

# Forgiving and Forgetting

Theology and the Margins of Soteriology

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# Forgetting: An Introductory Reminder

HARTMUT VON SASS and JOHANNES ZACHHUBER

Forgetting is no longer a forgotten topic. After decades in which the intellectual agenda was dominated by the imperative to remember and the corresponding fear that its failure would have dramatic consequences, recent years have brought an increasing recognition of the significance of forgetting.<sup>1</sup> One narrative of the shift might be this. While radical social, political, and cultural transformations throughout the twentieth century raised the spectre of an unprecedented loss humanity might suffer without sufficient memorial safeguards to protect its inheritance, the rise of the Internet with its seemingly limitless potential to store information has made people realise the threat emanating from an uncontrollable accumulation of knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Remembrance, it suddenly seemed, can be characterised as merciless or even totalitarian, smothering, with its control over the past, individual and collective agency in present and future. Forgetting, by implication, might quite possibly be a benign and humane reality empowering individuals and groups of people to regain control of their stories and identities.

This possibility, once conceded, led to further insights and questions across a variety of academic disciplines. Granted that human culture could not exist without memory, does not forgetting too have its role to play in the creation and preservation of its traditions and institutions? If it is true that oblivion consigns humanity's past to darkness and annihilation, is there not also the opposite danger which Friedrich Nietzsche called a 'degree of sleeplessness, [...] which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing'?<sup>3</sup> If Freud was right to highlight that forgetting has its pathology as repression, is there not also an inability to forget that is highly damaging to individuals as well as communities? And if all this seems to suggest that forgetting has been underestimated as a human

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<sup>1</sup> See H. SANER, 'Vergessen können, vergessen müssen, vergessen wollen, vergessen dürfen. Zur Dialektik des Vergessens bei Nietzsche', in: IDEM, *Erinnern und Vergessen. Essays zur Geschichte des Denkens*, Basel: Schwabe, 2004, 11–30.

<sup>2</sup> V. MAYER-SCHÖNBERGER, *Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> FR. NIETZSCHE, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. BREAZEALE, transl. R.J. HOLLINGDALE, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 62.

phenomenon with considerable psychological, sociological, cultural and religious consequences, does this not suggest that it needs to be studied both in its manifestations and in its effects on individual and communal life?

This, of course, is where the problem begins. Umberto Eco once suggested the *ars oblivionalis* as an example for an impossible discipline.<sup>4</sup> What he meant was not that forgetting was insignificant but that it literally could not be the result of a deliberate act. ‘Techniques for forgetting’ which Eco thought should be the subject of the art of forgetting,<sup>5</sup> would therefore be out of the question. Eco did not mean to rule out any study of the phenomenon of forgetting, but it is clearly the case that any such study struggles with the difficulty of getting a grip on its elusive object. No engagement with forgetting therefore can do without an awareness of this particular problem, and the present volume is no exception to that rule. At the same time it can be argued, however, that the precarious methodological foundation of the study of forgetting must not be permitted to stand in the way of meaningful explorations into its various aspects which are of supreme importance for human individuals and for societies.<sup>6</sup>

The present volume is committed to these insights. Its purpose therefore is threefold. It firstly aims to contribute more broadly to discussions about the understanding and the role of forgetting in the context of cultural studies, psychology, philosophy, and rhetoric. Thus, forgetting has to be contextualized while facing the possibility (or even danger) that its concept is unstable within all these divergent frames (*Part I*). There is, secondly, a more specific focus on the significance of forgetting for theology and, more specifically, soteriology elaborating on the precarious relationship between God’s memory, human experience of being God-forsaken, and the gift of reconciliation (*Part II*). Finally, the question of God’s forgetting in relation to his forgiveness will be subject to discussion. The traditional praise of memory is theologically challenged by attempts to appreciate God’s salvific forgetting as a potentially crucial element of responding to his fallen creation (*Part III*). The book is thus interdisciplinary but with a predominant theological interest. Ultimately, all three parts seek to answer the question of how forgetting can meaningfully be understood as enabling and supporting forgiveness.

This introduction will seek to frame the book’s contribution by contextualising them, initially, with regard to traditional as well as contemporary scholarly interest in the topics of forgetting and forgiving and, subsequently, within a preliminary, open-ended ‘grammar’ of forgetting.

<sup>4</sup> U. ECO, ‘An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget it!’, in: PMLA 103/3 (1988), 254–261.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> For some insightful recent work cf. two edited volumes: G. BUTZER/M. GÜNTER (eds.), *Kulturelles Vergessen: Medien – Rituale – Orte*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004; O. DIMBATH/P. WEHLING (eds.), *Soziologie des Vergessens: Theoretische Zugänge und empirische Forschungsfelder*, Konstanz: UVK, 2011.

## 1. Memories of Forgetting: Augustine and Friedrich Nietzsche

Contemporary interest in forgetting is not a radical innovation, but it would be equally wrong to speak of a long-standing intellectual tradition that has only lately been neglected. Throughout the history of Western thought, forgetting has always been a marginal or even marginalised topic. One cannot, after all, speak of memory without saying something about oblivion as well. There would be no need for Plato's *anamnesis* without the preceding *lethe*. Yet a more specific interest in the process of forgetting and its significance for human life has been confined to a small number of thinkers. In fact, it can be argued that all contemporary reflection about forgetting ultimately goes back to only two figures whose interest in the phenomenon was as influential as it was different: St Augustine and Friedrich Nietzsche.

Augustine did not leave behind a particular theory of forgetting but his uniquely creative mind kept returning to the phenomenon and to its peculiarities. His sustained interest in memory is well known,<sup>7</sup> and it has to be admitted that many of his reflections on forgetting were prompted by that concern. Thus he explained forgetting variously as *dysfunctional* or as a *lapse of memory*. To say, for example, that we have 'forgotten' a person's name may more appropriately mean that we have lost the ability to connect two separate items of information, the person and the name.<sup>8</sup> Or we call forgetting what really is our lack of the sustained study or practice required to keep activated the content of our memories. This content, then, is still there, but hidden in the 'recesses of memory'.<sup>9</sup>

In both these cases, forgetting means little more than the absence of remembrance, like a mere *privatio memoriae*. The language of oblivion can thus be a mere negation of memory, a negation moreover that only waits to be in its turn negated, as the *forgotten* content of our memory is more properly seen as a latency yet to be actualised. Some of the most memorable illustrations Augustine gives of forgetting can therefore equally if not better be understood as illustrations of what he calls the *magna vis memoriae*.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the parable of the lost coin (Lk 15,8) may *appear* to be a story about losing or forgetting something, but more properly it is, for Augustine, a story about the enduring power of memory, whose abiding presence grounds any such momentary experience of loss.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Augustine was well aware that the significance of forgetting does not end with our individual problems to remember the words of a foreign language or

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<sup>7</sup> R. TESKE, 'Augustine's Philosophy of Memory', in: *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, ed. E. STUMP/N. KRETMANN, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, 148–158.

<sup>8</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 10.19.28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.9.16.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.17.26.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.18.27.

the details of the house in which we were brought up. Was it possible, he wondered, that human beings could ever truly forget God given that he was inevitably close to them?<sup>12</sup> Was our oblivion of our race's original state of grace partial or complete?<sup>13</sup> If the former, could we not then recuperate it on our own and without the assistance of grace, but if the latter whence our longing for beatitude?<sup>14</sup> There were also things Augustine would much rather forget but could not, such as the images of sexual activity, which were still present in his memory and, while suppressed during the day, came back in full force while he was asleep.<sup>15</sup> The saints, on the other hand, when they enter eternal bliss, will forget their earthly sorrows even though they will retain some kind of formal recollection to make sure they do not lose their proper sense of gratitude towards him who has saved them.<sup>16</sup> Here forgetting is interesting in its own right. While it is something we cannot consciously control, we feel that it says something about our being as persons. Augustine does not feel guilty of his sexual desires during his sleep, but in the morning he is, nevertheless, 'sad' (*doleamus*) that something like this continues to happen to him. For those who enter into the eternal Kingdom, on the other hand, their oblivion explicitly is a condition for their happiness.

Augustine then provides fascinating material for a phenomenology of forgetting and for its relationship to other aspects of our humanity and our relation to God. His reflections make it clear just how central forgetting is to human existence even if his writing also reveals the challenges facing anyone seeking to make this explicit. This affirmation of the centrality of forgetting for the human condition Augustine shared with Friedrich Nietzsche even though in almost all other ways their interests diverge from one another. There is little indication that Nietzsche was concerned with the subtleties of how forgetting could be conceptualised or expressed. Nietzsche, much like his French contemporary Ernest Renan,<sup>17</sup> sought to press home one major insight: the peril of an affirmation of remembrance at the expense of forgetting. Writing 'untimely' at the high point of nineteenth-century historicism,<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche acutely perceived the danger of a society in full awareness of its historical past. Without denying the need for remembrance and recollection, he urged that both individuals and communities needed forgetting as well.

Why is that? The power of remembrance, Nietzsche felt, permits the past to exert complete dominance over human existence stifling off present and future.

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<sup>12</sup> AUGUSTINE, *De trinitate*, 14.13.17.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.15.21.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 10.20.29 and *De trinitate*, 14.15.21.

<sup>15</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 10.30.41.

<sup>16</sup> AUGUSTINE, *De civitate dei*, 22.30.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. RENAN, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, Paris: Presses-Pocket, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> NIETZSCHE, *Untimely Meditations*, 60.

He therefore asserted, ‘A man who cannot sink down the threshold of the moment and forget all the past, will never know what happiness is’,<sup>19</sup> because happiness requires that the past give way to the present. For the same reason Nietzsche asserted that ‘forgetting is essential to action of any kind’:<sup>20</sup> allowing the past unbridled control over our minds keeps us in reflective mode forever thus effectively preventing the impetus that triggers us to act.<sup>21</sup>

It may not be unfair to observe that Nietzsche’s invective against an undue affirmation of humanity’s memorial capacities raises questions more than it answers them. What is the role of forgetting in the cognitive process? Do we need forgetting as a kind of limit or horizon that only imposes form and order on human knowledge? Further, what is the relationship between forgetting and human temporality? Is it needed to balance human existence in past, present, and future and in that sense to achieve ‘happiness’? Finally, how does forgetting affect the relationship between reflection and agency? Does forgetting indeed, as Nietzsche argued, prevent action in general, or is it specific forms of action that are made more difficult by the predominance of memory?

## 2. Remembering Forgetting: Contours of a Current Debate

The questions emerging from Nietzsche’s plea for the legitimacy and the significance of forgetting sketch out the horizon of the more recent discussions. In fact, it can be argued that, taken together with Augustine’s observations and reflections, they very much sum up what is at stake in any intellectual engagement with this phenomenon.

### 2.1. *What is Forgetting?*

Forgetting, first of all, is difficult to capture, define or even discuss. It can easily appear as merely the negation of remembrance. Any attempt to investigate it as a *sui generis* phenomenon seems confronted with difficult theoretical problems. If it can be described and understood, much can be said in favour of a phenomenological approach focussing on its psychological, social and cultural reality.

This approach has been most consistently pursued by Paul Ricœur who integrated a lengthy examination of forgetting into his last major monograph, *Mem-*

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> For Nietzsche’s account of forgetting see H. VON SASS, ‘Vergeben und Vergessen. Über eine vernachlässigte Dimension der Soteriologie’, in: *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 55/3 (2013), 314–343, esp. 318–322.

ory, History, Forgetting.<sup>22</sup> Ultimately, Ricœur's concern was to gauge 'use and abuse' of forgetting in relation to the past, and his take on this issue was certainly not Nietzschean!<sup>23</sup> More important and in many ways ground-breaking, however, was his phenomenological analysis of forgetting which, building mainly on Augustine, Bergson, and Heidegger,<sup>24</sup> offers arguably the most sustained and detailed elucidation of forgetting in its various aspects and facets.

The same task has been tackled in very different ways by Harald Weinrich<sup>25</sup> and Marc Augé.<sup>26</sup> Of the two, Augé is closer to Ricœur, with whom he shares the broadly Augustinian outlook connecting forgetting with human temporality. Yet as an anthropologist, Augé largely confined himself to the study of forgetting as an empirical reality of social life. With Nietzsche, he accepts that societies need forgetting as much as individuals do, and his research is therefore focussed on the rituals developed in certain African cultures to that effect. Augé distinguishes between three 'figures' or 'forms' of forgetting. The first of those is the *return*, by means of which we recover a past that has been lost through the oblivion of the present or the immediate past.<sup>27</sup> Underlying this type is the recognition that the very existence of memorial culture depends on the 'forgetting' of one's immediate environment. The second form Augé calls *suspense*. He describes it as the recuperation of the present by forgetting about the past (and the future insofar as it will be a repetition of the past). Rituals connected with this type of forgetting are all those involving the temporary inversion of social and sexual order, such as carnival. Augé's third form is *commencement or re-commencement*.<sup>28</sup> He emphasises, however, that the prefix is not meant to denote repetition. Rather, 'the term designates the complete opposite of repetition: a radical new'.<sup>29</sup> Within the framework of human temporality, 're-commencement' signifies the need to forget the past in order to be open for the future, to 'create the condition for a new birth'.<sup>30</sup>

Weinrich, by contrast, writes as a cultural historian. His *Lethe. The Art and Critique of Forgetting* recognizes the difficulties of speaking or writing about forgetting directly and therefore approaches his object as it were obliquely through the medium of cultural history. In other words, he presents a history of forget-

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<sup>22</sup> P. RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. K. BLAMEY/D. PELLAUER, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the critical assessment by B. VIVIAN, 'On the Language of Forgetting', in: *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 95/1 (2009), 89–104, here 98–99.

<sup>24</sup> RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 30–31; 287–292; 427–440; 442–443.

<sup>25</sup> H. WEINRICH, *Lethe. Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*, München: Beck, 2000.

<sup>26</sup> M. AUGÉ, *Les formes de l'oubli*, Paris: Rivage Poche, 1998.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 76–77.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

ting, narrating characteristic episodes since antiquity that shed light on aspects of the phenomenon illustrating its significance as well as its diversity.

The fundamental and in a way categorical problems raised by the study of forgetting are not, arguably, fully solved by any of these three thinkers. In the present volume, Aleida Assmann contributes to this discussion from the perspective of cultural studies and Philipp Stoellger, who speaks of forgetting as a ‘phenomenon of withdrawal’, from a phenomenological and theological point of view. Lydia Schumacher grounds her theological argument in an Augustinian account of remembrance and forgetting, and Johannes Zachhuber draws on both Augustine and Ricœur to integrate forgetting into human temporality.

## 2.2. *Forgetting and Human Knowledge*

A second complex of questions is raised by the role forgetting seems to play in human cognition. Given the finitude of our mental capacities, form and order can only be imposed on known material if the latter is limited.<sup>31</sup> Not to see everything seems a condition for knowing anything. In this sense, forgetting has for a long time been of interest to neuroscientists and psychologists.<sup>32</sup>

The arguably most evocative plea in the twentieth century for a human need to forget in order to think and understand has, however, been articulated not by any philosopher or social theorist, but by the Argentinian writer Jorge Louis Borges, who in his short story *Funes the Memorious* depicted a man who cannot forget.<sup>33</sup> Ireneo Funes initially appears as a kind of mnemonic prodigy who knows by heart a book he borrowed only the previous day and is able to recount the most extraordinary details of historical events. As the narrative progresses, however, the uncanny and deeply problematic aspects of Funes’ condition are increasingly becoming obvious. He remembers everything, but this does not merely make his world almost unbearably bright and intense, it also breaks it down into its smallest elements.<sup>34</sup> He criticises Locke’s concept of an ‘impossible idiom’<sup>35</sup> in which there would be a word for every single object in the world, as for him such a language would have been ‘too general, [...] too ambiguous’.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> A. CALCAGNO has pointed out how important this insight was to Augustine and argues that it is missing in Hannah Arendt, ‘The Role of Forgetting in our Experience of Time: Augustine of Hippo and Hannah Arendt’, in: *Parrhesia* 13 (2011), 14–27.

<sup>32</sup> J.T. WIXTED, ‘The Psychology and the Neuroscience of Forgetting’, in: *Annual Review of Psychology* 55 (2004), 235–269.

<sup>33</sup> J.L. BORGES, ‘Funes the Memorious’, in: IDEM, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. D.E. YATES/J.E. IRBY, London: Penguin, 1970 (reprint 2000), 87–95.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>35</sup> J. LOCKE, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 3.3.2, ed. K. WINKLER, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996, 180.

<sup>36</sup> BORGES, ‘Funes the Memories’, 93.

For Funes recalled not only ‘every leaf on every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it’.<sup>37</sup>

Towards the end of the story, after an extended description of the marvels and the monstrosities of Funes’ memory, the narrator adds this brief reflection:

I suspect, however, that he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget differences, generalize, make abstractions. In the teeming world of Funes, there were only details, almost immediate in their presence.<sup>38</sup>

This is certainly the case; if anything, Borges may seem to be understating the problem. A person who cannot forget, one might argue, would not merely be ‘not very capable of thought’, but entirely unable to think, at least in the way we can know and understand this activity. Such a person may dream with Ireneo Funes of an ideal idiom corresponding to the level of detail contained in his or her memory, but meanwhile would be unable to use existing languages. Yet if this is the case, it becomes difficult or impossible to say what exactly such a person’s memory would be like or what it would contain. What, for example, would it mean for such an individual to know a book by heart given that its contents would be a mere multiplicity of unconnected sentences, words, syllables or even letters? What does it signify to ‘recall’ a past event if what we refer to as an ‘event’ is dissolved into an infinite number of impressions and perceptions that are separated by time and space?

Borges does not furnish his readers with an answer, but the questions he poses resonate all the more strongly. Several contributions to the present volume can be inscribed into this particular discourse on forgetting, esp. the papers by Bradford Vivian and Brigitte Boothe and, from a very different angle, George Pattison.

### 2.3. *Forgetting and the Politics of Remembrance*

Forgetting is deeply involved in our relationship with the past. Not merely epistemological but ethical and political questions arising from this observation are paramount when forgetting is being debated. As not everything can be remembered, the question of what *ought* to be remembered and what can and perhaps should be forgotten is as crucial as it is controversial.

In recent years, a number of attempts have been made to renegotiate this boundary. In 2010, the German historian Christian Meier addressed the ‘command to forget and the irrefutability of remembrance’ against the backdrop of public controversies about the heritage of East German communism.<sup>39</sup> Meier

<sup>37</sup> *Ibd.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibd.*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> CH. MEIER, *Das Gebot zu vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns. Vom öffentlichen Umgang mit schlimmer Vergangenheit*, München: Siedler, 2010.

recalled the age-old tradition of ‘clauses of oblivion’ in peace treaties intended to prevent the continuation of hostilities after the cessation of warfare because, as Hugo Grotius put it, ‘in peace it is not fitting to follow up former wrongs’.<sup>40</sup> Meier recognised that the crimes of Nazi Germany and in particular the Holocaust seem to have invalidated this older tradition; these are crimes that must never be forgotten. Does it, however, follow, he asked, that from now on all past crimes and every past evil has to be constantly remembered, or should we accept that the Holocaust was the exception to the rule? Meier argues for the latter, and in this sense pleads for a re-appreciation of the ‘command to forget’.

Interestingly, Ricœur had examined the same issue under the heading ‘commanded forgetting’ only a few years earlier. His conclusions are strikingly different from those reached by Meier. While admitting the ‘utility’ of such a law for practical purposes – such as limiting the revenge of the victors or creating a new national unity *after* civil conflict – the French philosopher ultimately emphasised the problems of such a practice more than its advantages: Does not the prohibition against the remembrance of certain acts make their repetition easier? And does it not ultimately cause more harm than good to suppress the voices of the victims from public discourse?<sup>41</sup> This caution against an unqualified endorsement of public forgetting is in line with Ricœur’s overall position, but the questions he raised are certainly important to bear in mind.

Critical of Ricœur’s reluctance to accept the virtues of forgetting is Bradford Vivian.<sup>42</sup> Vivian aims in a similar direction as Meier but casts his net much more widely. While he too seeks to establish the positive role forgetting can play in and for societies, he identifies as the root of traditional devaluations of forgetting a particular perception of this phenomenon. Forgetting, Vivian argues, is seen as threatening and problematical because it is associated with notions of death and decay.<sup>43</sup> In order to recuperate its creative and productive capacities, therefore, these deep-seated connotations have to be questioned. Ultimately, Vivian’s study addresses the rhetoric of memory and forgetting. Only by recasting their language will we succeed in availing ourselves of the productive resources forgetting can add to those of our own memorial culture.

The question of how remembrance and forgetting have to be related to permit individuals and societies the best possible interaction with their past – Nietzsche’s question, it will be recalled – is central for the present book as well. All contributors are agreed that next to remembrance forgetting too has its legitimate role to play in human life, but quite how the balance is to be struck between the two remains difficult and controversial and oscillates, therefore,

<sup>40</sup> H. GROTIUS, *De iure belli ac pacis*, 3.10, §17.

<sup>41</sup> RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 455.

<sup>42</sup> See note 23 above.

<sup>43</sup> B. VIVIAN, *Public Forgetting: The Rhetoric and Politics of Beginning Again*, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010, 1–7.

between more reserved accounts (see Aleida Assmann's, Simon Podmore's and Paul Fiddes' papers) and a conditioned, while explicit appreciation (in the papers by Bradford Vivian, Hartmut von Sass, Philipp Stoellger, Johannes Zachhuber).

#### 2.4. *Forgiving and Forgetting*

Forgiveness is one particular way human beings deal with past evil. Where it finds its place within the world of human morality, however, has been controversial as Klaus Michael Kodalle's historical survey has shown.<sup>44</sup> For example, how does forgiveness relate to justice? Can it be consistently applied and, if not, how can it be defended against the charge of expressing personal preferences? And further, what exactly *is* forgiveness: a declaration by means of which a culpable action is annulled? Does forgiveness, in other words, remove guilt? Or does it simply pertain at the subjective and psychological level permitting individuals to cope with the burden of traumatic experiences?

These conceptual problems notwithstanding, forgiveness has played, and continues to play a central role wherever questions of individual and collective guilt have been discussed in Western societies. Part of the reason forgiveness looms so large in those debates surely is its significance within the religious thought world of the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

The promise that sins are forgiven is unequivocal in the New Testament as is the need for human beings to forgive 'those who have trespassed against' them, but it is less clear how this is to be understood. In the present volume, Paul Fiddes assumes that forgiveness is related to reconciliation whereas Lydia Schumacher contests that very assumption in favour of a subjective and, as it were, therapeutic interpretation according to which forgiveness means the refusal to let oneself be hurt by another person.

Does forgiveness go along with forgetting? This question in many ways lies at the heart of the present volume, and it makes little sense to probe it in detail here. Suffice it to say that forgiveness clearly requires remembrance insofar as it is a conscious and deliberate act: nothing can be forgiven that is no longer remembered. It has been argued, however, that forgiveness leads to, or ought to lead to forgetting insofar as after it has been forgotten, evil really ceases to hold sway over the individuals or communities concerned.

Biblical language, as Bradford Vivian has shown, provides some precedent for this, insofar as God's promise that sins will be forgiven is (sometimes) accompanied by the statement, that they are no longer remembered.<sup>45</sup> The most famous of those passages is Jer 31,31–34 (the annunciation of a new covenant) which

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<sup>44</sup> Cf. K.M. KODALLE, *Verzeihung denken. Die verkannte Grundlage menschlicher Verhältnisse*, Paderborn: Fink, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> See VIVIAN, *Public Forgetting*.

ends with the promise that the Lord ‘will forgive their iniquities and remember their sins no more’. Vivian also suggested that Jesus’ writing in the sand in Jn 8,6 contains an oblique reference to the imagery likening remembrance to the writing on a wax tablet. By recording the charges against the adulterous woman in sand, by contrast, Jesus hands this information over to oblivion.<sup>46</sup>

Among later Christian thinkers it is above all Søren Kierkegaard who has suggested that forgiveness ought to be linked with forgetting – his intervention is discussed in this book by Simon Podmore, George Pattison, and Hartmut von Sass. Most recently, Miroslav Volf has fully explored this line of reasoning in his book *The End of Memory*, which in many ways can be seen as a theological counterpart to the contributions by Vivian and Meier.<sup>47</sup> Without denying the importance of remembrance, Volf argues that reconciliation is only possible on the basis of one’s willingness to let go of certain painful memories and thus to forget.

### 3. Forgetting – An Elusive Phenomenon

This introduction cannot aim at a full exposition of all the facets of forgetting and its relationship to the problem of forgiveness. A preliminary sketch, gesturing in the direction of possible answers and providing pointers to the more detailed discussion in later chapters, must suffice. A useful starting point may be the observation that forgetting appears to be an instance of deprivation, of lapse, of slipping into the hidden-inaccessible, of the almost obliterated. This ‘mobile army of metaphors’ is just a tentative counterproposal to an imagery which since Plato has provided the wax tablet as memory space with the result that forgetting is seen as the wiping out, scratching off or overwriting the wax. With Freud however, this imagery is to be modified, making use of spatial metaphors of inhabitation with upper- and middle-class antechambers and salons. Forgetting then appears as the inability to move from one room to another or as remaining in the antechamber of repression combined with the vague certainty that the apartment is much bigger than what one has entered into so far.<sup>48</sup>

Both imageries – the one of engraving and the one of spatiality – point to the *privative* character of forgetting.<sup>49</sup> An only partially manageable absence, a deficiency maybe, never directly accessible but noticeable only for its belated symp-

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 42–43.

<sup>47</sup> M. VOLF, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. WEINRICH, *Lethe*, 170.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. H. WEINRICH, Art. ‘Vergessen’, in: *HWP* 11, Basel: Schwabe, 2001, 671–676; also M. HEIDEGGER, *Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemässer Betrachtung*, in: *IDEM*, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 46, Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2003, 34.

toms: subsidence, deadening, a fading of consciousness, as Edmund Husserl once put it.<sup>50</sup> However, even the apparently harmless phrase of forgetting as a phenomenon of deprivation might lead astray insofar as forgetting may not even be a phenomenon but *is* – if it ‘is’ anything – this privation itself.

This privative character of forgetting can be specified in several ways:

*a. Temporally.* Although we may forget the presence around us, the object of our forgetting is never present. While we forget we cannot know *that* we forget. If this were possible, forgetting would be annulled immediately: the awareness of having forgotten is necessarily a delayed symptom *post oblivionem*.

*b. Locally.* While memory is connected to media, spaces and storages – such as libraries, stack-rooms, archives, scripts, hard disc, etc. – forgetting is not. A topology of forgetting would therefore only make sense if remembrance would be recast as a form of forgetting for example as outsourcing. Forms of forgetting, however, which do not follow this logic, exist in the *placelessness* of privation.

*c. Non-intentionality.* While it is possible to abandon memory to oblivion, a conscious decision to forget seems to defy its own purpose. The verb ‘to forget’ is not used in the first person of the present continuous (‘I am forgetting’) because it denotes an activity with no possible simultaneous self-ascription.<sup>51</sup> For the same reason the command to forget hits a brick wall or even leads to its exact opposite. Nevertheless, when we forget we are involved in this occurrence, so forgetting is no mere passivity. It happens to us, and we consciously allow or at least tacitly accept that. Forgetting is an event *without* an agent but happening *to* an agent who – without an *act* of forgetting – enters into a *state* of forgetting.<sup>52</sup>

*d. Capacity, not ability.* In accordance with its non-intentional character forgetting is a *capacity* (in the sense of a disposition) but not an *ability* (in the sense of a skill). In other words, we have the potential to forget, and yet we cannot train, develop, and improve this capacity, as it would be the case with a skill. The asymmetry between forgetting and remembering shows up again here. Remembering is about an accomplished action or expressive attitude, which is why *memoria* traditionally belonged to the mental faculties along with insight (*intelligentia*) and will (*voluntas*).<sup>53</sup> Forgetting, however, is not so easy to grasp and an ‘art of forgetting’ – if it does exist at all – can therefore only be found as a variation of the *ars memoriae*, as Harald Weinrich holds.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See E. HUSSERL, *Die Krisis der Wissenschaften als Ausdruck der radikalen Lebenskrisis des europäischen Menschentums* (HUA 6), Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1962, 1–276, esp. 45–54.

<sup>51</sup> See B. WALDENFELS, *Antwortregister*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1994, 384.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. the traditional relation between forgetting and insomnia, for instance in PLATO, *Philebus*, 52a–b; see also R. LACHMANN, ‘Gedächtnis und Weltverlust. Borges’ *memorioso* – mit Anspielungen auf Lurijas *Mnemonisten*’, in: *Memoria. Vergessen und Erinnern*, ed. A. HAVERKAMP/R. LACHMANN, München: Wilhelm Fink, 1993, 492–519; 500.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. AUGUSTINE, *De trinitate*, 14.7.10; 8.11.

<sup>54</sup> Cf. H. WEINRICH, *Gibt es eine Kunst des Vergessens?*, Basel: Schwabe, 1996, 46.

#### 4. Forms of Forgetting

It is arguable furthermore that a number of different forms of forgetting ought to be identified and distinguished:

*a. Individual and collective forms of forgetting:* One of the essential distinctions established by the cultural study of memory is that between individual and collective memory. In addition, a further distinction between communicative and oral, and cultural and tradition-based memory is sometimes drawn.<sup>55</sup> The same distinctions are arguably relevant for forgetting as well. If so, the difference is about more than the mere fact that in one case an individual forgets while in the other it is a collective. Rather, the mechanisms of correction, avoidance, or enactment of forgetting that obtain in individual solitude are different from those operating in a collective surrounding.

*b. Reversible and irretrievable forgetting:* This distinction is drawn in various ways by most theorists of forgetting. Augustine introduced the problem in his *De trinitate* with the following example:

Someone whom you do not recognize says to you: 'You know me', and to aid your memory he mentions where, when, and how he made your acquaintance. If, however, in spite of all the signs that he has used to awaken your recollection, you still do not recognize him, then you have already forgotten to such an extent that all that knowledge has been completely erased from your mind; and there remains nothing else but to believe him, or not even that, if the speaker seems to you to be untrustworthy of belief.<sup>56</sup>

Ricœur similarly distinguished between forgetting that 'effaces the traces' and forgetting which does not. In many ways, reversible forgetting is the more significant kind even though the possibility or desirability of irreversible forgetting is certainly of importance as well. The occurrence of irreversible forgetting arguably is more frequent in individuals, since collectives benefit from their internal heterogeneity. Yet irretrievable forgetting does occur in societies; in fact, according to Marc Augé, it is necessary in order to free capacities for the preservation of cultural memory.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> The distinction between individual and collective goes back to Carl Gustav Jung; on 'cultural memory' see esp. M. HALBWACHS, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and transl. L.A. COSER, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; J. ASSMANN, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München: Beck, 1997; H. WELZER, *Das kommunikative Gedächtnis. Eine Theorie der Erinnerung*, München: Wilhelm Fink, 2002.

<sup>56</sup> AUGUSTINE, *De trinitate*, 14.13 (ET: Augustine, *On the Trinity* Books 8–15 (Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy), ed. by GARETH B. MATTHEWS and STEPHEN MCKENNA, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 155).

<sup>57</sup> M. AUGÉ, *Oblivion*, transl. M. JAGER, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, esp. 56.

c. *Superficial and profound oblivion*: Forgetting usually refers to objects the mind had stored in, but subsequently lost from, its memory. Yet it is arguable that underlying this forgetting of bits of information there are deeper, more profound forms of forgetting which only make everyday forgetting possible. Thinkers from Augustine to Heidegger have discussed whether we forget God, the self or indeed being. This, surely, was not meant to suggest that those are things or names that have slipped our individual or collective memories, but ‘forgetting’ in those cases refers to an existential mode in which the connection with its most profound source has been lost. Ricœur expresses this distinction by suggesting that forgetting occurs along a vertical level of depth.<sup>58</sup>

d. *Destroying and conserving forms of forgetting*: Once the popular identification of forgetting with the erasure of contents is recognised as facile, the conceptual and terminological space widens and the possibility of conserving or even creative forms of forgetting comes into view, as suggested by Paul Ricœur. In fact, one can take this line of reasoning one step further by asking whether something genuinely new may even come to the fore in and through the withdrawal of forgetting.<sup>59</sup> Things we did not remember for a long time but which are conserved somehow in the subconscious are more freshly preserved, it might be argued, precisely on account of superficial forgetting. Hence this form of forgetting is creative and – in contrast to its destructive sibling – takes a hermeneutical form: something is forgotten *as* something.<sup>60</sup> This does not mean, however, that this distinction can always be reliably drawn; for Ricœur certainly, an unavoidable ambiguity remains between erasing and conserving forgetting, an ambiguity that might be the ‘most precious and secret hallmark of forgiveness’.<sup>61</sup>

These forms are open for further specification and can, of course, be variously combined. In that sense, one might ask, for example, which character the collective forgetting takes on as soon as it becomes creative and hermeneutical in the aforementioned meaning.

<sup>58</sup> RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 414.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. H.C. ASKANI, ‘Zwielicht und Vergessen: B. Waldenfels: *Ordnung im Zwielicht*’, in: *Bezeugte Vergangenheit oder versöhnendes Vergessen. Geschichtstheorie nach Paul Ricœur*, ed. B. LIEBSCH, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010, 91–109; B. WALDENFELS, *Ordnung im Zwielicht*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1987; P. RICŒUR, ‘Gedächtnis, Geschichte, Vergessen’, in: *Bezeugte Vergangenheit oder versöhnendes Vergessen. Geschichtstheorie nach Paul Ricœur*, ed. B. LIEBSCH, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2010, 91–109; 100.

<sup>60</sup> Concerning the hermeneutical ‘as’ cf. H. VON SASS, ‘Zur Grammatik des Missverstehens. Versuch einer hermeneutischen Schadensbegrenzung’, in: *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 59/1 (2012), 124–147, esp. 131–138.

<sup>61</sup> RICŒUR, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 593.

## 5. Memory and Forgetting: Beyond the Binary

Accepting the existence of creative in addition to purely destructive forgetting paves the way to the further recognition that the neat opposition between remembrance and forgetting as such may be simplistic. There seems to be less of a clear demarcation line between the two forms and more of a reciprocal relatedness, an economy. Without memories (or put more carefully: memorable things), there is trivially nothing that could be forgotten. And forgetting, *vice versa*, deepens memory by threatening it permanently and latently. Without forgetting, the ‘duty to remember’ remains empty, even unintelligible, while recollection might fizzle out in the impossible were it not for the priorities imposed by the danger of forgetting, which expose capacities of preservation thus arguably enabling us to memorise anything in the first instance.

Equally complex is the relationship between the two when it comes to institutions of *outsourcing*, media that externalise memories with the result that we may confidently forget them. This precisely was Plato’s concern with regard to writing as expressed in the myth of Teuth and Thamon: while pretending to bring the triumph of memory, it would rather become the starting point of a fatal dialectic in which recollection leads directly to ever more intensified forgetting.<sup>62</sup> The same argument is currently articulated in discussions about the long-term consequences of the internet.<sup>63</sup> The reason seems to be that this outsourcing of memories strengthens the precarious selectivity of human recollection. In this sense it may well be that, as forgetting *can* be conserving, remembrance may resemble more properly a form of forgetting. Recollection of something *as* something necessarily suppresses other things in restructuring and recoding them, and this process does not leave the memories untouched but instead (re)shapes them so that their origins are effectively forgotten. In this sense, recollection is an appropriation that performs effective rearrangements and adopts the character of a counter-memory.

Forgetting and recollection are thus, as Heidegger stated, two different ways of interacting with the past. In precisely this interim, the psychoanalytic concept of repression is properly located.<sup>64</sup> Repression is distinct from forgetting, since what is repressed is exactly what cannot be forgotten, as Brigitte Boothe and Agata Bielik-Robson explain in their contributions to this volume. No genuine forgetting is therefore possible if repression is identified as the paradigmatic case of forgetting, as in Freud, because all forgetting can always be traced back to an underlying case of repression: nothing is forgotten without a reason.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> PLATO, Phaedrus, 274c–278b.

<sup>63</sup> WEINRICH, Lethe, 257–271.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. HEIDEGGER, Zur Auslegung von Nietzsches II. Unzeitgemässer Betrachtung, 36.

<sup>65</sup> See WEINRICH, Gibt es eine Kunst des Vergessens?, 40–41.

## 6. Limits of Forgetting

Forgetting then is a powerful and important element of human life. Nevertheless, it has its limits. First of all, it appears that forgetting by definition can refer only to the past. We cannot normally use the verb 'to forget' in either the present or the future tense. This is because something in order to be forgotten had to contained in memory previously; a 'primordial forgetting'<sup>66</sup> of something that had (perhaps) never been present to our recollection, arguably makes no sense.

Furthermore, forgetting seems to have its limits with regard to what Husserl called the *Lebenswelt*. In other words, there really is the *unforgettable*. I can forget about many details in my environment and even in my life, but there is a degree of oblivion that pertains to my very person or to things that have significantly shaped and influenced me or that belong to common knowledge which, while possible (for example in cases of Alzheimer's disease), go along with the pathological loss of the very core of my personality. The *existential* shock experienced when approaching that limit towards the unforgettable calls attention to the exhilarating or catastrophic character of an event that is inscribed into the individual or collective memory. Instead of inscribing one might speak of 'burning in' or – along Nietzsche's 'mnemotechnique' – of being so painful that forgetting is neither possible nor tenable. An 'ethics of remembrance', then, would not only be a duty but the expression of a necessity in the light of what cannot be forgotten – and, therefore, probably could not be forgiven.

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<sup>66</sup> ASKANI, 'Zwielicht und Vergessen', 106.