

# *Memory and Moral Understanding*

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February 10, 2017

A common thought is that memory is, in some sense, the testimony of our past selves. I propose a limitation to this idea based on the idea that, where testimony cannot be a source of moral understanding, memory can.

## *Two Common Ideas*

- Memory and testimony are similar epistemic sources – neutral between reliabilists<sup>1</sup> on the one hand and people who think they *preserve* or *transmit* knowledge and epistemic grounds, on the other.<sup>2</sup>
- Testimony cannot be a source of moral understanding – Hills (2009), Hopkins (2007), Howell (2014) and McGrath (2009).
- The question: can memory be a source of moral understanding where testimony cannot?

<sup>1</sup> See Lackey (2008) and Sosa (2010)

<sup>2</sup> See Burge (1993) and Dummett (1994).

## *A Bad Argument*

We might think this looks unproblematic:

- (1) I understand the rules of chess because I remember them.

But compare:

- (2) I understand the rules of chess because Emily explained them to me.

Both sound fine.<sup>3</sup> But since (2) doesn't establish memory as a source of understanding, we shouldn't think that (1) establishes memory in this way.

<sup>3</sup> To my ear anyway..(?)

## *A Case for Memory as a Source of Moral Understanding*

**Moral Memory:** At time  $t_1$ , Nicola both believes that lying to save someone's life is morally permissible, is aware of the considerations that explain the moral permissibility of lying to save someone's life and also understands the moral permissibility of doing so. At time  $t_2$ , however, Nicola still believes that lying to save someone's life is morally permissible and is aware of the considerations that explain the moral permissibility of lying to save someone's life, but she no longer understands the moral permissibility of lying to save someone's life. Later, she hears her friend make a poor argument

to the conclusion that lying to save someone's life is not morally permissible. Nicola is not remotely disposed to find her friend's argument plausible, but when she hears it, she recalls her previous understanding of the moral permissibility of lying to save someone's life. At  $t_3$ , she thus again understands the moral permissibility of lying to save someone's life.

Here are the two claims that are plausible in this case:

- (i) At  $t_3$ , Nicola understands the permissibility of lying to save someone's life.
- (ii) The source of Nicola's understanding at  $t_3$  is her remembering.<sup>4</sup>

*Why (i)?*

- Plausibly, Nicola can meet the criteria associated with understanding that Hills identifies.<sup>5</sup>

*Why (ii)?*

- Distinguish between being the *source* of something and a *trigger* for it.
  - There's plausibly a difference between the relationship between Nicola's friend's poor argument (a trigger) and her belief, on the one hand, and the relationship between her remembering and her belief on the other.<sup>6</sup>
  - If it's not the source of her belief, then what is?

### *The Difference Between Testimony and Memory*

- Barnett (2015) offers the following cases:

**Two Sources:** Sherlock tells you that  $\phi$  and Clouseau tells you that  $\psi$ , where  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  are independent of one another. Based on the considerations that you are aware of, you have no reason for favouring Sherlock's testimony over Clouseau's. As a result, you believe both  $\phi$ , based on Sherlock's testimony and  $\psi$ , based on Clouseau's testimony. Unbeknownst to you, however, Sherlock's belief that  $\phi$  is based on excellent reasons, where Clouseau's belief that  $\psi$  is based on very poor reasons (Barnett, 2015, p. 358).

The second concerns memory:

**Two Beliefs:** On Monday you formed the belief that  $\phi$  and on Tuesday, you formed the belief that  $\psi$ , where  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  are independent of one another. Your belief that  $\phi$  was formed on the basis of excellent reasons, whereas your belief that  $\psi$  was formed on the basis of very

<sup>4</sup> There's a live question of whether showing that possibly (i) and possibly (ii) shows possible (i) and (ii). But I'm not sure of the best way to argue for this..(?)

<sup>5</sup> The criteria are the following:

1. follow an explanation of why  $p$  given by someone else;
2. explain  $p$  in her own words;
3. draw the conclusion that  $p$  (or that probably  $p$ ) from the information that  $q$ ;
4. draw the conclusion that  $p'$  (or that probably  $p'$ ) from the information that  $q'$  (where  $p'$  and  $q'$  are similar to but not identical to  $p$  and  $q$ );
5. given the information that  $p$ , give the right explanation,  $q$ ;
6. given the information that  $p'$ , give the right explanation,  $q'$  (Hills, 2009, pp. 102-103).

<sup>6</sup> Worth noting that even if memory triggers more memory, this would still be memory as a source of understanding.

poor reasons. On Wednesday, having forgotten nothing, reconsidered nothing, and learned no new relevant evidence, you recall both  $\phi$  and  $\psi$  occurrently, without recalling your original reasons for those conclusions (Barnett, 2015, p. 373).

- Barnett’s argument is that your earlier reasons might be relevant to your later belief in a way that a speaker’s reasons could never be relevant to a listener’s belief.
- The idea is that you might later recognise your bad reasons and thus come to abandon your view. This can’t be done in a case of a speaker without acquiring further evidence.
- But there would seem to be cases in which a speaker’s reasons *might* be relevant to a listener’s justification.<sup>7</sup>
- On the face of it the reasons are relevant not *because of* your testimony. But in Barnett’s case something similar is true – it’s not memory that matters.
- In the **Moral Memory** case, the idea is that memory provides something testimony cannot.

<sup>7</sup> Suppose you and I see the same sign that there’s a production of 1984 at the Maths Institute and you subsequently tell me . . .

### Deference

- Howell points out that those who think that there’s something wrong with deferring to others should find something equally wrong with deferring to our past selves.<sup>8</sup>
- This sounds highly plausible. But it needn’t be incompatible with the idea that I’ve been suggesting about an asymmetry between memory and testimony. The point is that, sometimes, memory doesn’t involve deferring. It can sometimes make something available to you that doesn’t require you to defer in any sense.

<sup>8</sup> Moral amnesia: I can’t remember my previous values, but I discover that I used to believe that lying is always wrong . . .

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