

## SPECTRAL REALISM, ACTUAL IDEALISM: IS TRUTH IN THE MAKING?

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper presents a critical discussion of Hilan Bensusan’s pan-mnemism, the metaphysical theory that everything possesses a memory-like structure. The analysis is guided by two key excerpts from Bensusan’s *Memory Assemblages*, concerning the nature of the past and the relationship between past, memory, and truthmaking. After presenting the basic tenets of pan-mnemism, with its reliance on a two-layer model of memory, the paper develops two main lines of argument. First, it challenges the claim that something can be added to the past by insisting on a firm distinction between memory as a cognitive phenomenon and the past itself. It is argued that memory, as a representation, subtracts from rather than adds to the past event it represents. Second, the paper questions the notion that truth is “in the making”, proposing that semantic properties like truth are logically prior to the cognitive act of remembering. Finally, after an analysis of Bensusan’s use of “the spectral” as a central metaphor for memory and reality, a parallel is drawn between pan-mnemism and semantic anti-realism to argue that Bensusan’s spectral realism functions as a form of idealism.

**KEYWORDS:** Memory; Pan-mnemism; Memory assemblage; The past; Truthmaking; Idealism.

### INTRODUCTION

My aim here is to discuss the book *Memory Assemblages*.<sup>1</sup> In *Memory Assemblages*, Hilan Bensusan proposes *pan-mnemism*, a metaphysical theory according to which everything has a memory-like structure. My reading of *Memory Assemblages* comes from the point of view of a reader who highlights the following excerpts, which I label as (PE) and (TE) for our convenience:

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<sup>1</sup> Bensusan, Hilan, *Memory Assemblages: Spectral Realism and the Logic of Addition*, London, Bloomsbury, 2024.

**The Past Excerpt (PE):**

The central claim of this book is that the past cannot disappear by going away. Things come back, though not quite the same as they were, because their surroundings rarely come back with them. Rather, something added *to* the past brings back what happened before as a specter. The past does not persist as it was; instead, it is in the hands of what will come next.<sup>2</sup>

**The Truthmaking Excerpt (TE):**

Truth, considered from the point of view of the interplay of memory assemblages, is always in the making – making truth is what responds to the diachrony of addends and memory, and it is relative to them.<sup>3</sup>

My aim here is to use these passages as lenses for discussing Bensusan's book. I will proceed as follows. First, the basic tenets of pan-mnemism will be presented, with a focus on its reliance on a two-layer model of memory derived from Aristotle and Locke. Next, an analysis of (PE) will be developed to argue for a firm distinction between memory as a cognitive phenomenon and the past itself, questioning the claim that something can be added to the past. Subsequently, (TE) will be examined to challenge the notion that truth is "in the making", proposing instead that semantic properties like truth are logically prior to the cognitive act of remembering. The discussion will also address Bensusan's use of the spectral as a central metaphor for memory and reality. Finally, the paper will draw a parallel between pan-mnemism and semantic anti-realism to argue that Bensusan's spectral realism functions as a form of idealism.

## PAN-MNEMISM

Pan-mnemism is a new and surprising metaphysical view on the fundamental nature of reality. It seems that reality is not what it seems to be. That is not a new idea. Thales believed everything was water, Democritus posited atoms, and Aristotle considered seeds and trees to be the same substance. The novelty of

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<sup>2</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 1, my emphasis.

<sup>3</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 166.

pan-mnemism comes from the claim that, for any and every being, this being has a memory-like metaphysical structure – everything is a “memory assemblage”. That is what it means to be a pan-mnemist: to argue that everything (“pan”) is “memory” (“mneme”). Thus, what appears superficially not to be like a memory is, at its fundamental depth, revealed to be memory-like.

It is relevant to make it clear that the book is not about garden-variety memories, but about a profound characteristic of reality that is discovered or proposed on a priori grounds. Memory, in pan-mnemism, is not an animal cognitive ability; to be memory-like, according to pan-mnemism, is the ultimate nature of every single thing. Thus, all things, including memories in the usual sense, and what is not memory in the usual sense, are memory-like if we are in the business of writing the book of the world. It follows from this proposal that the common process of remembering is the *explanans* of all things.

To understand what a memory assemblage is, it is useful to introduce the notion of the E-S-R process. Remembering (we are talking about ordinary remembering) is a three-step process that involves (1) learning (encoding), (2) storage, and (3) retrieval. Learning is acquiring information. Storage is holding the acquired information for later use. Retrieval is using the stored information. Bensusan, however, uses a simpler model than the E-S-R process. His model seems to come from chapter 10 of book 2 of Locke’s *Essay*, where memory is presented as a process involving retention of perception and subsequent recall, which is a perception of perception – that is, a phase that adds something to what was previously retained.<sup>4</sup> Locke’s view is similar to Aristotle’s theory that whenever we are actively engaged in remembering, we say in our soul that what is being remembered was heard, perceived, or thought before.<sup>5</sup> Note that the perception of perception is an addition that did not exist in the past. There is, thus, a structural difference between a common perception and a memory, because perception has only one layer, which corresponds to what is perceived, while memory has two layers – the layer of what is perceived and an additional

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<sup>4</sup> See Locke, John, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, Volume 1 – MDCXC, Based on the 2nd Edition, Books 1 and 2, Project Gutenberg, 2024. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/10615>.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, DM, 449 b. See Aristotle, ‘De Memoria et Reminiscentia’, in Richard Sorabji (ed. and trans.), *De Memoria et Reminiscentia: Aristotle on Memory*, Providence, Brown University Press, 1972.

layer of metacognition, something like “I perceived this before”. What is “retained” is the first layer. What is added is the metadatum “I have experienced this”. The novelty of pan-mnemism is to universalize this scheme. All things involve a layer analogous to retention and another analogous to retrieval. The scheme of Aristotle and Locke for the description of memory would thus explain the nature of things in general.

### IS PAN-MNEMISM CIRCULAR?

The question that interests me now is this: how can one type of entity, memory, serve as a model for explaining all entities? Isn't there a risk of vicious circularity in the explanation?

I propose that, to answer this question, we need to take into account that there are two ways of explaining what being is: the *formal* way and the *material* way. In formal ontological explanations, it is considered, in the manner of Porphyry's tree, that “being” is the genus of genera, which leads us to conclude that no other genus or species of thing can explain being as being. This may well be formally correct. There is, however, a tradition that seeks to explain the nature of being not abstractly, but concretely. The most important text in this *material* ontological tradition is Plato's *Sophist*. In this work, Plato puts into the mouth of the Stranger from Italy (an Eleatic philosopher) what came to be known as *the causal criterion of being* or *the Eleatic principle*.<sup>6</sup> According to the Eleatic principle, being is anything that can be either a cause or an effect of anything.<sup>7</sup> Through the causal criterion of being, we recognize matter as existing and numbers as non-existent. Holes exist because they cause falls and stumbles. And, in Plato's conceptual framework, Forms exist because they cause this world. Thus, if we follow the causal criterion of being, it is not true that being is indefinable. But the Eleatic criterion is not an *analysis* of the concept of being. The Stranger's proposal is *synthetic* rather than analytical: it explains the concept of being through the use of predicates (“cause,” “effect”) that would hardly be recognized as elements extractable from a

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<sup>6</sup> See Oddie, Graham, ‘Armstrong on the Eleatic Principle and Abstract Entities’, *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, 1982, pp. 285–95. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00354868>.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, 247 d–e. See Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, Project Gutenberg, 2013. Available at: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1735>.

conceptual analysis of the concept of being.<sup>8</sup>

I mention the Eleatic criterion not because Bensusan follows it. Bensusan is not saying that everything that exists is either the cause or effect of something. Nor is he saying that nothingness is causally inert. My point is simply to draw attention to the fact that Bensusan is explaining the nature of being in a material manner, as the Stranger does in the *Sophist*. According to the pan-mnemist criterion of being, an entity is that which has a fundamental structure analogous to the structure of a memory. And, because it is a material ontology, pan-mnemism is not circular.

#### THE PAST EXCERPT (PE)

What baffles me in (PE) is the assumption that it is possible to add something *to* the past. The default assumption (by common sense, by folk ontology, by descriptive metaphysics) is that the past is immutable. What can change, for the good or for the bad, is the (obviously present, for some present) *representation* of the past. I share these assumptions. And my commonsensical assumptions lead me to a question about Bensusan's pan-mnemism: is Bensusan *reducing* the past to a mere representation?

The answer is: *Yes*. Since Bensusan is reducing *everything* to memory, of course, Bensusan is reducing *the past* to memory. The question, then, is: what is memory? Here, the pan-mnemist has a problem. For a pan-mnemist, memory is the ultimate metaphysical *explanans*. Everything is memory-like. But what is to be memory-like? To answer this question, one has to already know what memory is. The problem is that memory is not a self-evident phenomenon. For the explanation of what memory is, Bensusan bends toward elements of Martin & Deutscher's causal theory of memory.<sup>9</sup> Bensusan's analysis of Martin and Deutscher's view on the nature of memory is insightful. Still, Bensusan draws the wrong lesson: "The lesson to be drawn from Martin and Deutscher's work and

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<sup>8</sup> Priest, 'Not to Be', p. 234. See Priest, Graham, 'Not to Be', in Robin Le Poidevin, Peter Simons, Andrew McGonigal, and Ross P. Cameron (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Metaphysics*, London, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See Martin, C. B., and Max Deutscher, 'Remembering', *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 75, no. 2, 1966, pp. 161–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2183082>.

developments thereafter for the claim that memory assemblages are ubiquitous is that remembering activates an access to the past that is not a cognitive one".<sup>10</sup> That is not correct. Martin and Deutscher propose a *cognitive* theory about the access of the rememberer to the past. In Martin and Deutscher's analysis of the concept of remembering, three conditions are each necessary and all sufficient for a *cognitive* phenomenon to be a memory phenomenon.<sup>11</sup> First, the rememberer should *represent* some "past thing". Here we have a clear distinction between the past and memory. Second, the "past thing" should come from a past *experience*. Here we have a clear description of memory as a cognitive phenomenon. Third, the past experience should be "operative [...] in producing his *representation*" (my emphasis). Thus, Bensusan claims that memory can be understood as a non-cognitive phenomenon. But it can't. Based on the reading of Martin and Deutscher, here is my first claim in this talk:

**Claim 1.** *Memory is a cognitive phenomenon.*

Claim 1 clarifies that memory is, essentially, a *cognitive* phenomenon. It clarifies a concern regarding (PE). The problem is that Bensusan conflates the past with memory. Since the past itself is not trivially a cognitive phenomenon, memory would not be a cognitive phenomenon if the past were the explainer of memory. Again, according to pan-mnemism, everything is, in a "deep" level, memory-like. But my concern is that, at a deeper level, Bensusan reduces memory to the past. But memory is not *the* past. Memory is a cognitive phenomenon that occurs in the present (for some present). When we talk about episodic memory, which I assume is the relevant variety of memory for the discussion of pan-mnemism, every remembering act requires some past event as its intentional object, but every remembering act occurs at some present time occurring after the relevant past time.<sup>12</sup> To make my concern clearer, here is my second claim:

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<sup>10</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 76.

<sup>11</sup> See Martin & Deutscher, 'Remembering', p. 166.

<sup>12</sup> See Tulving, Endel, 'Episodic and Semantic Memory', in Endel Tulving and Wayne Donaldson (eds.), *Organization of Memory*, New York, Academic Press, 1972.

*Claim 2. Memory is not the past; the past is not memory.*

Regarding Claim 2, my concern is that Bensusan takes the cognitive phenomenon of memory as identical to the non-cognitive phenomenon of the past. For the sake of parsing the elements of this worry, let us read (PE) again. The opening sentence of (PE) is: “The central claim of this book is that the past cannot disappear by going away”. How should we interpret the word “disappear” in this quote? Suppose Bensusan is saying that the past cannot *remain immutable* by going away. For example, you bought a book a year ago, but you never read it. You lost the book for a while. Then you found the book. Now you pick the book from the shelf. Then you read it and make notes in the margins of the pages. Now the book has changed. What does it say about *the past*? Not so much. The changes in the book occur after the relevant past time. Can the concept of memory help us to understand the imagined situation? Yes – if we are interested in cognitive phenomena; no – if we are not interested in cognitive phenomena. The lesson, again, is that the concept of memory is interesting in this context because memory is a cognitive phenomenon, and the concept of the past is not key in this context because the past is not a cognitive phenomenon.

Let us dive deeper into the question about the cognitiveness of memory. Suppose that the word “disappear” in (PE) should be interpreted as, let us say, “eternally present in a fixed form”. Then we have, first, to solve the ambiguity of “present”. In an ontological reading, “present” means “existent”, and let us say, for the sake of simplicity, that “existent” means something that you can quantify over (including events). In a cognitive reading, in contrast, “present” means something that a minded being can have in mind. Which one of these readings is the best for understanding the claim “that the past cannot *disappear* by going away”? Clearly, the cognitive reading. Why? Because, unless one assumes presentism, the past *can* exist as past. Eternalist, growing block, and moving spotlight philosophers accept that the past exists as past.

Remembering, as Martin and Deutscher clarify, requires a previous *experience*. Now, suppose that there is a moment in time which is previous to the experience of any cognition of any minded being. Let us call this moment *the unexperienced (U)*. The moment (U) cannot be *remembered*. But this moment (U) can be inferred and *thought* about. Is the fact that (U) cannot be remembered sufficient for the conclusion that (U) does not exist? No, it is not. But, of course, the fact that (U)

cannot be remembered is trivially sufficient for the conclusion that (U) cannot be remembered. The conclusion, again, is that memory is a cognitive phenomenon (this is my Claim 1) and that memory and the past are different phenomena (this is my Claim 2).

The point of this discussion about the reality of the past and the cognitiveness of memory is to give meaning to the claim, which is part of (PE), that “The past does not persist as it was; instead, it is in the hands of what will come next”. *Remembering* is in the hands of what will come next. But *the past* is not in the hands of what will come next. Unless “past” means “memory”. In this case, one could say that the past persists through “dynamic transformation” and “constant reassembly”.

Can the past “lapse into nothingness”?<sup>13</sup> The presentist’s answer is “Yes”. The eternalist’s answer is “No”. Can the past be completely forgotten? Unless one assumes some kind of “permastore” conception of information storage, it can. The point, again, is that memory and the past are different phenomena. And, even assuming a “permastore” conception of data storage, the past can *disappear* in the sense of the cognitive agent never having the opportunity for further retrieval. It is like a beer can that you bought and left untouched in your fridge for the rest of your life. This beer can is there, but it had no opportunity for “return”. Of course, maybe someone else comes and drinks your beer after your death. In this case, the beer can come to influence the metabolism of this person. But there is nothing interestingly “mnemonic” going on in this case. Why? Because there can be a “retrieval-independent past”.<sup>14</sup> What there cannot be is a retrieval-independent remembering experience. Since the past is not memory-like, it does not make sense to say that the past is or can be “retained on its own and on its own terms”.<sup>15</sup> One can use the metaphor of retention as a metaphor for the mind, which would be a “place” for collecting data. But unless one conflates memory and the past, it makes little sense to suppose that the past itself could be *retained*. What would be the *retainer*? The present? How? And it is not trivially true that “the past is not inert”.<sup>16</sup> (I believe it is false.) But it is an empirical truth that *memory*

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<sup>13</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 61.

<sup>14</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 66.

<sup>16</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 12.

is not inert.<sup>17</sup> The point, again, is that memory is not the past (Claim 2). Memory can be “retained”; the past cannot (Claim 1).

## METAPHORS OF MEMORY

One of the main contributions of Bensusan to the philosophy of memory is the proposal of “the spectral” as a metaphor for memory.<sup>18</sup> Concerning memory, it is *metaphorically* true, as we can read in (PE), that “something added to the past brings back what happened before as a specter. The past does not persist as it was; instead, it is in the hands of what will come next”.

Here, it can be useful to recap Julian Jaynes’s theory of the metaphors for the mind.<sup>19</sup> First, about metaphors in general, understanding anything, including memory and reality, usually involves “a metaphor for that thing by substituting something more familiar to us”.<sup>20</sup> Every metaphor has two terms: “the thing to be described, which I shall call the *metaphrand*, and the thing or relation used to elucidate it, which I shall call the *metaphier*”.<sup>21</sup> The usual metaphors of mind involve “a vocabulary or lexical field whose terms are all metaphors or analogs of behavior in the physical world”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the idea is that a metaphor describes a less-known term (the *metaphrand*) by applying a better-known term (the *metaphier*). The metaphier is part of a semantic field with its own associations, which are projected to the paraphrands. By this process, the metaphrand acquires new semantic associations. For example, if space is the metaphier of the mind, it makes sense to think about thoughts located side-by-side; and if time is the metaphier of the mind, it makes sense to think about thoughts occurring one after the other, or one at the same time as the other.

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<sup>17</sup> See Bartlett, Frederic C., *Remembering: A Study in Experimental and Social Psychology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1932; Alba, Joseph W., and Lynn Hasher, ‘Is Memory Schematic?’, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 93, no. 2, 1983, pp. 203–31, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.93.2.203>; De Brigard, Felipe, ‘Is Memory for Remembering? Recollection as a Form of Episodic Hypothetical Thinking’, *Synthese*, vol. 191, no. 2, 2014, pp. 155–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-013-0247-7>.

<sup>18</sup> See Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*.

<sup>19</sup> See Jaynes, Julian, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

<sup>20</sup> Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, p. 52.

<sup>21</sup> Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, p. 55.

Jaynes's framework explains why Bensusan's pan-mnemism feels odd. There are two layers of oddity. First, in Bensusan's pan-mnemism, reality is the metaphier, and "memory" is the metaphrand; but, at the level of common sense, reality and memory are at the same level of *no* complexity. Common sense approaches reality, memory, and any other framework or phenomenon through "down-to-earth, colloquial wisdom, judgments or assessments".<sup>23</sup>

Second, Bensusan's metaphier of reality, which is memory, is the metaphrand of a further metaphier: memory is a "specter" (a "ghost", a "revenant"). For Bensusan, the spectral is a metaphor for memory and, by extension, for reality itself. Thus, the nature of reality, which is less known, is explained by memory, which is better known; and the nature of memory, which is less known, is explained by ghosts, which are things that populate the imagination of children in general.

Bensusan explains how a ghost can be a metaphor for memory. First, in folk tales, sometimes, a ghost is something that "returns from the past". Like an episodic memory. Second, in children's imagination, a ghost is not fully present or graspable in a tangible way. Again, like a memory. Thus, ghosts can be metaphors of memory. But, as it occurs with metaphors, they carry their own semantic associations. In the case of ghosts, they connote unresolved or insistent issues. This is not always the case for memories. Still, memories, very much as ghosts, seem to be imaginary.

Going back to pan-mnemism, Bensusan's sequence of metaphors can be presented as a little Q&A:

Q. What is the nature of reality?

A. Reality is like a memory.

Q. What is memory?

A. Memory is like a ghost.

With the help of transitivity, this little chat helps us to spread the chain of semantic associations that emanate from ghosts to reality itself. If memory is like a ghost and reality is like memory, then reality is like a ghost. What comes next, as we will see, is idealism.

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<sup>23</sup> Geertz, 'Common Sense as a Cultural System', pp. 7-8. See Geertz, Clifford, 'Common Sense as a Cultural System', *The Antioch Review*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1975, p. 5-26, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4637616>.

## ADDITION OR SUBTRACTION?

Episodic memories are intentional mental states (Claim 1). Let us go back to the causalist view on the nature of memory. Supposing (1) a previous time  $t_1$  and a further time  $t_2$ , (2) the experience by S at  $t_1$  of event E, and (3) the representation by S at  $t_2$  of E, E is the intentional object of E's episodic memory. On the relationship between the *intentional object* of an episodic memory (which is a past event) and the *mental content* of an episodic memory (which is a representation of a past event), clearly, the content says less than what was experienced.<sup>24</sup> This is not surprising if we accept ghosts as metaphors for memories. A ghost is less a thing than the dead. Having in mind these observations, here is my third claim:

**Claim 3.** *A memory represents less than the past event represented.*

This claim is relevant in the discussion of Bensusan's pan-mnemism because Bensusan sees a memory as an "addend" to a past event. But a memory adds *nothing to the thing it represents*. And a memory represents *less* than what was experienced. A memory is not a 1:1 map of reality. Memory is about subtraction rather than addition. Consider the pair retention-retrieval, which is ubiquitous in Bensusan's book. At the moment of retrieval, memory gives the rememberer *less* than what was experienced. Thankfully, you do not need 24 hours to retrieve a day in life.

Is simulationism a theory of memory more useful for a pan-mnemist than causalism? Simulationism comes in two flavors: future-oriented simulationism and reliabilist simulationism.<sup>25</sup> Relevant here is future-oriented simulationism. According to future-oriented simulationism, episodic memory is a "spandrel" of a cognitive power whose survival function is to make the individual able to imagine possible future scenarios.<sup>26</sup> Future-oriented simulationists claim that:

[...] remembering is a particular operation of a cognitive system that permits

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<sup>24</sup> See Bernecker, Sven, *The Metaphysics of Memory*, New York, Springer, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> See De Brigard, 'Is Memory for Remembering?'; Michaelian, Kourken, *Mental Time Travel: Episodic Memory and Our Knowledge of the Personal Past*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2016.

<sup>26</sup> On the metaphor of a spandrel, see Gould, S. J., and R. C. Lewontin, 'The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm: A Critique of the Adaptationist Programme', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*, vol. 205, no. 1161, 1979, pp. 581-98, <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.1979.0086>.

the flexible recombination of different components of encoded traces into representations of possible past events that might or might not have occurred, in the service of constructing mental simulations of possible future events.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, for future-oriented simulationists, remembering is a special case of a more general capacity for mental time travel.<sup>28</sup> This means that, for simulationism, it can be true that “simulation depends on addition”.<sup>29</sup> However, an issue remains: for a simulationist, memory is a *cognitive* power. Simulationism is about constructing a present simulation of the past based on present hypotheses and interests. This brings us back to my first claim: memory is cognitive.

#### LOCKE’S TWO-LAYER THEORY OF MEMORY

John Locke has this simple and ingenious way of explaining what remembering is: remembering is a variety of perception-of-perception.<sup>30</sup> More precisely, remembering is the perception of a past perception. Let us call this the *PoP Theory of Remembering*.

The hard work of the PoP view is done by the notion of perception. In Locke’s philosophy, a perception is something one has in mind.<sup>31</sup> And perceiving is having in mind “ideas” of people, objects, and even one’s own thoughts: the human mind is sophisticated enough to have the ability to have perceptions of *perceptions*. We form ideas from two sources: sensory experience and reflection on our minds’ internal operations. This reflection, especially on past perceptions, creates a perception-of-perception, a PoP.<sup>32</sup> There can be several different varieties of PoPs. One in particular interests us here: the perception of a *past* perception.

In Locke’s view, to remember is to have an idea of a past idea. This proposal, as we will see, is useful for explaining why Bensusan’s pan-mnemonism is a pan-*mnemonism*. But first, let us parse the elements of the PoP theory. The strength of Locke’s view becomes more salient when we compare it to the usual metaphor of

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<sup>27</sup> De Brigard, ‘Is Memory for Remembering?’, p. 155.

<sup>28</sup> See Tulving, Endel, ‘Memory and Consciousness’, *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1985, pp. 1–12, <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080017>.

<sup>29</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> See Locke, *Essay*, book 2, chapter 10, § 2.

<sup>31</sup> See Locke, *Essay*, book 2, chapter 1, § 9.

<sup>32</sup> See Locke, *Essay*, book 2, chapter 1, § 2.

memory as a mental place for the storage of the things we experienced or thought before (see above the discussion about metaphors of memory). Memory is not literally a physical space for the storage of physical objects. Still, the metaphor of a “mind-space” seems to guide the common way of thinking about the nature of memory. Interestingly, the PoP theory explains memory in a non-spatial way. According to Locke’s *Essay*, memory is not a mental place for the storage of previous perceptions. And how could it be? If (1) to have something  $=x$  in mind is to perceive  $x$  and (2) stored perceptions are not being perceived, then (3) stored perceptions are not something one has in mind. What happens, according to Locke’s model, is something else. Your mind can “revive perceptions which it has once had, with this additional perception annexed to them, – that it had had them before”.<sup>33</sup>

Locke’s notion of perception-of-perception echoes Aristotle’s description of remembering as a process which includes a mental image and you “saying in your soul” that you had perceived or thought about the intentional object of the mental image before.<sup>34</sup> In the Lockean system, this Aristotelian idea opens space for the consequence that the class of perceptions includes at least two kinds of perceptions. First, there are simple perceptions, which are cognitions of people and things. Second, there are also metacognitive perceptions, the PoPs. A simple cognitive perception has a single layer. It is a perception of something. In contrast, a PoP has two layers. One is the perception of a person or thing. The other is the perception of oneself perceiving a person or thing.

Bensusan’s pan-mnemism, the metaphysical thesis that everything is a memory assemblage, can be a little bit clarified with the help of Locke’s two-layer theory of memory. According to Locke’s PoP Theory of Remembering, remembering involves an initial perception (an idea one has in mind) followed by an additional perception annexed to it (the idea that oneself has had the target perception before). This *additional* perception constitutes a second layer. In this second layer, retrieval *adds* something to what was perceived. Bensusan universalizes this Lockean scheme. Every existing thing, as a “memory assemblage”, inherently possesses a two-layered structure. Like a remembering

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<sup>33</sup> Locke, *Essay*, book 2, chapter 10, § 2.

<sup>34</sup> See Aristotle, *De Memoria et Reminiscentia*, 449 b.

state is a perception-of-perception in Locke's theory of memory, anything is *this-plus-that* in pan-mnemism.

Of course, such a theory opens space for the objection that if anything has the structure this-plus-that, then there is *this* and there is *that*. The existence of the simple elements is a condition for the existence of a complex thing. This is the *mereological objection* to pan-mnemism. Does the mereological objection hurt pan-mnemism? I do not think so. The short answer is that Bensusan accepts that if there is a whole AB, then the parts A and B exist, but the parts, very much as the whole, are "memory assemblages". According to pan-mnemism, every whole is *this+that*, and every "this" is a sum of some "this" and some "that"; the same for every "that". Each part of each whole has the same this-and-that structure. Thus, supposing that the whole AB is made from the parts A and B, the close analysis of part A reveals that it is a whole that has the parts CD, etc. And here is where and when the analogy with Locke's theory of remembering ends, since Locke's perceptions are the simplest elements. Thus, the mereological objection is an opportunity for making it clear that Locke's theory of remembering explains by analogy Bensusan's view that every being is complex, but Bensusan does not follow Locke's proposal of a class of primitives. The only primitive in Bensusan's pan-mnemism is the abstract structure this+that, which is the structure of a memory assemblage.

#### THE TRUTHMAKING EXCERPT (TE)

Here is, again, for our convenience, the Truthmaking Excerpt (TE):

Truth, considered from the point of view of the interplay of memory assemblages, is always in the making – making truth is what responds to the diachrony of addends and memory, and it is relative to them.<sup>35</sup>

As representations, new truthbearers can be "always in the making". But even new episodic memories, as new truthbearers, need their respective already made truthmakers, which are the events they represent. As a representation, a memory can be "in the making". More specifically, what can be "in the making" is the content of a memory. And this "making" requires semantic values like accuracy

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<sup>35</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 166.

and truth for its semantic evaluation.<sup>36</sup> Thus, memory cannot explain truth for the simple and direct reason that memory content is explained by accuracy and truth. This opens an opportunity for my fourth and last claim:

**Claim 4.** *Semantics is more fundamental than cognition.*

This claim is useful for understanding how episodic remembering, as a representation of the past, “adds” something that was not present in the past experience. This “addition” occurs in two ways. First, as a new truth**earer**, a memory “adds” to reality a new thing (a representation) which should, for the sake of semantic evaluation, be connected to the respective fixed and already existent truth**maker**. Second, episodic remembering has a meta-representational format. When one is representing a past event, usually one feels that the represented event was experienced before. This “saying in one’s mind” that the experience was experienced *before* is not something that the rememberer could experience *accurately* when they were experiencing the event. Thus, episodic remembering involves an “addendum” that could not be *correctly* (from a semantic point of view) present in the experience of the original event. Metaphorically, one could say a meta-representation “reshapes the past”, since a meta-representation is an “asymmetric addition” to the past representation.<sup>37</sup> But now, again, the thing is that we are talking about representations (Claim 1). And representations can be true or false, accurate or inaccurate (Claim 4).

The recognition of the semantic layer makes explicit a new way, against (PE), for the past to go away. The past can go away by being represented *falsely*. Truth is not in the making. Memory is. Since memory is a representation of the past, a memory has cognitive elements which are “exterior” to the past event.<sup>38</sup> These cognitive elements are “vulnerable” to the hazards of retrieval.<sup>39</sup> The past itself is not.

Bensusan suggests that the past is indexical.<sup>40</sup> Having in mind that the past is

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<sup>36</sup> See Bernecker, Sven, ‘Memory and Truth’, in Sven Bernecker and Kourken Michaelian (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Memory*, London, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 65.

<sup>38</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 12.

<sup>40</sup> See Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 7.

not a representation, I am afraid it is not. Past events in general do not need to have semantic properties. Representations of events, in contrast, constitutively have semantic properties. Episodic remembering is an indexical representation of the personal past. Indexicals are representations with two semantic layers.<sup>41</sup> The first layer is conventional meaning (intension). “I” denotes the speaker of “I”; “now” denotes the moment of the utterance of “now”. The second layer is the variable extension at each use of an indexical. For every subject that says “I”, the denotation (what is represented) is the speaker. For every moment of uttering “now”, the denotation is the moment of the utterance. The content of an event of episodic remembering is indexical because it involves representing *oneself* as representing the personal past. The event from the personal past, in contrast, is impersonal. This is true even about events involving you or me. An event is about nobody and nowhen for the very simple reason that an event is not necessarily a representation. Thus, the past is not indexical.

Pan-mnemist is the theory that reality is like a ghost. Is it a plausible theory? It depends on the meaning of “plausible”. First, pan-mnemism is plausible in the sense of appearing to save the phenomena: it is not rare to have the feeling that reality is... unreal. Pan-mnemism is also plausible in the sense of being worthy of applause. It is not a small feat to build a metaphysics based on the notion of memory. But pan-mnemist is not plausible in the sense of being easily believable. I would be surprised if experimental philosophers discovered that people in general see reality as memory. On the contrary, it seems that, according to folk ontology, memory is caused by past experience – a claim that could hardly be made compatible with pan-mnemism.<sup>42</sup> Regarding believability, I think that Bensusan proposes pan-mnemism not as a refutation of folk ontology, but as a revision of it motivated by the fact that “[n]arratives can be falsified”.<sup>43</sup> But it is odd to propose a non-cognitive view about the nature of memory as a solution for the *semantic* problem of inaccuracies and falsifications in the *representations* of

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<sup>41</sup> See Kaplan, David, ‘Demonstratives: An Essay on the Semantics, Logic, Metaphysics, and Epistemology of Demonstratives and Other Indexicals’, in Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>42</sup> See Mahr, Johannes Benedikt, Brian Porter, Kelli Barr, et al., ‘What Is the Folk Concept of Remembering?’, Preprint, Open Science Framework, March 3, 2025. [https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/94p3w\\_v1](https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/94p3w_v1).

<sup>43</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 167.

the past.

In a way, my bafflement with (PE) and (TE) is similar, in spirit, to Appiah's reaction to anti-realism, as both anti-realism in semantics and pan-mnemism in metaphysics challenge deeply ingrained realist beliefs about the nature of the past and truth.<sup>44</sup> Against (PE), I believe that memory, but not the past itself, is "in the hands of what will come next".<sup>45</sup> Regarding (TE), E is the *truthmaker* of the memory of E. For this reason, there is not much space for claiming that truth "is always in the making".<sup>46</sup> What is "always in the making" is memory as a representation; ergo, as a *truthbearer*.

Anthony Appiah, in his discussion of semantic anti-realism (particularly in the work of Michael Dummett<sup>47</sup>), points out that anti-realism is "characteristically [...] revisionary of logical practices; it suggests that we should sometimes not say what we have felt entitled to say in the past".<sup>48</sup> This applies to statements about the past, which Dummett considered "the most difficult case" for anti-realism.<sup>49</sup> Appiah points out four points of concern regarding anti-realism which are paralleled to my concerns regarding pan-mnemism. The first point is about *the revision of logical principles*. Anti-realism may require rejecting classical logical principles like the *law of excluded middle* and denying *bivalence* (that every statement is determinately true or false). This is a revision of *how we speak and reason* about truth. Similar proposals are at least suggested by Bensusan. Second, semantic anti-realism ties truth to *assertibility conditions* or the *availability of evidence*. If there is no evidence, the truth-value of a statement about the past might be indeterminate or even non-existent. In a way, (PE) and (TE) are metaphysical versions of the anti-realists' view about the limitation of reality to what is retained-and-retrieved.

Third, anti-realism leads us to "repugnant" ontological consequences: "past events, the memory of and evidence for which had dissipated, were expunged,

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<sup>44</sup> See Appiah, Anthony, 'Anti-Realism Unrealised', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 135, 1984, p. 85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2219504>.

<sup>45</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Bensusan, *Memory Assemblages*, p. 166.

<sup>47</sup> See Dummett, Michael, 'The Justificationist's Response to a Realist', *Mind*, vol. 114, no. 455, 2005, pp. 671–88, <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzi671>.

<sup>48</sup> Appiah, 'Anti-Realism Unrealised', p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> Dummett, 'The Justificationist's Response to a Realist', p. 762.

not merely from our knowledge, but from reality itself: they were no more; they had not happened”.<sup>50</sup> Again, there are similarities between semantic anti-realism and pan-mnemism. For an anti-realist, if there is no present evidence of E, then E is not real. For a pan-mnemist, if E is not retained-and-retrieved, there is no E. *And here we can see the main problem/feature of pan-mnemism: it is a variety of idealism.* Just as Berkeley says that to be is to be perceived, the pan-mnemist argues that to be is to be retained-and-retrieved. Fourth, anti-realism has a problem of intersubjectivity/time:

[...] understanding an utterance of P in someone else’s mouth, or in my own mouth at another time, should consist in knowing what evidence, available to other people (at any time) or at other times (for myself), makes utterances of P appropriate.<sup>51</sup>

By suggesting that addition changes the truthmakers, Bensusan creates for pan-mnemism a similar problem. Different people at different times cannot think about the same, and even communicative exchanges at some span of time seem to be reduced to mere verbal disputes, since every new addition would change the truthmakers. This is a problem that affects a key motivation for pan-mnemism: justice. Justice requires that the consideration of the past as past as the norm for the evaluation of the representations of the past. There is no possibility of justice when the present representation of the past becomes the norm for the evaluation of the “truth” about the past. In this case, what is “remembered” becomes “the truth”, and what is more easily “remembered” is, unfortunately, what is more often repeated, what is shouted loudest – what comes from the strongest throats, which are usually those throats that have not been cut.

In sum, semantic anti-realism and metaphysical pan-mnemism directly confront the deeply held intuition that the past is fixed, unchangeable, and objectively determined. Both Bensusan and the anti-realists propose theories that are explicitly revisionary of conventional philosophical or logical practices. For both, the past is not a straightforward concept. For anti-realists, it’s problematic because of the challenge of verifying past truths. For Bensusan, as we see in (PE) and (TE), it’s problematic because it’s inherently incomplete and subject to ongoing transformation.

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<sup>50</sup> Dummett, ‘The Justificationist’s Response to a Realist’, p. 672.

<sup>51</sup> Appiah, ‘Anti-Realism Unrealised’, p. 99.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I critically engaged with Hilan Bensusan's pan-mnemism, a metaphysical theory positing that all reality possesses a memory-like structure. My analysis, guided by the Past Excerpt (PE) and the Truthmaking Excerpt (TE) from Bensusan's *Memory Assemblages* (2024), has sought to challenge key tenets of this view. Against the assertion (PE) that something can be added to the past, I have argued for a fundamental distinction between memory and the past itself, establishing that memory is a cognitive phenomenon (Claim 1) and that memory is distinct from the past (Claim 2). Furthermore, I claimed that memory, as a representation, inherently subtracts from, rather than adds to, the past event it represents (Claim 3). In addressing proposition (TE) that truth is "in the making", I advanced the notion that semantic properties, such as truth, are logically prior to the cognitive act of remembering (Claim 4). Through an examination of Bensusan's spectral metaphor for memory and reality, a parallel was drawn between pan-mnemism and semantic anti-realism, ultimately suggesting that Bensusan's spectral realism functions as a form of idealism, where existence is contingent upon retention and retrieval.

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