

### Why Episodic Memory is Necessary for Our Grasp of Pastness

Understanding what it is for events to have happened in the past, or for there to have been a past at all, requires the concept of *pastness*. The best (if not the only) access we have to past events are through memory. Would it then follow that it is through memory that we come to acquire the concept of pastness? Memory is a past-oriented faculty, since we can't say that we remember something from the future, nor could we coherently imply that we're remembering a present experience. Bertrand Russell claimed that memory was essential in recognizing that something had pastness, because without the ability to recall past events, we would never "***understand the word 'past', any more than a man born blind can understand the word 'light'***" (Hoerl, 2017 pp 207). So, the idea is that there could be no knowledge of the past by inference, because without memory, we'd never ever know that there was anything in the past to be inferred. Within the faculty of memory is a distinctive capacity that's concerned with episodes or events pertaining to the past. This is episodic memory – which, when deployed, allows us to receive and store "***information about temporally dated episodes and events, and temporal-spatial relations among these events***" (Hoerl, 2001 pp 315). This is contrasted with another form of declarative memory called semantic memory, which is more concerned with the memory of facts or propositions about the past. These are the two main candidate memory systems that I will consider in this paper, assessing which best explains how we acquire the concept of pastness. Specifically, I will focus on episodic memory and evaluate whether we have good intuitive reasons for thinking that the possession of episodic memory is necessary for a grasp of the concept of the past. My aim is to show that episodic memory is necessary for us to grasp the concept of pastness. ■

The proposition "Caesar crossed the Rubicon" is a semantic proposition. ■ It doesn't deal with my personal experience of Caesar per se (but rather my indirect experience of him via some history documentary). But, in comprehending the sentence, I'm already employing my concept of pastness (i.e., 'crossed' can be read as 'crossing in the past'). Semantic remembering may often deal with propositions about the past, but they mainly preserve the knowledge I already had to have about pastness. Therefore, Hoerl argues that a preservative capacity like semantic memory won't give insight to where we *acquire* the concept pastness (Hoerl, 2017 pp 208). However, Hoerl also argues that there are also issues with taking episodic memory to be purely generative: if we think episodic memory gives a feeling of pastness, and that that's where we infer our concept of pastness from, it leads us to a contradiction. This sense of familiarity that's said to give rise to pastness *presupposes* that the subject is already acquainted with pastness. Because, how else could they recognize a present mental state as being from the past, if not by comparing


it to the concept of pastness which they must have already known? This explanation doesn't say what enables a person to grasp the concept in the first place.

Episodic memories are always personally experienced, so often these episodes will have experiential characteristics. Debus refers to these types of episodic memories as "R-memories" (Debus, 20). When you recall a R-memory, you are really revisiting the experience through some of your distinct perceptual senses (e.g., you can *see* your grandmother in front of you again, or *hear* your name being called by her) (Debus, 24). Debus argues that there is a dependency between a subject's ability to think about the past and their R-memories. Specifically, Debus says that the subject can only "***grasp the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events***" (Debus, 21). I think what's essential to Debus' argument, and what's crucial for the aim of this paper, is the idea that the concept of the past is not an a priori concept. As we've seen in the 'familiarity' hypothesis, the concept of pastness is necessary for thinking about pastness (i.e., you must already have the concept to recognize it as such). And every concept stands in determinate relations with the other concepts that it is not. For example, the concept of 'light' is understood by what it is not – darkness. So, understanding pastness requires differentiating it from other concepts it isn't (i.e., the present, or futurity). And since pastness is not an a priori concept, pastness needs to first be experienced so that its relation to other concepts can be comprehended. This strengthens the connection pastness has with experience. What about pastness' connection with time?

Debus thinks that a subject's ability to think about the past depends on their ability to remember particular past events (Debus, 26), because embedded into the concept of the past is the idea that unique, distinct events have occurred in the past. This is considered as a basic topological feature of pastness (i.e., that there have been particular times during which particular events took place (Debus, 28). Thus, conceiving a particular time X is just a matter of conceiving X as a time when some event happened. Although it may seem intuitive that episodic memory is connected to our temporal understandings, it's not clear how episodic memory can give us access to both events and the times they occupy. That is, how do episodic memories recall their pastness with them? What is pastness' connection with memory?

In the case of semantic memories, although the remembered fact was learned in the past, this 'pastness' doesn't necessarily attach itself to the memory like in the case of episodic memories. Remembering the fact that Reykjavík is in Iceland doesn't mentally transport me to some particular time. This is the core phenomenological difference between episodic and semantic remembering. My episodic memories of visiting Reykjavík, by contrast, are composed of episodes that have various experiences tied together to form a larger memory. The time represented in this memory cannot be entirely discontinuous or disjoint, the way that my facts about Reykjavík can be. For example, I may know the two following facts about Reykjavík: it was founded in 1786 and had a puffin breeding colony. These two facts have temporal attributes but can be interpreted as disjoint facts in my mind, although I also know that their puffin

breeding colony also existed in 1786. Why is this not ‘known’ to me the same way as my episodic memories of Reykjavík? The core difference is that I don’t have a personal experience of the ‘pastness’ of either event. I’m not claiming that I don’t comprehend their pastness (I surely have the concept of pastness), but rather that there is different, stronger conception of pastness that’s maintained in episodic memories. **My semantic memories are therefore prone to a weak characterization of time.**

So, if we turn to episodic memories as the source for grasping the concept of pastness, the question remains of how the understanding of pastness is necessarily obtained by it. Hoerl’s idea is that episodic memory can itself contribute or of be a manifestation of pastness. Hoerl contends that by episodically remembering a past event, you aren’t just retrieving information pertaining to the event. There’s a *retained* cognitive contact with the past event itself (Hoerl, 2017 pp 212). Hoerl is specifically claiming that perceiving an event gives us a cognitive contact that ‘acquaints’ us with it. And that episodic memory preserves this awareness of that relationship. What gives us the concept of pastness from this cognitive contact, I think, is it’s decline of force and liveliness in our memory. My initial memories of Reykjavík were vivid; it was an R-memory clad with various sensory details. But after a month, some of those details became hazed. Now after 5 years, I think that many of my episodic memories of Reykjavík are projected in my mind like semantic propositions (e.g., my once lively memories of swimming in the blue lagoon have now become ‘memories’ of mere physical actions I did). Looking into the far past of my life, many of my earliest memories feel as though they’ve had their experiential details eroded away completely. There seems to be a spectrum for episodic memories where the changes of time alter many of its ‘felt’ details. However, my knowledge that the memory was in the past has been persistent. I don’t think that after 10, 15, 100 years I would ever feel that pastness would diminish from the memory, even when my R-memories have transcended into semantic memories. The concept of pastness is thus a feature that’s inherent in episodic memories. 

However, one may object to my claim that episodic memories inherently indicate pastness by asking why episodic memories specifically provide the concept of pastness. As well, the objectors may say that in cases of episodic memory that lack what-when-where content, or memories that involve highly reconstructed narratives, episodic memory fails to clearly unite these cases in a temporally characterizable way (Boyle, 8). Their reasons may be that semantic memories can also have what-when-where content, so what features do episodic memories have that uniquely indicate pastness? I don’t think the cases of episodic memories that lack experiential content threaten my thesis, because those memories lost their what-when-where content after a certain amount of time, which is just a natural a by-product of our overall memory system. We tend to forget details after a while, but that doesn’t imply that they weren’t once accessible to us. And even when their temporal details are lost (e.g., when you forget someone’s birthday or the day Iceland was founded), this doesn’t mean that their pastness becomes inaccessible to us in the same way. In cases where episodic memories are highly reconstructed via imagination or narrativity, these imagined features aren’t what indicate pastness, but the

underlying memory that they've predicated their features on is what retains pastness. I may reconstruct my trip to Reykjavík in such a way where I think I was wearing a swimsuit the entire time. In this reconstruction, the swimsuit is the masqueraded false detail, but this is merely an addition on top of a real memory: that I was wearing something, in a city that I really did visit. Regardless of which details I swap out, the pastness is not captured in the details, but rather in the overall form of the memory. The question of how episodic memory temporally characterizes these cases has to do with level of details lost, or the decline of certainty in the overall memory. The form of pastness is still always indicated, but the details within can be lost in biological memory system like ours. And after 70 or so years, when these episodic memories appear as semantic memories with similar what-when-where content, I would still retain the concept of *pastness* because it was initially through episodic memory that those semantic memories arose. Every knowledge obtained of a semantic proposition was once a (perhaps experientially dull) experience. The concept of pastness was necessarily through episodic memory because whatever sources we utilize in memory was built from concepts we obtained via episodic memories. With respect to semantic memories, I think that episodic memory is the only intuitive avenue we have for conceptually grasping pastness.

## Reference List

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