



IS REMEMBERING A KIND OF IMAGINING?

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ABSTRACT: The scope of this paper is my objection to Michaelian's claim, who advocates that the reliability condition is the mark which specify *genuine rememberings*. Against this view, I argue that this strategy is doomed to fail, since the relationship between memory and past has to be already in play and so everything which could count as reliable for a genuine remembering is itself a genuine remembering. If my argument is sound, the conclusion is that the appeal to reliability implies circularity, and so simulation theory cannot provide an explanatory account of the distinction between imagining, understood as a sort of confabulation, and genuine remembering.

KEYWORDS: Remembering, Imagining, Causation, Simulation, Reliability Condition.

Is episodic remembering a kind of imagining? Episodic remembering is characterized as memory of past personal events, whose content is supposed to be retrieved through acts of remembering.² Recently, there has been extensive philosophical research in which a novel pathway on the relationship between remembering and imagining is under scrutiny. One of the leading theorists of this new wave is Kourken Michaelian, who claims that there is no essential difference between remembering and imagining (MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2018, p. 27).³ His claim is based on a rejection of the causal theory of memory and on the assumption that remembering has a reconstructive nature.

This paper is divided in three parts. Firstly, I expose some motivations for simulationist approach on the theoretical analysis of rememberings by pointing to unsolvable problems left over by the causal theory of memory. As it is argued along the paper, a fundamental problem is that the analysis of episodic rememberings in terms of necessary causation is vulnerable to some counterexamples, by means of which the claim that genuine episodic rememberings necessarily depend upon a past experience turns out to be contentious. The main point against causation dependency claim lies on remembering's reconstructive nature. Based on that view about episodic remembering's nature, simulation theory puts up a whole new way of treating

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² In this paper, I am solely concerned with episodic memory. Any time I talk of remembering, it should be read as episodic remembering.

³ It is to be clear that this thesis does not entail the truth of the converse claim. Obviously, not every act of imagining is an act of remembering, as are cases of imagining the future.

that phenomenon, giving pride of place to a subject's imaginative capacity, instead of distinguishing remembering from imagining in terms of causation.

Along the second part, my attempt is to provide a simple overview of the simulation theory, bringing its core claims about and discussing different views on the role played by memory traces. The point of this section is that of explaining the reasons for abandoning the contentful conception of memory traces, which is fundamentally connected to the storage model of memory, by arguing that the memory traces content claim does not guarantee the causal dependence necessity claim argued by causalists. In brief, the core idea is that, even if the activation of memory traces does its job well when past experiential contents are retrieved, if some rememberings either do not depend on that activation, or if a memory trace content is a blend of some undistinguishable past experiential contents, then the conclusion is that the necessity claim does not follow. In that section I argue in favour of this conclusion.

In the last part I make a different move by pointing to a serious issue on the simulationist account. On Michaelian's view, motivated by his objections against the causal view advocated by Bernecker (2010) and Martin and Deutscher (1966), no fundamental distinction is to be found between rememberings and imaginings, being the former a kind of the latter. As a consequence, this view blows out the distinction between remembering and confabulating, since they are both understood as kinds of imaginings. However, to save the phenomenological difference between confabulating and remembering, simulation theory appeals to the *reliability condition*. On that I make a point: basically, I am arguing that no explanatory value can be recognized by that strategy, since the essential issue remains untouched, namely the link between rememberings and the past continues obscure and unexplained by the reliabilism condition claim. The reliability condition cannot explain how episodic rememberings are qualified as such by having some link to the past, distinguishing itself from confabulating, merely imagining the past or imagining the future by the status of being connected to an autobiographical past. The point is rather simple: if rememberings are distinct from confabulations, their distinction certainly arises from the fact that the latter does not bring back the past, while the former does. And I reckon that the rememberings' link with a particular past remains unexplained by Michaelian's reliability condition move.

1. Motivations for the Causal Theory of Remembering

Suppose I am currently remembering some past experienced event and then I ask myself how my actual remembering is linked with my past. Certainly, it is intuitive to consider the

nature of this activity to be determined by its relationship with a particular past experience. If any psychological activity is to be called ‘remembering’, this activity has to be defined in terms of its relationship to some particular past experience. Hence, the crucial role of a theory of episodic memory is that of explaining that connection between past experience and its retrieval.

One usual way to explain the connection between episodic remembering and personal or autobiographical past experiences is appealing to a causal theory of memory, which assumes the presence of a causal link between the subject’s remembering and her earlier experience as a mark which specifies and distinguishes the phenomena of remembering from any other psychological activity, especially from the phenomena of imagining. There are quite different ways to construe the notion of causality involved in recent debates about the nature of genuine remembering. I am concerned with the version of the claim which says that causation links past experience to actual remembering in line with the exemplary version of the causal theory, which captures the analysis of remembering in terms of necessary causal dependence. As advocated by Bernecker and Martin-Deutsche, the causal chain which leads the act of remembering to the original experience is a *necessary condition* to genuine remembering. More specifically, their claim is that remembering distinguishes itself from imagining in terms of an appropriate causal chain, whose presence is meant to guarantee the occurrence of genuine remembering. Following this account, for remembering to occur, there has to be a relationship between two events located at different points in time: the original experience and a later retrieval of that experience. In short, the authors assume the existence of a relationship defined in terms of causation, which is supposed to bridge the gap between two events temporally distant.

The causal theory is meant to provide a way to eliminate ambiguity on the realm of psychological acts. And it understands the performance of episodic remembering according to the storage model of memory. In this sense, the fundamental idea is that the causal condition became necessary to remembering in terms of storage and retrieval of past contents. That is, if a psychological act is to be regarded as remembering, then the content of a particular past experience has to be causally active, being causally transmitted at the very moment in which an episodic remembering performance takes place. The analysis of the examples below should address that point.

Suppose that Roger attends a magic show. Later, he suffers an accident, the result of which is complete retrograde amnesia: he no longer remembers events from his past, including the magic show. Also, as a result of the accident, he is prone to producing confabulatory accounts of past events. Suppose that he produces a story that happens to correspond in perfect detail to his experience of the magic show. (MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2018, p. 2)

The decisive move in the causal theory of memory is the *necessity* claim with regards to the causal condition for a content representation to count as an act of episodic remembering. In this way, what prevents Roger's representation from being an instance of remembering is the fact that the stored content of his magic show attendance was not causally transmitted as the content of his story telling. The correspondence between them was a matter of mere luck or coincidence. In virtue of that, there would be no means to provide an account of the phenomenological distinction between remembering and imagining. To relieve this problem, causal theorists call for a causal connection to mark a difference in kind between those acts.

Another circumstance which suggests the call for causal condition claim is that in which the distinction between remembering and relearning is blurred. In Martin and Deutsche terms, appropriate causal connection is necessary for genuine remembering to occur, since the content of a stored particular past experience has to be causally *operative* at the moment of its retrieval (Cf. MARTIN and DEUTCHER, 1966, p. xxx)

Suppose, again, that Roger attends a magic show; later, he suffers an accident, the result of which is complete retrograde amnesia. If, at some point between the show and the accident, Roger told his friend Lane about the show, then he might later relearn of it from him. (MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2018, p. 3)

The challenge of spelling out the conditions for a genuine act of remembering has to face the danger of blurring the limits between different cognitive activities. On one hand, whether an act of remembering can be completely determined as such depends on specific conditions that must hold whenever the cognitive activity of remembering is in play. This is the chief motivation for causal theories, in order to excluding either correspondence by chance through imagining and relearning as genuine acts of remembering. In both examples given above, Roger is not supposed to be remembering since his cognitive activity does not depend on a causal chain leading his remembering to a past experience from where the content of his remembering must be derived. In the first case, it is only by chance that Roger describes his past perception. In the second example, Roger was merely informed of his attendance in a magic show, of which he has got no single piece of remembering. In line with the causal theory, Roger's remembering necessarily depend on a causal chain which goes backwards to his past experience of the magic show. And its absence implies that no genuine act of remembering should correspond to his cognitive activity.

2. Role of Memory Traces

The analysis of the second example also provides us with a good opportunity to explain why Martin and Deutsche postulate *memory traces* as vehicles for past contents and causally active in transmitting that content on any occasion in which an act of remembering takes place. The point is that, by distinguishing remembering from relearning, they were well aware of the fact that external prompts or remainders cues can also give rise to rememberings (Cf. MARTIN and DEUTCHER, 1966, p. 182). External prompts or remainders cues are characterized as a sort of circumstance in which a person sees a picture or hears a story that brings her past about. Back to Roger's case, it follows that when Roger was informed of his attendance in the Magic show, he could have remembered it, if he had not suffered from amnesia as a consequence of his accident. If Lane had supplemented his stored content with a story about the magic show and if his rememberings were primarily due to his stored content, then Roger could have remembered the magic show all right. Thus, assuming that an episodic remembering can take place if a stored past content is supplemented by external prompts, what distinguishes remembering from relearning is the role played by them. External prompts can supplement stored past contents, but alone it cannot give rise to rememberings. On the other hand, stored past content must be causally active in any instance of remembering. In Martin and Deutsche's view, Roger's memory traces have to do the relevant causal work, if his act is to be classified as a genuine act of remembering. Therefore, the version of the causal theory of memory advocated by Bernecker/Martin and Deutsche regards the causal work done by memory traces as the appropriate causal connection required by rememberings. In this sense, regardless its empirical features – which is a matter of controversy between empirical researchers – but according to a pure theoretical account of memory traces, which is motivated by the way in which the storage model of memory spells out the causal work done by the content of past experiences, the activation of memory traces is a necessary stage if a person is indeed remembering her autobiographical past. In such a way, at least two basic functions necessarily depend on the activation of memory traces. Firstly, it supposedly stores the experiential content and establishes a causal chain which leads the content of a particular remembering back to a particular past experience, being distinct from any other causal chain, like those which stem from external prompts. Secondly, the activation of memory traces must produce a distinct internal state of remembering.⁴ The reason why memory traces are indispensable to single out

⁴ The claim that a *distinct internal state* is produced by the activation of memory traces is not spelled out in details by Martin and Deutscher in their classical paper called "Remembering". And it is not the focus of my concern in this paper. However, it is worth to note that this claim opens the door to a different flank of criticism. That is, if

remembering's content is responsive to the fact that a different cognitive capacity might be causally operative in producing them. If, for instance, Roger attended a magic show while he was hypnotized, being then placed in a suggestible state, supposing that Lane tells him a story about his attendance, it is highly probable that his rememberings stem not from his experience but from Lane's description of it (Cf. MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2018, p. 16). In this scenario, though there is the presence of a causal chain leading back to his experiential content, it might be the case that a different cognitive capacity was responsible for Roger's seeming to remember.

Not only rememberings are causally dependent on retention of past contents. Merely imagining, imagining the future, confabulating, contrafactual reasoning are also somehow all dependent on some sort of retention cognitive capacity. The content retention of a past experience plays a role in many of our cognitive processes. Hence, causalists who appeal to memory traces have to argue that these devices must not only retain the content of a past experience but preserve what is essential to it.⁵ A past content has to be retained and preserved by memory traces whose activation has to be the cause of rememberings. So, it necessarily operates either in the content preservation and in transmitting past contents from experience to retrieval (Cf. MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2018, p. 21). In resume, memory traces are supposed to be the bearers of the right causal connection, helping to stablish the distinction between remembering, merely imagining, confabulating, relearning or any other cognitive activity which request a stored past content to be performed. In such a way, to remember is to activate the causal history of each memory trace, in which the content of a past experience is memorially retained. And given its preservative function, it is meant to explain the time endurance of mnemonic contents. Nonetheless, a crucial flaw of this account on remembering lies exactly in the assumption that past contents are retained by memory traces and retrieved by acts of remembering. It falls short of explaining how exactly memory traces retain what was essential with regards to a particular past experience content: in which way should the correspondence between episodic remembering and past experience be established? It would be too strong to call for an identity relation between episodic remembering content and past experience content. However, even assuming the weaker claim that these contents need to be

episodic genuine rememberings are to be qualified through that *distinct internal state* too, together with memory trace causation, then the rememberer should be aware of that internal state and, at least in part, this state should be a necessary condition for the occurrence of episodic rememberings. Given that, it seems that such condition does imply a first-person authority with regards to the genuity of her rememberings, being the person who remembers the same who attributes the status of her psychological activity as an instance of remembering.

⁵ There is a long discussion between preservationists and generativists about the capacity of remembering to produce new content. But I will not touch on this issue here. For more on that, see Bernecker (2010).

just similar to one another, how is that similarity to be spelled out? If there is no way to single out the experience from which a content was memorially preserved, is it reasonable to insist on claiming that a relevant causal chain is necessary to rememberings? This is a deep question and different philosophical approaches are available if one wishes to excavate it. To the extent I am concerned, I will now turn to point out in some details objections made by the simulation theory against this causal view on rememberings.

3. Simulation Objections

Opposed to the causal theory, the simulation theory of memory argues that the kind of causal link established by memory traces is not necessary for the occurrence of rememberings. It advances a challenge to the appropriate causation claim due to remembering's reconstructive nature. Precisely, the objection made by proponents of the simulation theory is based on the assumption that, at least in part, the content of a particular remembering is construed at the very moment of the retrieval, rather than derived from the content of a corresponding experience (Cf. MICHAELIAN, 2016, p. 23). If so, appropriate causation turns out to be not necessary to distinguish remembering from imagining or confabulating.

The simulation theorist's claim is thus that the occurrence of genuine remembering does not presuppose the transmission of information or content to the retrieved representation from the corresponding past experience. This is compatible with the possibility that there will inevitably be causal connections of other sorts between a given retrieved representation and the corresponding past experience—the causal theorist claims that memory is characterized by a causal connection of a specific sort, not simply that it involves a causal connection of some sort or other, and it is this claim, in particular, that the simulation theorist rejects (MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2018, p. 3).

The simulation account of memory is a post causal theory due to its focus on the analysis of the phenomena of rememberings as they seem, depending their occurrence on what happens when a subject actually remembers. It does not appeal to the logical necessity claim with regards to the causal link between rememberings content and past experiences content. The point made by Michaelian involves a close look on the workings of memory traces. Assuming the reconstructive nature of remembering, it appears contentious to consider that the role played by memory traces is that of storing the content of past experiences, and that they must be causally active in instances of genuine rememberings. A first problem with this view is the inevitability of infinite regress on the causal chains which links remembering to past experience. Let us take a step towards this issue.

There are two dominant conceptions of memory traces, the local trace theory and the distributed view. The local trace theory considers memory traces to be local and distinguishable. They are responsible for storing the single content of an experience, on which a later retrieval necessarily depends. The distributed view argues that memory traces constitute a larger network of nodes, being the single content of a retrieved representation a matter of activating a dispersed number of traces. The relevant point is how to adequate those versions of memory traces with the reconstructive nature of remembering. Both conceptions of memory traces seek to maintain the commitment to appropriate causation as a necessary condition to any act of genuine remembering.

Considering the local trace theory, multiple experiences may contribute to a single trace or multiple traces may contribute to the content of a single retrieved experience. Consequently, if a retrieved representation is appropriately causally connected to an experience, it might also be connected to another experience and so appropriate causation fails to single out the experience from which an act of remembering is derived (Cf. MICHAELIAN, 2016, p. 25). Considering the distributed conception of traces – spelled by Sutton (1998 and 2010) – according to which memories “are blended, not laid down independently once and for all, and are reconstructed rather than reproduced” (SUTTON, 1998, p. 2), it is hard to see how appropriate causation can follow, since no single trace is identified as distinct vehicle bearing distinct content. As it seems, the requirement of content transmission from past experiences to retrievals turns out to be not sufficient to single out the causal chain necessary to perform acts of remembering.

The point is that, even if the majority of rememberings contents may be causally derived from relevant past experiences – what is not in conflict with the simulation theory, as it only objects the logical necessity claim advocated by the causal theory of Bernecker/Martin Deutsche – the fact that some rememberings are derived either from multiple experiences or multiple traces should imply that sometimes a single cause cannot unquestionably be discriminated as the cause of a particular remembering. And so, causation should not be logically necessary to remembering. Furthermore, it seems intuitive to argue that sometimes the content of some rememberings may not be causally derived by memory traces activation. Consider for instance a person who remembers in virtue of being prompted by a story or another sort of evidence. In line with the causal theory, they are not cases of genuine rememberings, since no relevant past experience content is operative in her retrieval. However, if, as the simulation theory of remembering proposed by Michaelian claims, there is no real difference

between remembering and imagining the past (Cf. MICHAELIAN, 2016, p. 27), an episodic memory can also be the result of imagining the past. If so, the conclusion is that causation is not a mark which distinguishes rememberings from imaginings. And it allows for kinds of episodic rememberings absolutely disconnected from any particular past experience or any particular past experiential content. By this means it is conceivable to regard episodic rememberings as a product of imaginative processes too, what leaves it open to consider rememberings caused by external prompts, without the activation of memory traces, as cases of genuine rememberings. Thus, holding this view, Roger was remembering.

Similarly, to imagining future events, which draws its contents from stored past experiences contents, rememberings contents does not necessarily come from a particular past experience. Though it is equally derived from past experiences. But then, what is essential to specify the phenomena of remembering and distinguish it from merely imagining, confabulating and so on? Obviously, a person can imagine the past wrongly and, in this case, it fails to qualify as remembering. This fact presses Michaelian to find a way to distinguish remembering, understood as imagining the past, from confabulating. And in virtue of that, he adds a further condition to mark that distinction, namely the reliability condition.

4. Distinguishing Remembering from Confabulation

For simulation theory, remembering is a kind of imagination. With regards to episodic memory, it shares the same features as imagining the future. That is, just as imagining the future does not presuppose any causal connection to the future event, remembering does not presuppose any causal connection to the past event, even if the past event was experienced. However, assuming that view, how to distinguish between remembering the past and confabulating, both understood as kinds of imagination? The simulationist strategy is that of providing an account in terms of reliability, by means of which “to remember a past event is to imagine it in a *reliable manner*” (MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2017, p. 27).

In 2017 text, Michaelian and Robins argue that the reliability condition should enable a person to distinguishing genuine remembering from confabulation⁶. Hence, assuming that no relevant content distinction is present on the base of those activities, the most important issue for defenders of simulation theory concerns the particularity of genuine rememberings among different instances of cognitive activities. As it was pointed before, for the causal theory, this

⁶ I will not carry any discussion about the difference between false memory, confabulation and merely imagining. My focus here is the distinction between genuine remembering and confabulation.

difference is marked by the presence of appropriate causal link between retrieved contents and experiential past contents. On the other hand, according to simulation theory, the idea is that the reliability condition provides the means to distinguish imagining the past, understood as remembering, from confabulating or merely imagining the past (Cf. MICHAELIAN and ROBINS, 2017, p. 27). Hence, the concept of reliability, spelled out by reliabilist epistemology (GOLDMAN, 2012) plays a central role in Michaelian's account of remembering. He says that "the simulation theorist argues that properly functioning episodic construction systems are reliable and therefore treats reliability as a precondition for the occurrence of genuine remembering" (MICHAELIAN, 2018, pp. 2-3). Accordingly, it treats genuine memory in terms of reliable imagination and confabulation in terms of unreliable imagination.

Although reliability condition is an epistemic theory of justification, it is not used by Michaelian within that frame, as a justificatory condition, what would imply genuine remembering to be understood as justified true belief. This move would render remembering as necessarily dependent on a reliable belief formation process about the past. In this sense, it should be regarded as knowledge of the past. However, if simulation theory is to be taken coherently, according to the reliability condition added to it by Michaelian, we should end up claiming that memory-knowledge is a sort of imagining the past in a reliable manner. Belief and imagination correspond to distinct cognitive activities, and the reliabilist condition tied to the second one is associated with grounds for knowledge, namely that of justified true belief. However, on the simulation frame,

The inclusion of a reliability condition in the simulation theory is not motivated by epistemological considerations: Michaelian argues that the causal condition needs to be supplemented by the reliability condition in order to capture the difference between successful and unsuccessful remembering, and Michaelian(argues, first, that the causal condition does not accurately reflect the difference between successful and unsuccessful remembering and, second, that that difference is accurately reflected by the reliability condition. The simulation theory of memory is thus not an epistemic theory (MICHAELIAN, 2018, p. 4).

The move to dissociate the reliabilist condition from the epistemic frame is meant to distinguish simulation theory from an epistemic theory, so that it avoids the claim that a corresponding belief is a condition to regard a representational content as successful act of remembering. Obviously, one may remember an event without believing it to be true. Or,

conversely, believing something to be the case without imagining it (Cf. MICHAELIAN, 2018, pp. 3-4).⁷

The fact that a cup of coffee has been produced by a reliable coffee machine does not, by itself, imply that one ought to or may drink it. Similarly, the fact that an apparent memory has been produced by a reliable episodic construction system does not, by itself, imply that one ought to or may form the corresponding belief. The simulationist account of confabulation is thus not an epistemic account (MICHAELIAN, 2018, p. 3)

On what follows, I will draw a specific consideration on the incorporation of reliability condition within the frame of simulation theory of memory. This incorporation is meant to differentiate remembering from confabulation, the first understood as a reliable imagining and the second as unreliable imagining. Nonetheless, this strategy taken by Michaelian seems to have a more serious threat, namely it does not explain what links genuine episodic remembering to the past, and so its status of retrieving a past experienced content remains obscure.

Suppose that I am currently remembering a personal experience. If what distinguishes it as genuine episodic remembering instead of some sort of confabulating is the reliability condition, I have to assume that a reliable process is responsible for giving the status of episodic remembering to the content of my cognitive activity. However, at any rate, if a reliable process, which might be spelled out in terms of a reliable testimony, reliable perception or other reliable procedure, is responsible for attributing the status of genuine episodic remembering to the content of my cognition, it seems that any source for a reliable process of forming a genuine episodic remembering has to provide a content which should be *already linked* to the past.⁸ The next question would then be: what links the reliable content source to the past and what would then make that content a genuine past content? Simulation theory seems to lack a criterion to establish what is that which gives episodic remembering, understood as a sort of imagination, its pastness, being distinct from merely imagining, confabulating and so on. That is, what would attribute the quality of pastness to the reliable content source? Would it be that, to make sure whether I am remembering or just confabulating, I would have to check if the pastness of a reliable content source is given by another reliable process content and so on? Or somehow, we would have to establish, by agreement, that a given source is reliable to attribute pastness to a representation? I leave it as an open question and I am not concerned in giving definite answers, in order to try to solve the threat of skepticism about the authenticity of our rememberings.

⁷ For more on this point see Michaelian 2018.

⁸ Consider, for instance, the case of a person whose imagination obtains systematically as genuine remembering.

It is not clear how this issue is to be solved. Michaelian assumes a contentful conception of traces for past content retention, though no causation is claimed to be necessary in order to specify a cognitive act of remembering. The criteria for genuine remembering lies at reliability condition. However, this view does not touch on the further question of how a cognitive content gains its pastness quality throughout the reliability condition.

My point is that imagining in a reliable manner is not enough to make an episodic remembering content to belong to an autobiographical past, since no reliable process source content indicates how a remembering content is a past content. If my argument follows, the fundamental question is not how the pastness of an episodic remembering content, understood as a sort of imagination, is attributed. But how the reliable source content attributes pastness to a cognitive content. If it attributes pastness, somehow it has to be connected to an autobiographical experience, and this link should be explained. If not in terms of causation, different means to account for that link should be investigated. As it states, the question of how the reliability condition can account for the distinction between remembering and confabulating is still in need of being answered. What then gives the reliable source content its quality of being an instance of remembering? Another reliable process? If episodic remembering is qualified as such through a reliable process, isn't the reliable process content already an instance of genuine episodic remembering? But what finally gave this status to it? Those questions strike me as crucial to any theory which is meant to challenge and replace the causal theory of memory.

What Simulation theory seems to do is precisely the following: it changes the point of the traditional theory of memory, leaving open to question how cognitive contents, qualified as imaginings, are linked to an autobiographical past. Instead, as far as I understand, it takes for granted how the pastness of a cognitive content is to be attributed.

Conclusion

As far as my reasoning reaches, simulation theory lacks an explanatory account in order to mark the difference between remembering and confabulation, both understood as kinds of imagining. Within the storage model frame, where simulation theory should be placed, for it still assumes a contentful conception of memory traces, the leading point should be that of explaining how a cognitive content is linked to an autobiographical past in order to be qualified as episodic remembering. Moreover, if the reliable process content attributes pastness to a cognitive content, shouldn't it be that the reliable content source is itself an instance of episodic

remembering content? And so, what would mark the difference between confabulating and genuine rememberings?

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