

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL REVIEW

### THE ILLUSION OF MEMORY<sup>1</sup>

THE illusion of which I wish to speak is the direct awareness of past objects or events that seems to be involved in the process of memory. It is the apparent existence of that which has not only ceased to exist, but is known at the moment of remembering to be non-existent. That we should seem to be aware of objects which, as we know, are not there to be perceived, is of the sort that Kant may have had in mind when he spoke of "necessary" illusions. This is an illusion that arises in the nature of the experience, like that of the moon appearing larger when low in the sky, or the ocean seeming higher at the horizon than it appears to be at our feet. What I take to be illusory is not that memory is knowledge (how could there be any other knowledge without it?), but that it should seem to be an acquaintance with the past. Of course, no one seriously doubts that we do remember instead of merely seeming to remember, nor that in remembering we do have a veritable knowledge of the past. In speaking of an illusion of memory, I do not intend to question the truth of memory judgments, nor to dwell upon the "metaphysical pathos" that goes with meditations about the passage of time. The illusion in question pertains only to the quality or immediacy of the memory experience. In remembering, it is as if things past were nevertheless present, or as if there were a consciousness, a direct awareness, of the presence of remembered events, known to have occurred in the past. Memory, as an experience directly had or undergone, is not only "a remembrance of things past", but literally a "*presence* of things past", in Augustine's paradoxical phrase.

The apparent contradiction, that the same remembered object

<sup>1</sup>The presidential address prepared for the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association, December 1942