

Joint Reminiscing and Understanding the Past

DRAFT—DO NOT CIRCULATE

Abstract

Conversations about the past are ubiquitous type of human interaction. People constantly recount and discuss things they have done, that have befallen them, or that they have witnessed. These conversations are ubiquitous in adult life; and they are also an important type of interaction between children as young as 2 and their caregivers. In this paper I argue that early exchanges of this kind may be seen to play a key cognitive developmental role, in supporting the emergence of a mature concept of the past. In doing so, I consider the similarities and discontinuities between joint reminiscing and the more frequently-discussed, developmentally prior phenomenon of joint perceptual attention, and the extent to which the latter might provide a model for the developmental role of the former. I argue that, despite significant parallels, joint reminiscing nevertheless poses distinct cognitive challenges of its own. Specifically, in the final section I argue that a key cognitive advance afforded by participation in joint reminiscing is a reflective understanding of the special causal link between memory and earlier experience.

Conversations about the past are ubiquitous type of human interaction. In these conversations, we readily think of the past as a realm existing somehow ‘out there’, independently of our knowledge of it. Imagine chatting with a friend about a holiday you enjoyed together. Part of what distinguishes this particular conversational activity from, say, fantasising about a merely imaginary holiday is the shared recognition you are both talking about something that actually happened, and hence that your discourse is ultimately answerable to the facts about what happened on that very occasion. While there may, of course, be discrepancies between your memories, and some stories get embellished in the telling while other details get passed over, there is nevertheless such a thing as getting it right or wrong,

and this is a matter of something other than mutual agreement or stipulation. Yet this is in spite of the fact that there is nothing in the present scene—or, for that matter, anywhere in the world—you can point to as settling once and for all what the facts are, precisely because what you are talking about is over and done with. Photographs and other records may be important sources of confirmation, but ultimately the truth or falsity of your reminiscences is settled, not by anything in how things are now, but by how things *were*.

This everyday realism about the past is so familiar as usually to go without saying. Yet it is a definite cognitive achievement, one that from a certain perspective can seem puzzling and remarkable. This puzzlement is expressed trenchantly in a passage from G. E. M. Anscombe's early paper, 'The Reality of the Past':

It seems possible to show someone what to mean when one wants him to say "red" with meaning, but impossible to show him what to mean by "was red"; for how does one get his attention directed to what he is to speak of? When one has to teach "red" one can at least ensure that the learner's eyes are looking in the right direction; and one would not expect to be able to teach him except on this condition. But if one is trying to teach the use of the past tense, then there is nothing to which one can direct his attention and nothing in him to direct in the hope of directing the attention, as in the other case [i.e. the case of "red"] it was possible to direct the eyes. (Anscombe1981aa)

Anscombe is posing a puzzle here about how an understanding of the meaning of the past tense, and the correlative idea of the past as real, could ever be acquired on the basis of learning and experience. An initial reaction would be to dismiss this puzzle as resting on a crude form of empiricism, on which every idea must have a corresponding impression (an empiricism that Anscombe herself wholeheartedly rejected.) As enculturated adult humans we enjoy a rich tapestry of representations of the temporal domain—from verbal tense and simple lexical markers to the clock and calendar, relativistic physics, and the *Four Quartets*—and it would surely be misplaced to insist that these can be all grasped in the same manner as simple observational concepts, like 'red'.

However, this reaction only gets us so far. Even if it is a mistake to ask for the specific impression from which our idea of the past is derived, it is still a legitimate question what forms of experience or neighbouring concepts it might be based on, or related to; and whether the process of acquiring whatever conceptual capacities

are implicated in full competence with the past tense can intelligibly be characterised as one of learning.¹

The aim of this paper is to sketch and defend an account on which our ordinary adult understanding of the past as real is, at least in cognitively and developmentally typical individuals, grounded partly in a specific kind of social experience: namely ‘joint reminiscing’ interactions in which we share with others memories about things we have done or witnessed together. On this account, reminiscing together about the past is not merely an opportunity for exercising and verbalising an independently acquired conceptual capacity; it is, rather, a context in which human subjects come to learn the meaning of the very idea of the past.²

The empirical case that joint reminiscing might play some such role has been argued by a number of developmental psychologists, such as Katherine Nelson and Robyn Fivush (**Nelson1996**; **Nelson2004-NELTEO-3**), who see these exchanges as central to the development of both episodic memory and mastery of temporal language. A key piece of evidence comes from longitudinal studies showing correlations between early joint reminiscing frequency and style, and subsequent episodic recall and temporal reasoning abilities.³

¹These questions still presuppose a more minimal empiricism, that ordinary realism about the past is in some way the outcome of learning and based in experience. This assumption would be rejected by, for instance, a radical nativism like Fodor’s (**Fodor1975-FODTLO**). A different rejection of this assumption is Anscombe’s own Wittgensteinian position in ‘The Reality of the Past’, which holds that the use of the past tense, though culturally acquired, is nevertheless groundless, in the sense of not being based on anything in a justifying way. Arguing directly against either of these positions is beyond the scope of this paper; however, insofar as either is motivated in part by the idea that the idea of the past could not be acquired through genuine learning in the relevant sense, what follows will constitute an indirect argument against them.

²The caveat ‘for...typical individuals’ indicates that I am holding short of making the strong claim that participation in joint reminiscing is necessary for possessing the concept of the past. In general, I think we should be sceptical of any such tight links between concepts and specific types of experience for all but the most immediately observational concepts (such as colour concepts). The point is rather to characterise a normal route by which humans come to acquire the idea of the past, one in which participation joint reminiscing features as a genuine learning experience. This characterisation is consistent with the possibility that individuals deprived of this particular type of experience might come to acquire in some other way something recognisable as the concept of the past.

³E.g. (**fivush_elaborating_2006**) [more?/] However, it is not immediately clear what to make this body of research with regard to Anscombe’s challenge. Fivush and others are often noncommittal about the exact strength of the link between joint reminiscing and episodic memory abilities; and their focus is often equally on the importance of joint reminiscing for the developmental of

Moreover, making good on the idea that joint reminiscing can help answer Anscombe's challenge faces some considerable conceptual obstacles. Engaging in joint reminiscing would seem to be possible at all only if one already has some capacity to refer to past events; and this might be suspected, far from supporting the emergence of any associated conception of the past as such, simply to presuppose it. This is, of course, a special case of a general challenge to any strategy which would seek explain our grip on one or another aspect of objective reality by appeal to our ability to communicate about it.

A second, more specific challenge is suggested by Anscombe's comment that, in trying to teach someone the meaning of the past tense, there is "nothing in him to direct in the hope of directing the attention". That is, when it comes to learning about the past, the requisite posture of the mind would seem to be an entirely internal, covert matter, with no equivalent of pointing movements and direction of the eyes and head, that might as physical cues to help direct the child's attention to the subject-matter.

The main aim of this paper, then, is not so much to review the empirical case for a specific developmental trajectory, but simply to characterise joint reminiscing, and the distinctive cognitive hurdles and challenges it involves, so as to make it intelligible how participation in joint reminiscing could indeed be an occasion for conceptual learning in the way envisaged by theorists such as Fivush and Nelson. Clearly, if joint reminiscing is characterised in such a way that participation in it flatly presupposes a prior mastery of the concept of the past, then the developmental case will be hopeless. A desideratum in what follows, then, will be to make plausible how there could be some kind of 'way in' to joint reminiscing for someone who does not yet possess a fully-fledged conceptual understanding of the kind in question.

The plan is as follows. In §1 I characterise the basic developmental challenge raised by joint reminiscing, drawing on Christoph Hoerl and Teresa McCormack's discussion of the specific way in which attention is recruited in episodic recall. In §2 I elaborate this point by exploring the parallels between joint reminiscing and autobiographical memory, and of a socially differentiated self, as for the basic idea of the past.

joint perceptual attention. In §3 I consider a ‘continuist’ model of how joint reminiscing might be thought to develop out of joint attention to perceptually present objects, and criticise it on the grounds that it fails to address the specific challenge involved in co-ordinating attention when this involves a concerted mental act of recall. In §4 I then critically consider Hoerl and McCormack’s proposal that this challenge can be met by appealing to a general grasp of ‘how causality unfolds in time.’ In §5 I then propose an alternative, on which joint reminiscing involves a unique and very special type of causal understanding: understanding of the process of memory itself. This is not, however, a matter of applying more general causal reasoning abilities, but is essentially connected with the epistemic and communicative dimension to memory. In the conclusion I briefly reflect on how the socio-communicative account developed here reflects on the question of realism about the past.

1 EPISODIC RECALL AND ATTENDING TO THE PAST

We can make Anscombe’s puzzle more concrete by posing it developmentally. From around the third year of life onwards, children begin to be able to participate, with increasing levels of sophistication, in conversations with their caregivers about things they have done or experienced together. Here is a characteristic exchange, typical of many such examples collected in the developmental literature, between a mother and her 25-month daughter about a recent trip on a glass-bottomed boat:

M: . . . What happened when you looked through the glass in the bottom of the boat? What could you see?

C: A fish.

M: And was it pretty colours?

C: Mm.

M: Do you remember what colours the fish were?

C: Red pish [fish].

M: Red fish?

C: Yeah.

M: And yellow spots.

C: Uh mmm.

M: And do you remember feeding the fish?

C: Mmm.

M: What did we feed the fish with?

C: Ah some bread.
M: Bread. That's right. We fed the fish with bread. And Mummy and Daddy and Kate all had a swim in the water too. And what happened when we were swimming?
C: Aye ate a uh uh jelly shoe.
M: Your jelly shoe. What happened to your jelly shoe?
C: I got some um backa uh a backa boat.
M: On the back of the boat. And your jelly shoe fell in the water, didn't it?
C: Mmm.⁴

What can we say about the cognitive demands placed on the child by this exchange? Clearly, participating in it requires both parties in some sense to have memories of the event in question. Specifically, it plausibly requires them to have 'episodic' memories—memories of particular past events, as opposed to simply retained factual information or 'semantic' memory.⁵ But it is not just that the child has memories that are in fact of this rather than that event; in order for the conversation to work, the child has to draw on these memories in a particular way. That is, the child has to have some grip, however sketchily, on the idea that what is going on here is a conversation about something that actually happened on a particular past occasion, and the aim of the conversation is to get it right about what happened on that occasion.

To bring out the distinctive challenge for the child, we might contrast this cognitive project with the one implicated in another common type of early conversational interaction. Developmental research has consistently documented that preschoolers are very good at recounting how things generally go in various kinds of familiar social situations. For example, on being asked what happens at bedtime, a child might be able to provide an answer along the lines: first you have a bath, then you put your pyjamas on, then brush your teeth, and so on.⁶ In these kinds of conversation, as with the one above, it seems compelling that the child must in some sense have a feel for what is a right and a wrong answer to the question. However,

⁴From (Reese2002).

⁵The distinction between episodic and semantic memory is associated with the work of Ender Tulving (Tulving1985-TULEOE). However, there is some controversy as to how exactly the distinction between semantic and episodic memory should be drawn. See, for instance, (Perrin2014-PERTEO-16) for a helpful overview. I will aim to sidestep these definitional debates by focusing on the question what kinds of conceptual capacities, beyond episodic memory itself, puts the child in a position to engage in conversations about the past.

⁶Nelson1986 is a systematic study of this aspect of children's knowledge.

since the question does not concern any specific actual occurrence, the child need not necessarily understand the difference between a right and a wrong answer in terms of whether it is an accurate description of something that really happened, but is now over. Instead, it may be that a ‘right answer’ here means something more like the appropriate completion of a sequence. On this construal, knowing how a generic event-sequence like the bedtime routine ‘goes’ would be more like knowing how a song goes, or how the alphabet sequence goes—there is, to be sure, a difference between a right and a wrong continuation of a song, or of the alphabet sequence, but this does not mean that getting it right is a matter of producing a correct description of some actual historical performance of the song, or a generalisation over multiple actual performances. Getting it right here is just a matter of continuing in the conventionally proper way—in something like the way a child might understand saying ‘Thank you’ as the proper response to a gift or a favour.⁷

By contrast, in the exchange above, no such deflationary understanding of the difference between a right and wrong answer is available. A right answer here is more than just an appropriate response—in the sense in which ‘Thank you’ can be an appropriate response—but specifically is one that corresponds faithfully to what happened on a certain actual past occasion. To participate properly in the conversation, the daughter cannot simply rattle off an approved or expected answer at each turn, but must genuinely cast her mind back to that particular occasion and think about what happened.

A question this raises, then, is whether an adequate grip on the nature of the communicative situation necessarily amounts to a full-fledged concept of the past.

⁷It is worth stressing that the suggestion here is emphatically not that what appear to be the child’s reports of how things normally go are really nothing more than a string of verbalisations, devoid of representational content. Being able to produce a verbal description of what happens, say, at a restaurant is clearly connected with knowing what to do and what to expect on a trip to a restaurant, and hence the child’s verbal reports must at least be coordinated with action representations that can equally be deployed in navigating real instances of that type of situation. All this implies, though, is that, unlike the simplest cases of knowing how a song goes, the format of the knowledge in question must be flexible enough that it can be expressed equally in verbalisation and in action—in something like the way that the song “Head, shoulders, knees and toes” is both a song and the representation of a specific motor routine, which can be performed with or without singing the song. It does not imply that the difference between a right and a wrong answer here needs to be understood in terms that import any notions of truth and reference to other times.

If so, then the idea that the experience of joint reminiscing might form part of a basis for understanding the past looks distinctly unpromising.

An alternative way of thinking about what is required here is suggested by Christoph Hoerl and Teresa McCormack in their 2005 paper on joint reminiscing. Hoerl and McCormack propose that we see attention as being the key mechanism mediating between, on the one hand, information retained in memory, and, on the other hand, and the kind of thought about the past as such required for communicating about it. They explain:

Just as we can ask what it takes for a subject to use perception to answer questions about her current environment, so we can ask what it takes for a subject to use her memory to answer questions about her past environment. The answer, in each case, turns on the general notion of attention as a mechanism mediating a particular kind of active involvement on the part of the subject in the processing of information. Putting this notion of attention to work...requires acknowledging that successful recollection of a past event depends on two factors: (a) the subject's having experienced the event and having retained information from that experience, and (b) the subject's being able to draw on such information in a specific way. (Hoerl2005-HOEJRA)

This 'specific way' in which the child has to draw on its memories in order to participate is, in the case of joint reminiscing, to answer a question about what actually happened on that particular occasion—in contrast, for instance, with a use of one's memory to answer a question about what something looks or sounds like, or the words of a song.

This gloss on what active recall requires, beyond the mere having of episodic memories, might seem not to take us very far from the previous problem. If attending to one's memories in the requisite way in turn means using one's memory to answer certain questions, this might be thought to be possible only if one already possesses the concepts required to frame those questions. And this would seem to imply that one can direct someone's attention towards past events only if they already possess the concept of the past. This is just the stumbling block encountered by Anscombe, when she continues: 'Yet it seems that a necessary condition of his being able to grasp the meaning of "there was red" is his attending to the right thing, i.e. to the past showing of red, and that this can only happen if his mind is looking in the right direction: *but how can his mind look in the right direction unless he already has the idea of the past?*' (p. 105, final emphasis added).

The model of joint perceptual attention to environmental objects offers a potential way out of this puzzle. The phenomenon of joint attention has been of enormous interest to developmental psychologists and philosophers over the last few decades, precisely because it seems to be an important precursor both to a fully-fledged capacity to refer to mind-independent objects, and to an understanding of other minds, without simply presupposing these cognitive abilities.

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2 JOINT ATTENTION AS A MODEL AND PRECURSOR

It is by now a well-established datum in developmental psychology that from around nine months of age, infants begin to be able to share attention with others by following direction of gaze and pointing gestures. By around the second birthday, this pattern of engagement is typically much more developed, with infants initiating joint attention themselves, and offering verbal or pre-verbal ‘comments’ on the objects of joint attention. These interactions are often held to provide the key to a developing grasp of fundamental linguistic categories, and the ability to understand language as referring to an objective, public world of mind-independent objects. So we might look to joint perceptual attention as a model, both for the distinctive cognitive challenge involved in joint reminiscing; and, at the same time, for how joint reminiscing could support, rather than merely presupposing, understanding of the past.

A crucial and distinguishing feature of joint attentional interactions is that not only are the adult and child both directing their attention at the same thing, but this is in some sense mutually apparent. Michael Tomasello explains:

Importantly, in classic accounts of joint attention...the engagement here is not only triadic—the infant and adult are sharing attention to an external entity or situation—but, in addition, it has a kind of recursive social structure. The infant is attending not only to the adult’s attention to the object, but also to the adult’s attention to her attention to the object, and to the adult’s attention to her attention to the adult’s attention to the object, and so on. It is not that the infant engages in this kind of recursive thinking explicitly, but that the underlying structure of joint attention means that they both know together that they both are attending to the same thing. They are sharing experience. (Tomasello 2019)

One set of questions this characterisation raises, which I will largely set aside, is how exactly this ‘recursive’ structure should be characterised, without imposing unrealistic cognitive burdens on the participants.⁸ However this issue is to be resolved, though, what is unarguable is that joint attention in some sense involves an awareness of the other person’s attention to the object. In this connection, one of the most notable features of joint attention and its development is the way in which children become increasingly sensitive to the presence or absence of enabling conditions, and perform increasingly sophisticated checks that the intended partner is looking in the right direction, with growing sensitivity to line of sight considerations, and so on.⁹ Thus, one way in which joint attention might be thought to be developmentally significant is as a key context in which children explore and learn about the existence of other perceptual perspectives.¹⁰

However, the sense in which joint attention involves ‘sharing experience’ suggests something more than just this. A similar sensitivity to conditions on perceptibility is also shown, for instance, by a primate who hides a food item out of sight of a dominant conspecific. This sort of behaviour, taken alone, might be taken to exploit a grasp of condition of perceptibility only in the relatively weak sense that certain conditions, like a clear line of sight between a conspecific and a food item, are associated with certain actions toward that object, like the conspecific attempting to retrieve the item.

What seems to be on display in joint attention, at least incipiently, is something richer: namely, the idea of perception as a form of awareness or knowledge; one that is enabled by, but not identical with, physical actions such as looking, with appropriate orientation of the head and eyes, and the absence of interfering conditions such as occluding obstacles. On this construal, joint attention involves an

⁸For some different ways of tackling this issue, see (Peacocke2005; Campbell2005; Wilby2023-WILTFA-19).

⁹For a review, see (FrancoButterworth1996).

¹⁰In (Flavell:1992vm)’s influential schema, this amounts to ‘Level 1’ perspective-taking; the idea that what another person can see may be different from what I can see, if for instance they are looking in a different direction, or there is an opaque barrier in the way. It falls short of the ‘Level 2’ insight that things can look different to differently situated perceivers. See (MollMeltzoff2011) for an account of the developmental trajectory from early joint attentional interactions to Level 2 perspective-taking.

implicit appreciation for the idea that both participants share a subjective take on the same reality.

This richer idea of ‘sharing experience’ is connected with joint attention’s communicative role. The most important clue here is the ‘proto-declarative’ nature of joint attentional interactions: infants engage in joint attention, not merely in order to request some desired object, but rather to express interest, or to ‘comment’ on the object, and to elicit a consonant reaction in their partner.¹¹ It is possible to see in these ‘comments’—in contrast with merely ‘imperative’ expressions and gestures, tantamount to requests to be brought an object— a distinctively referential, or assertoric, function: they are not just responses *to* an object of shared attention, in the sense of being causally triggered by, and oriented towards it, but are *about* it, in being something like a judgment that the other is invited to share in. For the other to share in this (proto-)judgment, they must not only be poised to act on the object, but able to appreciate that the object does indeed have those features that make the comment appropriate.¹²

Putting these two components together—the idea of perceptibility as subject to enabling conditions, and the idea of perception as knowledge of the shared environment—we can see how joint attention might provide a framework for the development of properly conceptual thought about objects in the spatial environment. Genuinely conceptual thought, arguably, cannot simply be a matter of representations which pattern in the right way to appropriate stimulation. For instance, it is not enough that a judgment that something is red typically follow a perceptual presentation as of something red. Conceptual thought has an intrinsic generality to it, so that a judgment that some object *o* is *F* must flow from a general grasp of what it is for something to be *F* that is independent of any particular way

¹¹A key behavioural marker of this proto-declarative stance is the performance, in addition to anticipatory and confirmatory direction-of-gaze checks, ‘sharing looks’, in which the child looks back to the caregiver in order to express some emotional or aesthetic reaction—often of quite a complex and subtle kind (Carpenter2011). The sharing look brings a kind of closure to the interaction, making clear that the aim of was not the instrumental one of facilitate some result, such as being brought the object in question, but rather simply to share an appreciative reaction to the object with the other person.

¹²See (Roessler2005) for a development of this idea.

of being presented with the fact of *o*'s being *F*.¹³ And, arguably, this is just what the understanding of perceptual perspectives implicit in joint attention provides the groundwork for. The increasingly developed sensitivity of proto-declarative comments to whether or not the other person can see amounts to a growing appreciation for the way in which their apprehension of the reality I perceive depends on their own perceptual position. And this paves the way for a fully general conception of objects being as they are independently of any particular way of apprehending them.

Clearly, there is far more to be said about every element of this story than I can hope to attempt here. Nevertheless, this rough sketch of the developmental importance of joint attention provides us with a suggestive model for how joint reminiscing might provide a basis for conceptual understanding of the past. On the one hand, it is by no means obviously a consequence of the above story that participation in joint attention is only possible given the kind of fully general conception of the subject matter which it is supposed to support. It thus makes it at least intelligible how an infant might manage to participate in joint attention, but only later come to represent the object of this activity in fully conceptual terms. Just so, it might be hoped that this provides a model for how joint reminiscing might be possible, prior to representing in fully conceptual terms the idea that the object of joint reminiscing is something past.

At the same time, the above story makes intelligible how joint attention could lead the way to full conceptual understanding. The key component here is the way in which joint attention provides a frame for the development of an increasingly sophisticated understanding of perception itself, specifically of perception as a form of knowledge subject to causal enabling conditions. The analogous suggestion for joint reminiscing, then, would be that it provides conceptual understanding of the past insofar as it involves a developing appreciation for the conditions on being in a position episodically to remember something.

Two questions that emerge are thus: 1) to what extent does joint attention provide an adequate model for joint reminiscing, and specifically for how it might

¹³This point about the generality of conceptual thought is a central theme of (Evans:1982aa).

be possible absent a fully conceptual grasp of the past as such?; and 2) how might joint reminiscing provide a frame for learning about the conditions on remembering, analogous to the way in which joint attention allows infants to learn about the conditions of perceptibility?

The next section will tackle the first of these question, taking as a starting point a ‘continuist’ account of the relationship between attention reminiscing and joint reminiscing, before considering what needs to be added to this account to answer the second question.

3 SHARING A PAST

A ‘continuist’ approach to explaining joint attention sees it as an outgrowth of earlier, dyadic interactions between parent and child, with no third term involved. In a similar vein, one suggestion would be that joint reminiscing is not merely analogous to, but in some way an extension of, joint perceptual attention.

Vasudevi Reddy, for instance, argues that joint attention is grounded in a sensitivity to the gaze of others, the developmentally basic form of which is ‘feeling’ the other’s gaze—a highly distinctive pattern of sensory and bodily changes following the detection of another’s gaze as directed at oneself. She writes: ‘it is only if gaze is first felt to the self that another’s gaze toward other things in the world—to one’s own body or acts or to objects distant in space or to events distant in time—can be understood as attending in the way that we commonly understand the term’ (Reddy2011) She then sees joint attention to distal objects as less of a radical cognitive discovery of the external world, and more as part of a gradual process of externalising and expanding the domain of objects recognised as falling under the gaze of others: from first an undifferentiated self, then specific body parts, facial expressions and bodily actions, toys involved in actions, and so on to distal objects and events that are merely observed and not acted on or with. It is then not much of a further step to suppose that this process of externalisation might be continued beyond the here and now: as Reddy suggests, ‘the infant’s awareness of the objects of others’ attention expands...to nonpresent objects and events in time.’ (p. 146)

In seeing how this last step could go, we might focus first on cases in which very little by way of verbal prompting is required to establish the requisite referential focus. A limiting case of this would be when two people are already attending jointly to an occurrent event, and then, when it comes to an end continue to do so by means of their immediate memories of the event. For example, after watching an acrobat do a trick, a parent might say to their child ‘Wow! Wasn’t that amazing?’ Here the recency of the event might tempt us to classify this case simply as one of joint attention—even though, when the comment is offered, the event is strictly and literally in the past, and so keeping it in mind involves an exercise of memory.

Building on this idea, we might see more specific, descriptive verbal prompts to joint reminiscing—“Remember the animals at the zoo?”—as functioning in a similar manner, aiming to re-establish a triadic experiential connection that has been deactivated, though not entirely severed. Something is experienced jointly by two or more people, and at the time is an object of shared attention; when it finishes, other things intervene and the event lessens in salience, but it still remains *latently* salient. The verbal prompt aims to exploit this residual, or latent, salience, in order to restore the original connection.¹⁴ So, it might be suggested, the distinctive use of one’s memories to answer questions about what happened on a particular occasion is less of a distinctive cognitive achievement and more an outgrowth of less sophisticated forms of shared interaction: ones that are not explicitly recollective, but aim simply at maintaining focus on an occurrence as it concludes and recedes into the past.

What these cases serve to bring out is that many paradigmatic cases of early joint reminiscing take place, not as a one-off encounter, but in the context of an evolving and ongoing relationship, one that spans both the original shared event and the joint act of recall. It is not simply that both participants respectively have

¹⁴In a highly suggestive discussion of joint reminiscing, **Seemann2019-SEERTJ** similarly suggests that joint reminiscing aims to restore the original ‘epistemic constellation’ of an earlier joint attention triad; something that he suggests is ‘strictly speaking, impossible’. (p. 4824) While I would not necessarily wish to endorse this conclusion, it can be seen to be motivated by the same point I emphasise below: that, when there is a significant break or time-lag after the remembered event, joint reminiscing cannot be simply a matter of preserving an ongoing experiential connection, but requires a new, concerted act of recall.

memory images of the same event; the memories themselves are shared, in the sense that they constitute part of the shared experiential common ground of the participants.¹⁵ The fact that, in developmentally significant joint reminiscing interactions, the events in question are shared and thereby already mutually salient, can go some way to allaying Anscombe's worry that there is simply no way of directing someone's attention to the past if they do not already understand the meaning of the past tense. On this story, the developmentally primary cases are ones in which the child's mind is already primed to be 'looking in the right direction.'

However, this story as it stands suffers from two interrelated shortcomings. On the one hand, notwithstanding the observations above, there is still a significant contrast between cases of relatively uninterrupted joint focus on an occurrence as it goes from present to past, and cases where there is a significant time-lag of intervening activity: namely, that in the latter kind of case, re-establishing focus requires a concerted mental act of recall on the part of each participant. And the problem is that the account so far does have anything to say about how the former might develop into the latter.

This is connected with a second, more general shortcoming. The principal attraction of the continuist approach is that it shows how the communicative formation of joint reminiscing might make it possible to think about something that has happened, without necessarily conceptualising it as in the past. Yet, by the same token, the account as it stands provides few resources for explaining how participation in simpler cases of joint reminiscing might lead to conceptual understanding. For all that has been said, the child might continue to attend jointly to something which is now over, but without any real understanding that that thing is in the past, or of the difference between the past and the present.

The line of thought from the previous section suggests that part of what we

¹⁵One question this characterisation raises, and which was pressed by an anonymous reviewer, is whether their memories are 'distributed', in the sense that the information-processing mechanisms that enable them both to remember span the boundaries of either individual./// While I would not wish to rule out this possibility, I am not committed to it either: all I mean by saying their memories are 'shared' is that it forms a common part of, in **Sperber1995-SPECCA's** terminology, a mutual 'cognitive environment'; that is, both are aware of the object of memory in such a way that it is relatively salient to each of them as a possible object of discourse, and its salience to both is mutually apparent.

would need to appeal to here would be some way in which joint reminiscing might facilitate a reflective understanding of memory itself, as a contingent process that is subject to enabling conditions. This in turn would provide a foothold for the idea that there is more to the past than one can remember, and that one's memories of the past are fallible and corrigible. And this in turn provides for a fully general concept of the past, detachable from any given presentation of it in memory.

Yet this introduces a challenge which would seem to have no analogue in the case of joint perceptual attention. The triangulation of perceptual perspectives involved in joint attention has an overt, bodily guise. In joint attention, both parties can see each other seeing the object, and they can mutually co-ordinate their attention through their bodily actions and interactions, in the shared space they inhabit. By contrast, there is no corresponding overt bodily dimension to the feat of co-ordination involved in joint reminiscing, and no shared space encompassing both the participants and the object of attention. The act of recall required to enter into joint reminiscing in this respect would appear to be a purely inner act, with no outer bodily correlate. This is one way of seeing what is behind Anscombe's remark that, in trying to teach someone the idea of the past, there is 'nothing in him to direct in the hope of directing his attention' to the past.

In seeing how joint reminiscing could play anything like the envisaged developmental role, we need to find something in the situation of joint reminiscing that can serve as kind of cognitive proxy for physical cues like pointing gestures and eye movements. In the following sections I want to develop the idea that joint reminiscing exploits a particular kind of causal understanding, namely the understanding of memory as a special and unique kind of causal process.

4 TEMPORAL-CAUSAL REASONING

This suggestion is vaguely reminiscent of the Kantian idea that making sense of an objective temporal order between two contrary states requires conceiving of them as following one another in a law-governed causal progression. The specific developmental twist is that joint reminiscing provides the child with a motive and

opportunity to bootstrap the more general idea of a causal sequence in order to make sense of the relation of remembered events to the present. Specifically, Hoerl and McCormack suggest that what children learn in joint reminiscing is that remembered events do not bear rationally on what they ought to do, think or feel in the same way as present events, precisely because their effects have been overridden or counteracted by later developments. (This is a contrast with, for instance, merely imagined events, which fail to bear on the present simply because they are not real, without the need for any specifically causal story.) For example, in an excerpt of dialogue they discuss, a child recalls pinching her finger, and her mother reminds her that daddy came and made her feel better (p. 275; originally reported in (Fivush1994).) Here the positive and reassuring presence of daddy counteracts the negative effects of the hurt finger; and this is what helps the child in grasping the idea that, although she really did hurt her finger, this is no longer cause to be upset.

In their own discussion, Hoerl and McCormack propose that the key cognitive skill exercised in joint reminiscing is a specific kind of causal reasoning ability, namely ‘a grasp of how causality unfolds in time’. The key idea is that causal influence is propagated through sequences of events, in which the order of events can make a difference to the final outcome of the sequence. For instance, causal order might matter because some events will add to the effect of earlier events, whereas others will counteract or override their effects. Hoerl and McCormack present a number of studies suggesting that 3–4 year-olds typically struggle with tasks requiring this kind of reasoning, whereas 5 year-olds perform significantly better.

Causal-temporal reasoning is implicated in joint reminiscing, according to Hoerl and McCormack, because causal-temporal reasoning abilities are required to grasp the idea that past events can be fully real although their effects are no longer visible in the present. The crucial insight here consists in the ‘grasp of a particular kind of causal relationship obtaining between two events in virtue of the fact that the later event changed or obliterated the effects of the earlier event.’ (Hoerl2005-HOEJRA) Quite generally, they suggest, grasping the possibility that ‘things may no longer be as they once were’ depends on ‘the ability to conceive of re-

remembered events as belonging to a sequence of events, later stages of which can obliterate or change the effects of earlier ones.' (p. 280). Hoerl and McCormack then suggest that what children learn in joint reminiscing is that remembered events do not bear rationally on what they ought to do, think or feel in the same way as present events, precisely because their effects have been overridden or counteracted by later developments. (In contrast with, for instance, merely imagined events, which fail to bear on the present simply because they are not real, without the need for any specifically causal story.) For example, in an excerpt of dialogue they discuss, a child recalls pinching her finger, and her mother reminds her that daddy came and made her feel better (p. 275; originally reported in (Fivush1994).) Here the positive and reassuring presence of daddy counteracts the negative effects of the hurt finger; and this is what helps the child in grasping the idea that, although she really did hurt her finger, this is no longer cause to be upset.

Hoerl and McCormack may well be right to suggest that causal reasoning is a necessary component of a full conceptual grasp of the past, and that joint reminiscing is a significant context for the development of this ability. However, as regards the present challenge, it is hard to see exactly how these two claims help. The problem is that for many, perhaps most, memories we discuss with others, there is simply no salient chain of events connecting the remembered event causally to the present state of things. Suppose you have a memory of falling in a fountain as a child. You remember being wet; now you are dry. Hoerl and McCormack's idea is that in order to make sense of the idea that this is something that actually happened, even though you are no longer wet, you need to appeal implicitly to the idea that there was some cause of your going from being wet then to being dry now. But there is something highly artificial about this. Although there was presumably some cause at the time of your drying out—your parents rubbing you with a towel, say—it is a stretch to consider this a cause of your *now* being dry, much later; and still more so to think this plays any pivotal role in your grasp of the relation of that event to the present. For other remembered events, meanwhile, there may simply be no particular causal explanation of why things are not that way anymore. In remembering an explosion, or a concert, or a wintry walk in the snow, one need

not have in mind any specific causal explanation of why the thing is not going on any more. These events just come to an end, in their own way as it were, and then are over for good. It is not clear how exactly a grasp of temporal-causal relations is relevant to appreciating this.

The question that arises for Hoerl and McCormack's story, then, is how the causal reasoning abilities in question might be bootstrapped to arrive at a more general conception of the past, one which also encompasses past events for which there is no such salient chain of events.¹⁶

5 A LINK TO THE PAST

According to an influential way of thinking about episodic memory and what is so distinctive about it, the recognition of one's memories as deriving from an earlier experience is internal to the memory itself. For instance, Tulving characterises the 'autonoetic' aspect of episodic memory thus: 'When you remember an event, however vaguely, you are aware that the present experience is related to the past experience in a way that no other kind of experience is.' (Tulving2005-TULEMA) So a natural suggestion at this point would be that getting a fully general concept of the past is partly a matter of coming to conceptualise this special way of being related to the past as specifically a causal process with associated enabling conditions. In particular, the idea would be that remembering is a process subject to what Sydney Shoemaker (Shoemaker1970-SHOPAT) dubbed the 'Previous Awareness Condition'—the constraint that, in order to remember something, one must have previously experienced it. Thus, this special way of being related to an earlier ex-

¹⁶One option, which was suggested by an anonymous reviewer, would be that causal-temporal reasoning introduces a schematic notion of causal precedence which is inherently generalisable, and so suffices in principle for the concept of the past, as that which is causally prior to the present. The problem with this suggestion is that, while there may be some notion of causal priority that is schematic enough to be indefinitely iterable, it is not clear that this is necessarily involved in the kinds of causal reasoning abilities highlighted by Hoerl and McCormack. The causal relations that connect past events to the present are very diverse. In particular, some events are causally relevant to the present only insofar as they are remembered. Thus, a sufficiently general notion of causal priority needs to encompass the special way in which past events may bear on the present by way of the psychological marks they leave on experiencing and remembering subjects. And this, as I argue, requires a significant departure from the idea of causality unfolding in chains of events.

perience is one such that only the actual subject of that earlier experience can stand in.

As a first response to this latest difficulty, it is worthwhile to point out that this particular construal of the auto-noetic character of recall rests on a separation of the remembered event from the experience of the event which, at least in many central cases, is rather artificial. Consider the exchange at the beginning of section §1 between Rebecca and her mother. Is the child remembering the fish she could see through the bottom of the boat, or is she remembering her seeing of the fish? The choice seems like a false one. What she is remembering, in the first instance, is neither a purely external event nor a perceptual state, but an entire, multifaceted episode in her past life with her mother—what might, in everyday language, be called an experience, but with none of the connotations of perceptual passivity associated with the standard philosophical use of the term (the same sense in which a magazine might publish an ‘experiences’ column.)¹⁷

Indeed, a striking—yet entirely typical—feature of dialogue is how freely and naturally the mother switches between prompts that relate solely to features of the remembered scene—like the colours of the fish—and aspects of the (shared) experience of it. In drawing the daughter’s attention to aspects of the remembered scene, then, the mother is simultaneously drawing her attention to the experiential source of her knowledge of it. There is no gap between the two: remembering the fish, in this context, just is remembering seeing the fish.

Equally significant here is the way the mother’s prompts switch freely between direct questions about what happened—“What did we feed the fish with?”—and questions framed in terms of the notion of memory—“Do you remember feeding the fish?” And what this suggests is that the child is not only being encouraged simply to use her memory to access facts about that occasion, but is, at the same time, coming to learn that what she is doing is *remembering*. Thus, even in early exchanges like this one, in which the child’s part is only fragmentary, we can begin to see how a child might come to learn what remembering is, namely accessing knowledge of a past event made available by the experience of that event, in the

¹⁷For a complementary plea for the importance of the concept of experience for episodic recall, see [Hoerl2018-HOEEMA-2](#).

process of sharing those memories with others.

A second way in which the notion

In answering this complaint, I suggest we do indeed need to appeal to an aspect of the subject's growing understanding of their own experience, and of the specific way in which earlier experience gives rise to later memories, but in a way that departs from the metarepresentational construal. The idea we need to appeal to is that, just as experience makes available knowledge about one's present environment, and so puts one in a position to make claims about it in the here and now, so experience can also make such knowledge available for later use, putting one in a position, at a later time, to make claims about how things were in one's environment at the time of that experience. On this conception, what one is doing in recall is attempting to access knowledge made available by earlier experience; the 'mechanism' here is simply one's own personal persistence, as the same knowing and experiencing subject of both earlier experience and later recall.¹⁸

Understanding of the causal link between experience and memory need amount to nothing more than this: the availability of sometime experiential knowledge for later use, by the very same subject of that experience. This understanding does, therefore, involve a form of metarepresentation, insofar as it concerns the subject's recognition of their own persistence over time—but this is to be contrasted with the representation of causal connections between representational states. This is not to deny that the continuing availability of such knowledge may ultimately consist in, or supervene on, a network of causal or functional relations between representational states; the point is that it need not be conceived as such in order to articulate the distinctive manner in which memories derive causally from earlier experiences.

¹⁸This is not to say, of course, that personal persistence is a sufficient for being able to recollect an experience in the sense of guaranteeing it; clearly, ordinary forgetting and other memory disturbances can and often do get in the way. However, it is a *normally* sufficient condition, in the sense that, if someone with their senses in working order witnesses some event, no further explanation is required of how they are later able to recall it. That is, 'I saw it' is an adequate answer to the question 'How do you know?'

This is, of course, only the very beginning of a story. We have seen how, in joint reminiscing, a child might be prompted to attend to a past event, and thereby also to attend to the experience that put her in a position to attend to that event, and to understand what she is doing under the heading of ‘remembering’. But this falls short of a fully conceptualised understanding of memory as knowledge of the past subject to the Previous Awareness Condition. In seeing how this story might be fleshed out, there are two factors we might appeal to, both of which relate to the wider communicative and developmental context in which bouts of joint reminiscing are typically embedded.

The first of these is an increasingly developed and articulate understanding of the discursive norms that govern memory reports. The locution ‘I remember...’ claims a special kind of authority on the part of the speaker, as first-hand witness to events described in what follows. This distinctive epistemic authority is such as to typically (albeit not universally) trump the testimony of speakers whose claim to knowledge is based on inference or hearsay; at the same time, it is vulnerable to being undermined by evidence that the speaker could not have been in the right place at the right time, or that their senses were not in working order.

In this respect, the discursive norms governing the formula ‘I remember...’ mesh tightly with the Previous Awareness Condition as a causal condition on remembering: it is because remembering requires having been there that ‘I remember...’ signals the authority of one who knows because they were there, and is undermined by evidence that they could not have been there. Yet it is not just that the Previous Awareness Condition explains or justifies why the norms hold. One aspect of the discussion in this section was that the specific causal link embodied in the Previous Awareness Condition needs to be understood precisely in epistemic terms, as experiential knowledge made available for later use by the subject of that experience. There is, therefore, a dependency in the other direction: part of what it is for memory to be subject to the Previous Awareness Condition is for the knowledge made available by memory to be knowledge made available from earlier experience, and thereby to have the peculiar normative status of first-hand

knowledge.¹⁹ Thus, as the child becomes increasingly well-versed in the discursive norms that surround the giving and evaluation of memory reports, this is not so much a matter of coming to apply an independently understood theory of how memory works to the task of evaluating speakers' credibility; rather, because the ordinary understanding of memory is partly constituted by a grasp of the epistemic status of one who remembers, acquiring a fully conceptualised grasp of memory and the Previous Awareness Condition is partly a matter of progressing from a merely tacit to a fully articulate grasp of the norms that flow from its epistemic status.

In the conversation between Rebecca and her mother, this may all be entirely tacit: Rebecca is doing little more than acting in accordance with the norm that///

The second factor we can appeal to is the way in which an understanding of memory relates to the concept of a person.///

There is a strong temptation to balk at the idea that an understanding of the communicative and causal dimensions of memory could go hand-in-hand in this way. One wants to insist that the discursive norms governing the sharing of memories apply as they do because of the causal nature of remembering; and that, even if they are acquired contemporaneously, it is the causal understanding that explains or grounds a grasp of the norms. But tackling Anscombe's puzzle about the past requires us to resist this temptation. Although it is true enough, in a limited sense, that the discursive constraint that one can only speak with the authority of a witness if one was actually there to witness something applies because of the causal facts about how memory works

Because the the dependence of recall on earlier experience is grasped fundamentally in epistemic terms, it is therefore bound up with the discursive norms governing conversations about the past.

not like a typical causal principle connecting types of events, one that might be discovered on the basis of observation, experiment and inference. It is, rather, a discursive commitment one invokes, insofar as one presents oneself as voicing

¹⁹This two-way dependency between the normative and the descriptive recalls certain views of the two-way relation between aesthetic or moral properties and the experiences they tend to produce. Cf. (Wiggins1987a).

knowledge the past

more like a rational commitment one invokes, insofar as one takes oneself to know about one's own past, and to give voice to such knowledge, on the basis of remembering.

Voicing the kind of first-hand knowledge of the past one has as a witness just is, in part, to present oneself as having been there at the time, and thereby to make one's claims vulnerable to undermining evidence that one was not there—"No, you can't remember X, because you were off doing Y at the time". These interlocking constraints and commitments serve to characterise, on the one hand, the distinctive social activity of reminiscing; and, on the other hand, the distinctive causal pathway that is memory. In this way, understanding the causal connection between experience and remembering is not a separable achievement from actually *using* one's memory to think and communicate about the past. It is in the very act of voicing first-hand knowledge about something one has witnessed, or in recognising another's such knowledge, that one recognises the causal process of remembering as such.

With this account at our disposal, of the way in which an appreciation of the special link between experiencing and remembering is embodied in the activity of reminiscing, we can accordingly see how an understanding of the past might intelligibly grow, under the guidance of the communicative promptings of a caregiver, out of some more rudimentary forms of joint reminiscing in which an ongoing experiential connection is merely prolonged, with no need for a separate act of recall. In the simplest cases of little or no prompting, the child's grasp of the idea of memory and its attendant constraints may be wholly implicit, in the sense that the child is merely participating in an activity that is in fact governed by certain normative constraints that derive ultimately from the nature of remembering, but with no real understanding of its own. Yet, even in these cases, the child is already using its memory, albeit under parental guidance, to voice knowledge of the past. And since the causal link of memory is grasped precisely in the act of voicing knowledge about the past, the seeds of this peculiar species of causal understanding are already present whenever the child does in fact voice such knowledge, even in the absence

of any more reflective articulation of the causal conditions of its being able to do so. With more sophisticated joint reminiscing exchanges, where explicit verbal cues to recall are involved, we can then see a dual role for the various verbal prompts provided by the caregiver, analogous to the dual role of pointing gestures and the like in co-ordinating joint perceptual attention: on the one hand, as making salient a certain event in the shared life of both parent and child, in order to establish, or re-establish, it as the object of discourse; at the same time, as expressing and making explicit the rational commitment of having present at the past event, thereby drawing out, or bringing to reflective articulation, the child's latent understanding of the causal link to the past that is memory.

6 CONCLUSION

I began this paper with Anscombe's puzzle about the origin of the very idea of the past. In what follows I sketched a development story that can go at least some way to answering that puzzle. Let me briefly summarise the key points of this story. Joint reminiscing, in the simplest cases, trades just on the fact that both participants are aware, via the episodic contents of their memories, of an occurrence they have both recently experienced together, even if it is not conceptualised as such. In these cases, the event remains salient, or latently salient, as a potential topic of communication, despite having concluded; and this latent salience is exploited by the participants in establishing it as the mutually understood topic of conversation. In more complex cases, a further, concerted act of recall is necessary, elicited by verbal prompts of the sort "do you remember...?" And here the act of recall is guided by a developing, though not necessarily complete, appreciation of the idea that being able to speak knowledgeably of an event one remembers requires having been there when it happened. These exchanges, in turn, are an occasion for the child to develop a more fully fledged understanding of the causal constraints on remembering. And this, finally, opens the door to a realistic understanding of the past: as something real but now absent, of which we have authoritative, albeit

partial and corrigible, knowledge via our memories.

A ramification of this point is that the very idea of the past as real is dependent on socio-communicative interaction in quite a fundamental way. And one question this raises is how robust a realism about the past is justified by the above account of its origin.

In general, philosophical and psychological theories that seek to ground one or another aspect of our grip on objectivity reality in intersubjectivity have tended to be associated with some form of idealism, or at best a realism of a quite watered-down kind—making truth and objectivity a matter of intersubjective agreement, or justifiability to others, or some such notion. By contrast, the above account does not have any such implications. The conclusion of the developmental story just sketched emphatically does not make truth about the past a matter of warranted assertibility, or ideal agreement, in the present. On the contrary, the idea of remembering as dependent on having been there provides precisely for the idea that there can be past events of which we have no knowledge, and even no way of knowing about, insofar as we might not have been around to witness them. The point is that, on the account sketched above, the manner in which our memories relate us contingently and mediately to the past becomes an object of reflective knowledge only in the course of sharing those memories with others.