

Forgiving and Forgetting

Theology and the Margins of Soteriology

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ISBN 978-3-16-154081-3

ISSN 1616-346X (Religion in Philosophie and Theology)

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliographie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.dnb.de>

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The book was typeset by Gulde-Druck in Tübingen, printed by Laupp & Göbel in Nehren on non-aging paper and bound by Buchbinderei Nädele in Nehren.

Printed in Germany.

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Forgiveness between Remembrance and Forgetting

Overcoming the Power of Past Evil

JOHANNES ZACHHUBER

On the final pages of the last book of *De civitate dei*, the magisterial account of the two cities that make up the history of all creation, Augustine considers the end of all things. How will perfect happiness for the saints be possible? One aspect he specifically dwells on is the memory they will retain of their past sorrows. For the Bishop of Hippo it suffers no doubt that this memory will have to be erased if their bliss is to be complete:

In the everlasting City there will remain in each and all of us an inalienable freedom of the will, emancipating us from every evil and filling us with every good, rejoicing in the inexhaustible beatitude of everlasting happiness, unclouded by the memory of any sin or of sanction suffered, yet with no forgetfulness of our redemption nor any loss of gratitude for our Redeemer.¹

There is a tension in this statement of which the Bishop of Hippo himself is well aware: how can they remember their salvation and retain gratitude for God's forgiveness if they have forgotten their past trespasses along with their evil consequences? And yet they need to forget in order to ensure that past evil has really been overcome. How then are remembrance and forgetting related to each other, and how are they both related to forgiveness? An easy answer to these questions, so much seems clear, is impossible. While it can, and should, be argued that forgetting is part of the healing process initiated by the act of forgiveness, it appears equally obvious – as indicated by Augustine – that forgiveness presupposes the presence of the past in our memory.

My chapter is intended to offer some reflections on this very problem. It is an intricate, but also, I believe, a rewarding one as it leads to important insights into some fundamental theological and philosophical topics ranging from hu-

¹ AUGUSTINE, *De civitate dei*, 12.30 (English text: SAINT AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*, Books XVII–XXII, trans. G. G. WALSH/D. J. HONAN, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1954, 508).

man personal integrity, freedom, and temporality, to guilt, responsibility, and forgiveness.

My most fundamental assumption will be that remembrance and forgetting gain their significance in the context of human temporality. They are ways in which we deal with the past; and this interaction is never easy or straightforward as past, present and future are, for human beings, intimately connected. Unless we stay in touch with the past we do not have present or future either; but we must equally be able to leave our past behind in order to experience the present moment and be open to new developments in the future. Our humanity is therefore threatened both by an uncontrolled loss of remembrance, as through repression or dementia, and by the total, overwhelming presence of the past, as in the case of trauma or in victims of abuse who cannot forget what happened to them. Preserving our humanity, I shall argue, therefore requires remembrance as well as forgetting.

This emphasis on temporality links my interest in remembrance and forgetting with forgiveness, which I understand as a human response to past evil intended to prevent such evil from overshadowing and dominating our future lives. Forgiveness, then, is one way in which we defend our humanity in the face of the twin-threats of total and uncontrolled remembrance and complete oblivion. Forgiveness has its function in human social life and – as we shall see – in our relationship with God insofar as it interrupts the power of past evil and thereby permits new beginnings: it allows relationships to be reconciled and heal; it helps individuals to move on with their lives after difficult or even traumatic experiences; it prevents past evil from being constantly repeated. Forgiveness is not identical with either remembrance or forgetting, but it can, I shall argue, be inscribed into the specific way in which the interplay of remembrance and forgetting is fundamental for the preservation of our human temporality and thus our very humanity.

By approaching my subject from this angle, I shall never leave the thought of St Augustine far behind.² As is well known, his specific understanding of time, which for centuries had been all but neglected, became a major inspiration for Martin Heidegger's phenomenology of human temporality in the early twentieth century³ and has, from there, cast a long shadow over both philosophy and theology ever since. Of supreme relevance for this subsequent development has been the philosophy of Paul Ricœur, to whom my own investigation is much

² Augustine seems to have been fascinated by this topic throughout his life. The classical exposition of his theory is to be found in Book 11 of his *Confessions*. The most penetrating (albeit highly critical) interpretation of this text is still K. FLASCH, *Was ist Zeit? Augustinus von Hippo. Das XI Buch der Confessiones. Historisch-philosophische Studie. Text-Übersetzung-Kommentar*, Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1993. For an Augustinian approach to the topics of forgetting and forgiveness cf. the chapter by L. SCHUMACHER in the present book.

³ M. HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1986.

indebted, and which culminated in his magisterial, monographic treatment of *Memory, History, Forgetting* towards the end of his life.⁴ With Ricœur I accept that the Augustinian (and Heideggerian) emphasis on the internal experience of time has to be connected with the external reality of physical or, as Ricœur says, ‘cosmological’ time in order fully to account for our experience of remembrance and forgetting.

I shall proceed by first unpacking in some more detail my understanding of remembrance and forgetting as related to temporality. In a second part I shall then consider ethical implications of the way we remember and forget. I shall discuss in particular what I call the ‘duty to remember’. In a third part, I shall move on to the problem of forgiveness. From a consideration of forgiveness and forgetting in human interpersonal relationships, I shall finally, in a fourth section, move on to the idea of divine forgiveness and argue that remembrance and forgetting are helpful categories to conceptualise this fundamental belief in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

1. Remembrance and Forgetting as Aspects of Human Temporality

Our humanity is conditional on the experience of time. We always come from a past, know ourselves as currently existing in the present, and we look forward to the future. It has often been observed that these three modes are far more than a recognition of the fact that we exist on a linear, progressive temporal development that moves us inevitably from birth to death. Rather, our present experience is conditioned by the awareness that we ‘have’ past, present and future. What does this mean? I shall consider these three dimensions of our temporality in turn and explain how, in my view, the duality of remembrance and forgetting is intimately interwoven with all three of them.

Past

Let me begin with the past. I have said before that it is a constitutive aspect of our humanity that we have a past. And in some ways this is clearly the most appropriate way to speak about it. Our past is not a place or a country we have once visited and to which we could again return. Thus far, it is truly ours and only exists insofar as, and to the extent that, we retain it in our memories. The past for us inevitably is remembered past; to ‘have’ a past in the way it is consti-

⁴ P. RICŒUR, *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*, Paris: Edition Du Seuil, 2000; English text: *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. K. BLAMEY/D. PELLAUER, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006. Of other recent literature I should mention in particular M. AUGÉ, *Les formes de l’oubli*, Paris: Payot et Rivages, 1998.

tutive for human beings therefore means that what happened in the past *is* still present with us. 'Our' past is always and inevitably a 'present past'.⁵

It is, then, evident how remembrance is fundamental for human temporality and thus for human integrity. Without remembrance, there would be no 'past' in the specific sense in which our past is part of our identity. Our memory is the unique capacity that allows us to retain a recollection of what happened prior to this moment and to integrate it into our current lives. But if by means of remembrance the past becomes part of the present, it is equally significant that it becomes part of the present *as* the past. In other words, this 'present past' is still different from the present; however much we retain of it, we retain it in the awareness that it is something that occurred before. Were it otherwise, we would exist in an atemporal present; we would not have a sense of a difference between the past and the present as both would be one and the same indistinguishable reality to us.

Human temporality, then, includes 'having' a past in the precise sense that things that happened previously are retained in our memory such that they become part of our present identity; but they do so with the clear sense that they belong to the past. Temporality would be denied both by the absence of remembrance, which would take our past away from us, and by the inability to distinguish the content of our memory *as* the past from the present, which would obliterate all difference between past and present.

It is then also evident that forgetting must be a factor in this interplay between human past and present. Our memorial capacity is finite; there will therefore always be something we remember while there are other things we forget. It stands to reason that we will inevitably remember only a small fraction of what we could in principle remember. The content of our remembered past, then, resembles a small island within the immense sea of the forgotten past. We can arguably go further than that and surmise that what we remember from our past and, consequently, how we remember our past is not merely determined by the random operations of our brain capacity but says much about the kind of human being we are. Our memories, after all, constitute our identity; it is at least likely that this can be reversed into the statement that our identity constitutes our memories: we tend to remember good or bad things; we remember our success or our failure; we remember other people's kindness or their rudeness. And in this way, our selective memories say much about what kind of person we are.

In this perspective, nevertheless, forgetting enters the fray merely as a negative entity. It is the absence of remembrance, Ricœur calls it '*l'effacement des traces*'.⁶ While it is a necessary part of human interaction with their past, it does

⁵ Cf. Heidegger's *Gewesenheit* in HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, §73, esp. 380–381.

⁶ RICŒUR, *La mémoire*, 543.

not appear in its own right but rather, one might say, as the shadow cast by remembrance. This, however, does not yet seem to be the full story.

Let me return to the turn of phrase from which I started: that we have a past. Looked at more closely, this very expression appears much less obviously true than it initially seemed to be. Instead, at closer inspection it reveals a deep and fundamental, almost paradoxical tension at the heart of our specific human temporality. Do we really have our past? While we may think of it as safely stored in our memories, it is also, perhaps primarily, that part of reality that we no longer possess nor in any way control. If something is 'past', we might then say, this means that, on the contrary, we no longer 'have' it. What is past, is past; any control we may have had over it, we have now lost. In fact, it may be more appropriate to say that the past has control over us. The past, we might be tempted to say, 'has' us at least as much as we 'have' it. While we have seen before that we cannot return to the past, we cannot either, as the phrase goes, 'run away' from it. The past is something that has happened and, whether we like it or not, is now part of our lives.

Once we take this aspect of the past into account, the relationship between remembrance and forgetting appears in a new light. Insofar as our humanity in its temporality is jeopardised by the loss of the past, forgetting was simply a negative force, potentially destroying a crucial feature of our humanity. We can now see, however, that the 'remembered past' is threatened not only by oblivion but also by the brutal force by means of which past events are retained in our memories and indeed impose themselves on our present whether we want it or not.

This problem can be described in two ways. We can emphasise that remembrance of the past is not the same as the retention of past events in our memories; the two are distinct in that we are subjects of the former act (I remember) but objects in the latter (the past that doesn't want to go away). Alternatively we can emphasise the need for the remembered past to be clearly distinct from the present as opposed to an overwhelming presence of something past within the present.⁷ Ultimately, both point to the same phenomenon: that our human need to have a past is not only limited and threatened by a lack or an absence of remembrance, i.e. forgetting, but also by an overwhelming presence of past events or experiences and thus far by an absence or lack of forgetting.

In this way, forgetting comes into view as a human capacity in its own right. And this is not merely a matter of its more positive evaluation or a critique of memorial omnipotence. We can appreciate forgetting even if we consider it as a mere negation; there is a too much of everything; we need boundaries and may therefore feel that the disappearance of memory has its own value. What I sug-

⁷ In this sense, Heidegger rightly says that remembrance presupposes forgetting: HEIDEGGER, *Sein und Zeit*, 339. Cf. RICŒUR, *La mémoire*, 572–573.

gest is more than, and in a way different from, a re-evaluation of forgetting. I argue that, as soon as we recognise that the 'past' of human temporality is not simply physical time that has elapsed, but a dimension of our existence in and through which we integrate part of what happened previously into our present and future selves, forgetting is as much involved in our relationship with the past as is remembrance. Forgetting in this sense, however, is different from the 'eracement of the traces' of remembrance. It is what Ricœur calls 'active forgetting', a conscious and volitional effort against the overpowering force of remembrance.⁸ Its primary aim is not to eradicate any recollection of a past event, but to prevent the latter from exercising total and unchecked control over present and future.

Both remembrance and forgetting then are equally necessary to make the past *our* past. Given the tendency of past events to slip into the nothingness of oblivion, remembrance is foundational for the temporal integrity of human existence; it protects and preserves humanity from the threat of *losing* its past. Yet there is also, as we now realise, the countervailing tendency of the past to 'have us' that is, to remain present in human consciousness independently of our own volition. Such an overwhelming presence of the past is equally threatening to the integrity of our humanity, and thus far forgetting too is an ineluctable condition of the preservation of our existential integrity.

Future

This interplay of remembrance and forgetting is not, however, crucial for our relationship with the past only. Like the past, the future too is more than and different from the mere extension of physical time beyond the present moment. To have a future is constitutive for humanity insofar as it is an open but limited space into which we project the potentiality of our existence. Our future is not so much something that is yet to happen as *our present awareness* that something is yet to happen. Just as our past is a present past, so our future is a present future. It therefore, in one sense, depends on our ability to know or at least have a reasonable expectation of, what is going to happen to us. Our future is not a black hole, but the opening within which our own plans unfold, structured by reasoned assumptions about surrounding developments. While it is a truism that we do not know what the future will bring, it is equally the case that there would be no 'future' for us were it not for the fact that we possess and exercise our prognostic abilities however fallible those may be.

At the same time, our 'present future' must be clearly distinct from past and present. It is only our *future* insofar as we are aware of it as something that is as

⁸ Cf. the discussion of Kant's attitude to remembrance and forgetting in: H. WEINRICH, *Lethe. Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*, München: Beck, 1997, 92–105.

yet to come about. This entails its fundamental openness; the future is the dimension of our existence that liberates our selves from the shackles of a fated repetition of the past. The future must provide for the possibility of new beginnings and novel developments. Having a future is, consequently, threatened in two ways. Without any ability to anticipate what is going to happen, we simply cannot have a future, but a completely fated repetition of the past equally undermines the specific openness characteristic of the future.

Once this is recognised, the importance of remembrance and forgetting for the future as a dimension of human existence becomes perceptible. The anticipation and prognosis of future events is, in many ways, nothing other than an extrapolation from past experience and in this sense a type of memory: we know what to expect in a certain situation because of and insofar as we remember what happened in an analogous situation in the past. Moreover, many aspects of our lives are cyclical, so it is literally a matter of remembering, for example, at which hour of the day a child has to be collected from school, on which day of the week a regular meeting takes place, or on which day of the year our tax return has to be filed. In this sense, our memorial capacity is what permits us to shape and structure the time that lies ahead into our own future; forgetting by contrast is what limits this ability. Forgetting surely is not, in this case, its only limitation as future predictions are also curtailed by contingent occurrences outside our control or indeed our knowledge. Yet we can see that someone who entirely lost his or her memory, for example through dementia, would not merely cease to have a past but also not 'have' a future any longer.

Yet once again the role of forgetting is different once we consider the essential openness of the future as a condition for its 'futuraity'. If remembrance is the foundation for our ability to project our future into the time that lies ahead, the sheer and overwhelming presence of past events in the mind can genuinely take the future away from a person. In this case, the future is reduced to a ceaseless repetition of the past as is the case, for example, with those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. In this condition, past and future merge into a perpetual present in which a traumatic experience is constantly reiterated and re-enacted. In a broader sense, one can think of the phenomenon Nietzsche described as *ressentiment*, the psychological disposition in which repeated past humiliations combine into such a powerful pattern that any emerging scenario can only be understood along the same lines. Forgetting is needed here as a capacity in its own right if the future as an open space with the potential for new developments is to be retained.⁹

⁹ In this sense, Augé recommends what he calls 're-commencement' as a form of forgetting that enables a radical new beginning: 'Son ambition est de retrouver le futur en oubliant le passé, de créer les conditions d'une nouvelle naissance qui, par définition, ouvre à tous les avénirs possibles sans en privilégier aucun'.

Quite generally, we can say that the merely physical capacity of retaining past events in our minds is as conducive to our human ability to have a future as it is threatening. Both remembrance and forgetting enable us to have a future when understood as cultural tools developed to negotiate our need to project past experience into the future with the prospect of genuine openness for new beginnings.

Present

What then can be said about the present along those lines, and how is it related to remembrance and forgetting? *Prima facie*, the present can be understood in two ways: as pure imagination based on our awareness of past and future; or as the only reality by contrast to the past which is no longer and the future which is yet to come. The former understanding results from a predominance of our memorial faculty which keeps our past present with us and extends its trajectory into the future. The present thus contracts to a fictional point in which the lines of past developments converge and from which the lines of future developments emerge. It is the end of the past and the beginning of the future, even though, as such, it is also the basis for the presence with us of both, past and future. If in this way the present all but disappears, we should not ignore, however, that the only way we can meaningfully speak of a present presupposes our awareness of past and future. We may well assume that those who have no recollection of the past and no anticipation of the future, say animals, live in perennial present, but it is hard to see how this could mean anything resembling our understanding of the present, given that the latter is defined by its bordering on past and future.

Our memorial capacity, then, provides us with a conception of the present as the intersection of the past and the future. Yet by the same token, as we have seen, it also threatens it. The present past and the present future, we might say, can easily leave no room for the present between them. So what about the present as the only reality? Once again, we can see how forgetting enters the fray as a positive mental capacity rather than a mere negation of remembrance. While it is arguable that there would be no present without remembrance of the past and anticipation of the future, it seems equally plausible that a conscious effort to forget both past and future is required to secure the space for the present in any meaningful sense of the term. The present only becomes real if forgetting creates the space for it by limiting the totalitarian dominance of past remembrance and concern for the future.¹⁰ This is no small thing. After all, the self

¹⁰ AUGÉ, *Formes de l'oubli*, 77, describes this form of forgetting as 'suspens', 'dont l'ambition première est de retrouver le présent en le coupant provisoirement du passé et du futur et, plus précisément, en oubliant le futur pour autant que celui-ci s'identifie au retour du passé'.

exists in the present; in particular, the present is the basis for human agency. It is therefore arguable that the absence of forgetting and the resulting loss of a real space between past and future constrains and ultimately throttles our potential as agents.

What has emerged, then, is that human temporal existence in all its three dimensions, as past, present, and future, is dependent on both remembrance and forgetting. Without the memorial power of the human mind no temporality would be possible, no past, no future and, ultimately, no present either. And yet this power is also ambivalent: while its retention of past events enables the creation of human identity spanning past, present, and future, it can also make such an identity all but impossible by imposing an overwhelming and enduring presence of past events on the human person, which blurs the distinctions between past and present, turns the future into a fated repetition of the past, and annihilates the space for any genuine present. Meanwhile forgetting, if considered as the quasi-physical limitation of memorial capacity, is equally ambivalent as it threatens to wipe out the recollection of the past and, with it, obliterates the works of memorial identity. It also, however, enables human identity by keeping the present past distinct from the present, the future from being a mere extension of the past, and the present from being annihilated between past and future. Like memory, then, forgetting is a human capacity in its own right that is needed to create and uphold human temporality as the condition for truly human existence.

It is therefore wrong to conceive of perfect existence as remembrance without forgetting. Remembrance without forgetting may be the reality of a machine, a computer or indeed the internet. The perfect being, if human experience is anything to go by, must be understood as having the capacity to remember and forget in exactly the right way and to exactly the right degree.

2. The Ethics of Forgetting

We must then enquire what this means. What is the right way and the right degree of remembering, and what is the right way of forgetting? So far, we have seen that both belong together if human beings are to attain and retain their integrity. Can we go beyond the blanket statement that we ought to remember what is worth remembering but forget what ought to be forgotten? Along the lines of my argument so far, the answer would have to be something like this: 'right' remembrance and 'right' forgetting has to be measured against the human ideal of an existence in past, present, and future. Yet once again we may want to know whether this can be further explicated or spelled out in more

detail. How do we know whether something ought to be kept in memory or whether it is better to be left to oblivion?

The most influential attempt to answer this question, arguably, has been Friedrich Nietzsche's essay about the 'use and abuse' (*Nutzen und Nachteil*) of history for life. Faced with the intellectual world of nineteenth-century historicism, Nietzsche urged that, while human beings differed from animals in their memorial ability, its superabundance could stifle contemporary agency by shutting down and closing off future options and the willingness to engage oneself. This, Nietzsche argued, was bad because it vitiated against the imperative of life itself:

Forgetting is essential to action of any kind, just as not only light but darkness too is essential for the life of everything organic. A man who wanted to feel organically through and through would be like one forcibly deprived of sleep, or an animal that had to live only by rumination and ever repeated rumination [...] There is a degree of sleeplessness, of rumination, of the historical sense, which is harmful and ultimately fatal to the living thing, whether this living thing be a man or a people or a culture.¹¹

It is easy to recognise in Nietzsche's concern the interplay of remembrance and forgetting specifically for the human ability to have a future. His insistence on the right and indeed the need to forget in order to allow new beginnings and in this sense permit life to flourish, is justified. If we look at individual human existence in isolation, Nietzsche can be a good and helpful guide encouraging creative forgetting as an antidote to the stifling omnipotence of a memorial culture. The criterion he offers to strike a balance between remembrance and forgetting, the need for individual self-preservation, is indeed important and has to be taken into account in attempting such a balance. It is not, however, in itself sufficient.

There is a dimension Nietzsche altogether ignores or at least considers only in an extremely one-sided manner, and this is the way individual remembrance and forgetting is interwoven with the experiences of other people. While Nietzsche explicitly mentions nations and civilisations as needing forgetting as much as the individual in order to stay alive and active, he really only considers them in analogy with the individual person. In other words, the reality of the other does not enter into his consideration at all. The borderline separating the light area of that which is remembered from the darkness of oblivion according

¹¹ FR. NIETZSCHE, *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen 2: Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben 1* (KSA Vol. 1, 250): 'Zu allem Handeln gehört Vergessen: wie zum Leben alles Organischen nicht nur Licht sondern auch Dunkel gehört. Ein Mensch, der durch und durch nur historisch empfinden wollte, wäre dem ähnlich, der sich des Schlafes zu enthalten gezwungen würde, oder dem Thiere, das nur vom Wiederkäuen und immer wiederholten Wiederkäuen leben sollte. [...] Es giebt einen Grad von Schlaflosigkeit, von Wiederkäuen, von historischem Sinne, bei dem das Lebendige zu Schaden kommt, und zuletzt zu Grunde geht, sei es nun ein Mensch oder ein Volk oder eine Cultur.' English text: FR. NIETZSCHE, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. BREAZEAL, transl. R.J. HOLLINGDALE, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 62.

to Nietzsche has to be drawn with the sole aim of self-preservation in mind; care for the needs and the integrity of others was a motivation deeply suspicious to the sworn enemy of Platonic-Christian morality.

It is perhaps uncontroversial today to see Nietzsche's perception as limited in this regard. While the Western moral tradition undoubtedly has its pathologies, Nietzsche's unequivocal condemnation of it and his refusal to accept care and regard for the other as a legitimate dimension of human agency take him to an extreme position far removed from that of genuine humanity. The truth is that our individual experiences of remembrance and forgetting are interwoven with that of other people. Not merely in the sense that we partake of collective memories as well as collective oblivion – a separate topic which I shall leave aside in this essay¹² – but also insofar as it matters for ourselves what others remember and what they forget as much as, *vice versa*, our own patterns of remembrance and forgetting affect those around us.

We are not indifferent to the fact that a former friend or student has seemingly entirely forgotten how we used to help and support them, and we are likewise painfully conscious of the fact that a person we offended years ago shows clear signs of preserving an exact memory of that occurrence. And while we may be less conscious of it, we still *ought to* realise that the same is true for how others perceive, and are affected by, our own instances of remembrance and forgetting.

By comparison with the significance remembrance and forgetting has for the integrity of our personal temporality, as analysed in the previous section of this chapter, the inclusion of the perspective of the other can lead to one of two consequences: where relationships are broadly consensual, harmonious, and peaceful, their effect on the patterns of remembrance and forgetting will arguably concur with those that are beneficial for ourselves. Shared memories are stronger and more secure than individual ones – they are less affected by the threat of oblivion – and therefore increase their support for our identity in past, present, and future. Likewise an implicit agreement to forget certain elements or dimensions of the past arguably supports and enhances its positive effect for all the individuals' experience of their temporality.

Things are very different, however, when it comes to conflictual relationships. Where one person's win is another person's loss and one person's triumph another's humiliation, it is arguable that the 'uses and abuses' of remembrance and forgetting differ between those sides. In fact, they will often be reversed. What may be important for the one to remember, the other would prefer to forget. The battle that is triumphantly commemorated by the victors would rather fall into oblivion as far as those who were vanquished are concerned. A

¹² Cf. M. HALBWACHS, *On Collective Memory*, transl. L.A. COSER, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992; P. RICŒUR, 'Die vergangene Zeit lesen', in: IDEM, *Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit*, transl. A. BREITLING, Göttingen: Wallstein, 1998, 74–87. Augé's 'forms of forgetting' are all considered as collective.

ritualised remembrance of such an event, such as the Orange Order marches in Northern Ireland, can therefore be regarded as provocative and spiteful by the descendants of the losing side. The latter, in turn, have usually retained recollections of acts of violence and barbarism which the victorious side is likely to have eliminated from their memories. Victims of crimes of abuse are often affected by the traumatic onslaught of overwhelming and uncontrolled remembrance; they struggle to forget. The perpetrators, on the other hand, forget what they have done to ease their moral burden.

This discord of remembrance and forgetting may in itself not be a spectacular insight, but it turns into a veritable problem for my present subject once it is combined with my earlier observation that our individual patterns of remembrance and forgetting matter for those with whom our lives are intertwined. The pain a victim of abuse or injustice feels in the face of a past experience that refuses to go away is arguably increased by the awareness – or even the concern – that the perpetrator may already have forgotten what they did. Looked at in isolation, it could perhaps be argued that for the latter forgetting their past trespass is justified in the interest of self-preservation. Permanent dwelling on past failure can cripple the ability to act in the present and the confidence in one's future prospects. Yet failure to remember in this case affects the integrity of another person. The balance between remembrance and forgetting can therefore not be based solely on the needs of one individual; it has to take into account those of other affected people.

It is in this sense that I would argue that self-preservation cannot be the only principle of an ethics of forgetting. There is also what I would call the duty to remember. What I mean by this is the imperative to remember past events even though it might appear advantageous to consign them to oblivion. The duty to remember concerns difficult and painful memories which nevertheless have to be faced if only out of concern for those to whom this remembrance matters.¹³

One may query whether the duty to remember is strictly juxtaposed to the individual interest in self-preservation. Is it not the case that ultimately a fuller awareness of one's involvement in past evil is also beneficial for one's own integrity? Is not the interplay of remembrance and forgetting, as described in the previous section of this chapter, deeply misunderstood if it is reduced to the notion that pleasant memories ought to be retained, whereas difficult ones are better forgotten? This is indeed arguable, and the tension postulated here be-

¹³ For this reason I am sceptical with regard to the proposal in CH. MEIER, *Das Gebot zu Vergessen und die Unabweisbarkeit des Erinnerns: Vom öffentlichen Umgang mit schlimmer Vergangenheit*, München: Siedler, 2010, to return to the traditional practice of commanding oblivion after the end of a war or dictatorship. Meier argues that the holocaust, which he accepts must never be forgotten, is the exception not the rule. This may well be right, but the danger with the kind of oblivion he prescribes is that it is deaf to the cries of the victims. Cf. Ricœur's insightful critique of the 'oubli commandé' in: RICŒUR, *La mémoire*, 585–589.

tween the 'selfish' interest to remember and forget what is good for ourselves and the 'altruistic' duty with regard to others may be resolved in a higher notion of character development that makes the integration of difficult memories inherently desirable. Yet this does not diminish the insight that the two perspectives do collide in practice, and it does not therefore either contradict the principle that, when determining the balance between remembrance and forgetting, the perspective of the other has to be brought to bear on our decision. This is the addition, I would argue, that is needed to prevent Nietzsche's plea for a balance of remembrance and forgetting based on self-preservation from turning into the cruel and merciless assertion of one's individuality as which it is often presented.

In my previous section I had reached the insight that the ideal of human perfection would not be the person who remembers everything and forgets nothing, but he or she who is in control of both their remembrance and their forgetting. We could, however, think of individuals whose command of remembrance and forgetting is perfect, yet who remember and forget all the wrong things: they forget what they owe to others, but retain in their memories every detail of a past event they can use to damage and humiliate other people. They are untroubled by a guilty conscience because they purposefully forget the wrongs they did to those who depended on them. We can think of such a person as the embodiment of evil power.

By contrast, the good person would be one who is not only capable of commanding remembrance and forgetting, but chooses to do so in the right way. And this right way, I have argued cannot only be measured against the person's interest of self-preservation – even though this is in itself a legitimate concern – but must necessarily include the perspective of others with whose existence and whose memories the person's life is intertwined.

In this comprehensive view, the need to balance remembrance and forgetting both with regard to one's own well-being *and* with regard to the personal integrity of others, includes the whole gamut of human interaction. It is not limited to past evil, to guilt and trauma. Yet experiences such as these constitute a particular challenge to our humanity, not least to its temporal dimension. It is past evil that is difficult to remember and often also difficult to forget, and this difficulty points to the threat that past evil poses to our full possession of past, present, and future. It is the remembrance of past evil that most often becomes traumatic, overshadowing present and future, closing down the prospect of genuinely new departures into the future.

While it would be wrong, therefore, to reduce the discussion of remembrance and forgetting to our need to deal with instances of evil or hurt, it is evident nevertheless that those experiences pose an immediate threat to the integrity of our human temporality. They therefore put our ability to balance right remem-

brance and right forgetting in a way that preserves our own integrity *and* is mindful of others', to its most difficult test. And while forgiveness is not the only option of which we can and ought to avail ourselves in the face of evil, hurt and trauma, it is an important one and supremely so for the Christian theologian given the prominence of this concept in the Bible and in later Christian tradition. I shall therefore use the remainder of my chapter to explore how forgiveness can be understood within the framework I have developed so far.

3. Forgiveness between Remembrance and Forgetting

Forgiveness is sometimes defined with regard to reconciliation, as an act intended to restore a broken relationship.¹⁴ My own understanding here will be different. I shall consider the primary purpose of forgiveness as the restoration of personal integrity in the face of past evil. This may involve renewing a broken relationship or re-forging a troubled friendship, but given that there are dysfunctional and pathological relationships, which are better ended, forgiveness may also be a way of facilitating the act of emancipation from them. Forgiveness in this sense is a human attempt of dealing with past evil. Its ultimate aim is to prevent such evil from overshadowing present and future thus undermining the integrity of human temporality. Being able to forgive, I shall therefore argue, means restoring overwhelming and painful memories in a way that locks them securely in the past thus opening up new possibilities for the future and a real appreciation for the present. Being forgiven does likewise even though we shall see that there are additional aspects to be considered when it comes to the balance between remembrance and forgetting in the case of the perpetrator.

Forgiveness can be conceptualised in two different ways: on one hand as a speech-act which essentially accomplishes what it achieves. On the other hand, it can be understood as a process in which wounds from past hurt are being healed. Where forgiveness is conceived in broadly forensic terms, the speech-act model will appear most plausible, but in the context of restoring broken humanity, it makes more sense to speak of forgiveness as a process in which both sides, the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven, work on the restoration of their existence in past, present and future.

If this is right, then the efficacy of forgiveness must be measured in terms of its ability to undo the damage that has been worked by past evil. How is this possible? On the basis of my earlier reflections, the answer would appear to be this: past evil hurts and damages not so much because it is remembered *per se*, but insofar as it has gained total power over our memorial process. Past evil is precisely the past that 'has us'. It is what is retained in our recollections inde-

¹⁴ See the chapter by P.S. FIDDES in the present book.

pends of our own volition, objectifying us and crushing our agency, closing down our future and eliminating our present. For this reason, past evil has a tendency to repeat itself; it is evil that constantly begets new evil in the same way in which, as we have seen, a dysfunctional future is reduced to the fated repetition of the past.

It seems evident then that forgetting has an important part to play when it comes to forgiveness, as we have found that forgetting takes its place as a positive factor of human temporality precisely when we consider overwhelming ‘memories’ of past events and experiences. Yet forgiveness is not simply the same as forgetting. While we say ‘forgive and forget’, such an implied equation is simplistic and misleading. There may be past events, which arguably include past evil, that we simply forget, but it would be wrong in such a case to say they have been forgiven. Forgiveness is an intentional act; it has to refer to some determinate event in the past, and this past event clearly has to be remembered by us. In order to forgive, then, we have to remember. Forgiveness without remembrance is impossible.

Can we be forgiven without remembering? Once again the answer is no, certainly if we exclude the possibility of a merely passive reception of forgiveness. In fact, we have seen earlier that the remembrance of the perpetrator is in important ways bound up with the possibility for the victim to forget. It is arguable that the same can be said about forgiveness. Being forgiven presupposes the awareness of past failure and guilt; it presupposes the willingness to move beyond self-preservation and towards the realisation that our own human integrity cannot or at least should not be preserved without any regard for the other.

In fact, it may in some ways be more pertinent to ask whether being forgiven is compatible with forgetting. The natural tendency of human self-preservation being to forget about events that show us in an unfavourable light, the duty to remember is a powerful and important imperative countering this tendency in the interest of the person who has been violated or hurt. Yet guilt can also traumatise; there clearly is an unhealthy fixation on past wrongdoing that is destructive to the perpetrator’s human integrity and ultimately harmful not only to him or herself, but also to the victim. Forgiveness, if it is to work, cannot be a one-way affair that benefits one side at the expense of the other. It has its place in human life because of the recognition that past evil overshadows present and future for both perpetrator and victim, albeit in different ways. Due to the interdependence of human agency, the latter state of affairs is ultimately harmful to all those who have been affected by that evil action or event.

It is in this sense that I argue here that forgiveness finds its place ‘between remembrance and forgetting’. Forgiveness enables forgetting and thus restores to human persons their full temporality including past, present and future. Where it works, it can break open the cycle through which past evil repeats itself and open up new possibilities for a better future. Yet such forgetting cannot

work without remembrance, as I have explained in the foregoing. Can anything more be said about the balance that has to be found between remembrance and forgetting in the process of forgiveness?

I suggest the following: forgiveness, I have defined, has the purpose of helping people cope with past evil. Yet the extent to which forgiveness alone is capable of destroying or, we might say, annihilating past evil varies from case to case depending on various factors. We might think, at one extreme, of a minor incident involving only two persons: a slight or an offence. In such a case it is arguable that, as we say, this incident is best forgotten. The reason for this is, I think, that the only way it can overshadow the two individuals' lives is through their inability to forget. The incident continues to stand between them as long as they personally and individually find it impossible not to think about it whenever they meet or think of one another. Once the slight has been truly forgiven, it can be consigned to oblivion; there is no need for further remembrance.

Such cases, however, are rare. In most instances there is reason to think that past evil does not simply go away because we decide to forget about it. Its effects linger on, and it is at least a matter of prudence, but often also a moral duty to retain them in our memories. In fact, even the case of the singular offence may be more complex than it seemed at first sight. True, it may have been unique and therefore should not be permitted to blot a person's reputation for the rest of their lives, but can we be sure that this is all it is? Could it not also indicate a more serious flaw in the individual's character of which we should better be aware, for our own sake as well as for the sake of others? Questions like this can never be answered with absolute certainty and underline the need for the perpetrator who is forgiven to play an active role in the process as the victim can only come to forget if reassured that a new beginning is sought by both sides.

Many cases in which past evil overshadows our present and future, however, are more serious than that. A drunk driver who causes an accident fatally wounding a child will never fully escape the consequences of this single act. The victim's parents may be willing to forgive, but this does not mean that the loss of their child will ever stop affecting their lives. But even assuming they are able to overcome their trauma, their loss may have had knock-on effects on yet other people, so the one evil act continues to have power over the lives of people for an indefinite future.

Why is this important? I have defined forgiveness as a human attempt of dealing with past evil. It now becomes evident, however, that human forgiveness can never fully achieve this goal. It may sometimes come close to it, but it is arguable that in many cases it falls far short of it. Human forgiveness is therefore always limited and incomplete. It may aim at forgetting in order to restore to human beings full temporal integrity, but due to its severely constrained ability to annihilate the evil it seeks to overcome, forgetting always has to be balanced with remembrance, not merely in the general sense in which forgetting involves

latent remembrance, but more specifically a remembrance that keeps present a clear sense of the continuing power of past evil. We can take this observation one step further, then, and say that this need to remember will be the stronger the less the act of forgiveness is able to annihilate the ontic reality of the evil at which it is directed. *Vice versa*, human forgiveness will most closely approximate its goal of active forgetting where its power to annihilate evil is the greatest.

4. Divine Forgiveness as Perfect Forgetting

Given these limitations of human forgiveness, it would seem intuitively plausible to turn to divine forgiveness as its more perfect analogue. Can divine forgiveness, however, be understood along the lines I have suggested here? Can it be inscribed into the dialectic of remembrance and forgetting? To these problems I shall devote the final section of my chapter.

The first question we may want to ask is whether God can be thought to forget anything. *Prima facie*, the divine attributes of classical metaphysics would seem to make that impossible. God's omniscience appears to imply that he remembers everything and forgets nothing. His atemporal eternity seems to make his being incompatible with the notion of temporality that was so fundamental for my earlier account of remembrance and forgetting.

I would, however, argue that such a view is based on a misunderstanding of what those attributes are meant to express. They are aimed at describing God as the perfect being. While the retention of all the information that was ever available in the world might characterise a super-computer, it is doubtful that this kind of concept is helpfully applied to God. Sure enough, God must be immune to forgetting insofar as it is a limitation of remembrance. He does not, in other words, forget out of a failure to remember. Yet we have seen that forgetting is more than that; it is also an expression of the self's sovereignty over the blind forces of remembrance. It would therefore appear that to deny God the ability to forget would rob him of an important aspect of his perfection. Instead, we should reaffirm a point made earlier: that perfection means the ability to remember what is worth remembering and forget what ought to be forgotten. God's omnipotence would therefore indicate that he fully possesses this ability; his goodness and his justice would mean that he avails himself of this power in the best possible way. His eternity cannot, then, mean that he is simply outside time, but that he perfectly 'has' past, present and future. This makes him different from human beings whose temporality, as we have seen, is constantly threatened by their exposure to uncontrollable loss of memory but also the overwhelming presence of past events.

If God then perfectly remembers what is worth remembering and forgets what ought to be forgotten, we can also begin to see how his forgiveness is per-

fect too. I have located forgiveness between remembrance and forgetting. God, consequently, forgives evil of which he is fully aware (he does not forget due to any limitations of his knowledge) by letting it sink into the nothingness of oblivion in the interest of a new and open future. In this way, God's forgiveness is closely aligned with his creative power. Insofar as he is the one who 'makes all things new' (Revelation 21, 5), his forgiveness is not bound by the limitations that constrain human attempts to forgive. If and when God forgives evil, we may assume, he forgets about it, and given his overall control over his creation, this means that it will really and truly be annihilated.

It is less clear, admittedly, how this view can be related to the world of our experience. While it makes *a priori* sense to ascribe to God the power to annihilate past evil by means of forgetting about it, there is little empirical evidence that this happens in the world around us. On the contrary, the reality of forgiveness, human as well as divine, is constantly confronted with and frustrated by, the perseverance and the lasting power of evil. What happens, then, when God forgives a person who has done grievous wrong to someone else? I have shown above that forgetting in such a case must generally be limited insofar as past evil continues to overshadow the life of the victim. I have called this the duty to remember. It would seem implausible to exclude divine forgiveness from this rule as long as there is no evidence that it comes with the power to bring about a more radical annihilation of evil than we see happen in reality. As far as we can see, divine forgiveness operates in the same twilight as human forgiveness, and belief in its healing power is constantly threatened by the awareness of the resilience and the perseverance of past evil.¹⁵

It seems evident to me that part of the answer to this problem must lie in the recognition of a tension between the forgiveness that is already given to us and its eschatological fulfilment. Divine forgiveness in the present, then, is partly a promise that can only bring full fruit once God has actually 'made all things new'. We must in this life receive divine forgiveness in the hope that God will ultimately annihilate all evil without losing sight of the very real perseverance of evil in our world.

This need to acknowledge an eschatological dimension to our experience of divine forgiveness, however, is only one aspect of the problem posed by the view aligning God's forgiveness with forgetting. A further difficulty results from the divergence, noted earlier, between the needs of perpetrators and vic-

¹⁵ This, incidentally, is more than a theoretical problem. There are indications that the Christian Churches are particularly tempted to take divine forgiveness as a pretext for acting *as if* past evil has in fact been annihilated. They therefore have often supported a unilateral suspension of justice and redress and thus in effect served perpetrators rather than victims, for example by helping Nazi criminals escape to Latin America after World War II. The Churches are therefore well advised to reflect on forgiveness not merely as a practice they want the world to emulate, but also as one that has its very own, very iniquitous trappings for themselves.

tims with regard to remembrance and forgetting. This divergence, it appears, fully affects the divine-human relationship: whereas it may seem attractive for the perpetrator to hope that God, having forgiven his evil deed, now forgets about it, those who have become victims of mistreatment, violence or abuse put their hopes on God's remembrance. The latter, as is well known, is one of the most prominent themes in the Old Testament, and the Psalms in particular repeat, time after time, the plea that God should remember and not forget the plight and the suffering of his people.

The victims, of course, do not ask for divine forgiveness, they ask for his justice. If it is the case, as I have argued above, that forgetting past wrongdoing increases the pain for the victims of those acts, and if divine forgiveness entails forgetting of past evil, then divine forgiveness fails in preserving the justice needed by those who have been the victims of evil. What is more, this problem does not obviously go away in the eschaton. In fact, Augustine asserted that the saints will need to *know* about the suffering of the wicked in order fully to enjoy their eternal bliss.¹⁶ Clearly, the affirmation in traditional Christianity of eternal hell reflects the realisation that 'forgive and forget' may ultimately be unbearably painful for those who have been subject to suffering and abuse. As such, this doctrinal topic is a remarkable compromise given that it implicitly acknowledges the perseverance of evil into eternity.

It is, however, doubtful that traditional dualistic eschatology solves the conflict between divine forgiveness and divine justice. It is hardly plausible that the trauma of those who were abused or persecuted will be eased by the thought that their persecutors and tormentors suffer eternal pain. What they need, rather, is the open confession and repentance of those who committed evil acts. For the victims to find peace and let their suffering slip into oblivion, they need to know that their perpetrators remember.

The tension between divine forgiveness as forgetting and divine justice can therefore only be solved by recognising that God's relationships with human beings are not detached from the human, social sphere of interaction. God does indeed forgive the sinner and forget the sin, but he does so in order to enable the perpetrator to *remember* what he or she has done. At the same time, God reassures the victim that he will not forget their plight – and in this way enables them to let their past experiences sink into oblivion. In this way, we may say, God takes the place of the other person and provides what is often too difficult for human beings to give: his forgiveness (offered vicariously for the traumatised victim) helps the perpetrator to recover his or her past, present and future through remembrance of their evil actions; his remembrance (offered vicarious-

¹⁶ AUGUSTINE, *De civitate dei*, 12.30.

ly for the perpetrator) assists the victim in their quest for the recovery of their integrity in past, present, and future through forgetting their trauma.¹⁷

These different paths notwithstanding, the goal for both is the same, the annihilation of evil which, once it has been achieved, transforms both sides and prepares them for a new and better existence. In this sense, my initial hypothesis that divine forgiveness is perfectly situated between remembrance and forgetting but ultimately aimed at forgetting can be confirmed. God remembers what is good and just to remember – this includes past evil as long as its power is unbroken – but he forgets what ought to be forgotten, and ultimately all evil will in this way be destroyed.

¹⁷ A fuller engagement with the doctrine of atonement than is possible in this chapter would be needed to work this out in more detail.