Paul Ricoeur and the Duty of Truth towards the Past

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The Politics of Memory

Contemporary politics is full of historical misrepresentations and outright falsehoods about the past. But why exactly is this problematic? And why do we think there is a duty to tell the truth about the past? Paul Ricoeur’s final work looked for answers.

Paul Ricoeur’s last major work on the philosophy of history, Memory, History, Forgetting has so far received little attention, at least in anglophone circles. It is nonetheless worth discussion because it draws together the phenomenology of historicity, the epistemology of historical knowledge, and the ethics and politics of historical memory in an explanation of why history as a form of knowledge matters. In particular, this post examines Ricoeur’s arguments for a duty to tell the truth about the past. But first, it explains the interconnectedness of the three themes indicated in the title.

We can begin with memory, which Ricoeur treats as the primordial form of human relationship to the past. Psychoanalysis, he argues, makes clear that a good life requires being reconciled to the losses that a mortal life necessarily entails. Failure to do so leads to trauma in the individual. The same can be said of society at large. The marked difference between individual living memories and collective public memory poses the challenge of finding a bridge between the different levels of analysis. Here Ricoeur draws on phenomenology to close the gap. Turning to Alfred Schutz, Ricoeur claims (in a similar argument to the later Wittgenstein’s insistence that there can be no such thing as a private language, because language rests on a form of life) that memory is always social. The formation of an individual identity can only occur in a social context, typically that of the family in the first instance. But the family is equally embedded in a wider society that gains cohesion from living through the same events, allowing a genuinely collective element to emerge and connect the self to a political community.

Ricoeur maintains that this is how the “just allotment of memory” becomes an important civic theme. Every society must confront the question of what should be remembered, which is the same as asking what must never be forgotten. At the same time, according to Ricoeur, there is such a thing as an excess of memory. Like Nietzsche, Ricoeur held that an “excess of memory” can prevent us from living our lives to the full. It stops us from moving forward. This is true at the individual level.
when someone has undergone tremendous brutality or witnessed atrocities. But it can also be true collectively. Violent or otherwise traumatic episodes that are subject to official denials and cover-ups have the power to poison the life of an entire society.

**History and Truth**

Ricœur gives history a phenomenological foundation. The idea of being an historian only makes sense if one has already encountered multiple representations of the past via education in the classroom, news of archaeological discoveries, or films, TV shows, novels, and now even video games. Museums, memorials, and state occasions of remembrance are also part of the scene. That said, Ricœur nevertheless insists on a firm epistemological distinction between the kind of knowledge associated with memory and with the second term, history, understood as knowledge that emerges from historical inquiry. They are entirely different forms of knowledge about the past. Historical knowledge is based on evidence and inquiry, and despite his emphasis on narrative form, Ricœur likewise stresses that history has nothing to do with fiction. History’s claim to truth is part of what defines it as an intellectual enterprise.

This claim to truth is built on constructing facts from evidence, which in turn renders the kind of testimony associated with personal memory problematic. Ricœur sometimes writes as if the problem were simply one of deciding whether or not to trust the reports of those involved. From his more general account of history as an autonomous form of explanation, however, it is evident that criticism of testimonies and sources in general cannot take the form of judgements about their reliability. History offers an “explanatory intelligibility” that no eye-witness is in a position to provide.\(^5\) It gives an answer to the question ‘why’, whereas the condition of testimony is not that it explains anything in the first instance but only that it recounts a personal experience.

As Ricœur saw, however, the impression that history is thereby calling testimony into doubt or devaluing it can still cause difficulties. He acknowledged Hayden White’s work on the problems associated with the National Socialist campaign to exterminate the Jews in this context. White raised the issue of the appropriacy of asking about the truth of testimony of these events, questioning whether factual verity was the right approach to the recollections of those who had survived to recall, for instance, their internment in a concentration camp.\(^6\) Ricœur agreed that such testimony raised both ethical and historical considerations, saying “it is the
citizen as much as the historian” who is obliged to respond to them. Nevertheless, it was not impossible to write a history of even the most terrible events, and responding to them as a citizen still required retaining the “critical resources” that history has made available.\footnote{7}

**Forgetting as Emancipation**

Ricœur goes so far as to say that historical writing exercises an “assertive vehemence” towards past events, in a way that insists on their having been.\footnote{8} Ricœur’s hope, at least, was that “those who negate great crimes...will find their defeat in the archives”.\footnote{9} But this hope relies on our still seeing the events of the past as part of the same continuum to which we ourselves belong. This viewpoint is potentially in tension with the purely explanatory perspective on the past that eschews treating the past in terms of its significance or relevance to our own time. Moreover, history is not a forensic inquiry. The pursuit of truth is not, as such, the pursuit of justice in a court of law, even if both activities are indifferent to interests.\footnote{10} Finally, there is the problem of moral relativism; it is easy to dismiss the crimes of the past on the grounds that values were simply different then. So Ricœur has to find a way of connecting historical epistemology to our ethical evaluation of the past.

Ricœur’s solution is to make history a precursor to his third term, forgetting, and in particular the kind of forgetting that goes along with forgiveness. His argument is that forgiveness depends partly on truth, at least ideally speaking. That is, one cannot forgive without knowing what is being forgiven; the capacity to be fully forgiving can therefore be taken to imply having a full knowledge and understanding of exactly what was done and why. As an ethical relation, forgiveness necessarily goes beyond justice, which is concerned with guilt and punishment. It matters because at least for those who survive, whether guilty or innocent, life continues after justice has been done. In other words, justice is a necessary but not sufficient condition for reconciliation. Forgiveness is important because it can be liberating for the person who bestows it, as well as for the person who receives it. Only then can we really let go of the past so that it no longer weighs on us.

As with Ricœur’s treatment of memory, the phenomenon of forgiveness has both an individual and a social dimension. Whether individual or social, he agreed with Jacques Derrida that forgiveness is always an extraordinary act.\footnote{11} No one who has committed heinous crimes can simply expect to be forgiven. Forgiveness is always
an act of grace on the part of the person bestowing it, and not everyone can or wants to do so. But those who can may find liberation in doing so. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created to try and achieve this for the collective. While Ricœur was aware of the problems associated with doing so, he believed that it was at least worth the attempt. Forgiveness aims at forgetting, but not in the form of erasure or denial or repression. All of these relations to the past tend to ensure that the issues remains unresolved. But the role of history in public life is to allow a society to lay the ghosts of its own past properly to rest.

**Conclusion: Obligation and Commemoration**

Ricœur’s argument ties together the epistemological commitment to truth in historiography and an explanation of its ethical importance. Up to this point, his justification of the importance of historical truth has been a consequentialist one. We should tell the truth about the past because it is useful in the present. This is not, however, the end of the matter. Ricœur also argues that historiography is a contribution to our duty not to forget, in the sense of ensuring public preservation of the past in collective memory, even, or perhaps especially, when it comes to events that are no longer within living memory. He is worried that in the absence of authentic historiography, we are left with only the self-serving official versions of history produced by nation states to serve their own ideological ends. Genuine commemoration in public memory is easily perverted by omissions, misrepresentations, and outright falsehoods.

Finding additional arguments that establish grounds for the duty to tell the truth about the past thus acquires considerable significance. It is generally held that rights and duties are correlative. So Ricœur needs arguments that relate specifically to the case of duties towards people in the past. One of Ricœur’s arguments is that “we are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are”. It could perhaps be said, however, that although people in the past undoubtedly served as the prerequisite for our possibility in the biological sense, it does not give them rights against us. The objection is that ancestrality is a biological not a normative status. Ricœur, however, produces two other arguments. The first is a general one. Assuming everyone is entitled to justice, presumably this entitlement does not cease with our death. When we are alive, we all have an interest in others telling the truth about us; no one wants to be the subject of lies or misrepresentation. The second argument applies especially to those who were
victims of crimes but failed to receive justice in their lifetime. They can be said to have lost their lives, but not their interest in justice.

Ricœur’s overall position can perhaps be thought of as a mirror image of the kind of questions about intergenerational justice that come up in relation to environmental issues. Our current consumption will affect people who do not yet exist, and so it can be argued that we should take them into account. In writing history, our actions do not directly affect the people in the past, but they do affect their interests, which do not cease when life ends, as the practice of ensuring that wills are properly executed makes plain. What Ricœur is proposing could be understood as a form of secular piety at the societal level, the comparison of which to pagan cults of ancestor worship, stripped of their superstitious elements and distilled into a spirit of rational respect, is not entirely far-fetched. For Ricœur, truth is the debt we owe to the past and, at the same time, what enables us to live with it.

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Tags: Memory Politics / Ricœur / Truth

3 Ricœur, Memory, xv.
5 Ricœur, Memory, 243.
7 Ricœur, Memory, 258.
8 Ibid., 280.
9 Ibid., 178.
10 Ibid., 315.
11 Ibid., 468.
12 Ibid., 453.
13 Ibid., 89.