

## Cultural Memory and Dialogue between Cultures. A Philosophical Perspective

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### Abstract

*Focusing on the concepts of collective memory and cultural memory, the article connects the theories developed by two contemporary philosophers: Hans Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. The aim is to explore the relationship between the ways we see our respective cultures and the ways we understand and judge other cultures. A key notion in this sense is historicity. As Gadamer put in *Truth and Method*, "historical consciousness should definitely succeed in taking into account its own historicity. In our opinion, it seems appropriate to conclude that staying within the boundaries of tradition does not limit the freedom of knowing, but rather lays the foundations of its possibility". How we see our own culture determines our experience of otherness and constitutes the basis for intercultural dialogue that can be either positive or negative.*

**Keywords:** Culture, collective memory, cultural memory, phenomenology of memory, historicity, otherness.

### Introduction

What is a "culture" and what about its interplay with other cultures? Is there a social and cultural memory? If so, does this affect in any way intercultural relations? And, if so, in what ways? The purpose of this article is to try to understand if the intercultural dialogue can in any way be associated with the relationship that every culture has with its own past. The assumption set forth here is that the knowledge of another culture, as well as the entire set of judgments that we form about it and therefore our subsequent attitudes and behaviours towards it are somehow mediated by the different ways of approaching the knowledge of one's own culture, along with its interpretation and evaluation.

#### 1. Culture and cultural memory

There is indeed no univocal and precise definition of "culture". As a rule, this refers to the distinguishing features and identity that are peculiar to a specific community of human beings, which are manifested through certain forms of expression, such as lifestyle models and artistic productions. However, the size and scope of this community can vary quite a lot, usually coinciding with a people or a nation, although it can also be instead a regional community or a social class, etc. Amongst the different cultures, relationships of various kinds more or less positive can be established, ranging from mutual understanding and even cooperation to mutual exclusion, up to open conflict, even with violent means, as is the case for ethnic conflicts (see Cairns & Row, 2003; see also Rossi, 2001), which are always cultural as well as political conflicts. I am using here the term "culture" in relation to a group of people belonging to the same nation as the concept of nation refers to the sense of belonging amongst individuals who share common values and historical traditions, but who are not necessarily citizens of a country owing a territory of its own. Moreover, memory in this context should not be confused with the set of cognitive processes of the human mind that allow us to remember; in other words, it is not about the faculty of memory. Instead, it is "social memory" or "collective memory" (see Halbwachs, 2001) that contributes to forming the social identity of the members of a nation and forms itself through what the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has defined as "cultural memory". In fact, "the consciousness of social belonging, which we refer to as 'collective identity', is based on our *participation in a common knowledge and memory*, handed down [...] through the use of a common symbolic system. [...] This involves not only words, sentences and texts, but also rituals and dances, models and ornaments, as well as costumes and tattoos; it is about eating and drinking, including monuments, images, landscapes, trail signs, and border marks. Everything can virtually become a sign to codify communality [...]."

So, when referring to a ‘culture’, or more precisely to a ‘cultural background’, we will mean this complex consisting of the communality that is handed down symbolically”; hence, “collective identity corresponds to a cultural background that actually founds it and, above all, reproduces it. Cultural background is the medium whereby a collective identity is built and maintained through generations” (Assmann, 1992, my translation).

Thus, socialisation is found to be a mostly narrative process, while culture becomes the object of memory, of a memory told and evoked through symbols, which plays a role in the structuring of the social identity of individuals (see Kearney, 1998, pp. 241-257 and Smith, 2003) and this because, as stated by Paul Connerton in *How societies remember*, our experience of the present depends to a large extent on our knowledge of the past (see Connerton, 1989).

As a matter of fact, the past does affect our own identity, and consequently our perception of the present and of the role we play there in as well as, at least in part, the choices we make as acting players, i.e. our actions. As you can easily guess, this matter also involves implications on the moral level. Suffice it to recall the words of Alasdair MacIntyre in his famous work *After virtue: a study in moral theory*: “What I am is therefore to an essential extent what I inherit, a specific past that is present to a certain degree in my present”; “I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, and my nation a multiplicity of debts, expectations, and obligations, and this constitutes what is given of my life, my moral starting point” (MacIntyre, 1985). In short, it is starting from this *datum* that I judge the present and move across it as a moral being even though I can then even go so far as to criticise and question what I have been learning to-date in the context wherein I found myself living. Is there any moral obligation towards what we inherit from those who gave life to the past? This further aspect of the question, which cannot be investigated here, has been analysed in depth by Janna Thompson in her book *Taking Responsibility of the Past* (Thompson, 2002).

## **2. Gadamer and culture as openness to possible “others”**

When it comes to linking the concepts of memory and culture, it is useful to refer to Gadamer’s analysis of *Bildung*, as expounded in the first part of *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)* (Gadamer, 1986). As Gadamer points out, the German term meaning “culture” derives from *Bild*, i.e. “image”, which contains in itself the concepts of reproduction (*Nachbild*) and model (*Vorbild*). By referring to the Hegelian *Phänomenologie des Geistes (Phenomenology of Spirit)*, he recognises as the general character of culture its “knowing how to keep universal points of view open for what is other and different”. This openness implies a departure from oneself and from one’s own particular interests, that is, a real alienation (*Entfremdung*). The reconciliation with oneself takes place at the moment in which one recognises himself *in the other*, and is “a return to oneself from the other”. This process becomes even clearer, according to Gadamer, when moving on from *praktische* to *theoretische Bildung*: “theoretical behaviour, in fact, means already in itself alienation, i.e. the effort ‘to deal with something that is not immediate’. Thus, the theoretical culture leads beyond what man knows and experiences immediately” (Gadamer, 1996, my translation). Now, what is the relationship between culture and memory? Gadamer argues that “retaining, forgetting, and remembering belong to man’s constitutive historicity, and in fact they constitute a part of his history and culture”. “Retaining” (*behalten*) is ambiguous, as it means having memory (*mneme*, in Greek), which in turn relates to remembering (*anamnesis*); “forgetting” (*vergessen*) does not imply an empty loss, but also making way for new ways of understanding and looking at things; while “remembering” (*wiedererinnern*), i.e. memory (*Gedächtnis*), which is selective because “one has memory for certain things, but not for others; there are things that one wants to preserve in his memory, and others that are banned therefrom”, is “an essential character of man’s finite historical being”. So, the memory processes (i.e. retaining, forgetting, and remembering) are themselves culture, and culture is also openness (*Offenheit*) towards “the points of view of possible others”.

## **3. Ricoeur and the phenomenology of memory**

*Oneself as Another / Soi-même comme un autre* (Ricoeur, 1990) is the title of a famous work by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, whose anthropological outcomes serve as a background for his subsequent investigation expounded in *Memory, History, Forgetting / La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli* (Ricoeur, 2000) in which he undertakes a journey on board a three-masted ship to resume his image, its masts consisting, respectively, of a phenomenology of memory, an epistemology of history and a hermeneutics of historical condition, which finally comes to a meditation of oblivion. The horizon of history, memory, and oblivion consists of forgiveness, or rather “difficult forgiveness”, as the title of the epilogue reads.

The phenomenology of memory, in particular, moves on a dual level of investigation, a cognitive one which investigates “what” memory is and a pragmatic one which investigates “how” one remembers, culminating with reflective memory, with the consideration of the one “who” remembers. And it is precisely on this latter plane that the question of the relationship between private individual memory and collective memory arises prominently. While recognising the difference between the two, Ricœur tries to minimise the gap between them that has been imposed by historiography. “There comes a moment he says when we must really shift from the *I* to the *us*. In Ricœur’s analysis, this moment is marked by a shift from the consideration of the “inner gaze”, as seen in the three paradigmatic moments to be found in Augustine’s, Locke’s and Husserl’s reflections, respectively, to that of the “outward look” on collective consciousness and memory, according to the approach of Durkheimian origin developed by Maurice Halbwachs.

The transition from the *I* to the *us* is not like a leap, in that it is not so much due to a sudden break, as it happens instead as Ricœur puts it “by analogy”. In fact, the collective consciousness is formed through a process of “objectification of intersubjective exchanges”, to whose products “one can, therefore, extend [...] the analogical character, which Husserl ascribes to any *alter ego* as opposed to *one’s* ego. Thanks to this analogical transposition, we are authorised to use the first person in plural form and to assign to an *us* whatever the holder of the latter all the prerogatives of memory: always-being-mine, continuity, past-future polarity. According to this assumption, which has it that intersubjectivity bears all the weight of the constitution of collective entities, the only thing that matters is that you never forget that it is only by analogy, and in relation to individual consciousness and its memory, that we deem collective memory as a collection of traces left by the events that have been marking the course of the history of the groups under examination, and that we acknowledge its power to stage these shared memories on the occasion of parties, rites, and public celebrations” (Ricoeur, 2000; on the excess of commemoration see Todorov, 1995; on the duty of commemoration see Margalit, 2001; see also these interesting studies, in a sociological perspective: Tota, 2001 and Jedlowski, 2002).

#### **4. Gadamer on experience as historical consciousness**

However, can collective memory affect relationships between cultures? And, if so, how? I am now laying Ricœur aside to go back to Gadamer, but this time tackling the second part of his *Truth and Method*, and precisely the section “Analysing the consciousness of historical determination”, focusing on the point where the philosopher considers the concept of “experience” (*Erfahrung*). After pointing out that “the truth of experience always contains a reference to new experiences”, and before stressing that “experience here means something that belongs to the historical essence of man” and that we cannot possibly escape, Gadamer (in this case deviating from Hegel) argues that “the dialectics of experience does not find its fulfilment in a knowledge, but in the openness to experience resulting from experience itself”. The hermeneutic experience, in particular, concerns the “tradition” (*Überlieferung*) and the tradition is a “language”; in other words, it communicates, just as an “I” communicates with a “you”. In this case, experience is therefore “experience of the you”, and the knowledge that is acquired through it is “the understanding of the other” (*das Verstehen des Anderen*).

This also applies to “historical consciousness”, which, despite “knowing the otherness of the other, the past in its otherness”, is at the same time always conditioned by tradition, which has formed the interpreter with his mental categories and with his “judgments and prejudices” (*Urteile und Vorurteile*). These, however, do not pose any limit or obstacle to the understanding of the past; on the contrary, they are its very starting point, and “those who do not want to recognise the judgments that determine it will not be able to see even the beautiful things that let themselves be seen in the light of former”. Therefore, “historical consciousness [...] should definitely succeed in taking into account its own historicity. In our opinion, it seems appropriate to conclude that staying within the boundaries of tradition does not limit the freedom of knowing, but rather lays the foundations of its possibility” (Gadamer, 1996, my translation).

#### **Conclusion**

This reasoning, in my view, can also be extended to the attempt to understand other cultures, which are in turn supported by other traditions and memories, regardless of whether these are more or less different from one’s own. The questioning of the past and its interpretation through one’s own tradition and cultural memory, with all the judgments and prejudices that this entails, constitute the starting point for understanding other cultures as well, towards which we are urged to open ourselves, in order to try to understand them, only if we perceive a communality and a link with our own culture, and this link is primarily constituted by a common essential historicity recognised as such.

Every culture is, in fact, a historical construction. In other words, it is the result of a certain human organisation that has been progressively forming in space and time. We must therefore acknowledge that the same historicity proposes itself as a universal and common condition, as a way of being of humanity as a whole, which, however, has taken different forms over time and for various factors (including environmental), eventually giving rise to different cultures, towards which the same attitude that urges us to yearn for an understanding of our past can lead us to open ourselves. I believe that this openness to dialogue with others is fully possible only when a culture has reached a high degree of maturity (it would be equally correct to say “civilisation”, if this word had not been unfortunately used, both in the past and in the present, to justify actions in which we cannot find the slightest trace of something referable to as “civil”) and perhaps, also, when a culture does not feel, so to speak, “under siege”, threatened in its own existence.

However, openness to the other does not mean that the others and their “other memory” are necessarily welcomed and respected in the same way as our memory is – that we, being ours, cannot but accept and learn to respect, even when it hides dark sides, and so even at the price of removing some parts from it, making these fall into the dark abyss of oblivion, or modifying and altering its meaning through operations of de-construction and re-construction, which may be more or less appropriate and morally acceptable, until achieving a degree of real manipulation...

Finally, there is another danger: this openness, even when it has actually taken place, can at any time end in a re-closure or in an identification of the other as a “bad other”, even as a “monster” that threatens us and so we can develop a negative attitude towards it, rejecting it, condemning it, and driving it back or even going so far as to decide to fight it.

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