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## 'Memory, History, and Justice: In search of conceptual clarity'<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

How should we reconfigure the relationship between memory and history as two distinguishable yet interconnected epistemological routes to knowing the past? This article seeks some conceptual clarity on the intricate and complex interrelation between memory and history, also in conversation with some questions that arise from contexts associated with historical injustice. With this purpose in mind, the article engages especially the later work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur's response to the memory-history problem is not to view memory and history as adversaries, but to view them as conjoined and complementary as we grapple with the past and the temporality of our own lives. In light of this affirmation of the dialectical relationship between memory and history, the article further emphasises some aspects that are important to consider in the search for a responsible historical hermeneutic.

### INTRODUCTION: MEMORY, HISTORY AND JUSTICE

In the "Preface" to his monumental work *Memory, History, Forgetting* the French Philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes that this book grew out of some private, some professional and some public preoccupations. Under the rubric of "professional consideration" he refers to the fact that this book is a prolongation of an uninterrupted conversation with professional historians who have been "confronting the same problems regarding the ties between memory and history."<sup>3</sup>

The ties that bind history and memory – these two ways of retrospection, of looking at or engaging the past – indeed raise some serious and challenging problems and questions. Without doubt the relationship is complex, given (among other things) the fact that both "memory" and "history" have multiple senses. Therefore one needs to give at least some indication of what one means when using these terms, albeit that one should also recognise their conceptual fluidity. In addition, one should affirm the boundaries and the interconnectedness between memory and history. Memory and history are not to be conflated in our discourse and practice, although they overlap in some significant ways. Geoffrey Cubitt puts it well in his book *History and Memory*:

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2 This article is dedicated to Prof. Vincent Brümmer in celebration of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. I first met Prof. Brümmer in 1992 when I attended his doctoral seminars as a student in Utrecht, and I remember vividly his emphasis on the need to be clear and coherent in one's reasoning. One can rightly say that his own impressive and influential oeuvre exemplifies the search for conceptual clarity, for the sake of love and life. A first draft of this paper was read at an international conference on "Memory and Historical Injustice" in Melbourne, Australia in February 2012.

3 Ricoeur, P 2004, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), xv. For the original French text, see Ricoeur, P 2000. *La Mémoire, L'histoire, L'oubli* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil).

“History and memory are proximate concepts: they inhabit a similar mental territory ... (W)e can see them as conceptual terms that have constantly interacted with each other, moving in and out of each other, circling each other warily or amorously, sometimes embracing, sometimes separating, sometimes jostling for position on the discursive terrain that is their common habitat.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the fact that memory and history are connected concepts, and that there is often tension and even conflict between these two ways of knowing the past, it is not easy to conceptualise the relationship between memory and history. The difficulties involved in reflecting on the ties that bind memory and history have not discouraged scholars from venturing into this slippery terrain, though, and it has been said that “(f)ew topics in recent years have elicited as much interest among historians as the relationship between memory and history.”<sup>5</sup> The so-called “turn to memory” in historical scholarship (a turn that is noticeable across academic disciplines, making memory studies “a peculiarly busy interdisciplinary arena”<sup>6</sup>) has emphasised the need to gain greater clarity on the close but complex relationship between memory and history.

This article seeks some conceptual clarity on this intricate interrelation between memory and history, also in conversation with some questions that arise from contexts associated with historical injustice. With this purpose in mind, the article engages especially the later work of Paul Ricoeur, albeit that there is much to be gained from positioning Ricoeur’s reflections on memory and history against the backdrop of his philosophical project as a whole.

In the preface to *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur mentions another, more public, preoccupation that has informed this book:

“I continued to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle offered by an excess of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere, to say nothing of the influence of commemorations and abuses of memory – and of forgetting. The idea of a policy of the just allotment of memory is in this respect one of my avowed civic themes.”<sup>7</sup>

The concern for the “just allotment of memory” is also shared by those who want to reflect responsibly on South Africa’s apartheid past. Discussions on memory and history – and their interrelation – do not occur in a historical vacuum and they become especially poignant in contexts saturated with narratives of historical injustice. The work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission offers a fitting example to consider in this regard. If one wants knowledge of the work of the Commission one can turn to the official report (published in seven volumes or on official websites). This report is and will be, without doubt, an important and in many ways indispensable source for historians who want to embark on some or other kind of historiographical project connected to South Africa’s apartheid past. There are of course many traumatic memories and painful stories not included in the official report. Furthermore, the written or recorded sources that have found their way into the “archive” are not to be equated with the testimonies themselves or the events these testimonies point to. While the value of documents such as the official report can hardly be overstated, it is nevertheless important not to limit the work and legacy of the Truth Commission to the “documented history,” just as South Africa’s apartheid history cannot be viewed only through the lens of the official Truth Commission report. For a responsible historical engagement with South Africa’s apartheid past, a careful and critical interaction with documented history is extremely important. However, there are many memories not represented (or even misrepresented) in these sources. Hence

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4 Cubitt, G, 2007, *History and Memory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 4, 5.

5 Hutton, P 2000, “Recent Scholarship on Memory and History,” *The History Teacher* 33/4: 533-548, 533.

Cf. Gardner, P 2010, *Hermeneutics, History and Memory* (London: Routledge), 90.

6 Cf. Cubitt, *History and Memory*, 4.

7 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, xv.

the need for, and value of, oral history projects. In both documented and oral history, moreover, questions (often implicit questions) regarding the relationship between memory and history keep on coming to the fore.

One of the interesting more recent reflections on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the book entitled *There was this Goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* by Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni and Kopana Ratele. This book offers an illuminating engagement with the testimony of Notrose Konile, the mother of Zabonke Konile, who was killed in what came to be known as the Gugulethu Seven incident. Antjie Krog, well known for her haunting observations as reporter on the work of the Truth Commission reflected in her book *Country of My Skull* (1998), attended the hearing of Konile on 23 April 1996 and was struck by her seemingly incoherent testimony. The details do not concern us directly here, although I can mention that the title of the book is taken from a part of Notrose Konile's testimony, which was recorded as follows: "I had a very – a very scary period, there was this – this goat looking up, this one next to me said oh! having a dream like that with a goat looking at you is a very bad dream."<sup>8</sup> Years later Krog revisited this testimony with two colleagues from the University of the Western Cape, Nosisi Mpolweni and Kopano Ratele, who were then lecturers in the Xhosa and Psychology Departments respectively. They met regularly to discuss Konile's testimony and it became clear to them that the testimony in the official report is incomprehensible as it stands, and in order to make sense of it, you need to make use of indigenous language and knowledge systems. By tirelessly exploring the gaps and inconsistencies in Konile's testimony, and drawing on their respective disciplines, Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele indicate how a greater understanding of language and cultural contexts can challenge stereotypes and reductions. They observe: "As there were slippages in the interpretation of Mrs Konile's testimony, the valuable information with regard to her feelings and aspirations could not reach many of the Truth Commission officials and the audience. Slippages in translation can lead to misinterpretation and misrepresentation of a testifier, while intimate cultural knowledge can lead to a fuller and more just interpretation of a mother-tongue testimony that could restore the dignity of the testifier."<sup>9</sup>

I briefly recall this book because it offers a powerful reminder that one should guard against views that overestimate the ability of documented historical sources to represent the past. This is not to say that documents and written sources are not extremely important for historical investigation, but the inherent vulnerability of the archive should be acknowledged. But does this mean that we should rather privilege memory as a more reliable way of gaining knowledge of the past? Can one privilege memory over above history or is these two intentions of the past, to follow Ricoeur's position, undecidable."<sup>10</sup> And if so, for what reasons?

## MEMORY OR HISTORY?

Before entering into a more detailed engagement with Ricoeur's thoughts on memory and history, it might be worthwhile to bring the differences, overlaps and tensions between memory and history sharper into focus. David Lowenthal comments helpfully in this regard:

"Memory and history are processes of insight; each involves components of the other, and their boundaries are shadowy. Yet memory and history are normally and justifiably distinguished: memory is inescapably and prima-facie indubitable; history is contingent and empirically testable."<sup>11</sup>

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8 Antjie Krog, Nosisi Mpolweni and Kopana Ratele, *There was this goat: Investigating the Truth Commission Testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 13.

9 Krog, Mpolweni and Ratele, *There was this goat*, 55.

10 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 385.

11 Lowenthal, D 1985, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 187.

Memory and history thus point to two distinguishable yet interconnected epistemological routes to knowing the past.<sup>12</sup> History is based on empirical sources in a more direct way, although memory is shaped by accounts of the past by others (that is “history”). In a similar vein, history relies on eyewitnesses and their testimony (that is “memory”). Despite the connections and overlaps, the world of memory appears quite different from the world of history.

Philip Gardner uses some vivid images to describe these different worlds. He links the world of memory to the brightness of day in which we move around in an assured way because we can see our surrounding (although we may make mistakes in what we believe we have seen). The world of history is different, since the sun has already set, and to navigate this dark space we need artificial light as a substitute for the sun. We must therefore look elsewhere for illumination, “to the archive, to the documents of history, without which the events that happened before our time would remain unlighted.”<sup>13</sup> Gardner not only views the movement from history to memory in terms of the metaphor of “light”, but also views it as a question of distance and scale. Whereas history has to bridge the distance, difference and dislocation between present and past, the past and the present are already more intimately connected in the case of memory, with the agency of the individual playing a central role. In addition to describing the difference between memory and history in terms of images of light and distance, Gardner refers to the movement from history to memory as a movement from silence to sound: “In terms of sources it takes us from the document to the voice. In terms of method, it takes us from reading to listening.”<sup>14</sup>

One might refine Gardner’s description of the differences between the world of memory and the world of history, but his discussion is helpful to emphasise that we are dealing with two distinct ways of representing the past. Other features of the difference between memory and history can be added. Alan Megill, for instance, has argued that memory – however one defines it – has the character of being “immediate” and that we do not have adequate grounds for challenging what somebody remembers, while history, on the other hand, is different since it brings evidence into play.<sup>15</sup> For Megill the blurring of history and memory is therefore deeply problematic, and the task of the historian “ought to be less to preserve memory than to overcome it or at least to keep it confined.”<sup>16</sup> Attempts not to conflate history and memory and to respect their boundaries are certainly helpful. But, on the other hand, it also seems problematic to cast memory and history in two opposing camps, the one being private, passive, subjective and value-related, and the other public, active, objective and fact-based. Over against these dichotomies and antinomies one can also point to the fact that Ralph Samuel has rightly argued “that memory, so far from being merely a passive receptacle or storage system, an image bank of the past, is rather an active shaping force ... and that it is dialectically related to historical thought, rather than some kind of negative other to it.”<sup>17</sup>

In the discourse on memory and history and their relation a certain tension is often highlighted. From the side of those who privilege memory over history, “history” is viewed as pretending to make value-free objective claims about the past that do not do justice to particular

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12 Lowenthal rightfully reminds us: “‘Knowing the past,’ as Kubler says, ‘is as astonishing a performance as knowing the stars’; and it remains no less elusive for being well documented” (*The Past is a Foreign Country*, 191).

13 Gardner, *Hermeneutics, History and Memory*, 89.

14 Gardner, *Hermeneutics, History and Memory*, 90.

15 Megill, A 2007. *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 22.

16 Megill, *Historical Knowledge*, 37. Megill therefore argues that a critical historiography, although it is informed by memory, has to stand at a distance from memory: “In short: history both needs memory and needs to go beyond memory” (*Historical Knowledge*, 40).

17 Samuel, R 1994, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso), x.

memories and identities. Those who privilege history over above memory are, in turn, sceptical of the way in which memory in their view functions in an arbitrary way without means to check its validity. In short, history seems to be vulnerable to questions of identity, while memory seems to be vulnerable to questions concerning truth claims. Gardner states the matter succinctly:

“If memory settles upon identity, it opens itself to the perils of wilful manipulation or organized forgetting. If history settles only upon its own claims to truth, it closes its eyes to its own boundedness. If history deprecates memory, it lays waste to its wellspring. If memory ignores history, it squanders its credibility.”<sup>18</sup>

The dialectic between memory and history therefore remains, and a responsible engagement with the past is probably best served by allowing space for this tension to be creative and constructive, viewing both modes of retrospection with suspicion and trust. In conversation with Ricoeur, this article explores further why one cannot decide which one of these two epistemological routes to the past has priority. Ricoeur’s response to the memory-history problem is not to view memory and history as adversaries, but to view them as conjoined and complementary as we grapple with the past and the temporality of our own lives.<sup>19</sup> With this in mind, we now turn more directly to Ricoeur’s thought.

#### RICOEUR ON MEMORY AND HISTORY

*Memory, History, Forgetting* presents Ricoeur’s mature thought on memory and history, and their dialectical relationship. However, the concerns of this book are not new, since – as Ricoeur has noted in his “intellectual autobiography” – much of his previous work is marked by a concern for “a sense of history.”<sup>20</sup> The strong continuity between the themes that announce themselves in *Memory, History, Forgetting* and Ricoeur’s earlier work should thus be noted, and it is profitable to read this book against the backdrop of his whole philosophical oeuvre.

Our concern in this paper is not to give a detailed discussion of Ricoeur’s extensive discussion of the themes of memory, history and forgetting. The main argument is rather that Ricoeur’s thought is valuable to keep the necessary tension between memory and history creative, as well as to view both memory and history – as two distinct but interconnected modes of representing the past – with suspicion and trust. However, before turning to these matters, it might be valuable to represent in very broad strokes something of the main intention and argument of *Memory, History, Forgetting*.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur grapples by way of an innovative framework and extensive discussions of the relevant literature with questions relating to the importance of – and difficulties associated with – the quest for the representation of the past.<sup>21</sup> Although

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18 Gardner, *Hermeneutics, History and Memory*, 115.

19 Cf. Gardner, *Hermeneutics, History and Memory*, 97.

20 Ricoeur observes: “Of course, the question of history comes up as early as 1949 in ‘Husserl and the Sense of History’; the same question also returns in other guises: the status proper to the history of philosophy, objectivity and subjectivity in history, the sense of history in general, the place of violence and non-violence in history, the sense of history and Christian eschatology, progress, ambiguity, hope, and so forth. The first collection of my articles, *History and Truth*, bears the mark of this constant concern for the ‘sense of history.’” See Hahn, L E 1995, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Chicago: Open Court), 39. And in the third volume of *Time and Narrative*, we can add, Ricoeur deals extensively with the way in which history and fiction, when taken together, offer the reply of a poetics of narrative to the aporias of time. Cf. Ricoeur, P 1988, *Time and Narrative, volume 3* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 99-240. For corresponding material, see Ricoeur, P 1984, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (The Aquinas Lecture, 1984) (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press).

21 Just before the table of contents in *Memory, History, Forgetting* there is a picture of a baroque bronze

this book resists easy summary, the broad argument of the book is presented in three clearly defined, but interlinked, parts. The first part of the book is, as the title suggests, devoted to a discussion of memory. Ricoeur's *phenomenology* of memory begins with an analysis of the object of memory (*le souvenir*) and goes on to deal with a given memory (*anamnesis*, recollection). The discussion then moves to memory as it is exercised (reflective memory), with reference to the use and abuse of memory. This section also includes a discussion of individual and collective memory. The second part of the book can be viewed as an *epistemology* of history. Here Ricoeur discusses the three phases of the historical operation: the stage of testimony and the archives (the documentary phase); the phase of explanation and understanding; and the historian's representation of the past on a scriptural level (the representative phase). Throughout this discussion Ricoeur is interested in the historian's intention to produce a truthful reconstruction of the past. The third part of the book is framed within a *hermeneutics* of the historical condition. In this section Ricoeur argues for a critical philosophy of history that is "attentive to the limits of historical knowledge that a certain hubris of historical science transgresses time and time again."<sup>22</sup> In addition, this section contains a meditation on forgetting. The epilogue of the book deals with what Ricoeur terms "difficult forgiveness." Although *Memory, History, Forgetting* has – apart from the epilogue – three clearly distinguishable sections, Ricoeur emphasises that the sections do not constitute three separate books, but can be seen instead as three masts with interlocking but distinct sails that belong to the same ship setting off on a single itinerary. There is a common concern that "flows through the phenomenology of memory, the epistemology of history, and the hermeneutics of the social condition: the problematic of the representation of the past."<sup>23</sup>

Given the focus of this paper on the dialectical relationship between memory and history, it is worthwhile to attend briefly to Ricoeur's discussion of this matter in a chapter on "History and Time" in the third section (on "The Historical Condition") of *Memory, History, Forgetting*. As already mentioned, Ricoeur argues that one cannot give priority to either memory or history. In the process he considers what he views as two intersecting and competing developments. On the one hand, there is the claim to dissolve the field of memory into history (which includes the development of a history of memory). On the other hand, there is the attempt of memory to historicise itself. Therefore Ricoeur is concerned with two questions, namely "Is Memory just a province of history?" and "Is Memory in charge of history?"<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur implicitly answers both

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sculpture from the Wiblingen monastery in Ulm, Germany (it is also used on the cover of the French text). The heart of the problem and argument presented in *Memory, History, Forgetting* is well captured in this thought-provoking sculpture. Ricoeur offers a commentary in an adjacent note: "It is the dual figure of history. In the foreground, Kronos, the winged god. An old man with wretched brow: his left hand grips a large book, his right hand attempts to tear out a page. Behind and above, stands history itself. The gaze is grave and searching; one foot topples a horn of plenty from which spills the cascade of gold and silver, sign of instability; the left hand checks the act of the god, while the right hand displays history's instruments: the book, the inkpot, and the stylus." Ricoeur does not interpret this sculpture in more detail, but one can argue that Kronos as an old man represents the fleeing of time into the past. History, the other figure in the sculpture, holds the instruments for conquering time. With the passing of time, the past moves into oblivion and becomes, on a fundamental level, inaccessible to us. Nevertheless, we try to gain access to the past and interpret it, which is made possible by the fact that traces remain in memory. Through the writing, recording and reading of history, we try to represent – to make present again – the past by attending to these traces. It is between the fallible power of memory and the force of forgetfulness that Ricoeur places his critical philosophy of history/historiography.

22 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, xvi.

23 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, xvi.

24 See Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 385-392. In dealing with the question "Memory, just a province of history?" Ricoeur mainly engages with an essay by Krzysztof Pomian entitled "De l'histoire,

questions, as can be expected, in the negative. The unending debates between the rival claims of history and memory need not, however, end in a paralysing aporia. Therefore Ricoeur writes: “the *history of memory* and the *historicization of memory* can confront one another in an open dialectic that preserves them from the passage to the limit, from that *hubris*, that would result from, on the one hand, history’s claim to reduce memory to the level of one of its objects, and on the other hand, the claim of collective memory to subjugate history by means of the abuses of memory that the commemorations imposed by political powers or by pressure groups can turn into.”<sup>25</sup>

This quotation makes Ricoeur’s intentions clear. The hubris of history (that reduces memory to one of its objects) should be countered. On the other hand, the abuses of memory – the danger of too much memory – should be kept at bay. This requires prudent consciousness, a prudence that respects, among other things, what Ricoeur calls “the uncanniness of history.”<sup>26</sup>

## TOWARDS A RESPONSIBLE HISTORICAL HERMENEUTIC?

It is clear from the brief discussion above that Ricoeur affirms the need to maintain the dialectical relationship between memory and history. For Ricoeur memory is the matrix of history, and as such one cannot conceive of history without memory. This is not say that history is merely an extension of memory, but the stance that memory and history are antithetical should be rejected. In addition, the way in which history as a mode of responsible retrospection can police the abuse of memory ought to receive due emphasis.

In the Introduction to this article brief reference was made to some of the challenges involved for an historical engagement with South Africa’s apartheid past, and the role of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as one response to the reality of historical injustice in South Africa. For the historian working on these themes both documented and oral sources are important and this implies the need for some understanding of the complementary and conflicting relationship between memory and history. On a methodological level the nuanced work of Ricoeur provides valuable conceptual clarity in order to address these challenges in a responsible manner. In this section of the article I would like to limit the discussion to two aspects – much more can and should be said – that are especially pertinent en route to a responsible historical epistemology and hermeneutic in dealing with the past in contexts marked by conflict, violence and historical injustice, as well as by the concomitant search for reconciliation, truth and justice.

A first aspect relates to the need to emphasise the vulnerability of memory (while at the same, paradoxically, affirming the capability of memory). A second aspect relates to the importance of underlining the reality of the historical past through a careful historical or historiographical operation (while at the same time highlighting the mystery or strangeness of the past in the light of our historical condition).

### The vulnerability of memory

The fact that memory plays an important role in the historical process is uncontested. The value of the plea for (collective) memory – made by scholars such as Maurice Halbwachs, Yosef

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partie de la mémoire, à la mémoire, objet d’histoire,” while his main conversation partner in dealing with the question “Memory, in charge of history?” is the literary critic Richard Terdiman.

25 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 392, 392.

26 Cf. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 393. Under the heading of “The Uncanniness of History” Ricoeur adopts Freud’s notion of *Unheimlichkeit* in his discussion of the influential work of Maurice Halbwachs, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and Pierre Nora. Ricoeur concludes his informative discussion by saying that “the ‘uncanniness’ of history prevails, even as it attempts to understand the reasons why it is contested by commemorative memory” (*Memory, History, Forgetting*, 411).

Yerushalmi, and Pierre Nora – as a challenge to reductive understandings of historiography can hardly be overestimated. But we should also keep in mind that memory is a slippery and ambiguous notion. Even a committed advocate for memory such as Yosef Yerushalmi writes at the start of his justly acclaimed book *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*: “Memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes treacherous ... We ourselves are periodically aware that memory is among the most fragile and capricious of our faculties.”<sup>27</sup> Memory is indeed at once fragile and potent. The ambivalent potential of memory – also for contexts associated with the public legitimisation of historical injustice – should be noted, for, as W. James Booth perceptively observes, “Memory has fuelled merciless violent strife, and it has been at the core of reconciliation and reconstruction. It has been used to justify great crimes, and yet it is central to the pursuit of justice.”<sup>28</sup>

Ricoeur too is deeply aware of what he refers to as the vulnerability of memory, acknowledging in the process the possible abuses of memory. According to Ricoeur, the abuses of natural memory<sup>29</sup> occur on three levels, namely the pathological, therapeutic level (referred to by Ricoeur as “blocked memory”), the practical level (described as “manipulated memory”) and the ethico-political level (termed “obligated memory”).

On the therapeutic level Ricoeur refers to the vulnerability of memory in the light of what he calls wounded or even sick memory, linking blocked memory to words like “traumatism,” “wound,” “scar” etc. Ricoeur’s discussion here – which engages two of Freud’s influential essays, namely “Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten” (“Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through”) and “Trauer und Melancholie” (“Mourning and Melancholia”) – is worth considering in the important discourse that brings memory into conversation with notions such as “trauma,” “narrative” and “forgiveness.” In lives and communities scarred by violence and injustice, the presence of blocked memory can indeed be something that needs to be worked through, hence the call by many for “the healing of memories.”<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur makes a further important remark about “symbolic wounds” that requires serious consideration, especially in post-conflict situations: “What we celebrate under the title of founding events are, essentially, acts of violence legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right. What was glory for some was humiliation for other. In this way, symbolic wounds calling for healing are stored in the archives

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27 Yerushalmi, Y H 1982, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 5.

28 Booth, W J 2006, *Communities of Memory: On Witness, Identity, and Justice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), ix.

29 Ricoeur also refers in his phenomenology of memory – before turning to natural memory – to the abuses of what he calls “artificial memory.” See *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 58-68.

30 For some important perspectives engaging South African contexts, see the essays by an interdisciplinary team of scholars collected in Goboda-Madikizela, P and Van der Merwe, C 2009, *Memory, Narrative and Forgiveness: Perspectives on the Unfinished Journeys of the Past* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press). As the “Preface” notes, this collection “explores the relation between trauma and memory, and the complex, interconnected issues of trauma and narrative (testimonial and literary). It examines transgenerational trauma, memory as the basis for dialogue and reconciliation in divided societies, memorialisation and the changing role of memory in the aftermath of mass trauma, mourning and the potential of forgiveness to heal the enduring effects of mass trauma” (xi). For a valuable earlier collection of essays that includes some theological and ethical perspectives, see Botman, H R and Peterson (eds.), R M 1996, *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation* (Cape Town: Human & Rousseau). For an important recent publication on dealing with the past in an intercultural context, see Diawara, M, Lategan, B, and Rüsen, J 2010, *Historical Memory in Africa: Dealing with the past, Reaching for the future in an intercultural context* (New York: Berghahn Books).

of the collective memory.”<sup>31</sup>

Ricoeur places on the practical level – the level of manipulated or instrumentalised memory – the important problem of memory and (personal and collective) identity. He is especially interested in the way in which memory is mobilised in the service of the quest and demand for identity. As he writes elsewhere, “the diseases of memory are basically diseases of identity.”<sup>32</sup> The fragility or vulnerability of memory is therefore interconnected with the fragility of identity.

In addition to the abuses of blocked and manipulated memory, Ricoeur discusses possible abuses on an ethico-political level as he engages the emotional topic of the alleged “duty to remember.” For Ricoeur it may even be that this duty to remember “constitutes, at one and the same time, the epitome of good use and of abuse in the exercise of memory.”<sup>33</sup> In this context Ricoeur brings the notion of justice into play: “The duty of memory is the duty to do justice, through memory, to an other than the self.”<sup>34</sup> Here, as in Ricoeur’s project as a whole, some clear ethical concerns presents themselves.

Moreover, we should note that Ricoeur does not approach memory merely from the viewpoint of its deficiencies, but also in the light of its capacities.<sup>35</sup> For our reference to the past we have no other resource than memory itself. Consequently, Ricoeur emphasises that our acknowledgement of the unreliability of memory must be interwoven with the admission that memory is our one and only resource to signify the past character of what we declare we remember. The deficiencies of memory should thus not be viewed from the outset as pathological and dysfunctional, “but as the shadowy underside of the bright region of memory.”<sup>36</sup> As Ricoeur states: “To put it bluntly, we have nothing better than memory to signify that something has taken place, has occurred, has happened *before* we declare that we remember it.”<sup>37</sup> This implies, in our view, that any reflection on the relationship between memory and history should not minimise the tension brought to the relationship by a strong emphasis on memory as an essential category in the attempt to offer a reliable representation of the past.

### The reality of the historical past

One can say that Ricoeur views memory with both suspicion and trust. The abuses of memory are clearly acknowledged, but the deficiencies of memory are not a reason to view memory as a mere province of history or to take refuge in the dream of historical objectivity. The objectivist historical mentality with its over-confident claims regarding value-free, dispassionate and “objective” accounts of the past, on the basis of an inflated confidence in the power of primary

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31 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 79.

32 Ricoeur, P, “Memory and Forgetting” in Kearney, R & Dooley, M (eds), *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

33 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 87.

34 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 89.

35 The themes of fallibility and capability are important for Ricoeur’s philosophical project. See, for instance, his earlier work *Fallible Man* (Chicago: Regnery, 1965). In an interview with Sorin Antohi, Ricoeur refers to a move in his philosophical anthropology from fallibility to capability: “In the intermediate book between *Memory, History, Forgetting* and *Time and Narrative*, namely, *Oneself as Another*, the central concept is man as he is able and capable. What man *can* do: I *can* speak, I *can* narrate, I *can* act, I *can* feel responsible ... therefore my last book on memory, history and forgetting is related not to fallible man but to capable man, this is to say that man is capable of making memory and making history” (Ricoeur, P & Antohi, S, “Memory, history, forgiveness: A dialogue between Paul Ricoeur and Sorin Antohi.” *Janus Head* 2005: 8/1, 17). See also Mechteld Jansen’s chapter on “Fragiliteit: Breekbaarheid en Kwetsbaarheid” in Jansen, M M 2002, *Talen naar God: Wegwijzers bij Paul Ricoeur* (Dronten: Uitgeverij Narratio), 222-273.

36 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 21.

37 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 21.

sources to provide access to the past, should be resisted. While one must rightly challenge a certain form of objectivist historiography, since there is no way around subjectivity, we should remember too – as Paul Ricoeur has already argued in his early essay “Objectivity and Subjectivity in History” – that “there is good and bad subjectivity and we expect the very exercise of the historian’s craft to decide between them.”<sup>38</sup> Although the debate surrounding objectivity in history can easily become stale, it is important to keep in mind that the “sources” do not tell the complete story and even the best archives offer us a limited window onto the past.<sup>39</sup> Access to archives and primary sources does not absolve us from the task of *interpreting* the sources and placing them within meaningful interpretive frameworks and narrative configurations.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* Ricoeur – who has a stake in the autonomy of historical knowledge in relation to what he calls “the mnemonic phenomenon”<sup>40</sup> – engages the non-chronological movement from the archive to historiography (as the writing of history) as he seeks to provide a coherent epistemology of history. In the process he embarks on an extensive description of what he calls, following Michel de Certeau, “the historiographical operation.”<sup>41</sup> Without giving a detailed discussion here,<sup>42</sup> we can mention that Ricoeur describes the historiographical operation as consisting of three phases. These three phases are not seen by him as three distinct chronological stages, but as “methodological moments, interwoven with one another.”<sup>43</sup> The first phase of the historiographical operation (the documentary phase) ranges from the reports by eyewitnesses to the constituting of archives, which aims at establishing documentary proof. But these documents in the archives are themselves derived from the testimony of memories. Thus history starts with testimony, and testimonies are collected, preserved and consulted in the archive. Towards the end of his discussion of the documentary phase, Ricoeur asks rhetorically whether documentary proof is more remedy than poison for the constitutive weakness of testimony. This question points to the need for the explanation/understanding phase,<sup>44</sup> since there are no documents produced or consulted without some prior questions, and no questions are generated without an explanatory project. The third phase that Ricoeur discusses in his portrayal of the historiographical operation is that of the historian’s representation in written form. To mark the specificity of the third phase, Ricoeur prefers not to speak of historiography, but of literary or scriptural representation. Such representation

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38 Ricoeur, P, *History and Truth* (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1965), 22. For Ricoeur “subjectivity” does not merely refer to the historian’s subjectivity, but also to the idea that “the *object* of history is the human *subject* itself” (40).

39 For a critical engagement with the notion of “the archive” see Derrida, J, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Cf. also Vosloo, R R. “Archiving Otherwise: Some Remarks on Memory and Historical Responsibility”. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXI/2, 2005: 379-399.

40 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 136.

41 Ricoeur acknowledges that his use of the term “historiographical operation” has been influenced by Michel de Certeau’s contribution to the project edited by Jacques le Goff and Pierre Nora under the title *Faire de l’histoire*. See Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 136. For a revised version of De Certeau’s essay, see De Certeau, M, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 56-113.

42 For a more extended discussion of Ricoeur’s description of “the historiographical operation,” see Vosloo, R R 2011, “The writing of history as remedy or poison? Some Remarks on Paul Ricoeur’s Reflection on Memory, Identity and ‘the historiographical operation’” in Jonker, L (ed.) 2011, *Texts, Contexts, Readings: Explorations into Historiography and Identity Negotiation in Persian Period Jehud* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck Verlag), 11-30.

43 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 137.

44 Ricoeur refers to the second phase of the historical operation as the explanation/understanding phase, because he wants to challenge the dichotomy that is often created between explanation and understanding (as famously posed by Dilthey in the nineteenth century).

must understand itself as “standing for” (*représentance*, the German *Darstellung*), thus it has intentionality. This intended “something” makes history the learned heir of memory. In this process of intentional representation, narrative form plays an important role. Ricoeur also acknowledges the rhetorical aspect of staging a narrative. Ricoeur is also interested in the confrontation between historical and fictional narrative. What is at stake for Ricoeur in his discussion of the respective relationships between representation and narrative, representation and rhetoric, and representation and fiction, is the capacity of historical discourse to represent the past. This intentional aim, the “standing for,” of history is important as it indicates the expectation that historical knowledge constitutes attempted reconstructions of past events. This is the contract between the writer and the reader. Unlike the contract between a writer of fiction and his or her reader, the author and the reader of a historical text “agree that it will deal with situations, events, connections and characters who once really existed, that is, before the narrative of them is put together.”<sup>45</sup>

The brief discussion above points to Ricoeur’s affirmation of what can be called, following the title of his “Aquinas lecture” (1984), “the reality of the historical past.”<sup>46</sup> Although Ricoeur affirms the role of narrative in both historical-scholarly and literary representations of the past, the difference between history and fiction should be respected. This implies, among other things, that critical history (via a coherent and responsible epistemology) has a role to play alongside, and sometimes in conflict with, memory. While memory is the matrix of history, it is not the master of history. The “autonomy” of history should be acknowledged. At the same time the affirmation that history seeks to represent the “reality” of the past should not lead to the type of over-confidence that does not duly respect the mystery or the uncanniness of the past. The messy and recalcitrant nature of the past ought to challenge any attempt that presumes to equate our historical representations with the past. The strangeness of the past should keep haunting history, with historians even underlining this strangeness on a more conscious level (also as they engage contexts marked and scarred by historical injustice). In this regard a remark in the book *There was this goat* comes to mind. Grappling with the irregular and marginalised testimony of Mrs Konile before the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the authors comment: “These ‘strange’ testimonies underline the importance of refraining from ‘un-strange-ing’ the strange – to allow it to be strange – but within its original logical and coherent context. Accommodation of ‘strangeness’ would keep the spaces of tolerance open for many people emerging from contexts of conflict and estrangement.”<sup>47</sup>

#### CONCLUSION: THE RECEPTION OF MEMORY TAUGHT BY HISTORY, AND THE WITNESS TO JUSTICE

An analysis of Ricoeur’s discussion of the relationship between memory and history clearly reveals that he does not want to privilege any one of these modes of retrospection, but that he wants to affirm their dialectical relationship. Memory is not a province of history and history is not merely historicised memory. The convincing power of *Memory, History, Forgetting* lies in part in the way in which Ricoeur is able to maintain this tension within the context of the threats posed by our “being-in-time”-ness and forgetting. For any responsible historiographical project Ricoeur’s engagement with these themes hold much promise. The question can be asked, though, whether the relevance of Ricoeur’s treatment of memory, history and forgetting stretches beyond the writing of history.

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45 Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 275.

46 Cf. Ricoeur, *The Reality of the Historical Past* (1984).

47 Krog, Mpolweni, Ratele, *There was this goat*, 100.

With this question in mind, a lecture Ricoeur presented in English under the title “Memory, history, oblivion” in March 2003 at a conference on “Haunting Memories? History in Europe after Authoritarianism” at the Central European University in Budapest makes for interesting reading. In this lecture Ricoeur engages critically with his own focus in *Memory, History, Forgetting* on the *writing* of history (in line with the lexicon definition of historiography). In Ricoeur’s words:

“What I am proposing today is a shift in the prevailing standpoint, a shift from writing to reading, or, to put it in broader terms, from the literary elaboration of the historical work to its reception, either private or public, along the lines of a hermeneutics of reception. This shift would give an opportunity to extract from their linear treatment in the book some problems which clearly concern the reception of history rather than the writing of history and to emphasize them. The issues at stake clearly concern memory, no longer as a mere matrix of history, but as the *reappropriation* of the historical past by a memory taught by history and often wounded by history.”<sup>48</sup>

Ricoeur then elaborates on what he views as the most interesting consequences of this shift concerning the relationship between memory and history. This relationship is now treated not in a linear but in a circular way, with memory now appearing twice in the course of the analysis, first as the matrix of history (from the standpoint of history-writing), and later as the channel of the reappropriation of the historical past. This is not to disregard the linear account in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, since without this movement no reappropriation of the past is possible. However, Ricoeur points to the importance of memory as the reception of the historical past.

This focus on memory as the reception of the historical past has some important implications. In closing I would like to point to the fact that, among other things, it reminds us that questions regarding the relationship between memory and history cannot be separated from certain ethical concerns, hence the need for an ethics of memory and history.<sup>49</sup> Some important questions therefore present themselves, such as: Whose memories of the past are remembered and privileged? Are those recalling the memories or witnesses of the past today engaging those memories through history (i.e. through a responsible historical epistemology and hermeneutic)? Are those witnesses today who are receiving or reappropriating memories from the past themselves witnessing for justice? With whom – and in which communities and as part of which tradition – are we grappling with our interwoven and often contested constructions of the past?

In our Introduction we referred to Krog, Molweni and Ratele’s investigation of the testimony of Notrose Nobomvu Konile, who through her seemingly incoherent testimony occupied a specific space in documented history (with her name not included in the index of the Truth Commission’s website and whose name is misspelt in the official transcriptions). Yet they witness to her memory by trying “to understand this unmentioned, incorrectly ID-ed, misspelt, incoherently testifying, translated and carelessly transcribed woman.”<sup>50</sup> This reminds us that we should be sensitive to the way in which representations of the past have led to exclusion and victimisation. As Ricoeur comments: “We need, therefore, a kind of parallel history of, let us say, victimisation, which would counter the history of success and victory. To memorise the victims of history – the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten – should be a task for all of us.”<sup>51</sup>

In our continual reflection on the relationship between memory and history, we are therefore continually challenged to narrate the historical past other-wise. In this process we would do well

48 Ricoeur, P, “Memory, history, oblivion”. See [www.fondsriceur.fr](http://www.fondsriceur.fr), 1,2.

49 See, for instance, Wyshogrod, E, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Margalit, A, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Carr, D, Flynn, R T and Makkreel, R, *The Ethics of History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004).

50 Krog, Mpolweni, Ratele, *There was this goat*, 4.

51 Kearney and Dooley, *Questioning Ethics*, 10,11.

to remember the words of Isak Dinesen that Hannah Arendt uses at the beginning of the chapter on "Action" in *The Human Condition* (and that Ricoeur is also fond of quoting): "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them."<sup>52</sup>

**KEY WORDS**

Memory

History

Justice

Ricoeur

Historical hermeneutics

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<sup>52</sup> Arendt, H 1958, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press). Cf. Ricoeur, "Memory, history, oblivion," 9.