

THE PRESENT OF PAST THINGS

The theme of memory has been continually discussed throughout the history of human thought, in particular after Plato placed memory at the center of his epistemology. The importance he attributed to memory was enormous. Any knowledge, he claimed, even of the kind he appreciated least, namely, common belief or opinion based on sensual perception, was impossible without remembering. In fact, knowledge in its proper sense, i.e., the knowledge of ideas, was itself considered by him as *anamnesis*, a recollection of what the human soul had learnt when it existed free from the body and contemplated the true being, and what had been forgotten once the soul began its existence in the physical world.¹

Nowadays, not only have attempts to understand memory been continued, but, particularly over the last decades, they appear to have been intensified² and come to light in various disciplines representative of both science and the humanities, at the same time surfacing also in private exchanges and in the public debate. The role which philosophy plays in these efforts has also remained significant, so much so that the philosophy of memory is sometimes identified as a separate field of study.³ Among the reasons why an interest in memory-related problems is currently on the increase, scholars indicate a specific social amnesia suffered by contemporary human beings, as well as the risk they face while dissociating themselves from their pasts, which have shaped them and their communities.⁴

Whether highly specialized or purely ‘amateurish,’ reflection on memory embraces paradoxes, or even contradictions. Memory is described as individual, private, internal, and hidden (sometimes hidden also from its ‘owner’), but also as collective, typical of the social groups of which a given individual is a member, as external, publicly open and accessible. On the one hand, memory lasts over time and makes it possible for other things to last, e.g., by

¹ For a more detailed discussion of Plato’s concept of memory, its kinds and functions, see Elżbieta Wolicka, “Platońskie rozłogi pamięci,” *Znak*, no. 647 (2009), <https://www miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/6452008elzbieta-wolickaplatonskie-rozlogi-pamieci/>.

² For an extensive discussion of the growing scholarly interest in memory see Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz, “Introduction: Mapping Memory,” in: *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 1–9.

³ See Kourken Michaelian and John Sutton, “Memory,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/memory/>.

⁴ See Radstone and Schwartz, “Introduction: Mapping Memory,” 1–2.

underpinning individual and social identity; memory appears a bond so strong that being remembered by future generations is considered as ersatz immortality (or, as the only form of immortality available to humans), while being obliterated from memory through the destruction of the material and cultural traces of one's existence—as punishment more severe than death.⁵ On the other hand, memory is also seen as fragile, easily damaged or lost, susceptible to distortion, or even unfaithful by its very nature. As such, memory reveals one of the aspects of *conditio humana*, one of the ways in which human existence is inextricable from time and, as such, transient “Like flowers of the field we blossom. The wind sweeps us and we are gone: our place knows us no more” (Ps 103:15–16). Memory may be perceived as a source of pain and as hindrance or as a spring of consolation and strength. The experience of memory embraces our helplessness as we confront its contents and our precarious victories over its power, which tends to resist human desires and decisions, as well as our attempts to take responsibility for the memories we keep and meet the moral challenges memory poses.

Reflection on memory resorts to metaphors, or—as Gaston Bachelard would have it—images. In his view, while giving “a concrete substance to an impression that is difficult to express,”⁶ metaphors are insufficiently grounded in reality and, at the same time, not creative enough to have any phenomenological value or to provide models of intimacy.⁷ Images, reversely, have such a capacity and can be helpful in our understanding of human beings as entities endowed with “the secret psychological life.”⁸

Several images of memory (in the Bachelardian sense of the term) can be found among the nonliteral ways of describing memory propounded throughout the history of ideas. Let us recall, for instance, the simple image from Plato's *Theaetetus* that Socrates described to his interlocutor, and thus to all the future readers of the dialogue: “So, for the sake of argument, imagine that our minds contain a wax block, which may vary in size, cleanliness and consistency in different individuals, but in some people is just right ... And let us say that it is a gift of Memory, the Mother of the Muses, and that whenever we want to remember something we've seen or heard or conceived on our own, we subject the block to the

⁵ See, e.g., Tracy E. R o b e y, “Damnatio memoriae: The Rebirth of Condemnation of Memory in Renaissance Florence,” *Renaissance and Reformation* 36, no. 3 (2013): 5–32. Today, the emergence of new and technologically sophisticated forms of external memory which make it possible to preserve information, as it were, ‘forever’ have triggered a debate on “the right to be forgotten” (see. M i c h a e l i a n and S u t t o n, “Memory”).

⁶ Gaston B a c h e l a r d, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 74.

⁷ See *ibidem*, 78.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

perception or the idea and stamp the impression into it, as if we were making marks with signet-rings. We remember and know anything imprinted, as long as the impression remains in the block; but we forget and do not know anything which is erased or cannot be imprinted.”⁹ The choice of material of which memory, a divine gift, has been made appears interesting: wax is both soft enough and sufficiently hard to render faithfully and preserve the shape of an object stamped in it, while the impression may be also easily distorted and gradually fades away in time. Interestingly, the image of a wax block also indicates that remembering involves a voluntary act and that we are free to choose what we are going to remember. Enduring in the soul, Plato’s block of wax, resembles numerous ‘external’ objects capable of playing analogous roles. Such objects may differ considerably—as a wax block differs from a paper copybook, a computer hard disk drive or a virtual cloud—but all of them are used to store information. What these different forms of memory share with the wax blocks carried in our souls is the essential (albeit not fail-safe, which computer users know all too well) dependence of data recording (or of conveying something to memory) on the human will.

Drawn with a greater flourish, yet analogous, is the image of memory proposed by St. Augustine: “So then, I will leave behind that faculty of my nature [the senses], and mount by stages toward him who made me. Now I arrive in the fields and vast mansions of memory (*lata praetoria*), where are treasured innumerable images brought in there from objects of every kind perceived by the senses. There too are hidden away the modified images we produce when by our thinking we magnify or diminish or in any way alter the information our senses have reported. There too is everything else that has been consigned and stowed away, and not yet engulfed and buried in oblivion.”¹⁰ The image emphasizes the wideness of the ‘space’ of memory, which can neither be compared to a wax block, nor looks like a flash drive, but resembles a landscape or an edifice; memory is not a ‘portable’ device, but a place one visits in search of past impressions and ideas, in spite of the uncertainty as to whether what is sought is there to be found.

According to Gaston Bachelard, other attractive images of memory can be inspired by French literature. Compared to the Augustinian picture, they have been as if scaled down to accentuate the personal aspect of memory; they are “models of intimacy,”¹¹ hybrid “subject

⁹ P l a t o, *Theaetetus*, 191 d, trans. Robin A. H. Waterfield (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987), 99f.

¹⁰ S t . A u g u s t i n e, *The Confessions*, book 10, chapter 8, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1997), 244.

¹¹ B a c h e l a r d, *The Poetics of Space*, 78

objects”¹² associated with the human mode of existence, with inhabiting a home. For instance, Bachelard attaches a great importance to the image of a wardrobe (*armoire*), which he calls “a fine thing,”¹³ and “an entity of depth.”¹⁴ He cites the poem *Ève* by Charles Peguy, in which the words “wardrobe,” “memory” (*memoire*), and “temple” (*temple*) are repeated rhythmically and replace one another so as to become almost synonymous.¹⁵ “In the wardrobe—Bachelard also writes—there exists a center of order ... Here order reigns, or rather, this is the reign of order, Order is not merely geometrical; it can also remember the family history ... with the presence of lavender the history of the seasons enters into the wardrobe.”¹⁶ The image sketched by the French philosopher is redolent of peace, of the atmosphere of the childhood home turned into a myth, and although memories sometimes “come crowding,”¹⁷ such an inflow is not an attack of an uncontrollable or hostile force; rather, memories are like beams of light. And even the fact that the wardrobe, or memory, sometimes refuses to open and conceals its content cannot undermine the optimistic tenor of the image.

Not all the historical images of memory depict it as a kind of repository for what is past; modern ones, despite preserving their spatial character, appear much less static, as, for instance, the image that compares remembrance to a mental time travel. In the twentieth century, the concept of memory as a capacity of a mental travel in subjective time, i.e., of reliving past events, but also of anticipating future ones, is gaining popularity in psychology,¹⁸ in particular in the context of empirical studies.¹⁹ However, such an approach to memory dates back to St. Augustine’s attempts to define certain faculties of the soul: “The present of past things is memory, the present of the present is attention, and the present of future things is expectation.”²⁰

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem.

¹⁵ See, e.g., *Oeuvres complètes de Charles Péguy, 1873-1914*, vol. 7, *Ève* (Paris: Éditions de la Nouvelle revue française, 1925), 58.

¹⁶ B a c h e l a r d, *The Poetics of Space*, 79.

¹⁷ Ibidem.

¹⁸ See Endel T u l v i n g, “Episodic Memory: From Mind to Brain,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 53, no. 1 (2002): 5. Issues related to memory understood as a mental time travel are discussed in a monographic volume of *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*. See *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 11, no. 2 (2020).

¹⁹ See M i c h a e l i a n and S u t t o n, “Memory.” Some researchers believe that the ability to mentally travel in time distinguishes humans from other animals. See, e.g., Thomas S u d d e n d o r f and Michael C. C o r b a l l i s, “Evolution of Foresight: What is Mental Time Travel, and Is It Unique to Humans?,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 30, no. 3 (2007): 299–351.

²⁰ S t. A u g u s t i n e, *The Confessions*, book 11, chapter 20, 300.

The image of mental time travel to the past appears to pose something of a paradox by suggesting that the mind moves towards what has been remembered, while, at the same time, such travel is described as reliving or reconstructing the past in the present; as if it were the remembrance moving towards the mind rather than the mind moving towards the remembrance.

The paradox seems to have been avoided in the simile recently proposed by Clare Mac Cumhaill,²¹ who compared remembrance to “perception with a mirror”²²: “When one looks in the direction of a mirror in the same space in which one is, one can see regions behind one.”²³ By this image Mac Cumhaill refers to a particular type of memory—so far ignored, in her view, in scholarly research—which she calls “phasic memory,”²⁴ as opposed to episodic memory (memory of events) discussed in the context of mental time travel theories. Phasic memory, Mac Cumhaill claims, enables one to relive not only past events, but also “‘what it was like’ to be oneself at some earlier stage or phase in one’s personal history.”²⁵ Such an activity of memory is triggered by a renewed contact with certain objects known in the past, such as revisiting one’s childhood home, a walk in a forest frequented years before or, most importantly, rereading a book, relistening to a piece of music, or seeing again a once-enjoyed painting. It is due to the purpose of the works of art and to the attitude the subject assumes when confronted with them that the author attaches particular weight to these objects. As artworks have been designed to be contemplated, they are not used instrumentally but—to use the term Mac Cumhaill borrows from Kant—considered disinterestedly, and thus encounters with them make us “more apt to notice the effect they have on us.”²⁶

The images of memory recalled above represent different kinds of memory and ‘mechanisms’ of its activity, as well as its different aspects and ways in which it is experienced. None of those images, however, reveals the dramatic side to memory; at most, they reflect a melancholy awareness of its transient nature and an anxiety over possible distortion of past facts. The images in question ignore memories so permeated with violence that they might crash the wax blocks in our souls or demolish the walls of our memory palaces and populate them with ‘ghosts’ of people and events to which we would not wish to

²¹ C. M a c C u m h a i l l, “Still Life, a Mirror: Phasic Memory and Re-encounters with Artworks,” *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 11, no. 2 (2020): 423–46.

²² *Ibidem*, 424.

²³ *Ibidem*, 444; see also: *ibidem*, 423, 424.

²⁴ See, e.g., *ibidem*, 444.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, 423.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 426. For a discussion of the ontology of artworks that can trigger phasic memory see *ibidem*, 425–9.

return; memories do not push against the closed doors of an old beautiful wardrobe nor do they flood the imprudent person who decided to open them and risked being deprived of her safe sense of identity or burdened with guilt over what they she had not done. The images also keep silent about those lost in a mental time travel and unable to return to the present, or those who, appalled by the reflection of their past selves in metaphorical mirrors, will never find the courage to glance in them again. One might say that, because of the contexts in which they have been devised and the purposes they serve, the discussed images do not address the dark side of memory as their main theme, although they do not exclude it.

Some of them make memory seem passive: what is stored in it, what can emerge from it and become present appears inert, as if these were inanimate ‘things’ which are subject to gradual erosion. Human experience, however, challenges such representations, and not infrequently, even in most satisfying and quiet everyday life, does one find oneself at war with memory which proves active and loaded with an immense mental energy. Such experience has been accounted for in psychoanalysis (at least as intended by Sigmund Freud) which aims “to discover how our past, despite being irretrievably absent, maintains the power of its presence; and, to the extent possible, to devise means for undoing this power.”²⁷

Finally, neither addressing memory-related ethical issues would be eased by a reference to the discussed images. The social or cultural aspect of memory has been assumed in them but never brought to the fore, and they remain neutral about the moral content of recollections, whether they pertain to inflicting or experiencing evil. An even more important reason, however, for the ethical irrelevance of such images is their focus on the fact that we turn out helpless when faced with our memories, that memory inevitably distorts reality and cannot be controlled by the human will. Since we forget to remember what we would like (or what would be good for us) remember and, at the same time, we cannot forget, whether individually or collectively, what we wish (or what would be good for us) to forget, the power of memory turns into, so to speak, blind fate. What we take for memories (and much of that may be just fantasies or false beliefs) appears to shape us without us knowing about it or wishing it and to lead us where we would rather not go.

In the poem “From an Unwritten Theory of Dreams”, dedicated to Jean Améry, Zbigniew Herbert writes about “memory’s bell” which is heard in different ways by torturers, “good-natured genocides ... already forgiven by brief human memory,”²⁸ and by their

²⁷ Richard Terdiman, “Memory in Freud,” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, 94.

²⁸ Zbigniew Herbert, “From an Unwritten Theory of Dreams,” trans. Alissa Valles, in Herbert, *Pan Cogito szuka rady: Mr Cogito Seeks Advice*, ed. Alissa Valles, trans. Czesław

victims: in the former “memory’s bell awakens no ghosts or nightmares / memory’s bell repeats its great absolution”²⁹; to the latter “memory’s bell repeats its great terror / memory’s bell beats an unceasing alarm.”³⁰ In sustaining the complacency of the torturers and the suffering of the victims, the combined individual and collective memories are, in this case, false and unjust. It would be difficult to answer the question what one ought to do in a case like that. Endless public debate illustrates the difficulty to find solutions, in particular, practical solutions to individual problems. The fundamental and universal obligation, however, is apparently to be seeking and spreading the truth about the past, about bygone events which remain present in the collective memory. One can also point to another, related duty (it is not, in fact, an obligation towards memory or the past, however, being aware of the nature of memory helps appreciate the importance of the obligation), namely, the one to spare no effort to create a culture in which there would be no torturers and thus no victims. In the context of our historical memory, such a goal may appear utopian, but even modest success in this respect is significant for the humanity of every one of us. Efforts to achieve that goal require not only retaining the memory of evil, but also nurturing the memory of the creative and life-giving power of the good we have experienced and done.

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Miłosz, Peter Dale Scott, and Alissa Valles (Kraków: Wydawnictwo a5, 2019), 117.

²⁹ Ibidem.

³⁰ Ibidem, 119.