

Thinking About the Past and Experiencing the Past

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Abstract: The present article aims to show that a subject can only fully grasp the concept of the past if she has some experiential, or recollective, memories of particular past events. More specifically, I argue that (1) in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past. (2) But then, in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have some recollective memories of particular past events. (C) Hence, a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some recollective memories of particular past events. I defend the premises of the present argument against various objections, indicate why we should accept both premises, and accordingly end by endorsing the argument's conclusion.

1. Introduction

Each of us, so I assume, is able to think about the past, and each of us understands what others refer to when they refer to the past. Thus, each of us possesses the concept of the past. The question which I suggest we consider in the present article is whether experiential memories, or, as I also call them, 'recollective memories', play any role in our ability to think about the past.

Recollective memories seem pretty pervasive. Indeed, we all have recollective memories on a daily basis. For example, try to remember the last dinner party you went to. Chances are that you remember at least some aspects of the event in an experiential way. You might have an experience as if seeing again the host welcoming you at the door. Or you might have an experience as if hearing once more some particular sounds or noises—the sudden bang emanating from the kitchen at some point, or a new tune played towards the end of the party. In an attempt to describe those occurrences, we might say that 'you see the person again in front of your mind's eye', that you can 'hear the tune in your head', and so on for the other senses. When talking about R-memories here, I mean to refer to those cases of remembering which have such experiential characteristics.

Many people have offered helpful comments on the material developed in the present article, amongst them an audience at Stirling and an audience at York; but I am particularly grateful for the very generous and substantial help from various anonymous referees. I am sadly unable to thank them in person, but if they happen to read this, they will know who they are. Thank you!

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R-memories play a crucial role in our mental lives. Indeed, various of our other mental faculties and abilities depend on our ability to R-remember past objects and events. The present article describes one such relation of dependency, namely the dependency that obtains between a subject's ability to think about the past, and her ability to R-remember particular past events. A subject, so I hope to show, can only grasp the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events.

In order to show this I start, in Section 2, with some methodological considerations. Section 3 proceeds to set out the article's 'Main Argument'. In Section 4, I discuss and defend the first premise of the Main Argument. Sections 5, 6 and 7 defend the Main Argument's second premise; in Section 8, I consider some implications for our ability to think about the future; and in Section 9, I conclude that we have good reason to accept the Main Argument's conclusion: a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events.¹

2. Setting the Scene

In order to address the question which role R-memories play in our understanding of the concept of the past, one might first have to address the more general question of what it takes to understand, or grasp, a concept. Clearly, the philosophical and psychological literature on concepts is vast, and there is no time to engage with much of it here.² However, we should begin by stating some basic assumptions about our understanding of concepts which will be presupposed here.

Concepts, so everybody will agree, are necessary for us to think. Thus, a subject does, for example, have to understand the concept of the past in order for her to be able to think about the past. Apart from this widely shared truism, the Main Argument developed in the following article relies on the assumption that:

(First Assumption) at least with respect to some concepts, a subject can only understand the relevant concepts if she also understands certain *other concepts*.

This assumption might be endorsed for two very different reasons. One might hold that a subject can only understand a certain concept if she understands the

¹ Hoerl (1999) develops a set of ideas that seems closely related to the 'Main Argument' of the present article. For other material relevant to present concerns cf. also Peacocke, 1999, ch. 3 ('The Past'); Dummett, 2004; Peacocke, 2005 and Dummett, 2005. Other important points of reference are McDowell, 1978 and Wiggins, 1992.

² For a brief recent survey of the philosophical and psychological literature on concepts cf. Margolis, 2006. Recent influential monographs on the topic include Peacocke, 1992; Fodor, 1998; and Prinz, 2004. Other recent contributions are collected in Villanueva, 1998. Margolis and Laurence (2000) offer a collection of classic papers on the topic, together with an extensive introduction to the debate.

concept's place in the wider conceptual scheme of which it is a part. According to some such form of 'holism' about concepts, a subject needs to understand a concept's connections with other concepts in order to understand the concept at all. Indeed, I think the present assumption is plausible for such holistic reasons.³ However, alternatively someone might also endorse it because she holds that we can distinguish between complex concepts and primitive concepts. Primitive concepts are, on this view, conceptual 'atoms'.⁴ Complex concepts are literally composed of primitive concepts, and a subject can only understand a complex concept if she understands the primitive concepts of which the relevant complex concept is composed. The First Assumption might therefore be accepted by both atomists and holists about concepts, who otherwise differ radically in their views about concepts, and the First Assumption therefore should not be particularly controversial.

Second, the Main Argument developed in the following article relies on the assumption that:

(Second Assumption) at least with respect to some concepts, it is necessary that the subject have certain *experiences* in order to understand the relevant concepts.

Again, as far as it goes, this Second Assumption seems rather plausible. Indeed, it would seem highly implausible to oppose this assumption and hold that subjects can understand all the concepts they do understand without relying on any experiences whatsoever. There is no time to discuss any of the arguments that might be offered in support of the latter view here,⁵ but for present purposes, it seems legitimate to ignore what seems a very implausible position, and to accept the Second Assumption instead.

Third, the present article assumes that:

(Third Assumption) the concept of the past is *not* an a priori concept.

The claim that a concept is a priori is usually understood as the claim that the relevant concept is 'independent of experience and [...] of all impressions of the senses'.⁶ But then, in the present article I try to defend the claim that a subject can

³ For a recent defence of holism cf. Heal, 2003.

⁴ More specifically, primitive concepts are 'mental representations [which] have no structure' (Fodor, 1998, p. 22). In order for a subject to understand primitive concepts, she therefore does not have to rely on her ability to understand any other concepts.

⁵ Maybe a very radical nativist about concepts might, taking her lead from ideas developed and defended by Fodor, want to endorse some such position. She might say that a subject can understand all concepts independently of any experience, because all concepts are either innate, or else the result of some (experience-independent) combination of innate concepts with each other.

⁶ Kant, 1983, B2.

only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events, and this implies that the concept of the past is *not* an a priori concept. An opponent might offer various arguments in support of the claim that the concept of the past *is* an a priori concept, but I here assume that the opponent's arguments to this effect can be shown to be unsuccessful.⁷ Thus, I here assume that the concept of the past is *not* an a priori concept.

Furthermore, the present article assumes that:

(Fourth Assumption) we can learn something new and important about a subject's understanding of a certain concept by considering which dependency-relations might, in a mature and healthy human being's mental life, obtain between her grasp of the relevant concept on the one hand, and other features of her mental life on the other.

Of course, a subject's understanding a concept necessarily depends on her having acquired the concept first of all. However, in the present context I suggest that we consider the case of a subject who has already acquired, and now understands, the concept of the past, and that we consider the ways in which the subject's present understanding of that concept might depend on other features of her present, fully developed mental life.

Thus, the aim of the present article is primarily descriptive. I aim to describe some important dependency-relations which obtain in a mature and healthy human being's mental life between her grasp of the concept of the past on the one hand, and other features of her mental life on the other. This in turn might well have implications for an account of the subject's *acquisition* of the concept of the past; but I am here *not* trying to offer such an account.⁸ Rather, I here propose to ask, with respect to a mature and healthy subject's mental life, which conditions need

⁷ More specifically, the opponent might try to defend the claim that the concept of the past *is* an a priori concept with the help of two well-known arguments, both of which I think can be shown to be unsuccessful. The first of the relevant two arguments might be sketched as follows: (i) Our perception presents us with things 'as existing at one and the same time (simultaneously) or at different times (successively)' (Kant, 1983, A30/B46.). (ii) This is only possible if an a priori concept of time underlies our perception. (iii) Accordingly, our concept of time is a priori and underlies our perception. (iv) If our concept of time is a priori, then our concept of the past must also be a priori. (v) Thus, our concept of the past is a priori. However, one can show that the second premise of the present argument is false. The second argument in support of the claim that our concept of the past is an a priori concept depends on a kind of 'thought-experiment' (cf. Strawson, 2002, p. 58) and might (with the help of Kant, 1983, A30-31/B46) be reconstructed as follows: (i) Although we can think of time as void of appearances, we cannot conceive of appearances without conceiving of them as situated in time. (ii) Accordingly, time is given a priori. (iii) If our concept of time is a priori, then our concept of the past must also be a priori. (iv) Thus, our concept of the past is a priori. However, one can show that claim (i) does not lead to the conclusion drawn in (ii).

⁸ For some suggestive remarks on the question which role memory might play in a subject's *acquisition* of the concept of the past, cf. Martin, 2001, p. 280.

to be met in order for the subject, who does grasp the concept of the past, to do so. Thus, in Quassim Cassam's terminology, I aim to offer a 'revelatory argument', namely an argument which:

. . . set[s] out to uncover the actual structure or nature of our cognitive faculties by showing that their having a particular structure is a necessary condition of the possibility of some cognitive achievement of ours which is assumed to be actual (Cassam, 1999, pp. 85 f.).

More specifically, the cognitive achievement of ours which is here assumed to be actual is our ability to think about the past, and the particular structural feature of our cognitive faculties which I aim to explore is the link between a subject's ability to think about the past, and her ability to recollectively remember past objects or events.⁹ In Cassam's most recent terminology, the question I suggest we consider in the present article is therefore a 'how-possible-question'¹⁰—I assume that we do understand the concept of the past, and I ask how this is possible. More specifically, I suggest we consider which role *R-memories* play for our grasp of the concept of the past.

Lastly, before we set out to answer this question in detail, we should be clear about the phenomenon of recollective memory. *R-memories*, so we said, are memories that have experiential characteristics. For example, when you remember the last dinner party you went to, you might have an experience as if seeing again the person who sat opposite at the dinner. Or you might have an experience as if hearing once more some particular sounds or noises—the sudden bang emanating from the kitchen at some point, or a new tune played towards the end of the party. In an attempt to describe those occurrences, we might say that 'you see the person again in front of your mind's eye', that you can 'hear the tune in your head', and so on for the other senses. Thus, when talking about '*R-memories*' here, I mean to refer to those cases of remembering which characteristically 'correspond to our use of the distinct senses'.¹¹ *R-memories* are those cases of remembering which have 'perception-like' experiential characteristics.

⁹ Someone might doubt the usefulness of such a 'revelatory project' generally, or at least of the revelatory project of the present article in particular. Indeed, as Cassam (1999) 86 points out, an opponent might argue that 'the facts about our cognitive faculties which [revelatory arguments] reveal are [. . .] discoverable by direct inspection or by some other means'. This in turn might prompt the opponent to argue that the relevant 'revelatory arguments' are somehow redundant. However, I very much doubt that the structural features which the present article aims to reveal are discoverable by direct inspection. And even if there was some other means by which the structural features to be worked out in the present article might be revealed, as long as we bring the relevant features out by developing the present set of arguments, there does not seem any particularly good reason why we should look for, and then prefer, those other means.

¹⁰ Cf. Cassam, 2007.

¹¹ Martin, 2002, p. 403. In the passage from which the present quote is taken, Martin explains what he means by 'sensory imagining'. The phenomenon of *R-memory*, so it seems, can be

In order to clarify which cases of remembering should count as ‘R-memories’, it might also be useful to relate the phenomenon of R-memory to other classifications of different kinds of memory which have been offered in the recent philosophical and psychological literature.¹² Most importantly, in recent psychological research the concept of ‘episodic memory’, originally introduced by Tulving (1972), has been widely used; the concept is used differently by different authors,¹³ but at least sometimes ‘episodic memory’ is defined as memory which has experiential characteristics. If we understand the concept of ‘episodic memory’ in this way, it seems plausible to hold that R-memories are a sub-group of episodic memories. For while there might be some memories which have experiential characteristics which are not ‘perception-like’, it seems that all memories which have ‘perception-like’ experiential characteristics (that is, all R-memories) should be classified as memories which have experiential characteristics.¹⁴

However, there seem to be various other ways in which the concept of ‘episodic memory’ is used in the literature. In order to avoid any conceptual confusion, I therefore will here only use the concept of ‘R-memory’, as introduced. R-memories are, to repeat, those cases of remembering which characteristically ‘correspond to our use of the distinct senses’¹⁵; that is, they are those cases of remembering which have ‘perception-like’ experiential characteristics.

3. The Main Argument

The present article aims to defend the claim that a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events. We are now in a position to set out to consider the ‘Main Argument’ which supports this ‘Main Claim’. The Main Argument runs as follows:

(Main Argument)

(MA1) In order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past.¹⁶

introduced in perfectly analogous ways. Our account of the *nature* of R-memory, however, will differ radically from any account that could possibly be given of the nature of sensory imagining.

¹² For some of the relevant classifications cf. e.g. Shoemaker, 1967; Tulving, 1983; and Martin, 2001, pp. 258 ff.

¹³ For a recent survey, cf. e.g. Conway, 2008.

¹⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting the present comments on the relation between ‘R-memory’ and ‘episodic memory’. I discuss the relation between the concept of R-memory and relevant other classifications in greater detail in Debus, 2007, section 1.

¹⁵ Martin, 2002, p. 403.

¹⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee who prompted an important clarification of (MA1).

(MA2) However, in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have some R-memories of particular past events.

(Main Claim) Hence, a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events.

At first sight, the conclusion of this argument does seem rather surprising. For example, consider Anna:

Anna used to go swimming a lot, but she hasn't gone to the pool for quite a while. Considering the situation, she thinks to herself: 'Actually, in the past I used to enjoy swimming a lot—maybe I should go back to the pool again sometime soon.'

Assume the Main Argument is sound. Then Anna needs to have some recollective memories of particular past events in order for her to be able to think that she enjoyed swimming in the past. She does not have to have recollective memories of herself swimming, nor does she have to have an *occurrent* recollective memory right now. But she has to have some (at some time *occurrent*) recollective memories of some particular past events. This does seem rather surprising. Indeed, most of us probably never thought that their ability to *think* about the past might depend on their ability to *remember* particular past events, let alone on their ability to *recollectively* remember particular events. However, in the following I aim to defend just this claim. I will discuss each of the two premises of the Main Argument in turn, and I hope to show that we should accept the Main Argument's rather surprising conclusion.¹⁷

4. Particular Past Events, and the Concept of the Past

According to (MA1), the first premise of the 'Main Argument', a subject needs to understand the concept of a particular past event in a particular way (namely, in a

¹⁷ The Main Claim also has surprising implications for extreme cases of amnesia (and I am grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting the following clarification). An extremely amnesiac patient who remembers not even one particular past event is, according to the Main Claim, unable to think about the past. Of course, so a defender of the Main Claim will say, an extremely amnesiac patient might still be able to *utter* sentences such as 'I wonder what my past might have been like', but such a patient is unable to *understand* this and similar sentences. Patients with extreme amnesia, so the defender of the Main Claim will hold, are unable to think about the past. However, as most amnesiacs do remember at least some (if only very few) particular past events, the present considerations only apply to very few (if any) patients suffering from a very extreme form of amnesia. (I offer some further considerations related to a hypothetical case of extreme amnesia in Section 5 below.) Also, as an anonymous referee points out, it might be interesting to explore empirically whether subjects with increasingly severe amnesia have increasing difficulty thinking about the past. Indeed, if this was found to be the case, it might further support our present considerations.

way that might *contribute* to her understanding of the concept of the past) in order for her to understand the concept of the past. Indeed, everyday probing of our concept of the past suggests that it is part of that concept that unique, particular events occurred during the time which we now call the past. We think of the past as a period of time during which particular events took place. In order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, therefore, the subject needs to understand that unique, particular events took place in the period of time to which she refers when she talks about ‘the past’.

For purposes of illustration, try to conceive of someone who does not understand that particular events occurred in the past. For example, assume that we ask Anna whether she agrees that particular events occurred in the past. In reaction, Anna just looks at us blankly. It seems rather implausible to say of someone in such a situation that she grasps the concept of the past. This in turn indicates that the idea that there were events in the past is deeply ingrained in our everyday conception of the world in general and is an essential part of our understanding of the concept of the past in particular.

Indeed, not only does this seem intuitively compelling. Rather, we can also develop the following argument in support of this claim:

(Argument in Support of (MA1))

(S1) In order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject understand, in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, that there were particular times in the past.

(S2) However, ‘the only way [for a subject] to conceive of a [particular] time t is to conceive of it as the time at which something, X , happens’.¹⁸

(S3) Hence, in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject understand, in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, that particular events occurred in the past, which in turn implies that the subject must understand the concept of a particular past event.

(S4) Thus, just as (MA1) says, in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject understand, in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, the concept of a particular past event.¹⁹

Indeed, it seems plausible to accept that, just as (S1) has it, in order for a subject to be said to understand the concept of the past, the subject must understand that there

¹⁸ van Fraassen, 1985, pp. 29 f.

¹⁹ On an absolutist account of time, time’s existence and the properties of time are logically independent of the events, if any, which occupy it. Note that the claim that a subject can only *grasp* the concept of the past if she understands that there were particular events in the past does not necessarily imply that the absolutist account of time is false.

were particular times in the past. For, in order for a subject to be said to understand the concept of the past at all, the subject should at least have a rough grasp of the topology of time in general, and the topology of the past in particular. One of the most basic features of the topology of time in general and the topology of the past in particular is there being (or having been) particular times at which particular events occur. Accordingly, it seems rather plausible to accept that subjects who do not understand that there were particular times in the past just do not understand our concept of the past either.²⁰

But then, so (S2) has it, in order for a subject to conceive of a particular time, she needs to conceive of it as the time at which a particular event occurs. An opponent might suggest that a subject can be made aware of a particular time ostensively. We just ‘point’ at a particular time somehow, and the subject will understand what we mean. However, assuming that some such ostensive act was possible at all, a subject in a relevant situation would come to understand the concept of a particular time in virtue of conceiving of *a particular event* taking place at a particular time—namely, in this case, in virtue of the particular event of ostension. The opponent’s present suggestion therefore does not really offer an *alternative* to the claim at hand, but on the contrary rather *supports* it.

Alternatively, an opponent might suggest that a subject can conceive of a time as the time at which some *process* occurs. However, processes are composed of events, which implies that the present suggestion does no harm to (S2). In reply, the opponent might deny that processes are composed of events. In this case, we might grant the opponent that all the arguments in the present article which speak about ‘events’ should be reformulated and be developed for ‘events or processes’. This does seem possible, which in turn indicates that the opponent’s present suggestion does no serious harm to the argument at hand either.

Instead, the opponent might suggest that a subject can conceive of a time as the time at which certain *states of affairs* obtain.²¹ However, it seems plausible to hold that the concept of a state of affairs is the concept of something *being* the case and *remaining* the case (for a certain period of time). But then, in order for a subject to understand what it takes for something to be and remain the case, she also needs to understand what it takes for something to change, which in turn requires an understanding of the concept of an event (namely, an event of change).²² Thus, it seems plausible to accept that we can only understand the concept of a state of affairs by contrasting it with the concept of an event (of change), which in turn means that a subject’s conceiving of a time as the time at which a certain state of affairs obtains could not be *primary* in our understanding of particular times, as the opponent must hold in order to oppose premise (S2). Hence, we can conclude once more that we have no good reason to give up on (S2).

²⁰ For a detailed discussion of the topology of time cf. Newton-Smith, 1980.

²¹ The present objection might make use of ideas developed by Shoemaker (1969).

²² Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.

Alternatively, an opponent might hold against (S2) that a subject can conceive of a particular time ‘as standing in a certain [temporal] relation to the present’ (thanks to an anonymous referee for the present suggestion). Thus, a subject might have the concept of the present, and a ‘recognitional capacity’ for certain temporal intervals, and she might then be able to think of a particular time by thinking of it as something which lies a certain temporal interval away from the present.

Clearly, in order to develop this suggestion fully, we would have to say more on what exactly it takes for a subject to have recognitional capacities for temporal intervals. However, for present purposes we might here focus on the following observation: If a subject’s recognitional capacity for a temporal interval did *not* include the understanding that a particular temporal interval lies between two different particular times, then if a subject was to combine her grasp of the concept of the present with her recognitional capacity for certain temporal intervals, it would remain open for her what was to lie at the other end of a relevant temporal interval—it might well be another temporal interval (rather than a particular time). Thus, if a subject’s recognitional capacity for a certain temporal interval was, together with the subject’s understanding of the concept of the present, to enable the subject to conceive of other (non-present) particular times, the subject’s recognitional capacity for a relevant temporal interval would have to include an understanding that temporal intervals lie between two different particular times (at least one of which has to be a particular time which is not the present). This, however, renders the opponent’s present suggestion as to how a subject might conceive of a particular time immediately circular and therefore not viable, either.²³

Indeed, it seems difficult to think of any way in which a subject might be said to understand the concept of a particular time *without* conceiving of it as the time at which a particular event takes place. Nevertheless, so an opponent might say, even if we seem unable to *explain how* a subject might be said to understand the concept of a particular time *without* conceiving of it as a time at which a particular event takes place, it seems that subjects *can* conceive of a particular time without conceiving of it as the time at which a particular event takes place.²⁴ For indeed, anybody who considers an absolutist conception of time does just that. On an absolutist account of time, time’s existence, and the properties of time, are logically independent of the events, if any, which occupy it. But then, if they are logically independent, we should be able to *conceive* of particular times *without* conceiving of them as the times at which particular events take place. However, if (S2) was true, we could not conceive of particular times in this way, and the absolutist account of time would therefore have to be unintelligible. But while the absolutist account of time might be *false*, it is *not* unintelligible, which in turn means that (S2) must be false.

²³ For a more detailed consideration of problems of circularity see the discussion of the ‘Non-Employment-Condition’ in Section 5 below. In the terminology developed there, the present suggestion fails because the Non-Employment-Condition is not met.

²⁴ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to consider the following objection.

In response to the present objection, a defender of (S2) will point out that we have to distinguish between different levels of generality here. An absolutist account of time might be quite intelligible as long as it is phrased as a claim about particular times in general. Indeed, someone who tries to think about ‘all particular times’, or ‘particular times in general’, might try to abstract from all the individual moments of time she has so far encountered by ‘subtracting’ any events that occurred at the relevant times, and then generalize the remaining conception of a ‘particular time *without* the relevant particular event’ to ‘all particular times’. Thus, at this level of generality, the absolutist account of time might seem intelligible, and maybe even plausible.

However, (S2) is not concerned with general claims of this kind. Rather, (S2) is concerned with the question as to what it might take for a subject to be able to conceive of any one particular time—for example, what it might take for you to conceive of the particular time at which you read the first word of the last sentence, or of the particular time at which you have reached the full-stop at the end of this sentence. The only way in which you can conceive of any one of those particular times, so (S2) says, is by conceiving of them as the time at which something (e.g. your reading a relevant word or punctuation mark) occurs.

And indeed, our discussion of (S2) has shown that it is difficult to see how *else* you might be able to do so. Of course, a defender of an absolutist account of time would have to insist that somehow, it *is* possible for you to conceive of any one of those particular times independently of the occurrence of any particular events; this implication of the absolutist account, however, does remain rather contentious; and unless the defender of the absolutist account of time is able to offer an answer to the question *how* it might be possible to conceive of any one particular time *without* conceiving of it as the time at which a particular event occurs, present considerations suggest that in *this* respect, the absolutist account does indeed remain unintelligible.

Accordingly, we seem to have good reason to *accept* (S2). (S1) together with (S2) give us good reason to accept (S3), which in turn implies that (S4) must also be true. Thus, just as (MA1) has it, in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, the subject must understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past.

However, so an opponent might object, the present considerations in support of (MA1) are misleading.²⁵ It obviously seems difficult for us to conceive of a subject who does not understand the concept of a particular past event but nevertheless grasps the concept of the past. But this is so simply because, as a matter of contingent fact, anybody of whom we would be prepared to say that she does understand the concept of the past also happens to endorse the belief that particular events occurred in the past. The belief that particular events occurred in the past is a very widely held belief about the past. However, a subject could understand the concept of the

²⁵ Thanks to Alison Hills for prompting me to consider the following objection.

past perfectly well *without* endorsing that belief. The belief that particular events occurred in the past is ‘central but inessential’²⁶ for a subject’s understanding of the concept of the past. Thus, (MA1) is false—in order for a subject to grasp the concept of the past, it is *not* necessary that she understand the concept of a particular past event.

In order to assess the opponent’s present objection, we once more have to consider the Argument in Support of (MA1). The argument is valid, so the opponent who wants to oppose its conclusion will have to find fault with one of its premises. Indeed, so the opponent might hold against premise (S1) of that argument, it is *not* true that a subject must understand that there were particular times in the past in order for her to understand the concept of the past. Rather, just as the belief that there were particular events in the past, the belief that there were particular times in the past is also ‘central but inessential’²⁷ for a subject’s understanding of the concept of the past. For the concept of the past is a ‘conceptual atom’ which a subject can understand quite independently of understanding anything else at all.

The view that our concept of the past is a ‘conceptual atom’, however, is extremely implausible, for it remains utterly unclear how it could possibly make sense to say that a subject can grasp the concept of the past without understanding anything else at all.²⁸ If, on the other hand, we grant that there are *some* other concepts which are essential for a subject’s grasp of the concept of the past, it does seem very plausible that the concept of a particular time is one of the relevant concepts. Thus, we have good reason to accept that in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, the subject must understand that there were particular times in the past, just as (S1) says.²⁹ The opponent’s present attack of the Argument in Support of (MA1) is therefore also unsuccessful. We can continue to hold that in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, the

²⁶ Peacocke, 1992, p. 3.

²⁷ Peacocke, 1992, p. 3.

²⁸ Furthermore, an atomist about the concept of the past also seems to run into trouble when trying to explain how a subject’s concept of the past could possibly be a concept *of* the past. In order to explain how a conceptual atom might be linked with whatever it stands for, conceptual atomists standardly refer to an ‘asymmetric law-like link’ which is said to obtain between the things in the world which the concept stands for, and the concept itself (cf. e.g. Fodor, 1987). One might try to develop this idea with respect to broccoli and carburettors, but as far as the concept of the past is concerned, it does seem rather unclear how such a link might be established between the relevant concept and what it is said to stand for. Thus, even someone who favours conceptual atomism with respect to *some* concepts might have good reason to consider the suggestion that in order for a subject to understand the concept of the *past*, the subject has to understand some other concepts.

²⁹ An ‘atomist’ might object that as soon as we grant that it is necessary that the subject grasp some other concepts in order for her to be said to grasp one particular concept, we have to grant that no two subjects can think the same thoughts. (For the objection, cf. Fodor and Lepore, 1992; for a discussion and rebuttal cf. Heal, 2003.) There is no space to discuss this objection here, but Peacocke (1992) develops a view of ‘Local Holisms’ which aims to show that, and how, we can avoid the opponent’s present objection.

subject needs to understand the concept of a particular past event, just as (MA1) has it.³⁰

Next, we should then consider (MA1) somewhat more closely. More specifically, we should ask what it *takes* for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event. It seems that according to our everyday understanding, an event occurs at a particular time at a particular place, that is, it has a particular spatio-temporal location, and it usually involves particular objects.³¹ Furthermore, it seems plausible to accept that under normal, everyday conditions, a particular *past* event cannot now be undone or modified in any other way.³² Indeed, it also seems plausible to accept that in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, the subject herself has to understand that under normal, everyday conditions, particular past events cannot now be undone or modified in any other way.

For example, consider Mary who claims to understand the concept of a particular past event, but who also holds that under normal, everyday conditions, particular past events can be undone. Let us assume that she does not consider any special science-fiction scenarios in which it is possible to act on the past in some way. Rather, she simply insists that under normal, everyday conditions, it is possible to change particular past events. In this case, we would presumably all agree that

³⁰ However, the present discussion of (S1) and (S2) might raise somewhat more general concerns. More specifically, an anonymous referee suggests that the Main Argument's conclusion, the Main Claim, can only be properly developed in the context of 'a positive account of what it is to grasp a system of temporal relations between times themselves'. And indeed, it seems plausible to assume that the present discussion as well as the Main Claim itself are closely linked with such an account. However, it seems impossible to develop such an account prior to, and independently of, present considerations (as the anonymous referee seems to suggest we should do). For it seems plausible to accept that in order for a subject to grasp a system of temporal relations between times themselves, the subject has to grasp what 'times themselves' are. But then, a subject's grasp of what times themselves are does, as the present discussion indicates, depend on the subject's having recollective (and perceptual) experiences of particular events occurring at particular times. Hence, our present considerations suggest that a subject can only grasp a system of temporal relations between times themselves if she has recollective (and perceptual) experiences of particular events occurring at particular times. This claim in turn seems rather important and deserves much closer attention, but there is no time to consider it further here. Still, for the time being we should at least note that the present discussion might also contribute in important ways to any future attempt to develop an account of a subject's grasp of a system of temporal relations between times themselves.

³¹ Note that our everyday understanding of events is bound to diverge in many respects from the various accounts of events which have been developed in the relevant philosophical literature (cf. e.g. Chisholm, 1970; Davidson, 1980a and 1980b; Kim, 1993; Lombard, 1986; and Bennett, 1988. Simons (2003) provides a brief survey of the recent debate). For present purposes, those philosophical accounts of events are irrelevant. After all, we are here trying to assess the claim that a subject can only grasp the concept of the past if she understands that particular events took place in the period of time which we call 'the past'. This claim is only plausible as long as it demands that the subject have an everyday understanding of the claim that particular events occurred in the past. It would be utterly implausible to hold that a subject can only be said to grasp the concept of the past once she has understood some complex philosophical account of events.

³² For related comments, cf. Hoerl, 1999, pp. 241-6.

she does not understand our everyday concept of a particular past event. On the other hand, maybe she has not thought much about the issue so far. We therefore prompt her to tell us whether or not she thinks that under normal, everyday conditions, particular past events can be undone, which, after consideration, she answers positively. Once more, it seems that if she comes to this conclusion, she just does not understand our concept of a particular past event.

More generally, Mary's exemplary case indicates that we have good reason to accept that in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, it is necessary that she understand that under normal, everyday conditions, particular past events cannot now be undone or modified in any other way. This in turn should help us to understand what the Main Argument's first premise demands.

5. Descriptions and Factual Memories

(MA2), the second premise of the 'Main Argument', is bound to be more controversial. That premise says that in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have some R-memories of particular past events.³³ Someone might immediately object to this claim, holding that the concept of a particular past event is an a priori concept. However, as long as we do not (as indicated earlier) even have any good reason to accept that the concept of the *past* is an a priori concept, it seems difficult to see how we could develop a convincing argument in support of the claim that the concept of a *particular past event* is an a priori concept. I therefore suggest that for present purposes, we assume that we have no particularly good reason to assume that the concept of a particular past event *is* an a priori concept, and explore the possibility of experience playing a role in a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event.

Now, many R-memories *are* R-memories of particular past events. For example, when you remember the last dinner party you went to, and when you remember the host's welcoming you on your arrival, you R-remember a particular past event. Thus, R-memories often do present the subject with particular past events, and it seems plausible to accept that R-memories of such particular past events might in turn also somehow contribute to the subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event. However, (MA2) claims more than this. In order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that

³³ Note that (MA2) should not be understood as demanding that the subject have an R-memory at the very moment in time at which we want to say of the subject that she does understand the concept of the past. Rather, the demand 'that the subject have some R-memories of particular past events' will also be met if the subject has had relevant experiences in the not too distant past.

it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, so (MA2) says, it is *necessary* that the subject have some R-memories of particular past events. And indeed, I think we should endorse this claim, because it turns out to be the only viable option. Of course, various alternatives to (MA2) might be developed. However, as we will see, none of those possible alternative suggestions is viable, which in turn gives us good reason to accept (MA2). A subject who R-remembers a particular past event is *experientially aware* of the relevant particular past event in a specific, namely a recollective, way. And we will see that unless a subject *is* aware of particular past events in this way, the subject cannot understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past.

As indicated, we can show this by assessing the various possible *alternatives* to (MA2). Thus, firstly, we might consider the suggestion that a subject can understand the concept of the past perfectly well without having any memories whatsoever. Rather, so someone might say,

(Description-Suggestion) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, it is sufficient that the subject be able to understand *descriptions* of particular past events.

Indeed, so the defender of the present suggestion continues, consider Mary:

(Mary's Case) Mary has never remembered anything at all in her entire life. Nevertheless, when we describe particular past events to her—when we tell her about the Battle of Hastings, for example, or describe the walk she took yesterday afternoon—she seems to *understand* those descriptions of particular past events.

But then, so the defender of the present suggestion might say, if Mary understands *descriptions* of particular past events, she should also be able to understand the *concept* of a particular past event. For the relevant descriptions describe particular past events, so that she can come to understand the concept of a particular past event on the basis of those descriptions. Thus, in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, it is sufficient that the subject be able to understand *descriptions* of particular past events. Thus, so the opponent concludes, (MA2) must be false.

However, we are presently trying to show how a subject can understand the concept of a particular past event in order to clarify how a subject can understand the concept of the past. Indeed, as we said earlier, a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she understands the concept of a particular past event. But then, it seems plausible to accept that:

(Non-Employment-Condition) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that this might contribute to

her understanding of the concept of the past, the subject should not have to rely on an ability to employ the concept of the past.

A subject can only understand *descriptions* of particular past events if she does employ the concept of the past. The opponent's Description-Suggestion therefore violates the Non-Employment-Condition. Hence, a subject's ability to understand *descriptions* of particular past events is not sufficient for the subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that this might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past. A subject whose grasp of the concept of a particular past event depends solely on descriptions of particular past events therefore could not possibly understand the concept of the past, and should accordingly not be said to understand the relevant descriptions either.

Alternatively, so someone might suggest, consider a subject who has *some* memories of particular past events, memories which we might, following Norman Malcolm, call 'factual memories'.³⁴ A factual memory of a particular past event is a *belief* about the relevant event which the subject has formed at the time at which the event originally occurred, and which she has retained since then.³⁵ Thus, a subject who factually remembers a particular past event simply has a certain *belief* about a particular past event. But then, so runs the present suggestion,

(Factual-Memory-Suggestion) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, it is sufficient that the subject have factual memories of particular past events,

which, so the opponent concludes, in turn implies that (MA2) is false.

Indeed, so the defender of the present suggestion will say, consider Emma:

(Emma's Case) Emma has many factual memories of various particular past events. For example, she remembers that it was sunny on her first day at school, and she remembers that she met her friend Alice for coffee yesterday afternoon. However, Emma never has any recollective memories whatsoever.

The opponent might grant that maybe, no case like Emma's will ever occur in real life. However, so the opponent will insist, we can conceive of a subject like Emma, and that is all the present suggestion requires us to do. A subject like Emma, so the defender of the present suggestion will say, should be said to understand the

³⁴ For the terminology, cf. e.g. Malcolm (1963, p. 223), who distinguishes between 'factual memory' and 'perceptual memory'.

³⁵ Recent psychological research confirms that subjects can and do draw a distinction between recollective and factual memories. In the psychological literature, the distinction is usually drawn by saying that the subject 'knows' or 'remembers' respectively. (Cf. e.g. the questionnaire developed by Rajaram (1993, p. 102). For a survey of relevant psychological work done on the two different kinds of memory, see Gardiner and Richardson-Klavehn, 2000.)

concept of a particular past event perfectly well. For Emma's factual memories are memories of particular past events, and Emma can understand the concept of a particular past event on the basis of those factual memories. Thus, in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, it is sufficient that the subject have factual memories of particular past events.

However, a subject who factually remembers a particular past event has a *belief* about the relevant past event. It is difficult to see how a subject could possibly understand anything on the basis of a belief which she might be said to have, but which has so far never been occurrent in her mental life. Such beliefs—beliefs we might be said to have, but which have never been occurrent in our mental lives so far—might have the most surprising impact on our lives—for example, they might make us do all sorts of things without us even noticing—but it seems difficult to see how they could possibly be said to help us to *understand* anything, such as, for example, the concept of a particular past event. Thus, it seems plausible to accept that in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event on the basis of a certain belief, the relevant belief has to have been occurrent at some point in the subject's mental life so far.³⁶ But then, a subject can only have an occurrent belief about a particular past event if she employs the concept of the past. Thus, the present suggestion once more violates the Non-Employment-Condition. In order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that this might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is *not* sufficient that the subject have factual memories.

More positively, our considerations of the first two alternative suggestions have made us aware of the Non-Employment-Condition. Intuitively, the Non-Employment-Condition does seem rather plausible. Furthermore, we might also develop the following argument in its support:

(In Support of the Non-Employment-Condition)

- (i) In order for a subject to be said to understand a certain concept, the subject should be able to explain what she is thinking about with the help of the relevant concept.
- (ii) However, if a subject's understanding of a concept *C1* and her understanding of another concept *C2* were to be immediately dependent upon each other, any attempt on the part of the subject to explain what she is thinking about with the help of either *C1* or *C2* would force the subject to move in an immediate circle, which means that the subject could not explain what she is thinking about with the help of either *C1* or *C2*.

³⁶ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting some important clarifications here. The anonymous referee also rightly points out that it might be worthwhile to consider the implications of the present claim about beliefs for the analogous case of R-memory. Indeed, it seems plausible to accept that in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event on the basis of a certain R-memory, it is necessary that the relevant R-memory have been occurrent at some point in the subject's life so far.

Indeed, we might hold that a certain ‘circularity can be fine if the circle of concepts is big enough. Perhaps we can analyse concepts by tracing their conceptual connections with other concepts, where, arguably, circularity is unavoidable, since you cannot escape the network of inter-connected concepts’.³⁷ However, we still have good reason to hold that in order for a subject to understand a certain concept, her having to move in a very narrow circle of concepts is unacceptable.

(iii) Accordingly, a subject should not be said to understand two concepts *C1* and *C2* if her understanding of *C1* and her understanding of *C2* were to be immediately dependent upon each other.

(iv) A subject’s understanding of the concept of the past and her understanding of the concept of a particular past event would be immediately dependent upon each other if the Non-Employment-Condition was *not* met.

(v) Thus, in order for a subject to understand either the concept of the past or the concept of a particular past event, the Non-Employment-Condition has to be met; hence, in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, the subject should not have to rely on an ability to employ the concept of the past, just as the Non-Employment-Condition says.

The present argument gives us good reason to accept the Non-Employment-Condition. How, so we should therefore ask next, could a subject possibly *meet* the Non-Employment-Condition?

6. The Combination-Suggestion

A defender of (MA2) will hold that a subject can only meet the Non-Employment-Condition if she has R-memories of particular past events. However, an opponent might suggest instead that:

(Combination-Suggestion) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is sufficient that (1) the subject understand the concept of a particular *present* event, and that (2) the subject understand the concept of temporal precedence.

Indeed, so the defender of the Combination-Suggestion will say, a subject can understand the concept of a particular present event on the basis of her perceptual experiences of presently occurring events, and a subject can understand the concept

³⁷ Keefe, 2002, p. 255. As Keefe suggests, Strawson (1992) might be said to endorse this view.

of temporal precedence on the basis of her perceptual experiences of change.³⁸ We all have such perceptual experiences of change on a daily basis. For example, we can see a clock's second hand move clockwise, we can 'see a traffic light change from red to green, hear a musical piece being played at very slow speed, or feel the raindrops running down our face'.³⁹ In short, we can perceive things change and move. In those cases, 'we can directly perceive one event preceding the other within the scope of one act of apprehension.'⁴⁰ On the basis of her perceptual experiences of change a subject can, in turn, understand the concept of temporal precedence. But then, once a subject *combines* her understanding of the concept of a particular *present* event with her understanding of the concept of temporal precedence, so the defender of the Combination-Suggestion will say, a subject can also understand the concept of a particular *past* event. Quite simply, so she will hold, combining her concept of precedence with her concept of particular present events, the subject can come to understand that events just like particular present events have occurred *before* any particular present event. This, so the opponent will conclude, is equivalent to the subject's understanding the concept of a particular past event.

However, it seems plausible to accept that under normal, everyday conditions, particular present events can be manipulated or modified now. For example, you are presently reading this text, but you might, just now, be interrupted by an incoming email. In that case, you would stop reading this text here, which in turn means that the present event—your reading this text—can be modified or manipulated. More generally, so the present example suggests, we have reason to accept that under normal, everyday conditions, particular present events can be manipulated or modified now. Furthermore, it also seems plausible to accept that a subject can only understand the concept of a particular present event if she understands that under normal, everyday conditions particular present events can be manipulated or modified now.

But then, as we saw earlier, a subject can only be said to understand the concept of a particular past event if she understands that under normal, everyday conditions particular past events cannot be undone or modified in any other way now. Thus, while a subject can only be said to understand the concept of a particular present event if she understands that under normal, everyday conditions a particular present event can be modified or manipulated now, a subject can only be said to understand the concept of a particular past event if she understands that under normal, everyday

³⁸ Historically, the considerations which follow have usually been embedded in a discussion of 'the specious present'. The classic exposition of the idea of the 'specious present' can be found in James (1890/1950) ch. XV. In the following, however, none of the historical material is presupposed, nor should it be. The position I wish to consider is described fully in the text.

³⁹ Hoerl, 1998, p. 166.

⁴⁰ Hoerl, 1998, p. 157. Ayer (1956, p. 152) expresses the same idea when he writes that the 'relation of temporal precedence is "given" to us' in such perceptual experiences of motion and change.

conditions particular past events cannot be undone or modified in any other way now. Combining her concept of precedence with her concept of a particular present event, the subject might be able to understand that events just like particular present events have occurred before. However, we now find that, against the opponent's assumption, this is not equivalent to the subject's understanding the concept of a particular past event. For a subject who combines her concept of precedence with her concept of a particular present event does not understand that under normal, everyday conditions particular past events cannot be undone or modified in any other way by anybody now. As a subject should only be said to understand the concept of a particular past event if she does understand this, we have to conclude that the Combination-Suggestion fails to offer a plausible account of how a subject might understand the concept of a particular past event.

In response, the defender of the Combination-Suggestion might try to modify her suggestion and hold that in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event, not only does the subject have to meet conditions (1) and (2) of the Combination-Suggestion, but in addition a subject also needs to understand the concept of 'non-changeability', that is, the subject must understand what it means to say that it is not possible for anybody to change a particular event now. Thus, so the opponent might suggest,

(Modified Combination-Suggestion) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is sufficient that (1) the subject understand the concept of a particular *present* event, that (2) the subject understand the concept of temporal precedence, and that (3) the subject understand what it means to say that it is not possible for anybody to change a particular event now.⁴¹

Indeed, so the defender of this Modified Combination-Suggestion will say, once a subject combines her understanding of the concept of a particular present event and her understanding of the concept of temporal precedence with her understanding of what it means to say that it is not possible for anybody to change a particular event now, the subject can, just as the Modified Combination-Suggestion says, understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past.

But then, how could a subject understand what it means to say that it is not possible for anybody to change a particular event now? The defender of the Modified Combination-Suggestion might answer as follows: A subject who understands the concept of a particular present event understands that under normal, everyday conditions, particular present events can be manipulated or modified by someone who is appropriately placed now. But then, combining this insight with the concept

⁴¹ Thanks to Michael Wheeler for this suggestion.

of negation, a subject can also understand what it means to say that it is not possible for anybody to manipulate or modify a particular event now. Hence, so the defender of the Modified Combination-Suggestion will say, a subject who understands the concept of a particular present event, who understands the concept of negation, and who combines both concepts in the relevant way, can meet condition (3).

However, the present suggestion encounters the following problem: In order for a subject to understand that it is not possible for anybody to change a particular event now, it seems necessary that the subject understand that the relevant event is actually irrevocable. However, a subject will not be able to understand this by combining her understanding of the concept of negation with her understanding that under normal, everyday conditions particular present events can be manipulated or modified by someone who is appropriately placed now. A subject who only relies on a combination of those two elements is restricted to a consideration of particular present events, events which can be manipulated or modified by someone who is appropriately placed now. Making use of her understanding of the concept of negation, she might be able to envisage an alternative scenario in which a particular present event occurs while it is not the case that the relevant event can be manipulated or modified by anybody now. Thus, she might be able to conceive of the possibility of it not being the case that certain events could be manipulated or modified by anybody now. This, however, does not yet seem to provide her with an understanding of the actual irrevocability of events which, as a matter of fact, cannot be undone or changed in any way by anybody now. Rather, the present procedure just provides the subject with the sketch of some alternative scenario which does not actually obtain. A subject's being aware of possible scenarios in which it might, counterfactually, be the case that a certain event could not possibly be changed by anybody now does not yet seem to provide her with an understanding of what it means to say that a particular event is actually irrevocable. Rather, in order for a subject to understand what it means to say that a particular event is actually irrevocable, and that it is not possible for anybody to change the particular event in any way now, it seems necessary that she be aware of actual particular events which as a matter of fact cannot be undone or changed in any way by anybody now.

This implies that a subject who combines her understanding of the concept of negation with her understanding of the claim that particular events can be manipulated or modified by someone who is appropriately placed now should not be said to understand what it means to say that it is impossible to change a certain event now. We therefore have to conclude that the Modified Combination-Suggestion does not succeed at providing us with a viable alternative to the Main Argument's second premise (MA2) either.

7. Perceiving Past Events?

This in turn means that we are left with our earlier question: How could a subject understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might

contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past? More specifically, how could a subject understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that the Non-Employment-Condition is met? It seems that we have two options here. A subject might either be able to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past on the basis of certain *beliefs and descriptions alone*, or she might need to rely on certain *experiences*. We have seen that a subject who relies on beliefs or descriptions alone cannot meet the Non-Employment-Condition. We should therefore consider the suggestion that a subject needs to rely on certain *experiences* in order for her to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past. Again, there seem to be two relevant options here. The relevant experiences might be experiences of particular *present* events, or they might be experiences of particular past events. It seems unlikely that a subject's experience of particular present events could be sufficient for her understanding the concept of a particular past event. For, experiences of particular present events can presumably only contribute to a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular present event, and we have seen a moment ago that a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular present event is not, in combination with an understanding of some other concepts such as the concept of precedence, sufficient for her to understand the concept of a particular past event. Thus, on the basis of our considerations so far, we have good reason to assume that:

(Experience-Condition) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to the subject's understanding of the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have *experiences* of particular *past* events.

(MA2), in turn, develops this 'Experience-Condition' further. According to (MA2), the subject needs to have certain experiences of particular past events—namely, recollective memories—in order for her to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past.

However, (MA2) is not the only way in which the Experience-Condition can be developed. Rather, subjects might also *perceive* particular past events. For example, consider Claire:

(Claire's Case) Claire looks up into the night sky and perceives the explosion of a star.

The relevant star is light-years away from earth, and the explosion which Claire perceives *now* took place many years ago. Thus, so one might hold somewhat more generally, whenever a subject perceives a particular stellar event, the subject

perceives a particular past event.⁴² Similarly, one might also hold that whenever a subject watches a film of a particular past event, the subject perceives a particular past event.⁴³ But then, so it might be suggested,⁴⁴

(Perceptual-Experience-Suggestion) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is sufficient that the subject have *perceptual* experiences of particular past events.

This in turn would imply that (MA2) is false.

However, the present suggestion is faced with the following dilemma: When a subject perceives a particular past event, the subject is either *aware* of the fact that she is presented with a particular past event, or she is *oblivious* to that fact. If a subject who perceives a particular past event is *oblivious* to the fact that a particular event she is presented with is a past event, the relevant experience could hardly contribute to the subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event. On the other hand, if the subject is *aware* of the fact that she is presented with a particular past event, the relevant experience *might* contribute to her understanding of the concept of a particular past event, but we then have to ask *how* a subject could be aware of this fact. For example, simply in virtue of looking up into the night sky, Claire certainly is not aware of the fact that she is presented with a

⁴² Someone might object that a subject who perceives a particular stellar event perceives a *present* event rather than a particular past event. (Cf. e.g. Lewis (1986, p. 277, fn. 9) who argues that when I perceive distant stars as they were long ago 'the stars, as I now see them, are not straightforwardly past; for lightlike connection has as good a claim as simultaneity-in-my-rest-frame to be the legitimate heir to our defunct concept of absolute simultaneity.') But be this as it may, for the sake of the argument we might here simply grant the opponent that someone who perceives a particular stellar event does perceive a particular past event.

⁴³ In opposition to this suggestion, someone might say that cases in which a subject watches a film of a particular past event should not be described as cases in which the subject perceives a *particular past event*, but that a subject in a relevant situation should rather be said to perceive a *film* (which happens to record a particular past event). Indeed, as Walton (1984, p. 252) rightly points out, the mixed evidence as to whether or not the assumption that a subject who watches a film which records a particular past event perceives the relevant particular past event relies on an extension of the ordinary English sense of the word 'perceive' in general, and the words 'see', 'hear', etc. in particular. In reply to those who hold that a subject in a relevant situation perceives the *film*, which happens to be the recording of a particular past event, one might point out that the above suggestion 'needn't be made in terms of [...] perception. One might prefer to introduce a new notion, to speak of being "in contact with" things, for instance, when one either sees them with the naked eye' (Walton, 1984, p. 275 fn.13) or sees films of them. Indeed, we would presumably all agree that a subject who watches a film which records a particular past event is in some experiential 'contact with' the relevant particular past event. In order to accommodate the present doubts, the above suggestion might therefore be reformulated, replacing talk of 'perception' with talk of 'experiential contact'.

⁴⁴ Thanks to Hemdat Lerman and Anil Gomes who both (independently) prompted me to think about the following suggestion.

particular past event. Rather, in order for Claire to be aware that she is presented with a particular past event, she actively has to form the belief that the event which she presently perceives in the night sky is a particular past event. More generally, it seems plausible to accept that a subject who perceives a particular past event can only be *aware* of the fact that she is presented with a particular *past* event if she forms a *belief* to that effect. But then, in order for a subject to form a belief that an event which she presently perceives *is* a particular past event, the subject needs to *employ* the concept of a particular past event. At the threat of an immediate circle, therefore, cases in which a subject *perceives* a particular past event could not possibly contribute to a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event. The Perceptual-Experience-Suggestion must therefore be false.

But then, as we said earlier, there are only two ways in which a subject could be experientially aware of a particular past event—namely, either by perceiving it, or else by recollectively remembering it. Perceptual experiences, so we have seen, cannot play the role described by the Experience-Condition. Hence, we have to conclude that the relevant role must be played by a subject's recollective memories. This, in turn, is just what (MA2) says, and so we seem to have good reason to accept (MA2).

An opponent, however, might oppose (MA2).⁴⁵ Indeed, so she might say, consider the following case:

(Complete Amnesia after Accident)

Adam has been involved in an accident, and regains consciousness on a hospital bed. Before the accident, Adam was a normal, healthy adult; now he suffers from complete amnesia. Regaining consciousness, he is confused about his situation.

Maybe, so the opponent of (MA2) concedes, no such extreme case of amnesia has ever occurred in real life. However, we are able to conceive of this situation, and therefore have to take it seriously. Indeed, so the opponent continues, given the situation as described, it seems plausible that Adam will wonder what has happened to him, and that in doing so, he has thoughts about particular past events.⁴⁶ Accordingly, so the opponent concludes, Adam does understand the concept of a

⁴⁵ Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting me to consider the following objection.

⁴⁶ The anonymous referee further develops the present thought in the following way: Adam 'is very concerned about a series of particular events, namely the series of events that left him on a hospital bed with no R-memories at all. He wants to know what those events were. In that sense [Adam] is very much thinking about particular past events. He knows what it takes for an event to be a particular past event, since he is wondering what series of events *of that type* brought about his amnesia and got him where he is. Sure, there is no particular past event E such that [Adam] is thinking about E ([he] is amnesiac after all). But that doesn't mean that [Adam] doesn't know what a particular past event is. What sort of event would he be enquiring about when he asks his doctors "what happened to me?" if he didn't understand what past events are?' (personal communication).

particular past event even though he has no R-memories (any more) at all, which shows that (MA2) must be false.

In response, and in defence of (MA2), we should firstly point out that (MA2) is concerned with a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to a subject's understanding of the concept of the past. And while we might grant the opponent that Adam does somehow understand the concept of a particular past event, we might try to show that this understanding is not of the relevant kind—that is, that it is not of such a kind that it might contribute to his understanding of the concept of the past.

However, more importantly, so the defender of (MA2) will hold, we should question the opponent's conviction that Adam does, in the situation as described, 'understand what past events are'. It seems very plausible that anybody in a situation like Adam's will be very *confused* about their situation, and it also seems very plausible that anybody in such a situation will, if they have the relevant mental capacities, quite urgently want to find out what is going on with them, and how the situation in which they find themselves can be explained. Given that an explanation of the relevant situation will have to refer to particular past events, we (who luckily are not amnesiacs ourselves) might redescribe such thoughts by saying that relevant subjects are thinking about particular past events. This redescription on our part seems fine as far as it goes, but we would be wrong to take it to entail that subjects like Adam are themselves able to employ and understand the concept of particular past events.

Indeed, the latter claim seems rather questionable. Given the utter confusion which any subject with full amnesia will find herself in, it seems, quite on the contrary, highly likely that a subject with full amnesia will not be able to think any clear thoughts that go beyond an attempt to understand their immediately present situation at all. More specifically, Adam is bound to find himself in a deeply bewildered state of incomprehension, and it seems very plausible to assume that while Adam might wonder what is going on with him, in the situation as described he will not understand the concept of a particular past event.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Recent self-observation on my own part might also support this claim. I was recently involved in an accident in which I was hit on the head and rendered unconscious, and I eventually found myself coming back to consciousness sitting up on the verge of a road. I quickly came to recognize my surroundings and upon being asked was able to say who I was and where I lived. Nevertheless, I did, and still do, suffer from local amnesia relating to the events which occurred shortly before, and then during, the time of the accident. Immediately upon regaining consciousness, still fully in the thrall of the localised amnesia (which I then obviously could not have referred to as such) I was utterly confused and fully focused on trying to cope with my own bewildering present situation, and while everybody around me was presumably well aware of the events that had just led up to the situation I then found myself in, I don't think I myself could have thought any thoughts about particular past events in the state of bewildered confusion which, upon regaining consciousness, my amnesia relating to the events of the accident left me with. Rather, it was the fact that I was able to remember other things about my life (such as my name, occupation, and phone number) which helped me to regain

This in turn means that we can defend (MA2) against the present objection. Furthermore, as we have seen earlier, we have good reason to endorse (MA2). Thus, we have good reason to hold that, just as (MA2) has it,

(MA2) in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have recollective memories of particular past events.

In an attempt to develop (MA2) further, one should next explain *how* recollective memories might contribute to a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event in the relevant way.

Indeed, in one sense this might be done fairly swiftly. For, as we said earlier, a subject who R-remembers a particular past event is *experientially aware* of the relevant particular past event. But then, experiences contribute in very many ways to our understanding of the most varied concepts, simply because relevant experiences present us with the objects, properties, or events which fall under the relevant concepts in very immediate and accessible ways. More specifically, therefore, recollective experiences of particular past events contribute to a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event simply because relevant recollective experiences do present the subject in a very immediate and accessible way with particular past events. However, in order to build on the present suggestion, we should in a second step account for the metaphysics of recollective memory, that is, we should account for how exactly it might be possible that recollective memories present a subject in immediate and accessible ways with particular past events. This, in turn, is a question which is too substantial to be addressed here, but I have developed my own answer to that question in a separate paper elsewhere.⁴⁸

my bearings and then later enabled me also to start thinking about the events of the accident, which I still (more than a year later) cannot remember anything about. Thus, on the basis of my own encounter with a case of very local amnesia, an attempt to understand what the situation of someone who suffers from full amnesia might possibly be like does make me think that full amnesia must be unimaginably confusing and bewildering for the afflicted subject, and it would seem plausible to me that a subject (such as Adam) who suffers from full amnesia does not understand hardly anything, and more specifically does not understand the concept of a particular past event. The fact that (MA2) implies that this should be so therefore does not seem a weakness of (MA2) but might, quite on the contrary, count in its favour.

⁴⁸ See Debus, 2008. As an anonymous referee rightly points out, such an answer should, among other things, consider the difference between cases in which a subject recollectively remembers a particular past event and *treats* the relevant experience as one that relates her to the relevant particular past event, and cases in which a subject recollectively remembers a particular past event but treats the relevant recollective memory in a 'script-like way' (cf. McCormack and Hoerl, 1999), that is, as presenting her with an event of a certain *type* only. Cases of the latter kind will not, while cases of the former kind will, contribute to a subject's understanding of the concept of a particular past event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of

8. Thinking About the Future

For the time being, we should return to the Main Argument of the present article. The Main Argument is valid, we have seen that both its premises are true, we have elucidated the relevant premises, and we therefore have rather good reason to accept its conclusion.

However, so an opponent might claim, by replacing all occurrences of the words ‘concept of the past’ in the Main Argument with the words ‘concept of the future’, we can formulate a new argument about the concept of the future, as follows:

(New Argument)

(NA1) In order for a subject to understand the concept of the future, the subject needs to understand the concept of a particular future event.

(NA2) However, in order for a subject to understand the concept of a particular future event in such a way that it might contribute to her understanding of the concept of the future, it is necessary that the subject have some experiences of particular future events.

(New Claim) Hence, a subject can only understand the concept of the future if she has some experiences of particular future events.

But then, so the opponent will continue, the fact that it seems possible to formulate this variation of the Main Argument should in turn prompt us to abandon the Main Argument, for:

(Objection from the Concept of the Future)

(i) the Main Argument, which is developed here in order to show that a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events can also be employed to show that a subject can only understand the concept of the *future* if she has some experiences of particular future events.

(ii) However, we never have any experiences of particular future events.

(iii) Nevertheless, we all do understand the concept of the future perfectly well.

(iv) So, something must be wrong with the argument which seems to show that a subject can only understand the concept of the future if she has some experiences of particular future events.

(v) But then, that argument is structurally identical with the Main Argument.

the concept of the past, which renders the relevant distinction important for present purposes. Indeed, I think one can account for the difference between both kinds of case by showing that recollective memories are usually embedded in a context of relevant beliefs, and that the two kinds of recollective memory presently under consideration differ because they are embedded in importantly different relevant contexts of beliefs. There is no space to develop this idea here, but I do so in Debus, 2010 and Debus, under review.

(vi) Hence, the Main Argument must also be flawed, which means that we have to give up on the Main Argument.⁴⁹

In reply, one might deny either the first or the second premise of the present objection (or both). For present purposes, let us here focus on the objection's second premise. According to that premise, we never have any experiences of future events. However, it seems that, quite on the contrary, we sometimes do have experiences which present us with particular future events. For example, you might experience a desire for a particular future event, you might experience wants, wishes and urges directed at particular future events, just as you might be afraid of a future event, or hope for a particular future event. It seems that in each of those cases, you are experientially presented with particular future events. Of course, the relevant experiences differ in important respects from the experiences we have of particular past events. However, the experiences we have of particular past events—namely, recollective memories—also differ in important respects from the experiences we have of particular present events—namely, perceptual experiences. The fact that the experiences we have of particular future events do in turn differ from both the experiences we have of particular past events and the experiences we have of particular present events is therefore anything but surprising. On the contrary, one might be surprised if there were great similarities between those different kinds of experience. But then, given that we do have experiences which present us with future events, we can conclude that premise (ii) of the opponent's 'Objection from the Concept of the Future' is false. This in turn means that the 'Objection from the Concept of the Future' does no harm to the Main Argument developed in the present article.

Nevertheless, the opponent's present suggestion is important, because it points towards a substantial further implication of the arguments developed in the present article. Indeed, someone who endorses the Main Argument as developed in the present article might also have good reason to endorse the 'New Argument', as set out by the opponent above. For it seems rather plausible that the arguments offered in support of the premises of the Main Argument as developed in the present article might, *mutatis mutandis*, also be developed in support of the premises of the 'New Argument'. Thus, it seems plausible that the arguments developed in the present article might, *mutatis mutandis*, also be used to show that:

(New Claim) a subject can only understand the concept of the future if she has some experiences of particular future events.

This in turn might chime well with recent experimental psychological research on memory which has emphasised structural similarities between a subject's ability

⁴⁹ Various people have made this objection in discussion, and Campbell (2001, p. 186) offers something like this objection in print.

of orienting herself towards the past in memory, and her ability of orienting herself towards the future.⁵⁰ Indeed, if the New Claim could, *mutatis mutandis*, be defended in the same way in which we have here defended the Main Claim, we would find that our ability to understand the concept of the past, and thus our ability to think about the past on the one hand, and our ability to understand the concept of the future, and thus our ability to think about the future on the other, stand in structurally analogous dependency-relations to our having experiences of particular events—in the one case a dependence on experiences of particular past events, and in the other case a dependence on experiences of particular future events. Thus, we might be able to support the view, popular in contemporary empirical research, that there are structural similarities between a subject's ability of orienting herself towards the past, and her ability of orienting herself towards the future. However, these suggestions will have to remain tentative until the New Argument has been discussed in greater detail.⁵¹

⁵⁰ The relevant empirical research is conducted within what is now often called a 'mental time travel framework'—that is, relevant research investigates how subjects can 'travel mentally in time' by remembering the past on the one hand, and by thinking (or imagining, or otherwise mentally relating to) the future on the other. Thus, Suddendorf and Corballis (2008), for example, who offer a useful survey of the issues at hand, suggest that '[m]entally constructing past episodes and mentally constructing future episodes may, in fact, be two sides of the same coin: our ability to travel mentally in time' (Suddendorf and Corballis, 2008, p. 31). (Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting that the present point of contact with the empirical literature be made more explicit.)

⁵¹ As an anonymous referee points out, contemporary experimental research within the 'mental time travel framework' has recently also offered some important new insights into memory in non-human animals. (For a survey of relevant recent work cf. e.g. Roberts, 2008.) Indeed, there now is some evidence in support of the claim that animals have 'episodic-like memory'. But then, so an opponent might say, this in turn throws doubt on the Main Claim of the present article. For (i) it seems highly unlikely that non-human animals have R-memories. (ii) But then, non-human animals have 'episodic-like memories'. (iii) A creature which has 'episodic-like memories' can think about the past. (iv) In order for someone to think about the past, it is necessary that they understand the concept of the past. (v) Thus, non-human animals understand the concept of the past, while they do not have any R-memories. (vi) The Main Claim must therefore be false. In response, the defender of the Main Claim will want to question premise (iii) of the present objection. Indeed, so the defender of the Main Claim will say, it remains unclear why we should interpret the evidence which has prompted experimental psychologists to ascribe 'episodic-like memory' to non-human animals as evidence for the relevant animals' ability to think about the past. On the contrary, it seems possible to interpret the relevant evidence without the ascription of any such thoughts to the relevant non-human animals. The opponent, however, might insist that independently of any evidence obtained so far, it seems quite plausible to assume that non-human animals, who do not have any R-memories, can nevertheless think about the past. And indeed, it might be rash to preclude this as a possibility; however, it would also seem plausible that the phenomena we might wish to describe in relevant non-human animals by ascribing thoughts about the past to them while not ascribing any R-memories to them are bound to be very different from the phenomena we describe when ascribing thoughts to mature healthy human animals; and, as indicated when 'setting the scene' in Section 2, in the present article I am interested in mature healthy human animals. For those mature, healthy human beings the Main Claim has, or so I hope, been shown to be true, and this is all the present article aims to do.

9. Conclusion

On the basis of the considerations of the present article we can, for the time being, conclude quite decisively that we have good reason to endorse the Main Argument and its conclusion, namely the claim that:

(Main Claim) a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories of particular past events.

At first sight, this conclusion does seem rather surprising. For we usually do not assume that recollective memories have any great relevance in our wider mental lives at all. The present article, or so I hope, gives us good reason to reconsider this attitude of neglect with respect to our recollective memories. Indeed, so we find, recollective memories do play a crucial role in a subject's mental life. Our everyday thoughts about the past would be *impossible* if it was not for our recollective memories of particular past events. A subject can, as we have seen, only understand the concept of the past if she has some recollective memories of particular past events. In an attempt to understand our own mental lives in general, and our ability to think about the past in particular, we should therefore give the phenomenon of recollective memory our careful consideration.

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Appendix: The Interdependence-Claim

The present article has shown that a subject can only understand the concept of the past if she has some R-memories. However, we also have good reason to accept that a subject can only have R-memories if she understands the concept of the past. Indeed, the latter claim might be supported as follows:

(Reverse-Dependency-Argument)

(RD1) In order for an experience to count as an R-memory, the subject should, under normal circumstances, be disposed to make *epistemological use* of it—that is, the subject should be prepared to take the relevant experience into account when making new judgements about the R-remembered object or event, and she should be prepared to re-assess beliefs which she has endorsed so far about the R-remembered object or event in the light of the relevant R-memory.

(RD2) But then, in order to make epistemological use of a relevant experience, the subject should have reason to take it that the particular experience presents her with how things were in the past (rather than with an imaginary scenario).

(RD3) In order for the subject to have reason to take it that a relevant experience presents her with how things were in the past (rather than with an imaginary scenario), it is necessary that the experience be embedded in a context of relevant beliefs.

(RD4) But then, in order for a subject to have relevant ‘embedding’ beliefs, the subject needs to understand the concept of the past.⁵²

Hence,

(Reverse-Dependency-Claim) in order for an experience to count as an R-memory, the subject needs to understand the concept of the past.

Although there is no time to do so here, the present argument can be successfully defended,⁵³ and we therefore have good reason to accept its conclusion. Thus, while the Main Argument of the present article aimed to show that in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have some R-memories of particular past events, we now find that in order for a subject to have any R-memories the subject in turn also has to understand the concept of the past. We should therefore endorse the ‘Interdependence-Claim’, namely the claim that:

(Interdependence-Claim) a subject’s understanding of the concept of the past and a subject’s R-memories are interdependent. Thus,

(Main Claim) in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have some R-memories (namely, R-memories of particular past events); and

(Reverse-Dependency-Claim) in order for an experience to count as an R-memory (of a particular past event, or of anything else), it is necessary that the subject understand the concept of the past.

Given that we have reason to accept both the Main Claim and the Reverse-Dependency-Claim, I think we also have very good reason to accept the Interdependence-Claim. However, so an opponent might object,⁵⁴

(Against the Interdependence-Claim)

(i) the Main Claim says that in order for a subject to understand the concept of the past, it is necessary that the subject have some R-memories of particular past events; this implies that in *acquiring* the concept of the past, the subject has to rely on some R-memories, and it thus implies that the subject’s concept of the past is in some way *derived* from some of her R-memories.

(ii) But then, if the subject’s concept of the past is in some way derived from some of her R-memories, it must be possible for a subject to have R-memories temporally *prior* to her deriving the concept of the past from those R-memories.

⁵² Note that in order for a subject to have relevant ‘embedding’ beliefs, the subject does *not* have to *employ* the concept of the past. Thus, the demand that an R-memory be *embedded* in a context of relevant beliefs does *not* violate the Non-Employment-Condition.

⁵³ I have done so in Debus, 2010 and Debus, under review.

⁵⁴ The reconstruction of the following argument relies in important respects on Cassam, 1999, pp. 92–4.

- (iii) However, if it is possible for a subject to have R-memories temporally prior to her acquisition of the concept of the past, it follows that the relevant R-memories are *independent* of the subject's understanding of the concept of the past, which in turn is incompatible with the Reverse-Dependency-Claim.
- (iv) Hence, if we accept the Main Claim, namely the claim that a subject's concept of the past necessarily depends on the subject's R-memories, we then have to reject the Reverse-Dependency-Claim, namely the claim that a subject's R-memories necessarily depend on her concept of the past.
- (v) Thus, the Interdependence-Claim is false.⁵⁵

In reply, we might here focus on premise (ii) of the opponent's objection. If the subject's concept of the past is in some way derived from some of the subject's R-memories, so that premise says, it must be possible for the subject to have R-memories temporally *prior* to her deriving the concept of the past from those R-memories. However, as Cassam points out, we might question the:

... assumption that derivation from experience implies the temporal priority of experience. Just as Kant does not take the fact that certain concepts 'must have arisen completely *a priori*, independently of experience' (A2) to imply that such *a priori* concepts are somehow temporally prior to experience, so it should not be assumed that each and every concept which originates in experience is temporally posterior to experience. Thus, in the case of those concepts which [might be said to be] conditions of experience, the proposal that they are derived from experience does not require one to accept that experience is possible 'before' them, and hence that experience must be possible 'apart' from them (Cassam, 1999, p. 94).

Hence, we can conclude that we do not have any good reason to accept premise (ii) of the opponent's argument Against the Interdependence-Claim, which entails that the opponent's objection to the Interdependence-Claim is unsuccessful. We can conclude that, as the Interdependence-Claim says, while a subject's grasp of the concept of the past necessarily depends on the subject's R-memories of particular past events, a subject's having any R-memories in turn also necessarily depends on the subject's grasp of the concept of the past. Thinking about the past and experiencing the past are closely intertwined and interdependent.

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⁵⁵ For a discussion of the present argument cf. also Allison, 1973, pp. 79 f.

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