



The feeling of familiarity

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ABSTRACT. The relationship between the phenomenology of imagination and the phenomenology of memory is an interestingly complicated one. On the one hand, there seem to be important similarities between the two, and there are even occasions in which we mistake an imagining for a memory or vice versa. On the other hand, there seem to be important differences between the two, and we can typically tell them apart. This paper explores various attempts to delineate a phenomenological marker differentiating imagination and memory, with a special focus on two proposed markers that have generated considerable philosophical discussion: the feeling of pastness and the feeling of familiarity. As we will find, neither of them proves to be up to the task at hand. However, by way of a deeper exploration of the feeling of familiarity, we are able to tease out some important morals for efforts to differentiate imagination and memory on phenomenological grounds and, more generally, for efforts to engage in a descriptive phenomenological enterprise.

Keywords: Memory; imagination; familiarity; pastness; temporal phenomenology.

O sentimento de familiaridade

RESUMO. A relação entre a fenomenologia da imaginação e a fenomenologia da memória é interessantemente complicada. Por um lado, parece haver importantes similaridades entre as duas, existindo ocasiões em que confundimos uma memória por uma imaginação e vice versa. Por outro lado, parece haver importantes diferenças entre elas, tal que podemos tipicamente distingui-las. Este artigo explora diversas tentativas de delinear um marcador fenomenológico que distingue a memória da imaginação, dando foco especial a dois marcadores que têm gerado considerável discussão filosófica: o sentimento de passadade (*pastness*) e o sentimento de familiaridade. Como veremos, nenhum dos dois consegue lidar com a tarefa que temos em mãos. No entanto, ao explorar de modo mais profundo o sentimento de familiaridade, traçaremos algumas lições importantes no que se refere às tentativas de se distinguir a imaginação e a memória a partir da fenomenologia e, de modo mais geral, às tentativas de se engajar em empreendimentos fenomenológicos descritivos.

Palavras-chave: Memória; imaginação, familiaridade; passadade; fenomenologia temporal.

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Introduction

'I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory.' So sings the character Hamilton in Lin-Manuel Miranda's eponymous hit musical. This striking lyric, which is fittingly repeated at various key moments throughout the show, captures something deeply important about Hamilton's attitude towards death and its looming specter throughout his life, even from a very young age.¹ But, more salient for those of us working on philosophy of memory and philosophy of imagination, it also captures something deeply important about the phenomenology of these mental states. Though what it is like to imagine is different in many ways from what it is like to remember, there are times that the two feel very much alike.

Philosophers have long recognized both the similarities and the differences between the phenomenal character of memory and imagination, and they have offered various accounts that attempt to respect the similarities while nonetheless accounting for the differences. Indeed, these issues were the subject of philosophical scrutiny even in Hamilton's own time. Less than two decades before this founding father was

¹ We first hear it in his own introductory anthem, 'My Shot.' We hear it again during the battlefield song 'Yorktown.' And we hear it for the final time during a brief spoken monologue in 'The World Was Wide Enough,' right after Hamilton has been fatally shot by Aaron Burr.

born in 1757, Hume took up the issue and offered an account according to which the difference can be explained in terms of force and vivacity: “[...] the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination” (Hume, 1739/1985, p.9). Now, several centuries hence, these claims are largely rejected by philosophers who work on memory or imagination.² But though the Humean account has long fallen into disfavor, there is no corresponding agreement on what theory should be adopted in its stead.

That said, one suggestion that’s often been considered to be promising concerns a certain kind of feeling that memories seem to involve, namely, the feeling of familiarity. As noted by Bertrand Russell, we tend to regard certain images “[...] as more or less accurate copies of past occurrences” precisely because of this kind of feeling (Russell, 1921, p. 163). On Russell’s account, it’s this kind of feeling that helps to distinguish memories from phenomenologically similar states like imagination. But as promising as this suggestion initially sounds, there are good reasons to worry about it. Though imaginings do not *typically* involve a feeling of familiarity, they sometimes do – as we are reminded by the quotation from Hamilton. It’s precisely because Hamilton imagines death so frequently that this imagining feels familiar to him and, correspondingly, that it has come to feel more like a memory than like an imagining – even though it is an imagining and even though he knows that it is an imagining.

Does this Hamiltonian point doom the Russellian analysis? Might we be able to redeem it? In this paper, I aim to address and answer these questions. Ultimately, we will be led to some larger morals about the constraints involved in coming up with an adequate account of the phenomenological marker that allows us to distinguish memory from imagination, and, correspondingly, our prospects for doing so.

As should already be clear, the discussion of this paper operates at the level of phenomenology. My interest here is in accounting for what memory and imagination are like, not in accounting for what they are. One might reasonably hope that making progress on the task of accounting for the phenomenology of memory and imagination would facilitate progress on the task of accounting for the nature of memory and imagination, but I will not take up that latter task here.

Perhaps when put this way the aim of this paper seems modest. But I’d reject that assessment. In fact, I can’t help but worry that the project of this paper should, by my own lights, be seen as something of a fool’s errand. In previous work I’ve expressed pessimism about the enterprise of descriptive phenomenology (see Kind, 2021). In particular, I’ve worried that we currently lack the kinds of concepts we would need in order to adequately capture the nature of phenomenal experiences. In that discussion, I was specifically focused on imaginative experience, not memory experience, but my points should generalize. My conclusion was this: Unless work is done to sharpen and deepen our phenomenological vocabulary, our attempts to characterize and account for imaginative phenomenology ‘seem doomed to fall short.’

Unfortunately, that work remains to be done. But it is my hope that even in advance of that work, we can make at least some progress – even if only partial and incomplete – towards the goal of identifying the phenomenological marker differentiating memory from imagination. In fact, as I think we will come to see, the progress that we make here helps to pave the way for that important work to come.

The paper starts in Section I with some brief clarifying remarks about the phenomenology of memory and imagination. In the next two sections, I turn my attention to two suggestions for the relevant phenomenological marker owing to Russell – not just the feeling of familiarity already mentioned but also the feeling of pastness. As we will find, neither of them can serve the purpose that Russell wanted to put them to. But in Section IV, I return to take a second look at the feeling of familiarity. This leads to a deeper understanding of it that has some promising implications. I draw out these implications in the Conclusion.

I. Some brief preliminaries: Remembering, misremembering, and imagining

In addition to his famous claim that the mind is distinct from the body, Descartes also claimed that the mind is better known than the body. Did he also mean that it was perfectly known? His ruminations in the *Meditations* and elsewhere have struck many as suggesting infallibilism about self-knowledge, i.e., we cannot be wrong about our own mental states. Though not all contemporary philosophers agree that he really endorsed this claim, there is widespread agreement that the claim itself is false. In contemporary discussions of self-knowledge, infallibilism is wildly rejected, and it is generally believed that an individual’s judgments about their own mental states can be, and often are, mistaken.

One area where we sometimes make mistakes concerns our judgments about whether we’re imagining or remembering. Though Hamilton did not make this mistake – he correctly judged that he was imagining, even

² See Kind (2017) and Kind (2021) for relevant discussion.

though what he was doing felt more like a memory – many of us will, on occasion, mistake a memory for an imagining or vice versa. Suppose that, while slightly tipsy, I insult a colleague; the alcohol relaxes my inhibitions and I say something aloud that I've thought many times before but had always previously managed to keep to myself. The next morning when an image of my uttering this insult to my colleague comes before my mind, I take myself to be imagining the conversation. Perhaps it's due to a sense of self-protectiveness – I just can't believe that I would have actually said it! – but I don't take myself to be remembering a conversation that actually happened. Though in this case I mistake a memory for an imagining, on a different occasion I might mistake an imagining for a memory. Having several times imagined myself raising a particularly devastating objection during the Q&A at the most recent department colloquium, I might start to believe that I actually did so – and the next time this imagining comes before my mind, I mistake it for a memory.

But though these examples suggest that we are by no means infallible when it comes to identifying whether we are imagining or remembering, such mistakes are typically few and far between. We do typically know when we're imagining and when we're remembering, and we know this directly and immediately, and not on the basis of any inference. In fact, this point is repeatedly recognized and, indeed emphasized, throughout the literature in the philosophy of memory.³

Upon hearing this, however, one might worry that it's inconsistent with the widespread phenomenon of misremembering. In our day-to-day life, upon realizing that we've misremembered something, it's common to say 'Oh, I must just have imagined that.' Since we often can't tell that we're misremembering, how can it be the case that we typically know which activity that we're engaged in? To address this worry, we need to reflect on the difference between misremembering and imagining. When we misremember something, we are in some sense engaged in an act of memory – it's simply an unsuccessful one. In contrast, imagining is not unsuccessful use of memory but a different kind of mental activity.⁴ Here's one way to think about it: Both remembering and misremembering can be grouped together under the heading of apparent memory – where apparent memory includes both successful (i.e., accurate) attempts at remembering and unsuccessful (i.e., inaccurate) attempts at remembering. Though in what follows I will put things in terms of memory vs. imagination, and though I will talk about the search for a phenomenological marker that enables us to differentiate memory from imagination, this should be understood in terms of the contrast between apparent memory and imagination.

A criterion that distinguishes (apparent) memory from imagination is often referred to as a criterion of *mnemicity*. This can also be described as a *memory marker*. As my discussion thus far has made clear, the kind of memory marker that interests me here is a *phenomenological* one. But this is not the only kind of memory marker that might exist. Memory markers divide into two rough classes: those that are first-personal and those that are third-personal. When a rememberer makes a determination whether they are remembering or imagining from their own, internal perspective, they use a first-personal marker. When someone (possibly other than the rememberer) makes this determination from an external perspective, they use a third-personal marker. (See Michaelian & Sutton, 2017.) Given that my discussion is operating at the level of phenomenology, it should be clear that I am focused only on first-personal memory markers.

With these preliminaries in place, it is time to turn more directly to the task at hand.

II. The feeling of pastness

Russell offers his account of memory in in *The Analysis of Mind*. The account treats memory as dividing into two parts, an image and a belief. As he notes:

Memory-images and imagination-images do not differ in their intrinsic qualities, so far as we can discover. They differ by the fact that the images that constitute memories, unlike those that constitute imagination, are accompanied by a feeling of belief which may be expressed in the words 'this happened' (Russell, 1921, p. 176).

But what gives rise to the relevant belief? On Russell's view, an image will give rise to a belief of this sort when it involves two kinds of feelings, a feeling of familiarity and a feeling of pastness. As he notes, it's the feelings of familiarity that "[...] lead us to trust our memories," while it's the feeling of pastness that enables us "[...] to assign places to them in the time order" (Russell, 1921, p. 163)

³ See, e.g., Urmsen (1967, p. 86), Byrne (2010, p. 15), Hopkins (2018, p. 54), and Fernandez (2018, p. 336).

⁴ In recent years, several philosophers have adopted a continuist view on which memory and imagination are not fundamentally different kinds of activities (see, e.g., Michaelian, 2016). Though I don't have the space to go into this here, I believe my point in the text could be reformulated in such a way that it could be accepted even by continuists.

Given that what we remember is, by definition, both past and in at least some sense familiar, Russell seems to have put his finger on something importantly right about the phenomenology of memory. But can these feelings that Russell has identified serve as markers to distinguish memory from imagination? In this section I'll address this question with respect to the feeling of pastness before turning in the sections that follow to the feeling of familiarity.

Claims similar to Russell's about the feeling of pastness recur throughout contemporary discussions of the topic. Consider, for example, Jordi Fernández's discussion of this feeling: "The feeling of pastness is one of the reasons why we can tell that a certain experience that we are having *seems* to be a memory as opposed to an episode of imagination" (Fernández, 2008, p. 336). Fernández grants that we are sometimes mistaken, i.e., that we might sometimes mischaracterize an episode of imagining as an episode of remembering. But he notes that it is nonetheless true that when an individual takes themselves to be remembering a certain event, the way in which that event is presented to the individual is not neutral about its temporal positionality:

[W]hen I apparently remember my apartment being on fire, the fire does not appear to me as taking place now (as it would if I were perceiving it). It does not appear to me as taking place at no particular time either (as it would if I were imagining it). The fire seems to appear to me as taking place in the past. The phenomenology of memory seems to involve, then, a certain form of temporal awareness (Fernández, 2008, p. 335-336).

We see a similar reflection in a recent discussion of memory by Mohan Matthen (2010). Like Russell, Matthen seems to accept that temporality is not built into an image itself – "[...] any image could equally be of a present or a past experience" (Matthen, 2010, p. 10). But he thinks temporality plays a role in the phenomenology of memory experiences nonetheless:

When I remember eating lunch yesterday, I have an experience that duplicates some of the imagistic features and affective accompaniments of that lunch experience. However, the memory-experience presents *itself* as about the past – it has, so to say, a 'feeling of pastness' (Matthen, 2010, p. 8; italics in the original).

When they identify and characterize this feeling of pastness, however, philosophers such as Fernández and Matthen are not doing so in the context of a phenomenological enterprise, i.e., their discussion is not principally aimed at getting clear about the phenomenal character of memory. Rather, their interest in this phenomenal feature of memory lies primarily in how it interacts with theorizing about memory, e.g., whether it might be able to explain what memory is or why it is preservative.⁵ Thus, they offer the phenomenological reflections that they do primarily in the service of developing and defending their preferred accounts of the nature of memory and/or its epistemic power.⁶ While proceeding this way may well prove a productive strategy for developing a plausible account of memory, I worry that it is not a productive strategy for developing a plausible account of memory's phenomenology.⁷ Rather it seems fraught with risk, more specifically, with the risk that one's view of what memory is will end up dictating one's view of memory is like. Consider, for example, Christopher Hoerl's discussion of 'The Phenomenology of Episodic Recall' (Hoerl, 2001).

What I wish to argue, in short, is that our possession of episodic memories has a particular role to play in our knowledge about the empirical world. And it is in this light that questions about the content and phenomenology of episodic memories have to be addressed (Hoerl, 2001, p. 321).

This passage provides a particularly clear exemplar of the risk I have in mind. Perhaps Hoerl's accounting of memory's phenomenology ends up being an accurate one. I cannot hope to settle that question here. But note that the procedure Hoerl sets out is one that takes issues about phenomenology in light of already existing theoretical commitments about memory's epistemic role. In fact, it is a procedure that explicitly aims to develop an account of the former in light of the latter. It's hard to see how proceeding this way would be at all likely to yield an accurate sense of what memory is like.

But let's return to the feeling of pastness. When philosophers have taken up discussion of this feeling specifically in the context of a phenomenological enterprise, their treatment of it has been considerably more dismissive than that given by either Fernández or Matthen. In comparing the two feelings associated with

⁵ In his recent book, Fernández returns to these issues and discusses the phenomenology of memory in greater detail. See Fernández (2019), especially chapters 4 and 5.

⁶ There is a similar dialectic in Jerome Dokic's recent discussion of the phenomenology of memory – a discussion that occurs in the service of his development of what he calls a *two-tiered account* of episodic memory. Dokic focuses on the subjective feeling of first-handedness, i.e., a feeling that one's current state originates "[...] directly from one's past experience, excluding the essential involvement of either reasoning or testimony" (Dokic, 2014, p. 415). In Dokic's view, this feeling is distinct both from the feeling of pastness and from the feeling of familiarity. But even if he is right about this, it is clearly akin to them. As such, I believe the considerations that count against these two feelings serving as a phenomenological marker between memory and imagination would very likely be able to be extended to this first-handedness feeling.

⁷ The similar risk arises with respect to accounts of the nature of imagination and its phenomenology.

memory's phenomenology that Russell highlights, for example, Alex Byrne treats the feeling of pastness as a 'dubious invention': "While the 'feeling of familiarity' is, well, familiar, surely the 'feeling of pastness' is not" (Byrne, 2010, p. 23). In another discussion of the phenomenology of memory, Fabrice Teroni approvingly quotes this passage from Byrne and notes that he shares Byrne's misgivings (Teroni, 2017, p. 29).⁸

In contrast to Byrne and Teroni, I am not inclined to dismiss the feeling of pastness as a spurious phenomenological characterization. But that said, I share their sense that it is unlikely to be an adequate way of marking the phenomenological difference between memory and imagination. The problem, to my mind, is that the feeling of pastness does not seem distinctive to memory. Insofar as I understand this feeling, I'm inclined to think it can be (and often is) shared by imagining.

Here I depart from Fernández. As we saw above, Fernández suggests that states of affairs being imagined are presented as taking place at no particular time. But, assuming this is meant to be a general assessment, it strikes me as mistaken. Certainly some imaginings are presented this way. When I now imagine a golden dragon flying over the Santa Monica pier, what I imagine need not be presented to me as happening at any particular timeframe – either now or in the past or future. But it might be. I might imagine the golden dragon flying over the Santa Monica pier right now, or during my last visit there, or during the next full moon. These imaginings would all have temporal presentations.

Perhaps one might object that this isn't built into the phenomenology; rather, it simply follows from the intention that I set myself while imagining. This doesn't seem right to me, but rather than argue about the phenomenology of this particular example, it may help to consider another. Suppose I imagine my grandparents' wedding, an event at which I wasn't present as it took place long before I was born. I don't think I've ever even seen their wedding photos. In my imagining, my grandparents look happy and youthful. Later in his life my grandfather lost an eye to cancer, and so most of my memories of him involve his wearing an eye patch, but in my imagining of the wedding, he has both of his eyes. My grandmother's hair is the vibrant red of her youth as opposed to the gray of her later life. Her wedding gown is in an old-fashioned style, as are the clothes worn by the other wedding guests. The wedding feels remote and distant to me. All of this seems to me to be unquestionably part of the phenomenology itself. What I imagine is being phenomenologically presented as taking place in the past and the imagining is correspondingly infused with a sense of pastness.

In this way, the imagining of my grandparents' wedding feels very different from my imagining of my teenage son's wedding, a wedding that hasn't yet occurred and at this point is merely hypothetical. In that imagining, I see my son looking older, a grown man, dressed in a smart looking tuxedo that's far more sophisticated than anything he's worn up to this point. In all these ways, that imagining seems to me to be infused by futurity, and it seems to appear to me as not having yet happened. But when I imagine my grandparents' wedding, the events imagined do seem to appear to me as having taken place in the past.⁹

Granted, those events don't present themselves to me as having taken place on a particular past day, or even in a particular past year. But that does not distinguish imaginings from memories. When I remember my sister-in-law's wedding, for example – an event at which I was present – the wedding remembered has a sense of pastness even though it too does not present itself to me as having taken place on a particular past day or even in a particular past year. And similarly for my memories of many other weddings that I've attended. (It turns out I'm bad at keeping track of anniversaries, I guess.).

Thus, even though the feeling of pastness should not be dismissed as a dubious invention, it nonetheless does not seem like the right kind of phenomenological marker to distinguish memories from imaginings. Though many of our imaginings lack any feeling of pastness, this feeling does seem to be associated with many of our imaginings that are directed at past events. Perhaps not all such imaginings about the past have the feeling of pastness. After a difficult conversation with my son, I might imagine an alternate version of the conversation – one in which I handled things better, didn't lose my temper, listened better to what he was saying. Though I am imagining a conversation that took place in the past, the feeling of pastness might be displaced by the ways that I am (as it were) re-imagining it. But many of our imaginings about the past will involve the feeling of pastness, and as such, this feeling can't serve as a marker to distinguish our memories from our imaginings.

⁸ Related misgivings are also expressed by Dorothea Debus, who worries that it is unclear "[...] which actual mental phenomena the term 'feeling of pastness' might refer to" (Debus, 2016, p. 138)

⁹ See Michaelian (2016, p. 192-194) for a discussion of the feeling of futurity and how it relates to the feeling of pastness.

III. The feeling of familiarity: A first look

Might we have more luck in finding a phenomenological marker that distinguishes memory from imagination with the other feeling that Russell mentions, namely, the feeling of familiarity? Though as noted by Byrne the feeling of familiarity may well be a familiar one, it will be helpful to flesh out in more detail what exactly it is. And unfortunately, Russell does not say much to help us on this score. He does note that familiarity is a feeling that comes in degrees – one image may seem more familiar to us than another, and one part of an image may seem to us to be more familiar to us than other parts. He also takes the feeling itself to be importantly nonreflective or noncognitive. An animal, for example, may have a feeling that they are in a familiar environment, but this does not amount to a judgment that the environment has been experienced before. As Russell puts it, “The judgment that what is familiar has been experienced before is a product of reflection, and is not part of the feeling of familiarity” (Russell, 1921, p. 169).

But this still leaves it somewhat vague what exactly the feeling of familiarity is and how it should be best understood. In an effort to make progress on this score, Teroni explores whether the feeling should be characterized as affective, i.e., as akin to emotional experiences. In support of this characterization, he offers two similarities between the two. First, the fact that the feeling of familiarity comes in degrees is something it has in common with emotions. Just as one’s fear or joy might sometimes be stronger and other times weaker, so too one’s sense of familiarity might sometimes be stronger and other times weaker. Second, just as emotions are often thought to involve appraisals (e.g., fear involves an appraisal of danger), the feeling of familiarity also seems to involve an appraisal, more specifically, an appraisal of a situation’s lack of novelty and, correspondingly, of one’s ability to cope with it (Teroni, 2017, p. 29-30).

One factor that initially seems to count against treating the feeling of familiarity as affective is its apparent lack of valence. It seems essential to emotions that they present themselves as either positively valenced, as in the case of joy, hope, or gratitude, or negatively valenced, as in the case of sadness, fear, or anger. Could feelings of familiarity really fit into this kind of framework? On Teroni’s view, this question should be answered in the affirmative. Quoting Titchener, who describes the feeling of familiarity in terms of warmth, ownership, and intimacy, Teroni suggests that this feeling is best understood not as neutral or without valence but as positively valenced.

Perhaps there is some reason to worry here. Don’t we sometimes have very negative reactions to familiar experiences? Suppose you have to take a foul-tasting medicine every day for a week. The taste becomes familiar but you might still have an adverse and negative reaction to it each morning. Here, however, the negative valence is not from the familiarity, but from the accompanying disgust. Given that the disgust is likely felt quite strongly and the familiarity comparatively weakly, the strength of the negatively valenced disgust might well override the positively valenced familiarity.

Given these ways in which the feeling of familiarity might be thought to have an affective profile, Teroni thus concludes that feelings of familiarity “[...] may well turn out to be emotional experiences” (Teroni, 2017, p. 30). But regardless of whether he is right about this categorization, his reflections help us to sharpen our understanding of the feeling of familiarity. And so we can now return to our main question: Can this feeling serve as the phenomenological marker to distinguish memory from imagination? It’s here the *Hamilton* example rears its ugly head: aren’t there some imaginings that, by mere dint of repetition, come to feel familiar? If so, then it can’t be this kind of feeling that enables us to distinguish memory from imagination.

In fact, the point made in *Hamilton* has been made in the philosophical literature as well. In a mid-twentieth century discussion of theories of memory, R. F. Holland notes that when a given image feels familiar to you, this might not derive from the fact that it is a memory but rather from the fact that “[...] you have amused yourself by creating some such fanciful image as this on many occasions in the past” (Holland, 1954, p. 468). This leads in turn to a deeper problem about the feeling of familiarity. As Holland puts it, familiarity does not wear its source on its sleeve – when a situation feels familiar to us, the mere feeling does not give us any information about why it has arisen. We have to rely on other information to determine the explanation. Does it feel familiar because we’ve experienced it before and we’re now remembering it, or for some other reason? And this suggests two things. First, the feeling of familiarity cannot serve as a phenomenological marker of the difference of memory and imagination. But second, since there will often be cases in which we don’t have any relevant information to determine the explanation for the familiarity we’re feeling, one might be tempted, perhaps, to conclude there is no such marker at all.

Having noted the temptation of this conclusion, Holland argues that it should be resisted. Though he acknowledges that it may have started to “[...] seem impossible for a characteristic or feeling of familiarity to

do what Russell wished it to do,” i.e., to distinguish memory from imagination, “[...] that is not to say that some kind of Memory-Indicator cannot exist – only perhaps, that it tends to elude description” (Holland, 1954, p. 469). I agree with Holland on this score. Here it’s worth reminding ourselves of a point we made much earlier: Though we are by no means infallible, we do typically know when we’re imagining and when we’re remembering, and we know this directly and immediately, and not on the basis of any inference.

Are there any other accounts available to us? J. O. Urmson has suggested that we can tell whether we are remembering or imagining by attending to what we are trying to do; if we have chosen to act “[...] so that resemblance to actuality is a criterion of the success of our activity,” then we are remembering; otherwise, we are imagining (Urmson, 1967, p. 90). But of course, memories can sometimes come to us without our trying or having chosen to do anything at all. So this suggestion does not seem promising. Relatedly, it has sometimes been suggested that imaginings carry with them a feeling of agency or responsibility with respect to their content – a sense that the content is up to us – in a way that memories do not. But the *Hamilton* example belies this as well. Once an imagining has been consistently repeated, it no longer needs to involve any sense of agency or responsibility. While there are other occasional suggestions found in the relevant literature as well, I will not attempt to canvas them all. To my mind, however, they are no more promising than the ones that we have considered.

And now I suspect one might again feel tempted, if not quite to claim that there is no phenomenological marker, then to claim something similar: Perhaps the difference between imagination and memory is simply a brute phenomenological fact. Insofar as explanations in terms of bruteness don’t seem much like explanations at all, however, I’d like to try to resist this temptation as well. To some extent, I think the problem that we’re facing here is the one that I’d anticipated from the start, namely, that we lack an adequate vocabulary to characterize and account for phenomenology. Though we can’t hope to solve that problem here, I do think there’s more we can and should do before it would be appropriate to give in to the temptation of bruteness. More specifically, I’d like to suggest that a deeper look at the feeling of familiarity can prove fruitful. There are more dimensions to it than we have heretofore discussed. In saying this, I don’t mean to suggest that we’ll end up concluding that this feeling is a phenomenological marker after all; even with this deeper look, I don’t think it will be able to carry this weight. But I do think that some further thought on this matter will prove revelatory, and, in particular, it will help us to bring some important phenomenological facts to the surface.

IV. The feeling of familiarity: A second look

Often, when I’m sick or otherwise feeling low, I find myself turning to the same sources of comfort again and again. To give just one example, I will rewatch ‘Once More with Feeling,’ a sixth season episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* that is performed as a musical. (Don’t judge.) I’ve now seen that episode countless times – almost certainly at least ten times, but probably more. The overall plot is familiar to me, as are the various song lyrics, melodies, outfits, and scenes. But there is also a further layer, or even layers, to the feelings of familiarity associated with my rewatching the *Buffy* musical. In addition to the events and other details of the episode feeling familiar to me, the very experience of watching the episode feels familiar to me as well. And also familiar to me are the emotional responses I have. When I laugh or tear up, it feels familiar to me that I am having precisely these reactions to precisely these moments of the episode. Importantly, these feelings of familiarity attend to the experiences that I’m actually, currently having. Yes, I remember having watched the *Buffy* musical before, but I’m not now remembering it; I’m watching it.

This example helps brings to the fore two important points about the feeling of familiarity. First, it is not an undifferentiated simple. Rather, it is multi-layered and multi-dimensional, and it can stem from different factors all at once. Second, it is considerably more widespread than we might have first thought when it was being introduced as being part of the phenomenology of memory. In the previous section, we had already seen that feelings of familiarity are not limited to the experience of remembering, since they sometimes also accompany the experience of imagining. But now we see something further: Feelings of familiarity sometimes accompany present perceptual and emotional experiences as well.¹⁰

In the *Buffy* case, the familiarity derives from the fact that my current experience replicates a past experience, indeed, many past experiences. But we can have feelings of familiarity in our present perceptual

¹⁰ If Teroni is right that feelings of familiarity are themselves emotional responses, then we would have a case in which we’re having emotional responses to our emotional responses. But that should not be seen as a problem. Consider the fact that we’re sometimes happy to be feeling angry or, conversely, angry to be feeling happy.

and emotional experiences even when they do not involve this kind of direct replication. We interact with all sorts of people that seem familiar to us even though we have never encountered them before. Because my older son looks a lot like me, when people who know me well meet him for the first time he often seems familiar to them; their experience of seeing him, that is, involves a feeling of familiarity. The actress Keira Knightley looks a lot like the actress Natalie Portman, so a viewer who has seen movies starring one of them will often have a feeling of familiarity when seeing a movie starring the other. This general phenomenon occurs not just in our interactions with various people but also in our interactions with various objects. A given house might feel familiar to me, even though I have never been in it before, because it has a similar layout to the house that I grew up in. A given book may feel familiar to me, even though I have never read it before, because the author has a similar writing style to one of my favorite authors.¹¹

All of these cases involve familiarity without replication of past experience.¹² But it seems nonetheless true that the familiarity owes pretty directly to a related sort of relationship with past experience – one of resemblance. Though resemblance is weaker than replication, it's not surprising that it too could give rise to feelings of familiarity. Interestingly, however, a current experience might sometimes engender feelings of familiarity even when there is neither replication of nor even significant resemblance to any past experience. Perhaps sometimes when this happens it will turn out that we are simply deluded in some way. We're simply wrong to feel a sense of familiarity. But I don't think that delusion need always be part of the explanation. Even when the experience we're undergoing is radically different from any kind of experience we have had before, the feeling of familiarity might be perfectly reasonable and appropriate. Consider this passage from Andrew Sean Greer's novel, *The Confessions of Max Tivoli*:

Some things are so impossible, so fantastic, that when they happen, you are not at all surprised. Their sheer impossibility has made you imagine them too many times in your head, and when you find yourself on that longed-for moonlit path, it seems unreal but still, somehow, familiar.

In some ways, this passage makes a similar point to the *Hamilton* one that we've already considered. But while Hamilton's point was that a repeated imagining can come to feel so familiar that it itself feels like a memory, Greer's point is that a repeated imagining can make a first-time experience feel so familiar that it feels like it's happened to us before. Here again we see the kind of layers involved in feelings of familiarity that we saw above in the *Buffy* case. Notice also that while Greer is focused on fantastic events, we will find the same kind of phenomenon in more mundane cases. Consider someone who repeatedly imagines their own wedding. When the big day finally comes, their having repeatedly imagined it makes this first-time experience feel familiar – perhaps so familiar that it even feels like it has in some way already happened before.

These examples point to a much wider variety of cases in which the feeling of familiarity can be involved than we might have initially thought. Do they all have something in common? In each case, the feeling seems to involve a sense of already-having-been-experienced. The problem, however, comes from the fact that this sense need not correspond to its actually having been already experienced. It might have just been some related experience, or it might even have just been experienced in imagination.

Conclusion

Some brief morals

We're now in a better position to assess the role that the feeling of familiarity can play in marking a phenomenological distinction between memory and imagination. Having taken a second and deeper look at the feeling of familiarity, we have learned considerably more about this feeling. Unfortunately, the discussion did not succeed in redeeming the suggestion that this feeling can serve to distinguish memory from imagination. But I don't think we expected that it would. Moreover, when we think about what we've learned, I think it will turn out that we've made some important progress. In particular, we've been pointed in a promising direction for further exploration. In understanding how the feeling of familiarity accompanies states other than states of memory, we have also come to understand that this feeling can be multi-layered

¹¹ These cases seem to involve what Russell (1921, p. 169-170) calls recognition. Though he takes recognition to be different from feelings of familiarity, nothing he says seems inconsistent with this feeling being part of the phenomenological character of our experiences in such cases.

¹² Interestingly, although we interact with familiar people in familiar settings all the time, the feeling of familiarity is not always present. As noted by Bruce Whittlesea and Lisa Williams (2000), one is more likely to experience a feeling of familiarity when one encounters a familiar person in an unfamiliar setting (or, at least, a setting in which one does not usually encounter that individual) – as when one encounters a member of the wait staff from a local restaurant on a bus, dressed in civilian clothes rather than in the restaurant's uniform. Though empirical studies have shown that familiarity is often connected with fluency of processing, Whittlesea and Williams argue that it can also arise in these kinds of cases of discrepancy, and they hypothesize that "[...] the perception of discrepancy is a major factor in producing the feeling of familiarity" (Whittlesea & Williams, 2000, p. 547).

and multi-dimensional. And that suggests that we may have been working at too coarse a phenomenological level. If we were able to tease apart the different layers and dimensions of the feeling of familiarity, it's possible that we could hit upon one such layer or dimension that is proprietary to memory and thus would serve as the kind of phenomenological marker we've been looking for.¹³

This will undoubtedly be difficult work. As I noted at the start, we are in a fairly impoverished state when it comes to phenomenological vocabulary. But perhaps, in addition to underscoring the importance of improving that situation, the discussion of this paper contains some hints for how we might go about doing so. In particular, the point about coarseness might be generalized. It's not just when it comes to feelings of familiarity that we might be working at too coarse a phenomenological level; rather, we seem to be working at that level far too frequently.

In various areas of inquiry, both philosophical and beyond, progress has come when we were finally able to see beyond what had long looked to us as atomic, as indivisible. It is thus not at all surprising that a similar point would apply to descriptive phenomenology as well. The problem is not just that we don't at present have the right words to describe phenomenological properties, but we haven't quite homed in on the properties that we should be aiming to describe. And perhaps, to return once more to the *Hamilton* example with which we began, it's by starting ourselves on the path of imagining this work that we can make it come to feel almost like a memory and thus get it done.¹⁴

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¹³ Alternatively, perhaps, this might point us toward a way to conjoin aspects of the feeling of familiarity with aspects of other feelings, thus giving us a more complex kind of phenomenological marker than we'd initially expected.

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