

An Ethical Outlook on The Influence of Memory on Violence

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As we witness the growing popularity of what is referred to as memory discourse within the fields of historical and cultural studies, it becomes apparent that there is a lack of systematic insight into the ethical dimension of this subject. This paper attempts to alleviate this imbalance. In the first section, the author scrutinizes the relationship between memory and violence. This has appeared in human history as a very real and multifaceted issue but remains under-explored in philosophy and theology. Given the vibrant nature and moral fickleness of memory, in the second section the author outlines some ethical requirements that should regulate the use of memory. Epistemological, pedagogical and practical aspects of memory are taken into consideration within a comprehensive, broader social context, as well as individual demands. Presuming that memory can be a valuable ingredient of a good life, the author reconsiders the ethical criteria for memory, which should not just prevent violence but also stimulate tolerance and peaceful co-existence.

Although the subject of memory has a long philosophical and theological tradition (e.g. Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Locke, etc.), it appears that the *memory discourse* or *memory boom* that had emerged in the 1980s largely bypassed the normative approach. Considering that memory has been the subject of much literature over the last three decades, it is surprising that only a few analytic philosophers have discussed the critical role of memory in coping with the aftermath of the Holocaust. The topic of coping with memory has been primarily left to historians or social scientists, and philosophy and theology have remained largely silent. However, this omission of the normative significance of memory has recently been mitigated by a few outstanding works in the fields of both philosophy and theology; works by, for instance, Avishai Margalit, Jeffrey Blustein, Paul Ricoeur, and Miroslav Volf. This paper takes its starting point in these theories.

The importance of the normative approach to how we use past experiences is paramount when observing the large number of conflicts caused by repressed historical traumas that have later surfaced through transgenerational transmission and instilled mutual misunderstandings between ethnic groups. It follows that a memory, as one of the effective tools of managing the past (other tools, for instance, are history, myth and tradition), is very powerful and hence challenging from an ethical point of view. To overcome the conflicts and violence caused by often-manipulated memories, it is not

sufficient merely to scrutinize their origins, but it is indispensable; it is also crucial to 'reign in' or regulate these memories through a normative framework. Therefore the morally significant question concerns not only whether, and what, we must remember, but also the role that memory should play in the lives of individuals and societies, as well as what the right modalities of the use of past experiences should entail.

Confusing Memory and Its Influence on Violence

Memory is constitutive to the human condition and crucial in our daily lives, due to the many benefits it provides, such as healing, empathy, solidarity and protection. Much of the contemporary literature on memory, therefore, focuses on the therapeutic or protective role of memory, and sometimes maintains an uncritical approach to memory and creates the memory surfeit, as Nietzsche believed. This trend, however, overlooks the fact that memory is not a benign phenomenon, given that it is a (re)constructive and not a reproductive phenomenon - as pointed out by Maurice Halbwachs - which means that the same event can be interpreted in different ways and in accordance with the interests of the present context.¹

The misuse of memory, which recurrently took place in the last century, is based on this interpretive dimension of memory resulting from its limited epistemological structure. Because past events do not all have the same meaning in our lives, we constantly decide what has to be remembered as more valuable, and hence, it becomes crucial to choose among the different information sets we receive. But how can we distinguish beforehand which information to give predominance, or what constitutes a good use of memory in contrast to a bad one? What are the criteria that assure a good use of memory? Before we tackle these questions, let us first discuss the propensity of memory to cause violence.

The connection between memory and violence is twofold: The claim to possess memory might produce violence, but once committed, violence also becomes an object of memory, and how we remember past violence can also perpetuate new violence. It is a fairly widespread opinion that the more a past event is emotionally charged, the more it will be remembered. Along the same lines, Avishai Margalit argues that events of violence and wrongdoing are more suitable to be remembered because they are imbued with negative emotions; they leave deeper scars on us and therefore have a greater importance in motivating us toward action.² Given that the person has to penetrate deeper into complex events than simple ones, these events look for a way out and seek a solution, whereas happier events often lack a strong cognitive engagement. This is why a person might better recall events in which he or she put in more effort or struggled harder. For this reason, very often in our lives memories of pain or suffering attain a privileged position. What is problematic about that is that the memory of suffering, as is

¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *La memoria collettiva* (Milano: Unicopli, 1987), pp. 79-122; also, see Teresa Grande, *Il passato come rappresentazione. Riflessioni sulle nozioni di memoria e rappresentazione sociale* (Messina: Rubbettino Editore, 1997), pp. 18-23; Paul Connerton, *Come le società ricordano* (Roma: Armando Editore, 1999), pp. 43-47.

² Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 111.

sometimes believed, does not necessarily prevent people from inflicting suffering. Those who have suffered may even become explicitly inclined to hurt others, i.e., the victims become the perpetrators based on their memories. Because they endured violence, they feel empowered and justified to inflict it upon others due to their past sufferings. Other times, people are even motivated to commit acts of violence in order to be remembered.³ The moral ambiguity of memory means that memory can operate in completely divergent directions; in some cases, memory can prevent violence, whereas it can breed violence in others.

It is not uncommon for individual or collective memory to exist in a discordant relationship with identity. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we re-examine our past and come across confusing or sometimes even threatening parts of it, as we try to fit it into a meaningful and coherent image of ourselves. At the collective level, this nexus appears to be even more prominent and vulnerable. This is because institutions and communities do not have individual memories, since they lack what corresponds to the biological foundation and anthropological disposal of memory. The difference lies in the fact that institutions and entities do not possess memory, but instead build one for themselves.⁴ Therefore, unlike the mechanism of remembering that takes place spontaneously and in accordance with the general laws of psychology, at a collective and institutional level this process is driven by a deliberate policy of memory and targeted policies.⁵ One may reflect upon the Rwandan genocide which, according to some authors, was fueled by European colonialism and its political and ideological constructions.⁶ Anthropologists and historians agree that descriptions of the Hutu and Tutsi as two separate tribes or two different ethnic groups are entirely implausible, and that European colonizers, by overemphasizing the legends regarding the origins of the Tutsi, had an important role in producing narratives and stratifying memories of the Tutsi and Hutu, consequently laying the foundation for future hatred and conflicts.⁷

In our contemporary world, ethnic conflicts between groups are often motivated by the sort of history that is supplanted by political myths. Given the power of the socio-psychological conditions that fuel conflicts, policies that rely on such myths initially strive to create a kind of common victim identity which ensures that all those who belong to the same group feel that aggressive behavior towards another group is justified (e.g. others are to blame for our unsuccessful past, they represent an enemy to the future of our group, etc.). Therefore, to achieve certain political aims, memory is used to mimic past examples of greatness or defeat and to uphold a destructive relationship with the past. The explosion of anti-Semitism by the Nazis, or the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans carried out by the Serbs, can be interpreted in this same vein, because these examples rely

³ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory. Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Michigan-Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), p. 32.

⁴ Aleida Assmann, 'Memoria collettiva', in *Dizionario della memoria e del ricordo*, edited by Nicholas Pethes and Jens Ruchatz (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2002), pp. 314-316, at p. 315.

⁵ Aleida Assmann, *Ricordare, Forme e mutamenti della memoria culturale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), p. 15.

⁶ Ugo Fabietti and Vincenzo Matera, *Memorie e identità, Simboli e strategie del ricordo* (Roma: Maltemi, Gli Argonauti, 2000), p. 165.

⁷ Claudine Vidal, 'Il genocidio dei Ruandesi tutsi: Crudeltà voluta e logiche di odio', in *Sulla violenza*, edited by Françoise H. Héritier (Roma: Maltemi, 1997), pp. 232-238.

on the type of relationship with the past in which the emulation of our forebears is removed from a socio-historical context.⁸

Totalitarian regimes definitely conceal memories in a more obvious way. Given the constitutively selective nature of memory, what we should blame totalitarian regimes for is not that they retain only certain elements of the past and let others fall into oblivion since they cannot act otherwise, but rather that they claim the right to control what they want to retain.⁹ It is precisely because they want to legitimize their power or their ideology that these regimes often seek to radically change the references to the past by resorting to various means - from physical to psychological coercion. In this way, totalitarianism denies free access to a plurality of collective memories and tries to establish a single one which is fully the function of the dominant power.¹⁰ When the externalized forms of memory, or so-called 'prosthetic' memory, are destroyed and their traces fade, the group risks collective amnesia, and the collective identity suffers setbacks.

Although domination over memory promises victories, only rarely can the winners' memory completely abolish that of the losers. The latter remain hidden in tacit knowledge, beyond the subjective awareness, and remain present in action, narratives and unconscious practices. Hence, the memory of the oppressed persists, placed in the background, ready to be rediscovered, to return to the stage and re-emerge when the initial conditions that had side-lined it change. It is on the trail of the past, forgotten and denied by those in power, that revolutionary processes emerge. Given its latent power to resurrect aversions and desires that were buried, memory is very valuable to opponents of totalitarian regimes, because every act of reminiscence, even the most humble, can be likened to anti-totalitarian resistance.¹¹ Consequently, dictatorship is threatened when a society is divided into a plurality of groups, each of which has developed a representation of the past, or a memory that is useful to their own interests and their own vision of the world.

Toward the Ethics of Memory

The redemptive or healing power of memory and the political use of memory are quite widespread phenomena today. These two different uses of memory suggest that memory, from a moral standpoint, is dangerously ambiguous. Considering that our past is a succession of many important and less important events, what types of selection should we make? To which events should we give predominance? And what, precisely, are we obliged to remember?

Are We Obligated to Remember? Why and What Are We Obligated to Remember?

We always remember partially, and we do not have complete control over our memories. Sometimes, they just pop into our mind without our involvement, i.e., involuntary memories, and other times, we deliberately decide to remember, i.e., voluntary

⁸ Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 8.

⁹ Tzvetan Todorov, *Gli abusi della memoria* (Napoli: Ipermedium Libri, 2001), p. 33.

¹⁰ Paolo Montesperelli, *Sociologia della memoria* (Roma-Bari: Editori Laterza, 2003), p. 45.

¹¹ Todorov, *Gli abusi della memoria*, p. 31.

memories. Thus a question arises: Is it possible that an ethics or morality of memory exists? I deem it possible, for a few, main reasons. First, we refer to the type of memory that is conscious and voluntary (intentional calling to mind). That is to say, we do not bear responsibility for events that slip from our mind because we cannot remember or forget on demand (ought implies can); but we can do something to prevent oblivion and therefore bear responsibility for not having prevented oblivion. The same applies to thoughts, because we do not know why, at any given time, we think of one thing rather than another; but if we wish, we can also choose to think of certain things at a precise moment. Although we cannot voluntarily produce memories, thoughts or emotions, and we lack direct control over them, we can do a lot to control them - perhaps not directly, but we can be responsible for a prior action linked to that memory, thought or emotion. We may use helpful, indirect methods of remembering, thinking or feeling. This process is similar to what Justin Oakley, in his book *Morality and Emotions*, calls 'learned spontaneity'.¹²

Although memory provides many benefits, it is not beneficial in all circumstances; rather, 'within limits and under certain condition remembrance is an indispensable ingredient of a good life and civic health'.¹³ However, we must make a distinction concerning the asymmetry, as noted by Margalit, between protecting morality and promoting it. Promoting is extremely desirable and valuable. Protecting is a must. The source of the obligation to remember stems from the effort of radical evil to undermine morality itself by, among other means, rewriting the past and twisting the truth.¹⁴ Furthermore, we have an obligation not only to avoid harming people but also to improve our relationship with them: We must remember to forgive and reconcile. Because we have an obligation to forgive and reconcile, we have an obligation to remember. The imperative to remember refers, above all, to salient examples of radical evil and crimes against humanity and involves collective efforts to redress the harm suffered by victims of past injustices. Public remembering is an act of acknowledgment towards the victims of wrongs and is therefore an act of justice. 'Extracting the exemplary value from traumatic memories, it is justice that turns memory into a project; and it is this same project of justice that gives the form of the future and of the imperative to the duty of memory'.¹⁵

However, even when acts of remembrance are not obligatory, they may be valuable due to the attitudes and emotions they express. Memory shapes and is shaped by identity, and identity is internally associated to values and obligations (memory is not only a descriptive category but also a normative category). How and what we remember partly establish our identity, and our identity becomes normative for us; that is, a framework of various values and obligations. We can reproach ourselves not only for the wrongs we have committed but also for not developing our talents, for personal shortcomings, for failures of character, for evil thoughts, and for cruel desires; in other

¹² Justin Oakley, *Morality and Emotions* (London-New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 139-140.

¹³ Blustein, p. 2.

¹⁴ Margalit, p. 83.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 88.

words, being too easy on oneself is as morally objectionable as being too hard on oneself.¹⁶

How Should We Remember?

So far, it is clear that instead of deleting the past, we have to manage its influence. How can memory become a bridge between adversaries, or a path to the avoidance of violence? In the second chapter of his *Unfashionable Observations*, titled 'On the Utility and Liability of History for Life', Nietzsche highlights the uses of remembering and of forgetting to a greater extent than anyone before him. He portrays various types of relations to the past (monumental, antiquarian and critical history) to articulate a 'virtue of remembrance', in which one remembers neither too much nor too little, also known as the Nietzschean challenge. For him, the question is not whether we should remember, since remembering is part of our human condition, but how; that is, how memory should be included into, and function within, the lives of individuals and groups. In his view, happiness and a successful life call for a large capacity to forget the past. Therefore, he advocates the value of forgetting, because man's energies and attention are then turned away from the past and centered on an object in the present; or at the least, he suggests that we should remember or forget 'at [the] right time'.

While recognizing the merits of Nietzsche for noting that memory can serve life instead of being merely a gathering of information, Volf is right to criticize Nietzsche for ignoring the social context in which, and for which, the use of memory occurs.¹⁷ With this in mind, I believe that three main ethical demands - truthfulness, exemplarity or integration, public or personal good - that pertain to the ways of remembering suggested here are attentive to both the individual and collective memory.

Truthfulness and Epistemic Aspect of Memory

Skepticism of the accuracy of memory has preoccupied much of the literature on memory, given that all our memories are notoriously fallible and epistemologically limited.¹⁸ However, despite the scepticism that arises from the fact that memories are particularly vulnerable to distortion, we are nonetheless responsible for remembering correctly (even though we are not to blame should we unintentionally fail to remember). In essence, when we claim to remember, we are asserting that, to the best of our knowledge, our memory is true in the sense that it corresponds to events as they occurred. The expressivist standpoint noted by Blustein goes even further: According to this stance, we ought to remember even if no good or some bad is promoted.¹⁹

This last statement seems overly rigid, a meticulous prescription that is far from the real world and human good. Along similar lines is the widespread postmodern idea that negates any objective truth, or considers it dangerous, and hence absolves people of

¹⁶ Blustein, p. 94.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

¹⁸ There has been much talk about the conflict between the historical truth and the personal testimonies that often do not coincide. The good intentions of historians must consider witness accounts to find a middle ground between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of the testimony, because a community in the construction of its collective memory uses both (for instance, see Tzvetan Todorov, *Memoria del male. Tentazione del bene, Inchiesta su un secolo tragico* (Milano: Garzanti, 2001), p. 157).

¹⁹ Blustein, p. 35.

the moral obligation to remember truthfully.²⁰ However, regardless of how dangerous the truth may be, we cannot create a stable society by bypassing that truth and picking only the elements that seem innocuous, because the dangerous truth will, sooner or later, catch up with us. This is the first lesson of psychoanalysis, but also the logical conclusion derived from our ordinary experiences. The danger is when we try to possess the truth instead of searching for it, so that 'the conflict is deepened not because truth matters too much to both parties, but because it matters too little (...) It is dangerous to claim to possess the truth, but it is even more dangerous to claim that all memories are equally valid in terms of their correspondence to actual events'.²¹

More than epistemological errors and unhealthy repression, untruthful memories also often injure those involved in the remembered activity because the obligation for truthfulness in remembering lies at the root of the obligation to do justice. Thus, although we can blame memory for lacking reliability, it is our only and unique resource to access what we claim to remember of the past. This, for example, is not the case for imagination, which refers to what is unreal and made up. Memory's claim to truth is thus a crucial trait of the concept of memory, its constitutive part: 'And yet, we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place before we call to mind a memory of it'.²² As we shall see in the following, a completely different question arises, which concerns whether, and how, this memory should be interpreted or related to other duties. So far, we can conclude that the truth of memory continues to say little or nothing about its use.

Exemplarity, Integration and Pedagogic Aspects of Memory

Remembering appropriately, particularly in cases of abuse, is not a private affair, even though the remembering takes place in the isolation of our own minds. Because others are always implicated (individual and collective memory are intertwined), remembering is always of public significance. How we manage our memories not only shapes our identity and our relationships with others but also affects our relationships in every social setting of which we are a part. A single memory of abuse affects the wider society and becomes an *example* of the uses of memory; thus, we have a moral responsibility to distinguish good use from bad.

From this perspective, Tzvetan Todorov bases his critique of the uses of memory by making a distinction between different modalities of remembering. In his view, there are two distinct ways of giving meaning to, or interpreting, the past: *Literal memory*, which focuses exclusively on our own well-being and tries to replicate the original event, returning tit for tat, and *exemplar memory*, which corresponds to a model for understanding new situations with different agents. An illustration of literal memory, which subordinates the present to the past, can be found in the impossibility of reaching reconciliation and agreement between Palestinians and Israelis, or in conflicts in Northern Ireland. In contrast, Todorov suggests, we should use memories in the

²⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Isključenje i zagrljaj. Teološko promišljanje identiteta, drugosti i pomirenja* (Zagreb: Steppress, 1998), pp. 258-267.

²¹ Volf, *The End of Memory*, pp. 57-58.

²² Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 7.

exemplar way. This means that we should interpret an event in such a way that is representative of a more general category, i.e. as a model to understand new situations with different agents (without threatening its singularity and uniqueness). The past event becomes an example which is comparable and a source of meaning for other analogous situations, and thus we can extract a lesson from it, making the past a principle of action for the present.²³ Todorov's exemplar memory is a very helpful notion for understanding different modalities of the use of memory, and is widely discussed in philosophy, theology and anthropology.²⁴ One of the most interesting issues to arise in these discussions, and which furthermore is useful for our analysis, is the question of whether exemplar memory can in practice fulfill its protective function. Given that in the real world people sometimes draw very different lessons even from more simple events, it is certainly difficult to identify correct analogies to past situations. Even when these analogies appear straightforward, history shows us that they are often misleading (the pledge 'never again' after the experience of the Holocaust did not hinder the atrocities committed in Rwanda or Srebrenica). Volf is right in suggesting that the major problem is the difficulty in identifying which current situation matches the past one, since the distinction between victims and perpetrators is often blurred as yesterday's victims sometimes become tomorrow's victimizers (Croats, Muslims and Serbs in ex-Yugoslavia; Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland; Jew and Palestinians in Israel).²⁵ The other problem with Todorov's exemplar memory is that not all people share the same view of justice and real possibilities for justice in this world, since the memory of injustice can strengthen our belief in injustice.²⁶ In Todorov's exemplar memory Volf highlights one

²³ Todorov, *Gli abuse della memoria*, pp. 48-57.

²⁴ For instance, Ugo Fabietti and Vincenzo Matera in their book *Memorie e identità* employ Todorov's distinction in their anthropological study, and attempt to attach this concept to the distinction made by Edouard Glissant about unique and relational identity in his book *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996). Presuming that isolation and immobility of a collective group and the strength of the bond that holds together the individuals belonging to it are most probably directly proportional, they examine the role of memory in consolidating the link between a given populace and its identity (they presume that the passage from the mythical toward the historical conscience has its counterpoint in the idea of the potential to enlarge the territorial domain proper, i.e. temporal and spatial dimensions are interrelated). For that purpose they employ the above-mentioned distinction made by Glissant. Glissant assumes that foundational myths have a role in sanctifying the presence of one community on its territory, and that when it comes to the historical conscience the community tries to expand its boundaries by making contact with other populations. In his view, this enlargement occurs in two different modes. One mode corresponds to Western societies and ancestral cultures, when encountering other cultures, expanding their boundaries by excluding the identity of others. Thereby, the group seeks to strengthen their perceived identity (unique identity). The other mode corresponds to more complex societies that adopted creolisation (the process by which long-term contact between different cultural influences and traditions creates a new entity) and allows for the intersection of different identities (relational identity). Fabietti and Matera find a connection between Todorov's exemplar use of memory, which gains knowledge of the past in order to improve present conditions, and relational identity that rejects isolative behavior by the group. They also perceive a strong bond between literal memory and unique identity or closure, intolerance and aggression. (Fabietti and Matera, pp. 28-32, 182).

²⁵ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

very important aspect: That we should treat memories as examples, but we should do so in a correct manner. This aspect, to me, however, seems to be contained in Todorov's notion because he also stresses that not all lessons from the past are good, and that we need the help of universal rational criteria to sustain human dialogue in distinguishing good use from bad.

However, Todorov reminds us that truthfulness does not prevent us from giving the past new significance or interpretation. In fact, the capacity for effective reparative agency hinges on what Blustein calls 'the retrospective construction of meaning', i.e. one makes sense of the past by fitting it into a narrative structure that links it to the present and transforming it (he also suggests appropriation and thematization as ways of taking responsibility for the past).²⁷ Furthermore, the unique truth of memory and its historical singularity are not betrayed by its new interpretation, universalization and comparison. On the contrary, memory can provide us with a critical message from a pedagogical point of view. In its comparative dimension, and extrapolating its exemplary value, memory serves to illuminate the object of further research, and imparts a greater understanding to other similar events.

Practical Aspect of Memory and Human Good

Rather than its epistemic value, the ethics of memory should be concerned with their practical dimension, which primarily concerns implementation in our social settings. Let us take Volf's example of a case of wrongdoing: We could separate wrongdoing from a person's overall character and deeds. Such remembering would be truthful, although only in part, but it certainly would be unloving. It could transmute that person into a very different one, attributing to his or her identity only bad qualities. However, we could also remember that person in the context of his or her entire life, which might exhibit a good deal of virtue.²⁸ This attitude is in the essence of the Christian view, which assumes love as a fundamental concept that governs the ambiguous power of memory.

Although we must remember to reconcile, sometimes, reconciliation also requires the restraint of memory for a certain period.²⁹ Given that memory is not an unqualified or absolute good (because it is also a function of something, hence an instrument), the proper use of memory as a balance between remembering and forgetting is dynamic in the sense that 'what is an appropriate balance under some historical or psychological conditions might not be appropriate under others'.³⁰ As Blustein stresses, the duties associated with memory are not independent of their social and historical settings and other values and commitments we may have (conflicts between competing social

²⁷ Blustein, pp. 66-76.

²⁸ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p.15.

²⁹ Amnesty, for example, has the purpose of putting an end to the serious political conflicts (civil wars, revolutions, violent changes of political regimes) for the purpose of reconciliation between citizens and bringing civil peace. The ancient Greeks provided an example of not only therapeutic oblivion but precisely 'political' oblivion, which is similar to today's amnesty (see Maurizio Bettini, 'Sul perdono storico. Dono, identità, memoria e oblio', in *Storia, verità, giustizia. I crimini del XX secolo*, edited by Marcello Flores (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2001), pp. 20-43, at p. 38).

³⁰ Blustein, p. 3.

projects).³¹ Therefore, in suggesting ethical criteria we must be mindful of our other duties, values and commitments and the effects that our coping with memory will have on other important dimensions of our personal life (e.g., our mental health and stability, empathy, moral development, and obligations as citizens) or the social community in which we live (peace, solidarity, democracy, economic recovery). We could say that there is

(...) a surfeit of memory if there is a kind of collective paralysis induced by shame and guilt over past wrongdoing that prevents progressive political change (...) Or there might be a surfeit of memory insofar as dwelling on the past prevents the realization of various social and political goods (...) a group dwells on its past out of proportion to the severity of the wrongdoing for which it is responsible or which it suffered, or out of proportion to its degree of responsibility for it.³²

Memory - truthful memory, that is - may be in competition with social and political goods and projects of different sorts that devour social resources, and sometimes it is these that should give way to memory. Certainly, the historical truth is not an absolute good (in Christian ethics, love is definitely the greater good), and sometimes we have to give predominance to a person or to the common good instead of to historical truth.

Relationship between Criteria

Having emphasized some ethical criteria that should govern the use of memory in the light of broader social contexts, we have to discuss in greater depth whether there is a tension or competition between these criteria that somehow call for further ethical analysis. What I have in mind is a situation where we have to decide which ethical duty to give priority. Given that the second criterion - integration or exemplarity - is determined by the well-balanced use of epistemological and practical aspects and presupposes the incorporation of memories in the whole of someone's life (similar to virtue ethics when the agent works on his own character), this criterion is not at odds with other criteria but, rather, brings them together. In view of the fact that when we dealing with memories, human life or communities are always entangled, this balance is not a mathematic equation but rather a delicate and dynamic relationship of deontological (always be truthful) and consequentialist principles (what good will come from this truth?) What does this mean when discussing memory?

Needless to say, the truth is a constitutional part of memory and is 'implied in the intending of the past 'thing', of what was formerly seen, heard, experienced, learned.'³³ If we don't remember truthfully, we don't remember at all but, rather, substitute an account of what really happened for our imagination. Nevertheless, the relationship between truth and memory, or truth in memory, is not as straightforward because, very often, especially when complex and distant past events are at issue, memory becomes a sort of fusion of truthful narrative and imagined construction. Still, this awkward epistemological structure of memory does not deprive us of the moral obligation 'to

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 23.

³³ Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 55.

render the past event truthfully to the best of our knowledge',³⁴ or as Ricoeur states, 'we bear the moral obligation to pay to others the debt of giving their 'due' by remembering them truthfully.'³⁵

How, then, can the first criterion – truthfulness – possibly be called into question? Firstly, even though the presupposed 'unsteady truthfulness' of memory does not dispossess us from searching for a more detailed representation of the past, it makes room for errors or misinterpretations and hence points towards a more elastic way of managing memories. In short, it means that instead of claiming to possess the truth of the past and absolutizing our views, we should employ a more humble and unpretentious attitude with regard to past issues. Secondly, and more importantly, adhering blindly to the truth (which is, in some respects, relative because it is always in danger of what historians call 'presentism') cannot bring reconciliation or guarantee social cohesion. Without taking anything away from the moral obligation to remember truthfully, often when managing memories we should call attention to the importance of appropriate use rather than truthfulness of memory. Too much truth (especially if lethal) in one particular situation can fuel violence, whereas portioning the truth or revealing it in a pedagogical way attentive to the socio-cultural context can bring people closer.

According to Margalit, giving predominance to truth over other criteria when regulating memories is an empirical assumption based on the memory-prison metaphor.³⁶ But what Margalit has in mind regarding memory prison differs slightly from what I intend by memory prison, and my view is more similar to Todorov's literal memory. Margalit's idea about memory prison is based on Freud's account of repressed memories as subversive agents that cause dysfunctional conduct. Psychoanalytical healing, hence, indicates releasing the strangulation effect and removing the affective force of memory, so that people no longer 'cling to these memories emotionally'.³⁷

By prison Margalit means repression that influences present actions or, in Freud's terms, 'repetition compulsion', i.e. when a person repeats or re-lives a traumatic event over and over by re-enacting the event, or putting themselves in situations where the event is likely to occur again. Even though Margalit is very much concerned with making the traumatic, repressed individual or communal memories open and explicit, in order to obtain the cure he is also suspicious of truth about the past bringing reconciliation by being revealed. 'Still memory breathes revenge as often as it breathes reconciliation and hope of reaching catharsis through liberated memories might turn out to be an illusion'.³⁸ Thus, in his account, the memory prison metaphor refers to freedom from repression and to the importance that truth has in our normal functioning in society, although he is ultimately very skeptical that liberation from the prison of memory and pointing instead exclusively at the truth, which is isolated from the wider socio-cultural context, will address the social and moral dimensions of past experience.

I believe, however, that the 'memory prison' metaphor can be applied in an even broader sense, not only in the case of repressed traumatic memories but also when a

³⁴ Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 53.

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The reality of the Historical Past*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1984), pp. 25-27.

³⁶ Margalit, p. 6.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Remembering, Repeating and Working Through', in *The Standard Edition of Complete Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12 (London: Hogarth, 1958), p. 152.

³⁸ Margalit, p. 5.

person constantly relives the past (not only the repressed but also the conscious past), without taking the opportunity to open up to new experiences. People trapped in a memory, be it their own or inherited, rely on the past for an alibi that frees them from responsibility for the present and have less of a chance to build an autonomous identity; thus their moral judgment of the past and present is highly determined by this imprisonment.³⁹ It has been claimed that the same happens at a collective level through the promotion of a cult of memory that recalls injuries suffered in the past, on the basis of which its practitioners ensure certain privileges in society. In these cases, the matter wholly concerns the desire for a utilitarian gathering of not only moral and symbolic but also material benefits. Any chance of escaping the agonizing story is rejected, because this 'special' status gives one the right to avoid moral and social standards. As Todorov puts it:

Candidates for victim status are many, because, having been the victim gives you the right to complain, to protest and to moan. (...) It is more beneficial to remain in the role of the victim to receive compensation for the offense: instead of a temporary satisfaction, it retains a permanent privilege attention (...)⁴⁰

Thus, the memory prison metaphor can be understood in both senses, i.e. when we are the victims of repressed memories, or the victims of our underdeveloped moral standards. Consequently, the truth of memory seems to be an essential but nonetheless qualified aspect of how we deal with our individual or collective memories and should not be exercised without considering other personal or social benefits.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested some ethical guidelines for governing the use of memory. The concepts and themes considered represent some central ideas discussed in a few rare works on ethics of memory. Bearing in mind these ethical demands of memory, I believe that, despite all of its limits, memory can function as an ingredient of a good life. This can be accomplished at two levels - both ethical, but to varying degrees: Sometimes, there is an imperative to remember every time human lives are jeopardized or that we owe justice to the victims of the past who run the risk of being forgotten, silenced or marginalized; other times it is valuable to remember, because we can add quality to our lives, increase our effective agency, or improve the level of our personal development or social conditions, etc. As stated, ethics has to do with both protecting and promoting. Consequently, by pointing to the 'demands or tasks of memory', an ethical dimension can

³⁹ An individual can be imprisoned by the past in two ways: in the past of his or her predecessors and in his or her own past. The first is known as the psychological phenomenon of second-generation syndrome and this phenomenon is closely related to the concept of transgenerational transmission. The identity of people locked in the past always searches for a balance between remembering and forgetting; remembering because it seeks to ensure continuity and avoid inner fragmentation, and forgetting since it seeks to adapt to the new world and function properly within it, repressing or deleting all distressing memories (cf. Dina Wardi, *Le candele della memoria. I figli dei sopravvissuti dell'Olocausto: traumi, angosce, terapia* (Firenze: Sansoni, 1993), p. 139).

⁴⁰ Todorov, *Gli abusi della memoria*, p. 64, my translation.

eventually transmute even the most appalling past into new life possibilities. Regardless of what has happened in the past, we still can make good use of the past because we are much more than our memories (our identity also incorporates elements of other people's experiences, our present and our anticipating the future), although we are profoundly influenced by them.

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