

Observer perspective and acentred memory: some puzzles about point of view in personal memory

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Abstract Sometimes I remember my past experiences from an ‘observer’ perspective, seeing myself in the remembered scene. This paper analyses the distinction in personal memory between such external observer visuospatial perspectives and ‘field’ perspectives, in which I experience the remembered actions and events as from my original point of view. It argues that Richard Wollheim’s related distinction between centred and acentred memory fails to capture the key phenomena, and criticizes Wollheim’s reasons for doubting that observer ‘memories’ are genuine personal memories. Since field perspectives in personal memory are also likely to be the product of constructive processes, we should reject the common assumption that such constructive processes inevitably bring distortion and error. Yet field perspectives tend to be treated as privileged also in the domains of memory for skilled movement, and memory for trauma. In each case, it is argued that visuospatial perspective in personal memory should be distinguished from other kinds of perspective such as kinesthetic perspective and emotional perspective.

Keywords Memory · Perspective · Wollheim · Observer memory · Personal memory

1 Field and observer perspectives in personal memory

When I remember specific episodes in my personal past, particular moments—whether ordinary or significant, joyous or embarrassing—are experientially accessible. For example, I visualize myself walking happily through that archway for the very first time, or nervous as I met that person at a party one particular summer afternoon. I cringe as I remember playing that awful shot, when batting well, in that season’s big game against our club’s arch-rivals: I still clearly see

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myself flaying wildly at the ball in an over-extravagant cover drive, edging horribly straight to second slip, trudging off the field, again.

These are natural descriptions of common forms of recollective experience. Such examples illustrate not only the cognitive, affective, and kinesthetic aspects of personal memory, but also reveal it as having a visuospatial perspective, or perhaps rather that when remembering in this way I adopt such a perspective (Wollheim 1984, p. 80). In these cases the visuospatial perspective in question happens to be an external or ‘observer’ perspective, in which I see myself *in* the past scene, remembering it ‘as an observer might see it’: the contrast is with an ‘own-eyes’ or ‘field’ perspective, when I remember the event as from my ‘original point of view’ (Nigro and Neisser 1983, p. 470). My observer memories, or (better) the observer perspectives I adopt in remembering, are marked in the way I figure in the memory, represented as from the outside: yet as these cases suggest they are also familiar phenomena. Although an observer perspective on a particular memory can be stable and regularly repeated, the switching of vantage points while remembering particular experiences is also common. The following example from a formal, diary-based psychological study of involuntary autobiographical memories illustrates such a spontaneous switch, in this case from an allocentric to an egocentric perspective (Berntsen and Rubin 2006, p. 1193):

I see myself dancing at a party at the university. I remember my clothes and my legs (the way they moved). Suddenly, I am ‘inside my own body’ looking out. A guy I know a little walks by me and says as he passes: ‘You look good today’.

In paradigmatic observer memories, when I see myself in the remembered scene there is no uncertainty about my identity: no inference is involved in coming to know that these were *my* past actions and experiences. As the remembering self, temporarily viewing the remembered scene from the external visuospatial perspective, I simply treat the represented self within the scene as my past self. This is a mundane analog of more unusual autoscopic (seeing-oneself) phenomena, a mnemonic version of an out-of-body experience in that egocentric and body-centred perspectives are dissociated, and subjective perspective shifted to a distinct and often elevated extracorporeal location (compare Brugger 2002; Mohr and Blanke 2005).

The distinction between field and observer perspectives in remembering, though thus both familiar and puzzling, has received barely any philosophical attention. This short paper aims to highlight the distinction and to address only the most obvious puzzle, about whether observer memories are indeed legitimate forms of personal memory. It does not, in particular, begin to explore the importance of the flipping of perspectives, a topic of increasing current interest (Rice and Rubin 2009), or to construct a positive account of observer perspectives in personal memory and their significance. Here I argue that observer memories are genuine cases of remembering, analyzing the puzzling neglect of observer memories in Richard Wollheim’s treatment of a range of closely related phenomena, and extending one of the few more recent philosophical treatments of the topic to date by Debus (2007). One might accept my case to that point, yet think that a field or

'own-eyes' visuospatial perspective is still the canonical or privileged form of personal memory: I examine and criticize versions of this idea in relation to memory for skilled movement and memory for trauma. Visuospatial (and more generally sensory) perspectives are by no means the only kind of perspectives that characterize personal remembering. At the very least, we need also to acknowledge the existence of kinesthetic perspectives and affective perspectives, which can vary separately both from visuospatial perspectives and from each other.

I focus here on the intrinsic significance, within the philosophy of mind, of the distinction between field and observer perspectives in personal memory. But there are at least two other reasons for being interested in it. The first springs from consideration of the relations between the field/observer distinction in remembering, and the distinction between imagining from the inside and imagining from the outside, to which philosophers have offered considerably more attention. This suggests that an understanding of perspective in personal memory may have implications for central questions in moral psychology regarding the role of point of view (in both remembering and imagining) in self-definition and self-understanding over time (Goldie 2003; Mackenzie 2000, 2007; Velleman 1996; Williams 1973), and in aesthetics (Choi 2005; Smith 1997) and the philosophy of language (Higginbotham 2003; Recanati 2007). Secondly, there are pragmatic or underlabouring reasons for philosophers to attend to the field/observer distinction. After some interest in the 1890s, the psychological study of perspective in memory recommenced gradually in the 1980s and 1990s: experimental interest in the topic has since grown substantially, and over 50 studies in the past 10 years include a measure of memory perspective. Robust consensus is developing about certain systematic properties of field and observer perspectives in memory. Some consistent findings are that field perspectives are in general significantly more common, but that observer perspectives—always found in a significant minority of memories—increase in memories of more temporally remote events; that memories recalled from an observer perspective tend to include less affective and sensory detail than those recalled from a field perspective; and that memories are more likely to be recalled from an observer perspective when the person either was more self-conscious or self-aware during the original experience, or is more self-conscious or self-aware at the time of recollection (Robinson and Swanson 1993; McIsaac and Eich 2002). As in other areas of the cognitive psychology of memory (Tulving 2000, p. 34), ongoing experimental work has perhaps outpaced attention to the conceptual basis of the distinction: so philosophers of mind can help clear the ground for more securely-grounded empirical research.

2 Clarifying the distinction

I begin with two further clarifications before examining doubts about observer 'memories'. Firstly, the investigation need assume no specific account of personal (or recollective) memory itself. We do not need firm commitments on its boundary conditions, only on features of its central cases: in paradigmatic examples of personal remembering, I remember acting in certain ways or having certain specific

experiences, where these actions or experiences are in principle (even if not in practice) locatable as having happened at particular past times within my personal history (Campbell 1997; Hoerl 2007). This leaves open, for example, the plausible claim that the broader class of personal memories might also include mnemonic access to generic sets of past experiences, as in condensed or summarized memories of routine or repeated episodes in the personal past (Brewer 1996; Schechtman 1994). Perhaps the field/observer distinction applies equally well in cases of generic or summarized personal memories (as implied by Debus 2007, pp. 173–177): but there's no need to examine it initially in that context.

Secondly, although we may hope that analysis of the field/observer distinction should eventually throw some light on the relations between personal and factual memory, the distinction itself is best seen as a distinction *within* the realm of personal memory. It has no grip in the case of autobiographical knowledge disconnected to personal memory. Some of my beliefs about my own past are solely due to testimony (such as family tradition) or access to external media (photographs and so on). Some of these beliefs may be both true and justified: I may truly say, for example, that I remember that I was stung by a bee when 18 months old. But this is semantic rather than personal memory: I do not remember *being* stung. Such autobiographical knowledge in the form of factual memories does not involve the same sensory-perceptual-affective processing as does personal memory, and does not in general have a visuospatial perspective.

This last point needs to be qualified a little. It's true that, drawing on such purely factual memories and on other general knowledge, I can imaginatively compile a scene in which I visualize myself acting or experiencing in ways in which (as a matter of fact, at some level of abstraction) I did (compare Wollheim 1979, pp. 216–217). This kind of imaginative compilation is not the usual way in which my merely semantic knowledge about my own past is deployed. But when it does occur, I can either experience the imagined or reconstructed events as from my own eyes, or observe myself in the imagined scene: 'field' perspectives are, as I'll argue further, no less likely than 'observer' perspectives, logically or psychologically, to be the means or medium of wholly or partially compiled scenarios. But even where such visuospatial imaginings (of either kind) do arise out of factual memories, they are phenomenologically and psychologically distinct from the visuospatial perspectives that go along with personal remembering. My primary concern here is with field and observer perspectives in personal remembering, rather than these related phenomena.

It's because the basic distinction between field and observer perspectives thus lies within the realm of personal memory that the doubts which I examine below about the legitimacy of observer perspectives as a form of memory are an important challenge. But in some recent research, the field/observer distinction is instead extended beyond personal memory into the realm of factual or semantic memory. Crawley and French (2005), for example, studied not only personal memories from childhood, but also reports of childhood events of which subjects have 'no conscious recollection' and know about only from other sources. For *all* these events, they asked subjects to answer the question 'Is the memory seen from a field (own eyes) or observer perspective?' In thus assessing perspective in reports of

merely semantic autobiographical knowledge, Crawley and French have moved outside the realm of personal memory, so that any perspective apparent in those reports is not a perspective taken on in an activity of personal remembering. Not surprisingly, they found that the childhood events of which subjects had no conscious recollection—those for which they had only semantic memory—elicited a vastly higher number of reported ‘observer memories’ (2005, p. 676). But this attempt to expand the field/observer distinction beyond the realm of personal memory unhelpfully confuses the dialectic: citing this study by Crawley and French, Viard et al. (2007, p. 2456) go on simply to *describe* the field perspective as that ‘which characterizes episodic [personal] recollection’. These moves rule out by fiat the existence of personal memories experienced from an observer perspective, as in the examples given at the start of this paper: they should thus be resisted, so that we can then ask whether, as a matter of fact, observer perspectives occur in genuine cases of personal remembering.

3 Doubts about observer memories

Richard Wollheim’s discussion of ‘centred’ and ‘acentred’ event memory in *The Thread of Life* provides a helpful counterpoint to our examination of the distinction between field and observer perspectives. The connection between Wollheim’s distinction and our distinction has been mentioned (Mackenzie 2007, pp. 141–142) but not analyzed. I argue that the two do not line up neatly, and that the difference is instructive. Wollheim’s otherwise rich and psychologically realistic treatment of event memory neglects observer memory. Wollheim’s category of ‘centred event-memory’, I suggest, does coincide with what I have called field memory (or, field perspective in memory): but the key category of ‘acentred event-memory’, which he does allow, does not line up with what I have called observer memory. Despite the unusual absence of worked examples in these sections of Wollheim’s text (1984, pp. 101–106), we can reasonably infer that he rejects its possibility. In doing so, he helps us identify two general assumptions behind doubts about observer memories. The first assumption is that observer perspectives are more likely than field perspectives to be the product of constructive processes. The second assumption, which has more general significance, is that construction is incompatible with accuracy in memory.

‘Acentred event-memory’ occurs when in remembering a certain event I remember it ‘from no point of view within that event’ (Wollheim 1984, p. 102). Although I experienced the event (since this is a form of event memory), I have now ‘edited myself out of it’. As Peter Goldie notes, Wollheim is here forging a space between merely semantic or ‘propositional remembering’ (as when I simply know that I met that person at that party, or that I was dismissed for 32 in that cricket match), and the full centred or field or (as Goldie puts it) ‘stream of consciousness memory’ in which I perceptually re-enact ‘from the inside’ the events ‘as they then took place, in effect perceiving things as one then did’, when ‘there is no external perspective’ (Goldie 2003, p. 311). But Goldie then goes on to interpret Wollheim’s acented memory as if it was observer memory, as if in acented memory ‘oneself,

as one then was, appears as part of the content of what one remembers' and 'one sees oneself as another' (p. 312).

Goldie's account of this external perspective in personal memory, I will suggest below, helps us to offer a richer analysis of the emotional significance of observer memory. But it is mistaken as a reading of Wollheim's acented memory. For Wollheim, it is impossible to see myself, as I then was, in the remembered scene: 'when I acentrally remember an event, I can't figure in the memory' (1984, p. 103). Wollheim argues that such a form of acented memory, were it possible, 'would require that I be represented as from the outside, but the fact that it is an event-memory forbids this, for this isn't how I experienced myself in the course of the event' (p. 103). In contrast, the acented event-memories which Wollheim does allow, in which I am instead simply edited out of the scene that I remember, are both 'marginal' and 'unstable', tending always to switch into centred memories as I 'reassume in the representation of the past event the very part that I played in the event itself' (p. 102).

Having confirmed that Wollheim's acented memories are indeed phenomena distinct from the psychologists' observer memories (and from Goldie's external perspectives in remembering), we can evaluate his reasons for rejecting the possibility of observer memories. On his view, 'I cannot figure in acented memory' (1984, p. 103) because the change, distortion, or deviation from experience required to represent myself as from the outside is too great. Wollheim argues this point even though he does not have a simple replay or archive model of event-memory: he concedes that I need not remember every aspect of the past event, and that my memory may also, within limits, 'distort or deviate from experience' (1984, p. 103). But still, to be an event-memory at all, it must be the case even for an acented memory 'that I should, or should within broad limits, remember the event as I experienced it', even if not 'as experienced by me' (which would turn it again into a centred or field memory) (p. 104). This condition, Wollheim suggests, would not hold for the putative kind of acented memory in which (as in our examples of observer memory) I appear as a represented figure in the remembered scene.

It is odd that, in thus rejecting the possibility of event-memories in which I appear as a figure represented in the remembered scene, Wollheim does not even canvass or offer an explicit alternative analysis of any apparent cases of observer memory, such as those mentioned at the start of this paper. He may have taken it as obvious that such cases would not be genuine memories, in that the level of construction required to achieve a stable external perspective on myself, represented as from the outside within the remembered scene, would rule out the kind of causal dependence between experience and memory which he elsewhere argued is essential to experiential memory (1979, pp. 197–206).

But, as Debus argues, this is not so: the existence of observer memories is entirely compatible with a general causal theory of memory (2007, pp. 197–199). Causal dependence of an appropriate kind between present memory and past experience (Bernecker 2008; Martin and Deutscher 1966) does not require identity of point of view. Debus suggests that the transformation of spatial information evident in a genuine observer memory results precisely from the causal process that appropriately links experience and memory. Such systematic manipulation of

spatial information can in fact preserve relevant spatial information about relations between the objects represented in the memory (including the represented past self). In the external visuospatial perspective through which I remember my actions in that game or the events at that party, the spatial relations between the represented objects and participants in the remembered scenes may be preserved across the causal process, even though my point of view is no longer inside those scenes.

One might respond that Wollheim was concerned not only about the appropriate causal dependence of memory on experience, but also about the extent of the constructive processes involved in compiling the external perspective and inserting a represented past self into the remembered scene. But again, as Debus argues (2007, p. 197),

there does not seem any reason to doubt that in cases in which the spatial elements of a past situation are experientially ‘reconstructed’ as part of a present observer- memory, the relevant reconstructions will most often be accurate.

This important point ought to help us decisively cut the links between construction and falsity, plasticity and invention, malleability and unreliability which have been assumed by memory theorists of very different persuasions (Freud 1899, pp. 321–322; Hirst 2009; Loftus 2005). Critics of this ‘alliance of construction and error’ rightly point out that the thought that construction *entails* distortion only makes sense against a background assumption that genuine personal memory must replay or archive the past in an exact copy of an original experience (Campbell 2004, p. 128; Debus 2007, p. 196). Consideration of the field/observer distinction can help us erode this pervasive and more general assumption that constructive processes (whether internal or social in origin) are inevitably malign (compare Barnier et al. 2008; Sutton 2009).

4 Are field perspectives still fundamental?

It may turn out to be the case that there are more false ‘memories’ from observer than from field perspectives: but this would be an empirical discovery, rather than an obvious truth, and it will not be *just* because of their perspective. Field perspectives are in the same boat as those involving observer perspectives with regard to the involvement of active and constructive processes, and can of course also turn out false. Many or most personal memories are accessible from either field or observer perspective, and as we’ve seen the perspective can often be switched: this suggests that the difference in perspective is one of form rather than content, and that the same underlying (complex and distributed) representations can animate occurrent memories involving either perspective. A focus on the objective circumstances of past events is more likely to lead me to adopt an observer perspective, whereas being asked to focus on how I felt about the same events is more likely to drive a field perspective (Schacter 1996, p. 21). Such considerations about the fluidity and openness to influence of perspective in memory militate against any intrinsic privilege being afforded to field perspectives, so we should

critically examine areas in which they are treated as in some way more fundamental or special. In doing so, we also begin to see the varieties of perspective which coexist within personal memory.

At a general level, firstly, internal or field perspectives are no more intrinsically tied to reality. In the different empirical tradition of thought-sampling research, with memory not specifically at issue, ‘own-eyes’ reports include the most unrealistic or implausible scenarios (such as ‘a slice of ham hovering in space’), while ‘see-oneseff’ reports are more often memories (such as taking an external perspective ‘as if up in a tree, watching’ an experience the subject had had by a campfire (Foulkes 1994).

Back within the realm of personal memory, we can briefly examine two domains in which the field/observer distinction plays a role: in memory of skilled movement, and in memory of traumatic personal experience. In both memory and imagery, elite athletes can employ (or find themselves employing) either internal or external visuospatial perspectives on their movement skills. They can remember what they saw and felt while performing well or badly, or they can see themselves performing well or badly in the remembered scene. One reason that this is an intriguing domain for the understanding of the field/observer distinction is the level of deliberate cultivation and control often sought over both memory and imagery among elite athletes. Received wisdom in sports psychology has long advised the cultivation of the internal perspective (Mahoney and Avenier 1977). But the field has arguably suffered due to the confounding of visuospatial perspective with motor or kinesthetic perspective. It is perfectly possible for me to remember the kinesthetic sensations I experienced while engaged in some skilled activity while at the same time remembering my overt movements from an external or observer visuospatial perspective. Indeed, for certain task domains in particular, this may be a preferable way to access the kinesthetic processes psychologically (Callow and Hardy 2004). There is certainly, with regard to kinesthetic memory and its cultivation, no fundamental privilege to be accorded to internal or field visuospatial perspectives. There need be no neat coincidence between kinesthetic, motivational, and visuospatial perspectives (Martin et al. 1999).

The case has also been made that field perspectives in personal memory are privileged with regard to their emotional impact and role. Wollheim saw the egocentric perspective of centred or field memories as partly responsible for their psychic force. On his view, they transmit affective as well as cognitive influence, maintaining and transforming the emotional significance of particular past events, and also grounding the possibility of liberation from the influence of the past (1979, pp. 215–224). Likewise, a striking consensus in recent clinical psychology suggests that field perspectives in personal memory are associated with greater emotional health, especially for those who have suffered trauma. The adoption of observer perspectives on traumatic past experiences is seen as a cognitive avoidance strategy, employed (whether consciously or automatically) by such people to regulate and minimize emotional arousal and ‘to spare themselves the horror of reliving’, but which thus limits emotional processing (McIsaac and Eich 2004, p. 252).

But, beyond the difficulties of interpreting existing evidence for these claims, there are two reasons to be cautious. The distinction between field and observer

visuospatial perspectives in personal memory need not coincide with a distinction between internal and external emotional perspectives: despite Wollheim's association of the affective influence of past events uniquely with the egocentric perspective in personal memory, there is no essential bar to seeing myself in the memory while yet feeling the emotional force more strongly. But this suggests, further, that even when observer visuospatial perspectives do coincide with external emotional perspectives, 'emotional processing' need not thereby be less likely. Peter Goldie defends the external perspective just because of its utility for emotional re-evaluation of past actions and events. Only by responding emotionally from one's present perspective (rather than while still immersed in memory within the vantage-point of the original experience) can one 'look the past in the eye' and integrate egocentric and objective perspectives on one's actions (Goldie 2003, pp. 312–317). Substantial individual differences in personality and recall style are relevant to a finer-grained understanding of responses to trauma: but there is no reason to identify successful emotional processing with only one form of visuospatial perspective on the past.

In this short discussion of the distinction between field (internal or 'own-eyes') and observer (external or 'see-oneself') visuospatial perspectives in personal memory, I have aimed firstly to underline the philosophical and scientific interest of the topic, and secondly to defend what I take to be a natural acceptance of observer perspectives as compatible with genuine experiential memories. I have also briefly suggested that visuospatial, affective, and kinesthetic perspectives in personal memory can be distinguished, and that in principle at least they can vary independently.

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