

DOSSIER

## The philosophy of episodic memory and moral agency

The dossier “Mental Time Travel and Moral Agency” was designed to show how philosophical investigation of episodic memory can help to clarify some basic functional presuppositions for moral agency. This specific relationship, strictly speaking, is not new at all. For example, if we consider Locke’s classical discussion of personal identity, especially focusing on the peculiar set of questions that motivated it, we will realize that the operations of memory were already there. According to the famous chapter XXVII from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, to be a person, in a forensic sense, namely, from the point of view of moral agency, is to be able to connect the episodes of a lifetime in an autobiographical fashion. Indeed, we are all on the same page to recognize that piece of Locke’s writings as *fons et origo* for the philosophical problems around personal identity and, of course, moral personhood.

Very few areas of contemporary philosophy presuppose an interdisciplinary work so thorny and toilsome as the philosophy of memory, and the impact of the idea of ‘mental time travel’ on the renewal of the body of acceptable questions and answers in the field, setting up new challenges for researchers from the cognitive sciences, experimental psychology and, of course, philosophy, gives us an eloquent testimony of the actual difficulties. The contributions for the dossier attest the interdisciplinary mood in that ongoing investigation, its very different perspectives, and some of the conceptual doubts and critical views on the use of the concept of mental time travel in the discussions on the functional architecture of episodic memory.

Preliminary versions of the papers that make up this dossier were presented and discussed at the workshop “Mental Time Travel and Moral Agency” hosted by Unisinos University on October 16 and 17, 2017. The organization of the workshop and the present dossier were a source of great joy and intellectual satisfaction, largely because of the opportunity to bring together young researchers who were working at that time in five different universities, from Brazil, Italy, and New Zealand.

In *Mental time travel and the philosophy of memory*, André Sant’Anna offers a well-crafted *resumé* of what he calls ‘mental time travel view’ of memory, examining first the introduction of that concept in the empirical research on episodic memory and then in the raising of new proposals for solutions to older questions in that specific subfield. When we conceive episodic memory as part of a larger projective mechanism, in other words, as a mechanism whose main task is “to construct and imagine possible futures” (Suddendorf and Corballis, 2007, p. 302) rather than remember the past, we already have the conceptual and explanatory link to moral agency or to the capacities for temporally project ourselves. That connection shows up clearly if we recollect the definition suggested by Gerrans and Kennett (2010, p. 588): “A moral agent needs to be able to conceive of herself as a temporally extended entity as a necessary condition for moral reflection and decision-making”. Indeed, the moral agent needs the capacity to frame temporally extended self-representations in both directions, past, and future, in order to have the resources to solve the moral evaluation problems ahead.

Nara Figueiredo’s contribution, *On the philosophical foundations of episodic memory as awareness of past events*, discusses, from a Wittgensteinian perspective, a major controversial

topic in the philosophical investigation of memory, especially triggered after the distinction made by Endel Tulving between episodic and semantic memory. The controversy spread around different ways to explain or conceive the awareness of past and future events implied in Tulving's view on episodic memory. The central suggestion of the paper leads to reject the idea of episodic memory as awareness of past events and redesign the distinction between episodic and semantic memory using the embodied capacities of recollecting events in a non-representationalist approach/fashion to explain the first pair. As a desirable side effect, Figueiredo's paper reminds us of the indispensable task of conceptual clarification in order to improve psychological theories on memory processes.

In a more empirically-informed perspective, César Meurer's contribution, *Mental time travel: towards a computational account*, highlights some intersections between the philosophy of memory and metaphysical theories of time, on the one hand, and massive modularity approach in the philosophy of mind and evolutionary psychology, on the other. The author suggests, on innovative grounds, that both the abilities of mental time travel and process present events, implement similar computational cognitive tasks and, most importantly, both capacities seem to be functionally dependent on the I-HERE-NOW module as a basic self-representation. If Meurer it is on the right track on that hypothesis, then we must accept that mental time travel and moral agency are both functionally dependent on the self-referential tracking of what he calls the "ecological now".

*Situating "mental time travel" in the broad context of temporal cognition: A neural systems approach*, authored by Fernanda M. Carvalho, magnifies the body of empirically relevant information needed for a better understanding of the abilities for mental time travelling in the broadest context of the cognitive apparatus that enables us to experience the flow of subjective time and to process the temporal dynamic of real events. The section '*Neural correlates of mental time travel (MTT) and self-referential cognition*' is especially relevant to grasp the connections between moral agency and mental time travel abilities because it reviews and discusses the empirical evidence for the overlapping of brain regions activated in counterfactual thinking, remembering the past and project-

ing the future, which are three of the most salient capacities required for moral agency.

In *Does moral responsibility require mental time travel? Considerations about guidance control*, Beatriz Sorrentino Marques prudently steps back a little to examine whether a special type of mental time travel, which she calls, following the relevant literature, implicit prospection, is a requirement for attributions of moral responsibility for one's actions. Her strategy is prudent because she is not talking about all kinds of mental time travelling related to general capacities for moral agency but focusing on a central aspect and well-delimited *sine qua non* ability for moral agency: self-attributions of moral responsibility. The paper concludes in an exemplary way that implicit prospection helps to explain one of the main components for planning, form intentions, and guidance control, namely, the affective valence in the act of choosing one course of action instead of another.

*Undoing one's past*, the last paper of the dossier, by Eduardo Vicentini de Medeiros, argues for a single point, asking us to consider the episodic counterfactual thinking as a possible direction in mental time travel simulations, in order to obtain a more robust picture of capable moral agency. The main idea is to propose a cluster of mental operations for moral agency, including (a) episodic memory, (b) episodic future thinking, (c) the capacity for regret, and (d) episodic counterfactual thinking.

On behalf of all participants, we hope the present dossier will arouse the interest of the prestigious community of *Filosofia Unisinos* - *Unisinos Journal of Philosophy's* readers, encouraging a fruitful debate on the proposed topic.

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## References

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