



Avishai Margalit. *The Ethics of Memory.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. 227 S. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-01378-0.



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This is Water: The Ethics of Memory

Here is a story of two Davids: One sits in an Austrian prison, sentenced to three years incarceration for a denial of memory—indeed, of an entire community of memory—while the other writes witty books and gives even wittier commencement addresses that explore the very troubled landscape of memory. The second David (Foster Wallace) is far more amusing than the first, so let us begin with a joke from his recent commencement speech at Kenyon College, a joke he adapted from his work, *Infinite Jest*:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What the hell is water?”[1]

Wallace explains that the point of the story is not to offer himself to the graduates as the wise old fish but rather that “the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.”[2] Wallace’s comment rises above the platitudinous when one considers the ethics of memory, and especially when one considers the example of the other David (Irving).

Irving is notorious for having a scholarly career that at one point garnered praise from Hugh Trevor-Roper and A.J.P. Taylor for historical scholarship but resulted in bankruptcy, bans from entering Germany, Italy, Australia, and Canada, and a thorough, humiliating defeat in his British libel suit against Deborah Lipstadt in early 2000. Lipstadt had accused Irving of denying the reality of key elements of the Holocaust in her book, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (1993). Her defense featured voluminous historical evidence produced by notable scholars, including a report by Cambridge historian Richard Evans establishing that Irving had distorted and deliberately mistranslated documents, used unreliable or discredited sources, and falsified statistics. The trial affirmed the general judgment of historians regarding Irving, cost him an estimated 3 million pounds sterling, and generated condemnation from the British High Court’s Mr. Justice Gray that

“Irving has for his own ideological reasons persistently and deliberately misrepresented and manipulated historical evidence; that for the same reasons he has portrayed Hitler in an unwarrantedly favourable light, prin-

cipally in relation to his attitude towards and responsibility for the treatment of the Jews; that he is an active Holocaust denier; that he is anti-semitic and racist and that he associates with right-wing extremists who promote neo-Nazism.”[3]

What is most remarkable about this trial and judgment is what animates Foster’s fish tale: both serve to support the case for an ethics of memory, where preserving memory of “the most obvious, important realities”—the ones we have the hardest time maintaining in living memory, truly seeing and talking about them—establishes the memories of those realities as objects of ethical obligation. Mr. Justice Gray spent hundreds of pages in his final judgment, not condemning David Irving (that came at the end) but rehearsing the thousands of pages of evidence and testimony offered at the trial establishing that the historical truth of the Holocaust and related matters provided Lipstadt with a sufficient defense of what is normally considered a *per se* defamation, that of professional incompetence. As Irving was found to have denied the reality of key aspects of the Holocaust, among other things, and the trial affirmed the historical truth, the *memory*, of these aspects, Irving suffered no compensable harm. He was simply shown for what he is: a failed historian who denied historical memory in order to serve his right-wing ideological purposes. As an object lesson, one could not ask for a better example of the importance of the ethics of memory. To use Wallace’s words with regard to the fish story, what the Irving trial and its result showed was the importance of the awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over: “This is water.” “This is water.”[4]

Of course, water comes in many forms. When we ask, “What is it that is ‘so real and essential’” that we should remind ourselves over and over?” that is, that we should preserve historical memory—the answer can be elusive. In some ways, David Irving was an easy target, since the historical evidence for the Holocaust quickly overwhelms those with hermeneutical quibbles, let alone wholesale denial. Is the same true when we deal with longstanding struggles between Israel and the Arab world? Is it true when we consider the twisting and (literally) tortured path of Haitian history in the past thirty years? Is it true when we consider the memory of September 11 (What is water in that case?) or the U.S. adventurism in Iraq since then? If, as Lee Siegel has written, “it sometimes seems as if though the present were being dreamed by the past,” what are we obligated to remem-

ber, and why?[5]

In *The Ethics of Memory*, a work that several reviewers have deemed—correctly, in my judgment—profoundly humane, Avishai Margalit explores the ethical significance of memory and forgetting, with special reference to the potential value or even obligation to serve as the agent of historical memory for those who suffered and perished in the Holocaust. His subtle, nuanced, and elegant arguments are formed in a synthesis of traditional, British analytic philosophy and a profound sensitivity to the complexities of history and memory.

Margalit follows Bernard Williams in distinguishing between “ethics” and “morality” in terms of the relations each describes and informs. “Ethics” refers to “thick” human relations and corresponding obligations, etc., the obligations we share with those near to us. As Margalit puts it, the thick relations of ethics “are anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory,” consisting of “our relations to the near and dear.” These thick relations can include the obligations of memory. “Morality” refers to the “thin” human relations and corresponding obligations we have and owe to each other simply because of our shared humanity. For Margalit, these are “our relations to the stranger and the remote” (p. 7).

Margalit argues that there is a complex but clear connection establishing an ethics of memory but that the connection between morality and memory is much less clear. Near the beginning of his book, he related the following story:

“I came across a report concerning the speedy and problematic career of a certain army colonel. The colonel was interviewed about a publicly known incident in his past, when he was the commander of a small unit. One of the soldiers under his command had been killed by so-called friendly fire. It turned out that the colonel did not remember the soldier’s name. There followed a flood of outrage directed at the officer who did not remember. Why wasn’t the name of this fallen soldier ‘scorched in iron letters’ on his commander’s heart?”

“I was struck by the moral wrath heaped on this officer simply for not remembering something, and it led me to think about the officer’s *obligation* to remember—and if indeed he has an obligation.” (pp. 18-19)

Well versed in the psychological aspects of both memory and ethics, Margalit begins to answer his own question by looking at some of the genuinely difficult cases where history and memory make conflicting claims

upon the conscience of those involved as well as upon the reflective and theoretical considerations of those who view them from a practical distance. The most important of these cases is the Holocaust, where the role of memory has been at issue from the very beginning (that is, from the end of the Holocaust) and where memory itself has become a question as the historical Holocaust recedes with each generation. Margalit explores the possibility that we have obligations to forgive and what relationship such an obligation has to forgetting the wrong that was done. His conclusion in this case is that we do have an obligation to forgive, an obligation founded in the duty that we have to ourselves to prevent the deformity of our own lives that he sees as consequential to a cultivated desire for revenge. The emotional life of those who are riddled with resentment is a constant theme for Margalit, and while those whose actions have created the conditions of resentment cannot demand that we forgive them, we owe it to ourselves, in the most literal sense, to take steps to release our own lives from the dominion of the offender and his offense. Only by doing so can we return ourselves to ourselves.

This does not mean forgetting the offense, however. For Margalit, historical forgetting in many cases distorts one's perception of and reaction to current injustices. It is at this point that Margalit's argument faces its most difficult obstacles: How is one to cultivate historical memory without that memory serving as a psychological, ideological, and even moral justification for the worst abuses of the present? Is the preservation and then ideologically shaded use of historical memory an essential element in some of our era's clearest abandonment of moral sense and ethical obligation? The use of historical memory in two Byzantine labyrinths of conflicting moral arguments, that of Israel and the Palestinians on the one hand and the conflicts of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s on the other, give us examples of this problem.

The relationship between memory and ethics takes many forms, some more twisting and twisted than others. Consider the following excerpts from an article in *Ha'aretz*, from December 2004:

"Deputy Chief of Staff Major General Dan Halutz said yesterday that had the Israel Defense Forces known that assassinating Hamas leader Salah Shehadeh in July 2002 would lead to the death of innocent Palestinians, the operation would not have been approved.

Sixteen Palestinian civilians, including nine children, were killed and dozens more were wounded when the Israel Air Force dropped a one-ton bomb over Shehadeh's

house in a residential area of Gaza City.

Halutz said ... that after dropping a one-ton bomb on Shehadeh's house in a densely-populated Gaza neighborhood he told his subordinates to 'sleep well at night, your operation was perfect.' He added: 'By the way, I sleep well at night.' 'What do I feel when I drop a bomb? A slight bump in the airplane,' he said." [6]

What was the "community of memory," to use Margalit's phrase, that allowed General Halutz to sleep well at night after committing those sixteen civilians, and especially those nine children, to an eternal sleep? Were the "thin" relations of shared humanity so thin that they could not be seen from his airplane's altitude? If what General Halutz remembers is a slight bump, has the connection between ethics and memory been served?

Margalit distinguishes between the memory of the Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389, where Serbian forces under Lazar Hrebeljanović were defeated by Ottoman troops under the Sultan Murad I, from the defeat of Harold and the English by Norman invaders at Hastings in 1066. Margalit is clear that one important difference is that the memory of Kosovo is of a complete and devastating defeat for Serbian life and culture, one whose memory was kept alive through the one surviving Serbian nationalist institution, the Serbian Orthodox Church. The result of Harold's death and the Norman victory (which was uncertain until Harold was killed) was the eventual understanding of the Norman Conquest as a step in the emergence of England as a significant power, the gradual introduction of more regular forms of law and social bonds in England, etc. The distorted memories in the Serbian example were kept alive and used as pernicious illusions in the 1990s by resurgent Serbian nationalists. The Serbs were like Stalin in the face of the German invasion in 1941, who had nothing to offer his people but the ideologically bound memories of Alexander Nevsky's victories against the Teutonic Knights and Ivan the Terrible's defeat of the Tatars. The Serbian case constitutes what Margalit terms the "illusion *within* the collective memory" rather than an illusion "of" collective memory (p. 99). Kosovo Polje and Hastings generated actual collective memories but the former continues to generate illusions within the collective memory. How does this help us understand the General's "slight bump?"

The community of memory and the obligations that reside there are seen through the lens of the illusions bound to that community's collective memory. In the case of General Halutz and his community's collective memory, some would see that memory as bounded by