

Reviewed by: Lisa Bortolotti, *Department of Philosophy, University of Birmingham, UK*

In recent years, the philosophy of memory has flourished, and *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory* does a great job at pointing to the different areas of philosophy affected by the study of memory, including metaphysics, epistemology, phenomenology, philosophy of time, philosophy of mind and history of philosophy. In each of the areas, contributors highlight specific issues of interest, some of which have attracted considerable controversy and are still hotly debated, such as the nature of memory itself and the best way to characterise the contribution that memory makes to our knowledge of the world.

I have a long-standing interest in whether beliefs that are seen as epistemically problematic (due to being false or irrational) support our agency. I suspect that they do have a positive role to play and that such role is mediated by how they impact on our sense of self and the construction of our self-narratives. Memory beliefs are especially important in this context, as they convey autobiographical information about the past. In the *Handbook*, there are several contributions that are relevant to the role of memory beliefs and that I thoroughly enjoyed reading, including Bernecker on “Memory and Truth” (Chapter 4), Hutto on “Memory and Narrativity” (Chapter 15) and McCarroll and Sutton on “Memory and Perspective” (Chapter 9). Here, due to the space constraints, I shall focus on Fivush and Graci on “Memory and Social Identity” (Chapter 21).

Memory beliefs and the sense of self

A person with dementia and impaired autobiographical memory may sincerely report beliefs about her past that others find inaccurate and implausible. However, having those beliefs and reporting them may enable the person to retain information about herself that would otherwise be threatened by the progressive degeneration of her memory capacities. In Bortolotti and Sullivan-Bissett (2018), we discuss some examples from the literature on Alzheimer’s disease. One such example is Martha’s story. Martha often told the story of how she learnt to drive, and she bought her own car, defying the objections of the people closest to her (Hydén and Örulv, 2009: 207). This was something she was presumably very proud of because not many women at the time would have done the same. Notwithstanding repetitions and inconsistencies in her reports, the story played a key role in Martha’s sense of self by reinforcing the conception of herself as someone who would follow her own mind.

Even in the absence of known memory impairments, it is common for people to sincerely report beliefs about their past that downplay their responsibility for failed tasks and overstate their role in achieving success. Such memory beliefs do not reflect the totality of the evidence, and are motivationally biased; however, having those beliefs and using them to explain past performance and to predict future performance may be more conducive to the attainment of people’s goals than having more realistic beliefs. That is because realistic beliefs often lead to self-doubt. In a paper on the relationship between optimism and success (Bortolotti, 2018), I consider the literature on self-affirmation as offering some good examples of this. It has been argued that negative affective states associated with poverty cause agents to make short-sighted and risk-averse decisions that are often self-defeating (Haushofer and Fehr, 2014). But when agents are encouraged to describe past achievements that gave them a sense of pride before making a decision, then they are more likely to think in ways that show intelligence and flexibility and to take advantage of the opportunities available to them (Hall et al., 2014).

Memory beliefs and socially constructed identities

Some of the positive effects of memory beliefs partly stem from the social context in which people report them. While sharing their narratives with their peers, people express their values, redefine

their identities and receive feedback on their beliefs. Narrative identity evolves and is preserved in a social context. In Fivush and Graci's chapter, we learn about the social dimension of how narrative identity is established in the first place, in the relationship between a young child and (typically) her mother.

In their fascinating developmental perspective, Fivush and Graci emphasise the connection between certain ways of reminiscing the past together and other things we value, such as attachment, coping and emotional regulation. They argue that "more elaborative maternal reminiscing earlier in the preschool years facilitates the development of more coherent and elaborative narratives as children grow older" (p. 272). When they are adults, those people who were invited to reminisce past events in a more detailed way by their mothers have more coherent and emotionally regulated self-narratives. In particular, when addressing difficult or traumatic events, they identify opportunities for growth, and as a result, they cope better with the difficulties or the trauma they experienced.

There are two aspects of this discussion that I find useful in thinking about memory beliefs and their potential role in supporting agency. The first is that it is not the *accuracy* of the memory which contributes to the development of good narrative identities down the line, but its *elaboration* and *coherence*, especially in relation to those emotions that children may find particularly hard to understand or manage, such as sadness and grief. This suggests that some memory distortions may not be problematic, for instance, when they contribute to increased elaboration of the remembered events or help impose coherence on the jointly constructed narrative. Although Fivush and Graci do not address this issue, we can speculate that a moderately unrealistic emphasis on how unpleasant situations can be remedied may be welcome, depending on what it enables the person to do.

The second observation is that the benefits of an elaborated and coherent narrative identity developing as a result of the social scaffolding happening in childhood are not merely psychological, or not psychological in a narrow sense. As we can see from the passage below, Fivush and Graci describe the benefits in terms of the construction and maintenance of a self that can cope effectively with adversities and feels loved, safe, secure and competent:

Securely attached parents and children engage in elaborated and emotionally expressive and regulated co-constructed narratives of everyday and challenging experiences, and these children develop more coherent, emotionally expressive, and regulated narratives as they grow older. As these securely attached and narratively elaborative individuals develop into adolescents and young adults, these early foundations set the stage for the formation of a narrative identity and life story. As adults, more securely attached individuals continue to narrate their experiences more coherently and in more emotionally regulated ways, and, importantly, narratives that coherently express attachment-related themes of exploration and support seeking are related to greater personal growth. (p. 278)

Conclusion

Reflecting on how reminiscence underlies narrative identities helps us understand the relationship between memory beliefs and agency. We saw that reminiscing in an elaborated and coherent way gives rise to more detailed and better emotionally regulated narrative identities. In Fivush and Graci's chapter, the inclusion of items such as personal growth and exploration among the benefits of elaborated and emotionally regulated self-narratives suggests that such narratives support the person's agency in general, potentially sustaining her motivation to persevere in the pursuit of her goals in the face of setbacks.

References

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Author biography

Lisa Bortolotti is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham, affiliated both with the Philosophy Department and the Institute for Mental Health. She works in the philosophy of psychology and psychiatry, specialising in the study of behavioural manifestations of irrationality, such as delusional beliefs, cognitive biases, distorted memories, and failures of self-knowledge. Her latest books are *Irrationality* (Polity 2014) and *Delusions in Context* (Palgrave 2018).

Reviewed by: Felipe Rocha L Santos, *Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas, Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brasil*

The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory, edited by Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian, should be considered one of the main references for those who want to have at the same time a panoramic view of the philosophical problems concerning memory and a more in-depth view. The book has 48 chapters, divided into eight thematic parts, focusing mostly on the analytical tradition of philosophical investigation. Unfortunately, as highlighted by the editors in the introduction, many relevant and interesting problems could not be placed in the book, given the lack of space. What is interesting about this book is that even with an approach to analytic philosophy and even focusing on themes such as “Memory and Time” (Part 5, Chapters 16–18), “The Epistemology of Memory” (Part 7, Chapters 22–26), and “Metaphysics of Memory” (Part 2, Chapters 4–7), the book devotes 18 chapters to the history of the philosophy of memory, discussing from classical philosophers as Plato (Chapter 30) and Aristotle (Chapter 31), to contemporary philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein (Chapter 46) and Paul Ricoeur (Chapter 48), with an interesting inclusion of chapters on the philosophy of memory in Classical Indian philosophy (Chapter 32) and Chinese Buddhist philosophy (Chapter 34).

Given the wide variety of themes discussed in the handbook, I will focus on one of the parts that attracted my attention, since it discusses themes that are not only relevant to philosophy, but also which are very important to our everyday life, namely, “Memory and Morality” (Part 8, Chapters 27–29). This part has three chapters wherein a different aspect of memory and morality is discussed in each. In fact, there is not yet exhaustive literature on memory and morality, especially addressing topics such as the use of memory modification technologies (MMTs) and contemporary legal aspects such as the legal concept called *the right to be forgotten*. Having said that, I will briefly comment on the chapters that form this section and the possibilities they open for the discussion of the ethics of memory.

In “A Duty to Remember” (Chapter 27), Jeffrey Blustein briefly discusses what cases we are or should be obliged to remember. What is interesting here is the brief historical approach, searching in classical antiquity for antecedents to this discussion, and seeking to compare modern ethical