



Memory and retrospective reports of totally selfless states of consciousness

Ying-Tung Lin

Institute of Philosophy of Mind and Cognition, National Yang Ming Chiao Tung University, No. 155, Sec. 2, Linong St., Beitou Dist., Taipei City 112304, Taiwan. *Author for correspondence. E-mail: linyingtung@nycu.edu.tw

ABSTRACT. The debate about the necessary involvement of any form of self-consciousness in conscious experience has recently shifted its focus to the question of whether there are totally selfless states of consciousness (TSSC). The primary source of evidence for the existence of TSSC is the subjective reports from subjects who either are currently undergoing or have undergone altered experiences such as drug-induced ego dissolution. While the subjective reports are made largely after the occurrence of the experience, such reports have been challenged on the basis that one cannot coherently report about TSSC from one's own, autobiographical memory. This paper addresses this issue regarding TSSC from the perspective of memory study. The aim is to examine whether and how it is possible for a subject to report a past TSSC based on her own memory without being considered as confabulating or misremembering. Such an examination can provide potential explanations for how a person reports a past experience of TSSC.

Keywords: Selfless states of consciousness; retrospective report; memory; ego dissolution.

Memória e relatos retrospectivos de estados de consciência totalmente 'selfless'

RESUMO. O debate sobre o envolvimento necessário de qualquer forma de autoconsciência na experiência consciente recentemente mudou seu foco para a questão de saber se existem estados de consciência totalmente 'selfless' (ECTS). A principal fonte de evidência para a existência de ECTS são os relatos subjetivos de indivíduos que estão atualmente passando ou passaram por experiências alteradas, como a dissolução do ego induzida por drogas. Embora os relatos subjetivos sejam feitos em grande parte após a ocorrência da experiência, tais relatos foram contestados com base no fato de que não se pode relatar coerentemente sobre ECTS a partir de memórias autobiográficas. Este artigo aborda essa questão sobre ECTS a partir da perspectiva do estudo da memória. O objetivo é examinar se e como é possível para um sujeito relatar um ECTS passado com base em sua própria memória, sem que essa seja considerada uma confabulação ou uma má-lembrança (*misremembering*). Esse exame pode fornecer explicações potenciais sobre como uma pessoa relata uma experiência anterior de ECTS.

Palavras-chave: Estados de consciência selfless; relatos retrospectivos; memória; dissolução do ego.

Received on June 2, 2020.

Accepted on July 6, 2021.

Introduction

There has been much debate about whether conscious experience requires a sense of self or self-consciousness. Some argue that the former necessarily involves the latter, and thus there is and can be no totally selfless states of consciousness (TSSC). Whether there is non-egoic experience therefore becomes a crucial point of contention. One of the strategies to argue against the necessary involvement of any form of self-consciousness is to argue for the existence of TSSC. Common candidates for TSSC that have been considered include drug-induced ego dissolution (DIED), meditative states, lucid dreamless sleep, and some psychopathological states (e.g., depersonalization disorder, Cotard's syndrome).

The primary source of evidence for the existence of TSSC is subjective reports from subjects who are currently undergoing or have gone through these experiences (Fink, 2020). In these reports, subjects ascribe to themselves episodes in which they were conscious but lacked a feeling of self. Researchers engaged in the above debate have taken these reports largely at face value. Most of the subjective reports are made after the occurrence of the experience. As such, memory plays a crucial role in enabling retrospective reports. However,

such reports have been challenged on the basis that one cannot coherently report about TSSC from one's own, autobiographical memory (Metzinger, 2004, 2018).

This paper addresses the debate on selfless states of consciousness from the perspective of memory study. The aim is twofold: First, to examine whether and how it is possible for a subject to report a past TSSC based on her own memory without being considered as confabulating or misremembering. Second, such an examination can provide potential explanations for how a person reports a past experience of TSSC. The debate on TSSC and retrospective reports will first be introduced (section 1). Memory will then be categorized (section 2). Utilizing this categorization, I will go on to examine which form of memory a subject can adopt as a basis to report after TSSC without confabulating or misremembering (section 3).

The analysis will show that for one to retrospectively report one's past TSSC, the report is grounded either by non-genuine memory or by a genuine memory of TSSC which, however, itself is a rare and bizarre recollection experience. This paper reveals the complications that lie beneath the apparently simple reporting of TSSC and cautions against the reports being taken at face value within the philosophical debates on TSSC.

1. The debate on selfless conscious states

Can there be phenomenal consciousness without self-consciousness? How pervasive is a sense of self in our conscious experiences? Some researchers in philosophy and science of mind endorse a necessity claim—some (basic) form of self-consciousness or sense of self is necessary for consciousness—and thus argue that self-consciousness is ubiquitous in all conscious experiences (e.g., Damasio, 1999; Gallagher, 2010; Guillot, 2017; Zahavi, 2014). This kind of view has sparked a lively debate over whether there can be totally selfless states of consciousness (TSSC).

In the quest to find cases of TSSC, a range of popular candidates have been identified, including DIED, meditative experiences, psychopathological cases, and dreamless sleep. The main source of evidence in support of these altered states of consciousness being instances of phenomenal consciousness without a sense of self is subjective reports of TSSC. Here are some examples of such reports:

Then I was dead. [...] I wasn't me any longer. There was no me. There was no ego. There was no fear. I was dead. I was in heaven or I was in transit to meet my maker and I was full of bliss at the concept of that idea. (#27601).¹

I participated in a silent, 9-day, Buddhist-style meditation retreat. During the second morning meditation of the fifth day, I experienced pure awareness" (quoted in Metzinger, 2018, p. 23).

Many of these reports are retrospective; that is, the reports are made after the occurrence of the suspected episode of TSSC (e.g., DIED, meditative states). Memory is therefore centrally involved: It allows subjects to report their past experiences via the retention of information. Suppose a subject *S* has an experience *E* at t_1 . Memory enables *S* to provide a retrospective report *R* of *E* at t_2 . But what kind of memory is involved? This paper focuses on retrospective reports of TSSC and explores in what form the information is encoded and retrieved when such a report is made.

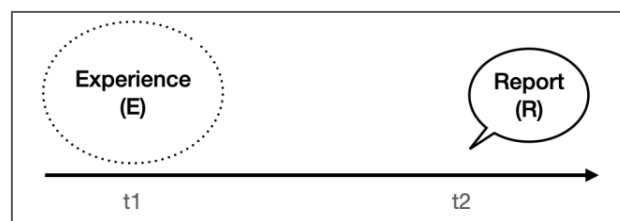


Figure 1. Retrospective report of past potential episode of TSSC.

While these reports specify that the subjects are going through or have gone through an episode in which no self-consciousness exists, there is still a first-person element involved. As noted by Fink (2020), “[...] these claims come in the form of a reflexive first-person ascription, where a person ascribes to *herself* some mental event—in this case, an episode of phenomenal ego-dissolution, either in the past or in the present” (Fink, 2020, p. 2). The subjects do not fail to ascribe past events—that is, totally selfless states *E*—to themselves, even when *E* is reported to be totally selfless at t_1 .

¹ From Erowid database: erowid.org/experiences

There are generally two kinds of attitudes toward the reporting of TSSC. One is to take the reports at face value and use them to argue for the existence of TSSC (e.g., Letheby, 2020; Letheby & Gerrans, 2017; Millière, 2020). In contrast, the other is to cast doubt on or reduce the weight of the report, for example by questioning the rationality of subjects claiming they have undergone TSSC or by arguing that such reports are judgments influenced by cognitive bias (Fink, 2020; e.g., Sebastian, 2020). One of the worries that may lead one to take the latter approach is the methodological issue of how a subject can report her selfless experience, if indeed such a kind of experience exists.

Metzinger (2004) illustrates the problem of retrospectively reporting TSSC as follows:

Autophenomenological reports given by human beings about selfless states [...] will typically not impress philosophers much, because they contain an inherent logical fallacy: How can you coherently report about a selfless state of consciousness from your own, autobiographical memory?" (Metzinger, 2004, p. 566)

The problem is how one can ascribe to oneself a past mental event of TSSC. To rely on autobiographical memory to report an event would seem to involve some sense of self or identity for one to ascribe the past mental state to oneself. As Millière (2020) states, "[...] this suggestion seems premised upon the assumption that a conscious episode must involve some form of self-consciousness in order to be stored and later retrieved as an autobiographical memory" (Millière, 2020, p. 31). In this vein, Metzinger (2018) suggests that "[...] autophenomenological reports about MPE [minimal phenomenal experience (without self-consciousness)] are actually either reports about more complex experiential configurations or reports about false autobiographical memories" (Metzinger, 2018, p. 25).

Fink (2020) addresses the issue by investigating what he calls the 'SANE (self-ascriptions of (episodes of) non-egoic experience) paradox':

If there is one and only one self (UNIQUE) and if this self necessarily shows itself in experience (PHENSELF), then—if a feeling of self is missing (CEASE)—any self-reference is impossible. But self-reference seems to be necessary in order for this state to be cognitively accessible *as one's own* (Fink, 2020, p. 12).

Fink argues that if the conditions of UNIQUE, PHENSELF and CEASE have to be fulfilled and the option of treating their report as deluded, irrational or deceptional is excluded, there can be no subjective reports of one's TSSC. He suggests other possibilities which can avoid the SANE paradox and at the same time explain the reports: During the episode of suspected ego dissolution, what actually happens is ego expansion (the feeling of self expands until everything in consciousness becomes part of the self), a no-ego revelation (the feeling of self is always missing but the subject just comes to realize it), or a partial disruption of feelings of self (there are multiple feelings of self at one time, and only one of them is interrupted).

However, while it is obvious that the SANE paradox applies to those who make introspective reports about their ongoing TSSC, it is less clear whether the paradox applies to retrospective reports, that is, those made after the occurrence of TSSC. This paper will supplement this part of the literature from the perspective of memory study.

2. Autobiographical memory and the categorization of memory

Metzinger (2004) questions whether one can coherently report about a selfless state of consciousness through one's *autobiographical memory*. There are distinct definitions of autobiographical memory. Some researchers regard it as a type of episodic memory, whereas for others, autobiographical memory involves semantic and episodic memory (Conway, 2005). This paper will adopt the latter definition wherein autobiographical memory is defined as a recollection comprised of self-referential information which is the result of the interplay of episodic and semantic memory. According to this understanding, there are conceptual and experiential forms of autobiographical memory, supported by the systems of semantic and episodic memory.

The issue of how to distinguish semantic from episodic memories has been hotly debated. In this paper, I mainly endorse and adopt Tulving's distinction. First, semantic memory concerns "[...] the symbolically representable knowledge that organisms possess about the world" (Tulving, 1985b, p. 2). Episodic memory, in order to enable "[...] the remembering of personally experienced events" (Tulving, 1985b, p. 2), deals with the information of "[...] personally experienced events and their temporal relations in subjective time and the ability to mentally 'travel back' in time" (Tulving, 1985a, p. 387). As Rowlands (2020) puts it,

[w]hat is distinctive of episodic memory is the way in which facts are presented: they are presented by way of experiences. And these experiences, in turn, are presented as ones that the subject had at the time of the episode (Rowlands, 2020, p. 337).

Note that semantic memory is generally considered to be independent from the spatial and temporal contexts in which it is acquired (e.g., the capital city of a country), and in contrast, episodic memory is generally related to a specific time and space (e.g., a trip to a place). Moreover, it is commonly held that episodic and semantic memory differ in that the former concerns personal information and the latter is about the world. However, contextually dependent personal information can also be found in semantic memory (e.g., the countries one has visited, the school one attended, etc.). “Personal semantic memory,” defined as “factual knowledge about a person’s own past” is coined to illustrate such cases (Kopelman, Wilson, & Baddeley, 1989, p. 726).

Noetic and auto-noetic consciousness are introduced by Tulving to differentiate these two memory systems. Semantic memory is accompanied by noetic (knowing) consciousness, which enables an introspective awareness of the internal and external world; thus, the object of noetic consciousness is one’s world or personal knowledge. Auto-noetic (self-knowing) consciousness, on the other hand, follows episodic memory and provides the phenomenal characteristics of recollective experience, such as the sense of ‘pastness’ and ‘subjective veridicality.’ In the same vein, ‘mental time travel’—to mentally project oneself backwards to experienced events—has been seen as a central property of episodic memory (Suddendorf & Corballis, 1997; Tulving, 1983, p. 2005). This allows one to ‘travel back’ to an earlier experienced situation, and to re-live or re-experience what has happened in one’s mind. Note that “mental time travel” may be misleading. When we think about the past now, despite the fact that we are recalling a past experience, we are still in the present and aware of the present moment and environment. What allows us to be in the present moment and at the same time ‘reliving’ the past when remembering is that we not only feel that we are in the present, but at the same time we also experience being the protagonists in the past event as ourselves. A sense of identity or connectedness between the rememberer and the one being remembered allows us to travel back in time.

Moreover, it is crucial to note that it is commonly agreed that episodic memory has a constructive nature. Schacter, Norman, and Koutstaal (1998) propose the constructive memory framework, according to which representations of experiences are conceptualized as ‘patterns of features,’ which represent different facets of the experience (see also De Brigard, 2014; Michaelian, 2016). Based on the idea, retrieval is regarded as the process of pattern completion, in which a subset of features come to comprise a past experience (Schacter, Guerin, & St. Jacques, 2011; Schacter & Addis, 2007). Such a process allows the construction of an episodic simulation of the past that includes a protagonist and the experience of being the same person as the protagonist in the mental simulation.

In real life, these two kinds of information, supported by episodic and semantic memory, respectively, cannot be neatly differentiated. Everyday memory, under most circumstances, is largely the result of the interaction between these two memory systems. However, for the sake of analytical convenience, we will consider two kinds of information retention supported by episodic and semantic memory systems, respectively.

3. Memory as the basis of retrospective report of selfless states

On what basis can a subject report a past conscious experience as totally selfless without being seen as confabulating or misremembering? Based on the analysis in section 2, there are different ways in which one can retrospectively report a past experience from one’s memory. One can report a past experience in the following ways, by distinguishing how the form of information is retained from t_1 to t_2 :

- Conceptual information (realized by the processing within semantic memory);
- Experiential information (realized by the processing within episodic memory);
- Other. E.g., external evidence or external memory combined with inference.

The first possibility is for a subject to report TSSC based on the conceptual form of information encoded at t_1 . The second is based on experiential information which is dependent on the system of episodic memory. Then, both the conceptual and the experiential forms of memory are further distinguished into self-referential or non-self-referential based on whether they involve any form of self-referential component in consciousness, which includes thinking of oneself as oneself, being conscious of one’s location, body, bodily action, mental states or mental actions as one’s own, etc. (Millière, 2020). Autobiographical memory, which is Metzinger’s (2018; 2004) topic of concern, is regarded as the conceptual and experiential information which involves a self-referential component.

There are other possibilities, such as reporting on the basis of external evidence or memory (e.g., one's past notes). Since this option is not generally taken into consideration by researchers in the context of TSSC, it will be excluded from the present paper. In this section, we will examine the other possibilities and consider how a subject can report TSSC without confabulating or misremembering.

3.1. Conceptual basis for reports of selfless states

The first possibility to consider is that the subject reports past TSSC on the basis of some forms of semantic memory. Conceptual information is formed during TSSC at t_1 and allows the subject to report TSSC at t_2 . Here, the issue is how one can form semantic knowledge about TSSC during the occurrence of TSSC. As introduced above, semantic memory is generally defined as conceptual knowledge about the world and is therefore non-self-referential. However, there is also personal semantic memory, which is about a person's own past. The latter can be self-referential or non-self-referential, depending on whether it consists of some forms of self-reference². For the purposes of our discussion here, let us consider self-referential and non-self-referential semantic memory, respectively, as the basis for reporting TSSC.

First, can the subject form self-referential semantic knowledge during the occurrence of TSSC at t_1 , which she can retrieve at t_2 in order to report the experience? This suggestion runs into the SANE paradox discussed by Fink (2020). As discussed in section 1, unless one endorses Fink's (2020) alternative options to total selflessness, one cannot form self-referential semantic information at t_1 without being challenged as confabulating or misremembering.

So, can the subject form non-self-referential semantic knowledge—instead of a self-referential form—at t_1 such that she can report past TSSC? In this context, non-self-referential semantic knowledge involves no use of an indexical 'I' or self-reference. Experience without self-consciousness does not seem to prevent one from forming conceptual information about the experiential content, as long as it involves no self-reference. However, the difficulty here relates to how the subject at t_2 recognizes that one's beliefs about experience are about one's own past experience. One may be able to judge that such knowledge is about one's own past experience based on evidence through reasoning. Yet, if so, we should be able to find such reasoning in the subject's retrospective reports, and the retrospective reports of TSSC do not seem to show the involvement of such reasoning.

3.2. Experiential basis for reports of selfless states

The other possibility is for the subjects to report TSSC based on episodic memory, by 're-experiencing' the past TSSC. As in section 2, full-blown episodic memory requires 'mental time travel,' that is, for the subject to mentally project oneself backwards to the experienced events. In contrast to semantic memory, episodic memory allows one to encode and retrieve experiential information: an episodic simulation of past experience is reconstructed at t_2 .

In addition, when remembering a past experience, we usually experience it as if we were in this simulated past actual world. That is, there is a protagonist in the episodic simulation and this protagonist is experienced as oneself. That said, there is no reason to deny the possibility of an episodic simulation of an experience without any experiential component that can constitute any sense of self—if it does exist and the subject is undergoing such experience (see below for further discussion). Thus, we consider both self-referential episodic simulation (SES)—episodic simulation with some form of self-referential component in experience—and non-self-referential episodic simulation (NES)—episodic simulation with no such self-referential component—at retrieval. Combined with two potential ways of encoding—encoding self-referential information (SI) and non-self-referential information (NI)—there are four possibilities:

- A. SI at encoding at t_1 , SES at retrieval at t_2
- B. NI at encoding at t_1 , SES at retrieval at t_2
- C. SI at encoding at t_1 , NES at retrieval at t_2
- D. NI at encoding at t_1 , NES at retrieval at t_2

The main problem of (A) and (C) is that one would fail to encode any self-referential information as the person is supposed to undergo TSSC. First, while the experience involves no sense of self, there is a lack of source or

² A personal semantic memory can be about the rememberer's past but not in a self-referential form. For instance, 'The address [the rememberer's name] has lived at is...'

basis for one to form self-referential information, if it does not fall into the category of false memory. Second, whether one can cognitively access experience as one's own and encode self-referential information on the basis of TSSC, it encounters the SANE paradox discussed by Fink (2020) (see section 1).

The two remaining plausible possibilities are (B) and (D): the subject encodes selfless experiential information at t_1 , and at t_2 she retrieves experiential information, either with some sense of self or with no sense of self at all. These two possibilities avoid the paradox encountered by (A) and (C). However, the problem with (B) concerns how one can reconstruct an episodic simulation with a sense of self from a selfless one. On the other hand, the issues with (D) pertain to (1) how encoded selfless information allows one to self-ascribe past mental states, and (2) whether one can form a selfless episodic simulation without being in a TSSC. We will examine (B) and (D) in turn in more detail.

Concerning (B), can one have a recollection with some sense of self based on the encoding of selfless experiential information? Can a sense of self or self-reference be added to the mnemonic content and be *remembered* by the rememberer? Most memory researchers are in general agreement as to the reconstructive nature of episodic memory (e.g., Bartlett, 1933; Schacter & Addis, 2007); however, memory—as opposed to imagination—is connected to the past in some way. Bernecker (2010) offers a useful distinction between the truth and authenticity constraints, and argues that “[...] a [genuine, non-inferential] memory state must accord not only with objective reality [truth constraint] but also with one's initial perception of reality [authenticity constraint]” (Bernecker, 2010, p. 214). Can an egoic reconstruction of an experience of TSSC fulfill these constraints and be seen as genuine memory by memory theorists like Bernecker?⁵

A similar debate can be found in the case of observer memory—memory in which the subject adopts an external perspective instead of the original one. In that context, some argue that observer memory ought to be excluded from genuine memory. For instance, Bernecker (2008), as a moderate preservationist, holds that parts or aspects of the original perceptual content can be lost from the memory, but no new content should be added to a genuine memory. Observer memory may fulfill truth constraints—because the modification in observer memory is systematic and information (e.g., spatial information) is preserved—but it is often regarded as failing to meet the authenticity constraint. McCarroll and Sutton argue that observer memory fulfills both constraints and is qualified to be considered as a genuine memory (McCarroll, 2018; McCarroll & Sutton, 2017). Their strategy is to argue that the perceptual content that is thought to be ‘added’ is already available in the original perceptual experience.

Let us return to the issue of whether egoic reconstruction of TSSC can be considered a genuine memory. According to what we have learned from the debate around observer memory, either an egoic component or some sense of self is already present in the original experience at t_1 —which cannot be an option in the consideration of (B), or it cannot be deemed a genuine memory for it fails to meet the authenticity constraint.

Let us turn to (D), that is, non-self-referential episodic simulation at encoding and at retrieval. The SANE paradox is avoided since there is no self-referential content at encoding; however, the question concerns what happens at retrieval: Can a subject form an episodic simulation of a selfless state of consciousness while she is a self-conscious rememberer in the real world? Initially, it does not seem particularly problematic for one, under normal circumstances, to form an episodic simulation of an altered state of consciousness. For instance, we can imagine what it might be like to have phantom limb syndrome. Also, if one has experienced the rubber-hand illusion, one can recall what it was like to have such an illusion. However, the experiences of phantom limb and rubber-hand illusion only involve absent or altered ownership of a local body part, which belongs to what Millière (2020) calls “[...] partial selflessness.” When it comes to TSSC, things are less clear. Certainly, we can have extremely simple mental imagery. Yet, this is not close to the TSSC one experiences during ego dissolution or meditative experience.

Still, such a possibility should not be dismissed simply because it is rare and difficult to imagine. Suppose one can form such a kind of selfless episodic simulation. A memory episode of TSSC a subject experienced at t_1 will generally be recognized as genuine memory by memory researchers—since it accords with the past experience and thus fulfills the authenticity constraint. However, will it be treated as one's past experience so that one can report TSSC as what happened in one's past?

The above analysis prompts the following question: What enables a subject to recognize that an episodic simulation is about a past experience and ascribe the past experience to herself? In a full-blown episodic

⁵ It is important to note that Bernecker's (2010) view that memory implies truth and is thus under these constraints is not generally accepted. For example, constructivists such as De Brigard (2014) and Michaelian (2011, 2016) object to this view.

memory, there are at least two components. The first is to identify with the protagonist in the episodic simulation, which allows one to have the phenomenal experience of ‘I am this.’ Mental time travel, as one of the core features of episodic memory, requires the subject to have the experience of being someone in memory as well as a sense of identity—that is, experiencing the protagonist in memory as the same person. Second, the subject needs to experience it as a memory episode. This relates to the issue of what the memory marker is (e.g., vividness, sense of pastness, or other metacognitive feelings).

In addition to these two components, a sense of mental ownership or ‘mineness’ over the episodic simulation is often involved, though it may not be necessary. This feature is best captured by its absence in Klein and Nichols’s (2012) report on the case of patient R.B., who “[...] was able to remember particular incidents from his life accompanied by temporal, spatial, and self-referential knowledge, but he did not feel the memories he experienced belonged to him” (Klein and Nichols, 2012, p. 8). The following is R.B.’s description of his experience of recollection:

What I realized was that I did not ‘own’ any memories that came before my injury. I knew things that came before my injury. In fact, it seemed that my memory was just fine for things that happened going back years in the past [the period close to the injury was more disrupted]. I could answer any question about where I lived at different times in my life, who my friends were, where I went to school, activities I enjoyed, etc. But none of it was ‘me.’ It was the same sort of knowledge I might have about how my parents met or the history of the Civil War or something like that.

R.B. demonstrated a very particular form of altered memory—episodic recollection without a sense of personal ownership. His case suggests a potential dissociation between self-referential mnemonic content and a sense of personal ownership of the memory.

R.B.’s dissociation allows us to make the distinction between two kinds of self-ascription. One is the ascription of past experience. That is, through the episodic simulation, I know that ‘something happened to me in the past,’ or ‘that experience happened to my past self.’ Such self-ascription is distinct from the second kind, namely self-ascription of memory, which allows me to know that ‘this is my memory,’ or ‘I recall something.’

Returning to our question: Will the selfless episodic simulation be treated as one’s past experience without running into the SANE paradox? The distinction between two kinds of self-ascription may provide a potential answer. NES may in fact be a case in which there is self-ascription of memory without self-ascription of past experience. Since only self-ascription of past experience requires a self-referential component at t_1 , it does not encounter the SANE paradox. Furthermore, the self-ascription of memory allows one to attribute the episodic simulation as one’s own. If so, recollecting a past TSSC—a selfless episodic simulation with a sense of personal ownership about the simulation—is the kind of case that is the opposite of R.B.’s case. Such recollection cannot be considered autobiographical memory—at least not the typical kind of autobiographical memory. Even so, this does leave open a possibility for the subject to report past TSSC without confabulating or misremembering.

Millière and Newen suggest a similar way out for retrospective reports of TSSC.⁴ They distinguish second-order self-representation from first-order self-representation. First-order self-representation includes different forms of self-consciousness in the contents of memory. Second-order self-representation, such as self-involvement and sense of ownership, concerns the relationship between the remembering subject and the remembered scenario. Millière and Newen suggest that some kind of metacognitive monitoring may be the underlying process.

Recall the question of how a subject who forms non-personal semantic knowledge at t_1 can report TSSC as her past experience, discussed in section 4.2. It can be addressed in the same way by resorting to the self-ascription of memory (or second-order self-representation) which allows the subject at t_2 to recognize non-self-referential semantic knowledge as one’s memory.

The analysis seems to support retrospective reports as evidence for TSSC; however, there may be some worries about this strategy. First, is self-ascription of memory sufficient for a subject to report about a past TSSC as one’s own which involves self-ascription of past experiences? While these are two different kinds of self-ascription, it is unclear if the former allows one to report about the latter. One may reply that a lack of careful introspection and analysis may result in such reports. This then brings us to concerns about how the recollection of the potential TSSC may itself be a complex experience. This will be addressed in the next section in which some methodological issues are raised in relation to relying on memory to argue for the existence of TSSC.

⁴ The authors presented the idea in ‘*Selfless memories*’ at the Bochum-Grenoble Research Center mini-lecture series ‘*Memory and self*’ on April 6, 2021.

4. Methodological concerns about reporting by memory

Here different forms of memory as the basis for TSSC reports are analyzed. There are a number of ways in which memory can support the report of total selflessness. The result suggests that to avoid the SANE paradox laid out by Fink (2020), a retrospective report can be grounded by non-self-referential semantic knowledge with self-ascription of memory, by a non-genuine memory episode (B) or by a genuine memory episode of TSSC (D) with self-ascription of memory (without self-ascription of past experience). Without explaining and understanding how and on what basis the reports are being made, the reports should not be taken at face value without caution.

One would generally agree that before the subjective reports are interpreted and used, it is crucial to understand the basis on which the reports are being made. Here, the analysis has further shown that the experience of recollection itself may already be an unusual and rather complex phenomenon. Somewhat ironically, we have relied on the reports and recollection to understand the suspected episodes of TSSC; however, the recollection is no less complicated.

It is important to note that such analysis does not directly support the existence of TSSC. To claim that there is in fact such totally selfless states of consciousness, one will encounter numerous methodological problems. For example, one would have to distinguish non-existence in experience from memory failure. We can recall only a part of a whole past experience. In fact, our recollection rarely comprises a complete reconstruction of the past experience. An episode of memory in which there is only experience (without being conscious of experience as one's own or any form of self-consciousness) does not imply that there was no self-consciousness at all at t_1 .

Conclusion

This paper analyzed different forms of memory as the basis for TSSC. The result suggests that to avoid the SANE paradox (Fink, 2020), a retrospective report is grounded either by non-genuine memory or by a genuine memory of TSSC. However, the latter results in a rare recollection experience, which itself is no less bizarre or difficult to understand than TSSC. Note that the aim of this paper has been merely to provide the analysis; it does not imply any position within the debate on the existence of TSSC. Such analysis shows that the methodological issue of how the retrospective reports of TSSC are treated is more pressing than has been acknowledged to date. Without explaining and understanding how and on what basis the reports are being made, we should be wary of taking the reports at face value.

References

- Bartlett, F. C. (1933). Remembering: a study in experimental and social psychology. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 3(2), 187–192. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2044-8279.1933.tb02913.x>
- Bernecker, S. (2008). *The metaphysics of memory*. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.
- Bernecker, S. (2010). *Memory: a philosophical study*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Conway, M. A. (2005). Memory and the self. *Journal of Memory and Language*, 53(4), 594–628. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jml.2005.08.005>
- Damasio, A. R. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.
- De Brigard, F. (2014). Is memory for remembering? Recollection as a form of episodic hypothetical thinking. *Synthese*, 191, 155–185. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-013-0247-7>
- Fink, S. B. (2020). Look who's talking! Varieties of ego-dissolution without paradox. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences*, 1(1), 1-36. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.33735/phimisci.2020.1.40>
- Gallagher, S. (2010). Defining consciousness: the importance of non-reflective self-awareness. *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 18(3), 561–569. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/pc.18.3.04gal>
- Guillot, M. (2017). I me mine: on a confusion concerning the subjective character of experience. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 8, 23–53. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-016-0313-4>
- Klein, S. B., & Nichols, S. (2012). Memory and the sense of personal identity. *Mind*, 121(483), 677–702. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzs080>

- Kopelman, M. D., Wilson, B. A., & Baddeley, A. D. (1989). The autobiographical memory interview: a new assessment of autobiographical and personal semantic memory in amnesic patients. *Journal of Clinical and Experimental Neuropsychology*, *11*(5), 724–744. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01688638908400928>
- Letheby, C. (2020). Being for no-one: psychedelic experience and minimal subjectivity. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences*, *1*(1), 1–26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33735/phimisci.2020.I.47>
- Letheby, C., & Gerrans, P. (2017). Self unbound: ego dissolution in psychedelic experience. *Neuroscience of Consciousness*, *2017*(1), nix016. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/nc/nix016>
- McCarroll, C. J. (2018). *Remembering from the outside: personal memory and the perspectival mind*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- McCarroll, C. J., & Sutton, J. (2017). Memory and perspective. In S. Bernecker (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory* (p. 113–126). London, UK: Routledge.
- Metzinger, T. (2004). *Being no one: the self-model theory of subjectivity*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Metzinger, T. (2018). Minimal phenomenal experience [Preprint]. *MindRxiv Papers*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31231/osf.io/5wyg7>
- Michaelian, K. (2011). Generative memory. *Philosophical Psychology*, *24*(3), 323–342. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2011.559623>
- Michaelian, K. (2016). *Mental time travel: episodic memory and our knowledge of the personal past*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Millière, R. (2020). The varieties of selflessness. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences*, *1*(1), 8. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33735/phimisci.2020.I.48>
- Rowlands, M. (2020). Memory. In S. Robins, J. Symons & P. Calvo (Eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Psychology* (p. 336–344). Routledge.
- Schacter, D. L., & Addis, D. R. (2007). The ghosts of past and future. *Nature*, *445*(7123), 27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1038/445027a>
- Schacter, D. L., Guerin, S. A., & St. Jacques, P. L. (2011). Memory distortion: an adaptive perspective. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, *15*(10), 467–474. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2011.08.004>
- Schacter, D. L., Norman, K. A., & Koutstaal, W. (1998). The cognitive neuroscience of constructive memory. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *49*(1), 289–318. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.49.1.289>
- Sebastian, M. A. (2020). Perspectival self-consciousness and ego-dissolution: an analysis of (some) altered states of consciousness. *Philosophy and the Mind Sciences*, *1*(1), 1–27. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33735/phimisci.2020.I.44>
- Suddendorf, T., & Corballis, M. C. (1997). Mental time travel and the evolution of the human mind. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, *123*(2), 133–167.
- Tulving, E. (1983). *Elements of episodic memory*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Tulving, E. (1985a). How many memory systems are there? *American Psychologist*, *40*(4), 385–398. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.40.4.385>
- Tulving, E. (1985b). Memory and consciousness. *Canadian Psychology*, *26*(1), 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080017>
- Zahavi, D. (2014). *Self and other: exploring subjectivity, empathy, and shame*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.