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MEMORY AS A SUBJECT OF EVALUATIVE INQUIRY

When we study, discuss, analyze a reality, we analyze it as it appears in our mind, in our memory. We know reality only in the past tense. We do not know it as it is in the present, in the moment when it's happening, when it *is*. The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting.

– Milan Kundera, *Testaments Betrayed*[1]

1. ELEMENTS OF A MORALITY OR ETHICS OF MEMORY

This is a book about memory and our relations to the past – our individual pasts and our collective pasts – written from the standpoints of the moral, social, and political branches of philosophy. The subject of memory has a long history within certain branches of philosophy, of course. In epistemology and metaphysics, philosophers going back to Plato have been intrigued by a phenomenon at once so familiar and yet mysterious.[2] They have addressed such questions as: is memory a form or source of knowledge? What sort of link with the past does memory establish? Can skepticism about memory be avoided? Is our concept of the past derived from memory, or does memory presuppose a concept of the past?

Since Locke, memory has also played a central role in philosophical discussions of the unity and continuity of the self. However, evaluative inquiry about memory has been curiously neglected by philosophers, at least those working within the analytic, or the Anglo-American, tradition. By and large, those who have engaged in this sort of inquiry have not been philosophers. For example, historians, political scientists, and legal scholars have written about how societies can and should confront large

scale wrongdoing in their pasts, and about memory in relation to this task, but the philosophical literature on the relationship between doing justice to the past and memory is still relatively small. Moreover, few analytic philosophers have contributed to the vast scholarly literature on memory in relation to the Holocaust or reflected on the critically important moral role that memory has come to play in its aftermath.

This book, a work of philosophy, examines a number of interrelated aspects of this neglected dimension of memory. It concerns itself with how and why memory should be preserved and transmitted, with the reciprocal relationship between memory and identity and the moral significance of this relationship, and with the moral responsibilities associated with memory. An account of these matters constitutes a good part of what I call a morality or an ethics of memory.[3] To begin this inquiry and set the stage for the chapters that follow, I will take up three sets of issues in this opening chapter. They are, roughly speaking, issues of *value*, of *responsibility*, and of *identity*. Each of these elements of a normative account of memory is addressed in later chapters to one degree or another.

The overarching theme of the book is what and why individuals and groups have responsibilities to remember. Identity, which shapes, and is shaped by, memory, is a source of these and other responsibilities, so identity will be part of my discussion of the main theme. But what I propose to begin with is the value of memory and the good of remembrance,[4] as judged from the individual as well as the collective standpoints. It makes sense to begin here, because doing so will help us to understand the grounds of our responsibilities to remember and the nature of the demands they place on us. I do not claim, and indeed it would be foolish to claim, that remembrance is a good at all times and in every circumstance. My contention is rather that, within limits and with respect to especially significant events, experiences, or people from the past, remembrance is an indispensable ingredient of a good life and a necessary condition of civic health. The question of what these limits should be is partly answered by considering when it is well, or good, or all-things-considered best, to forget. As we will see, reflection on the value of remembering is intimately wrapped up with reflection on the value of forgetting.

The topic of memory and value occupies Sections 2–4 of this chapter. Few philosophers have understood so well the interplay between remembering and forgetting and the potential cost, in human terms, of memory

and the value of forgetting, as Friedrich Nietzsche did. It is with his rich and rewarding early work, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," that I begin Section 2. For Nietzsche, the question is not *whether* we should remember – for we would not be human at all if we did not – but *how* we should do so, that is, how memory should be integrated into and function within the lives of individuals and groups. He inveighs against different sorts of misuse of memory, and we should be able to appreciate the concerns that led him to defend the value of forgetting, whether or not we fully accept his positive account of the proper operation of memory.

I continue in Section 3 with the theme of the misuse of memory by introducing the notion of a "surfeit of memory." This notion has both personal and political relevance, and I give some examples of situations in which it might be said to apply. The so-called *Historikerstreit* [the quarrel among historians] of the 1980s in West Germany, for instance, was in part a debate about the appropriate limits of reflection on and remembrance of the Nazi past.

This is followed in Section 4 by a discussion of the criteria for judging whether we, individually and collectively, have achieved an acceptable balance of remembering and forgetting. The balance is dynamic in the sense that what is an appropriate balance under some historical or psychological conditions might not be appropriate under others. This section affirms, with Nietzsche, that memory is not an unqualified good and provides a way of thinking about its value. The section is also relevant to the sections on memory and responsibility because it suggests that the duties associated with memory are not independent of their social and historical settings. For this reason too, they are not duties to engage in acts or practices of remembrance no matter what other values we have and what other commitments we have reason to consider.

The next element of a morality or ethics of memory – the responsibilities that attach to it – is the subject of Sections 5 and 6. In this book, I alternately speak about the "responsibility," "obligation," "duty," and "imperative" to remember. These terms may be given different meanings: for example, "responsibility" may be thought to involve a discretionary element lacking in duty, or to apply in the first instance to interpersonal relationships, whereas "duty" is more impersonal. Although distinctions can be made between them, and may be useful in some contexts, I will

use them more or less interchangeably. In my usage, these terms have the following features in common: they refer to acts that (a) one "ought" to perform; (b) are not fully morally elective and so not merely one among many morally good acts that one might choose; and (c) it is wrong not to perform. As to (c), there are various reasons why this might be so. For example, it may be wrong both to forget the victims of injustice as well as to forget one's deceased loved ones, but the reasons will have to be at least somewhat different in the two cases.

As I suggest in Section 5, talk about an "imperative" to remember seems particularly appropriate in the wake of large scale wrongdoing and crimes against humanity: these are events that, intuitively, it seems we ought to remember and do wrong not to remember. No doubt the currency of the language of obligation in this connection can be traced in large measure to the inescapable fact that we live today in the shadow of the Holocaust. But responsibilities of memory are not confined to such extreme situations. It is a central contention of this book that remembrance is not only a good when properly constrained, but also in various circumstances morally imperative for us. Yet this is problematic because memory, as I note, is notoriously fragile and manipulable. To fulfill the requirements of a morality of memory, therefore, individuals and groups have to engage in an ongoing struggle against the natural and social processes of forgetfulness.

I suppose that this struggle against the erosion of memory is one that morality can at least sometimes win, and that the various impediments to taking responsibility for the past can be overcome, even if only unsteadily. On this basis, I go on, in Section 6, to briefly discuss the meaning of taking responsibility for the past and the moral significance of doing so. I also introduce a distinction that plays a central role in subsequent chapters: between different modes of justifying the responsibilities of remembrance and, in particular, the responsibilities that we commit ourselves to follow through on when we take responsibility for the past. I call these the consequentialist and the expressivist modes. "Past" refers to both an individual's past and a group's past.

In Section 7, I explain why identity should be included as an element of a morality or ethics of memory by linking memory with identity and identity with obligation. Identity is a source of obligations in the sense that there are normative considerations of this sort that someone with a

particular identity must take into account by virtue of having this identity. When identity is implicated in remembrance, identity can supply powerful ethical reasons for regarding remembrance as an obligation. "Identity," in this context, refers to what is sometimes called *biographical identity* and to its group analogue.

2. NIETZSCHE ON THE MISUSES OF MEMORY

The morally significant questions about remembering do not simply have to do with whether we should remember or not. The questions are considerably more nuanced and complex than this. Remembering is not an activity that we can think about normatively in isolation from other important elements of personal and social life, because it is intertwined with these elements. So we also need to ask about the role that remembering should play in the lives of individuals and societies and the extent to which they should concern themselves with the past. One way of making the point is that the value of remembering must be understood in relation to the value of forgetting. More specifically, we can plausibly say that the responsibility to remember must be regulated and tempered by an appreciation of the need to forget, to shift whatever portion of the past is at issue away from the center and toward the periphery of our constellation of concerns. (The needs are of various sorts and include psychological as well as political ones, as I will discuss in Section 4.) But in our contemporary post-Holocaust world, where memory, however painful its contents, is prized, socially sanctioned, and even sanctified, there is understandable reluctance in many quarters to seriously take up the matter of forgetting and to consider what value it may have. In view of this, we would do well to turn to a philosopher who argued against a bias in favor of memory, Friedrich Nietzsche. The work I will focus on is the second of his early *Untimely Meditations*, "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life."[5] This essay, although targeting a certain kind of "historicism" popular in nineteenth-century German philosophy of history, also sheds light on aspects of our complex relationship to memory and, for this reason, deserves a close look.

To understand Nietzsche's basic stance toward memory, be it individual or collective memory, we should initially distinguish between two examples of what is meant by *not remembering*. Dumb animals, such as cattle,

live without boredom or pain because they do not remember: they have neither the capacity to remember, nor, strictly speaking, the capacity to forget. Because cattle "do not know what is meant by yesterday or today" (60), they have a kind of happiness that men, in their weaker moments, cannot help envying, but which, they realize on reflection, could not satisfy them. Much the same is true, Nietzsche says, of the very young child who "plays in blissful blindness between the hedges of past and future" (61). Neither the animal nor the very young child is capable of willed abandonment of the past (i.e., forgetting) and of selective remembering, and it is this capacity that is the key to the sort of happiness appropriate to man:

> In the case of the smallest or the greatest happiness, however, it is always the same thing that makes happiness happiness: the ability to forget or, expressed in more scholarly fashion, the capacity to feel *unhistorically* during its duration. . . . A man who wanted to feel historically through and through, would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination. (62)

One can exist happily without memory, in the manner of animals, but "it is altogether impossible to *live* [the italics are Nietzsche's own] at all without forgetting" (62). Nietzsche makes it clear, moreover, that his remarks about the value of living unhistorically, "within which alone life can germinate" (63), are intended to be quite general in the sense that they apply not only to individual persons, but to peoples and their shared way of life as well:

> *The unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people, and of a culture*. . . The question of the degree to which life requires the service of history at all . . . is one of the supreme questions and concerns in regard to the health of a man, a people or a culture. (63, 67)

Happiness for an individual or a people, that is, the sort of happiness that is suited to their nature, depends on the capacity to forget, more precisely, on the capacity to forget when it is appropriate to do so:

> on one's being just as able to forget at the right time as to remember at the right time; on the possession of a powerful instinct for sensing when it is necessary to feel historically and when unhistorically. (63)

The capacity to forget as well as to remember "at the right time" is an intelligent habit, and how much we can do this in the right measure not only determines our happiness but also bears on how admirable we are as individuals as well as peoples and nations.[6]

It is critically important that human happiness requires both the capacity to forget and the capacity to remember, because human beings cannot live without forgetting any more than they can live without remembering. Or rather it requires, in Nietzsche's view, the intricate *balancing* of living unhistorically (i.e., forgetting one's history) and remembering. We can clarify what Nietzsche has in mind here by considering different sorts of orientation toward the past that fail this balancing test and, therefore, are not conducive to the health and happiness of individuals and peoples. I will draw on Nietzsche's discussion of *monumental*, *antiquarian*, and *critical history* for this purpose, more specifically, on his discussion of the "disadvantages" of these sometimes useful forms of historical consciousness.[7] (As I discuss them in this chapter, they refer not only to different approaches to the *study* of the past, that is, to history as a branch of human inquiry, but, more broadly, to different ways of conceiving of and engaging with the past.) Although there are "services [each] is capable of performing for life" (77), and although each has an important and valuable role to play in the formation of an individual's and a society's character, Nietzsche warns that "sufficient dangers remain should [they] grow too mighty and overpower the other modes of regarding the past" (75), should one "mode of regarding history *rule[s]* over the others" (70). These are dangers that threaten individuals, groups of people, and their cultures, and the warnings are at least as pertinent today as they were in Nietzsche's time.

(a) *Monumental history and the influence of the past*

Monumental history, or "the monumentalistic conception of the past" (69), involves belief in former greatness as "worthy of imitation, [and] as imitable and possible for a second time" (70). Past events are depicted as epic and worthy and, viewed in this way, inspire the present generation to acts of heroism and self-sacrifice to redeem and pay homage to the past. On the macroscopic level, nations and social groups renew their strength and their sense of their identity not by delving deeper into the

details of what actually happened in the past – monumental history has "no use for that absolute veracity" – but by celebrating a fictional past that "come[s] close to free poetic invention." Indeed, the "same stimuli can be derived" from "a monumentalized past and a mythical fiction" (70). Similarly, in the life of an individual, forebears can provide inspiring examples of courage, dignity, and wisdom when hope dims or energies flag; encouragement might even come from returning in memory to one's own former accomplishments or promise of extraordinary achievement. In summary, by looking to the past in this way and for this purpose, man (i.e., individuals and peoples) can "gain, from great examples of what man can do, courage for his present activity, elevation of his nature, and consolation in despair."[8]

But the dangers of this way of regarding the past are not difficult to discern. Monumental history "inspires the courageous to foolhardiness and the inspired to fanaticism" (71). We can see ample evidence of this in our contemporary world where ethnic conflicts between groups seeking to avenge some past injustice and restore their former standing are fueled by this sort of history. When history is supplanted by political myth and memory is absorbed in work of preserving exemplars of greatness for our emulation, we become locked into a stultifying and potentially destructive relationship with the past. For the individual, there is the danger that the example of his forebears, or his own former self, will dispirit rather than inspire, will fill him with despair rather than console him, will mislead rather than direct him in constructive ways. He may know what greatness is but trying to emulate it may deform his character and cripple his potential for self-realization.

(b) *Antiquarian history and nostalgia*

The second mode of historical consciousness is antiquarian in the sense that an individual or nation looks to the past – and it must be to his or its *own* past – with "love and loyalty" (72). The value of the antiquarian sense lies in the fact that it gives individuals and peoples a sense of rootedness and historical continuity and in this way comforts them with a sort of existential reassurance. That is, although an individual's life or a people's way of life may seem contingent when viewed from a standpoint detached from those who life it is, the antiquarian sense saves them from

indifference, despair, and anomie. It does this by showing those whose life it is that their life or way of life is linked to a past that gives it a meaning and a purpose:

> the feeling antithetical to this [i.e. to a restless, cosmopolitan hunting after new and ever newer things], the contentment of the tree in its roots, the happiness of knowing that one is not wholly accidental and arbitrary but grown out of a past as its heir, flower and fruit, and that one's existence is thus excused and, indeed, justified. (74)

This is the feeling that the antiquarian sense imparts and the valuable, indeed essential, contribution that it makes to life.

The antiquarian sense goes wrong, however, for individuals as well as groups of people, when it reveres things of the past merely because they are past and does not distinguish among them as worthy, less worthy, or unworthy. In other words, the antiquarian sense errs when it treats the past as if it were worthy of veneration simply because the passage of time has given it some special authoritative status. When not carried to extremes, or when confined to matters that are of trivial importance, this sort of veneration is no doubt innocent enough, perhaps even commendable. Otherwise, there are clear dangers when critical reflection on the past and its lessons for the present is discouraged or, in more extreme cases, dismissed as failing to show proper respect for tradition:

> The antiquarian sense of a man, a community, a whole people always possesses an extremely restricted field of vision; most of what exists it does not perceive at all, and the little it does see it sees much too close up and isolated; it cannot relate what it sees to anything else and therefore accords everything it sees equal importance and therefore to each individual thing too great importance. There is a lack of that discrimination of value and that sense of proportion which would distinguish between the things of the past in a way that would do true justice to them. (74)

It is when "the antiquarian sense" becomes a more-or-less general orientation to the past, or when having a sense of proportion in relation to the past matters, that this indiscriminateness "hinders any firm resolve to attempt something new" (75) and causes paralysis in the man of action through too much emphasis on a certain kind of memory or conception of the past. When this happens, the past, we might say, has no present; it is wrapped in a kind of aura that effectively insulates it from the present.

As a consequence, our veneration renders us powerless to move beyond the past.

One manifestation of an antiquarian orientation to the past is *nostalgia*, and Nietzsche's critique can be taken as a warning about its dangers.[9] Avishai Margalit expresses the common understanding of nostalgia as something negative:

> An essential element of nostalgia is sentimentality. And the trouble with sentimentality in certain situations is that it distorts reality in a particular way that has moral consequences. Nostalgia distorts the past by idealizing it.[10]

On this view, nostalgia is a defect of memory or of memory accuracy: nostalgic memory is not faithful to the past because it distorts it. Another author goes farther and claims, in very Nietzschean spirit, that "nostalgia and remembering are in some sense antithetical, since nostalgia is a forgetting, merely regressive, whereas memory may look back in order to move forward and transform disabling fictions to enabling fictions, altering our relation to the present and future."[11] Nostalgia is a kind of escapism, typically escape from the complications and disappointments of the present into an imagined golden past of unalloyed happiness. The past is frozen in time and the nostalgic person either seeks to restore that ideal, usually with disastrous consequences, or broods over the impossibility of doing so. Thus understood, nostalgia is characterized by just those qualities that Nietzsche condemns in the antiquarian attitude toward the past.

We do well to take Nietzsche's warnings about the antiquarian sense to heart. Nostalgia, a manifestation of that sense, saturates our popular culture,[12] but it is a highly selective form of remembering and forgetting and we should be alert to how it may distort political and personal, public and private life. Nietzsche, however, also sees value in the antiquarian regard for the past and, like him, we should consider whether nostalgia can function positively in laying the foundation for innovation and growth. There are in fact other understandings of nostalgia – chiefly discussed in the psychology and sociology literature[13] – according to which nostalgia is not merely regressive and a longing for an idealized and unrealistic past. To be sure, nostalgia always involves (explicitly or implicitly) drawing a contrast between the present and the past, a contrast that is