

SUMMARY. The article examines the ethics of memory and the ethics of remembering by asking which events communities are obliged to remember, how they ought to remember them, and what moral responsibilities arise from historical memory. Drawing on the reflections of Elie Wiesel, Avishai Margalit, and other thinkers, the author argues that memory is not merely the preservation of information or a form of historical knowledge. It generates obligations, shapes communal identity, and serves as a source of moral orientation. The ethics of remembering therefore includes decisions concerning education, public monuments, commemoration days, forms of historical narration, and what is often called “memory work,” particularly in relation to the Holocaust, the crimes of Nazism, and the atrocities of communist regimes.

The central concept of the article is “tragic knowledge”: knowledge of events that should not have happened and that cannot be fully mastered or neutralized by reason. The author emphasizes that the memory of the Holocaust and other forms of radical evil remains disruptive: it exceeds the ordinary limits of argument, language, and rational explanation, and thus calls not only for analysis but also for humility, silence, and hope. By discussing the example of German Erinnerungskultur, the article reveals the tension between the need to integrate a tragic past into public life and the danger of “domesticating” it, thereby diminishing its moral disturbance. Ultimately, the article argues that the ethics of memory has not only epistemological and political dimensions but also spiritual ones.

KEYWORDS: ethics of memory, ethics of remembering, tragic knowledge, Holocaust memory, Erinnerungskultur, moral responsibility.

In his Nobel Lecture, delivered on December 11, 1986, Elie Wiesel talks about “the mystical power of memory”: “Without memory, our existence would be barren and opaque, like a prison cell into which no light penetrates; like a tomb which rejects the living.”¹ Remembering can be an intentional act, but memory is also a

¹ Internet access <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/>>.

mysterious force that cannot be fully managed by reason nor reduced to a source of arguments and knowledge.

ETHICS OF REMEMBERING

Questions concerning memory are ethically relevant questions. There are certain events we must not forget and certain events that we have to remember. History books in schools are powerful tools to convey a certain sense of the past. Questions of memories and forgetting are occasions for discussion and, at times, provoke outrage.

Avishai Margalit starts his thoughts on an ethics of memory with an example: he describes the indignation caused by a superior soldier who failed to remember the name of a soldier who tragically lost his life.² We, too, would feel disconcerted if a father could no longer remember his daughter's name, or if a wife failed to remember her first husband. The fact that we feel close to someone is essentially linked to having common, shared memories, and that these memories came into existence in a significant and similar manner. These memories are cherished and respected and play equally important roles in our lives. Without common and shared memories, it is difficult to build community. True communities are also communities of memory. This is one of the challenges of a unified Europe, with the very different ways of remembering the second half of the 20th century in the West and the East.

The ethical relevance of what – and in which form – we ought to remember is shown to us quite plainly in the discussion on the value of holocaust education – what should we remember from the atrocities of the Nazi regime, what should we know about it, in which manner should we remember these contents?

An ethics of remembering will reflect on decisions about efforts to remember, decisions about public monuments, about textbooks, and about commemoration days. We sometimes speak of “memory work”, work on the past. Being work, it can be planned, taught, and learned. It will lead to results and process materials, but it is likewise strenuous and tiring. The object of an ethics of memory is first and foremost this work on the past.

Where do ethical questions concerning the memory arise? Initially, it has to be spelled out that memory is tied up with obligations. The statement “I remember X” results in obligations in matters of convictions and actions. The memory of having a dentist appointment on November 7 obligates a person to visit the dentist that day, to consequently expect a bill, and remember to pay this bill on time.

² Margalit, Avishai. *The Ethics of Memory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004.

Memories involve commitments that have to be honored. An ethics of memory will have to give thought to the responsibilities that arise from memories. In many of his writings, Eli Wiesel pointed out that memories of the atrocities of the Nazi regime oblige him not to forget to time and again make his voice heard.³ A clear indication of obligations resulting from memories is given by the title of the reports of crimes of torture during Argentina's dictatorship: *Nunca Mas*.⁴ We remember atrocities in order never to repeat any form of barbarism and to resist the beginnings. A community obligates itself not to forget certain things for its own interest of orientation.

We have a duty to remember radical evil, as Avishai Margalit put it in his *Ethics of Memory*, we have a responsibility not to forget what happened so that it may never happen again.

As a community in Europe, as a European Union, we need to remember the atrocities of the Nazi regime, we need to remember the holocaust, and we need to remember the atrocities under the communist regime.

TRAGIC KNOWLEDGE

Remembering the atrocities of the Nazi regime asks us to deal with tragic knowledge.

Tragic knowledge is knowledge about things that should not have happened. "Every time we make the judgment this ought not to have happened, we are stepping onto a path that leads straight to the problem of evil."⁵ Tragic knowledge is knowledge about some *malum* that happened. It is a kind of knowledge where we know at the same time "too much" and "not enough." Christoph Menke describes Oedipus as knowing too much (he knows that he killed his father and slept with his mother) and too little (he does not know how to live with this knowledge). "Oedipus' misfortune is not that he lacks knowledge, but that he lacked knowledge at the time and later gains knowledge of what he did at the time because he lacked knowledge."⁶

The knowledge we have about Auschwitz and Treblinka, Buchenwald and Dachau, is tragic knowledge. We know too much to be able to maintain innocent optimism and belief in the goodness of human nature; we know too much about the possibility and reality of evil, which makes it impossible to believe that we live in the best of all possible worlds. Robert Nozick has likened the holocaust to the

³ Cf. Weinrich, Harald. *Lethe – Kunst und Kritik des Vergessens*. München: Beck, 1997.

⁴ Cf. *Argentina – Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas, Nunca Mas: the report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*; with an introduction by Ronald Dworkin. New York, 1986.

⁵ Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2015, 5.

⁶ Menke, Christoph. *Die Gegenwart der Tragödie*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2005, 18.

second fall.⁷ At the same time, we know too little – we do not know what language to use to talk about what happened; we don't know what we owe the families of the victims. We don't know how best to remember and how to maintain hope. We know that we do not know how to undo the past. Tragic knowledge is knowledge about lasting loss.

One of these losses is the loss of appropriate language.

Dealing with tragedy takes us to the limits of what we are linguistically prepared for. Elie Wiesel famously encountered the limits of language after the war: he lacked words, words felt pale and lifeless; he felt the need to invent a new language.⁸ This theme of linguistic boundaries is particularly relevant with regard to the Holocaust and the Shoah. Being faced with unspeakable evil forces artists to explore the limits of the imagination, for example, through fiction, because “fiction has already been asking the questions that cultural theorists are only relatively recently beginning to ask, the implications of imagining the unimaginable.”⁹

Tragic knowledge remains disruptive – a thorn in the flesh of any system of orientation.

Tragic knowledge needs to continue to disrupt us.

ERINNERUNGSKULTUR AND THE DOMESTICATION OF TRAGIC KNOWLEDGE

It is hard to be disrupted again and again.

There is a longing for normality and for “moving on.”

In the spring of 2018, I took a group of American students to visit Holocaust Memorial Sites in Southern Germany and Austria. We spent a week visiting Dachau, Obersalzberg, Mauthausen, Schloss Hartheim, and Ebensee, and had the privilege of a 2-hour discussion with the oldest Holocaust survivor in Austria, Marko Feingold (who has since passed away but was 105 when he spoke with us). The eight students wrote travel journals during this trip.

They were shocked by the normalization they saw in Dachau and in the Austrian village Ebensee:

This is what one student wrote about Dachau:

⁷ Nozick, Robert. *The Examined Life*. New York: Touchstone, 1989, 236–242.

⁸ Wiesel, Elie. *Night*. New York: Penguin, 2008, ix.

⁹ Morgan, Glyn. *Imagining the Unimaginable. Speculative Fiction and the Holocaust*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020, 18; see also Stock, Angela, and Cornelia Stott. *Representing the Unimaginable: Narratives of Disaster*. Frankfurt / Main: Peter Lang, 2007.

My heart was pounding faster when we were in the bus getting close to Dachau. In my mind this was an isolated and dark place, so I was really surprised when I saw houses very close to the camp. Some of them were right next to it, and their balconies were facing the camp. I thought to myself that I would never want to live in a place that had a view to a setting where such atrocities had happened. Although this is not a judgement to the people who live there, I just found it very shocking that the city had approved an urban development so close to the site, that houses were built, and that people actually lived there. This leads to a deeper question? What should be done in places like this? How do we incorporate them into life? There is a tension between remembering and forgetting, continuing to feel the pain or moving on and building houses.

And this is a quotation from a student reflecting on Ebensee:

In Ebensee, where the concentration camp was destroyed, people's houses stand right above the former concentration camp site and overlook the small cemetery which stands as a memorial to those who died.

I understand the need to refrain from judgment, of course – I am not a cash-strapped Austrian looking for a place to live, so who am I to say anything? – but I found it deeply disturbing that the history of the place can be so relegated to the wayside that people can just live normally where a concentration camp once stood.

Tragic knowledge should continue to disrupt us. But it is hard to honor this idea. This is an ongoing challenge for an ethics of remembering. We try to tame tragic knowledge – we try to find ways to live with it, to categorize it, and to be able to develop a language to talk about it.

There is a certain ambivalence in the very idea of taming the tragic: on the one hand, it is the only way to continue with life; on the other hand, it takes the very point of the tragic, namely its permanent and deep non-resolution.

Germany is an impressive example of intentional *Erinnerungskultur*.

German *Erinnerungskultur* – dealing with the past in public space – is a specific example of an attempt to deal with a horrific past in an intellectually honest way, yet not without the intention of “taming tragic knowledge.” Germany has developed a particular *Erinnerungskultur* with special remembrance days (January 27, May 8, June 17, July 20, August 13, October 3, November 9), special sites such as the Holocaust Memorial Site in Berlin or the Jewish Museum in Munich, and a vibrant public discourse on remembering. The historians are charged with establishing an epistemic culture that allows us to be truth-seekers and to move on with our lives. German *Erinnerungskultur* has established ways to remember so that the country can continue to exist and integrate into the global community.

But this cannot happen without taming tragic knowledge.

This may be a main challenge for an ethics of remembering and an ethics of memory: how to say the truth truthfully and in a way that honors unimaginable suffering?

REMEMBERING AND THE RAWNESS OF REASON

In some instances, the language of arguments comes to an end, and silence is the only appropriate way of responding.

In his visit to the concentration camp at Auschwitz (28 May 2006), Pope Benedict XVI, who explicitly presented himself as a German (“it is particularly difficult and troubling for a Christian, for a Pope from Germany...”), underlined the importance of silence: “In a place like this, words fail.”¹⁰

Faced with evil and tragedy, we enter a territory “beyond reason.”

We can analyze, and we can find reasons and causes, terminology and things to know, and phenomena to explore, all of which are important and an expression of intellectual integrity.

But we need to go beyond the argument and beyond the word.

We are called to an ever-new experience of being terrified when dealing with Auschwitz: it really happened.¹¹ Tragic knowledge does not allow for the comfortable position of epistemic control and security. But this is hard.

We need to learn how to see the world, how to see ourselves in a particular way.

Tragic knowledge is *humbling* – it is humbling to know that atrocities could have been prevented, it is humbling to know that each person has a role in a tragedy, be it the role of the helpless or uninformed bystander.

An ethics of remembering leads us to humility and humble silence – but also to hope.

Tragic knowledge is *hope-seeking*: If we are so deeply burdened by the weight of the past that we cannot continue our journey, we cease to function and are thus unable to fulfil the epistemic duties and moral responsibilities that come with tragic knowledge. Hope that something good can come out of the painful, tragic knowledge that we carry is necessary to walk into a future.

Elie Wiesel, in his Nobel lecture, reflects on the need for hope:

Just as man cannot live without dreams, he cannot live without hope. If dreams reflect the past, hope summons the future. Does this mean that our future can be built on a rejection of the past? Surely such a choice is not necessary. The two are not incompatible.

¹⁰ Internet access <https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060528_auschwitz-birkenau.html>.

¹¹ Cf. Meier, Christian. *From Athens to Auschwitz: The Uses of History*. Harvard UP, 2005.

The opposite of the past is not the future but the absence of future; the opposite of the future is not the past but the absence of past. The loss of one is equivalent to the sacrifice of the other.¹²

He refers to a dimension that history cannot give us through description and analysis. Richard von Weizsäcker, in his famous speech from May 8, 1985, equally pointed to a dimension beyond reasonable pacification of remembering: "Seeking to forget makes exile all the longer; the secret of redemption lies in remembrance?" This oft-quoted Jewish adage surely expresses the idea that faith in God is faith in the work of God in history. Remembrance is the experience of the work of God in history. It is the source of faith in redemption. This experience creates hope; it creates faith in redemption, in reunification of the divided, in reconciliation. Whoever forgets this experience loses his faith."

These words point to a dimension beyond what reason can offer.

There is indeed a spiritual dimension to the ethics of memory and remembering.

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¹² Internet access <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/>>.

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ATMINTIES ETIKA IR PRISIMINIMO ETIKA

SANTRAUKA. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama atminties ir prisiminimo etika, keliant klausimą, kokius įvykius bendruomenės privalo prisiminti ir kaip tai daryti, kokios moralinės pareigos kyla iš istorinės atminties. Remdamasis Elie'io Wieselio, Avishai Margalito ir kitų autorių išvalgomis, autorius teigia, kad atmintis nėra vien informacijos saugojimas ar praeities pažinimo forma. Ji kuria išpareigojimus, formuoja bendruomeninę tapatybę ir tampa moralinės orientacijos šaltiniu. Todėl prisiminimo etika apima sprendimus dėl švietimo, viešųjų paminklų, atminimo dienų, istorijos pasakojimo formų ir vadinamojo „atminties darbo“, ypač kalbant apie Holokaustą, nacizmo nusikaltimus ir komunistinių režimų represijas.

Pagrindinė straipsnio sąvoka yra „tragiškas žinojimas“ – tai žinojimas, kas neturėjo įvykti ir ko neišmanoma iki galo racionaliai suvaldyti ar neutralizuoti. Autorius pabrėžia, kad Holokausto ir kitų radikalaus blogio formų atmintis išlieka trikdanti: ji peržengia įprastą argumentų, kalbos ir racionalaus paaiškinimo ribą, todėl reikalauja ne tik analizės, bet ir nuolankumo, tylos bei vilties. Aptardamas Vokietijos *Erinnerungskultur* (liet. *atminties kultūra*) pavyzdį straipsnio autorius atskleidžia įtampą tarp būtinybės integruoti tragišką praeitį į viešąjį gyvenimą ir pavojaus ją „prijaukinti“ taip, kad būtų prarastas jos moralinis trikdantis poveikis. Galiausiai teigiama, kad atminties etika turi ne tik epistemologinę ir politinę, bet ir dvasinę dimensiją.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: atminties etika, prisiminimo etika, tragiškas žinojimas, Holokausto atmintis, *Erinnerungskultur*, moralinė atsakomybė.