



Fernández, J. (2019). *Memory: a self-referential account.* Oxford University Press

Juan F. Álvarez

Université Grenoble-Alpes, Grenoble, France
Email: jalvarces@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0002-3726-470X

<https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ef.n64a13>

Fernández' most recent book constitutes an articulated development of several philosophical considerations on memory displayed in his previous and forthcoming publications. The result of such an articulated development ends up being a consistent account that provides an innovative and thought-provoking perspective on episodic remembering. This volume not only gathers and articulates the author's previous ideas, but also provides new reflections on, and objections to alternate theories of memory, which encompass four significant domains in the philosophy of memory. In the first part of the book ([Chapters 1, 2, and 3](#)), Fernández offers an account of both the metaphysics and the intentionality of episodic memory; in the second part ([Chapters 4 and 5](#)), the author deals with certain phenomenological aspects involved in remembering; in the third part ([Chapters 6 and 7](#)), two important debates in the epistemology of memory are discussed.

Chapter 1 spells out the *explanandum* of the book, and the adopted strategy to construct a suitable *explanans*. The metaphysical, intentional, phenomenological, and epistemic aspects of episodic memory compose the project's *explanandum*. The first aspect is related to the conditions under which a mental state qualifies as an instance of episodic remembering. The second one concerns the representations or contents of memories. The third aspect is about the experience or what-it-is-like aspect of remembering. The fourth one is related to the kind of justification that episodic memory provides for knowledge. Fernández' strategy consists in taking both

the intentionality and the metaphysics of memory as fundamental pillars on the basis of which the explanations about the phenomenological and the epistemological issues are constructed. More specifically, the intentional pillar –what the author calls the “self-referential view of mnemonic content”– is the principal source of information used in the accounts of both the experience and the epistemic justification afforded by episodic memory. Fernández’ self-referential view is actually the main pillar of the book because his accounts of the phenomenology and the epistemology of memory depend on it, whereas the metaphysical pillar simply works as a background that provides the definition of what a memory is. Both pillars are then independent: if Fernández’ metaphysical view turns out to be false, the self-referential view may remain true; if the latter turns out to be false, the former may remain true.¹

The construction of the metaphysical pillar is the goal of [Chapter 2](#). Fernández uses a functionalist framework, according to which episodic memories are determined by their causal relations with certain inputs and outputs of the subject’s cognitive system. Instances of remembering are thus individuated not in terms of some intrinsic property, but in terms of the functional role the state plays. A mental state qualifies as an instance of remembering, i.e., plays memory’s functional role only if: first, the mental state tends to be caused by a specific input, which is the past experience of the event; second, the mental state tends to cause a certain output in the subject, namely, a disposition to believe both that the remembered event occurred and that she experienced it. Accordingly, if a mental state of the subject’s cognitive system meets these two conditions, then the mental state in question is playing a mnemonic role; and if the subject’s cognitive system has a mental state that plays a mnemonic role, the subject is remembering.

The intentional pillar is built in [Chapter 3](#). Fernández’ proposal on the intentionality of memory is the result of a rigorous intuition-based analysis of the truth conditions of mnemonic content. According to the self-referential view defended by the author –which he calls the “reflexive view”– memories represent themselves as coming from a veridical perception of the fact that the subject affirms to remember, i.e., memories represent their own causal origin. Given the reflexive view of the self-referential approach, at least four elements are involved in mnemonic content: (i) the memory itself, (ii) the veridical past perceptual experience, (iii) the objective fact, and more importantly, (iv) the relations involving those elements, some of which are causal relations. Moreover, the content of a memory could be spelled out in the form of a proposition that connects these elements in a suitable way, such as: ‘the memory in question is caused by a subject having perceived an objective fact through a perceptual experience of it’ (Cf. Fernández, 2006, p. 54; 2019, p. 79).

¹ However, if this is the case –if the self-referential view turns out to be false– Fernández’ proposals on the phenomenology and the epistemology of memory will also be false.

Since Fernández assumes that the intentional properties of memories are responsible for their phenomenal properties, i.e., the phenomenal properties depend on the intentional properties, his self-referential view constitutes the account's core of the phenomenology of remembering. Fernández' account focuses on three phenomenological features that compose the what-it-is-like aspect of memory: two of those features are related to the experience of time, and the other one to the feeling of ownership. Chapter 4 provides the explanation of the former features, which are the "awareness of previous experience" –the awareness of what it was like for the subject to perceptually experience the remembered fact– and the "feeling of pastness" –the awareness of the remembered fact as having obtained in the past. From the self-referential point of view, both experiences are due to the kind of content carried by memories. On the one hand, the presence of the awareness of previous experience is due to the experience of component (ii) of the mnemonic content –the veridical past perceptual experience. In other words, in virtue of the subject's memory representing the relevant past perceptual experience, the subject is able to have the awareness of the qualitative properties involved in the past perceptual experience. On the other hand, the presence of the feeling of pastness is due to the experience of component (iv), which in this case is the causal relation between the past perception of the fact and the resulting memory. Thus, by representing and experiencing this past causal relation the subject is able to subsequently experience her memory as having obtained in the past. An important consequence of this idea is that the feeling of pastness is not the awareness of a fact's temporal property, but the awareness of the memory's causal origin, which is, again, part of its content.

Chapter 5 offers the explanation of the phenomenal feature related to the sense of "mineness" that memory seems to involve, which is characterized as the "feeling of ownership" or the subject's experience that she is the owner of her memories. The nature of this experience is allegedly explained by what the author calls the "endorsement model", according to which a subject endorses her memories because they seem to match the past. Subjects are then aware of their memories as being their own to the extent that they are aware of them matching the past. Once again, Fernández' endorsement model is based on the self-referential view, given that the model takes a component of mnemonic content in order to explain the presence and absence of the feeling of ownership. In this case, the relevant component is (ii) –the veridical past perceptual experience. In particular, the issue here is related to the perceptual experience's veridicality. In normal circumstances, a subject can endorse a memory and claim that it matches the past because it is assumed that the experience was veridical. If the subject brings into question the veridicality of a remembered perceptual experience, she cannot have the distinctive phenomenology of her memory as being her own.

In Chapter 6, Fernández' thesis is that, due to the nature of mnemonic content, memory judgments have a particular epistemic aspect: immunity to error through misidentification, whereby one cannot be wrong as to the identity of the remembered subject of the experience. A subject's memory judgment may constitute an error through misidentification when three conditions are fulfilled: (a) the memory represents a subject as having had certain property, (b) the memory is fully accurate, and (c) the subject mistakenly thinks that she is identical to the represented subject. Although the very existence of observer memories –memories that show the subject as part of a remembered scene– might undermine Fernández' thesis because the subject could easily misidentify herself, the author argues that component (ii) of mnemonic content –the past perceptual experience– is responsible for preventing memory judgements fulfilling condition (c).² More precisely, a further analysis of component (ii) allegedly shows that part of the content of the remembered perceptual experience is the self as the bearer of extrinsic properties, i.e., in a remembered perception subjects are aware of themselves as the bearers of certain relations to objects of the perceived scene. Thus, if the remembered perceptual experience implies self-awareness of the experiencer, she cannot be mistaken in thinking that she is identical to the represented subject.

Finally, Chapter 7 offers a new position in the debate on the epistemology of memory between preservativism and generativism. The central question of this debate is whether memory merely *preserves* epistemic justification or can also *generate* it. Based on the self-referential view, Fernández makes a case for a form of generativism according to which memory is a basic epistemic source, that is, memory is an independent source that generates justification without relying on other epistemic sources. What allows the author to argue for this view is component (iv) of mnemonic content –the causal relation between the memory itself originating from a veridical perception of a fact. Since (iv) is only provided by memory and not by any other source, subjects can have justification for forming beliefs about the causal histories of their own memories. Note that not even the relevant perception in which the memory state originated can afford this justification because, at the moment of perceiving, the content that the eventual memory causally originated in the current perception is not available. Only episodic memory generates this content, which can constitute new grounds to form certain justified beliefs.

2 Fernández' discussion of observer memories is, however, more intricate. Although for the author it is fairly clear that the possibility of having observer memories does not undermine the fact that memory is immune to error through misidentification, the specific reason that supports this claim may vary. After examining three variants of the same observer memory case, the author provides three possible reasons that might support such an idea: observer memories do not engender false memory judgements, or they are not fully accurate, or they are not genuine memories (Fernández, 2019, p. 156). Fernández nevertheless is not explicitly committed to one of these reasons, and for him the possibility that one of them might potentially explain why having observer memories does not undermine the fact that episodic memory is immune to error through misidentification seems to be enough.

There are at least two main contributions to the philosophy of memory that Fernández makes that are worth highlighting. Firstly, Fernández' functionalist theory enriches the discussions on the metaphysics of memory that are dominated by causal and simulation theories nowadays. As noted by Michaelian & Robins (2018), given that memories –under the functionalist theory– do not need to be actually caused by past experiences, Fernández' metaphysical proposal denies both the sufficiency and necessity of a causal connection between current memories and past experiences in order to account for remembering. Therefore, along with the simulation theory, the functionalist explanation represents a rupture with the predominant causal account in the philosophy of memory (Michaelian & Robins, 2018, p. 28).³ Secondly, Fernández' proposal on mnemonic content as a source of theoretical tools to clarify other philosophical issues may have interesting explanatory potential. On the one hand, philosophers could use this argumentative strategy to propose alternative perspectives to other recent debates in the philosophy of memory. On the other hand, philosophers could criticize and reject the strategy, its explanatory value, and its implications for the phenomenology and the epistemology of memory. Either option should provide interesting and important philosophical reflections on the nature of episodic memory.

Philosophers of memory already started to take into consideration Fernández' proposals with a critical spirit. Sant'Anna & Michaelian (2019) and Bernecker (2020) have shown some difficulties in Fernández' accounts of the metaphysics and the intentionality of remembering. Sant'Anna & Michaelian allege that the functionalist theory is too strict because it rules out both cases in which the subject does not form the disposition to believe that the remembered event occurred, and cases in which she forms instead the disposition to disbelief the occurrence of the event. They also claim that, since the theory rejects the necessity of a causal connection between memories and past experiences, it has difficulties in explaining the alleged particularity of remembering, which is that memories are about particular past events.⁴ In addition, Bernecker has pointed out, in the first review of the book, that the self-referential view of mnemonic content is mysterious and needs further explanations, because it is unclear how different memories represent their distinct causes when this information is inaccessible to the rememberer.

Regarding the phenomenology and the epistemology of memory, Perrin, Michaelian & Sant'Anna (2020) and Michaelian (2020) criticize some aspects of Fernández' proposal. Perrin, Michaelian & Sant'Anna present three objections against Fernández' view on the feeling of pastness. First, Fernández pretends to propose a first-order

3 Michaelian & Robins' comments on the functionalist theory of memory are based on Fernández (2018), which is a previous version of Chapter 2 of his book.

4 As Sant'Anna & Michaelian indicate, explaining the alleged particularity of remembering is not only a problem for the functionalist theory, but also for the simulation theory of memory.

representationalist account of memory, but the idea that the feeling of pastness is an experience of the causal component of mnemonic content does not seem to be an account of this kind. Second, they suggest that the claim according to which subjects experience some components of mnemonic content is not fully clear: for example, how can something as abstract as the causal component of mnemonic content be an object of introspection? Third, Fernández' proposal is not supported by empirical evidence and, actually, Perrin, Michaelian & Sant'Anna point out that some empirical work demonstrates that the feeling of pastness is sensitive not to the features of the content of memory states, but to the features of the processes that generate those states. With respect to one of the epistemic aspects of remembering, Michaelian asserts that Fernández' thesis that memories are immune to error through misidentification is misguided, because, Michaelian thinks, it is built on both a problematic view of mnemonic content and a questionable definition of observer memory. Contrary to Fernández, Michaelian contends that observer memories do imply that memory is vulnerable to errors through misidentification.

These criticisms highlight that the functionalist theory of memory, the self-referential view of mnemonic content, and the applications of the latter to the phenomenology and the epistemology of memory need further developments and clarifications, to confront important objections, and discuss with rival theories. All in all, this indicates that *Memory: A Self-Referential Account* has already had a considerable impact on the field, and that it will certainly be present in many important debates in the philosophy of memory.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Denis Perrin and Christopher McCarroll for comments on an earlier version of this review. Thanks to Kourken Michaelian for numerous discussions on Fernández' book. This review has substantially benefited from their remarks and invaluable suggestions.

References

- Bernecker, S. (2020). Review of the book *Memory: a self-referential account*, by J. Fernández. *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews. An Electronic Journal*. <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/memory-a-self-referential-account/>
- Fernández, J. (2006). The intentionality of memory. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 84(1), 39-57. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00048400600571695>
- Fernández, J. (2018). The functional character of memory. In K. Michaelian, D. Debus, & D. Perrin (Eds.), *New directions in the philosophy of memory* (pp. 52-72). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315159591>

- Fernández, J. (2019). *Memory: a self-referential account*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190073008.001.0001>
- Michaelian, K. (2020). Episodic memory is not immune to error through misidentification: against Fernández. *Synthese*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-020-02652-w>
- Michaelian, K. & Robins, S. K. (2018). Beyond the causal theory? Fifty years after Martin and Deutscher. In K. Michaelian, D. Debus & D. Perrin (Eds.), *New directions in the philosophy of memory* (pp. 13-32). Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315159591>
- Perrin, D., Michaelian, K. & Sant'Anna, A. (2020). The phenomenology of remembering is an epistemic feeling. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:1531. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.01531>
- Sant'Anna, A. & Michaelian, K. (2019). Teorías sobre o lembrar: causalismo, simulacionismo e funcionalismo. *Voluntas: Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, 10(3), 8-36. <https://doi.org/10.5902/2179378640445>