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MICHAŁ KUMOREK

ORCID: 0000-0002-7462-7389

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków

email: michal.kumorek@gmail.com

The Dialectic of Remembering and Forgetting in Memory Therapy: Ricoeur in Dialogue with Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

The article analyzes the impact of violence on memory and examines the scope of forgiveness in neutralizing negativity derived from memory distortion. Referring to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and the classical psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, the article discusses the characteristics of memory deficiency and excess, along with their impact on the formation of the historical narrative of a community and its identity. Pathological forms of memory are analyzed, which, through the psychoanalytic concepts of repression and melancholy, can result in compulsive repetition or manic states. By juxtaposing Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology with psychoanalytic theory, the article analyzes various modes of recalling and oblivion. It also shows the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, which, along with the entire process of working-through and mourning, can lead to forgiveness. This process provides both the guilty party and the victim with the prospect of regaining the ability to shape their lives independently of their determinative past, within the framework of Ricoeur's phenomenology of the capable human being.

Introduction

Memory, as the human ability to retain impressions, experiences, and stories, is extremely sensitive to forms of violence that can affect it from different sources. On the one hand, memory can be influenced by events that involve the individual. On the other, it can be shaped by the circumstances in which it is formed. Finally, the deformation of memory can also involve its recipient, who may seek to impose a specific historical narrative, often in the construction of propaganda or official accounts. This deformation often takes pathological forms of remembering or forgetting, as excess or deficiency. This article seeks to explore this issue through a critical dialogue between Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic phenomenology of memory and psychoanalytic theory, particularly the Freudian legacy concerning repression, trauma, and repetition. Ricoeur has made a significant contribution to phenomenological research on memory and its confrontation with psychoanalysis.

In this article, I examine how Ricoeur reinterprets key Freudian concepts—repression, repetition, mourning, melancholia—and their impact on the formation of memory. I also consider how Ricoeur's notion of forgiveness operates as a therapeutic praxis that addresses not only individual neuroses but also the psychic wounds of communities. I show how Ricoeur, by articulating the psychic economy of memory, brings to light the intimate link between symptom and story, trauma and testimony, and the pathology of repetition and the promise of forgiveness.

This inquiry seeks to demonstrate that the healing of memory—whether in the analyst's consulting room or in historical discourse—depends on a process of working through that involves elements of forgetting and remembering. Unlike their pathological forms of excess and deficiency, these enter into a dialectic that cultivates forms of recall and forgetting, enabling promises to be kept and forgiveness to occur.

Vulnerability of Memory

Forgiveness is one of the possible responses to the negativity associated with one's own or other people's actions. This negativity is embedded in human memory, manifesting itself through the inability to recall certain facts from the past and the spontaneous recurrence of other memories. People often

associate this negativity with a lack of trust in themselves and others. Forgiveness is a response that has the potential to neutralize this negativity still present in memory and to lead to numerous consequences. An exhaustive description of this potential for forgiveness requires an examination of negativity, which takes various forms, distorting or blocking human memory. Ricoeur examines these memory pathologies with a particular emphasis on the psychoanalytic perspective. He begins with two Freudian texts: *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* and *Mourning and Melancholia*. He then describes and reinterprets the process of memory distortion and its consequences. He links these Freudian texts to community-level phenomena, in which members are connected through various intersubjective relationships and possess certain shared memories that form the domain of collective memory (Lythgoe, 2017, pp. 56–57). Collective memory is closely tied to historical narrative, which, on the one hand, provides a critique of memory and prevents it from autonomously establishing a sense of the past. Historical narrative continually co-shapes the memory of individuals and communities. History, on the other hand, is co-shaped by the memories of both past and present generations (Ricoeur, 2015, p. 150). As a result, this collective memory—important for the formation of community identity—is particularly vulnerable to manipulation by various ideologies. The pathologies of excess and deficiency of memory become particularly evident in this domain, affecting the memory of individuals who constitute these communities (Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 9–12).

Traumas resulting from painful events of the past persist for a long time in collective memory and are among the most common causes of memory excess or deficiency—pathologies that also extend to subsequent generations. Marianne Hirsch describes the transmission of trauma, particularly to the children of victims who did not personally experience the trauma, as the concept of postmemory (Hirsch, 1997, pp. 22–23). Postmemory is based on images that draw on victims' narratives to replace memories. It can involve a wide variety of narratives that enable the transfer of trauma within both familial and social contexts. Ricoeur emphasizes that trauma can overwhelm narratives and express itself through experiences that are incommunicable in words (Ricoeur, 2016b, p. 252). Antoni Kępiński, a Polish psychiatrist, studied former concentration camp inmates' lifelong concentration camp syndrome (Kępiński, 2005, pp. 144–153). His successors pointed to the process of transmission of this syndrome to offspring and its manifestation

in subsequent generations (Dominik, 2005, pp. 232–237). Postmemory, which elucidates the intergenerational perpetuation of trauma, impacts not just the generations following the victims, but also those associated with the perpetrators and those who indifferently observed the injustice inflicted upon others. Ricoeur recalls the words of a German historian about the Nazi past, which refuses to pass and lacks the necessary distance from the present (Ricoeur, 2004c, p. 7). He also alludes to the ongoing political dispute and obsession with the collaborationist Vichy government, whose members and numerous collaborators were not held accountable due to amnesty. This was accompanied by a lack of narrative about that period, which facilitated the loss of memory. At the same time, this memory deficit led to an incapacity to “work through” the difficult events, which subsequently resurfaced in various pathological forms of political conflict, displacing earlier memories (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 452–499).

He emphasizes that traumatic experiences leading to memory deficiency or excess are themselves a form of forgetting. It is a dangerous oblivion that distorts history rather than facilitating the healthy evolution of human memory by purging the mind of superfluous recollections. This amnesia, which threatens recollection, may stem from several sources, including ideological constraints imposed by specific doctrines and the traumatic suppression of personal narratives (Ricoeur & Żakowski, 2002, pp. 45–47). Oblivion is a clear sign of memory deficiency, but it can also result from denying a fact or, as he stresses, from avoiding the effort to remember the past: “the expression of bad faith and its strategy of evasion motivated by an obscure will not to inform oneself, not to investigate the harm done by the citizen’s environment, in short by a wanting-not-to-know” (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 448–449). He illustrates this memory deficit with numerous examples that concern not only violence victims but also perpetrators. He also draws attention to the problem of memory excess, which—constantly recurring in memories of painful experiences of wrongs suffered or, less frequently, joyful moments of triumph—contributes to forgetting other, often already infamous moments of a community’s history. Moreover, in some areas, this excess of memory may serve as a strategy to avoid recollecting past events, and it can be attributed to either the deliberate actions of the ideological state apparatuses or the repression that occurs at the collective memory level, which in turn shapes the individual memory of community members.

Repetition Compulsion and the Anonymous Circle of Revenge

Ricoeur emphasizes that memory deficiency or excess can lead to many violent actions that cause harm to others. He finds arguments for linking some violent actions to forgetting, not only in the testimonies of recent history but also in Freud's text *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*. Freud believes that past experience is indestructible and that the unconscious, which is part of the human psychic apparatus, is characterized by timelessness that disregards the usual chronology of time (Freud, 1958e, pp. 70–71). Therefore, everything repressed or forgotten, including experiences that have always remained outside consciousness, can recur as a “repetition compulsion” (*Wiederholungszwang*), often manifesting as actions (*Agieren*), influencing the subject's attitude and character traits, and manifesting itself in numerous symptoms. Freud writes:

The patient cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it. Thus he acquires no sense of conviction of the correctness of the construction that has been communicated to him. He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.

(Freud, 1955, p. 18)

The repetition compulsion results in actions that fulfill the function of remembering and recur within the dynamics of memory. Naturally, the subject does not know that these actions are the result of memory reproduction (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 286–287). Moreover, this unconscious repetition compulsion does not lead the subject to recollect what these actions replace or reproduce. This inability to remember the past is caused by “resistance to repression” (*Verdrängungswiderstand*), the overcoming of which requires a long period of “working-through” (*Durcharbeiten*) (Freud, 1958d, pp. 147–156). Ricoeur notes that the repetition compulsion often pertains to forgotten traumatic events, typically associated with violence. I argue that the compulsion to repeat these events, replacing memories, frequently leads to the continuation of violence, serving as its unconscious extension. It is known as “repetition-memory” and differs from “recollection-memory,” which, as an active form of memory, has a critical function. I argue that this understanding of forgetting, together with the

blocked possibility of critically revisiting the past, explains the unconscious mechanism of repetition compulsion and makes it possible to interpret some actions within the anonymous circle of revenge. The desire to exact revenge on the perpetrator no longer governs the process; instead, blind violence acting as chaotic reciprocity selects completely random individuals as its new victims. In this way, violence exits the circle of vengeance and spills over into new areas of intersubjective relations, scarring other people's memories with the experience of harm (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 229).

Ricoeur draws attention to the particular danger of repetition compulsion in the field of collective memory, where it can transform into obsession or mania as an extreme form of action (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 443–444). It may appear not only as an action that is one form of repetition compulsion of the forgotten, but also as an effect of the inability to reconcile oneself to the loss of a loved or hated object (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 86). He cites the second Freudian text, *Mourning and Melancholia*, to explain this problem. Freud suggests that intense activity in the form of mania may arise from the subject's inability to cope with the loss of the object of affect and may be followed by extended periods of sadness, depression, or lack of initiative, which characterize the melancholic state. Meanwhile, melancholy often results from an excess of memory of the loss of a beloved or hated object within narcissistic patterns of attachment.¹ In particular, this lack of distance in narcissistic love morbidly integrates the subject with the object of affect, so that its loss is at the same time a loss of a part of oneself, leading to a disturbance in the subject's personal identity (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 217–219).

If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they do fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves or has loved or should love (...) So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches

¹ Ricoeur, following Heinz Kohut, points out that narcissism in its primordial forms is not a pathological phenomenon but relation of self-love involving *selfobjects* that enables the integration and constitution of a coherent identity in the developing subject. In adulthood, mature forms of narcissism integrate fantasies of grandeur with reality and become the basis of self-esteem, enabling the development of creativity, the achievement of ambitions, and a sense of humor, etc. (Kohut, 1966, pp. 243–272; Ricoeur, 1992, p. 332; 2012, pp. 74–75, 79–80).

against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego.

(Freud, 1958b, p. 248)

I take the view that in a state of mania a subject's actions in response to a lost love can be as dangerous as those driven by repetition compulsion. In particular, melancholy not only refers to an individual's incapacity to mourn but also to entire communities, societies, and nations that have lost an object of love: the state, territory, community members, material goods, or leaders. The attempt to replace the object of love with a new one, solely to fill the lack felt and recognized in oneself, without undertaking the difficult working-through of mourning, often leads to conflicts and wars. History is replete with examples in which a community affected by loss—instead of working-through the past in a process of mourning and opening itself to the future—remains in melancholic stagnation, interrupted only by a violent, often warlike action that provides an illusory overcoming of loss. Similarly, when an individual or community loses an object of hatred that co-shaped their identity, they often seek a new enemy instead of working-through and mourning. The majority of citizens in the countries behind the Iron Curtain hated communism, and its collapse served as a large laboratory for the identities of individuals and social groups, shaped, following Carl Schmitt, by opposition to Stalinist ideology and its institutions (Schmitt, 2007, pp. 27–58). The collapse of communism led to a search for new enemies. The lingering sense of injustice in memory, as well as its reinforcement in political narratives, intensified this search. These narratives often emphasize the West's indifference to the fate of societies incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence after the war (Ricoeur, 2021a, p. 190). I contend that mourning, which separates the subject from the object of hatred, becomes more difficult the more forgiveness it requires.

Remembering and Forgetting

Ricoeur, following Freud, connects both a deficiency and an excess of memory with an illness that manifests itself through traumas and symptoms, with repetition compulsion at its core. On the other hand, he likens forgiveness to healing, which emphasizes remembering and forgetting (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 77). Depending on the situation, this process targets either the forgetting

that poses a threat to the subject or the excess of memories. It concerns both victims and perpetrators: Ricoeur emphasizes that just as the art of healing requires the presence of another in the role of a doctor, work on memory necessitates the collaboration of a psychoanalyst or even a historian, especially in the case of collective memory. A variation of this healing work of memory, which takes the form of forgiveness, also requires the presence of another. Building on Hannah Arendt's ideas, Ricoeur shows that these acts can only be realized from the perspective of multiplicity, which implies the necessity of the other's presence (Arendt, 1998, p. 237; Ricoeur, 2005, pp. 161–162). At the same time, this plurality manifests itself in various ways, ranging from the presence of someone capable of forgiving to the encounter with another who can extend forgiveness or expect one to keep one's word. Ultimately, the assistance of another person is essential for both remembering the factual details of the past and for selectively forgetting particular aspects of them (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 23). These two actions collectively contribute to forgiveness in a permanent state of tension.

According to Ricoeur, forgiveness is a fundamental possibility for recovering from the traps of memory that fixate the subject on past events. These can burden the subject in two ways: guilt and debt.² He situates forgiveness between the “work of memory” and the “work of mourning” and indicates that true pardon requires the “work of recollection” (*Erinnerungsarbeit*), which recalls difficult experiences of wrongs suffered and their perpetrators in the memory of the victims. Wrongdoers, in turn, are reminded of their guilt and their debt to victims, opening the possibility of taking responsibility for the acts attributed to them. The work of recollection is accompanied by the basic psychoanalytic principle of utterance, which has a therapeutic function: the “talking cure” (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 388–389). It combines recalling and recognizing the past, identifying oneself with the past self, and understanding and remembering (Ricoeur, 2000, pp. 734–736). This process of bringing the past into consciousness becomes a fundamental element in overcoming

² The difference between guilt and debt is subtle, as evidenced by the fact that German uses the term *Schuld* for both. Ricoeur emphasizes that guilt enables the articulation of a subjective consciousness burdened by the consequences of its actions and susceptible to the reproaches of its own conscience. In contrast, debt arising from guilt belongs to the domain of objective attribution and denotes a condition that may be formally recognized, for example by a court (Gagnebin, 2019, p. 139; Ricoeur, 1969a, p. 104; 1969b, pp. 15–16).

“resistance to repression” (*Verdrängungswiderstand*) (Drwięga, 2019, p. 144). Only when the subject in the work of recollection gains access to the past and subjects it to a process of “working-through” (*Durcharbeiten*), does the “work of interpretation” (*Deutungsarbeit*) of historical facts reveal the multiplicity of their meanings, opening the perspective of penitence and forgiveness. During mourning, one can distance oneself from objects of love and hatred that persistently cause pain due to their absence (Ricoeur, 2004b, p. 446). Mourning means accepting the loss of these objects and reconciling oneself to the impossibility of constructing a narrative of the past without further losses (Ricoeur, 1999, p. 23). The possibility of forgiveness emerges when one accepts a narrative of the past that renounces the desire for revenge, anger, or malice from the victim’s perspective (Ricoeur, 2021b, pp. 173–181).

Ricoeur points out that this narrative mediation, which plays a key role in the work of recollection, in working-through, and in interpreting the meaning of the past, brings the psychoanalyst and the historian closer together. Their collaboration, often involving the patient or a collective subject, enables the telling of past events from diverse perspectives: those of victims and perpetrators, women and men, individuals with differing worldviews and religious beliefs, and members of different nations and communities (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 79). It takes into account not only the narratives of victors but also those who remain in the shadow of history (Leeuw, 2022, pp. 99–100). The stories of those who suffer demand to be told even more urgently (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 28). Learning to discuss the past in a new, forgiving light entails renouncing the active evocation of painful memories (Daughton, 2022, pp. 70–75). In this way, the narrative does not shift the subject to the past, which, in melancholy or desire for revenge, seeks to replace the present. Forgiveness brings a form of oblivion grounded in abandoning the constant recall of painful experiences. Recollection that enables forgiveness also creates a sense of forgetting; this forgetting constitutes one aspect of forgiveness. The second aspect involves remembering this forgetting (Ricoeur, 2004b, p. 454).

This aporetic juxtaposition of recollection and forgetting becomes clearer in Ricoeur’s comparison of two kinds of memory: *mnēmē-memoria* and *anamnēsis-reminiscentia*. The former characterizes passive memory, which involuntarily recurs at different moments in life, presenting the subject with images from the past. In contrast, the latter represents active memory, where the subject actively reaches into the past to retrieve memories (Ricoeur,

2004b, pp. 17–21). I take the view that *anamnēsis-reminiscentia*, also called *ars memoriae*, has been known since antiquity as an art and practice that served not only study (in the formula *repetitio est mater studiorum*) but also the maintenance of identity in religious communities, medieval *Christianitas*, and later nation-states. These two types of memory correspond to two types of forgetting: passive and active. Passive forgetting results from the inability to recall the past due to various obstacles, ranging from blockages and resistance to repression studied in psychoanalysis to the absence of historical narrative and traces of the past (Ricoeur, 2016a, pp. 259–260). In contrast, active forgetting is associated with a deliberate shift in perspective toward the past. On the one hand, it can be linked to forgiveness and entail a shift in how the past is discussed; on the other, in its most extreme form, it can lead to oblivion through the erasure of the past and the destruction of its traces, including archives, testimonies, mementos, monuments, culture and art, and even those who remember (Ricoeur, 2004c, p. 7).

Ricoeur's distinction between types of memory and forgetting, added to Freudian analysis, provides a deeper understanding of the dialectic between recollection and forgetting, highlighting the role of forgiveness and promise in healing memory. Passive forgetting, together with forms of active forgetting based on excuses and evasions that block the work of recollection, corresponds to the repetition compulsion described by Freud. By contrast, only working-through, which reaches the repressed area and overcomes the "repression resistance," opens the subject to the past (Ricoeur, 1970, pp. 412–413). The work of recollection may include forgiveness, while the "work of interpretation" involves making sense of the past. It presupposes a form of active forgetting—a renunciation of aggressive narrative recall—that allows the subject to relinquish the burden of the past that paralyzes memory and limits action (Ricoeur, 1998b, pp. 25–28). As Ricoeur emphasizes, "Forgiveness gives memory a future" (2008, p. 18). At the same time, Ricoeur cautions that forgetting must be treated carefully to avoid erasing past facts and reactivating pathological memory. On the one hand, forgiveness as forgetting must not forget itself—that is, the act of active forgetting. Only then can forgiveness remain self-aware and avoid the recurrence of a painful excess of past memory (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 17). On the other hand, forgetting in the mode of forgiveness cannot include past events and facts, which must be preserved as they enrich both individual wisdom and generational

historical knowledge (Ricoeur, 1965, pp. 82–84). Forgiveness, misunderstood as erasing trauma and injustice, would risk the recurrence of such events.

Pathological Forms of Forgetting

Ricoeur uses political and religious examples to illustrate this danger of forgetting. In the first example, he highlights the danger of amnesty as institutional forgiveness turning into a form of amnesia. According to him, this was the case in France's post-war history, where amnesty was intended to address the issue of citizens collaborating with the Vichy government. It represented a kind of injunction to forget, ordering the erasure of historical facts from memory. Ricoeur defines this imperative not to remember the past as a mode of memory that contradicts past events (*mnesikakein*), tracing its origins to an ancient Athenian decree that forbade citizens from recalling crimes committed by both sides. From the outset, the decree—justifying the injunction by describing crimes as “misfortunes”—revealed an attempt to erase memory. However, repressed experience does not cease to exist, which is why, in the 1990s, recurring disputes over settling accounts with the past led to sharp political conflicts in France (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 449–452). This shows that the courts cannot serve as instances of forgiveness and that the law cannot mandate non-remembrance, as this would lead to impunity (Fiasse, 2007, p. 373). Ultimately, Ricoeur does not deny the rare necessity of amnesty, although he stresses that it should be accompanied by a process of working through and mourning, both of which involve recalling the painful past.³ He further emphasizes that each affected member of the community should ultimately choose to replace the injunction to forget with a pacified memory (Ricoeur, 2015, p. 156).

Ricoeur considers a similar pathological form of forgetting in a religious context, stressing that the “forgiveness of sins,” as a sacrament and religious practice, cannot—from a human perspective—mean the erasure of past facts from history and memory (Ricoeur, 2004b, p. 488). I contend that some

³ Ricoeur refers to the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa as an example of amnesty, linking the memory of a painful past to its reworking. The TRC, established under the presidency of Nelson Mandela, provided a space for victims' public testimony and allowed perpetrators to seek amnesty in exchange for full disclosure of politically motivated crimes (Ricoeur, 2004b, pp. 483–486).

people claim this divine prerogative of forgetting. They believe they can receive divine forgiveness and relieve themselves of the burden of guilt without having to confront the past or seek pardon from the wronged party. Often, this desire to forget is linked to the wish to free oneself from anxiety, which, as Freud points out, results from a harsh *superego* formed in upbringing and mistakenly identified with the Christian conscience, which in the classical sense is a judgement based on an inner law (Freud, 1958c, pp. 95–98).⁴ This escape from remembering—often a result of neurotic rumination on guilt—may use the Christian concept of conscience as a convenient means of avoiding anxiety (Kłoczowski, 2010, pp. 121–133). It forms part of what is described as ecclesiogenic neurosis and represents a defense mechanism operating at an unconscious level (Prusak, 2016, pp. 34–40).⁵ In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur delineates another characteristic of the *superego*:

But one trait of the superego remained unexplained: its harshness and cruelty. This strange character rejoins other disconcerting phenomena which at first glance seem unrelated to it, such as the resistance to recovery. When one comes to see that this resistance has a “moral” aspect to it, that it is a form of self-punishment through suffering and that it therefore involves an unconscious sense of guilt finding its satisfaction in the illness, a consistent pattern is revealed which includes such different phenomena as obsessional neurosis and melancholia, the resistance to recovery, and the severity of the normal conscience. Let’s not go back over the question of whether it is correct to speak of an “unconscious sense of guilt.”

(Ricoeur, 1970, p. 298)

As psychoanalytic experience—which in this case coincides with confessional experience—demonstrates, one cannot erase the past, and its apparent forgetting, which is in fact repression, consistently resurfaces in anxiety and remorse.⁶ I argue that the passage from the most frequently repeated Christian

⁴ The initial identification of conscience with the superego is refined in Freud’s later writings, where conscience and the *ego ideal* (*Ideal-Ich*) are presented as components or functions of the *superego* (Freud, 1958a, pp. 123–132).

⁵ Ricoeur also draws attention to the pathology of scrupulous consciousness, which locks itself into the trap of constructing new prohibitions that structure action and ritualize everyday life (Ricoeur, 1969a, pp. 105–106).

⁶ In analyzing the psychoanalytic experience of recurring anxiety, Ricoeur refers to Freud’s distinction. Freud describes anxiety (*Angst*) as an uncomfortable anticipation of danger, and distinguishes it from fright (*Schreck*) and fear (*Furcht*). Ricoeur

prayer, “and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12), expresses only one, vertical direction of forgiveness, in which forgiving others guarantees divine forgiveness and implies belief in the Absolute’s non-recall of the past. However, another, horizontal dimension of forgiveness—present in other biblical passages—is characterized by human reciprocity and is linked to the religious practices of repentance and atonement.⁷ Its purpose is to preserve the memory of evil and prevent its recurrence. It also underscores the importance of asking forgiveness—from the one who incurred guilt toward the wronged person.

The Prospective Nature of Forgiveness and the Empowerment of the Subject

Ricoeur, following Reinhart Koselleck, notes that the work of recollection and the imbuing of memories with new meanings do not end in the past or present but extend into the future (Ricoeur, 2008, p. 14). The act of forgiveness lies at the convergence of archaeology and eschatology, two opposing hermeneutics found together in forgiveness (Ricoeur, 1989, pp. 330–333). This paradoxical juxtaposition of the past with its prospective dimension reveals the healing role of forgiveness as a horizon for establishing new meanings with regard to the immutable facts of the past. Ricoeur frequently cites Augustine’s formula, which juxtaposes the present of the past with the present of the future, revealing a promise that supports forgiveness in the healing process of memory (Augustine, 1953, pp. 327–366; Ricoeur, 2009, pp. 5–19). I argue that forgiveness itself contains an element of promise, affirming that the forgiveness of evil is final and does not entail additional conditions. It implies that in the future, forgiveness will be unquestioned

emphasizes that the past does not disappear and that unresolved anxiety returns. At the same time, he emphasizes the role of fright, pointing to its adaptive or preparatory dimension in contrast to the anticipatory character of anxiety; it is not an expectation of danger, but a response that prepares the subject for it (Ricoeur, 1970, p. 288).

⁷ Matthew the Evangelist offers a horizontal dimension of mutual reconciliation that includes a request for forgiveness. “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

and the past will not be recalled in a way that renews the perpetrator's guilt. At the same time, the promise supports forgiveness when a person needs time to work through the necessary stages to forgive (Kumorek, 2025, pp. 10–12). In extreme cases, when forgiveness is impossible due to the scale of the atrocities or the death of the one who could forgive, the promise assumes the role of restraining revenge (Ricoeur, 1990, pp. 245–246, 1998a, pp. 122–126). It often takes a silent form, expressed as a refusal to accuse or seek vengeance, thereby enabling peaceful coexistence.⁸

A person can work on the present of the past—that is, memory—while the work on the present of the future is not reduced to passive expectation but takes the form of a promise in the dialectic of past and future (Ricoeur, 1995, p. 81). The past constantly refers to this promise, which appears at the level of both psychoanalysis and history. These disciplines promise to uncover the past and endow it with meanings that allow it to break free from its burdens. Ricoeur emphasizes that promises, whether unfulfilled or flawed, contribute to this burden and continue to injure the memory. Politicians, alongside psychoanalysts and historians, may contribute to the healing of memory. Their role is to revive unfulfilled but constructive promises that can restore the living traditions of nations, communities, or families, as Ricoeur notes after Arendt (Ricoeur, 2008, pp. 15–16). Drawing on Immanuel Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, Ricoeur argues that promises open the prospect of a civil society governed by law. However, these promises—while acquiring an almost prophetic character within an eschatological horizon—still remain vulnerable to failure (Ricoeur, 2004a, pp. 33–34).

Ricoeur situates forgiveness between the work of recollection and the work of mourning, while emphasizing that it is not merely their sum; rather, it introduces an additional element: the gift (Ricoeur, 1995, pp. 81–82). This element gives forgiveness something of the generosity of the initial gift, which, as in Jacques Derrida's horizon of impossibility, does not wait for a request, regret, or repentance. Instead, it grants the perpetrator—burdened with guilt and debt—freedom from the past. This does not erase history

⁸ Reflecting on ongoing conflicts between Palestinians and Israelis, Albanians and Serbs, and Kurds and Turks, Ricoeur suggests that a provisional normalization of relations may be achievable through a form of “anonymous forgiveness,” which may arise in situations where an overwhelming number of grievances obstructs formal forgiveness in the immediate future (Ricoeur, 2004c, p. 11).

but separates the subject from guilt and debt (Ricoeur, 1969b, pp. 39–40). I contend that the subject freed from guilt and debt not only regains capacities diminished by reduced social esteem, respect, and self-confidence, but also gains the prospect of working on memory. By renouncing the constant recall of the past, those who forgive also open their memory to the future and acquire the capacity to act freely, without being constrained by the past (Kumorek, 2025, pp. 18–20).

Conclusion

In this article, I have presented an analysis of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to memory, emphasizing its vulnerability to violence and the disorders of recollection. By interfacing Ricoeur's philosophical anthropology with Freudian psychoanalysis—particularly the concepts of repression, repetition compulsion, mourning, and melancholia—I aim to show how memory serves as both a locus of trauma and a domain of ethical responsibility. Memory, whether personal or communal, is often characterized by excesses and deficits manifested in symptoms, ideology, and historical narrative. I have illustrated how working-through (*Durcharbeiten*) aims to reconcile the subject with past traumas through a dialectic of remembering and forgetting and thereby opposes both retribution and the erasure of memory. Ricoeur, influenced by Freudian concepts—especially the unconscious compulsion to repeat trauma through behavior—views memory as a psychic dimension intertwined with identity and intersubjectivity. The melancholic fixation on loss—whether of beloved objects, communities, or ideals—can paralyze both individual and collective agency, while the repression of guilt or suffering may perpetuate cycles of violence. In this context, forgiveness does not signify the negation of history; rather, it constitutes a healing practice that reorients memory toward the future. It lies between the work of mourning and the work of recollection, enabling subjects to overcome guilt and restore narrative coherence. It may be compared to the work of translation, which Ricoeur situates between the loss of the original meaning and the acceptance that will bring back a certain kind of freedom and happiness (Ricoeur, 2006, pp. 3–5). Forgiveness, thus conceived, requires a relationship with the other—historian, psychoanalyst, victim, or perpetrator—and incorporates both remembering and an active,

ethical form of forgetting. It is not equivalent to amnesty or divine absolution, which entails the erasure of memory. Instead, it functions as a form of promise that creates new possibilities and resists both revenge and forgetting. Forgiveness, understood as a gift, frees memory from its burdens, enabling both individuals and communities to look forward to a future grounded in justice, responsibility, and the reconfiguration of their narratives.

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Author note

Michał Kumorek, PhD, is affiliated with the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Kraków. He is the author of several articles on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and philosophical anthropology. He is currently conducting research on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of recognition. The main research problem of his project concerns the possibility of neutralizing the negativity inherent in the struggle for recognition.

Address for correspondence: Uniwersytet Papieski Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, Wydział Filozoficzny, ul. Kanonicza 25, 31-002 Kraków, Poland.

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