories—past experiences should not be regarded as part of memory's accuracy conditions. Otherwise, the majority of memories would be deemed unsuccessful, an implausible conclusion. In response, Dings et al. contend that this argument holds only if authenticity necessitates full accuracy. However, they argue, the level of accuracy required for a memory to be considered authentic is context-dependent and shaped by the function the memory serves within that context. In practice, rather than demanding complete accuracy, memory often requires only a more liberal and coarse-grained standard. By loosening the bounds of authenticity in this way, the paper develops a contextualist argument for the inclusion of authenticity conditions within the accuracy conditions of memory without implying their unsuccessful character.

Plausibly, an instance of episodic memory is accurate just in case its referent instantiated the properties attributed by the memory. Taking inspiration from two-dimensional semantics, Fernández (2024) argues that this account is in a sense ambiguous, as episodic memories possess two types of content. On one hand, a memory may refer to a particular object or event that was experienced in the past, to which it attributes certain properties. Its accuracy conditions are thus defined by the set of possible worlds in which that particular object has the properties it in fact had in the actual world. This constitutes the *objective content*, wherein the causal relation between the memory and the past object fixes said object as the referent of the memory without its being represented. On the other hand, there is a separate dimension of content, characterised by the sense in which a memory may refer to whatever object shares all of the qualitative properties of the particular object experienced in the actual world. In this case, its accuracy conditions correspond to the set of possible worlds in which the same qualitative features are instantiated. This forms the *subjective content*, wherein the causal relation between the memory and the past object is represented, while the memory itself has its reference fixed in a non-causal way. If this analysis is correct, it is strictly speaking incorrect to talk of 'the' accuracy conditions of episodic memories.

Episodic memory is naturally understood as a form of *de se* thought; that is, it inherently refers to the past experiencer of the remembered event, who, intuitively enough, is identical to the present rememberer. However, a key question arises as to whether this identification is immune or vulnerable to errors of misidentification. An influential debate on this issue took place some decades ago between Shoemaker and Evans, with Shoemaker (1970) contending that the immunity to error through misidentification (IEM) in episodic memories is merely de facto and Evans (1982) arguing that it is logically necessary. Extending his (2018) metasemantic account of immunity to error through misidentification, García-Carpintero (2024) advances an argument in support of Shoemaker's position. On his own definition, a mental state is vulnerable to errors through misidentification if, when its identification component is defeated, its existential component can still be true rather than excluded by the falsity of the identification component. García-Carpintero further argues that recent empirical findings supporting the constructivist approach to episodic memory—such as observer memories, vicarious memories, and disputed memories—offer mundane cases that also support the de facto nature of episodic memory's immunity to misidentification. For instance, in a case of disputed memory, it might turn out that I was not the one who made a brilliant objection at a given conference, but it remains true that someone else made it. While episodic memory is typically immune to errors of misidentification in standard cases, there are cases where this immunity fails.

It is commonly assumed that instances of episodic memory refer uniquely to specific, particular events. However, Entwistle (2025) points out, we often remember much more generic events, such as one's daily commute to work. Entwistle suggests that instances of episodic memory can integrate both an episodic mode of representation—typically associated with the particularity of what is represented—and a *non-particular*, generic event as its referent. How, one might wonder, is this divorce between episodicity and particularity possible? In particular, how can generic episodic memories be simultaneously *authentic*—that is, concerned with how one experienced the events through the particular experiences in one's personal past—and *true*, given that they refer to a non-particular, generic event? According to her proposal, generic episodic memories are experiential memories that refer to *event types* rather than event tokens, with such types having been abstracted from specific tokens in one's personal past. Instances of such remembering represent *what it was like* to experience past events of a given type, thus aiming to reconcile genericity with the possibility of both authenticity and truth.

2.4 Memories of fictional events

Two contributions question the sharpness and legitimacy of distinctions between memories referring to actual, perceptually experienced events and memories referring beyond this range and, in particular, to fictional events.

Semeijn (2024) responds to the view that there is an important difference between fiction memories (memories that the subject recognizes as originating in a fiction, such as a novel or a film) and ordinary memories. Inspired by an approach developed by Matravers (2014) in the field of aesthetics, according to which there is no cognitively interesting difference between our engagement with fiction and our engagement

with nonfiction, Semeijn develops a two-stage model of memory that recognizes a range of different tags for non-believed memories, including, for example, memories originating in hallucinations and dreams in addition to memories originating in fiction. On the basis of this model, she argues that there is in fact no important difference between fiction memories and ordinary memories, maintaining, first, that fiction memories are not a cognitively distinct kind of memory and, second, that our model of memory should not incorporate a fact-fiction dimension.

Werning and Liefke (2025) aim to provide what they call a 'non-disjunctivist' account of mnemic reference. If we grant that one can remember not only events that one perceived but also events about which one was told, events about which one dreamt, or fictional events, it might seem as though a form of disjunctivism is nonetheless likely. In other words, one might expect that the means by which reference in remembering perceived events is fixed is nonetheless fundamentally distinct from the means by which reference in remembering events that were experienced in other ways—in hallucination, in dreaming, in engaging with fiction, or in vicarious experience—is fixed. After all, whereas perceiving an event clearly involves being in causal contact with that event, one is not in the same way causally connected to the events at issue in vicarious, oneiric, or fictional remembering. Building on the account of referential parasitism developed in related work (Werning & Liefke, 2024), however, Werning and Liefke argue that disjunctivism can be avoided. Mnemic reference, they suggest, does not presuppose a causal connection between the memory and its referent. Instead, the reference of the memory is parasitic on that of the earlier experience (whether perceptual or non-perceptual), in the sense that the entity to which the memory refers is determined relative to the earlier experience. They argue, furthermore, that the 'minimal' memory traces described by Werning (2020) can help explain how such parasitism can occur.

2.5 Temporal cognition and the function(s) of episodic memory

Until recently, one might have safely assumed that the key to understanding the adaptive function of a memory system lies in its being past-oriented. It is now commonplace to suppose, instead, that episodic memory's most basic function is in some sense future-oriented. While one paper in the collection challenges this general tendency, two others address the relationship between memory and temporal cognition.

Keven's (2024) argument unfolds against this background of growing interest in the function of episodic memory. Opposing the increasingly popular view according to which the function of episodic memory is future-oriented, in the sense that it is part of a more general system designed to enable the subject to simulate and plan for future events, Keven argues that its function is in an important sense past-oriented: it provides the subject with information about the past behaviour of others who are known to them. An equally crucial part of the story, for Keven, is the place of *memory sharing* within a community. By providing both ourselves and one another with information relevant to choices about partner selection, episodic memory enables us to select partners who are likely to cooperate and to reject those who are likely to cheat. Keven's argument builds on theoretical models of individual reputations in

group cooperation to suggest that memory itself may have been vital to the evolution of cooperation.

The question at issue in Hoerl's (2024) contribution is whether it is necessary, in order for one to entertain a singular thought about an entity encountered in the past, that one think about that entity as having been encountered in the past. Hoerl recognizes that it is tempting to suppose that this is indeed necessary and suggests that the temptation is due to the fact that, in the case of human beings, the relevant thoughts are typically past-tensed memory-based thoughts. But, appealing to his recent work with McCormack (Hoerl & McCormack, 2019) on temporal updating, he argues that, in the case of nonhuman animals, the relevant thoughts are often present-tensed. This suggests, in turn, that it may not in fact be necessary, in order to entertain a singular thought about an entity encountered in the past, to think about that entity as having been encountered in the past.

Finally, Verdejo's (2024) contribution explores a phenomenon that has not previously been examined in detail by philosophers of memory: remembering as the same, in which the subject represents an entity *as the same* entity across time. For example, one might recall meeting someone in the past, wonder what that person is doing now, and imagine meeting him again in the future. The basic framework for Verdejo's exploration of this phenomenon is provided by the causalist-simulationist debate. On the one hand, he argues that causalism is unable to account for remembering as the same because it holds that appropriate causation, which might obtain regardless of whether the subject takes his thoughts to concern the same entity, is sufficient for remembering. On the other hand, he argues that simulationism is better placed to account for remembering as the same because it can provide an account that respects two constraints: a synchronic constraint, which says that, at a given time, a subject can only remember as the same an entity that he represents and for which a certain 'epistemic core' holds, and a diachronic constraint, which says that, over time, that epistemic core may change, resulting in new requirements for remembering as the same the entity that the subject represents. Verdejo's contribution thus points not only to a phenomenon that philosophers of memory have hitherto neglected but also to a potential means of moving the causalist-simulationist debate forwards.

3 Conclusion and future directions

We view this topical collection as laying additional groundwork for the many future debates surrounding memory and aboutness. Though the contributions will no doubt advance discussions within their particular areas of focus, we also look forward to future work on issues not directly addressed by the papers in this collection. We will end by gesturing towards just a handful of these questions for future investigation.

- How is mnemic reference achieved in non-episodic forms of memory?
- What are the mechanisms by which mnemic reference to objects or places is achieved?
- How is mnemic reference to event-constituents achieved in episodic (and/or semantic) memory, and how is this related to securing reference to events?

- How do issues concerning the representational *format* of memory states impact on issues about their referential character?
- What bearing should the semantics of *de re* memory reports in natural language have on the study of memory, and mnemic reference, in philosophy and psychology?
- Is the means by which reference to events in the personal past achieved interestingly analogous to the means by which reference to events in one's personal future is achieved?
- What role does imagery play in securing reference to particular events (etc.) in remembering, and what bearing does aphantasia have on this issue?
- Is there an important role for relational awareness in establishing memory demonstrative reference (or in the subject's 'grasp' of a token memory demonstrative)?
- How should we think about memories of apparently 'selfless' experiences, such as those which might appear to occur in meditative practice or psychedelic experience?

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Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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