Episodic Memory as Enactive Know-How: Cognitive, Affective, and Conative Resources of Remembered Experience

Dr. Russell Downham (russell.downham@gmail.com)
Department of Philosophy, Macquarie University
North Ryde, Sydney NSW 2109 Australia

Abstract

When philosophers and psychologists examine the knowledge contained in episodic memories of past experiences, they usually construe this knowledge in representational terms. Most commonly, episodic memory is thought to represent an eye-witness account of events in the rememberer's life; discussion then centres on the question of how reliably memory represents the past. In counterpoint to this dominant research paradigm, it is sometimes observed that when the remembered past diverges from the actual past, these apparent 'misrepresentations' may positively reveal the personal meaning of the rememberer's experience (Fraser, 1984). Episodic memory is thus acknowledged to represent either the past as it was experienced, or, alternatively, the meaning the experience has for the rememberer. In this brief paper I will show how episodic memory's claims to knowledge extend beyond the facts or meaning of the experiences represented, to include also the cognitive, affective and conative know-how elicited in the remembering of those experiences. In episodic remembering, the rememberer mentally re-enacts the thoughts, feelings, and intentions that constitute the first-person perspective of their remembered past. Following the momentum of intentional connections through which this remembered perspective is re-enacted, the rememberer is guided to think, feel, and will, in ways they might otherwise not know how to do from their present perspective, in their present situation. I will briefly discuss examples of each of these three varieties of enactive know-how -- cognitive, affective, and conative -- showing how they are similarly enabled by the re-enactment of our remembered experiences. By suggesting how rememberers might employ the cognitive know-how contained in episodic remembering, I also hope to show why this is an area deserving of more attention from researchers interested in the functions of episodic memory in everyday life.

Episodic remembering as mental re-enactment

'Episodic' memory (memory for experiences) is standardly contrasted with 'semantic' memory (memory for facts). As Richard Wollheim observes, this division corresponds to a grammatical difference in the way these two kinds of remembering are typically reported. The object of semantic remembering is a proposition: I remember that X happened. The object of episodic remembering is a direct object: I remember X happening. The key distinguishing feature of episodic memories is that they resemble, to some degree, the phenomenology of the experiences they represent; remembering an experience episodically, I remember what various things looked like, sounded like, or smelt like, as well as recalling my own thoughts, feelings, and desires at the time (Wollheim, 1984, p. 64). Because episodic remembering is a little like re-experiencing the past, some theorists have called it 'mental time travel' (Tulving, 1984).

The more phenomenological detail is remembered, the more precisely an experience can be rendered, but episodic remembering is not just a matter of remembering enough. Remembering an experience means mentally re-enacting it from the first-person perspective. To constitute this first-person experiential perspective on the scene remembered, the remembered phenomenology must also exhibit the intentional connections sparked by the protagonist's train of attention. As Wollheim notes, it is the intentionality of mental phenomena ‘that allows them to be internally related to one another or that makes for what has been called the “holism of the mental”.’ (Wollheim, 1984, p. 37) Because the mentally re-enacted scene follows these intentional relations, the rememberer in effect rehearses a stream of consciousness rather than merely apprehending a passing array of fragments. In episodic remembering, the rememberer mentally re-enacts the thoughts, feelings, and desires that constitute the first-person perspective of their remembered past. Following the momentum of intentional connections through which this remembered perspective is re-enacted, the rememberer is guided to think, feel, and will in ways they might otherwise not know how to do from their present perspective, in their present situation. Episodic memories are thus more than just passive images, or ‘snapshots’ of experience, as they are often characterised. Rather, as I remember thinking or feeling this or that, I tend to find myself in a condition -- cognitive, conative, affective -- somewhat like that in which the mental states I remember would leave me were I actually to have them. As I will now explain, this process of mental re-enactment is crucial to understanding the enactive know-how that episodic memories contain.

Remembering how to will

It is an unfortunate fact that our most sincerely held interests may fail to motivate us when needed most. Our tendency to give more weight to present consequences over future consequences has been well documented in psychological experiments, and is at times plainly evident in everyday life. Fortunately, through episodic remembering we are able to mentally re-enact the perspective of experiences whose influence may better serve our abiding interests. In his review of the directive functions of autobiographical memory, Pillemer illustrates the...
motivational power of remembered experiences with an example from the life of legendary basketballer Michael Jordan. Jordan recalls his failure one year to make the varsity team, and the deliberate use he made of the experience in memory:

It was embarrassing, not making that team. They posted the roster and it was there for a long, long time without my name on it. I remember being really mad too. Whenever I was working out and got tired and figured I ought to stop, I’d close my eyes and see that list in the locker room without my name on it, and that usually got me going again. (cited in Pillemer, 2003, p. 196)

Pillemer does not discuss how the motivating power of this moment depends on Jordan’s remembering it episodically rather than just recalling it as an autobiographical fact. But Jordan’s own description is revealing. Jordan did not just remember the list -- he remembered how he felt when he saw it on public display. He did not just remember that he had been really mad -- he remembered being really mad. Recalling this experience directed Jordan's attention to a possible undesirable consequence of his present inclination to rest, and re-iterated his desire to avoid that consequence. Realising the power of this memory, Jordan consciously used it to fuel his desire to push himself beyond tiredness.

If mental re-enactment is useful for ‘psyching ourselves up’, is there any advantage in using episodic memory over imagination for this purpose? As far as I know this question has not yet been experimentally investigated, but there are reasons to think memory offers a unique resource. To begin with, only memory gives Jordan a reason to doubt his assured success, and so a desire to avoid complacency. If he were to consciously direct imagination to this end, the undermining charge of irrelevance might be hard to dismiss. A part of him would likely be heckling from the sidelines: ‘What are you worrying about? You’re making it all up’. Moreover, if Jordan cannot remember ever actually failing, this thought is hardly going to convince him that he needs to push harder. If Jordan’s potential is only threatened by the temptation to complacency, he is unlikely to imagine himself being dropped from the team. Episodic memory, coming from another perspective, brings a different set of dispositions to bear upon our present mental state. Though what we remember is conditioned by our present perspective, it does not depend upon being generated by our present state of mind. By remembering past perspectives, we can re-ignite intentions which might otherwise fail to strike us as imperative in the present.

**Remembering how to feel**

Physical separation from loved ones can leave us missing not only their actual presence, but also the intimacy we feel around them. In their 2007 paper, the psychologists Alea and Bluck examine how remembering shared experiences can deepen our feelings of warmth and closeness towards loved ones, even in the other’s absence (including with loved ones who have passed away). They find that rememberers often repeatedly replay significant experiences which they take to be ‘relationship-defining’ so that they can keep their their loved ones close in their feelings and thoughts. By recalling precious times with those we love, we can remember what we felt in their presence. Our remembered experiences can in this way guide our feelings, helping us to maintain our emotional connections by keeping them alive in our thoughts.

**Remembering how to think**

Just as even our long-standing desires may wax and wane with changes in our state of mind and situation, so too, familiar thoughts may strike us as more, or less compelling in different extended mental contexts -- even when the relevant beliefs remain unchanged. To offer a personal example, I have long believed that bushwalking promotes my physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Despite this abiding belief, every time I go on a hike the realisation strikes me anew: bushwalking really does promote my physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. I wonder, how could the force of this knowledge have escaped me? On reflection, it’s not such a mystery: the reason that the thought is so compelling while I’m hiking, is that while I am thinking it I am actually experiencing the well-being that hiking promotes. A stream of affirming sensations, feelings, and perceptions re-affirm and re-elicit the thought that this, and now this, and now this too, is palpably good for me. In effect, I’m having different thoughts from the thoughts possible for me in the city, thinking about the benefits of hiking in the abstract, assenting to but not directly experiencing the benefits of hiking. This presents a problem, because when it comes to planning a hike, I am usually in the city. How can I give bushwalking the place in my thinking that it truly merits, when I am not in the place where its true merit is revealed to me?

Episodic memory holds a key. By remembering what it was like when I was hiking, I can, at least to some degree, resituate my thinking in a mental context that elicits my conviction as it occurred to me then. Remembering a hike isn’t as compelling as actually being there, of course, but it does mean my present state of mind has more in common with my earlier perspective than it otherwise would. For although the phenomenology of episodic recall suggests only a ghostly trace of the original experience, the process of re-enactment regenerates some of the momentum and reactivates some of the intentional connections that characterised my thinking in the original experience. Thoughts that I could otherwise entertain only as abstract propositions, take as their objects real episodes from my life, and so resonate more strongly with me as true to my experience. Mentally re-enacting my experience of bushwalking guides my train of thought, showing me, by example, how to think about that which makes my belief true, in a way that makes its truth compelling. Knowing that episodic memory works in this way, I know how to think
about the benefits of hiking, to the best of my ability to remember them.

In this brief paper I have tried to illustrate, by example, how thinking about episodic remembering as mental re-enactment might offer a fruitful approach by which to extend our understanding of the functions of episodic memory in everyday life. It might be objected that the 'know-how' I have identified does not depend on episodic remembering, but is merely supported, in certain instances, by the affective impetus remembering generates. (I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this concern.) Actually I think that these two ways of understanding memory's contribution amount to more or less the same thing, expressed through different conceptions of what know-how involves. It is not as if we ever forget how to will, to think, or to feel, and so we don't need to re-learn anything by remembering that which we have already done. And yet, our ability to employ the know-how we have learned waxes and wanes, depending on how well we are able to enact the perspective required. The mental re-enactment of remembered experience can enable us to think, feel, and will, from the perspective of our remembered past. Episodic memories thus open us to thoughts, feelings, and intentions which we might not be able to summon in the present. Of course, if who we are at any given moment is conditioned by our extended mental context, then at any given moment we can only be a part of who we are over the whole of our lives. That said, the more of our lives we can remember, the more of ourselves we can be.

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References


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