The problem of social memory in Śaṃkara's Advaita Vedānta

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to lay a foundation for the study of social memory in Advaita Vedānta which engages with the burgeoning literature in the modern field of Social Memory Studies. Initially, I consider Tulving's categories of procedural and propositional memory, the latter split between the episodic memory of a person's own past and the semantic memory of content independent of particular memorisers. I then work with Russell's contention that, since the seminal work of Halbwachs (1925, 1950), studies of social memory have been modelled on a notion of personal episodic memory rather than on earlier understandings of semantic memory. Later, I suggest that understandings of collective memory which are not so narrowly linked with episodic models, such as Ingold's discussion of the externalisation of memory, may be better to think with.

However, the bulk of the paper is concerned at this stage to examine in more detail Śaṃkara's 'ecology' of memory in terms of text and memory, everyday personal memory and its contexts, and liberation and memory. Whereas considerable attention has been given to the plausibility of Śaṃkara's arguments on memory and personal identity (e.g. Carr 2000), little attention has been paid to his other comments on memory, many made in passing. I argue that while the social memory of the transmission of the Veda (primarily a form of procedural memory) and of the deemed correct Advaitin interpretation of it (a form of semantic memory) seems initially at odds with the constitution of personal memory as fundamental to constituting the misperception of the individual "I", it, like the provisional use of "I" to designate that on which superimposition is made, has ultimately to be discarded, even while memory of both kinds is necessary in that process.