

Towards a Phenomenology of Memory and Forgetting

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Abstract

Differences and trends in the discourse of memory in France have been consistent since the publication by Henri Bergson of *Matter and Memory* in 1896. In *History, Memory, Forgetting* published in 2000, Ricœur's approach goes further than Bergson, Durkheim and Halbwachs. The memory issue in Ricœur is closely linked to a "hermeneutics of the self" that he already introduced in *Oneself as Another* in 1990. It seems that the traditional paradigm between individual and collective memory has been replaced by the necessary affirmation of the dialogical nature of memory related to the dialogical nature of the being as a self and as an other.

Keywords: Memory, History, Forgetting, Phenomenology, Hermeneutics

Résumé

Les discussions autour de la question de la mémoire en France ont été nombreuses depuis la parution en 1896 de *Matière et Mémoire* de Henri Bergson. Dans *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli* paru en 2000, l'approche de Ricœur semble aller plus loin que les précédentes tentatives de Bergson, Durkheim et Halbwachs. La question de la mémoire chez Ricœur est intimement liée à une "herméneutique du soi" introduite déjà en 1990 dans *Soi-même comme un autre*. Il semblerait que le traditionnel paradigme entre mémoire individuelle et mémoire collective ait été remplacé par la nécessaire affirmation de la nature dialogique de la mémoire liée à la nature dialogique de l'être en tant que soi et en tant qu'autre.

Mots-clés : Mémoire, Histoire, Oubli, Phénoménologie, Herméneutique

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Introduction

Differences and trends in the discourse of memory in France have been consistent since the publication by Henri Bergson of *Matter and Memory* in 1896. In *History, Memory and Forgetting* published in 2000, Ricœur's treatment of the question of memory goes further than Bergson, Durkheim or Halbwachs, and it is closely linked to the "hermeneutics of the self" that he already introduced in *Oneself as Another* in 1990. However, the heritage of this discourse of memory in France, since Bergson, is clearly present in the work of Ricœur, and it seems that, with him and through him, the discussion has come to a conclusion. The traditional paradigm of the relation between individual and collective memory has been replaced by the necessary affirmation of the dialogical nature of memory related to the dialogical nature of the human being as a self and as an other.

The discourse on memory in France really gained importance with the publication in 1896 of *Matter and Memory* by Henri Bergson (1859-1941), where he studied in particular the functions of the brain, and examined the relationship between perception and memory, as well as the problems in the relationship between mind and body. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) was of the same generation as Bergson and another prominent figure in the debate on memory that was going on in France in the late 19th century. In 1895, Durkheim wrote *The Rules of Sociological Method*, where he proposed a holistic view for the study of the social fact, refusing to study the psychological aspects of the individual. In 1898, he founded the journal *L'Année sociologique*, which would help to give a strong impetus to French sociology. A third important figure linked to the study of memory in France is Maurice Halbwachs (1877-1945), a sociologist and disciple of Durkheim. Bergson's influence on the work of Halbwachs would also be central, as I will show later. But it would be necessary to recognize a certain evolution in the work of Halbwachs. In *The Social Framework of Memory* (1925), he first demonstrates how the memory is activated by the context, or the socio-cultural framework in which the individual operates. His study of memory in the context of the family would especially have an influence on oral history. In *La topographie légendaire des Évangiles en Terre Sainte: Étude de Mémoire Collective* (1941), he emphasizes the aspect of localizable memory, giving birth to the concept of "lieux de mémoire"/"realms of memory" that would later influence historians of *The Annales School of Thought*, such as Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora. Paul Ricœur, with *History, Memory, Forgetting* published in 2000, draws a broad panorama of the discourse on history and memory by providing an overview of the subject since Antiquity, but also by integrating the fundamental question of forgetting. Forgetting and memory in Ricœur are like two sides of the same coin. In this respect, the words of Ricœur are unequivocal:

I remain troubled by the disturbing spectacle that gives too much memory here, too much forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of

memory – and forgetting. The idea of a fair politics of memory is, in this regard, one of my confessed civic themes.¹

I should also add that the subject of memory, commemoration and forgetting has been very much discussed in France since the establishment in 2008 of a parliamentary commission of information on memorial issues. This commission had to clarify the questions of “too much memory,” on the one hand, and “too much forgetting” on the other, but the commission also had to rule on the role of the political in the historical discourse, particularly related to the question of the history curriculum at school.

This commission of information emerged in a context of “rebellion” among a number of French historians, including Pierre Nora, Henry Rousso, François Dosse, who since the 1990s were facing the implementation of a consistent number of laws in France which, according to them, have had adverse effects on the flexibility of the work of historians.² The European Framework Decision of the 19th and 20th of April 2007, which introduced among other things a “crime of trivialization” of all war crimes and crimes against humanity, has also provoked strong reactions in France, Italy, Belgium and England. The question of the relationship between history and memory, and the problems that the judgment of the past from a present perspective and from a political institution may introduce, have been and are still central to these discussions.

The Discourse of the Scholars of Antiquity: Aristotle and Plato

The discourse on the relationship between memory and history is not new. The influence of Aristotle on the memorial discourse in France in the late 19th century was inevitable. For Aristotle, the imagination is a necessary condition for remembering and reminiscing. This led Aristotle, in *Poetics*, to conclude that the poets’ depiction of reality lay closer to the truth than that of the historians. Aristotle does not consider that there is a clear distinction between past and present. The subject of the memory necessarily belongs to the past while the perception of it belongs to the immediate present:

Memory is, therefore, neither perception nor conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by a lapse of time. As already observed, there is no such thing as memory of the present while present, for the present is the object only of perception, and the future, of expectation, but the object of memory is the past.³

Time as cumulative and memory as a process going from an affection in the past to a perception in the present are central issues in Aristotle. In contrast, the past-present relation in Plato is defined as an *aporia*, which is a kind of “non-sense.” The *aporia* persists in Plato, since he perceives the purpose of memory as to remember a “non-object,” in other words, to make present an object that does not exist any longer. This difference between the “has been” in Aristotle and the “no longer” in Plato is fundamental in all discussions on the issue of memory up to today.

In this context Aristotle speaks about two kinds of relation between affection and perception. He makes a distinction between *mneme* which is a memory that occurs unexpectedly and is caused by external stimuli and *anamnesis*, which is an active and voluntary process of rediscovery of the past. The mental image produced by the memory, according to Aristotle, is never a revelation of an image stored passively, but the result or the consequence of an active

process due to the lapse of time, which separates the object/the event itself from the reception or the perception of the object/the event in a more or less distant future.

There is a distinction between the representation of memory and the writing of history. The main difference lies, not so much in the final product, as in the process of rediscovery, that is to say, in the hunt for the past. Historians are bound to base their work on known or established historical facts or on official sources, at the same time as they are obliged to document, or prove, their findings. To a much greater extent, the representation and the perception of memory integrates an emotional and pictorial dimension. History tries to organize knowledge about the past and to structure time into various periods, whereas memory is a continuous phenomenon: memories exist insofar as they are still alive in the mind of the narrator. Memories are perceptible: they affect our emotions, our ways of thinking, our actions and our interactions with others.⁴

The Variability of Memory in Bergson, Durkheim and Halbwachs

For many philosophers who were opposed to the objective positivism of the late 19th century, the mental image produced by the memorial process could only be the result of a subjective process in which time and perception play a major role. For Bergson as for Durkheim, subjectivism is the only valid answer, the only source of philosophical truth related to the experience of time. This consideration would have a major influence on a writer such as Proust through his work on *In Search of Lost Time* (earlier translated as *Remembrance of Things Past*) where the experience of the past and the memory is generally described as involuntary. The most famous experience of involuntary memory is known as “the episode of the madeleine” in *Swann’s Way* from 1913:

She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called petites madeleines, which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim’s shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place...at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory...⁵

As Deleuze recalls, Bergson is not one of those philosophers for whom the pursuit of philosophy is related to the search for wisdom or a proper human balance. In Bergson, there is a genuine willingness to consider the human condition as “poorly analyzed” and philosophy as a “necessary effort to overcome his own human condition.”⁶ Time is for Bergson synonymous with duration. This means that time is pure movement, ceaseless change and process because the human consciousness is fundamentally directed towards action.⁷

The central difference between Bergson and Durkheim is that, according to Bergson, the variability of memory is linked to the subjective reception of the material by the body in which perception and affection play a central role. However, in Durkheim subjectivity is mostly related to the variability of the relation that the structure or the social relationship maintains with

time and duration. Durkheim stated his point of view very clearly in *The Rules of the Sociological Method*, where he divided psychology and sociology into two clearly separated areas:

[...] [The] new phenomena that arise in society are by definition different from those which occur in the solitary consciousness; we have to recognize that these specific facts reside in the society which produces them, not in its parts, that is to say its members. They are therefore, in this sense, external to the individual consciousness, considered as such.⁸

In this respect, collective memory in Durkheim cannot be dependent on the individual consciousness; it has a life of its own. Conversely, for Bergson, memory is a central element of life in both psychology and sociology, not just an interesting aspect of the social structure.

This concept of the variability of memory linked to time would also be essential in Halbwachs, who would very easily recognize himself in the theses of Durkheim. It should be mentioned that he would himself become Durkheim's student at the "Ecole Normale Supérieure" from 1898 to 1901. In the beginning Halbwachs would clearly steer away from the Bergsonian approach, which would lead him to write *The Social Framework of Memory*. In this book he tries to establish a typology of memory by identifying specific types of memory depending on the social context and time in which they could emerge. In this respect, he particularly studied the collective memory related to the family, the social class and the religious community. When it comes to the family, he stated, among other things, that the expression of feelings within the family is always the result of family structure, and that this is the condition for preserving cohesion within the family. To prove the structural dependence of memory, Halbwachs contends that the child's upbringing and development of his or her personality is dependent on the parents' view on their own children, even during adulthood. According to Halbwachs, it is the structure to which we belong, "the other from the outside," which works as a stimulus and gives us the opportunity to remember:

When we meet a friend that we haven't seen for a very long time, we have some difficulty, at first, talking to him. But soon, when we have discussed a whole variety of circumstances that each of us remembers and which are not the same although they relate to the same events, we become able to think and to remember together. The facts from the past become more important, we relive it more forcibly, because we are not representing it alone, and because we see it now, as we have seen it previously, when we looked through our eyes, and at the same time through the eyes of another.⁹

However, Halbwachs disagrees with Durkheim for whom there is a social consciousness outside and totally independent of the individual consciousness. It is at this point that Halbwachs distances himself from Durkheim. He asserts that the collective memory cannot be created without the influence of the social context, but he does not accept the fact that collective memory has an independent life from the individual consciousness. Collective memory in Halbwachs is necessarily plural and not unitary. This point is crucial because, I believe, it has led to many misunderstandings of Halbwachs' work.

As previously mentioned, the group functions as a stimulus in Halbwachs, but the interdependence between the individual and the collective memory is not rejected. Therefore, this brings him much closer to the thesis of Bergson. At this level an evolution in the theories of Halbwachs is evident between the publication of *The Social Framework of Memory* in 1925 and *On*

Collective Memory in 1950. In *On Collective Memory*, it is no longer just a question of a sociological study of memory; there is rather a clear affirmation of the ontological and internal dimension of the memorial phenomenon:

Our memories remain collective, and they are remembered by others, even though it is events in which we have been involved alone, and even though it is objects that we have seen only by ourselves. The reality is that we are never alone. It is not necessary that other people who differ materially from us are there, because we always bring with us and always bear in us a lot of people.¹⁰

This affirmation of an interdependence and interaction between the inner and the outer is in many ways similar to what Bergson asserts in *Creative Evolution* (1907) when he says that the individual experience is never singular, but always collective because it necessarily happens in relation with others.¹¹ Ricœur, who argues that the relationship to history is always shaped with a triple attribution to the self, relatives and others, also shares this point of view:

We would say that each individual memory is a particular point of view on the collective memory, that the view changes according to the place I occupy and that the place itself changes according to the relationship I have with other environments.¹²

In this sense, I cannot agree with Ricœur when he claims that Halbwachs goes too far by crossing the line between “we can’t remember alone” to “we are not genuine owners of our memories.” I believe that the thesis of Halbwachs is, in many ways, similar to Ricœur’s affirmation, and we can still wonder why Ricœur is not according much more interest to Halbwachs’ work. But Ricœur’s approach goes further than Bergson or Halbwachs by the fact that it is closely linked to a “hermeneutics of the self” that Ricœur introduces in *Oneself as Another* (1990). In this work he seeks both the recognition of a plurality and an otherness within the same individual. The other is not just an external element, but also a constitutive element of the being.

The starting point of Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of the self” is to consider a difference between the “I” and the “self.” The “I” of the human being, or what he calls “sameness” or “*idem-identity*,”¹³ is the constitutive and deep characteristic of the human being. It is the part of the individual that does not change and that makes it possible to recognize him/her. The “self” which is related to “*ipséité*” or “*ipse-identity*” is the part of the individual who is subject to change and contains an element of otherness. In Ricœur otherness is not only an element of comparison but also an element of involvement, not only an element from the outside, but also from the inside of the being.

Being able to talk about the other as an outside person (or what Ricœur called “*le particulier de base*”¹⁴), but also as a part of the self, is one of the central elements of the rhetoric in Ricœur and becomes a very important element when we consider the issue of memory. I believe this perspective of the “I” and the “self” contributes to a shift in the debate over the controversy between individual and collective memory, from an individual and collective perspective to a dialogical perspective, from a perspective of comparison to a perspective of involvement. The dialogical perspective in Ricœur is also an “inside perspective”, not only an “in between perspective,” situating Ricœur in the heritage of Bakhtin’s dialogism.¹⁵

Ricœur towards a Phenomenology of Memory and Forgetting

Links between Bergson and Ricœur become explicit in Ricœur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*, in which he fully acknowledges the legacy of Bergson's work and, in particular, in the chapter related to "Forgetting and the Persistence of Traces."¹⁶ There is in Bergson and Ricœur a strong and clear position on what could be called a phenomenology of time. In other words, our conscious life is in a perpetual oscillation between the dynamics of retention and protention. In that way, the phenomenology of time allows us to explore the meaning of our past intimately associated with an enhanced understanding of the future.

The discourse on memory in Ricœur is obviously highly influenced by the positions of Husserl. In Ricœur, the past is also considered as a "having been" and not only as a "being no longer,"¹⁷ thus recalling the words of Michel de Certeau for whom "deaths are absent from history, but these beings who are no longer are also beings who have been."¹⁸ In other words, there is the need to consider the legacy of the past in duration, which is cumulative, and which we have *in* us more or less consciously. Thus, even the forgotten event is a part of our personal time, since the fact that it has been forgotten does not mean that it has not existed or does not exist anymore.

Ricœur disagrees here with Bergson, for whom forgetting is in reality a complete logic of deletion:

All the facts and all analogies are in favor of a theory that would consider the brain as an intermediary object between the sensations and movements, which would make of this set of sensations and movements the tip of mental life, continuously inserted into the events. By giving to the body the only function of guiding the real memory and of connecting it to the present, it will define the memory as absolutely independent of matter. In this way the brain helps to recall the useful memories, but even more to exclude all others.¹⁹

For Ricœur, forgetting has the ability to become a timeless resource and is not to be considered just as a deletion.²⁰ Ricœur considers forgetting as a possible world of expectation, or what he calls "the reserve of forgetting."²¹ This paradigm of forgetting as both a "reserve" and "deletion" is at the origin of what Ricœur calls "the alarming threat which is at the back-plane of the phenomenology of memory and epistemology of history."²² But at the same time, Ricœur considers the problem of the reliability of memory, of the veracity of history, and the problem that memory could shape on the existence of the self and on the coexistence with others.

The real question in *Memory, History, Forgetting* is a matter of ontological nature. Indeed, if in *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur poses the question of the past as an enigma that cannot only be met by the gaze of the historian, but that needs to be rebuilt or retold, the central problem in *Memory, History, Forgetting* is linked to the question of the truth about the nature of the human being as a part of a dialogical or multi-directional process where the "myself-for-myself," the "myself-for-the-other," and the "other-for-myself" are in perpetual interaction.

In this sense, it is through both the paradigm of the question of forgetting and through the concept of the *ipse*, that Ricœur, in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, shifts the paradigm raised in particular by the debate between Bergson and Halbwachs, between individual and collective memory. The central issue is no longer whether to discuss the origin or the structure of memory at an individual or a collective level, but to be aware of the dialogical nature of the human being,

the risks that forgetting may cause for the many and complex relations between the self and the other and thus the necessary work of memory (the Aristotelian *anamnesis*) into forgetting as a reserve. According to Ricœur, the individual and the collective, the private and the social, the inner and the outer, all interact with each other and might lead to the possible “extension of personal expectations.”²³

From this consideration emerges the necessary development of what might be called an “ethics of memory” which would include the concept of “work of memory” as a process and the concept of “forgiveness” as an ultimate goal.

According to the subject of the “work of memory,” Ricœur states clearly that the concept of the “has-been” makes it possible to consider forgetting as an available resource for the work of memory.²⁴ This implies the negation of the ethical neutralization and the opening of the past to a consideration that is not necessarily historiographic. As such, for example, Ricœur points out in *Time and Narratives* the inconceivable ethical neutralization when we talk about Auschwitz, indicating at the same time that sometimes it requires an ethical position, which is not neutral. Thus Ricœur does not contest the “duty of memory,” as he has sometimes been criticized for. Instead, he claims the absolute need to join the “duty of memory” and the “work of memory,” thus saving the “has been” from the risk of becoming the “no longer.” Ricœur reaffirms therefore the central role of the historian, in addition to the need to open historiography to other forms of narratives, such as memorial testimony, for example.

The opening of the study of memory to the truth of the nature of the human being also leads to the notion of “forgiveness.” According to Ricœur, forgiveness can only be practiced and revealed individually and directly from victim to perpetrator. Forgiveness can be considered as an active and voluntary oversight, in other words as an *ethical use of forgetting*. Agreeing in this with Derrida, who argues that forgiveness should be neither normal nor normative nor normalizing but has to be maintained as exceptional,²⁵ Ricœur also strongly condemned the institutionalization of forgiveness or the political use of forgiveness in the example of amnesty granted by a state that requires the suppression of the fundamental right to remember.²⁶

“Forgiveness” in Ricœur has to be closely related to the broader concept of “debt.” In this sense, “being-in-debt” in Ricœur is opposed to “being-for-death” in Heidegger. According to Hannah Arendt, erasing the debt leads to an active erasure that leads to the impossibility of “continuing the action” or of overcoming our own human condition, to use the words of Bergson. In that way, the relationship between memory and history is reversed. Like historians such as Pierre Nora and Henry Rousso, Ricœur recommends considering history from the present, which would enable a reflection on the event between experience and the horizon of expectation.²⁷

Conclusion

Ricœur’s work, especially *Memory, History, Forgetting*, can be considered an integral part of the discourse on memory in France which started with Bergson and *Matter and Memory* in 1896. There are many more commonalities between Bergson, Halbwachs and Ricœur than *Memory, History, Forgetting* leads us to believe. The relations we have established here between Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* (1907), which is a main reference in Ricœur, and Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory* (1950) lead us to a new perception of their understanding of the individual and the collectivity to which they all refer. It is never a question of a unitary collectivity from which the

individual disappears, but a dialogical collectivity in which the individual plays an active part. Memories are always shaped in relation to others. In fact, the traditional paradigm of individual and collective memory may even lead to a non-sense, since the nature of memory is dialogical. Even though Ricœur, Halbwachs and Bergson clearly introduce a dialogical relation between the individual and the collective, Ricœur goes further in developing a dialogical dimension within the self. In Halbwachs, otherness was present in the self, but it was considered as the other-from-the-outside, whereas in Ricœur otherness comes not only from the outside but also from within.

In order to understand the past better and in order to make the past a real resource for new experiences and future expectations, it is necessary to consider the dialogical nature of memory. Memories are dialogical not only because of their narrative structure but also because of their ontological nature. This leads us to consider the polyphonic nature of the truth, present both in the search of the truth but also in the telling of the truth. That is not to say that there is no truth, instead it is to remind us that the truth is not unitary and thus is fragile, for better or worse.

- ¹ Paul Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), 1. [Translation mine]
- ² It is about the "Gayssot Act" from the 1990, which condemns denial of Holocaust, but also the "Taubira Act" from 2001 which recognized slavery as a crime against humanity and the "Mekachera Act" of 2005 which recognizes the "positive role" of colonization.
- ³ In *The works of Aristotle* "On memory and reminiscence" (vol. 3), ed. WD Ross. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930).
- ⁴ Alexandre Dessingué, et. al., *Memories from the War – Sola War Graves* (Stavanger: Hertevig Akademisk, 2009), 100.
- ⁵ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu, volume I. Du côté de chez Swann*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), 76. [Translation mine]
- ⁶ Gilles Deleuze, *Le bergsonisme* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2007), 19. [Translation mine]
- ⁷ Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 2007), 200.
- ⁸ Émile Durkheim, *Les règles de la méthode sociologique* (Paris: PUF, 2007), 12. [Translation mine]
- ⁹ Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997), 52. [Translation mine]
- ¹⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, 52. [Translation mine]
- ¹¹ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (NY: Dover, 1998), 93.
- ¹² Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 152. [Translation mine]
- ¹³ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1990), 11.
- ¹⁴ Ricœur, *Soi-même comme un autre*, 43.
- ¹⁵ For the link between Bakhtin and Ricœur, see Alexandre Dessingué, "Polyphonisme de Bakhtine à Ricœur," *Atelier de théorie littéraire* (2007) on <http://www.fabula.org>
- ¹⁶ Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 554.
- ¹⁷ Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 367.
- ¹⁸ Michel De Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 120.
- ¹⁹ Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire*, 198. [Translation mine]
- ²⁰ Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 574.
- ²¹ Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 656.
- ²² Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 553.
- ²³ Ricœur, *Temps et récit I* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 151
- ²⁴ Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 574.
- ²⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Le siècle et le pardon," *Le Monde des débats*, 12/1999.
- ²⁶ Ricœur, *La Mémoire, l'histoire et l'oubli*, 585-589.

- ²⁷ Reinhart Kosseleck, "Champ d'expérience et horizon d'attente" in *Le futur passé: contribution à la sémantique des temps historiques* (Paris: Editions de l'EHESS, 1990).