



Nostalgia reconsidered

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Abstract

Nostalgia is standardly assumed to be directed towards the past, to involve some salient feeling of the irretrievability of the past, and to be directed towards the memory of an event. In this paper I argue that none of these standard assumptions hold. I use a time-traveller example to demonstrate that nostalgia is not essentially past-directed. Once nostalgia is prised from the objective past, we can examine the other purported conditions, making space for the conclusion that the felt irretrievability of the past is not the necessary feature of nostalgia that we assumed it to be. I then argue that the notion that nostalgia is directed towards the memory of an event is misguided. Finally, I distinguish two routes to nostalgia and, with this distinction in place, argue that nostalgia is neither essentially time nor place directed. Nostalgia is simply change-directed.

KEYWORDS

atemporal nostalgia, nostalgia, nostalgia and change, nostalgia in marketing, nostalgia triggers

1 | INTRODUCTION

Nostalgia plays a significant role in our lives. It acts as a motivator behind many of our life choices, marketing consultants track and provoke it in order to influence consumer behaviour and it plays a significant role in determining our attitude to change. Yet relatively little attention has been given in the philosophical literature to what nostalgic feeling is and what little has been said on the matter tends to focus on a limited range of cases of nostalgic feeling in which nostalgia is presented as a longing for an irretrievable past event. This, I argue, leads us to be blinded to the true nature of nostalgic feeling in a range of significant ways.

Nostalgia is standardly assumed to have three key features—it is taken to,

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- be directed towards the past,
- involve some salient feeling of the irretrievability of the past, and
- be directed towards the memory of an event.

I will argue that none of these standard assumptions hold. I use a time-traveller example to demonstrate that nostalgia is not essentially past-directed. My conclusion here, that nostalgia is directed to one's personal past and not the objective past, is not in itself particularly significant or original. However, once nostalgia is prised from the objective past we can start to examine the other purported conditions of the emotion, making space for the conclusion that the felt irretrievability of the past is not the necessary feature of nostalgia that we assumed it to be. I then argue that the notion that nostalgia is directed towards the memory of an event is misguided. Finally, I distinguish two routes to nostalgia and, with this distinction in place, argue that nostalgia is neither essentially time nor place directed. Nostalgia is simply change-directed. I also argue that, contra recent proposals, nostalgia remains close to its etymological roots.

2 | THE NOSTALGIC TIME-TRAVELLER

Carlsson was born in 1973 and is 47 years old and, in that sense, what we might call the 'natural temporal home' of his 47-year-old self is 2020. But Carlsson loves to time travel. Although he has travelled to many different times he keeps a special place in his heart for the summer of 2030. That summer was warm and the recent global peace agreement had created a palpable widespread feeling of security and contentment. The smell of toasted almonds on a warm summer evening evokes a feeling of nostalgia to wash over him.

Assuming that Carlsson's emotional response is an instance of nostalgia—and I see no reason to withhold agreement that it might be—the case creates a number of problems for our standard assumptions regarding nostalgia. First of all, Carlsson is not longing for the past at all—he is longing for the summer of 2030, a date that lies in the future. Second, given that Carlsson is an experienced time traveller and has the means, it is not obvious that the event or time is irretrievable. Third, we can use Carlsson's experience to clarify the assumption that nostalgia is directed towards the memory of an event. The feeling of longing that Carlsson gets when he smells the toasting almonds on a warm summer night is a longing for the Summer of 2030—it is not, and I will argue cannot be, a longing for a single moment in 2030 when the smell of toasting almonds was previously experienced by him. More generally, it is a mistake to associate nostalgic emotion with a particular temporal event.

If we accept that Carlsson can be nostalgic about 2030 from the perspective of 2020, we accept that nostalgia is not essentially past directed. We experience the world as having a temporal ordering and that temporal ordering is, at least in theory, distinguishable from the temporal ordering of our own personal experience of it. For those of us who do not have the opportunity to travel backwards and forwards in time, the temporal ordering of our experience of external events is identical to the temporal ordering of those events themselves. As the events of the world unfold and pass from what we call 31st December into what we call 1st January, so too do our own personal experience of those event unfold. But Carlsson's case shows us that it need not be that way—that there is no necessary connection between the temporal events as they are unfolding and those events as we experience them. We can coherently separate the objective ordering of Carlsson's life, an ordering that progresses from November 1973 until January 2064, from the ordering of the temporal events as Carlsson has experienced them, an ordering that includes 15th March 1475 and repeated visits to 6th July 2030. The crude distinction is between what can be called an individual's personal time, and what can be called external time.

From his perspective in 2020, Carlsson experiences nostalgia about a time that is in the future. Therefore, it is not correct to state that nostalgia is an emotion that must be directed towards the past. However, the nostalgia that Carlsson experiences is directed towards an event that he experienced in his personal past—it is his past experience of the Summer of 2030 that he is nostalgic for. The lesson, then, is that we should classify nostalgia as an emotion that is directed towards one's past, rather than the past. On its own, that is a fairly mundane observation. However, separating nostalgia from the past frees it up in other unexpected ways.

3 | IRRETRIEVABILITY IS NOT A NECESSARY CONDITION FOR NOSTALGIA

Howard (2012, p. 641) classifies the irretrievability condition in the following way:

Any adequate view of nostalgia will acknowledge that it involves a felt difference between the past and the present: the very irretrievability of the past is salient in the experience.

It is plausible that the irretrievability condition is an artifact of the following line of thought:

- P1: nostalgic emotion is directed towards the past,
 P2: the past is irretrievable,
 C: nostalgic emotion is directed towards something irretrievable.

But, as we have shown above, nostalgic emotion is not necessarily directed towards the past. It can be directed towards the memory of any event that is not currently experienced. That memory might be of an externally past event or it might be of an externally future event. In any case Carlsson, as we have described him, has the means to attend any event in time, past or future, and this does not seem to render him incapable of feeling nostalgia. In fact, it seems plausible that feelings of nostalgia are in some way an explanation for his multiple visits to the summer of 2030.

If an irretrievability condition is to hold, it had better not hold on the basis of an assumption of the irretrievability of externally past temporal events—certainly, it does not seem plausible to classify irretrievability as a ‘felt difference between the past and the present’ as Howard encourages us to. But perhaps we can simply tweak the irretrievability condition to take account of the fact that nostalgia is directed towards one’s past rather than the past. Correspondingly, we can restate the argument above in a revised form.

- P1*: nostalgic emotion is directed towards one’s past,
 P2*: one’s past is irretrievable,
 C*: nostalgic emotion is directed towards something irretrievable.

Now we can ask the same question of P2* that we asked of P2: in what sense is one’s past irretrievable? Suppose that Carlsson is nostalgic for the Christmases of his youth. What would it take for the object of that nostalgia to be retrievable? Carlsson can hop in his time machine and ‘retrieve’ December 25th 1980 in the sense that he can take his current self back to that time and be part of that day once again. But is that what nostalgia directs us to? Is that what Carlsson is longing for—to participate in the Christmas of 1980 again but now as a 47-year-old man? It doesn’t seem likely that it is.

Maybe what Carlsson is longing for is to re-experience the day as a seven-year-old—to feel the overwhelming excitement that comes with being a child at Christmas. But what would it mean for him to re-experience that day as a seven-year-old? In re-experiencing that day, he would, by definition, be experiencing it as a seven-year-old who had experienced it before. That in itself would mean that he was not re-experiencing it at all as his awareness of this being a re-experiencing and his memory of the experience before would make this a new and distinct experience for Carlsson, and not a re-experiencing.

Perhaps what Carlsson is longing for is the event experience that his seven-year-old self had when he experienced the Christmas of 1980 for the first time. If this is what Carlsson is longing for it is an irrational, perhaps even paradoxical, longing. First of all, from the perspective of 47-year-old Carlsson, from the perspective of any temporal part of Carlsson, nothing would be gained by him having this kind of retrievability. His life, taken as a sequence of experiences, would be no different than if his experiences were not retrievable. This is because a re-experiencing of the original event in exactly its original form would be indistinguishable from the event itself with the inevitable outcome that we are left only with the original event. In any case it is certainly true that seven-year-old Carlsson reliving Christmas 1980, as an identical reliving, could not satisfy any longing that 47-year-old Carlsson has.

We are in danger of concluding that nostalgia is an irrational, paradoxical emotion—a longing for something that is not only metaphysically out of reach but logically out of reach. The saving of nostalgia comes with the realisation that nostalgia is not directed towards the memory of an event at all.

4 | NOSTALGIA IS NOT DIRECTED TOWARDS THE MEMORY OF AN EVENT

Above I set out three key features that nostalgia is standardly assumed to have. It is assumed to,

- be directed towards the past,
- involve some salient feeling of the irretrievability of the past, and
- be directed towards the memory of an event.

We have discovered that nostalgia is not necessarily directed towards the past and that it is not essentially connected to irretrievability in any interesting sense. We will now consider the claim that nostalgia is directed towards the memory of an event.

The problem we encountered in the previous section came from identifying nostalgia as a longing for a particular event in one's past. We assumed that when Carlssin is hit with feelings of nostalgia in the case in question, he longs for an event—for 25th December 1980. Here I will propose that we were mistaken in identifying nostalgia as a longing for an event and that nostalgia is instead a longing for a previously experienced complex emotion that is associated with an event, or a cluster of related events. We can run this in relation to Carlssin's nostalgic feelings about the Christmases of his childhood. Carlssin's 47-year-old self is hit with a mix of sensory data: the smell of burning peat in the cold air mingled with the smell of the cooking of traditional food and of the pine of the Christmas tree; the sight of the warm glow of the lights on the tree; the sound of the carol singers outside the door. And he is overcome with a feeling of nostalgia. The nostalgia links Carlssin with an event or cluster of events in his past and he is overwhelmed with a feeling of longing. But the longing is not a longing for the event of his past—as noted above, Carlssin is not longing to re-experience the Christmas of 1980. Rather it is a longing for a re-experiencing of the emotions that these events evoked in him at the time—excitement, happiness, perhaps a little fear. These emotions are, for Carlssin, directly linked to an event or cluster of similar events—childhood Christmases—but the longing itself need not be. The longing is to feel that again—that complicated mix of excited-happy-fearful that Carlssin associates with his childhood Christmases that his current sensory experiences gave him an overwhelming, but fleeting, reliving of. In this way, nostalgia is not to be thought of as an irrational desire to re-experience but as a rational desire to take a break from the experiences of the present and to seek refuge in previously felt emotions.

This helps with the problem we experienced in the previous section. The presumed irretrievability condition threatened to make nostalgia irrational. Nostalgia was to be defined as a longing for something that was both metaphysically and logically unavailable. Unlike the event of Christmas 1980, it is possible that the complex emotion that Carlssin experienced during this event could be available to him again. That being so, the emotional responses experienced in one's past are not as obviously irretrievable as the events of one's past are.

Defining nostalgia in this way also helps us make sense of the power of nostalgia to bring about action. If we allow nostalgia to be partly defined by the irretrievability condition, and in particular if the irretrievability of the object of the emotion is a felt part of the emotion, it is very difficult to make sense of the motivating power of nostalgia. Nostalgia can cause us to take action. Although not all desires to revisit favourite places are rooted in nostalgia, it is conceivable that it is a wave of nostalgia that motivates Carlssin to revisit the Summer of 2030 and that it is a wave of nostalgia that encourages him to try and recreate the Christmases of his youth. More generally, nostalgia can be responsible for the success of retro products and their marketing. Clearly nostalgia can provoke action. As such, the action that nostalgia provokes must lead us to some end that we take to be achievable. But in

order for nostalgia to be useful in this way, in order for it to be a tool that others can use to promote some action in us, it cannot be limited to the sensory-invoked wave that overcomes us when we least expect it.

5 | THE SENTIENT AND THE SENSORY ROUTES TO NOSTALGIA

In the philosophical literature it is often supposed that nostalgia is not something that we can choose to experience but is something that is thrust upon us, involuntarily. In the psychology literature, on the other hand, much of the evidence and data is gathered by attempting to purposefully trigger nostalgia and then asking controlled groups questions about their experiences. (See Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008)

It will prove useful to clearly distinguish these two apparent routes to nostalgia. The first route to nostalgia we can identify is through a conscious longing for a different time or place. The route is connected to some memory or quasi memory that one has and it can be purposefully triggered, perhaps by being asked to consider some element of dissatisfaction with the present or simply the awareness of a substantial change in circumstances. It is purposeful and considered. It is this route to nostalgia that marketers will use when building up a market for their product. They know, for example, that many people who are now parents grew up in a time when toys were more basic. They also know that those same parents experience some anxiety over the impact of the digital environment on their young children. Triggering nostalgia by showing some 80's kids playing with their Cabbage Patch Kids, the marketers are hoping that the parents will long for these simpler times and then buy their non-digital product. We can call this the *sentient* route to nostalgia. It is sentient in the sense that it is conscious and deliberate. It is also easier to block or halt if unwanted. As well as its application in marketing, the sentient route to nostalgia is a favoured tool of revolutionaries. As Bonnett (2016) notes, nostalgia is not just a passive emotion it can also be active and change-making. The sentient route to nostalgia is employed by politicians on the right when they want to highlight the loss of pre-globalised communities and values, and by those on the left when they want to highlight the wrongs of modern capitalism. This is not to say that sentient nostalgia is a golden ticket. The ultimate effects of provoking sentient nostalgia are unpredictable—the purchase of the retro toy can lead to disappointment, the attempt to re-experience the glory days can provoke complicated feelings of both longing and disgust. Still it is true that, in order for nostalgia to be useful in this sense, it has to be something that can be triggered 'at will'.

The other route to nostalgia is far less within the control of marketers and revolutionaries. It is not even clearly within the nostalgic subject's control. This route to nostalgia is through sensory data and it comes over one in a way that is immediate. For example, the smell of a particular flower may be what causes nostalgia for your grandmother's house to 'wash over you', rather than a purposeful reflection of visiting her house when you were a child. The feeling comes over you whether you want it or not. In fact, some may find they have to avoid particular places or experiences precisely because they trigger a strong nostalgic emotion that they have no power to stop and that they find unsettling. We can call this the *sensory* route to nostalgia. The sensory route to nostalgia is far less predictable than the sentient route. You may not know yourself what will trigger that feeling to wash over you so it would be very difficult for the marketer, or revolutionary, to work it out. Likewise, it is far less easy for us to get psychological data on nostalgia via the sensory route, for the same practical and epistemic reasons.

The identification of a distinct route to nostalgia, one which is purposefully directed rather than operating out with our control also opens up the possibility of nostalgic emotion that is directed towards an experience that we have never had.

6 | NOSTALGIA FOR AN EXPERIENCE ONE HAS NEVER HAD

Nostalgia is assumed to be an emotion directed to experience that one has had in the past. But are we also capable of feeling nostalgic for experiences that we have never had? And, if so, what can we learn about nostalgia from that possibility.

In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Boym toys with the idea of feeling nostalgic for a home that one has never had, perhaps the home that one feels one should have occupied, if only one had never been displaced. And, in his (2016), Alastair Bonnett also discusses how nostalgia can arise in the 'post memories' of descendants, stating that one can be nostalgic for one's lost childhood or lost home, allowing for feelings of nostalgia for places that one has never been and for experiences that one has never had.

Imagine that your parents' homeland had been torn apart by a war when you were in your mother's womb, causing your parents to flee the country. They come to a new country and raise you there. While raising you they tell you of the place that they still think of as home and you understand that, had things turned out differently, it would have been your home too. You hear tales of everyday living in the country, of what your house would have been like, of the neighbours, of the traditions that your family practiced. Your mother describes the house, neighbourhood and way of living in such detail that you build up a vivid picture of what your life would have been like if the war had never happened. You have built up an image of an experience of a place and time, from the stories of others, from images that you have come across and from imagining your place in that country. You feel nostalgic for the past that you should have had, but never did.

Accepting that one can be nostalgic for an experience that one has never had puts significant pressure on the traditional philosophical view of nostalgia.

However, whilst it is appropriate that our theory of nostalgia is open enough to cover all purported cases, we need to ensure that it is not too broad. While one can feel nostalgia for places that one has never been, there are conditions on which places and why. Identifying these limits give us a further insight into the nature of nostalgia.

One could not appropriately use the term nostalgia to describe a feeling of longing for *any* place that one has never visited. I may long for the Bahamas and be able to conjure an imagined experience for myself from images that I have seen and reports that I have heard of this place but my longing is not appropriately described as nostalgia. So what is it that makes nostalgia possible for the descendant but not for the longing tourist? The answer, I propose, can be found in the root of the word. The word *nostalgia* has its roots in the Greek words *nostos*—to return to one's native land—and *algos*—pain or suffering.

I suggest that what makes nostalgia appropriate in the case of descendants is that they feel, and have, a right of ownership or of belonging to a particular place, even if they have never been there. It is legitimate for a descendant of a migrant to refer to this place as home. If their parents had to flee their home country before they were born they can easily imagine a life in that country as one that they are entitled to. Through stories and images they will have built up a good sense of what life would have been there. They feel homesick for a home that they never had and nostalgic for their life there.

We can allow that the descendants feel nostalgia for the homeland yet mark a distinction between their responses and that of their parents. Because the descendants did not live in the homeland they cannot experience nostalgia for the place via the sensory route. They never experienced the smell of the local flower in the evening alongside the birdsong of the area. They were not immersed in the physical environment. So, while their parents can feel that overwhelming and involuntary rush of nostalgia brought on by a smell or sound and also feel sentient nostalgia brought on by thinking of their homeland, descendants can only experience nostalgia via the latter route.

7 | NOSTALGIA AS A REACTION TO CHANGE

Theorists claim that our conception of nostalgia has changed over the centuries, moving away from the origins. While 20th century clinicians considered nostalgia to be a variety of mourning or depression that was to be equated with homesickness brought on by migration from one's homeland (Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 1980), Bonnett (2016) claims that nostalgia has become less associated with place and more associated with time. And (Blunt, 2003) similarly notes that 'nostalgia is more usually understood in temporal terms rather than in spatial terms'. However, I propose that this shift is not a shift in what nostalgia is. Rather, only the likely objects of nostalgia have changed.

Nostalgia is neither essentially temporal nor essentially spatial. Nostalgia is essentially about change. And the shift in its objects is rather a marker of a difference in the kinds of significant changes that humans experience. In the 19th and 20th centuries, migration was devastating, even if it ultimately led to a better quality of life. Leaving one's homeland was final. Now, we are much more mobile. We flit around the globe fairly effortlessly. So, although we can still feel nostalgia for a place, that longing is more easily filled by a visit home or by a Skype call with one's relatives.

The triggers for modern nostalgia are different. The rate and the variety of change that agents have had to endure has increased exponentially during the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Working practices, entertainment options, accepted values, modes of communication—all have changed beyond recognition at fast pace. 21st century living would be almost unrecognisable to our 20th century counterparts. As technology advances, making travel easier and lifestyles very different, we experience an increase in nostalgia for how things used to be (a temporal focus) rather than where we used to be (a spatial focus). But it would be wrong to conclude from this that our conception of nostalgia has altered. As Bonnett (2016, p. 3) puts it, nostalgia is born out of modernity. Citizens of the 21st century are experiencing modernisation at an astonishing rate. As such, our nostalgia tends to be directed towards the simpler objects of the past rather than an irretrievable homeland. But at root, the emotion is the same—only its object has shifted.

8 | CONCLUSION

I have argued that three commonly held assumptions about the nature of nostalgia are mistaken, concluding that nostalgia is not essentially past directed, does not involve a felt irretrievability of the past and is not an emotion directed towards an event. More positively, I have argued that rather than being essentially temporal or essential spatial, nostalgia is an emotional response to change. I distinguish two routes to nostalgia—sentient and sensory. This distinction, in particular the identification of the sentient route, helps us to explain the utility of nostalgia.

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