

## Lecture

# Memory in philosophy

Chloe Balla, Vasso Kindi, Costas Pagondiotis, Ioannis Papachristou

### Abstract

In antiquity memory was represented as a deity, Mnemosyne, who gave birth to the nine Muses. Mythical narratives show the importance that people attributed to memory for everyday life but also for the understanding of the world. Before the technology of writing allowed people to inscribe law codes, a man with special mnemonic powers, described as a Mnemon, was a trusted and distinguished member of the society who preserved, in his own memory, the rules that were set by the community as well as the community's lore.

Later, in the fifth century, interest in technical training in public speaking gave new value to the technique of mnemonics, which was practiced and presumably taught by experts in this field, who often relied on written records for the purpose of memorization. Criticizing the mechanistic function of mere recording of information and the abuse of writing and reading for the purposes of memorization, Plato undermined the value of mnemonics, and shifted philosophical discussion interest in the mechanism of anamnesis or recollection. His theory depended upon and at the same time introduced a new class of objects, namely the Forms, which were the ultimate objects of recollection. Plato's metaphysical artillery set a new agenda in the history of philosophy, and marked the development of ideas on memory in the Neo-Platonism tradition. Plato represents an important side of the history of philosophy, without however exhausting it.

Aristotle, his contemporary student, followed a rather different vein, and attempted to demarcate memory and recollection as distinct functions. He connects memory to time and describes it as a passive storage of past events. By contrast, recollection, according to Aristotle, is not passive; recollection moves through discursive reason from fact to fact, until it recollects the object. Aristotle connects memory with sense-perception and, thus, attributes memory to all animals possessing sense-perception; whereas, only humans possess recollection because it involves reasoning.

Starting from an account of these distinct paths in the development of the concept of memory in antiquity we will focus on a variety of related issues, such as: memory as a faculty of the soul; memory, recollection and cognition; memory and emotions; recollection and self-knowledge.

In modern times, memory was invoked mostly in relation to epistemological issues, i.e., as a cognitive faculty that contributes to making sense of experience, consciousness, identity or time. In empiricist philosophy, in particular, where it played a major role, it was thought to be parasitic upon perception as it was supposed to recall or bring forward past sense impressions and, thus, contribute to the unity of perceptions, to fixing identity and, in particular, personal identity. It was also important for the experience of time. Rationalists such as Descartes also take memory to presuppose impressions, which leave traces on the brain making possible the recollection of ideas that resemble them. This is corporeal memory that Descartes distinguishes from intellectual memory. In general, in this period, memory has a mediating and synthesizing role bringing together and invoking impressions in storage and representational models of the mind.

Athenian Symposia: Cerebral Instantiation of Memory, Under the auspices of the Hellenic Clinical Neurophysiology Society, Athens, March 30-31, 2018

Guest Editors: Mary H. Kosmidis, Athanasia Liozidou, Lambros Messinis, Alexandra Thanellou, Ioannis Zalonis

The representational approach to memory is also dominant in contemporary analytic philosophy. Stored memory traces are postulated as necessary intermediates between the remembered object and the act of remembering so as to avoid causation at a temporal distance. There are various issues about these postulated entities that concern the relations they bear to the remembered object and the act of remembering. Most theorists favor the existence of a kind of causal relation among them. There is also debate about the way memory traces encode information about the remembered object. The main options here are pictorial, symbolic and distributed encoding. A related issue is how the encoded information is activated and whether this activation constitutes a passive reproduction or an active reconstruction. These questions are primarily for neuroscience to investigate, but there is certainly still room for philosophy. For example, a detailed description of the phenomenology of memory, of how one experiences from the first person perspective remembered objects, can set specific restrictions on the provided neuroscientific explanations.

**Chloe Balla** is Assistant Professor of ancient philosophy at the Department of Philosophy and Social Studies, University of Crete, Greece. Her publications include a translation with Introduction and notes of Aristotle's Constitution of Athens in Modern Greek (in collaboration with Robert W. Wallace: Athens 2015); a monograph on Platonic Persuasion: From the art of the orator to the art of the statesman (in Greek: Athens 1997), and two co-edited volumes: on The Interface between Philosophy and Rhetoric in Classical Athens (special issue of *Rhetorica*, 2007), and on the Deaths of Philosophers in Antiquity (Greek: Athens 2011). Her interests lie in the works of the Sophists, Plato, Aristotle and the medical writers.

**Vasso Kindi** is Professor of Philosophy of Science at the Department of History and Philosophy of Science of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She has published on philosophy of science, T. S. Kuhn's work, Wittgenstein's philosophy, philosophy of language, philosophy of history and ethics.

**Costas Pagondiotis** is Assistant Professor in Philosophy of Mind at the University of Patras, Greece. His research focuses on topics in the philosophy of mind, perception, and cognitive science. Special interests include the role of conceptual capacities in perception, the dependence of perception on action, self-consciousness, and pictorial experience.

**Ioannis Papachristou** received his PhD from Humboldt- Universität zu Berlin (2013) while being a doctoral fellow at Topoi Excellence Cluster in the framework of which he was appointed as Visiting Student Research Collaborator at Princeton University, USA. He has been awarded the Fellowship Fernand Braudel (2014-2015) at the Labex RESMED/ Centre Léon Robin, Paris IV- Sorbonne and later had a postdoctoral position at the Department of Philosophy, University of Geneva (2015-2016). Currently, I. Papachristou holds a postdoctoral position at the Research Centre for the Philosophy, University of Geneva.