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To cite this article: Sarah Robins (2017) In Defense of Vasubandhu's Approach to Episodic Phenomenology, Australasian Philosophical Review, 1:4, 416-419, DOI: [10.1080/24740500.2017.1411148](https://doi.org/10.1080/24740500.2017.1411148)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/24740500.2017.1411148>



Published online: 06 Mar 2018.



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## In Defense of Vasubandhu's Approach to Episodic Phenomenology

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### ABSTRACT

Ganeri [2018] explores three Buddhist approaches to episodic memory and concludes in favor of Buddhaghosa's attentional account. When comparing it to Vasubandhu's, Ganeri argues that Buddhaghosa's is preferable because it does not over-intellectualize episodic memory. In my commentary, I argue that the intellectualism of Vasubandhu's approach (at least as presented by Ganeri) makes it both a more plausible account of episodic memory and a more successful strategy for addressing the precarious role of the self in this form of memory.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 10 November 2017; Revised 6 December 2017

**KEYWORDS** episodic memory; memory traces; simulation

Episodic memories are memories of past events that the rememberer herself experienced. They include both the mundane and the momentous—where one's car is parked in the lot and the birth of one's first child. Philosophers and memory scientists have long been interested in characterizing this form of memory, but such attempts are dogged by problems of self-implication. Episodic memory appears inherently self-involving, but it is difficult to say how exactly the self is involved in a way that avoids circularity and/or contradiction. Ganeri's [2018] discussion of Buddhist approaches to episodic memory is a welcome addition to this conversation. As he notes, Buddhist philosophers face an especially difficult challenge in describing the role of the self in episodic memory, as any attempt to do so 'would seem to run counter to the essence of the commitment to the denial of the self' [ibid.: 357]. Ganeri provides a fascinating discussion of three Buddhist approaches to episodic memory: Buddhaghosa's, Vasubandhu's, and Dignāga's. Ganeri concludes with the judgment that Buddhaghosa's is the most viable and promising. When comparing it to Vasubandhu's, Ganeri argues that Buddhaghosa's is preferable because it does not over-intellectualize episodic memory [ibid.: 370]. This conclusion surprised me. As a philosopher of memory, it was Vasubandhu's approach (at least as presented by Ganeri) that struck me as the more plausible. Buddhaghosa's account did not seem to provide a descriptively adequate characterization of episodic memory. Vasubandhu's approach did not face similar difficulties, and appears to have better resources for addressing the role of self-implication in episodic memory. My commentary below develops these concerns.

First, let's evaluate Buddhaghosa's account of episodic memory, as presented by Ganeri. The account likens remembering to a form of perception or attention. As Ganeri describes the view, 'In episodic memory, a retrieved experience is selected for re-experiencing in simulation' [ibid.: 360]. Ganeri finds this account desirable because it minimizes the cognitive machinery involved in the process of remembering; there is no need for an extensive representational system or rich conception of the self. All that is needed is a set of perceptual and attentional capacities that can be used 'offline' to run simulations of previous experiences of perception and attention. In this way, remembering is only as cognitively elaborate as the perceptual and attentional capacities that it exploits. What's more, this simulational approach avoids positing any substantive notion of self. The sense of ownership characteristic of remembering is, Ganeri argues, fully captured by the as-if feeling that comes from reliving one's past perceptual and attentional episodes. The act of reliving 'is a phenomenologically immersive and embodied re-enactment of a past experience' [ibid.].

A mental capacity that has these features as Ganeri describes would be less cognitively elaborate and intellectually demanding. The question is whether such a capacity would be episodic memory. I argue that it would not. Episodic memory is inherently, inescapably *representational* and *self-involving*. Let's consider each of these features in turn. Episodic remembering is a mental activity now regarding an event or experience in the past. In order for remembering to occur, something must persist from the initial experience to serve as the object of one's current thought. Even if characterized as reliving or re-perceiving, there must be some sense in which the previous experience of living or perceiving has been stored and retained so that the replay can occur. Episodic memory must be, at least in this minimal sense, representational. What's more, the content of this retained representation is thoroughly infused with references to the self. As the use of terms like 'mental time travel' indicates, episodic memories are often vivid and richly detailed. These details are not straightforward depictions of the world, but depictions of the world as experienced *by the rememberer*. An episodic memory of a walk through the park does not just include fine-grained details of the trees and flowers and the scent in the air. These items are represented in ways that are suffused with her perspective, preferences, and prior experience [Schectman 1990]. The tree may be depicted as beautiful, the scent of the air as sweet, a particular bench along the path may be represented as the rememberer's favourite because of previous encounters there. There is no hope for removing the self from the presentation of these details.

It is unclear whether Buddhaghosa's description of episodic memory truly lacks either of these features. Buddhaghosa characterizes the capacity as perceptual, but as Ganeri [2018: 359] himself writes, the act of perceiving again involves a 'stored percept'. Storing perceptual representations may be less onerous than storing other forms of mental representation, but the need for representation has not been avoided altogether. Similarly, the role of the self may have been minimized, but it is not entirely absent. Ganeri includes a long quotation from Buddhaghosa, where he describes the memory of visiting the Great Shrine: 'it is as if the Great Shrine decked with ornaments came into focus in [lit. came to the avenue of] the eye-door, and it seems like the time when he circumambulated the Shrine and paid homage to it' [ibid.: 358]. The stored percept is not just an image of the Great Shrine; it is an image of the Shrine as experienced by the rememberer. The presentation of the Shrine's flags and banners will depict them as they were seen from his or her perspective, along with the feelings and ideas they

invoked during the initial encounter. In short, Buddhaghosa's account (at least as presented) appears to involve more representation and self reference than Ganeri wants.

Even with these features, however, it is unclear whether Buddhaghosa's account includes enough to capture episodic remembering uniquely. This worry concerns the second key component of episodic memory: phenomenology. There is a distinctive feeling to episodic remembering. As Ganeri quotes from Dokic, 'only episodic memories feel episodic' [ibid.: 360]. As characterized by Ganeri, Buddhaghosa's account is one of episodic simulation. Many contemporary accounts of memory are described in these terms. There are contemporary accounts of memory that characterize episodic memory in these ways—for example, De Brigard's [2014] *Episodic Simulation Theory*. But De Brigard and others distinguish between versions of this simulation, only one of which is remembering. One can simulate a past experience in order to make a decision in the present, reason hypothetically about the future, or speculate hypothetically about different ways the past could have gone. These activities would all seem to fit under the description of episodic attention. They all contain the as-if ness that is essential to Buddhaghosa's account of the phenomenology, but not all of them have it in the sense that is distinctive of episodic memory. De Brigard and others distinguish between the forms of episodic simulation in terms of the feeling that accompanies simulations of each type and the tense in which each simulation is run. But Buddhaghosa's account does not appear to have any additional resources to make this further discrimination. In a brief (and intriguing!) remark at the end of the paper, Ganeri casts the generality of Buddhaghosa's episodic simulation as a benefit because it may explain the similarity between memory and empathy as forms of mental travel. It would be great to hear more about this suggestion—and, in particular, how this similarity could be explained in ways that would still allow for each of these capacities to be distinct.

In further support of this point, consider the case of the patient R.B. (from Klein and Nichols [2012]), which Ganeri himself discusses as an important explanandum for an account of episodic remembering. R.B. is a patient who suffered a severe neurological trauma, the result of which is that he is able to call to mind and relive past experiences while denying any sense of ownership over the experiences. R.B. says of a past experience, 'I am able to re-live it. I have a feeling ... a sense of being there, at MIT, in the lounge. But it doesn't feel like I own it' [Klein and Nichols 2012: 687]. How would Buddhaghosa's account make sense of what is missing in the case of R.B.? As described by Ganeri, Buddhaghosa's account was supposed to illustrate how the ownership could be fully captured by the reliving.

To determine which Buddhist approach to episodic memory is the most plausible, another feature to consider is how the account approaches the apparent contradiction between the commitment to the self in episodic memory and the denial of the self in Buddhist thought. Buddhaghosa's approach appears to be one of explaining the contradiction away. There is no strong sense of self in the act of episodic remembering, so there is no strong commitment that runs afoul of Buddhist teachings.

Vasubandhu's approach is different. His account provides two roles for the self in memory. There is a primal self that is implicit in all of the rememberer's activities and perceptions, but also a second, and more substantive, representational self that is understood as the subject of the remembering experience. Consider again the case of remembering a walk through the park. The self is implicated in the first sense because of the way in which all of the content comes from a particular perspective with all of its attendant preferences and personal characteristics. This looks to be a way of

articulating the point I made about the essentially self-involving content of episodic memories. The self is implicated in the second sense because of the way the rememberer endorses or owns the content as her own. Vasubandhu takes the first sense of self to be inescapable. The second sense of self, however, is a delusion. There may be an attempt to claim ownership of a memory, but this ‘is a cognitive fabrication ... and there is no sense of the self’ [Ganeri 2018: 363].

Ganeri again favours Buddhaghosa’s approach because it doesn’t build in a requirement that one identify oneself in the act of remembering [ibid.: 370]. In downplaying the sense of self, there is a way in which Buddhaghosa’s account fails to take seriously the challenge for reconciling episodic memory and the denial of the self. On Buddhaghosa’s account, the challenge should never really arise because there is no such sense of self in episodic memory that needs to be explained away. But this, to my mind, is a challenge for the view because there is such a sense of self in episodic remembering. When we relive experiences from the past, they come with a sense of mineness and ownership. Buddhaghosa’s account has nothing to say about this. Vasubandhu’s approach, on the other hand, embraces the contradiction. Episodic remembering feels self-involving. The contradiction is explained by challenging the veracity of the feeling, not its existence. The feeling of ownership is a delusion. This makes sense of how there can be no self even if our experience of remembering often inclines us to suppose otherwise.

Regardless of which Buddhist approach to episodic memory is ultimately taken to be the most plausible, the introduction of all three into contemporary discussions of mental time travel provides a welcome boost of energy to the field. Ganeri’s efforts to put these two literatures into conversation with one another is likely to open new possibilities for characterizing episodic memory and its attendant features.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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