

The debate about the accuracy conditions of episodic memory: A critical overview

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Abstract

This paper offers a critical overview of the evolving debate on the accuracy conditions of episodic memory. We argue that the positive proposals articulated in the context of this literature are actually attempts to answer related but ultimately different types of questions. After presenting our overview of the debate, we discuss four lessons that can be drawn from it. While we do not put forward a substantive account of the accuracy conditions of remembering, we believe that these lessons contribute to advancing the debate by providing the grounds for more nuanced and rigorous engagement among philosophers interested in the accuracy conditions of episodic memory.

Keywords

Episodic memory, Accuracy conditions, Authenticism, Alethism, Pisticism

1. Introduction

There is a growing literature in philosophy of memory that concerns the *accuracy conditions* of episodic memory. As those involved in the debate conceive of it, the main issue is that of specifying what the accuracy conditions of episodic memory are (see, e.g., Michaelian & Sant'Anna, 2022; Michaelian, 2024; McCarroll et al., 2024). Some of the existing proposals addressing this question have been heavily influenced by a distinction—articulated in detail by Bernecker (2010, 2015)—between the *truth* and the *authenticity* of memory.¹

According to Bernecker (2010, 2015) there are two ways in which we can assess the accuracy of a memory. On the one hand, a memory is said to be *true* when its content is accurate with regard to the past objective world. On the other hand, a memory is said to be *authentic* when it is an accurate “reproduction” or “rendering” of a past representation.² To illustrate, suppose that you have a memory of your tenth birthday party in which your best friend accidentally knocked over the cake. Your memory is said to be true when it was the case that your best friend accidentally knocked over the cake, and it is said to be authentic when it was the case that you had an experience *as of*³ your best friend accidentally knocking over the cake and that experience is “reproduced” in your memory. More recently, it has become customary

¹ For accounts of the accuracy conditions of episodic memory that do not rely on the distinction between truth and authenticity, see, e.g., Campbell (2014), Rowlands (2018), Fernández (2019), Sant'Anna (2020), and Myin & van Dijk (2022). Since accounts that draw on Bernecker's (2010) distinction are becoming increasingly influential in the recent literature, the focus of our discussion will be on them.

² Bernecker's (2010, pp. 235–9) original discussion of authenticity focused on *propositional memories*, so authenticity is understood there in terms of memory ‘reproducing’ a past propositional attitude. While Bernecker (2010) has a detailed account of what counts as a ‘reproduction’ in propositional memory, he does not use this account to characterize authenticity in *visual memory*, which is the focus of Bernecker (2015) and also of our discussion. In Bernecker (2015), authenticity is characterized in terms of memory reproducing a “past mental state” (p. 453). As we clarify in section 3, what it means to say that a memory ‘reproduces’ a past mental state is that it *preserves* the content of that mental state.

³ We use the ‘*as of*’ locution here to highlight the fact that a memory may be authentic even when the original experience was non-veridical. For instance, you can have an authentic memory even if your original experience was a hallucination of your friend knocking over the cake.

in the literature to articulate this distinction in terms of “events” and “experiences”: a memory is said to be true when it is accurate with respect to a past event, and a memory is said to be authentic when it is accurate with respect to a past experience (see, e.g., McCarroll, 2018; Michaelian & Sant’Anna, 2022).

The truth and authenticity distinction has motivated three main accounts that attempt to specify the accuracy conditions of episodic memory. The first account, which has come to be known as *authenticism*, claims that the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed with regard to both past events and experiences (Bernecker, 2010, 2015; McCarroll, 2018).⁴ For authenticists, your memory above is accurate only when it was the case that your best friend accidentally knocked over the cake, *and* you had an experience as of your best friend accidentally knocking over the cake and that experience is “reproduced” in your memory. The second account, called *alethism*, holds that the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed only with regard to past events (Michaelian & Sant’Anna 2022). For alethists, all that is required for your memory to be accurate is that it was the case that your best friend accidentally knocked over the cake. Finally, the third account, named *pisticism*, holds that instead of events or experiences, the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed with regard to the intentional objects of past experiences. For pisticists, your memory is accurate only when it was the case that the intentional object of your past experience—that is, what your experience was about—was your best friend accidentally knocking over the cake, regardless of whether this event actually occurred.⁵

When outlined in this way, as it has been done by those involved in the relevant discussions, the debate about the accuracy conditions of episodic memory presents itself as a structured dispute around what seems to be a clearly defined question and well-established rules of engagement. However, as we shall argue in this paper, the positive proposals articulated in the literature are actually attempts to answer related but ultimately different types of questions. Acknowledging this, we believe, allows us to get a much clearer picture of the explanatory goals and significance of existing views, which in turn promises to offer a clear dialectical ground for further research in this area.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 offers an overview of the debate around the accuracy conditions of episodic memory by focusing on two issues that divide existing views: perspective switching and dream memories. Section 3 offers a critical analysis of this debate, arguing that positive proposals have attempted to answer at least four different questions related to the accuracy conditions of remembering. Section 4 outlines four lessons we think should be retained from our analysis. Section 5 concludes by summarizing the main points discussed in the paper.

Before turning to our main discussion, we would like to briefly clarify the nature of our project here. As will become evident, our discussion is largely exegetical: we aim to reconstruct and interpret views found in the existing literature on the accuracy conditions of episodic memory. We believe that the literature contains important confusions that warrant systematic examination, so identifying and articulating these issues is a crucial step toward achieving greater conceptual and dialectical clarity. Moreover, we see this as a particularly timely moment for embarking on such a project. Interest in the accuracy conditions of episodic memory is growing, as reflected in several contributions to the Eurasian Memory Meeting, to

⁴ As Sant’Anna (2024) points out, this terminology is misleading, for it would be more natural to associate the term ‘authenticism’ with the view that the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed with regard to past experiences only (e.g., Von Leyden, 1960). To remedy this, Sant’Anna (2024) proposes that we call authenticism the truth-and-authenticity view. However, given that our primary goal is to provide a critical overview of the debate, we will use the standard terminology to avoid further confusion.

⁵ The difference between alethism and pisticism will be explained in more detail in section 2, where we discuss the motivations for each view.

which this topical collection is dedicated. So, while we do not offer a substantive account of the accuracy conditions of remembering, we are confident that the discussion presented here can advance the debate by laying the groundwork for more nuanced and rigorous engagement among philosophers working on this topic.

2. The accuracy conditions of episodic memory

We begin by offering an overview of how recent discussions concerning the accuracy conditions of episodic memory have unfolded in the literature. This overview will help us get clear on what motivates existing views, as well the dialectical situation of the debate. We focus on two main issues that separate authenticist, alethic, and pisticist views. The first is the possibility of *perspective switching* in remembering. The second is how to account for the accuracy of *dream memories*. We then discuss two recent proposals that, despite being motivated by those views, do not deal directly with those issues.

2.1. Perspective switching

The first issue that separates authenticist, alethic, and pisticist views is the possibility of *perspective switching* in remembering. Recent work in the psychology of memory has called our attention to the fact that many of our memories are experienced from a visual perspective that is different from the visual perspective adopted at the time of experience (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; see Rice, 2010 and St. Jacques, 2024 for overviews). In other words, many of our memories seem to take a third-person or *observer* perspective on the events remembered, as opposed to the first-person or *field* perspective that characterizes our experience of those events. Interestingly, despite differing in important aspects from field memories, such as in terms of their emotional intensity, observer memories have not been found to differ significantly from field memories when it comes to their overall accuracy (St. Jacques, 2024). Moreover, recent research in experimental philosophy suggests that people do not necessarily regard those memories as misrepresentations of the past (Dranseika et al., 2021). Thus, intuitions to the contrary, there seems to be good theoretical reasons for treating observer memories as normal, genuine forms of remembering the past.

Perspective switching is controversial because it challenges authenticism. If, as authenticism would have it, the accuracy of memory should be partly assessed with respect to past experiences, then it follows from this that observer memories are always *inaccurate* due to involving visual perspectives that diverge from the visual perspectives of the original experiences. This is thought to further entail the problematic claim that observer memories cannot be *genuine*, for many philosophers assume that genuine remembering requires accuracy.⁶ However, given the widespread occurrence of those memories and the fact that they do not seem to be overall less reliable than field memories, this conclusion appears overly restrictive.

This tension has motivated two attempts to resolve it in an authenticist framework. The first is by Bernecker (2015). Bernecker argues that observer memories are a form of what he calls *inferential memory*. Inferential memories are memories that are based on “inferential reasoning involving background knowledge or fresh evidence” (2010, p. 77). To illustrate, suppose that, at time t_1 , you see a bird with such-and-such characteristics, but you lack the

⁶ In other words, genuine remembering is widely regarded to be *factive*. See De Brigard (2014) and Michaelian (2016) for critical perspectives. It is worth emphasizing here that while some authors distinguish between *genuine* remembering and *successful/accurate* remembering (e.g., De Brigard, 2014; Michaelian, 2016), many philosophers, including several involved in discussions about the accuracy conditions of remembering, simply identify the two. This is because they take genuine remembering to be a success state—which they define in terms of accuracy—so if a putative state of remembering fails to be accurate, it fails to be successful and consequently fails to be genuine remembering. We thank an anonymous reviewer for requesting that we clarify this point.

conceptual and discriminatory capacities to identify it as a specific type of bird. Later, at time t_2 , you learn that birds with such-and-such characteristics are cardinals. Then, at time t_3 , when you remember the bird from time t_1 , you remember it as being a cardinal. This memory is inferential in that it incorporates information acquired after the original experience by means of “inferential reasoning”, which, on Bernecker’s account, can be either conscious or subconscious (2010, p. 25). According to Bernecker, treating observer memories as inferential memories allows us to make sense of how they can be authentic. This is because, on his view, despite including new information, the content of observer memories is *entailed* by the content of the past experience.⁷ This entailment relation explains why the memory is accurate with respect to the relevant past experience.

The second attempt to resolve the tension is articulated by McCarroll (2017; 2018). McCarroll’s strategy is to show that some experiences involve observer perspective representations, such that the memories that originate in them can be considered authentic. More specifically, McCarroll (2018) argues that some experiences involve *non-visual* observer perspectives that are translated into *visual* observer perspectives by constructive processes at the time of encoding. Consider, for instance, a situation in which you are giving a talk, and you wonder about what a specific person in the audience is thinking about your presentation. When you do so, you entertain a *non-visual* observer representation of yourself—that is, you represent yourself from the perspective of what a person in the audience is *thinking*.⁸ On McCarroll’s view, this non-visual observer representation is sometimes transformed into a *visual* observer representation by constructive processes operating at encoding, such that, when you recall this situation, the resulting memory will involve a visual observer perspective, but it will not have more information than the original experience. Thus, for McCarroll, it is not true that all observer memories are inaccurate with respect to past experiences, and hence that all observer memories are unsuccessful.

McCarroll’s (2018) account has prompted a critical response from Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022). Michaelian and Sant’Anna contend that McCarroll fails to present a compelling argument that the content of visual observer perspectives in memory is derived from non-visual observer representations in experience. Specifically, they claim that McCarroll does not explain how the “translation” of non-visual to visual representations occurs without introducing new content to the resulting memories. They offer two arguments to this effect.

First, they note that the mere fact that some experiences involve non-visual observer representations does not explain how the various visual details that compose a visual observer representation in remembering become parts of memory representations. Consider, for instance, an observer memory in which you visually represent your body from the perspective of someone who is listening to you giving a talk. This memory contains visual details that could not, according to Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022), be present in a non-visual observer representation that you had at the time of experience. Consequently, they argue that constructing the visual perspectival representation found at retrieval requires the generation of new content.⁹

Second, Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022) argue that, even if we grant that the kind of translation that McCarroll (2018) has in mind could occur in principle, there would rarely be a

⁷ For Bernecker, the entailment relation follows from the fact that, despite containing new information, observer memories are not less reliable than field perspective memories (see Bernecker, 2015, pp. 461-2).

⁸ Notably, most observer memories tend to be remembered from the perspective of individuals who actually occupied the relevant perspectives in the remembered event (Rice & Rubin, 2011).

⁹ One might wonder here why is it that generation of content is taken to imply that the resulting memory is inaccurate. It seems plausible enough that a memory could generate content and still be accurate. This concern touches on several problematic points concerning how the term ‘accuracy’ is used in the debate that we will discuss in more detail in sections 3 and 4. For now, we will restrict ourselves to noting that ‘accuracy’ here is equated with preservation of content from experience, so if a memory generates content, it follows that it is not accurate.

correspondence in practice between the visual content of observer perspective memories and the non-visual content of observer experiences. More specifically, according to Michaelian and Sant'Anna (2022), the differences between visual and non-visual content are such that, unless the relevant non-visual representations had a similar level of detail to their visual counterparts, the generation of visual observer perspectives in memory would almost always require some form of content generation. This, they conclude, leaves McCarroll (2018) with the unwanted conclusion that authentic observer memories very rare occurrences.

In light of these difficulties, Michaelian and Sant'Anna (2022) conclude that alethism, the view according to which the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed with regard to events only, is in a better position to make sense of observer memories. According to alethism, even if there is variation in visual perspective, all it takes for a memory to be accurate (and hence genuine) is that it correctly represents a past event.

2.2. Dream memories

The second issue that separates authenticist, alethist, and pisticist views is how to account for accuracy in dream memories.

In recent work, Michaelian (2024) has argued that memories of dream experiences are neither true nor authentic. Against truth, Michaelian argues that dream experiences are not experiences of events—understood as *objective* events—but merely experiences *as of* objective events. In other words, when you dream about an event, it merely appears to you that the object of your dream is an event taking place in the objective world. Thus, there is no question as to whether dream memories accurately represent objective reality, and hence no question as to whether they are true.

Against authenticity, Michaelian notes that dream memories, too, may involve perspective switching. Building on the argument offered in Michaelian and Sant'Anna (2022), Michaelian argues that authenticity would require us to give up on the idea that observer dream memories are accurate, a conclusion that he finds implausible. As an alternative, Michaelian argues that the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed in relation to the *intentional objects* of our experiences, namely, the objects those experiences are *about*. When memory is accurate in this way, it is said to be *faithful* (2024, p. 168). This view, which Michaelian (2024) calls *pisticism*, allows us to make sense of accuracy in dream memories and memories more generally: memories are accurate when they correctly represent the intentional objects of dream experiences.

Responding to Michaelian (2024), McCarroll et al. (2024) have argued for what they call *attitudinal pluralism* about dream experiences. According to McCarroll et al. (2024), dream experiences are characterized by different ways of relating to the dreamed events. Suppose, for instance, that you dreamed last night about a giant snake in your room. This dream is characterized not only by your *visual* representation of a snake, but also your *thought* that it is a repulsive animal, your *fear* that it will attack you, and your *hope* it will go away. For McCarroll et al. (2024), these different ways of relating to the dreamed event—that is, the *attitudes* you have toward it—are central for conceiving of the accuracy conditions of dream memories. For example, if, when you remember the dream experience above, you remember thinking that the snake is a beautiful animal and wanting to caress it, there is an important sense in which your memory misrepresents your dream experience. Thus, McCarroll et al. argue that authenticity cannot be abandoned as a criterion for accuracy in dream memories, for that is the only way to capture the importance of our attitudes in assessing the accuracy of our memories.

Moreover, McCarroll et al. also criticize pisticism and alethism on the grounds that they fail to explain the visual perspectival phenomenology of memories more generally. According to them, this phenomenology results from memory representing the attitude of visually experiencing something. Thus, given alethism's focus on events and pisticism's focus on the

intentional objects experience, it follows that those views cannot explain how our memories are imbued with visual perspectives.

2.3. First-handedness and the bounds of authenticity

While not dealing directly with perspective switching and dream memories, other recent proposals have been articulated in the literature that are inspired by accounts of the accuracy conditions of remembering surveyed above.

Sant'Anna (2024) takes alethism as a starting point to consider what he calls the “puzzle of alethic memory”. This puzzle highlights the apparent incompatibility between the idea that memory seems to involve an *experience of first-handedness*—that is, a conscious experience that it originates in past experiences—and the alethist claim that memory does not represent past experiences. Sant'Anna argues that alethism can be reconciled with the experience of first-handedness by conceiving of this experience in metacognitive terms. More specifically, he proposes that the experience of first-handedness is a metacognitive feeling of fluency that, in virtue of a social process of feedback learning, has acquired the *derived* content that memory representations are about past experiences. Thus, on Sant'Anna's view, the appeal to metacognitive feelings with derived intentionality allows alethists to explain how there is an experience of first-handedness in remembering while denying that memory represents past experiences.

Dings et al. (2023) take up the question of how we should characterize the bounds of authenticity, namely, the question of how much of a match there should be between the content of experience and the content of memory. As Dings et al. note, the fact that remembering is a constructive capacity makes it unlikely that our memories will be perfectly authentic, so an account of how much similarity is sufficient for there to be authenticity is required.

To tackle this issue, Dings et al. (2023) adopt a functionalist approach in which “the content, structure and phenomenology of memory is always dependent on the function that memory fulfils in a particular context” (p. 5). More specifically, building on Bluck et al.'s (2005) work on the function of episodic memory, they identify three functions performed by episodic memory: a *self* function—when memory is used to “establish and maintain a sense of self” (p. 5)—a *directive* function—when memory is used to “guide behaviour in the present but also to predict and plan for the future” (p. 5)—and a *social* function—when memory is used to “establish and maintain relationships” (p. 6). They argue that each of those functions employ different levels of descriptions: the self-function favors high-level abstract descriptions, the directive function favors low-level detailed descriptions, and the social function spans these levels according to context (p. 12). Thus, their main claim is that, insofar as authenticity is concerned, accuracy is to be measured in terms of whether there is a structural relation between the content of memory and the content of experience in light of the function exercised by memory in a specific context.

To illustrate, consider one of Dings et al.'s (2023) example. Suppose that the content of your experience of writing a paper back in graduate school was characterized by low-level descriptions, such as typing on a keyboard, looking at a computer screen, moving a mouse, and so on. Later, suppose that you find yourself remembering the early days of your professional career and you remember this particular situation as one in which you were doing philosophy. In this case, your memory is exercising its self function by employing high-level descriptions to remember that event. For Dings et al., even though your memory includes new content—that is, you represent yourself “doing philosophy”, which was not the case when you first experienced this event—that does not imply that the memory is inauthentic. This is because there is, according to them, a “structural relation” between the high-level description employed in memory and the low-level description employed in experience. As they put it, “one does

philosophy by writing papers, which one does by typing on keyboards” (p. 9). So, while they do not offer an explicit definition of what a structural relation is, the basic idea seems to be that authenticity allows for memory to contain more information than experience as long as the relevant new information is grounded on the content of experience.¹⁰

3. Analyzing existing views

It is undeniable that considerations about the accuracy conditions of episodic memory is a common denominator in the works surveyed in the previous section. However, as we will argue in this section, framing those views as attempts to answer a single and overarching question—namely, the question of what the accuracy conditions of remembering are—oversimplifies the dialectics of the debate in a way that is detrimental to fully making sense of the nature and significance of existing proposals. To motivate this claim, we will revisit the proposals introduced above, but now with an eye to specifying the kind of questions they attempt to answer.

Let us begin by considering the disputes concerning perspective switching. When it comes to observer memories, our suggestion is that the central issue driving authenticist proposals is whether successful remembering only *preserves* content from the original experiences of those events. This is particularly clear in how McCarroll (2018) articulates the problem:

“If one takes oneself to be remembering, and one is accurately representing some past event in all aspects other than occupying the original point of view, what motivates the claim that such representations are not “real” memories? The answer seems to lie in the idea that memory should *preserve* the content of perception.” (p. 12, italics in the original)

Thus, as we have seen, Bernecker’s (2015) proposal to deal with this problem is to conceive of observer memories as inferential memories, which may include new content as long as that content is entailed by the content of the original experiences. In a similar vein, McCarroll (2018) attempts to show that visual observer perspectives are generated by encoding processes drawing on information already contained in experience. As a result, our suggestion is that initial authenticist attempts to account for observer memories are attempts to answer what we will call the Preservation Question:

(Preservation Question)

Does memory only preserve content from experience?

To say that a memory is ‘accurate’ with respect to a past experience in this sense is, therefore, to say that it preserves the content of those experiences.¹¹

The Preservation Question is also what, at least in part, motivates Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022). It is, in particular, the focus of their *negative* proposal. To see this more clearly, consider how they characterize authenticism, the target of their negative argument:

¹⁰ One natural question here is about the relationship between this approach and Bernecker’s (2015). Dings et al. (2023, fn. 6) discuss this point briefly, noting that their view is not at odds with Bernecker’s, but that it adopts a more liberal approach. More specifically, they argue that while Bernecker (2015) focuses on logical relations, their view allows for entailment relations between different dimensions where there might be structural relations of the relevant kind.

¹¹ One potential worry here is whether ‘accuracy’ is the right term to express the idea that memory *preserves* content from experience. We discuss this issue in more detail in section 4.

“Authenticism is the thesis that, in order for a memory to be successful, the retrieved representation must be authentic, i.e., that it must be accurate with respect to the corresponding experience. But what it is for a representation to be accurate with respect to an experience presumably just is for it not to include any content not included in the experience. *Authenticism just is, in other words, another way of formulating preservationism: to be an authenticist is to be a preservationist and vice versa.*” (p. 843, our italics)

Building on this, Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022) argue that, given the constructive character of memory, it is unreasonable to expect that observer memories—or any memory, for that matter—will *only* include information already contained in experience. So, while Bernecker (2015) and McCarroll (2018) insist that memory can only preserve content from experience, Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022) deny it. Otherwise put, they believe that a proper account of the accuracy conditions of remembering should be sensitive to the fact that memory *generates* new content.¹²

However, Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022) also put forward a *positive* argument: they contend that the accuracy conditions of episodic memory should be assessed only with regard to past events. This positive proposal, we suggest, promotes a subtle but important *shift of focus* that has gone unnoticed in the literature. More precisely, in emphasizing that truth is the relevant criterion for the accuracy of episodic memory, Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022) take ‘accuracy’ to be exclusively determined by what episodic memory *represents* or is *about*. Thus, they shift the explanatory target of the discussion to what we will call the Representation Question:¹³

(Representation Question)

What is it that episodic memory represents/is about?

To say that a memory is ‘accurate’ in this sense is, therefore, to say that it correctly represents its object, whatever that object is. It is worth noting that this way of speaking of ‘accuracy’ is in line with standard characterizations found in the more general literature on accuracy conditions, which define the content of mental representations in terms of their accuracy conditions (Schellenberg, 2019; Zahnoun, 2023).

This shift of focus to the Representation Question is, in effect, reflected in how subsequent discussions have unfolded in relation to dream memories. This is evident in how both Michaelian (2024) and McCarroll et al. (2024) articulate and argue for their proposals. Remember that Michaelian (2024) rejects truth because, according to him, dream experiences—and consequently dream memories—are not *about* existing events, but merely intentional ones. Pisticism is, therefore, a direct response to the Representation Question. Similarly, McCarroll et al. (2024) hold that accounting for attitudinal phenomenology in dream memories—and memory more generally—requires committing to the idea that memory *represents* or is *about* experiences. As we have seen, their main charge against alethism and pisticism is precisely that those accounts fail to properly explain this phenomenology. More importantly, however, we believe that this shift of focus to the Representation Question in

¹² See Michaelian (2011, 2016) for a more detailed defense of the idea that episodic memory is *generative*. Note that talk of ‘preservation’ and ‘generation’ here is restricted to *content* preservation/generation, so it should be distinguished from discussions about *epistemic* preservation/generation in memory (see Frise, 2023 for a recent overview).

¹³ Note that this is not how Michaelian and Sant’Anna (2022) articulate their view. The claim that their positive argument amounts to a shift of focus is rather our reconstruction of their proposal.

discussions about dream memories adds a layer of complexity to the dialectics of the debate that has been overlooked. There are, in particular, two points that are worthy of notice here.

The first is that authenticity is defined differently in the context of McCarroll et al. (2024). For McCarroll et al. (2024), authenticity is no longer a claim about the *preservation* of content from experience to memory, but rather a claim about what memory is *about*. We can see this clearly in how they introduce and explain the distinction between truth and authenticity:

“What is it that episodic memories are *about*? Episodic memories seem to be *about*, on the one hand, events in the personal past (Michaelian, 2016). On the other hand, part of the content of episodic memory also seems to be our experiences of those past events: this is the sense in which episodic memory is frequently thought to involve ‘reliving’ or ‘re-experiencing’ a past event (Tulving, 1985). There seem to be two aspects to the content of episodic memory (Rowlands, 2018). As such this gives us two conditions on the accuracy of episodic memory: truth and authenticity.” (p. 189, our italics)

Thus, while authenticity was framed as a response to the Preservation Question in the context of discussions about perspective switching, it is now framed as a response to the Representation Question in the context of discussions about dream memories.

The second point is that a new explanatory target is subtly added to the mix. In criticizing Michaelian’s (2024) pisticist account for not being able to account for the attitudinal phenomenology of memory, McCarroll et al. implicitly add a new explanandum for accounts of the accuracy conditions of episodic memory: the *phenomenology* of remembering. Thus, besides the two questions just introduced, accounts of accuracy conditions are now also expected to address what we will call the Phenomenology Question:

(Phenomenology Question)

How should we account for the phenomenological features of episodic memory?

And if McCarroll et al.’s suggestion is on the right track, the answer is that it should be in terms of what memory represents.

Finally, let us consider the two other approaches introduced in section 3. As we noted, although they do not offer explicit arguments for the main accounts of accuracy conditions, these approaches elaborate on aspects of those views in connection with related issues. The first proposal we considered was by Sant’Anna (2024), who starts with the assumption that episodic memory represents past events and tries to show how an aspect of its phenomenology—the experience of first-handedness—can be accounted for in an alethic framework. Thus, like McCarroll et al. (2024), Sant’Anna’s (2024) focus is both on the Representation Question and the Phenomenology Question.

However, the situation is slightly more complicated with the second proposal, which is advanced by Dings et al. (2023). While their initial focus seems to be the Representation Question—they define authenticity in terms of memory representing or being about experiences (p. 86)—the way they articulate the various elements of their positive proposal suggests that a full characterization of authenticity requires going beyond that question. This is because, for Dings et al., authenticity is not just a matter of memory accurately representing an experience, but rather of it accurately representing an experience in a *specific context*. This appeal to contextual considerations is what allows them to explain how the content of memory can sometimes deviate from the content of experience without necessarily violating authenticity. However, this appeal to contextual factors also calls for an account of what counts as a *relevant similarity* between the content of memory and the content of experience in the

relevant contexts. Thus, we suggest that, in addition to the Representation Question, Dings et al.'s (2023) focus is also what we call the Similarity Question:

(Similarity Question)

What counts as an appropriate similarity between episodic memory and its object—i.e., what it is about—in order for it to be considered as accurate?

And, as we saw above, Dings et al.'s answer to this question is that there must be structural relations between the information used to construct representations employing different levels of descriptions.

To summarize the discussion so far, our reconstruction of the debate suggests that existing proposals attempt to answer at least four different questions:

(Preservation Question)

Does memory only preserve content from experience?

(Representation Question)

What is it that episodic memory represents/is about?

(Phenomenology Question)

How should we account for the phenomenological features of episodic memory?

(Similarity Question)

What counts as an appropriate similarity between episodic memory and its object—i.e., what it is about—in order for it to be considered as accurate?

It is important to emphasize that, despite being different, these questions are related in important ways, which might explain why they have not been properly distinguished in the literature. Consider, for instance, the Preservation and Representation Questions. One assumption driving authenticist views in particular seems to be that answering the Preservation Question automatically gives us an answer to the Representation Question. In other words, authenticists seem to assume that the claim that memory preserves content from a past experience implies the claim that memory represents the past experience from which content is preserved.¹⁴ However, as we noted, not everybody agrees that memory preserves content from experience (see Michaelian and Sant'Anna, 2022), so keeping these questions apart is crucial to understanding the significance of those critical proposals.

Similarly, consider the Representation Question and the Phenomenology Question. If one assumes that the phenomenology of remembering is fully explainable in terms of its representational content (see, e.g., Fernández, 2019), then how we answer the Phenomenology Question is intimately connected to how we answer the Representation Question. This is particularly clear in how McCarroll et al. (2024) and Sant'Anna (2024) articulate their proposals. The problem is, however, that there is substantial controversy concerning the relationship between content and phenomenology in remembering (see, e.g., Perrin & Sant'Anna, 2022), which suggests, once again, that attempts to account for the accuracy conditions of episodic memory by answering the Representation Question would do well to keep those questions apart.

Finally, consider the Similarity Question on the one hand, and the Representation Question and the Preservation Question on the other. To answer the Similarity Question as we

¹⁴ As we discuss in section 4, there are good reasons for thinking that this inference is problematic.

have formulated it, one must specify what memory represents in order to assess how similar a memory is to its object. In other words, one must first answer the Representation Question. However, our framework allows—and perhaps even suggests—the possibility of formulating the Similarity Question in relation to the Preservation Question. More specifically, we might ask what kind of similarity between the content of episodic memory and the *content of its source*—that is, a past experience—would count as sufficient for the memory to be considered accurate. This reformulation might, for instance, offer promising ways for authenticists to resist some alethic arguments.¹⁵ Thus, given the tendency to conflate the Preservation Question with the Representation Question just discussed, it is important to keep them distinct, so as not to lose sight of the precise sense in which the Similarity Question is being posed.

To conclude this section, the take-home message from our discussion is that, contrary to how it is standardly formulated, the current debate about the accuracy conditions of remembering is not a unified dispute centered on a single, clearly defined question. Instead, it consists of a cluster of related but distinct questions. Recognizing this plurality is crucial, as it reveals that the main positions in the literature are often motivated by different concerns and aim to explain different phenomena. As we will explore in the next section, this points to a more diverse and nuanced theoretical landscape than is typically acknowledged.

4. Four lessons

In this final section, we outline four lessons that can be drawn from the reconstruction of the debate presented earlier. These lessons, we believe, offer important insights for future discussions on the accuracy conditions of remembering.

The first lesson is that the debate unfolds in two distinct phases, each characterized by different topics and questions. More specifically, our analysis highlights that initial discussions about the accuracy of episodic memory emerge in response to challenges posed by perspective switching. At this stage, the focus is on what we called the Preservation Question, where accuracy is understood as memory's ability to *preserve* the content of past experiences. Subsequently, the debate transitions into a second phase, shifting both the central topic and the guiding question. The focus now turns to dream memories, with the ensuing discussions being shaped by the Representation Question. In this phase, accuracy is reconceptualized as memory's capacity to *represent* or be *about* things in the world.

The second lesson is that some of the existing proposals are *peripheral*—that is, they are motivated by existing accounts of the accuracy conditions of episodic memory, but they are motivated by issues that extrapolate considerations concerning perspective switching and dream memories. This adds yet another layer of complexity to the dialectical situation, as those proposals introduce motivations and arguments that do not bear directly on the issues that drive the main accounts.

The third lesson is that our analysis provides a more nuanced picture of what drives existing theories, their objectives, and their relationships. In particular, it reveals that alethism and pisticism belong to the same family of views, while authenticism encompasses a more diverse set of argumentative strategies, leading to multiple distinct theses.

Consider alethism and pisticism first. We argued that both are motivated by a suspicion about the feasibility of providing a positive answer to the Preservation Question. As a result, they shift their focus to the Representation Question. However, they diverge in their specific approaches: alethism centers on perspective switching, whereas pisticism extends its scope to include dream memories. This difference leads to distinct conclusions about what episodic

¹⁵ More specifically, an authenticist could argue that Michaelian and Sant'Anna's (2022) argument assumes a very stringent similarity standard insofar as any generation of content is, on their view, sufficient to show that memory is not preservative. However, if we relax these standards, so as to focus on the preservation of specific features of experienced content, only *some* forms of content generation would entail that memory is not preservative.

memory represents or is about. For alethists, memory represents events, while for pisticists, it represents intentional objects. Despite this divergence, both views share the fundamental idea that accuracy in remembering is a matter of what memory represents or is about.

Next, consider authenticism. Our analysis reveals that authenticist views are much more heterogeneous than commonly acknowledged. More precisely, there are *two* distinct authenticist *argumentative strategies*, which have given rise to *three* different authenticist *theses* (see Table 1). The first strategy, which motivates what we might call *first-wave authenticism*, focuses on the Preservation Question, leading to a first authenticity thesis formulated in terms of content preservation. On this view, an authentic memory is one that preserves content from a past experience. The second strategy, which motivates what we might call *second-wave authenticism*, focuses on the Representation Question. This has resulted in the second and third formulations of the authenticity thesis. According to the second, authenticity is a matter of accurately representing or being about a past experience *simpliciter*. According to the third, authenticity is a matter of accurately representing a past experience in a specific context and according to certain standards.

	Strategy <i>Focuses on...</i>	Thesis <i>Authenticity is a matter of...</i>
<i>First-wave authenticism</i>	Preservation Question	preserving content from a past experience
<i>Second-wave authenticism</i>	Representation Question	accurately representing or being about a past experience <i>simpliciter</i>
		accurately representing a past experience in a specific context and according to certain standards

Table 1. Different authenticist strategies and theses

The fourth and final lesson we would like to discuss is best articulated by considering a critical question prompted by the first and third lessons. More specifically, one may wonder whether, given what we have said so far, the authenticity criterion as it is formulated by first-wave authenticist proposals is strictly about the *accuracy* conditions of remembering. The main motivation for thinking that this is the case is, we believe, that first-wave authenticists often speak of memory being an accurate “reproduction” of past experiences (see Bernecker, 2010, 2015). However, it is unclear whether that captures the essence of those proposals, especially when we look more closely into how they are articulated in the literature. If, as we have argued, what motivates first-wave authenticism is the question of whether content is *preserved* from past experiences, then we should be able to assess preservation of content in terms of accuracy. But this is odd, for preservation is not, at least in the way the term is standardly used, the kind of thing that can be accurate or inaccurate. In other words, either a memory preserves content from a past experience, or it does not; it is not obvious what we gain by saying that such preservation was accurate or inaccurate.

Note that, in questioning the idea that preservation can be assessed for accuracy, we are not questioning the idea that it can be assessed for success. We believe that it is perfectly plausible to ask whether a memory was successful in preserving content from a past experience. However, if the idea driving first-wave authenticism is indeed this one, then it is just misleading to frame the authenticity condition in terms of accuracy. Accuracy is indeed a form of success,

but it is not the only one. There can be other forms of success—notably preservation—that are not and arguably cannot be assessed in terms of accuracy.

So, what these remarks suggest is that truth and authenticity, in the way they were originally conceived by first-wave authenticists, are not two different criteria of the *accuracy conditions* of remembering, but rather two different criteria of the *success conditions* of remembering. Truth, on this view, would be the criterion according to which remembering must correctly represent the world. In contrast, authenticity would be the criterion according to which remembering must preserve information from past experiences. In other words, truth would be a condition of accuracy in remembering, but authenticity would not. What this means, more concretely, is that first-wave authenticist proposals would be best interpreted as views according to which *successful* remembering requires *two* distinct forms of *success*: *accurate representation* and *preservation* of content. Alethic, pistic, and second-wave authenticist views would, in contrast, be views according to which *successful* remembering only requires *one* form of *success*: *accurate representation*.¹⁶

Moreover, our claim that ‘accuracy’ might have been misused by first-wave authenticist helps us understand why second-wave authenticists have so readily switched their focus to the Representation Question in responding to alethists and pisticists. The presupposition behind those proposals seems to be that if the authenticity criterion is indeed about the accuracy conditions of remembering, then defending an authenticist view requires showing that memory represents or is about past experiences.¹⁷

However, if our analysis is correct, this is not the case. Indeed, when we parse things out in this way, it becomes clear that the transition from first-wave to second-wave authenticism is not as straightforward as one would have initially thought. More specifically, if memory represents past experiences, then there are good reasons for thinking that it *generates* content. For one thing, unless one is committed to the idea that experiences represent themselves as experiences, then the representation of experiences in memory seems to require the generation of content. For another thing, even if one is on board with the idea that past experiences represent themselves as experiences, it is difficult to make sense of how memory represents those experiences as *past* without generating new content. In other words, if second-wave authenticists want to retain the idea that memory only preserves content from experience, then they need an explanation of how the past tensed contents that characterize memories were already present at the time of experience. It is unclear, however, whether such a view could be properly motivated.

We do not, of course, offer these as full-blown criticisms of authenticism; much more would need to be said to fully motivate those points. Our aim is, rather, to highlight that once we pay attention to the nuances surrounding the role played by ‘accuracy’ in authenticist arguments, we gain not only a clearer picture of why authenticist proposals have diverged in

¹⁶ One point that is worth clarifying here is that we are not saying that talk of preservation is incompatible with talk of accuracy. Indeed, one may hold the view that successful remembering requires the preservation of accurate content. This is what is commonly referred to as *preservationism* in philosophy of memory (see Openshaw 2023 for discussion). While it might be tempting to identify authenticism and preservationism (see, e.g., Michaelian and Sant'Anna 2022), our analysis suggests that this is a mistake. This is because authentic memories are not necessarily accurate memories. One good illustration is the case of memories of hallucinatory experiences. These memories may succeed in preserving the content of the original experiences, but that content is not accurate. In other words, a memory may *succeed* in preserving content from a past experience even if that content *does not succeed* in being accurate. So, the way in which authenticists use the term ‘preservation’ is less demanding and more encompassing than the way in which preservationists use it. Thanks to an anonymous referee for requesting that we clarify these points.

¹⁷ This is a direct result of some authenticists equating the Preservation Question with the Representation Question discussed in section 3.

the way our analysis suggests, but also insight into potential tensions within the authenticist camp that have so far gone unnoticed.

To summarize, the fourth lesson from our analysis is that the focus on accuracy conditions does not provide a straightforward structuring principle for the debate. Instead, it oversimplifies the dialectical landscape and obscures key conceptual distinctions, for it misleadingly suggests that the scope of the debate is much narrower than it actually is. Once we acknowledge that accuracy is just one form of success, and that some of the existing proposals target other forms of success—i.e., preservation—we get a much clearer picture of why the debate has unfolded in the way that it did and what the principal motivations for existing approaches are.

We conclude this section by addressing two potential concerns with our proposal.¹⁸ The first refers to our claim that the debate about the accuracy conditions of remembering is not really a structured, unified debate that has accuracy as its focal point. In particular, one might worry that our framework simply dissolves the debate, leaving little room for informed engagement among authenticists, alethists, and pisticists. We think this concern is misplaced for three different reasons.

First, the four questions we identified as being central are related in important ways. As outlined in Section 3, the way we address one question is likely to shape how we approach at least one of the others.

Second, our framework offers a clear path for views that have been talking past one another to realign themselves in a way that fosters real engagement. To give one example, consider the case of authenticism and the relationship between the Preservation and Representation Questions. One way for first-wave authenticists to engage directly with alethists and pisticists would be to say that preserved content determines, at least in part, what memory is about. In other words, first-wave authenticists could insist that alethists and pisticists cannot get away with answering the Representation Question without considering the Preservation Question. If authenticists were to provide a convincing argument for this claim, they would put themselves in a promising position to challenge alethism and pisticism.

Third, as emphasized in the third lesson, our framework makes it clear that there is a genuine dispute over the Representation Question. Alethism, pisticism, and second-wave authenticist directly address this question and provide conflicting answers. Thus, even if the focus were to switch to the Representation Question from now on, the debate would not be dissolved.

In summary, even without a systematic discussion of alternatives for future engagement, the framework as it stands provides enough to make us confident that, rather than dissolving the debate, it lays the groundwork for advancing it.

The second concern, which may be articulated as an extension of the first, is that our framework does little to indicate what the next steps of the debate *should be*. Given what we said in this section and the previous, one might interpret our proposal as being that the Representation Question should take a center stage, and perhaps that we should see it as the structuring element in the debate.

While this might be a plausible conclusion to be drawn from our discussion, we want to remain neutral on the matter in the context of this paper. As it should be clear by now, the relationship between the four questions we introduced is quite complex, so we think it would be premature to attempt to dictate how discussions should unfold from now on without a more systematic investigation of their relationships. Thus, we are content with viewing our framework—and the analysis that resulted from it—as having an instrumental role to play in

¹⁸ We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for raising these concerns and encouraging us to address them.

the dialectics of the debate: that is, as offering tools to facilitate the formulation and articulation of theories and to promote more informed critical engagement.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we offered a critical overview of the evolving debate on the accuracy conditions of episodic memory. We argued that the positive proposals articulated in the context of this literature are actually attempts to answer related but ultimately different types of questions. More specifically, we argued that authenticist, alethic, and pisticist views are attempts to answer four different questions: the Preservation Question, Representation Question, the Phenomenology Question, and the Similarity Question. After presenting our overview of the debate, we discussed four lessons that can be drawn from it. These lessons emphasize the need to distinguish different phases in the debate, the existence of peripheral proposals, the heterogeneity of authenticist proposals, and the potentially problematic use of the term ‘accuracy’ in existing discussion. Taken together, these lessons provide the grounds for more nuanced and rigorous engagement among philosophers interested on the accuracy conditions of episodic memory.

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