

Toward an ethics of memory. Is memory the root cause of violence or a path to violence avoidance?

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Abstract:

As we witness a growing popularity of so called *memory discourse* in the field of historical and cultural studies, there is an apparent lack of systematic insight into the ethical dimension of this subject. This paper attempts to alleviate the imbalance in the treatment of the subject. In the first part the author offers some key insights into a phenomenology of natural memory. By indicating some essential elements of memory such as its volatile, dynamic and hence manipulable nature, the author shortly points to the abuse of memory at different levels and scrutinises the relationship between memory and violence.

Given the moral fickleness of memory, in the second part the author outlines the ethics of memory with the emphasis on the evaluative inquiry about memory and its relation with the notions of obligation and value. Taking into account that memory is a good in itself, and therefore a value and an ingredient of a good life, the author establishes a basic ethical criterion of memory and answers how we should remember and transmit memory, and suggests the ways in which memory, if reined in, can benefit our societies and guards them against further violence and injuries.

Keywords: memory; ethics; violence; value; society

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 for the most part bypassed the normative approach. Because memory has been the subject of abundant literature over the last three decades, it is surprising that only a few analytic philosophers have discussed on the critical role of memory in coping with the aftermath of the Holocaust. The topic of coping with memory was left primarily to historians or social scientists, and philosophy and theology remained largely silent. However, this omission of the normative weight of memory has been recently mitigated by a few outstanding works in the fields of both philosophy and theology (A. Margalit, J. Blustein, P. Ricoeur, M. Volf). Drawing upon these works, this paper attempts to alleviate the imbalance in the treatment of the subject. It what some authors call the ethics of memory in an outline that is simplified, because this topic goes far beyond this paper.

The importance of the normative treatment toward the use of the past is paramount if we think about the large scale of conflicts caused by repressed historical traumas that later surfaced through transgenerational transmission and instilled a mutual misunderstanding between ethnic groups. It follows that a memory, as one of the effective tools of the past (e.g. other tools are history, myth, 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 only to scrutinise their origin, though it is indispensable, it is also crucial to “rein in” or regulate these memories through a normative framework. Therefore the morally significant question regards not only whether and what we must remember, but also the role that memory should play in the lives of individuals and societies and about what the right modalities of the use of past should entail. In what follows I suggest basic ethical demands of memory that stand out as essential if we want to create a society where memory is alive but not overpowering, and is attentive to victims without causing new victims on account of old ones.

Preliminary remarks on memory

Today’s society is undergoing a type of ambiguous and paradoxical process. On the one hand, the modern life style makes most of us quick to forget, and memory is declining and increasingly losing value in the name of novelty; on the other hand, we extol memory and restart a process asserting the need for memory. Never before has historical memory been institutionalised to such an extent, because men have never lost the sense of belonging. It seems paradoxical that the memory is more nominated, because it is more threatened¹.

Alongside this cultural landscape, the political use of memory that loomed large in the aftermath of World War II stands out even more predominantly. The political elite that own structural information channels such as the media control the collective memory and can easily impose their subjective views and requests upon all individuals. Thus, at first glance, stands out the instrumental and utilitarian use of memory, which makes clear that memory cannot be reduced only to the cognitive faculties but also has a practical dimension. Remembering is a matter of doing something rather than simply being affected by certain knowledge about past events. What we remember often deeply affects what we do. Thus, on the one hand, there is an epistemological or cognitive dimension of memory (what was in the past), and on the other hand, there is a practical dimension of memory (what we should do with that memory or how we should remember).

Each memory, collective and individual, is by nature selective, volatile and evanescent, evolving in a constant processes of repression or forgetting. Due to the passage of time, the

1 Antonio Cavicchia-Scalamonti – Gianfranco Pecchinenda, *La memoria consumata*, (Napoli: Ipermeduim Libri, 1997), p. 26. Many authors talk about this paradoxical situation, but the first to talk about that phenomenon was Pierre Norra in his *Les lieux di memoire*.

memory is fading and is subjected to the process of reconstruction – we can add some meanings to it and cut off others. It is an unremitting process that sometimes can end up with an essentially different meaning from the past event². As some scholars such as M. Halbwachs say, we can never reach the original event because our memory is just a copy of the past event motivated profoundly by our present interests. Because past events do not all have the same meaning for our life, we constantly decide what has to be remembered as more valuable, and hence, it is crucial to choose among different information received³. However, how we can distinguish beforehand a good use of memory from a bad one? What are the criteria that assure the good use of memory? Before we address this question, let discuss its propensity for abuses and its propensity to cause violence.

Abuse of memory

Bearing in mind the previous multifaceted characteristics of memory, the abuse of memory is an expected threat. Memory is constitutive of the human condition and crucial in our daily life because of the many benefits it provides, such as healing, empathy, solidarity, and protection. However, its volatile and evanescent nature makes it susceptible to abuse. As Elie Wiesel reminds us, a protective shield of memory can sometimes easily turn into a sword and cause violence instead of peace and solidarity. Memory has a potential to redeem, but it first must be redeemed itself. To say, therefore, that the memory of suffering necessarily protects people from inflicting suffering, is certainly wrong. It may even happen that those who suffered are explicitly inclined to hurt others, i.e., that the victims become the perpetrators based on their memories. Because they remember violence, they feel empowered and justified to commit abuse on account of their past sufferings. Other times, people are even motivated to do evil to be remembered⁴. Thus, the separation line between a bad and good use of memory is very thin and therefore easy to cross over. 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.

The controversial role of memory is, in more systematic way, also recognised by Paul Ricoeur, who points to the active enterprise that memory plays in our lives and that has an ethical domain in terms of the use and abuse of memory. Ricoeur depicts this ethical dimension of memory as operating at three levels: the pathologic-therapeutic level (repressed or blocked memory); the practical level (manipulated memory); and the ethico-political level (controlled or forced memory). The path suggested by Ricoeur goes from blocked memory, and passes through manipulated memory toward forced memory⁵.

Concerning the first level, Ricoeur draws upon Freudian ideas on memory. In Freud's view, memory as an activity moves from repetition to remembrance and from melancholy to authentic mourning and requires a type of extrapolation. "Work of memory", which is attentive to both the excess and the denial of memory, is necessary if we want to protect

2 Frederich Bartlett, *La memoria. Studio di psicologia sperimentale e sociale*, (Milano: Agnelli, 1974). Frederich Bartlett wanted to analyse the serial reproduction of remembered event using the Indian story The War of Ghost. He asked a single person to repeat the story at different temporal intervals, which could take up to several years. The story was changed, and his example showed that the functional mechanisms of human memory are active without the actors being aware of it.

3 Maurice Halbwachs, *La memoria collettiva*, (Milano: Unicopli, 1987), pp. 79-122; 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.

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

5 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 69.

ourselves from wounds in repetition and melancholia. These individual characteristics are also in the collective existence, and according Ricoeur there is no historical community that is not born from a situation wherein we can assimilate, without hesitation, to violence. Thus, the archives of collective memory contain symbolic wounds that must be healed⁶.

However, the abuse of memory, according to Ricoeur, most prominent on the pragmatic level, where both memory and forgetfulness are subject to an intense manipulation by power. One cannot separate memory and identity and because identity is based on memory, and is thus fragile. This fragility related to the temporal dimension of identity, its confrontation with other threatening identities, and its 'heritage of the founding violence'⁷. Because memory is incorporated in identity through narratives and narratives have an educative function and define action, Ricoeur suggests a hermeneutic of critical suspicion such that narratives cannot be idealised or absolute but must be considered in critical comparison with other identities.

The ethico-political level is concerned with the just use of memory and construction of the future. The main problem that appears here is authorised history. which is the official history taught and learnt in institutions and forced via narrative or commemoration. However, without ordering or commanding memory, there is no way that a national community or its political body or any type of therapy can sustain memory. Ricoeur talks about the 'injunction to remember', but the duty of memory is present in the idea of justice: "It is justice which extracts from traumatizing remembrances their exemplary value, turns memory into a project, and it is this project of justice that gives the form of the future and of imperativeness to the duty of memory"⁸. The duty of memory is, in the final analysis, the duty of justice, and our communities must develop a "culture of just memory". I will return to some of Ricoeur's ideas later in this paper.

Memory and violence

The connection of memory and violence is twofold: the claim to possess memory might produce violence, but once committed, violence is also an object of memory, and the way in which 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. Although there is too much suffering, there is also too much memory because in a way, the suffering inflames remembering. Along the same lines, A. 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 action⁹. Given that the person has to penetrate more in depth in complex events rather than simple ones, these events are looking for a way out and seeking a solution, whereas events of happiness often lack a strong cognitive engagement. That is why a person might best recall events in which put in more effort or struggled more.

It is not rare that individual or collective memory lives in an inharmonious relationship with identity. Whether consciously or unconsciously, we re-examine our past and come across confusing or sometimes even threatening parts of it, as 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 more vulnerable. This is so because institutions and communities do not have individual memories because they lack what corresponds to the biological foundation and anthropological disposal of memory. The difference lies in the fact that the institutions and

6 *Ibid*, p. 79. 82.

7 *Ibid*, p. 82.

8 *Ibid*, p. 86.

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

entities do not have a memory, but they build one for themselves¹⁰. Therefore, unlike the mechanism of remembering that takes place in a spontaneous way and in accordance with the general laws of psychology, on a collective and institutional level, this process is driven by a deliberate policy of memory. There is no cultural memory capable of self-determination, but it necessarily must be based on mediators and targeted policies¹¹.

In our contemporary world, ethnic conflicts between groups looking for revenge on past injustice are often motivated by the sort of history that is supplanted by such policies and political myths. To achieve certain political aims, memory is used as to mimic past examples of greatness and uphold a destructive relationship with the past. The emulation of our forbearers, removed from a socio-historical context and buried in the past, can be fake and destructive¹². Totalitarian regimes definitely conceal memory in a more obvious way. Given the constitutive selective nature of memory, what we must blame totalitarian regimes for is not that they retain only certain elements of the past and let others fall into oblivion because they cannot do otherwise but rather that they claim the right to control what they want to retain¹³. Precisely because they want to legitimise their power or their ideology, these regimes often seek to radically change the references to the past by resorting to various means to do so, from physical to psychological force. In this way, totalitarianism has denied free access to the plurality of collective memories and tries to establish a single one, which is fully the function of dominant power¹⁴. However, when they destroy the forms of externalisation of memory, or so-called "prosthetic" memory, and its traces fade, then a group is at risk of collective amnesia, and the collective identity suffers setbacks.

Although domination over memory promises victories and sanctions defeats, only rarely can the memory of the winners 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 come back on stage and to 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 was very valuable by opponents of totalitarian regimes because every act of reminiscence, even the most humble, can be likened to anti-totalitarian resistance¹⁵. Dictatorship is threaten 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 is quite widespread today. These two different uses of memory suggest that memory from a moral standpoint is not unambiguously good but dangerously ambiguous. We can remember in many ways; too little or too much, masochistically or sadistically, literally or metaphorically; we can give priority to less relevant past events instead of important ones, and so forth. Because our past is a succession of many important and less important events, what type of selection should we make, to which events should we attribute predominance, and what, precisely, we are obliged to remember?

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

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

12 Jeffrey Blustein, *The moral demands of memory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 8.

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

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

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

Can we be obliged to remember? Why and what are we obliged 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 memories. Thus a question arises: Is it possible that ethics or morality of memory exist? I deem it possible, for of 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 the events that slip out of 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 having not prevented oblivion (as Kant says *du sollst, denn du kannst*). The same occurs with thoughts because we do not know why, at a given time, we think of one thing rather than another, but if we want to, 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 a direct control over them, we can nonetheless do a lot to control them, maybe not directly, but we can be responsible for a prior action that is linked to that memory, thought or emotion. We may use helpful, indirect methods of remembering, thinking or feeling. This process is similar to what J. Oakley, in his book *Morality and Emotions*, calls “learned spontaneity”¹⁶.

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”¹⁷. However, we must make a distinction that refers to asymmetry, as noted by Margalit, between protecting morality and promoting it. Promoting is highly 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 truth¹⁸. Furthermore, we have an obligation not just to avoid harming people but 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 restore the harm done to victims of past injustice. Public remembering is an act of acknowledging 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”¹⁹.

However, even when acts of remembrance are not obligatory, they may be valuable because of 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 normative category). How and what we remember partly establishes our identity, and our identity becomes normative for us, that is, a groundwork 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 mean desires, or, in other words, being too easy on oneself is as morally objectionable as being too hard on oneself)²⁰.

For example, we can be happy leaving the truth of the past behind us, as Nietzsche notes when he proposes blissful blindness (Volf call it eudemonic forgetting²¹), but our lives would lose profundity and richness, and our happiness would be false and unsteady.

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

17 Blustein, *The moral demands of memory*, p. 2.

18 Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, p. 83.

19 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, p. 88.

20 Blustein, *The moral demands of memory*, p. 94.

21 Volf, *The End of Memory*, p. 161.

How should we remember?

So far, it is clear that instead of deleting the past, we have managed its influence. The essential inquiry to pose in our conflict-ridden world is as follows: How can we remember rightly and in a salutary rather than destructive way? How can memory become a bridge between adversaries or a path to violence avoidance?

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 who preceded 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, acknowledged also as a Nietzschean challenge. For him, the question is not whether we should remember because remembering is part of our human condition but how we should do so, 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 the strong capacity to forget the past. Therefore, he advocates the value of forgetting because man’s energies and attention are turned away from the past and centered on an object in the present, or at least, he suggests that we should remember or forget “at right time”.

Recognising the merits of Nietzsche for noting that memory can serve life instead of being merely a gathering of information, Volf has reason when he criticises Nietzsche for ignoring of the social context in which and for which the use of memory happens²². With this in mind, I think that three main ethical demands that pertain to the ways of remembering suggested here (truthfulness, exemplarity, public or personal good) are attentive to both the individual and collective memory.

Truthfulness – epistemic value

Scepticism about accurate memory has preoccupied much of the literature on memory given that all our memories are limited, particularly regard to complex events, when our effort to recall them often involves a mixture of truthful description and imagined construction²³. However, despite that 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 if 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 in some way to events as they occurred. The expressivist standpoint noted by Blustein goes further: According to this stance, we ought to remember even if no good or even some bad is promoted²⁴.

The last statement sounds too rigid, such as a meticulous prescription that is far away from the real world and human good. On a similar track is the postmodern widespread idea that negates any objective truth or considers it dangerous and hence absolves people of the moral obligation to remember truthfully²⁵. However, regardless of how dangerous that truth is, we cannot create a solid society by bypassing that truth and picking only the elements that seem innocuous because the dangerous truth will, soon or later, catch up with us. This is the first

22 *Ibid*, 165.

23 There has been a lot of 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. Tzvetan Todorov, *Memoria del male. Tentazione del bene, Inchiesta su un secolo tragico*, (Milano: Garzanti, 2001), p. 157.

24 Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, p. 35.

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

lection of psychoanalysis, but also logical conclusion deriving from our ordinary experience. The danger is if 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 events²⁶.”

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 is at the root of its obligation to do justice. Thus, even if 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 is, for example, not the case for imagination, which refers to what is unreal and made up. The claim of memory 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”²⁷. As we see in what follows, a completely different question is whether and how this memory must be interpreted or put into relations to other duties. Given that the duty of truthfulness may conflict with other duties or moral values, the so-called collision of duties can occur. Thus, the truth of memory still says little or nothing about the use that we will exercise.

Exemplarity, integration – pedagogic value

Remembering appropriately, particularly regarding abuse, is not a private affair even when it happens in the isolation of our own minds. Because others are always implicated (individual and collective memory are intertwined), remembering is always of public significance. The way that we treat our memories not only shapes our identity and our relationships with others 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 a pervasive form of human interaction that is often hidden behind the veil of the civility, but it is ready to show its ugly face as soon as the social peace is sufficiently disturbed.

In his book *Gli abusi della memoria* Tzvetan Todorov suggests the way in which we can use memories and protect ourselves from the abuse. In contrast with literal memory (which focuses exclusively on our own well-being and tries to replicate the original event, returning tit for tat), he argues for exemplar memory - a model to understand new situations with different agents. Therefore, as Todorov suggests, we should use exemplar memory, which serves as a model to understand new situations with different agents. It is an example, and we can extract a lesson from it so that the past becomes a principle of action for the present²⁸. This distinction serves to make the distinction between unique identity and relational identity, whereas only the latter can overcome self-absorption and open up to the recognition of others and dialogue. There is therefore a strong bond between literal memory, unique identity, closure, intolerance, aggression and, conversely, between exemplar memory and relational identity, openness to dialogue, coexistence, hospitality²⁹.

Importantly for moral agency, truthfulness does not prevent us from giving the past new significance or interpretation (memory is reconstructive and not reproductive activity). In fact the capacity for effective reparative agency hinges on what Blustein calls the retrospective construction of meaning: 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

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

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

28 Todorov, *Gli abusi della memoria*, pp. 48-57.

29 Ugo Fabietti and Vincenzo Matera, *Memorie e identità, Simboli e strategie del ricordo*, (Roma: Maltemi, Gli Argonauti, 2000), p. 182.

thematisation as ways of taking responsibility for the past)³⁰. Furthermore, the unique truth of memory and its historical singularity are not betrayed by its new interpretation, universalisation and comparison. On the contrary, memory can give us a critical message from an educational point of view. In its comparative dimension, and extrapolating its exemplary value, memory serves to illuminate the object of further research, imparting a greater understanding to other similar events.

Public and personal good – practical value

As we all know, there is more than one way to retell past events. Many scholars advocate a utilitarian approach, which is attentive to the consequences for others social good. Not being utilitarian, I think that this way to cope with memories is satisfactory because we cannot apply deontological principles to memories, for example - always tell the truth - when we know that memories are truthful to some extent (which does not imply that we do not have to look for the truth as much as we can). More than in its epistemic value, the ethics of memory should be interested in its practical dimension, which is primarily concerned with its interpretation and its implementation in our social setting. Let us take Volf's example in the case of wrongdoing: We could separate wrongdoing from someone'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 in very different one, attributing to his identity only bad qualities. However, we could also remember that person in the context of his entire life, which might exhibit a good deal of virtue³¹. This attitude is in the essence of the Christian view, which assumes love as a fundamental concept that steers the ambiguous power of memory.

In the secular view, the personal or common good is a guiding principle of the ethics of memory: Although we must remember to reconcile, sometimes, reconciliation requires the restraint of memory for a certain period³². Given that memory is not an unqualified or absolute good (because it is 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".³³ As Blustein stresses, the duties associated with memory are not independent of their social and historical settings and the other values and other commitments we may have (conflict between competing social projects)³⁴. That is why, in suggesting ethical criteria we must be mindful of other our 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 psychic health and stability, empathy, our moral development, obligations as citizens) or social community in which we live (peace, solidarity, democracy, economic recovery). We can 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 realisation of various social and political goods (...) a group dwells on its past out of

30 Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, pp. 66-76.

31 Volf, *The End of Memory*, p.15.

32 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 civil peace. The ancient Greeks gave 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", *Storia, verità, giustizia. I criminali del XX secolo*, edited by Marcello Flores, (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2001), pp. 20-43, at p.38.

33 Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, p. 3.

34 *Ibidem*.

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”³⁵.

Memory, that is to say, truthful memory, may be in competition with social and political good and projects of different sorts that devour social resources, and sometimes it is these that should give way to memory. The historical truth certainly is not an absolute good (in the Christian vision, 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.

Conclusion

This paper intended to suggest a direction in which the ethics of memory should go. The concepts and themes considered are just the basic guidance, but the entire structure requires further examination. For example, there is no space left for the very important issue pertaining to the question how long we should remember, which refers to relationship between oblivion, forgiveness and amnesty (but others have talked about that).

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that the saving power of memory consists of redeeming it (E. Wiesel) and in choosing a “decent quotient” between remembering and forgetting. Although the truth is a constitutional part of memory, it alone cannot bring reconciliation or protect people from violence. Giving predominance to truth over other important criteria in regulating memories is an empirical assumption based on the memory-prison metaphor. Too much truth in one moment can cause violence, whereas dosing the truth or revealing it in pedagogical way attentive to the socio-cultural context can bring people closer so that they can at least sit at the same table, instead of holding each other at gunpoint.

Bearing in mind these ethical demands of memory, is an ingredient for a good life. Sometimes, there is no option but remember (we have an imperative to remember); other times it is valuable; and in the case that memory becomes a type of prison and the past becomes problematic because it diminishes effective agency and undermines the capacity for our personal development or bettering of social conditions, after facing this “dangerous memory”, we should to let it go. As Volf noted: “If salvation lies in memory of wrong suffered, it must lie more in what we do with those memories than in the memories themselves”³⁶. In other words, regardless of what happened in the past, we still can make good use of it 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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