

Theorizing Memory: From Antiquity to Modernity

Deepanjali Baruah

Abstract

The simplest way of understanding memory is to recall or recollect the past which the mind stores. Memory not only signifies a matter that the mind stores, but connotes multiple layers of meanings. The concept of memory has evolved from the classical Greek heritage to its modern-day interpretations. The classical concept has its Philosophical roots dealing with the concepts of the ancient Greek philosophers. Modern concept of memory differentiates itself from the classical concept as it posits in the understanding of the mental faculty and its processes while the classical concept deals with memory as a function of the brain that can be understood and localized. The modern reconceptualization of memory has led towards newer and scientific way of understanding, remembering and forgetting in collective and individual contexts. The concept of memory has undergone significant transformations from antiquity to modernity, reflecting changes in philosophical, historical, and cultural perspectives. Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have offered varied ideas on memory which subsequently influenced the thoughts of the contemporary thinkers and philosophers helping them to form newer ideas on the concept. Starting from Plato's belief that knowledge and memories are innate, and Aristotle's view on the knowledge of time, memory has passed a passage of behavioral/cognitive approach to the present approaches of collective and individual memories. Paul Ricoeur has questioned whether it is possible to develop the art of forgetting which may be placed with that of the art of memory. This might lead to the erasure of memory instead of memorialization. In this paper an attempt has been made to theorize memory, its progress from antiquity to modernity and also the concepts of forgetting and remembering which are integral to memory.

Keywords: analytic philosophy, phenomenology, consciousness, intersubjectivity, mental content

Introduction:

Memory is something that the mind stores which helps in recalling or remembering an event of the past. It helps profoundly in cementing relations and interacting with a wider world. The concept of memory has significantly evolved from its Greek heritage to the present age which involves perceiving, representing and

narrating the self along with the others. The modern concept of memory differentiates itself from the classical concept as it posits in the understanding of the mental faculty and its processes while the classical concept deals with memory as a function of the brain that can be understood and localized. The modern reconceptualization of memory has led towards newer and scientific ways of understanding, remembering and forgetting in collective and individual contexts. In this paper an attempt shall be made to theorize memory, its progress from antiquity to modernity, examining how the understandings of memory, forgetting, and remembering have shaped our relationship with the past. Anjali Gera Roy (2020) states that, “The obsession with memory must be attributed both to the fear of forgetting and the desire to remedy the amnesias of history. The memory turn in history has been ascribed to the limitations of traditional histories that are inherent in the nature of historical study” (Roy, 2020). Memory gives space to forgetting intentionally and unintentionally. The modern world is now obsessed with memory for the fear of forgetting or to recover from amnesia. By tracing the evolution of varied concepts of memory, this article sheds light on how our understanding of memory shapes identity, community, and cultural heritage, offering insights into the complex interplay between remembering and forgetting in individual and collective contexts. This highlights the article’s relevance to understanding memory’s role in shaping human experience and its broader implications.

The Greek Heritage of Memory:

The problematization of memory is as old as Western Philosophy. Plato spoke memory as the present representation of an absent and also opined that humans have the capacity to preserve the experienced memories. This concept centers round the theme of the *eikon* which refers to an image, likeness or representation. In philosophical contexts *eikon* is sometimes used to describe a copy or representation of reality, as in Plato’s theory of forms. This concept played a significant role in understanding how memories are formed, stored and retrieved. Plato described the *eikons* as imprints or stamps on the soul which could be recalled later. The Greek concept of *eikon* remains an important idea in the history of philosophy, influencing subsequent discussions of memory, perception and knowledge. Whitehead (2009) opines that, “Plato’s model of memory process implies that the images or objects or thought are to some degree material: they are stamped or incised into matter and are stored there so that they can be available for subsequent recall” (Whitehead, 2009).

On the other hand, Aristotle said that memory is of the past. Aristotle’s treatise *Peri mnemes kai anamneseos*, is part of a collection of nine treatises. In this treatise Aristotle stated that the persistence of memory does not depend on its recall but its presence to mind in relation to recollection. The act of remembering, according to Aristotle, takes place when time is elapsed. This interval of time is thus crucial, the initial impression and its return which ultimately leads to recollection. So, the knowledge of time plays an important role in the methodical way of remembering. The concept on *mneme* by Aristotle refers to the mental image or representation of a past experience that is retained in memory. Aristotle also noted that emotions play a significant role in memory as they can enhance or impair the ability to recall experiences. As for *anamnesis* which means recollection

of past lives or knowledge, comes from sensory experience. Aristotle believed that the mind is a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate and through experience, the mind acquires knowledge. In this view, instead of remembering knowledge from a past life as Plato suggested, Aristotle proposed that we come to know things through direct interaction with the world round us, primarily through perception and reason. Aristotle's focus was more on empirical observation and the process of learning from the world rather than recalling knowledge from previous lives or from a non-material source. Plato, the other Greek philosopher spoke of memory as the present representation of an absent thing. He opined that humans have the capacity to preserve the experienced memories. He believed that knowledge is not acquired through sense experience, but rather through recollection of immutable truths. Plato's concept of memory is closely tied to the idea on *anamnesis* or recollection. Recollection, according to Plato describes realities that are contingent and also a transformation of the spirit under the influence of a noble love. On the other hand, Socrates explained that objects of perception are a succession of constantly changing awareness, whereas objects of thought are those objects of perception to which we have given some degree of stability by imprinting them on the mind. For Socrates, the act of remembering is primarily active: it is when we 'want to remember'. In the *Meno*, (a Socratic dialogue written by Plato) Socrates discusses the idea of recollection, suggesting that learning is not the acquisition of new knowledge that the soul already knows. He posits that the soul is immortal and has experienced many lifetimes, and thus has excess to all knowledge. When we learn something, we are essentially remembering knowledge that our soul already possessed before birth. This process of recollection happens through questioning and reasoning, as Socrates often used his method of dialectic to help people remember what they already knew. Thus, Socrates viewed memory as a means of accessing innate knowledge, rather than simply storing experiences or facts. Memory in this sense is not about just retaining information but about uncovering truths already exists within us.

Modern Thinkers and the Theorizing of Memory:

Corporeal Memory and Memory of Places

The present age may be termed as the age of memory boom which began in the late 1990s owing to the thinkers working in the interdisciplinary fields on memory. As stated in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "memory is a trend which reinvigorated and transformed older philosophical debates by bringing them into contact with empirical and theoretical developments in psychology and the sciences of memory more broadly" (Encyclopedia of Philosophy). Modern thinkers have defined memory in varied ways. Paul Ricoeur, the John Nuveen Professor, Dept. of Philosophy at the University of Chicago wrote a landmark book on memory: *Memory, History, Forgetting*. He talks about two types of memory: corporeal memory and memory of places: "Corporeal memory can be enacted in the same manner as all the other modalities of habit, such as driving a car, when I am at the wheel" (Ricoeur, 2004). It is modulated according to the feelings of strangeness and familiarity. But sickness, wound, trauma of the past invite corporeal memory to target precise instances of recollection. Corporeal memory may also be termed as body memory or somatic memory which is frequently

attached to the idea of repressed memory. This memory is termed as body memory since it is concerned with the workings of the different organs of the body such as muscles, nervous system, tissues rather than just the brain. Corporeal memory operates outside of verbal language, allowing the body to recall experiences and emotions without conscious awareness. The traumatic experiences of a past event can be retained by this memory even though the conscious mind does not. The body plays a significant role in storing and recalling trauma which is acknowledged by the corporeal memory. According to Boyarin (1994), “Perhaps the most obvious link between memory and the body is through mnemonic marking. Intriguingly, nonstate collectives seem most often to mark individual bodies as a sign of inclusion, whereas states most often mark bodies precisely to exclude them” (Boyarin, 1994).

Ricoeur has also discussed the memory of places. Ricoeur (2004) states, “It is on the surface of the habitable earth that we remember having travelled and visited memorable sites” (Ricoeur, 2004). The relationship between place and memory results at the juncture of memory, history and geography. The act of inhabiting constitutes powerful human connections with particular time and locations. Ricoeur opines that the most invigorating experience of these memories is the visit of a place together which helps one to develop a communal feeling and to return to the past in a group. This memory is also termed as spatial memory. Therefore, the inhabitable places are memorable par excellence. These are memories of skills or routines associated with a place like navigating a familiar neighbourhood or performing a task at work. Our brains create cognitive maps of certain geographical locations allowing us to explore and recall the layout of the location. Positive memories of places can enhance our emotional wellbeing and provide a sense of comfort. Our sense of identity and belonging is strengthened by our memory of places. The memory of places is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that continues to be explored in various fields including psychology, neuroscience, architecture and geography. Another thinker Edward Casey also suggested the importance of memory of places. According to him there is a strong bond between memory and place since places can hold and preserve the memories through which the past can survive and also can revive itself.

Anne whitehead in her book *Memory* (2009) has stated about massive migrations taken place all over the world and other historical events during the 20th century ushering in displacement and dislocation. The process of migration creates nostalgic ruminations of former homeland. The desire for the lost roots and mementos sharpens the nostalgia which subsequently have popularized the discourses on memory. Whitehead (2009) opines, “At the same time, there has been a marked rise in concern with popular memory, and a proliferation of archives, particularly oral archives, established to preserve the memories of ordinary people” (Whitehead, 2009). Collective memories of catastrophic events in human history like the World Wars, Holocaust, genocides, ethnocides etc. have lingered in the minds of survivors, bystanders, perpetrators and even among those who did not have the first-hand experience of those events. The oral archives are one of the best tools for preserving memories of events. Mieke Bal has named memory as a concept of travelling. Bal’s contention is that memory

travels between discipline, culture and historical period and between academic communities. Memory, is therefore, historically conditioned bearing its own time and culture.

Collective Memory:

Maurice Halbwachs' in his phenomenal book *The Collective Memory* published in 1950 has stated memory having a collective entity for instance a group or the society. According to Halbwachs remembering takes place in the presence of others. It must be known that an individual always belongs to a group so he/she has innumerable experiences while living in a collective entity. Therefore, the individual memory takes possession of itself through the instruction/advice given by others. At the same time Halbwachs (1950) opines that it might not occur that remembrance takes place in a shared perspective, "but one may also affirm that the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in individual memories" (Halbwachs, 1950). The personal thoughts are placed in the frameworks of social and collective memories and then the act of recollection takes place. Collective memory is generally shaped by the surrounding social and cultural atmosphere. Another philosopher Henry Bergson gave a different approach on memory which influenced the idea of Halbwachs. However, Bergson's was a highly individualistic philosophy who considered our past experiences to be stored in the unconscious in its entirety which may be recollected when situation demanded. According to him the personal memories are reflected in dreams. But Halbwachs opined that memories are not unorganized, disoriented, irregular like dreams. So, dreams are illusions and the past cannot be evoked in dreams. Halbwachs consequently approved collective memory as he believed that the group constitutes of individual members and it is they who remember. Individual memory is replaced by collective memory in Halbwachs' contention on memory. Memory is shared as it is communicated by individuals and is subsequently mediated through different agencies like social groups and other institutions of the state. The twentieth and the twenty first centuries have witnessed multiple genocides, migrations and collective catastrophes. Therefore, collective memory has become indispensable factors of human lives. The Nazi Holocaust may be understood as one of the foremost determining factors of the study of memory at present. Marianne Hirsch (2012), the professor of Comparative Literature and Gender Studies, has argued that, "urgently and passionately, those of us working on memory and transmission within and beyond the study of Holocaust have argued about ethics and aesthetics of remembrance in the aftermath of catastrophe" (Hirsch, 2012). The traumatic memories not only affect the first generation (those who had the first-hand experience of the event) but also these memories impact the subsequent generations of people in a collective way specifically those who are indirectly connected with the event. The Partition of India marked the division of the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan. It is regarded as one of the darkest events in the history of India. Tiwari (2003) states, "In the ferocious massacres that followed at least one million Hindus and Muslims lost their lives. Hundreds of thousands of children were lost and abandoned; between 75,000 and 1,00,000 women were raped and abducted apart from the families that were torn apart" (Tiwari, 2003). Partition has been archived in literature, films, documentaries and museums. But the Partition stories are

alternative histories which are personal and collective “constructed through memory, gender, and ideas of self and span the subcontinent” (Khan, 2013). The traumatic memories of Partition have been documented through personal experience and collective suffering through literary register. Urvashi Butalia (1998), the renowned Indian activist and feminist, has opined about Partition that Partition histories are “difficult to forget but dangerous to remember” (Butalia, 1998). Collective memory and commemoration go hand in hand. Remembering and commemorating collectively a particular historical event like Partition fosters identity and sense of belonging. This is also called memorialization. According to Baruah (2021), “This memorialization in effect serves to prepare the ground both for reconstructing the past and rethinking the ways in which the narratives about Partition have been constructed in the past. It initiates, in other words, a new way of knowing” (Baruah, 2021). Therefore, such an event is commemorated collectively by observing the Martyr’s Day in India. In this way, collective memories are recounted and kept alive.

Forgetting and Remembering:

Forgetting and Remembering are integral elements of memory. Memory depends on the selectivity and its importance to a group or an individual. As stated by Albano (2016), “Theoretical speculations on processes of remembering in psychology provide us with a useful framework to consider the dynamics of remembering and the persistence of what is unremembered, not only individually but also socially, culturally and transculturally” (Albano, 2016). Forgetting suggests the extended explanations of encoded information within the system of memory. Forgetting occurs due to unretrieved memories. Remembering of the past may take place voluntarily or involuntarily. It depends on the prevailing circumstances and the person or group. Ricoeur (2024) states, “Forgetting is experienced as an attack on the reliability of memory. An attack, a lacuna. In this regard memory defines itself, at least in the first instance, as a struggle against forgetting. And our celebrated duty of memory is proclaimed in the form of an exhortation not to forget” (Ricoeur, 2004). But Ricoeur also states that the human memory has an access to forgetting, otherwise there will be immense suffering among the humans in this world. Memory lacking in forgetting could be a phantasm or an illusion resulting in the non-functioning of the normal human condition. Such forgetting needs to be encouraged which bears a collective traumatic past. Forgetting also helps one to gaze the present with a refreshed attitude. Before modernity, people could make out the difference between the present and the past. But with the advent of modernity this distinction became sharper between the things which are noncontemporaneous or unmodern and others contemporaneous or modern. American scholar David Gross (2011), has stated three different types of noncontemporaneity: absolute noncontemporaneity, relative noncontemporaneity and enduring noncontemporaneity. By absolute noncontemporaneity Gross (2011) means, “that part of the past that has been completely obliterated except for a few shards or fragments preserved in museums” (Gross, 2011). Through this he points out to a particular phase of the past which has been erased from the minds of humans. Some traces of the past may be available only in the form of material memory, preserved in museums or other institutes. Gross (2011) argues, “I mean

a part of the past that, while also over and done with, has nevertheless left behind more immediately and continuously experienceable physical or cultural traces than those housed in museum displays” (Gross, 2011). This forgotten phase of the past can only be brought back through references. This referential way of rediscovering the past may be of great value for the present scholars and researchers on memory. The third one is enduring noncontemporaneity, “which denotes those modes of thinking and behaving that have somehow managed to survive not piecemeal but intact into the present age” (Gross, 2011). Gross wants to state here that this noncontemporaneity is basically antiquated or strange for the people of the present time. Therefore, its elements are generally pushed to the periphery of social life or sidelined due to its out of sync nature. But still, they continue to live on though in the state of a reduced condition within the circumstance of a present. These fragile noncontemporaneities create a heightened sensitivity that something has not only passed away but on the verge of complete disappearance. This process may sensitize us about the fleeting and transient nature of material and human existence and to value whatever is perishing or forgotten. Forgetting is a condition of memory as it is closely related to it. People who undergo ordinary forgetting are according to Ricoeur is “happy memory”. It is important that people should forget certain phases of life to regain happiness and peace of mind. There are harsh realities of life, circumstances that change peoples’ lives. Innumerable incidents of rape, murder, arson, violence and bloodshed in the society create trauma and psychological imbalance. Therefore, it is generally suggested that such incidents should be forgotten and begin life afresh. Forgetting becomes an antidote to the sufferings undergone by victims of tragic incidents. A positive self-image may be maintained by forgetting negative details, fostering creativity and flexible thinking. Freud also opined that forgetting helps to ward off certain unpleasant experiences of life which he termed as pathological forgetting. Forgetting may also enable forgiveness which allows one to free himself/herself from the burden of the past. But the notion of forgive and forget seems to be unrealistic because forgiveness does not wipe out the past events, instead it ushers on the creation of a new relationship or situation that has been altered by the past experience.

Remembering refers to our capability of grasping the past. Remembering is the mental process which involves retrieving stored memories from the brain which can be triggered by memory cues, emotions or associations. The process can vary in clarity, accuracy, depending on the factors such as time, significance and attention to detail. When we remember, we often reconstruct moments, sometimes blending facts with interpretation, emotions or gaps with knowledge. It is a vital part of human cognition that helps us to make sense of the present, learn from the past experiences and guide future actions. There is individual and collective remembering. An individual remembers because he/she has the power to recollect and also recognize things. Individual remembering is a personal and subjective experience, influenced by one’s unique perspective and emotions. Strong emotions such as joy, fear or sadness can enhance memory consolidation and retrieval. According to Anne whitehead, collective remembering seems to be more effective in social groups. Collective remembering ensures shared recollection and commemoration of past events and cultural heritage within a

group or community. It helps fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose. Collective memories are often constructed and passed down through narratives such as stories, myths or histories. Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith state that a culture chooses the things to remember and forget based on hegemony, power and also gender. Michel Foucault also talked about how a culture orders, selects, preserves the past and determines remembering. The alternative histories such as memoirs and oratures have served to remember the stories of women or other disenfranchised groups which the official histories do not generally document. Whitehead (2009) comments, "This makes evident the relative degrees of power and powerlessness, privilege, and disenfranchisement that have shaped dominant memory discourse" (Whitehead, 2009). There are interesting texts by authors written in the context of different events of history in the form of novels, short stories, memoirs etc. A perfect example may be cited in connection to remembering is the Assamese novel *Makam* by Rita Chowdhury, a prominent novelist of Assam, published in the year 2010. It is a historical fiction which reminisces a forgotten historical epoch of Assam. *Makam* narrates the story of the Indians originally from China who were brought by the British from China as indentured labourers during the colonial times. They married the natives of Assam and assimilated with the Assamese culture and tradition. Later they were suspected of being spies as they were the descendants of Chinese villagers during the India-China war in 1962 and were forced to leave India. These stories were not told, remained under the carpet for a long time, until Rita Chowdhury unfolded this chapter of displacement, trauma, loss of identity of these forgotten people through extensive research and interviews. *Makam* thus serves as a story of remembering and post memory creating sensation in India after its first publication. There are several such silenced facts in history which are needed to be remembered and chronicled so that these events are not condemned into oblivion.

Edward S. Casey in his book *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study* (1987) provides a description of human memory. He talks about recognizing, reminding, reminiscing and commemorating. Casey (1987) also talks about primary and secondary remembering. "Whatever the exact duration, "primary memory" refers to the way in which what was just experienced (the "*soebengewesen*," as Husserl terms it) is drawn out and allowed to remain accessible" (Casey, 1987). In order to elaborate primary remembering he gives the example of tea-tasting. This tea-tasting becomes a momentary retention of the mind as this sinks away from explicit awareness.

Secondary remembering follows primary remembering which may be termed as recollection "*Wiedererinnerung*" (German word for remembering again or re-remembering). Casey (1987) states, "Its operation is conceived as that of rescuing former experiences from oblivion" (Casey, 1987). An object is brought back, revives anew from a reservoir. "The "re-" of secondary remembering takes on special significance in this activity of mnemonic re-enactment or re-presentation, a significance lacking in primary remembering" (Casey, 1987). Mnemonic modes are forms of remembering whose description cannot be confined to only psychological analysis. Edward Casey (1987) has suggested three distinctive mnemonic modes. "Each of

these modes involves outstanding factors that cannot be contained within the meshes of mentalism: factors that are external to mind itself such as physical reminders, the concrete discourse of reminiscing, and other human beings as objects of perceptual recognition” (Casey, 1987).

a) Reminders: I am being reminded of a possible action which I may undertake very soon or eventually, though not precisely when I shall perceive the reminder. (We may be reminded by a perception or by a thought). Heidegger termed it as “being-with-others.” It arises as discourse in the company of others. It is a matter, in short, of remembering with others. Therefore, Casey (1987) opines, “We do not reminisce something, we reminisce about it” (Casey, 1987).

b) Recognizing: *“A figure comes my way on the road. ‘Hi, is it Deepanjali?’ I can’t recognize him instantly but as soon as he removes his specs I suddenly recognize who he is. He is one of my batchmates, Sazad.”* There should be the availability of identity in the process of recognition. A sudden glimpse of recognition helps me by revealing the identity of the person associated with a particular body. At the same time, a distinct sense of “nearing” accompanies availability and enhances it. Consolidation is a second, somewhat less obvious, factor. It is just because Sazad came closer to me which resulted in a strong appearance to be recognized as the man I knew. His consolidation and coming closer, both served as tools of recognition for me.

c) Commemoration: If I am remembering a memorable event of the past in a group, it is commemoration. So, Casey (1987) states, “I am remembering with them, and they with me. It is a matter of something thoroughly communal” (Casey, 1987). These two are communicational factors juxtaposed between myself, *the commemorator* and the thing that I commemorated, *the memorandum*. Commemoration is never wholly private. Commemoration aims at keeping a particular past event alive through ceremonial observance. Commemoration of a past event is important because slowly the past becomes remote with a fear of oblivion. Forgetting and remembering thus are integral features of memory which help people to keep pace with the daily situations of life. Forgetting does not mean the complete loss of memory. Memory is possible through the forgetting that is preserved.

Conclusion:

The concept of memory has undergone significant transformations from antiquity to modernity, reflecting changes in philosophical, historical, and cultural perspectives. Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato and Aristotle have offered varied ideas on memory which subsequently influenced the thoughts of the contemporary thinkers and philosophers helping them to form newer ideas on the concept. Starting from Plato’s belief that knowledge and memories are innate, and Aristotle’s view on the knowledge of time, memory has passed a passage of behavioral/cognitive approach to the present approaches of collective and individual memories. Paul Ricoeur has questioned whether it is possible to develop the art of forgetting which may be placed with that of the art of memory. This might lead to the erasure of memory instead of memorialization. According to Whitehead, some amount of forgetting is necessary for the maintenance of civic health. Meaningful memories

should be shared so that people know the past better and learn from it. Memory travels in a fascinating way. People locate their memories according to their convenient time and place so it gives an opportunity to look at history from varied perspectives. Therefore, memory is historically conditioned. The modern concept of memory is that it is changeable and expedient which helps us to understand the past, specifically, the past historical events like the Partition which have left ineffaceable mark in the minds of human beings. The remembrance of the past also helps in the formation of identity at the present. Memory is a dynamic force influencing culture, identity and narrative itself, revealing the present through the past recollections and serving as cultural archive. The above discussion proves that memory is multidirectional which includes cross referencing and borrowing. Memory helps in establishing intercultural dynamics and a platform to articulate a vision of the past to shape up a meaningful present.

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