Margalit, Avishai: *The Ethics of Memory*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2004. ISBN: 0-674-01378-6; 227 S.

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The philosopher Avishai Margalit has written a profound, moving rumination on the meaning of memory.[1] In the background of his work lie the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, and other crimes against humanity. In the wake of such disasters, how are communities constituted by memory? How does memory work to give meaning to life? Is there an inherent moral or ethical value to memory? Is there an obligation to remember? Margalit proceeds like a master mechanic disassembling an engine. He takes each part, holds it up to the light and examines it from different angles, hones it when appropriate, and then puts it all back together again.

The truth will not necessarily set us free, Margalit suggests at the very beginning of the book. Contemporary culture, in its crude popular version of Freudian psychology, might always promote plumbing the depths of memory as a healing process. But memory is also pain and can easily inspire sentiments of revenge rather than reconciliation. Yet Margalit does contend, as his title suggests, that there exists an „ethics of memory," which is anchored in „thick relations," the ties constituted by a shared past and collective memories. Thick relations begin with the family and move to larger communities, such as the ethnicity or nationality or religious group. Memory is the very stuff of thick relations, and memory entails *caring*, a regard for the well-being of others. Hence, the ethics of memory is not a formalized intellectual system. It is a stance toward life or, better, a way of living that is intrinsic to thick relations. „Thin relations," in contrast, are more distant and abstract and can be as broad as the entire human family. They go beyond Benedict Anderson's „imagined communities," because unless we have a saintly calling, there is little that binds us to something so large as all of humanity. Thin relations are characterized by a natural indifference, so we call upon morality to regulate our relations to this super-large collectivity.

From these distinctions – thick and thin relations, ethics and morality – Margalit goes on to discuss myth, memory, and history. He is particularly concerned with *shared memory*, the recollections that individuals hold in common and thereby ensure the perpetuation of the community. Shared memories are quasi-religious rituals that reenact events of the past, as in the re-telling of the Exodus from Egypt or the post-World War I cults of the fallen soldier. Although events of radical evil should certainly be remembered, it is simply unrealistic to expect that humanity as a whole is capable of carrying those memories. Humanity cannot even communicate, let alone remember (p. 79). Memory is tied to specific communities, and even those communities require that its memory is in some fashion institutionalized in places, buildings, monuments, and stories. Moreover, memories also conjure up emotions, though not just as raw, re-lived experience. Memories cause us to reflect upon the past, present, and future; they enable us to lead more reflective, and therefore richer, more human, lives.

But can or ought we forgive? When individuals and communities have been subject to great injustices, is there any reason or obligation to go beyond the painful memories of past injustices and learn to forgive? Can or should they forget? Margalit asserts a resolutely humanist, non-religious position, yet creatively and colorfully draws upon the discourse of forgiveness and forgetting in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, which provides the foundation for his conclusion: we can never forget in the sense of blotting out or deleting past injustices. They remain, and should remain, with us. But there is an obligation to forgive, for only through a genuine sentiment of forgiveness is it possible to move beyond the immersion in past wrongs, beyond anger and vengefulness. In taking this position, Margalit draws also on anthropological studies of the gift, because the gift exchange implies an obligation of the recipient. He or she must graciously accept the gift, and, at some point, become the bearer rather

[1] For a shorter German version of his arguments, see Margalit, Avishai, Ethik der Erinnerung, Frankfurt am Main 2000.

than the recipient. Similarly, a sentiment or act of forgiveness binds the recipient, who must accept it and, with the bestower, move to the higher plane of reconciliation. Forgiveness restores the thick relations that bind together individuals and communities: it is the ethics of memory.

Margalit has written a very important book that is meaningful on both the individual and communal level. In a world where politics is increasingly preoccupied with the resolution of past injustices, Margalit's many insights deserve extended consideration. Yet his arguments are not always convincing.

In Margalit's discussion, communities are closed, already constituted entities and memory is a given. He presumes a homogeneous collective memory and he ignores the active historical process of memory construction. Can one talk about a singular „Jewish" or „German" memory of the Holocaust, an „Armenian" or „Turkish" memory of the Armenian Genocide, an „Anglo" or a „Native American" memory of ethnic cleansing and genocide? Only if one glides over the diversity within communities. Margalit writes that „natural communities of memory are families, clans, tribes, religious communities, and nations" (p. 69), but ignores the criteria and mechanisms of exclusion as well as inclusion that are so fundamental to every community.

Moreover, his discussion of the „ought" of memory is not totally persuasive. Margalit strips away encumbrances. He wants to get down to roots, to those relations that constitute a foundation for a larger ethic: we remember to ensure that our thick relations are, indeed, caring relations. But families and communities can be highly oppressive. Patriarchal and even abusive situations sometimes characterize family life. Families and communities are neither intrinsically good or bad. They can be formed by exclusive and even murderous convictions as often as they are formed by democratic and humanitarian ideologies. We have idealized notions of how families and communities ought to live, but whether an ethics of caring is truly *natural* to these relations, as Margalit suggests, is another matter entirely. Or one might say that there is an instinct of caring attendant with the parent-child (or perhaps mother-child) relation. It is not at all clear that communities at the level of religious groups, ethnicities, or nations are formed from a similar instinct. Indeed, one might argue just the opposite: that communities are most basically bound together by fear of outsiders and within the community. All sorts of pathologies may be enacted upon those who transgress the boundaries and traffic with those beyond the communal walls.

Finally, it is a bit strange that the chapter on forgiveness concentrates so heavily on the injured party. Margalit's main concern is that the victims surmount the „poisonous" sentiments of hatred and revenge. But if the act of forgiveness is an act of exchange, it is only possible when the perpetrator is prepared to accept the gift. More extensive consideration of remorse as well as forgiveness would have made for a much more balanced and convincing conclusion.

„The Ethics of Memory" is an erudite and thoughtful work. In developing his arguments, Margalit draws fruitfully from philosophy, psychology, history, and literature. Examples from the writings of Kant, Freud, Dostoevsky, Anna Akhmatova, Edward Albee, W.H. Auden, Ka T'zetnik and many others sprinkle the pages and enliven the reading. „The Ethics of Memory" is not always convincing, but it is a book that stimulates one to think with and against it.

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