

# Nostalgia Vindicated: Psychological, Emotional, Social, Biological, and Even Political

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*“Then we can’t go back”.*  
*She looked at him. “Back? To where?”*  
*“Then”.*

*Elizabeth Bowen, To the North (1932, p. 253)*

## Abstract

*Long viewed as something between a malady and self-indulgence, nostalgia has recently come to be more disinterestedly explored in human sciences and philosophy. The term itself dates to a 17th Century medical doctor’s investigation into the quite serious debility for soldiers in battles far from home. Currently researchers have widely assumed the phenomenon to be an emotion or mediated via emotions. Another view contends nostalgia is a social or political construct, and another suggests a biological basis. At least one observer has enjoined us to clarify the term and begin a more rigorous definition and study of nostalgia. This article takes up that challenge, approaching nostalgia from the many different (and seemingly not always consistent) facets of it. A pivot in the analysis consists in exploring two theories of what nostalgia consists in, for a sharper, more workable understanding of the phenomenon. We may thence more effectively inquire into its nature, whether indeed it is largely a socially or biologically derived phenomenon and even whether has a normative side. The article concludes that biological influences that appear to have moulded nostalgia as a phenomenon point to potential answers to normative criticisms of it as harmful and removed from reality.*

**Keywords:** *defining nostalgia, homesickness, longing, nostalgic fads, Proust, self-indulgence, valuing past over present, volitional vs. involuntary nostalgia.*

## *Introduction*

Nostalgia is one of those conceptual terms that beguiles philosophy, along with “love”, “feeling”, “truth”, and “consciousness”. Nostalgia, while having a growing literature, has drawn less attention than these other four terms. Perhaps it is *too* ephemeral, and it may seem less pertinent to philosophy. In the political-

theory arena, nostalgia gains some significance as a topic. Psychology has given it notable attention, perhaps more than has philosophy. The fact that nostalgia has a sure place in psychology should help cement its respectability as a matter meriting further philosophical study. One issue meriting attention is simply what kind of phenomenon nostalgia is (Casey, 1987; Hirsch, 1992; Batcho, 1995; Fuentenebro & Valiente, 2014) It is often considered as an emotion (Batcho, 2020a; Malpas, 2011; Sedikides, *et al.* 2016; Wijnand *et al.*, 2018), while some have treated it is a social construct (Davis, 1979; Illbruck, 2012). Nostalgia seems to require consciousness but possibly may be experienced in a dream. Most observers would concur it concerns the past, not the present or future. The tern just does not make sense of “I miss next year”. “Missing” implies no-longer present, hence present only at some earlier time. (See below § Missing, longing.) An agent may miss thinking about the future, but such is not longing for the future. The nostalgia episode may be described as lending the past a patina of favorability, whatever exactly happened during that past experience. Thus, an emotion of wistfulness, or a cloying, implacable longing for the period in question, is sometimes considered to be integral to nostalgia (Malpas, 2011). By other accounts, there may be a naivete requirement for nostalgic experiences, whereby the past incident cannot be known at the time as an experience that will indeed later become nostalgic (Moran, 1994). Some commentators have viewed nostalgia as involuntary; others, as volitional (Howard, 2012). Often it is deemed, normatively, to be a state not to dwell in because an agent may use it to drown out pertinent matters, distort what one can expect of nostalgia, and render the agent living dangerously out of touch with personal realities (Illbruck, 2012).

Like “feeling” or “consciousness”, “nostalgia” evidently depends upon a heavily subjective basis, diminishing the prospect for verifying a definition or theory of it. Such slipperiness ratchets up the philosophical challenge. The 17<sup>th</sup>-Century Swiss medical researcher Johannes Hofer, coined the term from the Greek νόστος, *nostos*, “return home”, and ἄλγος, *álgos* “pain, grief, suffering.” (Atia & Davies, 2010; Burton, 2020) Hence, nostalgia is suffering to return home, or homesickness. Hofer found that Swiss soldiers sent to far-off battles suffered what appeared to be actual, physical disease. Yet, nostalgia also has an ongoing stigma of ridicule and derision; deliberately evoking nostalgia is veritably a moral issue. As Malpas (2011) asks rhetorically,

*What is wrong with nostalgia? How and why has it come to be the case, as it surely has, that to say of a philosophical position that it is ‘nostalgic’ is already to indicate its inadequacy? (p. 87)*

It seems “indulging” in nostalgia is derided as veritably a kind of sin, at best a waste of time. However, it has been subject of philosophical investigation that leaves such negative assessment in doubt. In the course of this article, such philosophical challenge, along with other questions, start to shine through. In Nietzsche, one can find some favorability for nostalgia, as in his passage from *Zarathustra*, “O solitude! O my *home*, solitude! Too long have I lived in wild strange places not to return home to you in tears”. (1954, p. 295) A tinge of nostalgia may be seen in his longing for the presocratic philosophers. Phenomenological authors such as Ricœur (2006) exhibit some concern about the phenomenon for both the individual and society.

Psychological inquiry into nostalgia, growing out of medical research since Hofer’s time, has increased notably since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Much of this descriptive and experimental-psychological study has been positive about nostalgia and its therapeutic potential. (Zhou *et al.*, 2008; Wilson, 2011; Routledge *et al.*, 2011; Vess *et al.*, 2012; Batcho, 2020b; Ludden, 2020.). What may be philosophically interesting is not only nostalgia’s moral facet – which hardly deplores nostalgia universally – but also its ontology. A common view is that nostalgia is a socially molded emotional phenomenon, and possibly even socially originated in the first place (Illsbruck, 2012). Much of nostalgia research so far has pointed in this direction. The political uses of nostalgia (Boym, 2010; Atia & Davies, 2010; Earle, 2021), especially in populist rhetoric, has both a social constructivist facet and a personal emotional one, of which politicians reputedly take advantage. (See below § Political nostalgia.) Here the political, like the commercial, aims to activate and appeal to the personal. A further interesting facet of nostalgia’s ontology is whether a biological or evolutionary understanding of it plays a part in the phenomenon, as Burton (2020) mentions. Did humans evolve with the capacity or tendency for nostalgia?

This article contends that a unique, partially biological explanation of nostalgia may not only aid general understanding of the phenomenon but also reflect on the emotional, social, and political facets. Furthermore, if nostalgia has a viable biological component among the emotional, social, and political, it may in turn reflect on the neurophysiological nature of mind and emotions. Towards these ends, the article urges two empirical perspectives on nostalgia: It might have been evolutionarily adaptive; and it has arisen as an obsession with the past because of particularities of brain processing. At any time-slice, the brain/mind has too many processes at work to unify all immediate processed data at once. Instead, it must assimilate data over long periods. These two empirical proposals form the article’s core. To step back a moment before pursuing that goal, the preliminary goal herein

is to put the inquiry into its historical position (into its conceptual and literature context) and thereby add rigor to nostalgia's definition, before moving to the core empirical arguments.<sup>1</sup>

### *Sources of Nostalgia*

Hofer's 1638 coinage of the term, of course, did not create the phenomenon but represented a mental or emotional state that, since ancient times, history and literature have described. With the new term in hand, Hofer noted the syndrome in Swiss mercenary soldiers camped in the northern flatlands who longed for their Alpine landscapes. They exhibited such homesickness signs as fever, fainting, and sometimes death. In ancient times, such nostalgic longing appears in Odysseus and Aeneas in their struggles to come home. Captive Jews in Babylon lamented their loss of their homeland, weeping massively. Indeed, wars through the ages, often in inhuman environments, are understandably sources of nostalgia to the point of physical illness. Given these early stains on nostalgia and its presumed malady, not surprisingly it has long not been commonly condoned.

Nostalgia as a term has broadened since Hofer's day. There appears to be on ongoing, even universal, human phenomena consisting partly in longing for not merely lost places but lost times. This broadening of the term coincides with difficulty in pinpointing the term's represented phenomena. One challenge for understanding nostalgia is that it is often a subjective, experienced phenomenon, whether an emotion (Wijnand *et al.*, 2018; Howard, 2012) or sociopolitical construct (Boym, 2012; Ricœur, 2006; Reynolds, 2011). While Howard (2012) often speaks of it as an emotion, his view can also be seen as treating it as a mental phenomenon. After all, the "nostalgist's" (Howard's word) experience involves memory, whether adulterated or not, whether one's own or another's; and memory is primarily a cerebral/mental phenomenon. In some corners, nostalgia has a doubtful reputation (Trigg, 2006; Illbruck, 2012; Stern, 2013), seemingly a self-indulgent escape, a weakness that predator merchants take advantage of (Boym,

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<sup>1</sup> At this juncture, we should at least mention terms related to nostalgia, as well as types of nostalgia. Similar terms include *Reminiscence*, say savoring a whole period at will so one can bring it to fore. It seems odd that one would reminisce about a wholly bad period except for rare exceptions in that period, say a kind jail guard during a period of torture. *Recall* is merely the act of bringing up memories, with no particular value attached. *Memorializing* is a deliberate act, usually social, of evoking memories of a person, period, or act that has some significance for that person or persons. Types of nostalgia, besides those four angles for understanding it as given in the title – emotional, social, biological, and political – include longing for an autobiographical period, say age 14; for a flash ("Proustian", or pointillistic); for missing a friendship; and for regretting a period or an action taken or not taken. All of these will be brought up in the article.

2010; Earl, 2021). Nostalgia can also be viewed as positive, with aesthetic value beyond any therapeutic. (Proust, 1932a; Moran, 1994; Eske, 2005). But also the value can be curative, even healing. (Sedikides *et al.* 2004, 2008, 2016) or offer existential solace (Hirsch, 1992, Routledge *et al.*, 2011; Vess *et al.*, 2012; Newman *et al.*, 2020; Tierney 2013 sums many such positive values.) The supposition that nostalgia is merely an individual's being prodded by social (not merely individual) pining for the past readily reviles nostalgia for its promoting self-indulgence. A subculture conscripted into a fad for 1990's music or 1960s fashion-and-symbol fad is seen as victim of market exploitation. Even as a subject of scientific or philosophical study, nostalgia receives insufficient serious attention. Fortunately, research has increased in the past two or three decades. Despite this work, nostalgia remains a problematic social and moral concern.

To help illuminate nostalgia's both more positive or more negative aspects, a common distinction between "restorative" vs. "reflective" nostalgia has arisen. The former attempts (bootlessly, it seems) to recuperate something from the "nostalgiaized" past, in what could be a desperate attempt to live that past anew. The described reflective nostalgia instead considers that favored past more disinterestedly, appreciating what was good about the past but without the hopeless wistful aspiration to recuperate that past now.

Before proceeding with these views of nostalgia and its ontology in general, it is pertinent to mention some ways that the concept of "nostalgia" is commonly understood. These often coincide with common uses of the term. Mentioning them allows at least an initial handle on the term and phenomenon so ze may proceed with deeper investigation of nostalgia. The root concept is, as described, that of homesickness, commonly under dreadful conditions. The expats in Andrei Tarkovsky's 1983 film *Nostalghia* experience it intensively. A derivative construal of the term is that of the individual's – whether at home or abroad – longing for the past, whether the individual's own past or the agent's projected broader historical past. This sense of the term has arguably become the most widespread, in popular construal. A third common understanding is the socially oriented nostalgia of people longing for a period in the group's past. Well-known examples of this third sense include mass nostalgia for a society's earlier decades (see Reynolds, 2011; Grainge, 2012, about this phenomenon), such as "Eighties Nostalgia" with music and fashion of that period, often as a party theme, such as Halloween.

Given this preliminary basis of "nostalgia", inquiry into the ontology of nostalgia is prepared to continue. While the view of nostalgia as an emotion is widely assumed, I suggest it may form only a part of the story. The verb "feel" may help exemplify why nostalgia is often considered an emotion: In the senses of

the term given in the previous paragraph, nostalgia involves how a person feels about a memory or a past period (whether one's autobiographical past or a past that others presumably experienced). Now that more empirical work has been done on memory, as well as emotions (Prinz, 2008, 2012; Atia & Davies, 2010), brief mention of these phenomena is warranted. As for emotions, if nostalgia is an emotion, what kind is it (simple/basic or complex/secondary), and how does it fit in with other emotions? One needs then to consider whether nostalgia is a basic emotion such as fear, anger, joy, or disgust; or secondary (combining the basic), such as contempt, exhilaration, or indignation, or even higher-level. (Prinz, 2008) The challenge here is that nostalgia involves memory in a relation to the particular emotion experiences. Somehow, these two phenomena; memory and emotion, interact in a nostalgic episode.

One possibility is that memory often comes first, provoking an emotional response. Inversely, an emotion may arise, provoking a memory. Both of these views have appeared in the literature. (Tulving, 1972; Howard, 2012; Proust, 1932a) The challenge for the assumption that nostalgia is an emotion needs to meet these challenges, including empirical problems of whether there are bodily responses in emotional experience that are *de rigueur* for distinguishing the emotions from other phenomena.

Another ontological view mentioned is that nostalgia is a social construct. For some reason, social forces are exerted upon citizens or culture members to lead them to believe the past was better than the present. One very evident social construct of nostalgia is that promulgated by authoritarian regimes. Mussolini's propaganda harked back to the ancient Roman period as the height of Italy's achievement, hence a model for present Italy. The German National Socialist Third Reich exhibited a similar nostalgia in its program for a reinvigorated present. Less extreme examples of socially constructed nostalgia may be found at home, as when Ronald Reagan evoked the United States' nineteen-fifties as a paradigm for reconstructing the country after its shameful nineteen-sixties' antiwar movements. Thus, Reagan's "It's morning in America": Even the perfection of Genesis's Garden can be understood as a social construct longing for a humanity in an ideal past, which post-Fall worship of the Creator can only approximate. Judaism, Hinduism, Islam, and even some Buddhism may rest upon the presumed excellence of the human past. Economy-driven forces may construct a past for consumers to help bolster sales. (Yet, appealing to an ever-receding future, as via projected happiness upon owning a product. seems a more powerful inducement to increase sales.) In all, social constructs of nostalgia may be ultimately political, partly private in many a religion, and even economic.

For the most part, the social construct view of nostalgia remains unclear about the provenance of nostalgia per se. That is, does the socially nostalgia-constructing force establish the very possibility of nostalgia itself? Alternatively, the human agent already possesses the capacity to long for the past, and the social force enters to put that capacity to work. The social-construction approach seems to tend toward the former explanation. The latter view looks to biological factors that may influence nostalgia. These factors include the longing for past events as evolutionarily adaptive. Furthermore, the possibility that because of the way the mind assimilates events and the person's responses to them can take a notable amount of time, the events are only increasingly assimilated as time passes.

A later section elaborates on these biological facets of nostalgia. These facets are hardly decipherable as they now stand, isolated in this preliminary sketch of them. But it is worthwhile to mention them in advance, to indicate they form a contrast with the other ontologies of nostalgia mentioned in this section.

*First Steps Toward a More Rigorous Definition*

So far, I have used the term “nostalgia” non-rigorously, so as to put legs on the discussion and help indicate what it is about and how and where its dissection is to proceed. The next goal, then, is to develop a comprehensive, more refined definition of nostalgia that is acceptable to most readers. Pursuing this goal requires the next several subsections to follow. Howard (2012) observes such a need for a more rigorous definition than the miscellany of definitions in common use and attempts a more refined understanding of the term. He suggests that nostalgia need not involve comparisons between present and past, the latter the more desirable, nor must it be in such control by the agent. Rather, very brief, involuntary “Proustian” moments (sometimes abbreviated P when context allows), in which the past may or may not be good or bad are better typifying of what nostalgia involves.<sup>2</sup> But further discussion reveals that the Proustian may not be the most typifying of the phenomenon as Howard considers it.

I suggest that the best way to continue refining the definition would be to examine a number of different usages of the term and examine how or whether these resonate with closely related terms such as “fond memory”, “recall”, “memorialize”, “reminisce”, and “ruminate”. I thence provide some situations that an agent *X* experiences and, to modify Dennett's phrase (2013), pump the intuition for whether the situation is indeed a bona fide state of nostalgia or actually a related concept.

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<sup>2</sup> More on Proustian moments, as Howard describes, is to come.

The overall assumption in the following exercise is that nostalgia as a purported emotion most basically is homesickness. From that understanding stems nostalgia as most commonly assumed today – as a longing not merely a remoteness in space but also, more importantly, in time. With either of these, we should consider, “Is the experience in question one of nostalgia or of something else, according to the three common, preliminary notions of nostalgia”?

*Examples and candidate cases of nostalgia considered*

This section considers several candidate notions of nostalgia experienced by agent X, followed by assessments of whether these are *bona fide* nostalgia.

1. Many years into adulthood, X finds that the first year in high school – eYear-1 Magic’, she dubs it – was the best year of life so far. She had discovered music, practicing piano hours a day, and outdoor sports such as weeklong hiking. An inexplicable development in a romantic relationship ended that excellent year. But she can readily bring up scenes from it, which can often soothe her, suggesting life is not always bad. Among all the dozens of music pieces she learned during that year, hearing or playing them in her head evokes bliss.

2. At university, X made a friend, among many others, to whom she was particularly drawn. But inexplicably they drifted apart and lost contact. She often recalls scenes experienced with this friend. Does she long to see this person? Not obviously. She does often regret the loss (regret serving as a kind of counter-nostalgia).

3. X readily admits that many events and time periods after graduating were unpleasant, to the point of emotional pain – even physical, if she includes illness resulting from stresses. But memories that arose during this period, sometimes by her deliberate recall, included some pleasurable. One such instance was the travelling Impressionist exhibit at the local museum. These were often so poignant, she can hold onto them only as a bittersweet.

4. X, a journalist, was once assigned to a war-torn zone. One force caught her and tortured her. Anytime this memory is spurred, she does not quite experience the physical pain. She strives all she can to turn off the memory. Even flashes of the experience are painful.

5. When first imprisoned, in the smelly dark room, not yet knowing she would be tortured, she so desired to be home she experienced severe abdominal pain.

6. The torturers sometimes played a certain song; and during the process of her release, this music had been playing. The music seems liberating when it occurs to her or she hears it.

7. X likes to turn off the lights, close the window blinds and play recordings of music from the decade of the 2000's. During that period, Obama was elected and, she imagines, what with Occupy Wall Street and such social and political causes, those years were exhilarating. At the time, she had been too caught up in personal turmoil to participate.

8. Music comes up in X's head so often she cannot control it but wishes she could. Particularly annoying are songs that she never liked but that seep into her brain because so often heard in the street. The sad songs' intrusions are especially unappreciated when they flash uninvited in her ear's deepest parts and sometimes return all day.

These few examples should suffice for initial determining which are cases of nostalgia and which are not. To start with (1): It is not at all evident that X *must* devalue all the years except eYear-1 Magice in order to nourish fond memories of that year. That is, the alleged time-comparison character of nostalgia is not a necessary trait thereof but is incidental, depending on the case. Nostalgia is certainly not required in this case. X could consider Year-1 Magic as a favorite year without having to judge the others. Say she took the Eternal Sunshine pill and memories of all the other years disappeared. She could still be as strongly attached to Year-1 Magic as ever. By contrast, her fond memory of Year-1 Magic need not all be confined to an involuntary Proustian flash of a past experience that is good in itself whether or not that experience was good. In X's case of Year-1 Magic, she can readily call it up at will and linger on it for much, much more than a flash. (She does have some regret about that year, as she abandoned music for a more secure job future in journalism, but this regret does not alter her particular relation to that year.)

Example (2) concerns an experience many of us may have, explaining in part the appeal of social-media platforms: missing long-estranged friends. At least two questions arise: Does "missing" mean "desiring to see again"? And does one have nostalgia for a person, in contrast with a place and time period? Thus, one may reminisce favorably about a person in one's life but currently absent, yet not want that person to reenter one's life, for any of various reasons: These may include embarrassment for letting the time lapse or fear the person has flourished but one has not oneself. Reminiscence of this sort may be at work here, not nostalgia.

Number (3) brings in the apparent fact that past experiences are of potentially mixed quality, even when synchronic. Synchronic manifold experiences are common throughout a day. One may be strolling, appreciating a colorful sky, while worrying about how to pay a bill. X may long replay the memory of the sky and the stroll that day, while the desperate worry about bill-

paying gets rolled into a mush of bad memories. Diachronic experiences are those that follow, perhaps with other experiences, but at least through time. Thus, X may experience and later recall a series of events that followed one after the other. This example candidate case does seem to qualify as nostalgia, in that, by the process of extruding the favorable part of the memory and leaving the unfavorable to the dregs, there comes to be a seamless past for which to long.

The fourth example invokes a challenge to the notion that good or bad experiences can, after time, be recalled for the pleasure of the recall (as in a Proustian moment). X's experience in this torture was so horrid that even a Proustian flash of it cannot direct and influence the process of the flash. Simply, the terrible experience itself is beyond redemption.

Example (5) is of X in the prison before torture, so tormented by the prospect that she experiences classic homesickness. It is not merely missing or longing for home but has become physical illness. It is hard to accept that, given such dire conditions, even a pointillistic Proustian moment involving it would bring pleasure.

X's experience with the recall of the song with multiple associations, in Example (6), is a more plausible case where recall of a bad circumstance may elicit some pleasure. The song was played not only when she was in prison but as she was liberated from it. X may readily find the music upon leave-taking triumphed over her experience of it while in jail. (Compare snake venom which, when applied medicinally, may triumph over the poison.) More broadly one may find that multiply associated experiences, such as upon parting jail, may more likely be pleasing upon recall, if some of the associations are not as harsh as the experiences in Example 4.

Example (7), with X immersing herself in the culture particular to an earlier decade, is a case of classic contemporary, non-homesickness nostalgia. Still, it is appropriate to ask whether this example is indeed such a case. Here are some possible interpretations of Example (7): It is merely of an act of imagination. Or, X does not actually long to go back somehow to the era or long for it to reach forward out of the past to enter present time, so her recalling just may not be nostalgia. Or, nostalgia need not always require longing. Yet, the case does look much like social (or individual) occasions of nostalgia. While it does involve imagination, like such alleged nostalgia it involves too much immersion in that past culture to be mere imagination. There then remains a suggestion that, despite common understandings, nostalgia just may not necessitate longing.

Example (8) brings into question whether flash, pointillistic, Proustian memories can be good even if the experience remembered is not good at all. X

finds that the bad memories do not improve just because they appeared in a Proustian flash memory.

This final example could be followed by more, but limiting them to eight simplifies the discussion.

*Discussion of the eight examples of memory experiences*

A number of issues and questions start to arise from these examples, if in no particular order, as they draw on the example set.

- A. How does nostalgia differ, if it does, from calling up a fond memory?
- B. Is “longing” or “missing” necessary for nostalgia, and is “missing” the same as “desiring to see again”?
- C. Considering it is nigh apodictic that nostalgia concerns the past, how, when, or where does an experience fall from the present and into the past (so to allow nostalgia)?
- D. Must nostalgia be spontaneous, involuntary flash “P” memories, or may it be voluntary and extended?
- E. Must nostalgia require a normative “time comparison” (as Howard 2012 names it) (or “TC”) although he contends it is not necessary to nostalgia between present and past?
- F. P flashes allow that we could enjoy looking back on exceedingly bad times; but can we really savor a dreadful experience merely because its flashing into consciousness per se is enjoyable – i.e., is the flashing surprise what is enjoyed, not the past experience?
- G. Is it possible we have a nostalgia for a person, or is it events associated with a person that actually pertain?
- H. If events during a period can be strands of good and bad tangled diachronically, when one has nostalgia for that time, is the bad really longed for?
- J. (I skip from “I” to “J” so as to avoid confusion with the personal pronoun “I”.) What about regret, especially for an action one chose not to pursue/ Is regret a type of longing for the past (which one would want to change) thus possibly nostalgic?

Other pertinent questions can be brought up, but again a limited number suffices in working toward a workable definition of nostalgia.

Start with the issue raised in A. above: How does nostalgia differ from recalling fond memories? Many people would probably answer that nostalgia involves longing or pining for the past experience, as to return to it literally. The agent desires to ‘relive’ the past somehow. Recalling fond memories, by contrast,

may involve longing and time comparison but need not. Indeed, recalling fond memories while longing may just be nostalgia, whereas recalling fond memories without longing is not, is something else.

However, by the issue raised in B, nostalgia just may need not involve desire to relive the past. Time-comparison (TC) views of nostalgia, in which the past is better than the present involve this desire to relive the past. But the Proustian (P) view, as Howard (2012) describes, may not require such longing. Similarly for “missing”: Does missing someone entail desire to see the person again? I believe a Proustian would say “No” and time-comparison would say “Yes”. The question then is, which of these views of nostalgia best represents it?

D, then, directly asks which of these two views is more accurate. Toward that answer, E inquires whether nostalgia must have a normative component or standard, specifically a TC by which one assesses the earlier time as better. A challenge for TC is that it remains unclear just *what* is better in the past. Every single thing that was involved in the world in, say, 1995? Or only a few specific matters pertinent to the agent, such as the value of the dollar, the available chocolate, the amount of love people gave one another in the past? This problem does not preempt time-comparison views. Like many emotions, the emotion involved in longing just may not be susceptible to attack on its veracity or feasibility. Thus, doubting that nostalgia can be normative does not undermine the time-comparison view.

In further trying to answer D, F asks how well the Proustian view holds up to investigation into which of the two views more closely describes nostalgia. The Proustian view maintains that bona fide nostalgia consists in unexpected, involuntary, veritably instantaneous recalls to a past event or situation. In the well-known opening scene of Proust’s *Swann’s Way* (1932b), the narrator upon eating a tea cake has a flashback to a particular occasion of sitting in a drawing room as a child. Howard (2012) has contended that it is this spontaneous, involuntary act of the recall that constitutes the nostalgia and its pleasure, not the pleasure or displeasure experienced at the time recalled. Thus, even bad times can be recalled with the agent’s responding positively because it is *that act of recall* (not the subject – the past experience – of the act) that is pleasurable.

However, for one matter, it is not convincing that solely the act of recall is what is pleasurable, regardless of the quality of the earlier experiences involved. Surely, some bad experiences may seem, on hindsight, not as bad as when they occurred. A phenomenon similar to a “comedy effect” may be operative, whereby the moviegoer enjoys seeing events which are painful to experience for real while hilarious in the movie’s context. (Refer to the Keystone Cops, Charlie Chaplin, the

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Marx Brothers, or Woody Allen for examples.) But, as (4) above indicates, many experiences are just too awful to sustain this Proustian view for all nostalgia. A further matter is why exactly voluntary, long-savored memories should be discounted as bona fide nostalgia. Certainly, for cultural nostalgia, as in 1990's nostalgia parties, the experience seems to be more than a few, unprovoked emotional flashes but also a continued interpersonally triggered emotion commonly of longing. The nostalgia of homesickness, whether in unprovoked moments or in ongoing longing, seems hardly a matter of P flashes: If such homesick flashes did happen to the agent, it hardly seems that supposed pleasure of recall trumps the sickness or that a flurry of flashes of the long-away home would cure it. As a final matter, there is insufficient justification for dismissing out-of-hand the experiences, as well as emotions, people have upon deliberate recall, as in some nostalgia.

So far, it appears that neither the TC nor the P view convincingly captures the general understanding of nostalgia – whatever exactly that “general” understanding is. When one faces such an obscure, subjective, and primarily introspectively ascertained term, one can only proceed with vague assumptions, proffered hunches and approximations, searches for inconsistencies or other problems with current theoretical views, and learn as one can from dead-ends.

The issue G above, asking if a person per se can be an object of nostalgia, in contrast with events and experiences, may not be germane in this section but is worth a look. One general difference between people and past experienced events is the latter are irretrievable, whereas the person, if still alive, is at least theoretically, and in many cases actually, retrievable. Certainly, people over time change. Y now may differ from Y twenty years ago, and understandably X may be nostalgic for the Y of twenty years ago. Still, much of the originally known Y remains, much less irretrievable than, say, the high school farewell dance they attended back then. Now, if longing-for means “desiring to see again” and Y is still alive, then the nostalgic longing is superfluous. X can simply go visit Y. If X still longs for Y as they sit at the café, while Y retains all the characteristics that originally charmed X, I suggest it must be more of the events, the dance, the café, that X longs for rather than for Y. Y is retrievable, but the events are not.

Can this perspective on how nostalgia as pertains to past events be useful in assessing both the TC and the P? I conjecture that both views would have difficulty with the idea that past events or circumstances, not persons, are the object of nostalgia. By the P view, time comparison does not apply: What counts solely is the pointillistic involuntary act of a recall: That recall is good in itself, whatever the quality of the experience recalled. The flash may concern about any

type of object in memory, whether event, circumstance, or person. But if a person is involved, there need be no judgment on that person, such as assuming she or he has worsened according to some norm. By the TC view, a person may be involved as object of nostalgia, but because of the time-comparison, the past person would, by some norm, implicitly be worse now compared with before. So in the TC view there is an implicit judgment of the person as nostalgia-object. I am not contending that a normative standard must be evoked or implied in nostalgia, whether the P view may say “the normative issue is moot in defining nostalgia of any kind”, or the TC view would say, “the normative issue is pivotal in nostalgia for individuals”. Thus, the two views remain distinguished one from the other as to their perspective on persons as objects of nostalgia. Still we need a way of determining which of the two is the more faithful to “nostalgia”.

Issue H brings up the problem of whether experienced events evoked in presumed nostalgia can be of mixed quality – good and bad at once. On a moment’s reflection it is evident that experienced events are at times mixed in terms of the positive or negative emotional response. One may attend a joyous party at the same time one endures news of a loved one’s death. A single dance could be both celebratory and mournful. Later recall reinvokes some invigorating moments at the party that have no taint of the bad part. By the TC view, the act of (nostalgic) recall may indeed wash away much of that taint. But also, the bad aspect of the recalled event, such as the bad news, may be so persistent as to overwhelm and drown out the assumed comparison by which the past is better than the present. (In fact, by the time that event becomes the object of nostalgia, the person may have so coped with the death that the present is comparatively not all that worse than the past event.) The TC view does not hold well in accounting for mixed experiences. The P view, though, is unfettered by this problem: Whether the event experiences were good or bad or both, what counts is not that quality of experience but instead the involuntary act of flash recall.

The final issue here, J, concerning regret, may be only tangential to nostalgia. But regret concerns a longing *involving* the past: The agent desires the possibility of acting other than how one in fact did act. Yet, regret would mean that the past event was not good and so not better than the present. It may even mean that the past was worse because it started the chain of events that led to the present, damaged period. The P view would again be value-neutral to the past event, as what matters is its recall.

*Nostalgia Vindicated*

*Summation and synthesis of what is involved in nostalgia*

This section has explored several issues that arise in answering its questions about characterizing nostalgia. The primary focus has been whether major views of nostalgia, the time-comparative TC and the Proustian P, are sufficiently consistent with the common understanding of the phenomenon dubbed “nostalgia” – whatever exactly is that phenomenon – in the effort to narrow down what is involved in it, toward making a workable and widely acceptable definition. This subsection’s exploration can be summed with some extrapolation:

- Nostalgia differs from mere recall of fond memories. Fond memories are of events that, when they occurred, were experienced as good. While nostalgic recall may involve these, it need not.

- By TC, memories, fond or not, nostalgic or not, may involve longing – specifically the cloying, wistful desire to relive the past. Nostalgic episodes specifically involve longing and may concern past events that were generally not good at the time. By P, a nostalgic episode need not involve such longing and can be emotionally unattached from the recalled event.

- Consistently with TC and P, an agent may miss the past, that is, like to recall it, but need not long for its return.

- TC requires a standard by which the past is assessed as good or bad, while P requires no such standard, as the mere act of recall is a good.

- Consistently with TC and P, the past bad, from the present vantage, need not now be experienced as bad.<sup>13</sup>

It is useful to put this summary in a chart to note better how TC and P differ.

**Chart 1.**

*Comparison of nostalgia according to the time-comparison (TC) vs. the Proustian (P) theory of nostalgia.*

	TC	P
Nostalgia requires memory (the past) to be fond?	No, need not be; fond memories may induce longing, whereas nostalgic memories are longed-for.	Memory need not be longed- for, for it to be nostalgic.
A nostalgic agent may miss the past but not long for it?	Yes.	Yes.

<sup>3</sup> If events during a period can be strands of good and bad tangled diachronically, when one has nostalgia for that time, it is not apparent the bad is really longed for.

Nostalgia needs a standard to weigh good vs. bad past?	Yes.	No. Just the act of recall is good.
The nostalgic past need not now be bad?	Yes.	Yes.

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A curious finding is that on two of the four matters, both TC and P agree. On the first issue about fond memory, the two theories differ as to whether a fond memory need be longed-for to count as nostalgia. The reason for this discrepancy can be accounted for by the third matter and why TC and P differ. They differ because P's central concern is that it is the act of recall that counts for nostalgia, whatever the quality of the content of the original experience concerned. Thus, the reason for P's and TC's difference about the longing-for in nostalgia (per first matter) is that, for P, the quality of that original experience does not matter, and so that memory need not be longed-for.

Thus, this difference between TC and P boils down to, *for P, the act of recalling is what is good about nostalgia*, whatever the quality of experience recalled; whereas *for TC, what counts is the quality that the nostalgia-experience applies to the experience recalled*.

Upon this analysis, it becomes conceivable to reconcile TC and P theories, at least to the extent provided so far. Can this one last matter, summed in the previous paragraph, also lead to further reconciliation? Perhaps one theory can entail the other on this matter. P looks to the spontaneous act of willing as the measure of nostalgia's content. TC looks to the quality (decreased in the present compared with past) of the presumably original experience as the measure of nostalgia's content. Here are two concerns in attempting to reconcile the two theories:

(1) Can we plausibly conjecture that a TC episode requires a P to the extent that that spontaneous flash is the necessary basis for all nostalgic episodes? The P is the short fuse leading to the explosion of associated memories for TC episodes, and that explosion is what the nostalgic agent nurtures via what has thence become voluntary recall. A critic of this outlook may say, "Perhaps some P episodes lead to TC, but a P episode need not have such entailment to be valid in itself". That P outcome would be the source of subsequent TC episodes, although a P episode need not lead to a TC.

(2) The converse may hold that P episodes require a TC episode to the extent that the TC circumscribes the area within which a P randomly appears. Thus, an

agent may willfully invoke and savor old memories of serving in the army, and that area of memory-interest is what sets off the fuse to P nostalgia episodes.

I find the latter of these two concerns implausible. One point of the P theory is that these spontaneous memories generally come seemingly out of nowhere. Therein lies the strength of such recall. In Proust's story (1932b), Marcel's madeleine was especially powerful because he had not been savoring memories of the old drawing room where the tea cake landed him. The former conjecture that a TC requires a P is also problematic. Indeed, there may be occasions when a P nostalgia prompts an agent to explore through memories associated with the prompting P episode. Voluntariness in this realm of mental prompts is as messy as in other mental realms. But one could also generate a recall through one's own facts about oneself *that* a certain period of one's life is a good place to begin a lengthy nostalgic recall. A P episode would then not be serving as a prompt for the TC episode.

It does not appear, then, by this rapid analysis, that entailment, mutual or not, between TC theories and P theories, can serve as a means finally to reconcile these two into a single theory. Perhaps there are other potential means toward this reconciliation, but for now I have no further suggestions. However, having weighed these two sets of theories, we may have enough material with which to make an initial effort of describing nostalgia and what it consists in.

*Beyond the Tale of Two Theories: A Working Definition*

This tale of two theories suggests at least one possibility: Perhaps there is more than one basic way that nostalgia manifests, neither merely as P nor as TC. One type of nostalgia manifests in an agent's consciously knowing which parts or period of life went quite favorably, and thereby ready to recall scenes from that period upon demand. These recalled memories need not entail that the present is worse than earlier. The present may be going just as well as the recalled period. Similarly may an agent, with a list of recorded favorite music, decide which piece to play. Another type of nostalgia manifests in the Proustian involuntary, spontaneous, pointillistic memory, like a snapshot. The agent is actually more of a patient, at the mercy of the brain, but the brief recall is in itself not bad, even if the recalled memory "snapshot's" period were bad. Yet another possible manifestation of nostalgia is based on standards which the agent uses to compare the present unfavorably with certain periods of the past and thereby vaguely longs for that past over the present as if it could be experienced now. Wistfulness to the point of cloying is essential to such nostalgia. At one point in medical history, such nostalgia was seen as a medical illness. (Boym, 2002; Illsbruck, 2012; Burton,

2020) Its relation to another manifestation of nostalgia, homesickness, is apparent on its impossible-to-please wistfulness. At least homesickness can conceivably be assuaged by the agent's returning home. But due to time's linearity, it is not possible to return to one's past in flesh and blood, as cloying comparative nostalgia seeks. A fifth type of nostalgic manifestation is public nostalgia, as in nostalgia parties. While this type may be the most widely known, typical or salient, it seems to be an amalgam of other types, insofar as it appears to be a matter of sharing with others one's private nostalgia.

If we can accept that these five types of manifestation of nostalgia are faithful to the phenomenon, then we may propose what runs through them all and unifies them as "nostalgia". Evidently, they all concern the past, primarily one's own but possibly that of others. Moreover, they ascribe a positive value to the recall of the past: The experience of the recall in the present is pleasurable or at least valued positively, whether or not the experience recalled were bad when experienced in the past. In some cases, the nostalgia may work as a paint-job prettifying the past experience; but to experience nostalgia, the paint-job need not be in order. The original experience recalled may be quite consistent with the good quality of the general present. Comparison of the general present to a supposedly rosier past is only optional in nostalgia.

From these considerations, we may define nostalgia as follows:

*Nostalgia is an agent's present recall of past experiences, which experience upon the recalling is favorably valued, whatever the quality of the original experience recalled.*

I believe that this definition is consistent with the five types of manifestation of nostalgia given above. I also anticipate that in all sectors among those investigating nostalgia this definition will not be unanimously favored. Particularly, the role of positive comparison of the past with the present is here shifted to optional, not essential, and those who maintain that nostalgia must favor past over present may object to this definition.

*One alternative expansion of the definition*

*Nostalgia is an emotional phenomenon involving a subject's recalled past directly, either as first-hand experienced circumstances or derivative second-hand experiences usually, perhaps not necessarily, compared with the present circumstances, such that:*

- *The subject fondly experiences those past experiences;*
- *The longing irretrievability of the past is necessary to the nostalgia (a mere fond memory's irretrievability is of neutral affect);*

## *Nostalgia Vindicated*

- *The past may be “recaptured” as Proust (1932a) put it, but (re-)capturing that past – spontaneously for Proust – is not reexperiencing it, in that;*

- *The nostalgia may be either deliberately or spontaneously evoked.*

This alternative, if lengthy, is not inconsistent with the brief definition. Given that brief definition, other alternatives are possible.

### *Persistent criticism of nostalgia qua nostalgia*

Nostalgia often faces a presumably well-deserved bad reputation, so bad that many observers would maintain it is not worth discussing, certainly not seriously. At the very best, in such a view, nostalgia can be seen as having one practical advantage: entrepreneurs can use it to turn a profit and possibly boost the economy. Otherwise, nostalgia is a mood or emotion that only involves or leads to cloying wistfulness and impossible yearning that can damage character and undermine virtue. A few writers (Davis, 1979; Hart, Jameson, 1991) have examined nostalgia, prominently from a phenomenological perspective. A common perspective is, indeed as mentioned above; that nostalgia is socially constructed. Capitalism and its presumed manipulation of the consumer’s personality and its development, is often seen as a source of nostalgia and its unsavory nature and prevalence. I aim to step back from the social-constructive and economically manipulated aspect to nostalgia and inquire whether, instead, nostalgia is more basic in humans, seen across cultures, and more individually effected. From this perspective, nostalgia may indeed descend into market-manipulated, political, even sickly longing for a past that never existed in the manner presumed.

Nevertheless, even granted that sharp criticism, nostalgia may have a positive side, if finely tweezed from squeamish nostalgic overgrowth, compensating for the near impossibility of anyone’s living in any “present”. It may even more deeply aid agents in piecing together and appreciating the fragments of life-experience as these pass into past tense, provide a more realized and coherent view of one’s life narrative, and with it agents may better grasp the ever-elusive, fleeting “present” for all the goodness it may carry.

### *Justifying Nostalgia as a Reasonably Derived, Even Positive Facet of Human Experience*

The argument herein is based on two contentions. One is that nostalgia is a result of human consciousness’ running “multiple drafts” of perceptual phenomena simultaneously, similarly to, if varying from, what Dennett (1991) has described

for consciousness. The second contention is that nostalgia may have derived from action of evolutionary selective forces.

To explore the first component: Consider how the senses steadily process information, which takes time, from microseconds to longer. Other brain processes, including visceral, cerebral, and emotional, are also digesting information. Each of these pathways are working at their own speed. Likely, no single overseer is timing these processes and insisting that visual information *V* must be processed and decoded as it occurs – and *seems* to occur – precisely simultaneously with aural information *A*. In fact, there seems to be no precise “simultaneity” of sensory phenomena. Furthermore, some of the sensory processes are so complex, operating unconsciously, that an agent may not become conscious of the phenomena until moments later. Thus, a noise may reach a listener, who does not piece together until much later that it was due to a trumpet played in a nearby cave. Other processes may take much longer, even days to be clarified, such as piecing together just whose face it was that one saw in a passing car. The brain’s processes have no single “present”. I propose that these sorts of time lapses are the sources of nostalgia: It arises from the manifold processes of piecing together information about what, among the sense perceptions, emotions, thoughts, hopes, and other phenomena, was happening in and to the agent during some time-interval.

This position needs further explanation. I do not deny we can construe and make sense of phenomena within milliseconds of the stimulations as they occur. Rather, over time, we may – given some memory loss in the intervals – better construe and make sense of past phenomena, among the ever-growing contexts for information. Nostalgia is then a result of a gradual, continuous development of individual’s processing information. This fact points to the multi-tasked nature of individuals’ experience. Rarely does nostalgia develop after extremely brief intervals such as seconds or even minutes. Nostalgia commonly starts to creep in only after a sufficient level of information processing slowly drifts from an overall “present” mode to a “past”. Perhaps early on – at least several days’ lapse after particularly poignant events – one may start longing for that past.<sup>4</sup> In general, it seems that nostalgia grows over years, even getting stronger as years pass.

My second proposal is that nostalgia may actually be beneficial, if it is not overly indulged in, and possibly have selective advantages. If the past, often despite its travails, colors itself in our minds as actually quite good, then there is

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<sup>4</sup> If events during a period can be strands of good and bad tangled diachronically, when one has nostalgia for that time, it is not apparent the bad is really longed for.

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generally something good about one's life. Consider hypothetical groups of people who had no favorable moods concerning the past. They could well, upon trying times, fall into such despair as to be dysfunctional. By contrast, a group with a strong, favorable connection with and fond memory of the past could be more fortified during trying times, with greater hope. Nostalgia could then be adaptive, with strong naturally selective advantages for those who have a positive view on the unfolding of their lives, leaving these individuals a greater likelihood of arriving at adulthood and providing for viable offspring.

Burton (2020) offers another angle on the adaptiveness of nostalgia:

*Our everyday is humdrum, often even absurd. Nostalgia can lend us much-needed context, perspective, and direction, reminding and reassuring us that [in] our life... there have been, and will once again be, meaningful moments and experiences... The hauntings of times gone by, and the imaginings of times to come, strengthen us in lesser times. (n/p)*

This discussion of nostalgia's positive adaptive nature has a normative element. Criticisms of nostalgia or at least of its self-indulgent aspect hold that, whether or not nostalgia can have any good, it can certainly have some bad – morally bad. (Similarly with, say, opium, the problem is not the drug but its misuse.) The normative element is thereby invoked, but the possible adaptive potential for nostalgia makes a case that nostalgia need not be normatively reprehensible, at least when experienced in moderate doses. Such a naturalistic apology for nostalgia can seem to fall into the drawbacks of naturalistic morality, by which anything that was once adaptive and naturally selected for in human evolution could be ammunition for justifying war, even murder or rape if these acts ended up increasing adaptivity. However, the adaptation argument defending experience of nostalgia from normative attacks hardly compares with justifying what are commonly considered heinous crimes. If at worst nostalgia were induced by a type of bodily produced drug, such as endorphins, that can be abused, the normative issue is about how to use nostalgia, not whether any experiencing of nostalgia is bad across the board. Furthermore, the Dennett-like “multiple drafts” theory of nostalgia's ontology in the need to process vital information over long time periods implies: Nostalgia is a regular, possibly even inexorable, effect of the way human neural-processing works. Even if nostalgia can be abused, fighting it as if any taint of it will morally ruin an agent may be as damaging as indulging in it to point of losing touch with reality.

To sum this section and this part of the article's argument: Justifying Nostalgia as a Reasonably Derived, Even Positive Facet of Human Experience.

Nostalgia can be reasonably, cogently justified as an empirical fact about human beings' mental and emotional processes, with possible adaptive benefits and positive experiences for agents. Without deriving an "ought" from a "good", one can plausibly claim that it is incumbent upon normative arguments against (indulging in) nostalgia to provide an account of why nostalgia in general is not morally commendable.

*Summation up to This Point and Remaining Problems, Questions Concerning Nostalgia*

The discussion so far has striven to offer at the least a coherent perspective on nostalgia as an emotional, social, political, and political phenomenon and to begin to unify these perspectives. Many matters remain to challenge this effort, and among these I offer the following as closing meditations.

WE WERE ALWAYS MORE INNOCENT...

There is a less empirical, more phenomenal account for how the ontology of nostalgia arises: via our loss of a sense of innocence as our individual lives proceed. I allude to William Blake's two matching sets of poems: the *Songs of Innocence* and the *Songs of Experience*. Humans are born into a state of absolute innocence, completely dependent upon others to sustain them and unable to do harmful acts. They, though, can be harmed. As they grow older over the weeks, months, years, they slowly lose that vulnerability and innocence. They gradually pass from Blake's suggested state of innocence into the that of experience. They become capable of hurting both others and themselves. We discern, as we go on, that with the more experience we gain, the less innocent we are. Looking on the past, from this perspective, we were always more innocent than now. The past takes on the patina of time's earlier innocence.

This human characteristic does not morally justify an agent's dwelling excessively in the past but further explains why we may have a tendency to nostalgia – an explanation that may indicate how we may find the golden mean between indulgence and callousness. On the one hand, the callous approach to our ever-receding innocence would hold that taking the fact of that ever-receding innocence too seriously can only lead to self-pity and pampering. Humans long to be innocent. That state-of-living is more carefree, less burdened with fret, fear, and worry (even if experience is needed, at a practical level, for sustaining a life). But to evade the cloying sentiment, one must be very strict, to overcome and quash these emotional responses, to not feel them because if allowed they are detrimental. On the other hand, agents who prefer to give full rein to the emotional responses readily fall into the trap of mollifying these emotions, pitying oneself

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because the world, life itself, has stolen one's innocence. The middle route may allow the sentimental desire for innocence but without giving it free rein or hardening oneself emotionally. The middle route of hardening oneself just enough not to indulge in innocence-nostalgia while allowing oneself just enough innocence-nostalgia not to be wholly hardened, is an extremely fine thread, if at all realizable.

### THE ASYMMETRY OF PAST AND PRESENT, AS IT PERTAINS TO NOSTALGIA

One cannot "hold onto" the present as one can the past, such as through memories. In the present too much is happening at once, distracting the ability to focus on the present as a singularity. (Again, consider the Dennett-like multiple drafts of active experiencing.) The past being done, much of (sensual, pictorial) memory is analogous to snapshots, which one can contemplate. But it is not clear that one can comparably contemplate such "snapshots" of the present (unless by some forms of meditation).

An emotion, once activated, continues until dissipation, as an ongoing present experience. To risk a truism: when an emotion is past, one no longer experiences it. Fear, for example, being an emotion, continues diachronically present until dissipating. An excessive emotional occurrence may be remembered *per se* but almost always without that same emotional experience of a present fear. A past emotional event may be "re-experienced" by remembrance without that fear. The remembered event then seems less menacing, and the other thoughts, sensations, sights and sounds can be "re-experienced" without fear's menace. Thus, the past sometimes seems more appealing than the more conflicted present. Moreover, a given object of nostalgia, such as a memory, need not always evoke nostalgia.

### MIXED EXPERIENCES OF GOOD AND BAD AT ONCE

It seems that nostalgias come in assortments, the past experienced rarely being all good or all bad (Wildschut *et al.*, 2008; Barcho, 2020a and 2020b). When one considers a nostalgia period N, it is often of mixed emotions. One may long for favorable parts of the experience while downplaying or ignoring the unfavorable parts. It seems these assorted periods can be partly explained like the Dennettian scenario for consciousness (as an illustration, with no intention to endorse his theory as valid for consciousness): Our nervous systems simply takes time to assimilate the many facets of experience.

Mixed experiences may well be common. Consider an interesting case of mixed experience, such as the agent X's challenge from "Year-1 Magic" (in § Examples of candidate cases). Recall, Year-1 Magic concerned the fact X found

one year in her past worthily deemed as by far the best, veritably perfect. X does not necessarily long to go back to that period but thinks back on it with a type of fondness, not really nostalgia. Peculiarly, X does not long to return to that excellent period. It is as if by being veritably perfect, the period was complete and needed no more work. It seems lesser periods were simply incomplete and kept striving to complete themselves, as via nostalgia.

Consider how issue J (of agent X's eight issues A, B; ... J in § Discussion of the eight examples), resolves or responds to the predicament: the possibility of regret. Regret concerns a longing *involving* the past, but the agent bootlessly longs for the possibility of acting other than how one in fact did act. Yet, regret would mean that the past event was not very good and so *not* better than the present. It may even mean that the past was worse because it started the chain of events that led to the present, far from perfect, period.

A more extreme kind of mixed experiences involves an agent who cannot bear to look back on the particular sort of pain experienced, with any fondness, as from torture, unjust incarceration, and other suffering.

#### MISSING, LONGING

“Missing” someone or something need not mean nostalgia. “Longing,” though, implies one desires the presence of a thing or person right now, in material reality, as to bring that person or object that has gone out of any timeframe and back into timeframe (i.e., the present) What is this longing, then? Does one really wish to fly back in time? Or is one simply imaging presumed scenes, tastes, smells, sounds? This question may be the core, hard nut surrounding nostalgia and what about it frustrates so many people, especially those who deride it or readily deplore its hold on a person as if it is nigh immoral. But cannot one be content with the imaginational result, knowing full well it is imagined?

The cloying sense of one's impossible reconciliation with the past may be another facet that frustrates many nostalgia commentators and critics. That cloying sense may constitute the core negative aspect and notoriety of nostalgia – *not* any dissatisfaction with the present. But the question remains whether the cloying is necessary to nostalgia.

To risk an analogy to love: An agent may love more than one person (of whatever sort of love, whether romantic, parental, platonic). Similarly an agent may be fond not only of the present but also many an imaged past.

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### *Further ramifications of nostalgia's definition*

Is simply enjoying the memory of an autobiographical period nostalgia? What seems to be crucial to nostalgia is that the experience is irretrievably in the past and is experienced as favorable or fond. The present experience with which it is contrasted need not be bad or worse than the “nostalgialized” experience. In fact, the experience may not require comparison with the past. And the experience may not need to be one’s own; One may feel nostalgic for an era before one was born, as via a film or an oral story. Yet this imagined era may be partly or wholly influenced by others, as in recordings of that era’s music or parties where the previous era’s customs such as clothes-wear and speech are imitated. Conceivably one can well be overall content with one’s own present situation but also have a longing for a past era distinct from mere fond memory. This is a core issue in positioning nostalgia among related phenomena. You may have nostalgia for the way, during a period, you had great conversations with friends at cafes (say, at the same time you were at a professional downturn). Is such an actual instance of nostalgia? or must nostalgia be broader-reaching than mere specific snippets of an era?

To dig deeper, can one make the present be as magical and wistful as nostalgia is about the past? Perhaps, if so, this prospect may promise to be one of the positive reasons for learning something from nostalgia.

Furthermore, as the Introduction broached, we should further consider whether one can have “nostalgia for the future”. It seems fondness must be about one’s experience – even if indirect experience as in an oral tale – and so arise from one’s experience or encounter with certain circumstances, not projections of how circumstances may turn out.

As a final note, taking a cue from the P perspective, one may be fond not merely for the imagined past but also for one’s own memories per se, whether of good or not-good periods of one’s life

### *Political nostalgia*

So far, this article has opened up ways for vindicating emotional, social, and biological nostalgia from charges of self-indulgence, removal from reality, waste of time, and weakening of moral fiber. Just getting to that point has taken most of the article. There remains the delicate issue of whether political nostalgia, which may be the most challenging type to vindicate; may be salvaged. Yet, political nostalgia may be the most important type of those covered here. It concerns a practical factor reaching far past mere (if intriguing) understanding. Instances of it

can markedly influence world history and world future. Routledge's 2017 article title, "Approach with Caution: Nostalgia Is a Potent Political Agent", is telling and represents a common worry. Similarly for Earle's 2019 "In Search of Lost Time: How Nostalgia Broke Politics".

As § below, Sources of Nostalgia, pointed out, many a political movement, notably in the past century, has drawn on political nostalgia – longing for a more glorious period of the nation's history. In stirring the citizenry's emotional outrage, the demagogue incites both national and international policies as culprits and seeks drastic changes to ameliorate the problem, especially by military aggression. Such has been seen under the rules of Mussolini, Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot, and Putin, as well as lesser demagogues such as Reagan, Trump, Le Pen, and Modi. As Atia and Davies (2020) write, "If nostalgia is dangerous on an individual level, its political impact can be much more threatening: The politics of nostalgia are often reactionary at best" (p. 181). More ominously, the same authors quote Spitzer (1991):

*... nostalgia might not only be seen as a "betrayal of history" ... but a betrayal of memory itself – a debilitating imposition upon our consciousness of the past". (p. 181) Equally ominous is Cameron and Gatewood's (1994) diagnosis that nostalgia "sometimes [is] symptomatic of a more general crisis in cultural confidence. (quoted in Atia & Davies, 2010, p. 182).*

*Must* nostalgia; when political actors appeal to it, lead to nefarious results? Certainly, the past regained can readily lead to memory's distorting the past. Particularly when agents have not experienced the past appealed to, it can easily give way to rhetorical manipulation. No Italian citizen that Mussolini appealed had lived in ancient Rome.

Yet, there is possibly a source of emotions that would both rely partly on memory but also on a unifying spirit running through the nation which could help purge the dubious emotions of demagogues. Thus, Nussbaum in her 2013 *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. She asks readers to appreciate how pivotally emotions affect political life. Pointedly we should be aware how we may best gear our emotions for political liberalism. Politics depends upon our emotions; *we neglect them to our detriment* lest demagogues commandeer them over a populace who are, largely, dangerous: their emotions' servant.

For Nussbaum, political emotions per se are good, tempered by liberality; including patriotism and national affection, which includes the nation's history, and thereby admitting the nation's faults, comprising its current faults. Following such a program for political emotion, the rational and irrational temper one another. Nostalgia, then, should be largely out of its dangerous territory. Political

nostalgia, in this scenario, should then not be scorned nor allowed free rein. It could do as good for the nation and citizenry as biological, social, and general emotional nostalgia do for the individual, when tempered.

Of all the outstanding matters covered in this section, political nostalgia is the most important and urgent.

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