The Functional Character of Memory

1. **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to determine what is to remember something, as opposed to imagining it, perceiving it, or introspecting it. What does it take for a mental state to qualify as remembering, or having a memory of, something?[[1]](#footnote-1) The main issue to be addressed is therefore a metaphysical one. It is the issue of determining which features those mental states which qualify as memories typically enjoy, and those states which do not qualify as such typically lack. I will proceed as follows.

In sections 2 and 3, I will discuss the two main existing conceptions of the conditions that a mental state must satisfy to count as an episode of remembering. The first of these approaches is backward-looking. It puts forward conditions that strictly concern the aetiology of the mental state. I will argue that the conditions offered by the backward-looking approach are both too strong and too weak: They rule out mental states which, intuitively, count as memories while including mental states which, intuitively, do not qualify as memories. The second approach is forward-looking. It puts forward conditions that only concern the use that the subject makes of the mental state while forming beliefs about their own life. I will argue that the conditions proposed by the forward-looking approach are both too weak and too strong as well. However, the discussion of the two approaches will allow us to extract some helpful lessons on the constraints that any proposal about the nature of remembering should respect. An alternative approach aimed at incorporating those lessons will be offered in section 4 by drawing on the literature on functionalism. In section 5, I will argue that this approach can, on the one hand, accommodate as memories those mental states which indicate that the backward-looking approach and the forward-looking approach are too strict while, on the other hand, excluding those mental states which suggest that the two alternative approaches are too permissive. Accordingly, I will conclude that construing memory along functionalist lines is a satisfactory approach to the nature of remembering.

The scope of this project will be modest, in that I will only be concerned with a particular type of remembering. There are several forms of remembering. There is, for example, memory for events or states of affairs, for abilities, and for objects. Our discussion in this paper will focus on a specific kind of memory for events and states of affairs; a form of remembering which essentially involves having a mental image but it does not require having formed, at any previous moment, the belief that the relevant event, or the relevant state of affairs, obtained in the past.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is the sense in which one may remember, for example, that one left the door of one’s house open when one left for work in the morning. Let us call this ‘episodically remembering’ the event.[[3]](#footnote-3) This paper will be concerned with the conditions that a mental state must meet to qualify as episodically remembering an event (over and above that of having a mental image of the event). Accordingly, in what follows, when I speak of remembering an event or having a memory of an event, I will refer to, respectively, episodically remembering the event and having an episodic memory of the event.

**2. The causal theory of memory**

There is a popular view about the nature of memory according to which the issue of whether a mental state qualifies as remembering or not hinges on the origin of the state. The so-called causal theory of memory (or ‘CTM’, for short) remains the most influential version of this view. According to the classical formulation of CTM, for any subject S and event e, S remembers e just in case S is representing e, S represented e in the past, and the fact that S represented e in the past has caused S to represent e in the present.[[4]](#footnote-4) To clarify this formulation of CTM, it is worth elaborating on the notions of representation, causation and event used in it.

As far as CTM is concerned, the notion of representing an event should be understood as an umbrella notion that covers a number of possible ways in which a subject may experience an event. For example, if a subject perceptually experienced a worldly event in the past, or they introspectively experienced a mental event in their own mind, or they experienced being the agent of one of their actions, then the subject counts, on this reading of ‘representation’, as representing each of those events. Furthermore, the notion of representation used by the advocate of CTM also includes a way in which a subject can experience an event that may not be happening in the present, namely, by visualising the event. The reason why the advocate of CTM is employing such a broad notion of representation is that we all seem to have memories of events of very different types; events that we witnessed in the past, events of which we were aware subjectively, and events that consisted in our own actions. In all of these cases, the advocate of CTM claims, the mental states wherein we visualise those events qualify as memories of them if, and only if, they have been caused by our past representations of those events, whether those representations were perceptual experiences, episodes of introspection or agentive experiences.

The classical formulation of CTM is meant to be neutral on the precise nature of the causal relation. The thought is that whatever the correct view about the nature of the causal relation turns out to be, that relation must hold between a subject’s past representation of an event and a current mental state of the subject in order for us to count the subject’s mental state as a memory of the event. The advocate of CTM is, however, committed to the view that the causal link between the past representation and the memory must be ‘non-deviant’. What does this mean? Suppose that I am walking by a basketball court, and I see a basketball in the air on its way to the hoop. Suppose that the perception of the ball’s colour makes me think of a New York Knicks jersey, which in turn triggers in me the mental image of a basketball in the air on its way to a hoop. In this case, I am visualising the travelling of a basketball towards a hoop, and my mental image is at the end of a causal chain which originates in a recent perception of a basketball travelling towards a hoop. But, intuitively enough, my mental state does not qualify as an episode of remembering. The reason seems to be that, in this case, the causal link between the basketball and my mental image is, in some sense, indirect or deviant. Thus, the advocate of CTM requires that the causal link between a memory of an event and the subject’s past representation of the event must be non-deviant. Naturally, this move places the burden of specifying exactly what counts as a deviant instance of a causal relation, and what does not, in the CTM advocate’s shoulders. However, for the purposes of our discussion of CTM, I will assume that the advocate of CTM can draw the distinction between deviant and non-deviant instances of the causal relation in a principled way. As far as I can see, none of the objections to be raised against CTM below hinges on this point.

The classical formulation of CTM is not explicit on how the notion of an event should be understood. However, it does seem that one particular view about the nature of events fits most naturally with CTM, namely, that of events as property exemplifications.[[5]](#footnote-5) Notice that, except for rare cases of so-called eidetic memory, we do not remember all the details of those events that we have represented in the past. For example, imagine that, as a child, I once saw a horse performing the canter at some festival. Suppose that I now have a mental image wherein I visualise the horse moving with some gait during the festival performance. Let us stipulate that I have that mental image as a result of having seen the horse at the festival and that, in virtue of having that mental image, I am inclined to believe that I once saw a horse moving with some gait during a festival performance. Intuitively enough, it seems that the mental state that I now occupy is an episode of remembering. And yet, on the face of it, CTM seems to preclude us from accepting this mental state as an episode of remembering, since the event that I represented in the past (the horse performing the canter) seems to be different from the event that I am now representing in the present (the horse moving with some gait).

In order to handle this difficulty, the advocate of CTM may individuate events as property exemplifications or, more precisely, exemplifications of sets of properties by an object at a time. This allows the advocate of CTM to introduce a relation of inclusion between events: An event e\*, the advocate of CTM might claim, is included into an event e just in case all the properties which are exemplified as part of event e\* are properties exemplified as part of event e, in the same object and at the same time. Introducing this relation makes it possible for the advocate of CTM to argue that, in the past, I did represent, contrary to what it may have seemed at first glance, the very event that I am now representing when I have a mental image of a horse moving with some gait during a festival. For it seems reasonable to assume that, by representing an event, one always represents all the events included in it. And the event that consists in the horse moving with some gait is included in the event that consists in the horse performing the canter.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, provided that events are construed as property exemplifications, it seems that CTM can accommodate the intuition that we may remember an event without representing all the details of the event that we represented in the past.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, I will be assuming this conception of events for the purposes of our discussion of CTM.

What considerations can be offered in support of CTM? Episodic memory seems to register and store the content of those (typically, perceptual) experiences that we had in the past by producing mental images which inherit their contents from those experiences.[[8]](#footnote-8) The preservative aspect of memory is, for the reasons mentioned above, imperfect: Typically, not every detail of an event represented in the past will be preserved in our memory of it. Nevertheless, the preservative aspect of memory is of great importance to us. It provides us with the ability to navigate familiar environments by allowing us to recognise people, places and situations that we encountered in the past.[[9]](#footnote-9) Now, a virtue of CTM is that it accounts for this aspect of memory straightforwardly. If CTM is correct, then it is no wonder that our memories make available to us information which was initially provided to us by some of our own past experiences. For memories must inherit their contents from those experiences in which the memories originate. After all, according to CTM, a mental state would not count as a memory in the first place if it did not represent something that the experience in which it causally originates represented in the past. CTM enjoys, therefore, a significant virtue. Unfortunately, CTM also needs to face two important difficulties.

Firstly, CTM seems to be too strict. For, even though it allows a memory experience to include less detail than the experience in which it originates, it does not allow it to include more. And yet, a memory of a past event may, intuitively enough, include details that one’s past experience of the event did not include. Let us suppose that, as a child, I enjoyed accompanying my father while he went on country walks hunting rabbits and, once, I saw him shoot a white rabbit. Suppose that, as a result of having had that perceptual experience in the past, I am now having an experience wherein I visualise the rabbit, almost exactly as the rabbit appeared to me in the past, except for the fact that I now visualise the rabbit as being black. As a result, I am disposed to claim that I once saw a black rabbit being shot. According to CTM, my present experience does not constitute a memory of a black rabbit being shot, since it contains details that were never present in my original experience of the rabbit. This seems highly counter-intuitive.[[10]](#footnote-10) After all, cases of this sort are extremely common, so ruling this case out as an episode of remembering seems to make the scope of memory unreasonably narrow.[[11]](#footnote-11) It seems more natural to say that this is a case in which I misremember the event. Since incorrect memories still count as memories, this means that the case should be acknowledged as an instance of remembering. Let us call cases of this type, ‘embellishment’ cases.

Notice that, in the embellishment case considered above, the detail of the remembered event included in the memory, but not in the experience in which the memory originates, did not obtain in the past. (The rabbit was not, in fact, black.) But this is inessential to the objection being raised against CTM. Suppose that, as a result of having my perceptual experience of my father shooting a white rabbit in the past, I am now having an experience wherein I visualise the event, almost exactly as I perceptually experienced it in the past. The only difference is that I now visualise my father as wearing a belt with a silver buckle on it at the time of the shooting; a detail which (let us stipulate) I could not have perceived at the time of the shooting given my spatial position in the scene relative to my father’s. Suppose that this is a belt with which I am very familiar and, as it turns out, my father was indeed wearing it at the time of the shooting. The intuition remains that I am having a memory. And yet, according to CTM, my present experience does not constitute a memory of my father shooting the rabbit, since it contains details that were never present in my original experience of the event. Thus, it seems that embellishment cases pose a threat to CTM whether or not the details of the remembered event which, in those cases, are present in our memory of it, but not in our original experience of the event, were in fact details that the event enjoyed in the past.

Let us refer to the view according to which a memory of an event cannot include details which were never present in the subject’s original experience of the event as ‘preservationism about content’. There is a different view about memory in the philosophical literature according to which, if a subject knows some proposition on the basis of memory, it is because she knew it, at some point in the past, through some source other than memory. Let us refer to this view as ‘preservationism about knowledge’.[[12]](#footnote-12) It is worth pointing out that preservationism about content and preservationism about knowledge are logically independent views. The former type of preservationism does not entail the latter type, since there are, arguably, cases of knowledge generation in memory which seem to be consistent with preservationism about content.[[13]](#footnote-13) And the latter type of preservationism does not entail the former type, since embellishment cases of the two varieties considered above are, arguably, counter-examples to preservationism about content, and yet they are consistent with preservationism about knowledge. For instance, in the case in which I visualise a black rabbit being shot, no new knowledge is generated by my memory. For if I formed, on the basis of my memory, the belief that a black rabbit was shot, I would be forming a false belief, which does not amount to knowledge. By contrast, in the case in which I visualise my father shooting a rabbit while wearing a belt with a silver buckle on it, no new knowledge is generated by my memory for a different reason. In this case, if I formed, on the basis of my memory, the belief that my father was wearing such a belt, my belief would be true, but it could have easily been false. Hence, it does not amount to knowledge either.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Secondly, CTM seems to be too permissive. Imagine that I am capable of visualising events that I witnessed in the past but, due to some substantial cognitive deficit of mine, my mental images of those events do not convey to me the sense that the relevant events did happen, and that I witnessed them in the past.[[15]](#footnote-15) Suppose, furthermore, that I am a painter. I decide to paint a bird landing on the roof of a house and, at the end of my work, I have painted that scene in my canvas. However, I am not inclined to think that these are a house and a bird which I have ever encountered in the past. I do not think that these are, or were, a real house and a real bird. And yet, it turns out that I am wrong: The house that I have painted is a house that, in fact, I visited as a child. The bird that I have painted is a bird that, in fact, I saw during my visit. And the experience wherein I visualised the scene that I have painted in my canvas causally originates in my past perceptual experience of that bird landing on the roof of that house.[[16]](#footnote-16) According to CTM, in this situation, the experience wherein I visualised the house that I have painted in my canvas does qualify as an episode of remembering.[[17]](#footnote-17) This seems highly counter-intuitive. After all, the experience that I was having when I engaged in the project of painting a bird landing on the roof of a house did not convey to me the sense that this house and this bird were parts of my life in any way. And, for that reason, having such an experience did not make any difference as to which propositions I was inclined to believe regarding my past, and which propositions I was inclined to disbelieve. The experience made no impact on my beliefs about my past. It seems more natural to describe the case by saying that I was imagining a bird landing on the roof of a house when I engaged in the project of painting such a scene. Let us call cases of this type, cases of ‘epistemic irrelevance’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

One might dispute this way of describing the case by proposing, instead, that I am remembering, but I do not think that I am remembering. (This is, in fact, the way in which the original version of the case was understood by Charles Martin and Max Deutscher.) As far as I can see, the choice between construing the painting case as a case in which I imagine the event, and construing it as a case in which I remember the event, involves a trade-off between two explananda about memory. One fact in need of explanation in the painting case is the remarkable similarity between the event painted by me in the present and the event witnessed by me in the past. Let us abbreviate this fact as ‘Event Similarity’. A different fact in need of explanation is a more general fact about the connection between memory and belief: All other things being equal, when a subject remembers some event, it seems that the subject will be disposed to believe that the event took place in the past. Naturally, this kind of inclination can be overridden, for example, by the acquisition of other beliefs such as the belief that the subject’s faculty of memory is not to be trusted. Nevertheless, just like prima facie we are inclined to believe that those events that we perceive are taking place in the present, we are also prima facie inclined to believe that those events that we remember took place in the past. Let us abbreviate this fact about the connection between memory and belief as ‘Epistemic Relevance’.

If we construe the painting case as a case in which I remember the bird landing on the roof of the house, then Event Similarity seems, on the one hand, easy to explain. It does not seem surprising that the content of the mental image that I am having when I paint the event is so similar to the content of the past perceptual experience in which that mental image originates. After all, given the preservative aspect of memory, this is exactly what you would expect if the mental image that I am having, when I paint the event, is a memory of that event. But Epistemic Relevance, on the other hand, seems difficult to explain on this construal of the painting case. If it is indeed possible for a subject to have a memory of some event, and yet lack the inclination to believe that the event took place in the past, then such an inclination is not essential to memory. And if it is not essential to memory, then there must be a reason why, in common instances of remembering, a subject believes that the content of their memory took place in the past. But it is hard to see what the subject’s reason for believing this might be. For example, since a subject could imagine a past event without having the inclination to believe that the event happened in the past, it seems that the reason for believing that remembered events happened in the past cannot be that remembered events are presented to us as having happened in the past. Alternatively, one might think that there is some phenomenological feature which is characteristic of memories (such as their vivacity perhaps), and we have learnt that, typically, those events which are presented to us through mental images with that feature have happened in the past. But such a process of learning would be grounded on past experience. And, for that reason, it presupposes (and therefore cannot explain) our inclination to believe that those events that we remember took place in the past.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Conversely, if we construe the painting case as a case in which I imagine the bird landing on the roof of the house, then Epistemic Relevance seems, on the one hand, easy to explain. If it is impossible for a subject to have a memory of some event, and yet lack the inclination to believe that the event took place in the past, then such an inclination is constitutive of memory. Thus, the reason why a subject is inclined to believe that a remembered event happened in the past is simply that this is part of what it is for the subject to remember the event. But Event Similarity, on the other hand, seems difficult to explain on this construal of the painting case. Having said that, it does not seem that the similarity between the event painted by me in the present and the event witnessed by me in the past is impossible to explain. Such a similarity can still be explained by the fact that my current mental image of the painted event has been caused by my past perceptual experience of the very same event. Admittedly, there is a price to be paid for such an explanation: We must give up the idea that a causal relation between a past experience and a current mental image of the subject can only take place in memory. However, in the absence of independent considerations in support of this idea, the cost of explaining Event Similarity does not seem to be too high.

It seems, therefore, that CTM captures an important property of memory, namely, its retentive aspect. But it also seems that CTM ignores two other important features of memory. Remembering, as embellishment cases illustrate, is not only a matter of preserving some information provided by our past experiences of some events, but it can also involve reconstructing that information. Furthermore, remembering, as cases of epistemic irrelevance illustrate, must have the capacity to inform our beliefs about our past. It needs to make a difference as to which things we are inclined to believe, and which we are inclined to disbelieve, regarding our past. The outcome of our discussion in this section, then, is that a successful account of the type of mental state which qualifies as an episode of remembering should accommodate these two features while, ideally, preserving the main virtue of CTM. Let us now turn to an alternative conception of remembering which emphasises precisely those two features.

**3. The narrative theory of memory**

There is an alternative conception of memory wherein memory is not a passive device for registering and reproducing contents. It is instead a faculty akin to imagination in its creative capacity. The main tenet of this ‘narrative’ conception of memory (or ‘NTM’, for short) is that, in memory, we are engaged in an inventive project wherein we build stories about our past by integrating content that we have acquired through our own experience with content from other sources, such as testimony, inference and imagination. Memory, on this conception, is not meant to represent the past as we have experienced it. Instead, memory reconstructs the past in order to help us build a smooth and robust narrative of our lives. We may formulate NTM, more precisely, as the view that, for any subject S and event e, S remembers e just in case S is representing e, and S uses their representation of e as part of a narrative of S’s life.[[20]](#footnote-20) To clarify this formulation of the narrative view, it is worth elaborating on the notions of representation and narrative used in it.

The notion of representation used in the formulation of NTM should be understood even more broadly than that used in the formulation of CTM. The reason for the broadening of this notion concerns a somewhat complicated taxonomical issue in the study of memory. NTM is not usually offered as an answer to the specific question of what it takes for a mental state to qualify as an episodic memory. Instead, it is offered as an answer to the question of what it takes for a mental state to qualify as a so-called ‘autobiographical’ memory. The complication lies in the fact that the notion of autobiographical memory does not match that of episodic memory. An autobiographical memory is meant to be a memory of an event in one’s past, or in one’s life, whereas a non-autobiographical memory is supposed to be a memory of an event that does not concern one at all.[[21]](#footnote-21) Thus, an autobiographical memory may be episodic (such as the memory of one’s first kiss) or not (such as the memory that one was once seriously ill while being a three-month old baby). For this reason, when the NTM advocate claims that a mental state representing some event counts as remembering the event just in case the subject makes it part of the narrative of their life, the relevant notion of representation should be understood as covering not only experience, but also belief. For, in some cases, the mental state concerned will simply be the subject’s belief that the event was a part of their life.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The notion of narrative being used in NTM is particularly hard to spell out. Generally speaking, a narrative of the life of a remembering subject is a story of the subject’s life. Stories, however, are more than mere collections of pieces of information. They have, for example, a temporal structure. Thus, a story of the remembering subject’s life will confer some temporal structure to the events that the subject remembers. However, it seems that this will be a loose structure. Thus, it seems plausible to suppose that, for every remembered event e in the subject’s life, a story of that life will include a series of events, ordered by the earlier-than relation, which connects e with the current event which consists in the subject remembering e.[[23]](#footnote-23) But it also seems plausible to suppose that it will not be the case that, for any two remembered events e and e\* in the subject’s life, the story will include a series of events, ordered by the earlier-than relation, which connects e with e\*. Thus, a story of my life, as I remember it, may include a number of events that were part of a family vacation which took place during my childhood, and it may include a number of events which were part of my early schooldays. But it need not be precise as to whether the events in the family vacation happened before, or after, those in my early schooldays.[[24]](#footnote-24) Furthermore, stories have authors, since the matter of which episodes belong to the story, and that of how those episodes are organised, are not random matters. Quite the contrary, those aspects of the story are the products of someone’s making. Thus, if NTM is right, then the fact that a subject’s memory includes some events, and not others, and the fact that it organises them in some particular way, is something for which the remembering subject is responsible; something for which they can be held accountable. The remembering subject is, after all, the author of the narrative that includes their memories.

Beyond this, it is difficult to say how much more the advocate of NTM will build into the notion of a narrative. A number of issues about this notion are open to discussion, and it seems that different positions on these issues will yield different versions of NTM. We may wonder, for example, about the phenomenology of narratives, and whether the affective properties of a memory of an event, when that event is included in a narrative of one’s own life, must be identical with the affective properties of the original experience wherein that event was initially presented to one.[[25]](#footnote-25) Similarly, we may wonder about the function of narratives. One reasonable view about this issue is that the function of including, in memory, a past event as part of the narrative of one’s own life is epistemic: Including the event in the narrative is meant to provide one with answers to the questions of who one is, and what kind of person one is. Another reasonable view is that the function of including, in memory, a past event as part of the narrative of one’s own life is normative: Including the event in the narrative is meant to provide one with a standpoint from which one can evaluate one’s own past actions, feelings and reactions to significant events in one’s past.[[26]](#footnote-26) Finally, we may wonder about the intentionality of narratives, and the extent to which a narrative of one’s life must represent oneself as a character in the story. If the events in the story of one’s life are all represented, as it were, from the inside (and therefore one is never visualised as being a participant in those events when one remembers them), then is one still a character in the story being narrated? And if one is not, does the story count as a story of one’s own life?[[27]](#footnote-27) For the purposes of our discussion of NTM, I will assume a notion of narrative which is neutral on all of these issues. As far as I can see, none of the objections to be raised against NTM hinges on any of these points.

What considerations can be offered in support of NTM? The narrative theory can accommodate our intuitions regarding embellishment cases and cases of epistemic irrelevance. Consider, first of all, the mental state wherein I visualise a black rabbit being shot by my father. If NTM is right, then my mental state counts as a state of remembering in spite of the fact that the mental state at issue does not originate in a past perception of a black rabbit being shot. The reason is that, in virtue of occupying that mental state, I am inclined to believe that this is a scene that I witnessed in the past, and it meshes well with other things I believe about my past, namely, that I used to go on country walks with my father as a child, and that he used to shoot rabbits during those walks. The fact that NTM accommodates our intuitions regarding embellishment cases illustrates that NTM captures the reconstructive aspect of memory; the capacity of memory to alter information about events in our past. It is a significant virtue of NTM that it makes room for this feature of memory.

Consider, now, the mental state wherein I visualise a bird landing on the roof of a house; a mental state that I occupy while I am trying to paint that scene on my canvas. If NTM is right, then my mental state does not count as a state of remembering. This is in spite of the fact that the mental state at issue originates in my past perception of the scene. For it is not the case that, in virtue of occupying that mental state, I am inclined to believe that this is a scene that I witnessed in the past, and it does not mesh well with other things I believe about my past, such as whether I have ever visited a house that looks like the house on my canvas. The fact that NTM accommodates our intuitions regarding cases of epistemic irrelevance illustrates that NTM captures the requirement that memories cannot be neutral on whether remembered events actually happened in the past or not. Memory informs our beliefs about events in our past, and it is a significant virtue of NTM that it respects this feature of memory. Unfortunately, NTM must also face two significant difficulties.

Firstly, NTM seems to be too strict. For it does not allow a mental state to qualify as a memory if the subject cannot fit the event represented by that mental state into the narrative of their life. And yet, a memory of a past event in our lives may, intuitively enough, be isolated from all other memories in our possession. Let us suppose that, as a small child, I once fell into a swimming pool and, not being able to swim, I briefly sank to the bottom of the pool before being pulled out of it by someone. Suppose that I can now visualise sinking to the bottom of the pool. Let us stipulate, furthermore, that I can visualise it as a result of having once experienced it. Suppose that the mental state wherein I visualise the event does convey the sense that this event actually happened to me. And yet, let us assume, I cannot integrate this event within any account of the relevant part of my childhood: I cannot remember whether this happened at a public pool or at somebody’s house. I cannot remember whether it was an open air pool during summer or an indoor pool during winter. I cannot remember who was present during the event, and I cannot remember who pulled me out of the pool. In fact, I do not know anything else about this event, either through memory or through any other source. (We could, in fact, stipulate that this remains the case after one has searched for information about the event, for example, by asking one’s parents about it.) Thus, I cannot place any other event in my early childhood as happening before or after this event. On NTM, then, the mental state wherein I visualise sinking to the bottom of the pool does not qualify as a memory. The reason is that, as far as my ability to tell a story of my childhood is concerned, this event is completely isolated from all other events which I take to be in my past. As a result, it is not part of any narrative that I can construct about my life. And yet, it seems counter-intuitive to say that, in this instance, I do not remember sinking to the bottom of the pool (even though I may very well *think* that I do not remember sinking to the bottom of the pool). Let us call cases of this type, ‘isolation’ cases.

Secondly, NTM seems to be too permissive. Even though NTM accommodates the requirement that memory must have the capacity to inform our beliefs about our past, it does not require memories to have any particular aetiology. And yet, it intuitively seems that mental states of a type which does not normally originate in our past experiences do not qualify as memories. Take, for instance, a subject with Korsakoff’s syndrome; a form of amnesia typically caused by a lifetime of heavy drinking. Patients with Korsakoff’s syndrome can produce detailed descriptions of events that are supposed to have happened on the previous day, even though the events that the patients are visualising never happened to them. Furthermore, it is not unusual for patients with Korsakoff’s syndrome to construct sophisticated stories that include those events as being parts of their lives. The patient may, for example, sincerely give a detailed account of having recently gone on a trip, and report having had an interesting conversation with a fellow traveller in a train, even though they have been in bed for weeks.[[28]](#footnote-28) Now, according to NTM, the mental state wherein the patient represents their conversation with a fellow traveller in a train counts as a memory of that conversation. The reason is that the patient has the ability to tell a story about going on a trip which includes this event as a part of it. And yet, it seems counter-intuitive to say that the patient remembers having had that conversation in the train in virtue of having this ability. Instead, it seems more natural to say that the patient is imagining the conversation, and that the patient’s use of that scene while constructing a story of having recently gone on a trip is an instance of confabulation. Let us call cases such as this one, ‘confabulation’ cases.[[29]](#footnote-29)

It seems, then, that NTM captures two important properties of memory, namely, the fact that memory informs our beliefs about events in our past, and the fact that memory reconstructs the information that it conveys to us about those events. But it also seems that NTM ignores another important feature of memory. Part of what it takes for a mental state to qualify as an episode of remembering some event is, as confabulation cases illustrate, that there must be a robust, sufficiently reliable relation which holds between that type of mental state and the subject’s own past experiences of the event. The subject cannot be, as it were, making things up.[[30]](#footnote-30) Hence, the upshot of our discussion in this section is that a successful account of the type of mental state that qualifies as an episode of remembering should respect this feature of memory while, ideally, preserving the two virtues of NTM. Let us turn, then, to a proposal about the nature of remembering which is aimed at satisfying those constraints.

**4. Functionalism about memory**

At this point, it seems natural to try to include, within the conditions that a mental state must satisfy to qualify as an episode of remembering, some conditions which concern the aetiology of the mental state as well as some conditions which concern the impact that the mental state has on the subject’s beliefs. The framework of functionalism suggests a proposal about the nature of memories which allows us to incorporate conditions of precisely those two types.

The main tenet of functionalism is that a state of a subject does not qualify as a mental state of theirs in virtue of the intrinsic properties of the state, but in virtue of its association with a certain functional role. The functional role of a state is constituted by the causal relations in which the state tends to stand to perceptual inputs, behavioural outputs and other states of the subject. Accordingly, the different types of mental states that a subject has are, on the functionalist framework, individuated by reference to the various functional roles that a state can play in the subject’s cognitive economy. Now, what do ‘association’ and ‘by reference to’ exactly mean here? Functionalism comes in two different versions, depending on how one chooses to specify the way in which the functional role associated with a mental state is essential to the state belonging to a particular mental type.

On one version of functionalism (its ‘realiser’ version), a state that a subject occupies is a mental state of a certain type because mental states of that type have a characteristic functional role, and the subject’s state has that role. Thus, on the realiser version of functionalism, the functional role associated with a mental state is essential to the state being a state of a particular mental type in the following sense: The state must have that functional role, or ‘realise’ it, to qualify as being a state of the relevant mental type.[[31]](#footnote-31) By contrast, on a different version of functionalism (its ‘role’ version), a state that a subject occupies is a mental state of a certain type because it is the property of being in some state or other with a characteristic functional role, and the subject is in some state with that role. Thus, on the role version of functionalism, the functional role associated with a mental state is essential to the state being a state of a particular mental type, but not in the sense that the mental state must have the functional role at issue. It is essential in the sense that some state of the subject must have that functional role in order for the subject to occupy the mental state.[[32]](#footnote-32) The difference between realiser functionalism and role functionalism, then, is that, on the former version of functionalism, a mental state is a first-order mental state (the state that actually plays such-and-such role) whereas, on the latter version, it is a higher-order state (that of being in some state or other which plays such-and-such role).

What does functionalism have to do with memory? The proposal that I wish to put forward is that episodes of remembering are mental states that should be characterised functionally or, more precisely, should be characterised along the lines of role functionalism. According to what we may call the functionalist theory of memory (or, for short, ‘FTM’), for any subject S and event e, S remembers e just in case S has some mental image *i* such that *i* tends to cause in S a disposition to believe both that e happened and that S experienced e to happen, and *i* tends to be caused in S by having experienced e to happen. If we introduce the term ‘mnemonic role’ to refer to such a functional role, then we can abbreviate FTM as the thesis that remembering an event, or having a memory of it, consists in having a mental image which plays the mnemonic role for that event in the subject.[[33]](#footnote-33)

FTM is a functionalist view because, according to it, a mental image of a subject qualifies as a memory not in virtue of the intrinsic properties of that mental image, but in virtue of the functional role that the mental image plays in the subject. And it is a role-functionalist view because, according to FTM, the subject’s state of having a memory, or remembering, is a higher-order state. FTM pulls apart, on the one hand, the property of having the specific mental image that the subject is having when they remember an event and, on the other hand, the subject’s state of remembering the event. According to FTM, having the mental image at issue is different from remembering the event, since the subject could have had the same mental image without remembering the event. Consider, for example, a possible situation in which the mental image at issue plays a functional role in the subject which is different from the mnemonic role. In that situation, the subject does not remember the event despite the fact that the subject has the same mental image as that which, in the actual situation, they are having when they remember the event. Conversely, the subject could have remembered the event without having the mental image which, in fact, they are having when they remember the event. Consider, for example, a possible situation in which a different mental image plays the mnemonic role for that event in the subject. In that situation, the subject remembers the event despite the fact that the subject has a different mental image from that which, in the actual situation, they are having when they remember the event. Let us examine, now, what considerations can be offered in support of FTM.

**5. Narratives, causal histories, and functional roles**

It seems that FTM is permissive enough, in the sense that it does not conflict with our intuitions about those cases which suggested that both CTM and NTM were too strict. Consider, first of all, the case in which I have a mental image of a black rabbit being shot even though, in the past, I saw a white rabbit being shot. According to FTM, as long as the mental image that I am having when I visualise the black rabbit being shot is an image that plays the mnemonic role in me, I qualify as remembering the event (falsely or not). And it seems that the mental image at issue does play the mnemonic role in me: On the one hand, my mental image tends to cause in me the belief that I once saw a black rabbit being shot, and it tends to cause in me the belief that my perceptual experience was veridical; that the event did take place in the past. On the other hand, my mental image is the type of image that would be produced in me by past perceptions of black rabbits being shot. To be sure, on this particular occasion, my mental image was not actually caused by a perception of a black rabbit being shot since, in the past, I did not see a black rabbit being shot. Nonetheless, the fact remains that my faculties of perception and memory are related in such a way that perceptual experiences of black rabbits do produce in me the type of mental image that I am currently having. Had I seen, in other words, a black rabbit being shot in the past, this is the type of mental image that I would be having now. Thus, unlike CTM, FTM acknowledges this case as an episode of remembering.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Consider, now, the case in which I have a mental image of sinking to the bottom of a pool even though I am unable to relate this event to any other event in my childhood. According to FTM, as long as the mental image that I am having when I visualise sinking to the bottom of the pool is an image that plays the mnemonic role in me, I qualify as remembering the event. And it seems that the mental image concerned does play the mnemonic role in me: It is the type of mental image that would be produced by perceptual experiences of being underwater in a pool, and is the type of mental image that makes me believe that this event happened, and that I experienced it. Thus, unlike NTM, FTM acknowledges this case as an episode of remembering.

Furthermore, FTM seems to be strict enough, in the sense that it does not seem to conflict with our intuitions about those cases which suggested that both CTM and NTM were too permissive. Consider, first, the case in which I have a mental image of a bird landing on the roof of a house, and this is a scene that I witnessed in the past but, due to a serious cognitive deficit of mine, mental images of scenes that I witnessed in the past do not produce in me any inclination to believe that they were real, and that I have witnessed them in the past. If my having the mental image of a bird landing on the roof of a house does not tend to produce in me the belief that this is a real event, and the belief that I perceived it in the past, then, according to FTM, I do not qualify as remembering the event. And it seems that the mental image at issue does not play that part of the mnemonic role in me: Due to my stipulated cognitive deficit, my mental image is not the type of image that would produce in me beliefs of those kinds. Other mental images of the same type would continue to have a null effect on my beliefs about the past. Thus, unlike CTM, FTM rules out this case as an episode of remembering.

Consider, now, the case in which the patient with Korsakoff’s syndrome has a mental image of conversing with someone while travelling on a train days before, and the patient is able to construct a sophisticated story within which they can insert the scene that they are visualising. If the patient’s mental image of the conversation in the train is of a kind which does not tend to be produced, in that patient, by experiences of such conversations, then, according to FTM, the patient does not qualify as remembering the event. And it seems that the mental image concerned does not play that part of the mnemonic role in the patient: Since the patient suffers a form of amnesia, the patient’s mental image of the conversation in the train is not the type of image that would be produced by having experienced such a conversation. In other words, had the patient experienced having a conversation with a fellow traveller in a train in the past, the patient would not have retained this experience in the type of mental image that they are having now. Thus, unlike NTM, FTM rules out this case as an episode of remembering.

**6. Conclusion**

Role functionalism seems to have provided us with a satisfactory answer to the question of what remembering is: Remembering, or having a memory of, an event consists in having a mental image which plays a certain functional role in the subject. Such a functional role is backward-looking in that it involves a certain set of typical causes, and it is forward-looking in that it involves a certain set of typical effects. These two features of the proposal allow it to overcome the shortcomings of those proposals about the nature of remembering which are exclusively backward-looking; proposals such as the causal theory of memory. They also allow the functionalist proposal to overcome the shortcomings of those proposals which are exclusively forward-looking; proposals such as the narrative theory of memory. In the end, the functionalist proposal is closer to the causal theory of memory than it is to the narrative theory, since it relies heavily on causal relations. The main difference with respect to both theories, however, is that the functionalist proposal manages to draw the line between those mental states which count as episodes of remembering and those which do not at the right point.[[35]](#footnote-35)

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1. I will use the expressions ‘remembering’ and ‘having a memory of’ indistinctly. For that reason, the term ‘memory’ will be used to refer to a faculty as well as to the mental states which are delivered by that faculty. Hopefully this will cause no confusion. Both ‘remembering’ and ‘having a memory of’ will be used non-factively. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In what follows, I will switch between talk of memory for events and talk of memory for states of affairs. Hopefully this will cause no confusion. By a ‘mental image’ of, for example, an event, I mean an experience wherein the event is presented to the subject. In the common case in which the event is visible (it could have been visually perceived), a mental image of the event is an experience wherein the subject visualises the event. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The notion of episodic memory is introduced in (Tulving 1972). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The classical version of CTM is due to Charles Martin and Max Deutscher in their (1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For details, see (Kim 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alternatively, a more sophisticated formulation of CTM may explicitly mention relations of inclusion in the conditions for remembering. The CTM advocate may propose, right from the start, that for any subject S and event e\*, S remembers e\* just in case S is representing e\*, and there is an event e such that e\* is included in e, S represented e in the past, and the fact that S represented e in the past has caused S to represent e\* in the present. A formulation of this kind for CTM is discussed in (Bernecker 2010). Other relations between events, such as that of reduction in (Bernecker 2008), might also be helpful to handle the complication for CTM discussed above. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. An alternative conception of events is that of events as particulars. Can CTM still accommodate the same intuition if events are construed as particulars? As far as I can see, this may depend on whether the relevant particulars are individuated by their causal powers, or they are individuated by the spatio-temporal region that they occupy. In the former case, one can see how the CTM advocate may still be able to claim that the event that consists in the horse moving with some gait is included in the event that consists in the horse performing the canter. (One would expect, for example, that anything that were caused by the horse moving with some gait would also be caused by the horse performing the canter.) In the latter case, however, it is hard to see how the CTM advocate could avail themselves of a relation of inclusion between events. For discussion on the individuation of events construed as particulars, see (Davidson 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Versions of this picture can be found, for instance, in (Aristotle 1972, 28-32), (Locke 1975, 149-153), (Hume 2000, 12), (Broad 1937, 239-41), (Malcolm 1963, 208), and (Shoemaker 1984, 19). Thomas Reid also seems to endorse this view when he claims: ‘Things remembered must be things formerly perceived or known. I remember the transit of Venus over the sun in the year 1769. I must therefore have perceived it at the time it happened, otherwise I could not now remember it’ (Reid 1969, 326). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This ability is, in turn, highly valuable from a survival point of view. If we want to avoid danger, for example, being able to recognise a situation in which we find ourselves as one that we have previously experienced to be dangerous will be advantageous to us. Likewise, if we want to find food, then being able to recognise a place in which we find ourselves as one where we have previously experienced that there is food will be advantageous to us as well. The preservative aspect of memory is, for this reason, a crucial feature of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. To be clear, the difficulty for the causal theorist is not only that the event that I am now visualising is different from the event that I represented through the perceptual experience in which my mental image causally originates. The difficulty is, more strongly, that the former event is not included into the latter event. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The view that memories may include details that were not originally experienced by the subject can be traced back to Frederic Bartlett’s work on constructive memory (Bartlett 1932), and it currently enjoys wide acceptance within psychology. For a helpful survey of the relevant empirical literature, see (Roediger and DeSoto 2015). The constructive aspect of memory highlights a further sense in which its preservative aspect may be considered highly imperfect. It may actually be considered so imperfect that the preservative aspect of memory might not be enough to motivate CTM (Michaelian 2016). Nevertheless, these imperfections are not sufficient to disregard the preservative aspect of memory entirely, for the reasons mentioned in note 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. On preservationism about knowledge, see, for example, (Dummett 1994, 262) and (Audi 1997, 410). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See (Lackey 2005) for these cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The point that a belief which could have easily been false does not constitute knowledge can be motivated by using examples such as the classical ‘barn façade’ case in (Goldman 1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. It is hard to tell whether there are actual cases of this kind. The case of patient R.B., recently discussed by Shaun Nichols and Stanley Klein, might be a candidate (Klein and Nichols 2012). Patient R.B. suffers, due to head trauma sustained during a bicycle accident, a remarkable cognitive impairment. Patient R.B. can have, it seems, accurate mental images of scenes from his past. And yet, patient R.B. claims, of some of those images, that they are not his memories. One possible explanation for claims of this sort is that the patient does not experience those scenes as having happened in the past when he has the relevant mental images. If this hypothesis is correct, then patient R.B. has the kind of deficit envisioned above. However, it is debatable whether the hypothesis in question is correct. See my (forthcoming) for a defence of it, and (Klein and Nichols 2012) for an alternative hypothesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This is a variation of a case discussed in (Martin and Deutscher 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. This is true in the classical formulation of CTM. However, one could add an extra condition to the conditions for remembering posited in the classical formulation of CTM. One might require that, when the subject now represents an event, the representation needs to involve a specific type of phenomenology for it to qualify as a memory. This addition would have the effect of ruling out the mental image of the bird landing on the roof of the house. But this benefit would come at a price. The causal theorist would then be saddled with the task of specifying which traits of the phenomenology of memories are essential, and which are accidental. The task may not be insurmountable, but it seems worth exploring whether alternative theories about the nature of memory may not need to incur that cost. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The term is due to Dorothea Debus, who raises essentially this objection against CTM in (Debus 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For discussion of this point, see (Fernández 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Versions of this conception of memory can be found, for example, in (Schechtman 1994), (Goldie 2012) and (Brockmeier 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. On autobiographical memory, see (Conway and Pleydell-Pearce 2000) and (Barsalou 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. If the narrative conception of memory is a conception of autobiographical memory, one might wonder, why is it relevant to our present project? The reason is that, if the lesson drawn from cases of epistemic irrelevance in section 2 is correct, then episodic memories are autobiographical memories. For episodic memories must dispose us to believe that remembered events are part of our past, or belong to our lives. This means that, when the advocate of the narrative conception proposes a criterion for a mental state to qualify as a memory, the criterion being proposed will apply to all episodic memories, since it applies, more broadly, to autobiographical memories. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. How many events should a series include in order for the series to be a component in the story of someone’s life? Strictly speaking, nothing in our pre-theoretical notion of a story seems to rule out the possibility that such a series might only includes two events; an event e and the subject having a mental image of e. However, it is hard to see how NTM could get any traction by presupposing such a weak reading of ‘a series of events’. In what follows, therefore, I will assume that NTM presupposes a more robust notion of a series of events as a component of the story of someone’s life. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The thought here is that the temporal structure of memory, if memory is conceived as a narrative, will be a tree structure. The idea that the temporal structure of memory is a tree structure is discussed, independently of the narrative theory of memory, in (Campbell 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Richard Wollheim seems to endorse this view in (1984) whereas Peter Goldie rejects it in (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The epistemic view about the function of narratives is discussed in (Schechtman 1994) whereas the normative view is discussed in (Goldie 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Peter Goldie, for example, is sympathetic to the idea that a narrative of one’s life may include memories wherein the subject visualises herself, as it were, from the outside in (2012). But it is unclear whether, according to Goldie, such memories are *required* for a narrative to include the subject as a character in the story. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. For details of this phenomenon in Korsakoff’s syndrome, see (Talland 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Confabulation is not exclusive to Korsakoff’s syndrome. It is debatable, however, whether confabulation can take place without amnesia. For a comprehensive discussion of confabulation, see (Hirstein 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The intuition that the subject cannot be making things up can be captured by positing some sort of causal relation between memories and past experiences of the subject, but it does not need to be captured in this way. After all, the only thing that confabulation cases show is that the connection between the type of memory of some event that the subject is having, and the type of perceptual experience of the event that the subject would have in the past cannot be random. For a non-causal proposal about such a connection which captures our intuitions about confabulation cases, see (Michaelian 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. For an example of this variety of functionalism, see (Lewis 1980). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Role functionalism is discussed, for example, in (Block 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Could the mnemonic role associated with a memory of some event involve, so to speak, the input side of that memory only? As far as I can see, this would reduce FTM to a version of CTM. More importantly, it would dispossess FTM of the necessary resources to accommodate, as we will see in section 5, our intuitions about cases of epistemic irrelevance. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Analogous considerations apply to the case in which the extra details were in fact enjoyed by the event in the past. According to FTM, if the mental image that I am having when I visualise my father shooting while wearing a belt with a silver buckle is an image that plays the mnemonic role in me, I qualify as remembering the event. And it seems that the mental image at issue does play the mnemonic role in me: On the one hand, my mental image tends to cause in me the belief that I once saw my father shooting while wearing such a belt, and it tends to cause in me the belief that my perceptual experience was veridical; that my father was wearing that belt while he was shooting the rabbit. On the other hand, my mental image is the type of image that would be produced in me by past perceptions of silver belt buckles. To be sure, on this particular occasion, my mental image was not actually caused by a perception of a silver belt buckle since, in the past, I did not see my father’s belt at the time of the shooting. Nonetheless, the fact remains that my faculties of perception and memory are related in such a way that perceptual experiences of objects of that type do produce in me the type of mental image that I am currently having. Had I been, in other words, in a position to see the belt that my father was wearing at the time of the shooting, this is the type of mental image that I would be having now. Thus, unlike CTM, FTM acknowledges this case as an episode of remembering. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Versions of this chapter were presented at the 2016 *International Conference on Memory* (ICOM) in Budapest, the *New Directions in the Philosophy of Memory* 2016 conference at the University of Otago, and the *Philosophy Work in Progress Colloquium* at the University of Adelaide. I am grateful to the audiences at those talks for their feedback on the material presented there. For comments on a previous draft of this chapter, I am very grateful to Kourken Michaelian and Denis Perrin. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)