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Title: Drawing an Analogy Between Memory and Testimony

Abstract:

In epistemology, there is a tacit assumption that memory and testimony share some deep similarities that render them analogous. This assumption rests on the grounds that both are used to convey content from a source (the past self, in the case of memory, and a testifier, in the case of testimony) to a receiver (the present self and a recipient, respectively). Both are understood as strictly transmissive in nature; that is, no new content is added between the point of sending and the point of receiving.

I begin this paper by showing that conceiving of the analogy in this way is fundamentally mistaken. Given the bounty of empirical research that supports abandoning the idea that episodic memory is a preservative enterprise, psychologists and philosophers alike have moved toward a more constructive model of memory. The constructive model rejects the notion of memory as a kind of archive and recognises that remembering is a process involving content modification during encoding, consolidation, and retrieval through the continual combination and recombination of information and experiences. I argue that if memory is constructive and testimony is transmissive, there seems to be no support for an analogy that hinges on their transmissive functions, and thus the memory-testimony analogy begins to disintegrate.

Although this version of the analogy fails, we should not give up too quickly, for it appears that testimony, like memory, is not as transmissive as it might initially seem to be. I argue that testifying involves much more than mere transmission, and is not a matter of simply sending a belief from one mind to another, where it is received (and possibly accepted) largely unchanged. Rather, testifying involves cognitive and metacognitive labour from testifiers and recipients alike, with respect to a broad range of factors such as literal meaning, trustworthiness of the testifier, context of the exchange, and judgments about interlocutors' mental states and background knowledge. Once we accept that testimony is constructive, there emerges the possibility of salvaging the memory-testimony analogy. I conclude by sketching how the salvaged analogy might look, and considering and responding to a few worries about its limits. It is my hope that developing a constructive memory-testimony analogy will enable further investigation into the epistemologies of memory and testimony, allowing us to pursue testimonial answers to traditionally memory-focussed questions, and vice versa.