

## Book review symposium

Memory Studies  
2019, Vol. 12(6) 736–750  
© The Author(s) 2019  
Article reuse guidelines:  
[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](http://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)  
DOI: 10.1177/1750698019883205  
[journals.sagepub.com/home/mss](http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mss)



Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian (eds)

*The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*. New York: Routledge, 2017. 590 pp. \$230.00. ISBN 9781138909366.

**Reviewed by:** William Hirst, *Psychology Department, The New School for Social Research, USA*

As a psychologist, when I think about memory, I think about questions such as the following: How do people—and other species—remember the past? What neurological or cognitive mechanisms are involved? What are its properties? Is there one form of memory or many different forms of memory? If more than one, how does one characterize them? To some extent, the philosophy of memory tackles at least some of the same issues, but it appears on the surface to involve much more. As a cursory examination of the Table of Contents of *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory* indicates, there are concerns about the metaphysics and epistemology of memory and the morality of memory. When are you, for instance, morally obligated to remember? But then, when should you feel the obligation to forget? Questions such as these remain largely either unexplored or unrecognized by psychologists and neuroscientists, and one could reasonably argue, rightly so. One could equally argue, however, that psychologists have a great deal to learn about memory from philosophers. This volume is a good place to start. The editors—Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian—have masterfully found articulate and authoritative contributors who address these topics and many more. I particularly welcomed the section on the history of the philosophy of memory. There are separate chapters on Plato (Chapter 30), Aristotle (Chapter 31), Augustine (Chapter 35), Indian Buddhist philosophy (Chapter 33), Hume (Chapter 39), Hegel (Chapter 40), Bergson (Chapter 42), Halbwachs (Chapter 44), and Ricoeur (Chapter 48), to name just a handful of the 18 separate historical chapters. These will serve as a ready guide for anyone who wants to understand the contributions of different scholars to the study of memory.

As I read through the altogether 48 chapters in this volume, I found myself thinking back to my graduate school days. After a year or two studying the psychology and neuroscience of memory, I decided that I needed to know something about the philosophy of memory. At the time, at Cornell, the formidable Wittgensteinian philosopher Norman Malcolm was teaching a course on memory. I distinctly remember being hopelessly confused from the start. At least in the beginning of the course, Malcolm appeared to treat a memory as a memory only if it captured “truthfully” the past. As Bernecker states in his entry on “Memory and Truth” (Chapter 4), “‘To remember’ is factive in the sense that an utterance of ‘S remembers that p’ (where ‘S’ stands for a subject and ‘p’ stands for a proposition) is true only if p is the case. If not-p, then S may think that she remembers that p, but she doesn’t actually remember that p” (p. 52). A large number of chapters in this volume either embrace this notion, or feel that one must take it seriously enough to tackle it at length. To return to Bernecker again, many philosophers find the statement “I remember such-and-such, but such-and-such never happened,” if not literally contradictory, paradoxical. For them, it is “not really a

coherent assertion” (p. 53). From the first day of class, that seemed to be the case for Norman Malcolm.

For a psychologist, especially someone suckled on the constructivist approach to memory advanced by Bartlett, all of this struck me as bizarre. To account for the factivity of memory, as this volume makes clear, many philosophers take seriously some variant of trace theory. For them, experiences are encoded and leave a trace that remains fairly unaltered over time. At the desired moment, these traces are retrieved and placed in the “footlights of consciousness.” Yet everything I learned about memory in my psychological studies militated against this view of memory. I thought then and still think that trace theory is not only hopelessly out-of-date, but just wrong. Most psychologists would embrace a constructivist view and allow that there is nothing odd about stating, “I remember such-and-such, but such-and-such never happened.” Indeed, rather than being bizarre, statements such as these are all too frequent in daily life.

Yet this volume slowly worked on me, as one chapter after another dealt with concerns about memory and truth, in one way or another. I came to realize that philosophers have placed in the forefront what psychologists have failed to tackle head on. There is no doubt that lay people believe that their memories capture the past. They may accept that sometimes their memories are in error, but they act as if, and would claim that, overall their memories are representations not of an imaginary past, but the actual past. Even the diehard reconstructionist, the true disciple of Bartlett, accepts, at least to a degree, the factivity of memory. In his chapter on Bartlett (Chapter 45), Wagoner cautions that simply because people do not form traces of the past, but reconstruct the past “on the run” out of their schemata, it does not follow that memories are “necessarily inaccurate or distorted” (p. 540). As he writes, “If nothing else, they are accurate enough to maximize our functioning in the world.” (p. 540). But this appeal to functionalism must be extremely unsatisfactory to the philosopher trying to understand not simply why people act on their memories as if they are accurate, but also why they have the belief that they are and what about memory justifies that belief. I suspect that psychologists could supply no more definitive understanding of the “factivity” of memory than philosophers.

Indeed, if one examines the psychological literature, one quickly observes that whereas psychologists may side with a constructivist approach that mitigates the need for “justifying” memory representations of the past, they still cling, to varying degrees, to memory’s ability to capture the past in an accurate manner. It is not atypical to see within one paragraph a psychologist asserting the reconstructive nature of memory and then write about encoding and retrieval, thereby embracing both constructivist and trace theoretical approaches at the same time. But more critically, psychologists cannot even come to some agreement about how accurate memory actually is. As I stated, taking a functional approach and arguing it is good enough does not really get at what constitutes “good enough.”

The failure of psychologists to come to terms with the relation between memory and truth rests at the center of the recent debate among psychologists about the accuracy of eyewitness testimony. Since Loftus’ (2017) groundbreaking work on the malleability of memory, and the much longer Bartlettian tradition that emphasizes memory’s unreliability, psychologists have argued forcefully that eyewitness testimony should be viewed skeptically. The US Courts have begun to take their concerns seriously. Yet, recently, work by Wixted and his associates have asserted that if people’s memory is tested shortly after an incident and if the memory is confidently held, it tends to be accurate (Wixted et al., 2018). Those arguing for the unreliability of eyewitness reports often cite that many of the false convictions documented by the Innocence Project depended solely on the testimony of a single eyewitness. But Wixted has noted, that if one goes back to the original testimony collected shortly after the trial, the eyewitness in almost every case stated that they were not confident in their memory.

The Wixted work does not bear on the issue of whether it is bizarre or “not really coherent” to say “I remember confidently such-and-such, but such-and-such never happened.” Appeals to such judgments is a maneuver typical of philosophers, not psychologists. Psychologists seem content to simply study the relation between confidence rating and accuracy, leaving judgments about bizarreness and incoherence to others. But it is probably not too far of a step to go from (a) asserting that it rarely happens that inaccurate memories are confidently held to (b) stating it is bizarre to assert that one remembers confidently an event that never happened.

Whereas this debate about eyewitness testimony might seem to supply empirical evidence that might bear on the factivity of memory, no philosopher—or psychologist—would find it definitive. First, it is about the confidence people have in their memories, not claims about whether memories are “true” representations of the past. Psychologists largely eschew metaphysical musings about concepts like “truth.” Furthermore, as Wixted cautiously warns, “ideal conditions” must exist for confidence and accuracy to align. The testimony and confidence ratings must, for instance, be collected shortly after the incident. If the delay is too long a time, confidence ratings might not be a good indicator of accuracy. The caveats raise a conundrum that speaks to psychologists’ limited understanding of whether confidence in a memory can speak to its accuracy. In response to Wixted and colleagues’ claims, some psychologists see this limitation as evidence that memory is unreliable and that one can unparadoxically say “I remember such-and-such” even when one knows that such-and-such never happened. But these skeptics of memory’s representational nature must somehow confront the notion that, at least in the short-term, Bernecker’s truth condition seems to hold.

Reading through his volume has been a great treat. It has made me think more carefully about what is at stake in a constructivist approach, or for that matter, an archivist approach. Norman Malcolm’s obsessions turn out not be so bizarre. Indeed, whereas the methods for addressing the truth condition of memory may differ, the issues are not as different as I originally thought way back in graduate school. In other words, psychologists, as well as philosophers, will benefit from this landmark volume.

## References

- Loftus EF (2017) Eavesdropping on memory. *Annual Review of Psychology* 68: 1–18.  
 Wixted JT, Mickes L and Fisher RP (2018) Rethinking the reliability of eyewitness memory. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 13(3): 324–335.

## Author biography

William Hirst is Malcolm B. Smith Chair and Professor of Psychology at the New School for Social Research. He works in cognitive science and social aspects of cognition and memory.

**Reviewed by:** Sara Aronowitz, *Princeton University, USA*

This volume collects essays about memory across subfields including epistemology, applied ethics, and metaphysics. To my mind, its main strength is a combination of both contemporary and historical articles, inviting the reader to think about how the contemporary study of memory compares in focus, method, and aims to various historical attempts to understand memory. And so in this review, I will focus on a few aspects of the philosophy of memory brought to light by this historical context. For brevity, I will use just one historical example.

Deborah Black, in her contribution on Averroes and Avicenna (Chapter 36), details how these two philosophers placed memory in broader theories of cognition. A central issue in her discussion