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Episodic Memory, the Cotemporality Problem, and Common Sense

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Abstract

Direct realists about episodic memory claim that a rememberer has direct contact with a past event. However, how is it possible to be acquainted with an event that ceased to exist? That is the so-called *cotemporality* problem. The standard solution, proposed by Sven Bernecker, is to distinguish between the occurrence of an event and the existence of an event: an event ceases to occur without ceasing to exist. That is the eternalist solution for the cotemporality problem. Nevertheless, some philosophers of memory claim that the adoption of an eternalist metaphysics of time would be too high a metaphysical price to pay to hold direct realist intuitions about memory. Although I agree with these critics, I will make two claims. First, that this kind of common sense argument is far from decisive. Second, that Bernecker's proposal remains the best solution to the cotemporality problem.

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Introduction

This paper concerns the so-called *cotemporality problem* about the intentional object of an episodic memory.¹ In short, this problem involves a conflict between the idea that memory is about the past and the idea that the past does not exist. We will see that the main solution to this problem is to adopt an eternalist metaphysics of time. Nevertheless, some critics see eternalism as a theory too far from common sense to be accepted as a solution. Regarding this question, I will argue that yes, there could be resistance, on the part of regular people, to eternalism. However, I will add that the main problem for common people is not eternalism itself, but the *sophisticated* style of reasoning of any complex theory—including alternatives to eternalism as a solution to the cotemporality problem.

I will proceed as follows. In section 1, I explain why the cotemporality problem affects episodic memory without affecting other kinds of memory. Section 2 presents the cotemporality problem as a question related to the classical dispute between direct and indirect (representative) realists. In section 3, I briefly discuss the position according to which all varieties of episodic hypothetical thought have the same kind of intentional object. In section 4, I answer some questions related to the eternalist solution to the cotemporality problem. Section 5 explores statements by David Hume and Thomas Reid to illustrate that direct and indirect realists, regarding the intentional object of an episodic memory, could claim proximity with some commonsensical ideas, and that it does not mean that one or other of these two theories is clearly commonsensical. Section 6 is about the intrinsically superficial nature of common sense. I will claim that common sense is characterized by practicality and absence of method. Section 7 explains how eternalism can be a solution to the cotemporality problem.

1. Kinds of Memory

This paper is about the intentional object of an episodic memory. There are many types of memory, both cognitive and noncognitive.² Our question concerns the two cognitive varieties of memory: episodic and semantic. Since semantic memory concerns facts learned in the personal past, and facts can be assessed as true or false, the question about the intentional object of a semantic memory is relatively simple to answer: a semantic memory of *p* is about the (true) fact that *p*. However, the question about the intentional object of an episodic memory is more complex. Episodic memories “often involve ex-

¹ Sven Bernecker, *The Metaphysics of Memory* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 68–71.

² Kourken Michaelian, *Mental Time Travel: Episodic Memory and Our Knowledge of the Personal Past* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 30.

quisite detail, as well as perspective, imagery, and emotion.”³ That being the case, the intentional object of an episodic memory is not—at least not in a simple or direct way—a fact expressed by a proposition:

The nature of the representations involved in individual episodic memory and episodic future thought is a complex question, but it is fairly clear that these are not (or not wholly) propositional. . . . Propositions can accommodate neither sensory detail nor temporal structure.⁴

If the intentional object of an episodic memory is not purely propositional, then what is it? The best candidate among the main varieties of beings—individuals (objects and events), properties and facts—is an event. But, which kind of event? There are at least two good candidates for intentional objects of an episodic memory: (1) the past and objective event that originated the subjective sensory details experienced in the present and (2) the present and subjective event of the experience of sensory detail, perspective, imagery, and emotion.⁵ A *direct realist* about the intentional object of an episodic memory holds that the past event is the intentional object of an episodic memory and partially constitutes the content of an episodic memory.⁶ An *indirect* or *representative realist* about the intentional object of an episodic memory claims that the intentional object of an episodic memory is a present representation of a past event.

In sum, keeping in mind that the intentional object of an episodic memory is an event (instead of an object, property, or fact), the cotemporality problem can be reissued as a dispute about the nature of the event that is the intentional object of an episodic memory. There are two main philosophical positions about the intentional object of an episodic memory: *direct realism*, which holds that the intentional object of an episodic memory is a past external event, and *representative realism*, which holds that the intentional object of an episodic memory is a present internal event.

³ Sarah K. Robins, “Memory Traces,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*, ed. Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian (London: Routledge, 2017), 77.

⁴ Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton, “Collective Mental Time Travel: Remembering the Past and Imagining the Future Together,” *Synthese* (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-017-1449-1>.

⁵ Jordi Fernández, “The Intentional Objects of Memory,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*, edited by Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian (London: Routledge, 2017), 89.

⁶ Dorothea Debus, “Experiencing the Past: A Relational Account of Recollective Memory,” *Dialectica*, 62, no. 4 (2008): 405–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-8361.2008.01165.x>.

2. Two Kinds of Realism

Representative realists about memory claim that the intentional object of an episodic memory is an internal representation that occurs simultaneously to the situation of memory retrieval. According to this variety of realism, when agent S recollects event E, the intentional object of the recollection is *a present representation of E* instead of *the past event E itself*. If we make use of the distinction between the *vehicle* and the *intentional object* of a representation, representative realism about episodic memory means that the vehicle *and* the intentional object of the recollection are both *present* instead of *past*, which means that, according to representative realism, what is remembered is not the past event E, but the present representation of E.

Direct realists about episodic memory view representative realism as an unbearable theory. They claim that if the objects of our memories are present representations, then memory gives us no direct contact with the past. Also, if memory is about the present, then memory can never be accurate. A memory of event E has to be *about* E—which means, to a direct realist philosopher, that E itself constitutes, at least partially, the content of the memory.⁷ The vehicle of the representation of the past can be present, but the intentional object of an episodic memory has to be past. The problem with representative realism is that it deprives us of any mnemonic contact with the past itself. The direct realist does not accept that. Because of their uneasiness with representative realism, direct realist philosophers claim that an agent S has direct contact with the past itself when he or she remembers event E:

The main question at issue is evidently whether these images are really judged to be contemporaneous with the process of apprehending them. If not, they should not be presumed to exist in the present, and the principle of parsimony, if nothing else, would lead us to expect that they are simply the past events themselves. That they are apprehended in the present is beyond question, but it does not follow on that account that they are present existences. . . . The plain man, it is true, is apt to be puzzled when he is asked *where* his memory-images exist, and *when* they exist. . . . But the plain man does not confuse his images with his percepts, and it would be a very gross confusion indeed if he localised his images within the space which he perceives at the time of imaging. Indeed, if he did so he would suffer from hallucination. . . . In other words, any one who has an explicit memory-image literally transports himself in memory to the time and place of his original experience.⁸

⁷ John Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸ J. Laird, "Recollection, Association and Memory," *Mind* 26, no. 104 (1917): 411–12.

When S recollects E, S is literally in direct contact, in the present, with the past event E. The problem is that it is not obvious how anyone can have direct contact, in the present, with an event that has already ceased to exist. That is the so-called *cotemporality problem*.⁹

How is it possible for an agent to be in direct contact, in the present, with an event that has ceased to exist? The main solution, as we will see, is to claim that *the past event exists*—even though it is not occurring now.¹⁰ The question about the existence of past events is a topic in the metaphysics of time. There are two main theories about the existence of events. On the one hand, *presentist* philosophers claim that all there is are presently existing objects, properties, and states of affairs, including events. On the other hand, *eternalist* philosophers claim that present, past, and future objects, properties, and states of affairs are equally real *at any time*: “A piece of past existence is just that piece of past existence for all time. Because it is past it is eternally safe.”¹¹ The past event E, for instance, is real now, which means that, granted eternalism about the nature of time, nonoccurrence in the present of the event E is no obstacle for S’s direct contact with E. Having in mind these two theories of time, we can see that direct realism about episodic memory seems problematic just because we tacitly presuppose presentism, the view about the reality of time according to which only presently existing events are real. The solution is straightforward. A direct realist about episodic memory has to be an eternalist about time.¹² Let’s call this proposal *the eternalist solution*.

Not all philosophers of memory sympathetic to direct realism are happy with the eternalist solution. Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton, for instance, claim that eternalism may be an “expensive” solution:

The cotemporality problem arises because, while direct realism claims that the direct object of a present memory is a past event, there is no obvious sense in which a subject now might be directly related to a past event. Bernecker argues that the cotemporality problem can be avoided if we assume that past events continue to exist even after they have occurred. This may, however, be a high metaphysical price to pay simply in order to respect direct realist intuitions.¹³

⁹ Bernecker, *Metaphysics of Memory*, 71

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹ Laird, “Recollection, Association and Memory,” 410.

¹² Bernecker, *Metaphysics of Memory*, 71.

¹³ Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton. “Memory,” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2017 edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2017/entries/memory/>.

In this passage concerning direct realism about the intentional object of an episodic memory and Bernecker's solution to the cotemporality problem, Michaelian and Sutton are claiming two things. First, that the meaning of the notion of a direct relation between a rememberer and a past event is not obvious. Second, that, for this reason, the proposal of a direct contact with the past needs heavy theoretical argumentation. I agree with these claims. Even if regular people may eventually be able to claim direct contact with past events through memory, what a direct contact with the past means remains obscure. The possibility of this kind of relation with the past can be explained by eternalism. However, eternalism is far from obvious.

Let's take stock. In section 1, we saw that there are various kinds of memory, but the cotemporality problem concerns just episodic memory. In this section, we saw that there are two main varieties of classical realism about the intentional object of an episodic memory: direct realism and representative realism. In the next sections, we will proceed as follows. In section 4, we will examine some questions related to eternalism. In section 5, we will explore the classical debate between direct and indirect realists. In section 6, we will discuss some features of common sense that are relevant for the assessment of Bernecker's solution to the cotemporality problem. In section 7, we will examine some direct realist replies to indirect realist objection. But before that, we will see, in the next section, how André Sant'Anna and Kourken Michaelian propose that we rebuild the framework for the debate about the intentional object of an episodic memory.

3. Episodic Hypothetical Thought

In a recent article, Sant'Anna and Michaelian reissue the classical debate over the intentional objects of episodic memory in the context of the contemporary debate about episodic hypothetical thought and mental time travel.¹⁴ A detailed analysis of Sant'Anna and Michaelian's proposal is beyond the scope of the present paper. Nonetheless, I would like to—coarsely—situate Sant'Anna and Michaelian's position in the context of the discussion about the intentional object of an episodic memory, the cotemporality problem, and common sense. I will not describe the complex details of the pragmatist solution proposed by Sant'Anna and Michaelian because this subject is beyond the scope of this paper.

Sant'Anna and Michaelian see episodic memory as a form of episodic hypothetical

¹⁴ André Sant'Anna and Kourken Michaelian, "Thinking about Events: A Pragmatist Account of the Objects of Episodic Hypothetical Thought," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* (January 2018), <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323184598>.

thought (or mental time travel). Episodic hypothetical thought is a genus with four species: episodic memory, episodic future thought, past-oriented counterfactual thought, and future-oriented counterfactual thought. The varieties of episodic hypothetical thought are distinguished by temporal reference and modal status. There is episodic memory when S believes that an episodic thought is about the past in the actual world. There is episodic future thought when S believes that an episodic thought is about the future in the actual world. There is past-oriented counterfactual thought when S believes that an episodic thought is about the past in some possible world different from the actual world. Finally, there is future-oriented counterfactual thought when S believes that an episodic thought is about the future in some possible world different from the actual world. Episodic memory can be distinguished from misremembering and confabulation because remembering allows only true inferences about past events, misremembering allows some true and some false inferences about past events, and confabulation allows only false inferences about past events.

Sant'Anna and Michaelian claim that the classical framework of the debate about the intentional objects of episodic memories is inappropriate to the debate over the intentional objects of episodic thoughts in general. The problem is twofold. On the one hand, direct realism is a variety of "relationism": if S is not (causally) related to E, then S is not remembering E. The problem is that there is no suitable causal relationship between S and future or counterfactual events. On the other hand, an indirect realist philosopher claims that if S represents E properly, then S remembers E. The problem is that representations are "silent," in the sense that "they do not establish their own satisfaction conditions."¹⁵ Therefore, the classical space of inquiry about the intentional objects of episodic memories has to be replaced by a new framework where the question about the intentional objects of episodic hypothetical thoughts in general could be investigated properly.

Regarding the question about the intentional objects of episodic hypothetical thoughts in general, Sant'Anna and Michaelian endorse *continuism*: the thesis that all varieties of episodic hypothetical thought have the same kind of intentional object. Dorothea Debus and Denis Perrin, on the other hand, hold *discontinuism*: the thesis that the kind of the intentional object of an episodic memory is different from the kind (or kinds) of the intentional objects of episodic future thoughts, episodic counterfactual thoughts and episodic counterfactual thoughts.¹⁶ Sant'Anna and Michaelian present no argument for

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Dorothea Debus, "Mental Time Travel: Remembering the Past, Imagining the Future, and the Particularity of Events," *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 5, no. 3 (2014): 333–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-014-0182-7>; Denis Perrin, "Asymmetries in Subjective Time," in *Seeing the Future*:

continuism. They just take it for granted:

In psychology . . . it is increasingly taken for granted that episodic memory can be adequately understood only if it is seen as one instance among others of a more general capacity for simulating possible episodes. On this view, episodic memory overlaps heavily with other forms of episodic hypothetical thought—also known as “mental time travel”—at every level from the neural to the phenomenological. . . . We will simply take for granted the consensus view that the more general category of episodic hypothetical thought is prior to the more specific category of episodic memory. This view suggests that the traditional question of the objects of episodic memory should be replaced with a new question: What are the direct objects of episodic hypothetical thought?¹⁷

Although the current view in psychology can be taken to suggest that the classical framework for the debate about the intentional object of an episodic memory has to be replaced by a continuist framework, which would be advantageous for the discussion of the nature of the intentional objects of episodic hypothetical thoughts in general, it does not seem that this suggestion is a sufficient reason to argue against discontinuism. Still, Sant’Anna and Michaelian only present, as such an argument, the fact that it “makes what intuitively seems to be a unified mental phenomenon into something fundamentally disunified.”¹⁸ The problem is that this reason begs the question of what debunks discontinuism—to be a discontinuist is exactly to claim that what seems to be a unified mental phenomenon is something fundamentally disunified.

The scope of this paper does not allow me to dig deeper into Sant’Anna and Michaelian’s article. But I suggest that they are right in advocating for a unified kind of intentional object for all varieties of episodic hypothetical thought. Nonetheless, a mere suggestion based on the practices of an important group of researchers is not sufficient to discount entirely a view such as discontinuism. Substantive reasons are required. Keeping this in mind, I will return to the question about the relationship between intentional objects of episodic memories, the cotemporality problem, and common sense in the classical framework.

Sant’Anna and Michaelian claim two things about Bernecker’s solution to the cotemporality problem. First, that eternalism is not intuitive:

Theoretical Perspectives on Future-Oriented Mental Time Travel, edited by Kourken Michaelian, Stanley B. Klein, and Karl K. Szpunar (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 39–61.

¹⁷ Sant’Anna and Michaelian, “Thinking about Events.”

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Eternalism is an intuitively implausible view. Some may already be convinced of eternalism for independent reasons. To them, the eternalist solution to the cotemporality problem comes at no extra metaphysical cost. Others, of course, are not so convinced. To some of these, the price of the solution may seem to be too high.¹⁹

Second, they claim that Bernecker's solution requires the classical framework for the debate over the intentional objects of episodic memories. However, the classical framework has ceased to be satisfactory. Therefore, a new solution is required.

I agree with Sant'Anna and Michaelian's claim that eternalism can be an acceptable (but "intuitively implausible") solution for the problem of the intentional object of an episodic memory without being an acceptable solution for the problem of the intentional object of episodic mental states in general. However, I believe that discontinuism is plausible and that, therefore, there are no substantive reasons to abdicate the classical framework. Discontinuism is plausible because we can explain the contact between subject and the intentional object of episodic memory in a way that is not available for the explanation of the contact between subject and the intentional objects of future or counterfactual episodic thoughts. Having this fact in mind, in the following sections I will return to the discussion of the cotemporality problem in the classical framework for the debate about the intentional object of an episodic memory.

4. Two Problems

In the classical framework for the debate over the intentional objects of episodic memories, the main problems with the eternalist solution for the cotemporality problem, according to Sant'Anna and Michaelian, are (1) that there is nothing obvious in the idea that a rememberer is in direct contact with a past event and (2) that eternalism is not intuitive. That is why the eternalist solution would be problematic. It makes it metaphysically expensive to hold the main intuition behind direct realism. Let's call these problems *The Problem of the Direct Contact with a Past Event* (PDCPE) and *The Problem of the Intuitive Implausibility of Eternalism* (PIIE).

- *The Problem of the Direct Contact with a Past Event* (PDCPE): It is not obvious that a rememberer is in direct contact with a past event.
- *The Problem of the Intuitive Implausibility of Eternalism* (PIIE): Eternalism is intuitively implausible as a view about the nature of time.

¹⁹ Ibid.

On (PDCPE), I think there is some truth in the claim that the idea of a direct contact between a rememberer and a past event is “no[t] obvious,” as Michaelian and Sutton claim.²⁰ However, I think that the situation is more complex because later in the same article, the same authors claim that “direct realism . . . claims that . . . when one remembers, one is in the first instance related to past events themselves; it is thus perhaps the most intuitively appealing view of the nature of the objects of memory.”²¹

As I see it, it is fair to interpret this passage as saying that the view of a rememberer as being in direct contact with a past event is highly intuitive. It seems fair to interpret a “first instance” relation between a rememberer and a past event as direct contact between rememberer and past event. What would not be charitable would be to attribute to Michaelian and Sutton, without a justification, a contradiction. Since Michaelian and Sutton claim that the idea of a direct contact between a rememberer and a past event is both “no[t] obvious” and “the most intuitively appealing view,” they seem to contradict themselves. But, are they really contradicting themselves? That is not my opinion. I think that, as a matter of fact, common sense goes both ways. On the one hand, there is a commonsensical train of thought that makes us conclude that the idea of a direct contact between the rememberer and the past event is very intuitive. On the other hand, there is also another commonsensical train of thought that makes us conclude that the idea of a direct contact between the rememberer and the past event is not obvious. If there is contradiction (and, of course, there is), the contradiction is in the views held by proponents of common sense in general. Is that a problem for common sense? Again, not in my opinion. We have to remember that common sense is not a doctrine. Common sense can be shamelessly “imethodical.”²² The point of common sense is to be a repository of *practical*—rather than *theoretical*—wisdom easily applicable to every life situation, and life is multifarious. In a certain way, common sense *cultivates* contradiction—you have to seize the moment, but you also have to be patient; you are never too old to learn, but you cannot teach an old dog new tricks—and mocks the scholar who points to the contradiction but does not understand the practical usefulness, in a context, of an adage that contradicts a proverb.²³ As seen through this lens, Michaelian and Sutton are not contradicting themselves. Instead, they are pointing to two contradictory commonsensical views about the relationship between a rememberer and a past event.

²⁰ Michaelian and Sutton, “Memory.”

²¹ Ibid.

²² Clifford Geertz, “Common Sense as a Cultural System,” *Antioch Review* 33, no. 1 (1975): 5–26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4637616>.

²³ Ibid.

Nevertheless, we are scholars, and for us the *theoretical* contradiction has to be explained. How can it be the case that it is both intuitive and not intuitive that a rememberer is in direct contact with a past event? I think that this paradox emerges from the conflict between four independently plausible judgments concerning the general question about the relationship between a rememberer and a past event:

Memory Realism (MR): What we remember is real.

Memory Access (MA): Memory gives us direct contact with the past.

Presentism (Pres): Only present events are real.

Representationalism (Repr): We can access directly only what is present.

I believe that every one of these four claims is independently plausible. The evidence in favor of my belief is the easiness of the philosophical discourse offered as justification for these claims. In some cases, no theory is offered. In other cases, the proposed theory is indeed very intuitive. Memory Realism (MR) is held by anyone who accepts the possibility of truth (or some other kind of semantic accuracy) in memory—and it seems to be a truism that you cannot remember what did not happen.²⁴ Also, it seems that “we are committed, in our ordinary manner of conceptualizing time, to the reality of the past and future.”²⁵ Memory Access (MA) seems to be plain common sense. As Michaelian and Sutton said about direct realism and I have already quoted, “when one remembers, one is in the first instance related to past events themselves; it is thus perhaps the most intuitively appealing view of the nature of the objects of memory.” Presentism (Pres) seems very commonsensical. After all, the past is no more, and it seems that the future lacks being now. Usually, many philosophers just assume, without argument, that presentism is the commonsense view about the nature of time.²⁶ That it is sufficient to establish our point in defense of the intuitiveness of (Pres). Representationalism (Repr) seems to be uncontroversial—as William Hamilton, the editor of the works of Thomas Reid, once wrote, a direct contact with a past event seems to be a contradiction.²⁷

²⁴ Bernecker, “Memory and Truth,” 52.

²⁵ Adrian Bardon, *A Brief History of the Philosophy of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 86.

²⁶ John W. Carroll and Ned Markosian, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 181.

²⁷ William Hamilton, quoted in Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: Abridged, with Notes and Illustrations from Sir William Hamilton and Others*, 7th ed., edited by James Walker (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1857), 211.

All four claims—(MR), (MA), (Pres), and (Repr) —are independently intuitive and plausible. Nevertheless, the conjunction of all four claims seems to form a paradox. If what we remember is real (MR) and memory gives us direct access to the past (MA), then it is false that only present events are real and that we can access directly only what is present— \sim (Pres) and \sim (Repr). If only present events are real (Pres) and we can access directly only what is present (Repr), then what we remember is real (MR) if it is present, but it is false that memory gives us direct access to the past— \sim (MA). Other combinations are possible, but these two are enough to exemplify our problem. The first combination—(MR), (MA), \sim (Pres), and \sim (Repr) —is similar to historical forms of *direct realism* about the intentional object of an episodic memory. The second combination—(Pres), (Repr), (MR), and \sim (MA)—is similar to historical forms of *indirect or representative realism* about the intentional object of an episodic memory.

Now we have the elements required to deal with (PDCPE). It is both “obvious” and “not obvious” that a rememberer is in direct contact with a past event. On the one hand, it seems obvious that a rememberer is in direct contact with a past event because (MA) is intuitive: what one remembers, when one remembers episodically, it is past instead of present, future, or atemporal. Also, (MR) is intuitive: what one remembers is real. On the other hand, it does not seem obvious that a rememberer is in direct contact with a past event because (Pres) and (Repr) are intuitive: it seems commonsensical that only present events are real and that we can access only what is present.

It is time to investigate (PIIE). Sant’Anna and Michaelian claim that an eternalist solution to the cotemporality problem is “expensive” because eternalism is intuitively implausible. They are right—eternalism seems odd. However, it does not follow from the oddness of eternalism that regular people do not believe in the reality of past and future events. As McTaggart claims in the opening of his classical paper “The Unreality of Time,” the reality of time—including past events—is denied by philosophers and mystics, but not by regular people:

It doubtless seems highly paradoxical to assert that Time is unreal, and that all statements which involve its reality are erroneous. Such an assertion involves a far greater departure from the natural position of mankind than is involved in the assertion of the unreality of Space or of the unreality of Matter. So decisive a breach with that natural position is not to be lightly accepted.²⁸

In this passage, McTaggart is pointing to the fact that regular people believe in the reality of time —and time, intuitively, is more than the present. Commonsensical time has

²⁸ John Ellis McTaggart, “The Unreality of Time,” *Mind* 17, no. 68 (1908): 457.

extension and duration—two temporal properties that require more than the present. Of course, McTaggart’s conclusion that time is unreal is too sophisticated to be immediately accepted by regular people. Nevertheless, McTaggart’s diagnostic is right. Regular people believe in the reality of time.

Eternalism seems far from common sense. Nevertheless, regular people believe in (MA): memory gives us *direct* access to the past—which means that the Humean idea of an *indirect* access to the past is very sophisticated. Common sense is not sophisticated.²⁹ People not spoiled by philosophy believe in (MR): what is remembered is real—which means that the past is real. These—(MA) and (MR)—are two commonsensical views about memory that are consistent with eternalism. So why does eternalism seem odd? I submit that, in spite of the compatibility between the main tenets of eternalism and common sense, eternalism seems odd because it is a very complex *theory*, and proponents of common sense are proudly resistant to theories.³⁰ Eternalism is and always will be awkward to regular people, but the same is true for other complex theories with implications for the question about the nature of the intentional objects of memories. Presentism as a fully articulated theory, for instance, requires either the denial of (MR) and (MA) or very sophisticated explanations about our access to an unreal or present past.

It could be objected, against my proposal, that not all theories are rejected by people espousing common sense for the simple reason that they are theories. Presentism, for instance, is a theory (Pres), and people accept it. I think that this objection goes in the right direction. Yes, people tend to accept *simple* theories as presentism, as far as they are presented as being constituted by a single commonsensical claim. To accept a simple theory is to accept a commonsensical claim, and regular people accept commonsensical claims. Nevertheless, regular people are more resistant to accept *complex* or *articulated* theories—even when they accept the grounds of a complex theory as a matter of common sense. That being the case, regular people can accept (Pres) easily, and reject the articulation of (Pres) with the denial of (MR) and (MA). This difference in behavior is explained by the fact that common sense is a repository of easy solutions to practical issues.³¹ Simple theories are easy and complex theories are hard, even when implied by commonsensical claims.

Therefore, there is no substantive reason to reject eternalism as a solution to the cotemporality problem on the grounds that eternalism is not “intuitive,” because any philosophi-

²⁹ Geertz, “Common Sense.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

cal *theory* is likely to be distasteful to regular people, notwithstanding the fact that many philosophical theses are compatible with some commonsensical judgements. Common sense is not a doctrine—it is, as Clifford Geertz claims, “imethodical.” Common sense is not a religion—the point of common sense is life in this world, not salvation. Common sense is what remains as plain and simple guidance when religion, science, and philosophy fail.³² When Michaelian and Sant’Anna reject Bernecker’s eternalist solution to the cotemporality problem because it is “unintuitive,” they are not presenting any *substantive* ground to reject this solution. Of course this solution is not obvious—no *philosophical* or theoretical solution would be obvious because “obviousness,” when talking about common sense, is a characteristic of a style of thinking (in contrast with an intentional object of a thought) featuring naturalness, practicalness, shallowness, “imethodicalness,” and “accessibleness.”³³ It is just not possible to propose a minimally complex theory and be “obvious” in the sense required by common sense.

5. The Objects of Episodic Memory

As discussed, there are two kinds of realism about the intentional object of a memory. On the one hand, there is representative realism, a position exemplified by the philosophy of David Hume in his *Inquiry* from 1748: “The mind has never anything present to it but the perceptions, and cannot possibly reach any experience of their connexion with objects. The supposition of such a connexion is, therefore, without any foundation in reasoning.”³⁴

According to Hume, any intentional mental state is about the representation of an object, property, or state of affairs. No intentional mental state is directly about any object represented. Thus, Hume’s theory applies globally to perceptions, memories, and anticipations. On the other hand, there is direct realism. Nothing could be more distant from Hume’s position than Thomas Reid’s proposal in his *Inquiry*, from 1764:

Suppose that once, and only once, I smelled a tuberose in a certain room, where it grew in a pot, and gave a very grateful perfume. Next day I relate what I saw and smelled. When I attend as carefully as I can to what passes in my mind in this case, it appears evident that the very thing I saw yesterday, and the fragrance I smelled, are now the immediate objects of my mind, when I remember it.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 18.

³⁴ David Hume, “An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,” section XII, part I (Adelaide, AU: eBooks@Adelaide), Accessed March 27, 2016, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/h/hume/david/h92e/index.html>.

Further, I can imagine this pot and flower transported to the room where I now sit, and yielding the same perfume. Here likewise it appears, that the individual thing which I saw and smelled, is the object of my imagination.³⁵

Reid's thought experiment is about the intentional object of S's memory and imagination involving a particular property (the grateful smell of a very particular tuberose) experienced by S only once. Let's call this particular property *F*. What does S recollect when she remembers *F*? What does S imagine when she is imagining *F*? Using common sense as a method, Reid concludes that S remembers and imagines *F* itself. What S has present to her, when she remembers or imagines a property, is the property itself, not a representation of a property. The same can be said about the recollection or imagination of an object or an event. The intentional object of a mental state, factive or not, is a real object, property, or state of affairs instead of their respective representations.

Would it to be fair to say that the acceptance of Reid's answer to his thought experiment about the smell of tuberose requires us to pay a very high metaphysical price? No, it would not. Reid claims that he is just following common sense, and it is true that people think they remember the events themselves which were experienced in the past—that is just (MA). It is not obvious or intuitive to people in general that we do not remember the situations that we lived in our personal pasts, notwithstanding the fact that (Repr) is intuitive. It is commonsensical that all we can access is present. Nevertheless, the *theory* that memory gives us no access to the past is very sophisticated. It is in conflict with (MA). Hume's theory has some grounds in common sense, but it is far from being commonsensical.

In sum, there is a classical divide between the two main kinds of realist philosophers on the subject of the intentional object of a memory. On the one hand, representative realist philosophers claim two things: (1) we remember representations of events instead of the events themselves and (2) the relation between an agent and the event remembered is indirect because it is mediated by a representation. On the other hand, direct realist philosophers claim that we remember the events themselves with no mediation by any representation. Every party in this dispute can appeal to common sense as the ground for some of its claims, but no party in this dispute can win the debate by just appealing to common sense.

6. A Question of Common Sense

As stated before, some critics of direct realism about episodic memory claim that this variety of direct realism requires a metaphysics of time very far from common sense. Even granting the consistency with (MR) and (MA), two commonsensical claims, the meta-

³⁵ Thomas Reid, "An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense," in *Inquiry and Essays*, ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 14.

physics of time required by direct realism is eternalist, and eternalism seems “intuitively implausible.” I think that these critics of direct realism about episodic memory are right when they say that this variety of realism requires a very sophisticated metaphysics of time. Nevertheless, having in mind that (Pres) is in conflict with (MR) and (MA), presentism is not a better option. Are there any other alternatives? Not in the spectrum of the classical discussion about direct and indirect realism. Outside the scope of this debate, Sant’Anna and Michaelian propose a pragmatist theory about the intentional object of episodic thought in general, including the intentional object of an episodic memory. They claim that the intentional object of an episodic memory is a “pragmatic object.”³⁶ The discussion of this proposal is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, on the question about the intuitiveness of their theory, the authors themselves acknowledge the “unorthodox” and “unconventional” character of their proposal. Clearly, they are talking about the fact that pragmatism is not a mainstream *theory*. However, they do not claim that their proposal is commonsensical. Pragmatic objects are “immediately available to the mind, regardless of whether they exist.”³⁷ As far as I can see, it means that Sant’Anna and Michaelian’s pragmatism is not committed to (MR), (MA), (Pres), or (Repr). It is not committed to (MR), since the pragmatic object can exist, or not. It is not committed to (MA), since it does not claim that episodic memory gives us direct access to the past. It is not committed to (Pres), since it does not claim that only present events exist. Finally, it is not committed to (Repr), since it does not claim that we can access directly only what is present. All these features of a pragmatic object are evidence that it cannot be discussed in the framework of the classical debate about the nature of the intentional object of an episodic memory. For this reason, it is not possible in this paper to parse carefully the details of Sant’Anna and Michaelian’s proposal. I will leave the notion of a pragmatic object as a question to be investigated on another occasion. All I can suggest for now is that it does not seem a more commonsensical proposal than presentism or eternalism.

To get back to the main point, on the relation between commonsensical intuitions and philosophical theories in the classical framework for the discussion of the question about the intentional object of an episodic memory, I believe that neither of the two main theories of time is in a better situation than the other. The problem is not that some presentist or eternalist intuitions can be grounded in common sense. The problem is that, notwithstanding the fact that the most diverse philosophical claims about the nature of time can be supported by commonsensical intuitions, no articulated *theory* of time can be consistently attributed to people in general. As regards the metaphysics of time, there is no coherent *theory* that can be attributed, without qualifications, to people not intoxicated

³⁶ Sant’Anna and Michaelian, “Thinking about Events.”

³⁷ Ibid.

by philosophy. People naturally accept (Pres): present events—in contrast with past and future events—exist. However, people also accept without reflection that they remember the events themselves which were experienced in the past. It would be wrong to say that presentism has no ground in common sense, but it would also be wrong to say that eternalism has no ground in common sense. People do think they have, through memory, direct access to the past, and people easily accept (MR): what we remember is real, in contrast with what we just imagine, and these are commonsensical grounds for eternalist theses. In sum, there are a lot of folk theses about the nature of time, but there is no coherent folk *theory* about the nature of time. Therefore, it is always possible to criticize a theory of memory grounded in a theory of time because it mismatches common sense. But this kind of criticism is not fair because it is always possible to ground a theory of memory in some—presentist or eternalist—“theses” from folk philosophy of time.

In short, I am not saying that we can disregard common sense when we do metaphysics of memory or metaphysics of time. Any metaphysics that despises folk intuitions or theories is hopeless. Folk metaphysics is always relevant. All I am saying is that in some cases, isolated intuitions from folk metaphysics are not sufficient to rule out a theory. That occurs when folk intuitions about the nature of reality are in mutual conflict, and that is the case when we are talking about folk metaphysics of time.

7. Direct Realism about Memory with Eternalism

According to direct realism, we remember the past itself, without intermediaries, because we have had direct contact with the past itself. Therefore, we do not have to infer from the present *representation* that E happened in the past the *fact* that E happened in the past. The problem is: how is it possible to have a direct contact, in the present, with a past event? That is the cotemporality problem.³⁸ In this section, I will attempt to clarify (at least a little) the notion of *direct contact* required by direct realism by the metaphysical explanation of the notions of *immediate knowledge* and *coexistence*. I argue that direct contact in the sense of immediate knowledge or coexistence seems to be a problem for an eternalist direct realist about episodic memory only if presentism is presupposed—which begs the question.

Reid says that when we remember, we have direct contact with a past event. As I mentioned before, his editor William Hamilton disagrees: “An *immediate* knowledge of a *past* thing is a contradiction. For we can only know a thing immediately, if we know it in itself, or *as existing*; but what is past cannot be known in itself, for it is *non-existent*. In this respect memory differs from perception.”³⁹

³⁸ Bernecker, *Metaphysics of Memory*, 68–69

³⁹ Hamilton quoted in Reid, “An Inquiry,” 211.

Hamilton's point is about the mode of being of events. He is claiming that only what exists now can be known immediately. But a past event does not exist now. Therefore, a past event cannot be known immediately. Hamilton's point is not (Repr) —it is not about present representations as metaphysical bridges between agents and past events. He is not claiming that you can only access things through representations. Hamilton's point is not Hume's point. Hamilton's point is about metaphysics of time instead of metaphysics of intentionality. He is saying that there is a metaphysical problem for direct realism even if we grant that Reid's direct realism is right and Hume's representative realism is wrong. The problem is that to exist, for an event, is to be now, and past events are no more. Also, Hamilton's point is not Sant'Anna and Michaelian's point. Hamilton worries about logic—contradiction—instead of common sense. For Hamilton, to know immediately a past event “is a contradiction.” The contradiction is that a past event is nonexistent now, but what is immediately known is existent now.

The solution, again, is eternalism. If eternalist philosophers are right, then a past event does not occur now, but it does exist now. For an event, to *occur* before or after another event is one thing, but to *exist* tout court is another thing. That is why it is possible to have direct contact with a past event.

How could a rememberer have direct contact with a past event? The solution proposed by Bernecker is eternalism about the nature of time. According to eternalism, past events do not cease to be after they occur. It then follows that a direct contact with a past event is at least possible. How does it happen? By metaphysical constitution. The past event E constitutes the memory of E in the sense that a phenomenologically qualitative replica of S's remembering of E would not be a memory of E if it had not been constituted by event E.⁴⁰

Another kind of objection to direct realism about episodic memory concerns *coexistence*:

A third implication, I believe, of ‘direct awareness,’ in its philosophical use, is that if B is ‘directly’ aware of X, then B and X *coexist*. . . . This implication makes hard sledding for any interpretation of memory as direct awareness. Although a person can be said to remember someone who is standing right before him, it is also true that we speak of remembering last week's bonfire or earth tremor. The bonfire is not now burning nor the earth now trembling.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Dorothea Debus, “Experiencing the Past: A Relational Account of Recollective Memory,” *Dialectica* 62, no. 4: 405–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-8361.2008.01165.x>; Campbell, *Reference and Consciousness*.

⁴¹ Norman Malcolm, “Memory as Direct Awareness of the Past,” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Lectures* 9 (March 1975): 1–22, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0080443600000960>.

In my interpretation, “coexistence” in this passage means “simultaneity,” and the problem is that last week’s bonfire and the present recalling of last week’s bonfire are not simultaneous. Of course, Hume’s representative realism solves the problem: the present representation of last week’s bonfire and the present recalling of last week’s bonfire are simultaneous. Therefore, they can “coexist” according to Malcolm’s meaning of “coexistence.” Nevertheless, the representative realist has to concede that the memory of last week’s bonfire is about last week’s bonfire, not about the present representation of last week’s bonfire, which means that the representation as a vehicle can be present, but the event is represented as past. The representative realist can retort that last week’s bonfire is represented as past *now*, which means that the intentional object of the representation is the present instead of the past. The realist can insist that the fact that last week’s bonfire is grasped in the present is beyond doubt—but it does not mean that last week’s bonfire exists in the present.⁴² That’s the main problem concerning “coexistence” for representative realism. The representative realist philosopher would have to pay a high price to explain the memory of last week’s bonfire making reference only to present objects, properties, and states of affairs. (MR) would have to be sacrificed, and (MA) would have to be remodeled as a theoretical construct. The direct realist also pays a high price—the distinction between the *occurrence* and the *existence* of an event. Hence, the question about the intentional object of an episodic memory is not “cheap” for any theory. Consequently, the direct realist can use the eternalist solution to clear up the cotemporality problem paying the same kind of “price” that indirect realism would also have to pay to solve the question about “coexistence.”

The upshot of this section is that eternalism explains how direct contact with the past can be possible. Bearing in mind that the upshot of the previous section was that common sense is compatible with presentism *and* eternalism, we have sufficient elements to claim that there is no “common sense” problem that affects exclusively the eternalist solution to the cotemporality problem for direct realism about episodic memory. This is because (1) it is intuitive that memories are about past events and (2) the fact that a past event does not occur now does not prevent the present *existence* of a past event.

Conclusions

The cotemporality problem is about the consequences of direct realism about episodic memory. It is intuitive (MR): that we remember the past events themselves instead of the present representations of the past events; (Repr): that what we access is present; (MA): that memory gives us access to the past—but the idea that a rememberer is in direct con-

⁴² Laird, “Recollection,” 412.

tact, in the present, with a past event can seem odd.⁴³

Does a past event exist? That is a question about the metaphysics of time. Unfortunately, folk metaphysics would lead us astray on this particular question. On the one hand, people do believe that an event that ceased to occur exists no more (Pres). On the other hand, people do believe that we remember past events instead of their present representations (MR). To believe this, you have to presuppose that there are past events to be remembered.

Folk metaphysics of time cannot help us. We have to appeal to philosophical theories of time. Presentism is not a good option for direct realists about episodic memory for two reasons. First, presentism raises the cotemporality problem for direct realism. Second, presentism has no simple explanation for the fact that a memory about a past event can be assessed as accurate or inaccurate. These two reasons give the direct realist a negative rationale to subscribe to eternalism about the nature of time. However, there are also positive reasons for a direct realist about episodic memory to be an eternalist. First, eternalism explains how a past event can be available for representation. Second, eternalism explains how a past event can make an episodic memory accurate. Given these grounds, eternalism is the best choice for a direct realist about episodic memory.

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⁴³ Michaelian and Sutton, "Memory."

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