

MAŁGORZATA HOŁDA

## CAN FORGETTING BE CONSTRUCTIVE? THE HERMENEUTICS OF MEMORY, FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

**Abstract.** In his hermeneutics of memory, Ricoeur points to the dialectic character of the interrelation between remembering and forgetting. He abandons an understanding of forgetting as limited only to oblivion, or to deletion in the Bergsonian use of the term. He supplants the negativity of forgetting by the productivity of disremembering, and stretches forgetting to its reserve, to the dynamic unveiling of the details of past events, with varied degrees of truthfulness and accuracy. This article attempts to demonstrate that the positivity of forgetting in the context of reconciliation is a tangible possibility. Forgetting is viewed here as a positive, constructive faculty, which influences the future, makes it possible to create and shape it, and is opposed to a slavish adherence to memory anchored wholly in the past. The totality of the anchorage in the past results in an exclusive focus on remembering, and causes the impasse of being entrapped in a disconsolate past. We ascertain that forgetting is not a failure but rather a productive possibility, either self-creative or purgative, to educate oneself and the Other towards a more promising future.

**Keywords:** forgetting, forgiveness, philosophical hermeneutics, reconciliation, Paul Ricoeur

1. Introduction. 2. The dialectics of forgetting and remembering. 3. Forgetting, justice and reconciliation. 4. Forgetting and self-education. 5. Forgetting, accountability and narrative identity. 6. Forgetting and the subconscious. 7. Conclusion.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur states: “In the first instance and on the whole *forgetting* is understood as an attack on the reliability of memory. An attack, a weakness, a lacunae. In this regard, memory defines itself, at least in the first instance, as a struggle against forgetting.”<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur’s words express the commonly held view which

---

1 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer, Chicago 2004, 413.

sees forgetting as a negative quality. In this article, we pinpoint the possibility of a positive view of forgetting that is in accord with forgiving and the ensuing process of learning. Ricoeur's hermeneutics of memory and forgetting surmounts an understanding of forgetting as limited only to oblivion, or to deletion in the Bergsonian use of the term. Ricoeur supplants the negativity of forgetting by a productivity of disremembering. He broadens forgetting to its reserve, to the dynamic unveiling of the details of past events, with varied degrees of truthfulness.<sup>2</sup> Instead of grieving the impossibility of the completeness of remembering, he would rather speak of the monstrosity of an out-and-out memory, drawing on Luis Borges' imagery in *Funes the Memorious*.<sup>3</sup> In his hermeneutics of memory, Ricoeur expounds the interconnectedness of forgetting and forgiving, as well as the ethics of forgetting and reconciliation. He sees forgetting as an ethical issue.<sup>4</sup> In this article we follow Ricoeur's explication of the dialectics of forgetting and remembering, as well as his inimitable approach to justice and love as interlaced, and to the possibility of reconciliation. We also address the issue of forgetting and self-education as ensuing from the process of reconciliation. Last but not least, we signal the relationship between forgetting and the subconscious.

## 2. THE DIALECTICS OF FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

A discussion of the positivity of forgetting raises various questions pertaining to the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon. Is constructive forgetting an unthinkable possibility? Or is it a leeway oriented towards achieving profound changes in the 'I' and 'Thou' relation? To what degree and in what ways is the negativity

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>3</sup> L. Borges, *Funes the Memorious*, in: *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and other Writings*, eds. D.A. Yeats, J.E. Irby, New York 1962, 59–66.

<sup>4</sup> P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer, Chicago 2004, 452–453.

of forgetting transformable into a productive stimulus in learning – learning *with* and *from* each other? Can the positivity of forgetting genuinely enhance self-education? These and other queries related to the paradox of the positive, productive dimension of forgetting and, thus, of enriched learning, will be considered in this article in light of the exceptionality of forgiveness and the necessity to forget according to Ricoeur.

We should like to begin with a clear-cut but telling statement: in order to live one needs to forget, or with another significant contention: to forget means to have hope. We propose to see the radicalness of this avowal as echoing an important assertion by Tzvetan Todorov: “Narrative equals life; absence of narrative, death.”<sup>5</sup> Surprisingly as it may seem, forgetting performs a similar role to that of narrating. As the possibility of surfacing the concealed, a narrative occasions an outlet of the healing energy, which comes from the release of the repressed, the hidden, the unarticulated, the inexpressible, or even the reprehensible. The lapses of memory, the fissures in remembering the evil or the wounded past become meaningful loopholes in a narrative – the markings of the often-inexpressible emotions and images of the past. Forgetting serves the role of mitigating the poignancy of the past, and thus brings about a more benevolent view of the human being, whose proclivity not to remember creates the space for a renewed recognition of the Other, but also of oneself as the Other. In other words, narrating, remembering, unveiling, and equally crucially forgetting, which dismisses the narrative opportunity, are of ontological nature. They are wholly immersed in the texture of a lived experience – an experience which is always and in each case unique, and which always demands a distinctive approach and treatment. The art of forgetting exerts an enormous impact on life and on the possibility to educate oneself and the Other in an ongoing process which encompasses

---

5 T. Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, Ithaca (NY) 1977, 37.

a positive state of dis-remembering, and which aims at reconciliation and a new beginning.

One form of forgetting is an attentive prioritizing of some constituents of the past over some others. Forgetting can also mean an awareness of memory's delimitations. To configure and to reconfigure the retrieved past is the way memory operates. We can pose a question: is remembering and, therefore, not forgetting, a responsibility which cannot be dismissed? Ricoeur argues: "The duty of memory is the duty to do justice."<sup>6</sup> The inextricability of remembering and reconciliation leads to an execution of justice. In *Who Decides Whether to Remember or Forget?*, Marcie Mersky explains the need for remembering and analyzing past events thus: "in many places after periods of massive human rights violations and atrocity, the demand for truth became much broader, as a call not only to reveal the facts of the violations themselves, but also to explore the root causes of the violations and underlying historical grievances."<sup>7</sup> She contends that wounds remain open, not just because they are remembered, but because they are not re-articulated, or because they remain ignored, or even negated. Thus, remembering may mean a chance to reconcile.<sup>8</sup> However, oddly as it may seem at first glance, when we consider the opposite of remembering, that is forgetting, we can also conceive of it in terms of an achievement. This happens in cases where the past amounts to an insoluble impossibility, an impasse of not re-living the occurrences which were too improbable to be cured. If forgetting is instantaneously regarded as a negativity, can we speak of ways in which it can become affirmative and constructive?

Ricoeur speaks of the tension between remembering and forgetting. The dialectical nature of memory's workings beckons the problem of

---

6 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, op. cit., 89.

7 M. Mersky, *Who Decides Whether to Remember or Forget?*, <https://www.ictj.org/debate/article/remember-or-forget> [accessed on 4.04.2018], 1.

8 *Ibid.* 1.

the preciseness of the recalled past, the faithfulness of the account and the use and abuse of memory. In *Is memory for remembering? Recollection as a form of episodic hypothetical thinking*, Filipe De Brigard claims that “remembering is a particular operation of a cognitive system that permits the flexible recombination of different components of encoded traces into representations of possible past events that might or might not have occurred, in the service of constructing mental simulations of possible future events.”<sup>9</sup> We would like to use this definition of remembering to discuss its apparent opposite – forgetting. The encoded traces may vary in degrees of truthfulness. Accordingly, different levels of faithfulness equal differing levels of forgetting. Forgetting amounts to the crevices existing in a smooth, uninterrupted flow of memories. Forgetting of the poignant past seems to be dictated by the need to reconstruct the traces in such a way as to conquer the past which we cannot and do not accept. The unacceptable must be forgotten to make space for the simulations and constructions of the possible future, which are constitutively acceptable.

The positivity of forgetting is a necessity and a chance for a new beginning. Forgetting is not an expression of negligence or ignorance. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to renew the power of dialogue, especially in situations of conflict. The indispensability and irreducibility of dialogue to heal the wounds of the past rests not on a dilettante obliviousness, but on a deliberate, mindful re-visiting and re-working of the wrongs with an aim to educate oneself and the Other towards righteousness and justice. The conscious choice to forget the disgraceful is so vital because it helps build a bridge between the inconsolable past and the life-giving future. In *Paul Ricoeur’s Pedagogy of Pardon. A Narrative Theory of Memory and Forgetting*, Maria Duffy notices: “Memory is one of the most fragile

---

9 F. De Brigard, *Is memory for remembering? Recollection as a form of episodic hypothetical thinking*, in: *Synthese* 191(2014)2, 155–185, 2014, 156.

faculties, open to abuse as well as use, life-enhancing as well as life-diminishing.”<sup>10</sup> The two divergent poles of memory’s workings, life-enhancement and life-curtailement, are in a constant struggle, especially when the negativity of the wounded past seems to speak loud and is daunting. The tension between the two viable possibilities betokens the tenuousness of the human condition and the complex and challenging task of reconciliation.

In a different passage Duffy explains: “Allowing painful memories to emerge can be costly and suppression is one way of coping with the truth. Fear can block and distort the act of remembering as it may be too dangerous to remember, especially if the *status quo* is unchanged.”<sup>11</sup> The suppression, blockage, or distortion of memories are commonly viewed as ways to overcome the grueling past. We provide a further explication of the suppressed memories in the last subsection of this article. The negative mental techniques mentioned here are seen, however, as controversial in leading to a constructive overcoming of the abstruse, strenuous and troublesome past. The productive work of reconciliation is based predominantly on the positivity of forgetting, which comes from the re-opening of the past in order to forget and heal. Ricoeur’s model of forgetting relies on the premise of its beneficial outcome for individuals and communities. Practicing positive forgetting may and does affect both victims and perpetrators.

### 3. FORGETTING, JUSTICE AND RECONCILIATION

Rejecting forgetting seems an all too easy option. Ricoeur meaningfully shifts attention away from vengeance and compensation to, as he asserts, the true purpose of forgetting and reconciliation, which is peace. In her review article of Ricoeur’s *The Just*, Linda M. MacCammon

---

10 M. Duffy, *Paul Ricoeur’s Pedagogy of Pardon. A Narrative Theory of Memory and Forgetting*, London – New York 2011, 10.

11 *Ibid.* 10.

explains: “Ricoeur contends that justice does not spring primarily from a deontological sense of duty, but is an integral part of the ethical intention *to live a good life with and for others in just institutions*. In his words, the just “is first an object of desire, of a lack, of a wish. It begins as a wish before it is an imperative.”<sup>12</sup>

The longing for justice is dictated by a desire. This desire is the expectance of a return to equilibrium. To reconcile means to surpass the forced and evil asymmetry between ‘I’ and ‘Thou,’ the subjugated and the occupant, the unjustly treated and the justice seeker, the victim and the wrongdoer. The hideously built clash of interests, the unjust treatment, the atrocities of wars call for a reenactment of interpersonal balance or inter-national stability. According to Ricoeur, the need for and the necessity of justice arise from a wish or a lack that cannot be fulfilled otherwise than by means of positivity. Such a lack is a disruption, a cleavage in the firm, controllable agreement of rights. It cannot be satisfied by negativity; it can only be satiated by positivity. The positivity which rests on the movement from potentiality to actualization. It is always an upward trajectory, a transition from capacity to its genuine realization. The wish is not a wishful thinking, but a realization of the innermost responsibility to respect and to be respected. Ricoeur claims that the wish is the manifestation of a capable subject (*l’homme capable*). MacCammon comments on Ricoeur’s examination of the issue of the subject capable of justice thus: “In (...) *Who is the Subject of Rights?* Ricoeur isolates the ‘who’ behind the subject of rights. The aim of his regressive analysis is to discover the fundamental features that make a subject capable of commanding esteem and respect – a capacity that prompts the desire for justice.”<sup>13</sup> The wish for justice, which is viewed as

---

12 L. MacCammon, *Justice and Fundamental Anthropology: Uncovering Essential Connections with Paul Ricoeur*, <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/03.1/maccammon.shtml>, [accessed on 4.04.2018], 2.

13 Ibid, 2.

the manifestation of a capable subject, is interwoven with human vulnerability. In situations of conflict and necessary reconciliation, the capable subject is also the suffering subject. An act of reconciliation involves going beyond, and through this going beyond the suffering subject becomes an understanding subject. Thus, its total devastation is circumvented in a soothing embrace of wisdom.

The interlocking character of forgetting and reconciliation requires an understanding of the demand faced by the two sides in a situation of conflict: the injured party and the guilty party. The concomitant dynamics of forgetting and forgiving, the latter prompted by the former, open a foray into the otherwise extremely doubtful or unachievable reconciliation. Forgetting here is an act of benevolence – it is the generosity of the wounded self, which we can venture to call the giver of hope. The potentiality of munificence is not a simplistic proposition or an easily achievable destination. Rather, it is a consequential recourse to the primordially of the harmonic coexistence, a resignation from a prospect of a vengeful action. It is a return to, or a renewed uncovering of the rudimentary truth about humans, expressed profoundly by Gabriel Marcel: *esse est co-esse* (to exist is to co-exist).<sup>14</sup> This life-enhancing act of forgetting satiates the exigency of reconciliation which is the need of love. For Ricoeur, the commonly disjoint ethical values of love and justice are interrelated. He sees love as fundamental for an understanding of justice and as inseparably linked to it. The indivisibility of love and justice rests on the intersection between love of oneself and love of the Other. The well-being of the self calls for autonomy on the one hand, and, on the other hand, it consists in the self's predisposition to solicitude – the urgency of connection. Ricoeur writes: “The autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one's neighbor and with justice for each individual.”<sup>15</sup>

---

14 G. Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, trans. by G.S. Fraser, Chicago 1950, 16.

15 P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago 1992, 18.



Pondering on Ricoeur's elucidation of the requirements of justice, Linda MacCammon states: "Ricoeur's emphasis on memory is also central to his understanding of pardon, which does not involve the trial process, but which is vital in the quest for justice. Pardon is a supra-ethical value (belonging to the "economy of the gift") that can only be freely offered by the victim as a final act in the process of mourning."<sup>16</sup> The quest for justice signifies the processual nature of justice, thus articulating the potential difficulties and obstacles on the way to forget, forgive and reconcile. The supra-ethical dimension of forgiving denotes a conscious, voluntary act.<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur investigates the problematic nature of forgiveness and justice thus: "the idea of justice rests essentially on a relation of equivalence. Forgiveness, on the other hand, rests on a relation of excess, of super-abundance. There are two different logics operating here. Hence the question, can the logic of excess, which defines forgiveness, penetrate the logic of equivalence that defines justice."<sup>18</sup> According to him, the mutually excluding values of forgiveness and justice can only meet at the symbolic level.<sup>19</sup> The distinction that he makes, however, does not preclude him to express his firm conviction of the pointless character of vengeance, which he characterizes after Hegel: "punishment always remains imprisoned within the repetition of vengeance (...) the apex of law is the apex of injustice."<sup>20</sup> Significantly, he accentuates his idea of appeased memory, the memory which no longer speaks with the anger of the evil that has been done.<sup>21</sup>

---

16 L. MacCammon, *Justice and Fundamental Anthropology: Uncovering Essential Connections with Paul Ricoeur*, op. cit., 2.

17 A. Dessingué, *The Ethics of Memory in My Heart of Darkness*, in: *(Post)Colonial Histories – Trauma, Memory and Reconciliation in the Context of the Angolan Civil War*, eds. B. Jäger, S. Hobuß, Transcript-Verlag 2017, 96.

18 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgiveness: A Dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi*, Janus Head 8(2005)1, 14.

19 Ibid., 14

20 Ibid., 15.

21 Ibid., 17.

Forgiving is an act which instantiates a new economy, unthinkable as it is, and which feeds itself on the positivity of forgetting. It derives its power from the wellspring of the human potential to fight the dark forces of negativity by reinstating the positive via the seemingly pejorative. As Ricoeur sees it, the restorative work lies in the specificity of forgetting in reconciliatory situations. He employs the notion of overlooking, which conveys an effective initiation and puts an end to the process of mourning, thus constituting a genuine possibility of healing. Ricoeur also addresses the distinctive character of overlooking, which does not mean that remembrance is forsaken or eradicated. Rather, the oversight is constitutive of healing in its fundamental framework of 'looking away', therefore positively moving away from the wounded memory to look forward. Ricoeur explicates the concept of pardon thus: "Pardon is a kind of healing of memory, the end of mourning. Delivered from the weight of debt, memory is freed for great projects. Pardon gives memory a future."<sup>22</sup>

Remembrance, forgetting and reconciliation usually involve tension, emotional excess, as well as a cathartic resurfacing of the evil and a new beginning. Genuine reconciliation triggers and possibilizes creativity, which helps resolve conflict and cure the wounded past. This creative capability lies in the deepest recesses of what it means to be human. Creativity serves the role of a connective thread, which binds the theory of reconciliation to its practical execution. After Galloway, we would like to draw attention to the correspondence between Ricoeur's notion of pardon and the Nietzschean sense of voluntary forgetting: "for Nietzsche the purpose of 'active forgetting' is to willfully forget the past in order to overcome our traumas and transform our hauntings. Not dissimilar to Ricoeur, Nietzsche treats forgetting as a kind of affirmation rather than as a denial. In this way forgetting becomes necessary for

---

22 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer, Chicago 2004, 144.

our happiness and for imagining our possible futures.”<sup>23</sup> The poignancy of the wounded self and the inexorable memory of the past event are powerfully expressed in Confucius’ maxim: “To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it.”<sup>24</sup> Remembering is not just a duty in terms of justice. It is also undoubtedly a burden in terms of the moral guilt felt not only by the wrongdoer, but by the victim too. It is the burden which needs to be shaken off, it is the pain which needs to be relieved on both sides. In *Oblivion*, Mark Augé deploys the imagery of the sea to render the life-giving force of forgetting: “memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea (...) Oblivion is the life force of memory and remembrance is its product.”<sup>25</sup> In this passage, the author expresses metaphorically the interplay of forgetting and remembering metaphorically. Remembering gives contours to forgetting. Forgetting is reliant on remembering. Like the seashore holds the seawater, forgetting precludes the devastating, horrid effects of complete remembering. This image calls to mind once again Ricoeur’s account of productive disremembering and the idea of holding at bay the hideous consequences of the fullness of remembering.

#### 4. FORGETTING AND SELF-EDUCATION

The richness of the sea image in reference to memory, oblivion and remembrance leads to yet one more facet of forgetting and forgiving. Forgetting ensues learning anew. The educative force behind forgetting and forgiving definitely escapes any forms of counterfeit, it cannot be artificially made up. It amounts to an authentic, unadulterated possibility of educating one another to counterpoise the injured past and build the future happiness. Hannah Arendt talks about an

---

23 A. Galloway, *Collective remembering and the importance of forgetting: a critical design challenge*, <http://bit.ly/spc55-1-h1> [accessed on 3.04.2018], 3.

24 J.M. Templeton, *Discovering Laws of Life*, London – New York 1995, 194.

25 M. Augé, *Oblivion*, trans. by M. de Jager, Minneapolis 2004, 11.

irreducible character of conversion which is caused by forgiving, and the recovery from the past which breaks the constraint brought on our lives, the horror,<sup>26</sup> as well as the horror of being delimited to one single act, deed or event. In *The Human Condition*, she contends: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer’s apprentice who lacked the formula to break the spell.”<sup>27</sup> Forgiving frees us from the fixated, obsessive concentration on the singularity of an occurrence and its murky aftermath – the constantly renewed coming back to the wounded past, which annihilates any positive prospects for the future. Similarly to Ricoeur, who states: “Man is this plural and collective unity in which the unity of destination and the differences of destinies are to be understood through each other,”<sup>28</sup> Arendt accentuates our mutual vulnerability and indebtedness. “The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done – is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. Both faculties depend upon plurality, on the presence and acting of others, for no man can forgive himself and no one can be bound by a promise made only to himself.”<sup>29</sup>

The victim of wrongdoing is doubly victimized. The pain afflicted by the performing of an evil deed is augmented by its remaining under the spell of evil unless it is broken and genuine healing occurs. The educative trajectory does not rest on the mere recognition of the erroneous facets of the bygone, but much more profoundly, learning here is the probing to the very core of human freedom and the

---

26 H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago 20132, 237.

27 *Ibid.*, 237.

28 P. Ricoeur, *Fallible Man*, revised, trans. Charles A. Kelbley, New York 1986, 138.

29 *Ibid.*, 237.

hermeneutic creativity of morality. Learning anew is the reinvigorated flight to light. It may be a brisk recognition of the potentiality of goodness in the guilty party. It may also mean a difficult identification with the culprit in the sense that if there is harm done in the world it requires atonement, and the demand of expiation probably does not lie with the perpetrator only, but with us all – with human beings.

Thus, the defying of the forces of darkness entails an absurd, almost illogical repentance by the victimized party, who would otherwise stay forever in the state of a disturbed equilibrium. Arendt affirms: “Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom.”<sup>30</sup> Forgiving enables both parties, the perpetrator and the victim, to forsake a state of stagnant irresolution. It is the change brought about by an act of forgiveness which liberates both of them from the gloomy recollection of wrongdoing. The educatory force of forgetting lies in the abandonment of the old forms of thinking about the past and the future, and in the acquisition of new ones. An Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, speaks of hope as something existing on the far side of revenge – the possibility to discern this far side and what is there reanimates man’s capabilities to act otherwise, to recognize the other pole, the other side of the story: “Hope for a great sea-change. On the far side of revenge. Believe that a further shore is reachable from here. Believe in miracles. And cures and healing wells.”<sup>31</sup> If forgiving is the key to action and freedom, it is achieved in an overwhelming presence of moral creativity. The miracles, cures and healing wells come to being because of creativity. To be morally creative means to be human. Moral creativity embraces tension, catharsis, excess and renewal.

The bond of forgiveness and forgetting relieves the dire sensation of absolute remembering. The educative dynamism stems here from the victim’s propensity to reject the perplexing feeling of being enmeshed in a situation of no real deliverance. The crossing of the

---

30 J. Demakis, *The Ultimate Book of Quotations*, New York 2012, 134.

31 S. Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles’s Philoctetes*, London 1990, 77.

border of an unresolvable past demands an acquisition of the novel, formerly unrecognized and unnamed capabilities. The victim educates herself in uncovering the potential to curtail the non-communication, complication, or the unintelligibility of that which is unbearable. The most excruciating feelings need to be translated into the language of intelligibility. The intolerable must find its way to become graspable. The blatancy and infiniteness of the entanglement of one's life story into the stories of others<sup>32</sup> calls for a recognition of the possible ways to surmount an impasse and return to a state of positivity.

The positivity of forgetting relies to a great degree on the avoidance of clinging to some stereotypical or oversimplified renditions of the past, since these often become a hindrance to a fuller understanding of one's life and the life of the Other. Concentrating on collective remembrances that are too simple or too difficult constitutes an obstacle to a full understanding of the past, to a comprehension of the consequences of the committed evil, and to the learning of new-fangled ways of dealing with the knotty issues. In *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, David Kaplan accentuates the clichéd character of the highly unified group memories, which Ricoeur also acknowledges, and states the following: "The dangers of the stories groups tell about themselves is that they often become frozen oversimplifications, expressed in slogans and caricature, serving only the interests of power and authority."<sup>33</sup> Resorting to stereotype and rhetoric precludes the hermeneutic investigation and re-interpretation. It blocks the path to a more trustworthy account of the past.

Learning anew ensues from the hermeneutic reconfiguration of recollections. It may concomitantly entail a retracing of the previously concealed nuances, which also involves a cleansing effect. Furthermore, the hermeneutic reconfiguration can and often does exceed the pitfalls of the all too easily conceived accounts of the

---

32 P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, Chicago 1992, 140–145.

33 R. Kaplan, *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, Albany (NY) 2012, 96.

past, and thus involves a tedious educative process which embraces acquisition, but also and above all, comprehension and acceptance. Memory becomes viewed in terms of a fulfilled or unfulfilled responsibility of locating, naming and rendering an increasingly more faithful image of past events. The fundamental concepts of trace, imprint and image relating to memory shine in a new light when revisited according to a hermeneutic recognition of the past.<sup>34</sup> Ricoeur, after the ancient Greeks, draws attention to the interrelation between memory and imagination.<sup>35</sup> Viewing memory as related to imagination directs our attention to an essential import of the correlation between the pastness of memory accounts – and, thus, the exigency to retrieve the remembrances of the past – and the present, creative and possibly agile and mobile aspect of memory, expressed in imagining the past.

The advantage of educating oneself, derived from the hermeneutic investigation, has nothing to do with a nostalgia mode. The hermeneutic examination of the past does not delimit itself to a mere excavation of the minute details of the past, or to an exclusive search for the truth of grievances, but rather, it focuses on the profound and ever deepening apprehension of that which has already become history. Most significantly, the hermeneutic investigation orients itself towards educative objectives. Similarly, in the case of positive recollections, the hermeneutic retrieval of the past, neither invests in an expression of the nostalgic yearning nor resorts to a banal sentimentalizing of the niceties of the past. It unflinchingly centers on the possibility to both upkeep and upgrade the exquisite value of the good, the righteous, or the progressive.

The hermeneutic reflection on remembering, and the possibility of constructive forgetting, demonstrate that reconciliation comes

---

34 P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer, Chicago 2004, 170–176.

35 *Ibid.*, 8–11.

when the sense of the necessity of complete remembering is forsaken. Forgetting then becomes a positive quality, oriented towards the future. To abandon the evil of complete remembering means to care for the cultural, the refined, the sophisticated, the righteous, with the force of education which eradicates the undesirable, the unlikable, the negative. Memory in this context adopts the quality of imagination, or it can be said to be one with it. Imagination becomes all-encompassing – the past, present and future perspectives merge and serve an ethos of learning anew, learning *from* mistakes and *thanks to* mistakes, from one another and with each other. The erroneous character of the past and the remembering of it in such a perspective are nothing more than instantaneous incentives to apply what should be in a place of what was, or what is. The desirable wins the existent over.

The hermeneutic retrieval accommodates ceaselessly the past while simultaneously considering future events. Resultantly, the hermeneutic approach plays an exquisite educative role; it guides and shapes that which is ahead. The excavation of the past is vitally important when viewed through the prism of the recognition of oneself and the Other. The question of identifying oneself as a subject is interwoven with the question of remembering, which stands in agreement with a succinct yet extremely potent paradigm: ‘I remember, and thus I am.’ Memory is constitutive of me as a subject. However, to overweigh memory is to construe a monstrous image of the self, as one cannot remember all and remain untouched, untroubled, unmoved, or undisturbed. Disquietude caused by an unrefined, limitless access to remembrances can even go as far as to entail a complete discomposure of identity.

## 5. FORGETTING, ACCOUNTABILITY AND NARRATIVE IDENTITY

Another aspect of Ricoeur’s analysis of memory and forgetting, which we should like to comment on here, is the intertwined nature of memory accounts and accountability. Accountability rests on two factors: self-constancy and reliability, and these are strictly interrelated. In



Ricoeur's view, to feel responsible and to perform responsibility one must actually narrate, or vice versa – one is the narrator of one's own life and therefore one is responsible. To give an account, to narrate, equals to perform responsibility. The capability of being accountable is ultimately kindled by a predisposition for narration.<sup>36</sup> In light of the aforementioned, there arise the following questions. Does my memory give me a full access to accountability? Does forgetting also intersect with my accountability, or more precisely, can my forgetting facilitate accountability, or is it a wholly contradictory facility? Forgetting can be a productive, positive, and constructive facility, which paradoxically enhances accountability. This is the essence of the *aporia* of forgetting. Forgetting becomes a prerequisite of remembering when remembrances are relieved, when they cease to weigh me down. In that case, what I remember is no longer burdensome. I can focus then on construing my life. And this construing of the story of my life is endorsed by an effort to discern. I become capable of distinguishing what is best for me as well as for the Other.

Ricoeur's state-of-the-art notion of narrative identity gives a powerful answer to the human need for both remembering and forgetting. The intricacies of the interlacing capabilities of remembering and accountability become explainable in light of narrative identity, which credits both the constant and the changing elements of human subjectivity. The narrative of one's life provides a framework for all the dispersed fragments of a life story to combine into a cohesive whole. According to Ricoeur we are our lives' narrators. His *Life – a story in search of a narrator* grants us an insight into the capability of narrating. Each of the human capabilities is accompanied by vulnerabilities. Thus, the capability of narrating is interrelated with the vulnerability to mis-narrate, to give a distorted account of the past, which must be viewed in terms of responsibility. In light of Ricoeur's conception of narrative identity, if the human subject is capable of forgetting there arises

---

36 P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, Chicago 1992, 165.

a question of the validity of the unified and integrated subjectivity. Is subjectivity something whole and reliable? Ricoeur's phenomenological hermeneutics of the self opens itself to the versatility of the nuanced facets of human forgetting. The phenomenon of forgetting embraces the interpretative process. Narrating our life stories, we do interpret, we are interpretative subjects. This processual aspect is of vital importance. The human subject is not a transparent, ready-made entity, but it formulates and re-formulates itself. Remembering and forgetting play a crucial role in the configuring and re-configuring of the texture of what constitutes the self. Remembering fosters accountability – I am accountable for my deeds, I can narrate, I can retrieve past events from my memory. Forgetting seems to act as a facilitator as well. Narrating, I choose the style and way of doing so, and the troublesome can be mitigated by the lapses in memory, which, however, does not mean that I do not give a true account of the past. Remembering enables to reimagine the past. Forgetting contributes to the re-enlivening of the past with the aid of mental censorship. An account based on memory cannot be said to fully cater for an event, to fully render the past. The idea of the fallibility and versatility of memory-based accounts has given rise to an enormous and unflagging interest in historiography and in historiographic fiction in *belles lettres*.<sup>37</sup> The belief in the remembering-accountability-responsibility paradigm is counterbalanced by the disbelief in the possibility of the completeness of memory-based accounts according to the forgetting-accountability-responsibility scheme.

## 6. FORGETTING AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

In light of our assertion of the positivity of forgetting, it is worth mentioning the interconnection between forgetfulness and the

---

37 L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, London – New York 2004, 92–93.

subconscious, to whose understanding psychoanalytic investigation has greatly contributed. We do not aim to interrogate the nooks and crannies of psychoanalysis for its own sake here. Rather, we would like to draw attention to the phenomenon of repression in the context of the human capability of forgetting and its impact on the philosophical articulation of the positivity of forgetting. Can pushing memory out of our reach and making it inaccessible be positive? It seems clear that in cases of atrocious, calamitous events, repressing them can also serve the role of construing a world we can practically dwell in. In a situation of repression, the suffering subject finds itself at the limits of vulnerability. When all one's defenses topple, when there is no space for privacy, when one is robbed of what was most intimate and dear, repressing memories seems to be a constructive capability, or the only way of coping with the past. Whereas re-living the past, re-articulating it, opening it anew in order to narrate plays the healing role, in extreme cases repressing memories seems to be the only possibility to grapple with dire events, and in this sense forgetting takes on a positive tone.

Developing his hermeneutics of the self, Ricoeur enters into a dialogue with psychoanalysis. He does it in *Freud and Philosophy*, but also in his other writings. This meaningful encounter allows him to recognize that our immediate consciousness is not our true consciousness. It is when the initial knowledge of ourselves gets demeaned that we can fuller understand who we are. By repressing the difficult past, we are also capable of isolating what seems intensely poignant to us, more devastating than anything else. And in this way forgetting via repressing, albeit subconscious, becomes the source of knowledge. It contributes to our uncovering of who we are.

## 7. CONCLUSION

To conclude, we want to highlight that the issue of the positivity of forgetting seems to be less frequently discussed than the negative

aspect of forgetting. However, philosophical hermeneutics as exemplified here by Paul Ricoeur's notion of pardon, his insistence on the avoidance of the "frozen oversimplifications" in group memories, and the relationship between memory and accountability has shed light on the possibility to consider forgetting as a capability, as a positive faculty, instead of viewing it as a deficiency, or a wholly negative quality. The positive, constructive aspect of forgetting is undeniably connected with an effective reconciliation, executed via the balance of justice and love, which Ricoeur acknowledges as indispensable in settling conflicts and healing the wounded party, thus leading to achieve a more promising future, as well as the possibility of learning anew.

In light of Ricoeur's concept of a narrative identity, we can better understand the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. The revisited past, together with the omitted and the distorted accounts of the past contribute to its meaning. The forgotten is a consequential loophole, as there always arises a question about the reason for forgetting – was it intentional or involuntary? The meaning of the narrative of one's life with the unavoidable imperfections and infelicities rests also on the interconnection between forgetting and the subconscious. The repressed datum reveals something important about us. We do not want to remember the feelings associated with the events which were devastating for us. However, as suffering subjects, we also become understanding subjects – we understand more about who we are. Thus, the repressed memories help us discover who we are. It must be stressed that coming out of the vicious circle of revenge and unlimited remembering adheres to a human propensity for creativity. Therefore, forgetting becomes a constructive faculty. Through forgetting, or to use Ricoeur's term, disremembering, we can construct the future, we can be saved by justice as inextricably woven with love, and we can be saved by love which is pure forgiveness, and which makes space for forgetting. We would like to use H. Richard Niebuhr's famous words to recapture the main ideas relating to memory and forgiveness, and the constructive aspect of forgetting, addressed in this article:

- Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime;
- Therefore, we are saved by hope;
- Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history;
- Therefore, we are saved by faith;
- Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone;
- Therefore we are saved by love;
- No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own;
- Therefore we are saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.<sup>38</sup>

## REFERENCES

- Arendt H., *The Human Condition: Second Edition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013.
- Augé M., *Oblivion*, trans. by Marjolijn de Jager, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 2004.
- Bergson H., *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul, W.S. Palmer, Dover Publications Inc., Mineola (NY) 2004.
- Borges L., *Funes the Memorious*, in: *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and other Writings*, eds. D.A. Yeats, J.E. Irby, New Directions, New York 1962, 59–66.
- De Brigard F., *Is memory for remembering? Recollection as a form of episodic hypothetical thinking*, in: *Synthese* 191(2014)2, 155–185.
- Demakis J., *The Ultimate Book of Quotations*, Raleigh: Lulu Enterprises Inc., New York 2012.
- Dessingué A., *Towards a phenomenology of memory and forgetting*, *Études Ricoeuriennes / Ricoeur Studies* 2(2011)1, 168–178.
- Dessingué A., *The Ethics of Memory in My Heart of Darkness*, in: *(Post)Colonial Histories – Trauma, Memory and Reconciliation in the Context of the Angolan Civil War*, eds. B. Jager, S. Hobuß, Transcript-Verlag 2017, 81–98.
- Duffy M., *Paul Ricoeur's Pedagogy of Pardon. A Narrative Theory of Memory and Forgetting*, Continuum, London – New York 2011.

---

<sup>38</sup> H.R. Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, Chicago 2010, 63.

- Galloway A., *Collective remembering and the importance of forgetting: a critical design challenge*, <http://bit.ly/spc55-1-h1>
- (Post)Colonial Histories – Trauma, Memory and Reconciliation in the Context of the Angolan Civil War, eds. B. Jager, S. Hobuß, Transcript-Verlag 2017.
- Heaney S., *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles's Philoctetus*, Faber & Faber, London 1990.
- Hutcheon, L., *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Routledge, London – New York 2004.
- Kaplan D., *Ricoeur's Critical Theory*, SUNY Press, Albany (NY) 2012.
- MacCammon L., *Justice and Fundamental Anthropology: Uncovering Essential Connections with Paul Ricoeur*, <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/03.1/maccammon.shtml>.
- Marcel G., *The Mystery of Being*, Henry Regnery Company, Chicago 1950.
- Mersky M., *Who Decides Whether to Remember or Forget?*, <https://www.ictj.org/debate/article/remember-or-forget>.
- Niebuhr H.R., *The Irony of American History*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2010.
- Ricoeur P., *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. by D. Savage, Yale University Press, New Haven (CT) 1970.
- Ricoeur P., *Fallible Man*, revised translation by Charles A. Kelbley, Fordham University Press, New York 1986.
- Ricoeur P., *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004.
- Ricoeur P., *Oneself as Another*, trans. K. Blamey, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992.
- Ricoeur P., *Memory, History, Forgiveness: A Dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antebi*, Janus Head 8(2005)1, Trivium Publications, 14–25.
- Templeton M. J., *Discovering Laws of Life*, Continuum, London – New York 1995.
- Todorov T., *The Poetics of Prose*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca (NY) 1977.

---

MALGORZATA HOLDA

[margaret.c.holda@gmail.com](mailto:margaret.c.holda@gmail.com)

Czestochowa University of Technology, Faculty of Management, Department of Business Language  
Armii Krajowej 19 B, 42–200 Czestochowa, Poland

DOI: 10.21697/spch.2019.55.1.01