The role of memory in human life. On the basis of the ideas of the twentieth century philosophers and thinkers

Summary

In *The Sound and the Fury* William Faulkner writes: “Time is dead as long as it is being clicked off by little wheels; only when the clock stops, does time come to life.” The following words relate to the role of memory frames in human life. They also begin the analysis of the ideas of twentieth and twenty-first century philosophers such as Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur and David Farrell Krell. Even though there is a strict reference to the Modernist thinkers, the author goes slightly deeper, reminding earlier concepts of Plato, Socrates, Aristotle and Protagoras. The second part of the article has been devoted to the notions connected with time frames and memory such as experiencing of the passage of time, reminding, forgetting, forgiving as well as postmemory.

**Keywords:** memory, time, frame, postmemory, philosophy.

Everything that happens in human life is connected with memory. Since the ancient times thinkers have wondered what memory is, how people remember things, what stays in our memory and what goes away. In the earliest times philosophers reflected on the durability of memory and wondered how the feelings connected with the remembered things change in the process of time. In Plato’s *Theaetetus*, Socrates contemplates on the difference between the person who has learnt something and s/he evokes that knowledge, the person who has seen something, closes his or her eyes and evokes the image and the person who has not seen anything and has not learnt anything but has the ability to evoke things (Platon 2002, 163d, 190). In order to make an attempt to find the difference, it is crucial to mention Protagoras who states that in the course of time, every image
changes its colours and shapes, the same as every remembrance evokes different feelings (ibidem, 166b, 162). According to Socrates, every individual has his or her own wax tablet. Some tablets are bigger, while others are smaller, some of them are tougher, while others are softer nonetheless, neither their sizes nor materials are meaningful. What counts are the memories which we imprint on them. If the prints erase, we forget things and cannot evoke them in the future (ibidem, 191d, 234). The reflections of the philosophers mentioned above may approve Aristotle’s statement that memory is part and parcel of the past (ibidem, 449b 15, 287). Therefore, if memories are gathered in the past and re-occur as flashbacks at present, there is no doubt that they are strictly connected with the notion of time. The line separating the past from the present is so thin that one may hardly distinguish what happens at present and what has already become the part of the past. In Memory, History, Forgetting, Paul Ricoeur fairly observes that in the moment of forming a new memory, no one focuses on that particular instant of time but usually recollects some other, nonrandom past events (Ricoeur 2006, 30). As the philosopher further states, memory is the only way we may grasp and remember the past (ibidem, 35–36). So far, people have not had other better means of remembering the past than memorising them.

Another element which should be mentioned while discussing memory are memories. Are those two phenomena the same? Is there any difference between them? Ricoeur gives the answer to the questions above. He explains that memory may be singular and is a kind of skill or realisation, whereas memories are usually plural and each individual may possess them. It is hard to disagree with the philosopher’s words that the old age has more memories than juvenility but less memory (ibidem, 37). In Matter and Memory, Bergson provides a connection between memory and memories in which he makes an attempt to differentiate memory as a habit and memory as having memory of something. Obviously, both of them relate to the question of time, nevertheless the first one may be regarded as a present experience, while the latter refers to the past event (Bergson 2004, 70). In order to explain the difference between those two forms of memory, Bergson gives the example of learning a speech by heart. Rote learning may be regarded as a type of a habit; therefore, the person who recites a speech uses memory as making a habit. The very act of reciting does not require going back to the particular consecutive stages of memorising which took place in the past. Thus, it may be considered a present phenomenon, whereas recalling the words of a speech and the particular stages of rote learning from the past do not have any connections with making a habit. It might be regarded as some event which took place; it has its date as well as it is irreversible and unrepeatable (ibidem, 71). An unprompted single memory is an ideal from the beginning since no one can add anything to it or alter it. The memorised image is being saved in human memory with the particular date and place (ibidem, 74). Memory which repeats is being opposed to memory which imagines. In order to
evoke the past image, one has to be able to separate oneself from the present and to dream since it is probable that only human being is capable of making such an effort (ibidem, 71). In her *Thinking in Time*, Suzanne Guerlac combines memory with thought which has three aspects: pure memory, memory image and perception (Guerlac 2006, 140). Each of the given elements does not exist independently without each other but rather are complementary to one another. In order to understand the idea of pure memory, Guerlac quotes Bergson who suggests evoking some past event at present. While doing so, it is inevitable to go back with our thoughts to the past. Then the next stage is being focused on placing the memory in particular time and place in the past.

All this takes place in a virtual world of the mind; nonetheless, the image usually does not appear. At this point, the role of perception is visible. Its task is to imitate the image from virtual to the actual state (ibidem, 141). In *Matter and Memory*, Henri Bergson suggests that memory is a weaker type of perception. Perception is just a stronger kind of memory, and the difference between them is based on the difference of levels and not on the difference of sort. Both of them are regarded as representations. Perception is considered a phenomenon which represents memory and has a stronger degree than the former one. As Bergson further emphasises, no one is able to live his or her past while still living at present. In order to become a part of the past, one has to fully enter it. The philosopher gives the example of the person who attempts to enter darkness in the daylight. Doing so is almost impossible (Bergson 2004, 149–150). Perception and memory are totally different since memory is regarded as the past, while perception works at present. For Bergson, the present is the time of action, while the past is regarded as the time of stagnation. If the past and present are totally different, it has to be the same when it comes to memory and perception. In order to provide an explanation of the present it is not enough to provide its distinctiveness from the past. Additional duration must be added to the present. The thinker posits the present as a geometrical point which is neither stable nor motionless but is rather like a moving object which circulates from the future to the past. This present is a type of the present tense which we live in and experience (ibidem, 151–153). Experiencing the present is also connected with being conscious of the particular states of the mind as well as of the body. Being aware of possessing the body and having sensations may be regarded as living in the present. Therefore, if being conscious of the movements of the body might be concerned the present, the past is never connected with any movements. The past is connected with perception, and body movements can only be visualised as the images in the human mind. Bergson argues that most psychologists who separate memory from perception as well as the past from the present are wrong. According to him, when the past experience turns into an image, it becomes the part of the present which is outlived and refreshed in human mind (ibidem, 155–156).
Furthermore, the philosopher emphasises the importance of the human brain in memorising and perceiving. He attempts to analyse the way of storing the memories in it. Nevertheless, instead of asking where it is saved and stored, he focuses on how it is possible to be stored. In his analysis, he takes into consideration memory, perception, memorising as a habit, and sudden, accidental memories which are visualised in the brain. Such an attitude provides him an opportunity to include the past and present into his analysis. Bergson states that it is fallacious to want to localise past, or even present, perceptions in the brain: they are not there, it is in them (ibidem, 169). In his book entitled Remembering, the American philosopher Edward Casey highlights that one may enumerate three modes of memory. According to him, storing memories in the brain as well as going beyond it are the phenomena which oscillate between the reflexivity pole of memory and the worldliness pole of memorising (Casey 1987, 60).

The first mode has been called reminding. What exactly is reminding? It is connected with reminders which occur in the human mind on numerous occasions during the daytime. Each individual has experienced this pole of memory since during the day each person has many situations in which something reminds us of something else, something makes us think of something else. Those reminders are some kinds of clues or signs which insure memories from forgetting. Human beings may experience this mode in several ways, such as recapturing, automatic evocation of one particular memory due to the other one, photos, pictures, notes, documents or the reminding signs. All those elements warn humans against forgetting and prompt them what to do (ibidem, 62).

Another mode is reminiscing the characteristic feature of which is based on higher activity than reminding. It consists in a bigger stimulation of past memories by their constant evocation, mutual perpetuation of collectively experienced events or gathered knowledge in which the memories of the first person are the reminders for the second. Such memories can be internalised through making notes, writing diaries or lists in which hand writing plays the role of making a permanent sign. This is the way in which the reserves of memories are being made for the future (ibidem, 63).

The last mode of memory is based on transition and is called recognising. The phenomenon is based on recognising something that is distant at present but has happened in the past. The memory stays in the past and, as Casey writes, it goes back where it was (ibidem, 89). It belongs to the absence of history. Moreover, it is very similar to the Kantian subjective synthesis in which the memorised object or event is reviewed, linked and recognised.

Undoubtedly, on the one hand, all these three modes of memory seem to have a subjective character. On the other hand, they become the part of the phenomena which are connected with the whole body, space, and they form the horizons of worldliness. As Ricoeur states in History, Memory, Forgetting, the modes do not leave the area of intentionality but rather reveal its unreflective
The role of memory...

dimension. The human body remembers past pleasures, the same as the human mind/brain remembers the places of living from the past, visited places, past travels, as well as the mind is conscious that all past memories are evoked in the particular place at present (ibidem, 57). The human mind is always aware of the places where the body has been so as to enable the mouth to say “I was there.”

Referring to the physical memory, it is also possible to differentiate the body as a body, and the body as some kind of event. Physical memory may be evoked in the same way as all other habitual elements. As Ricoeur states in his book, mundane and simple everyday actions such as driving a car and touching the steering wheel may also be connected with the physical memory. Past experiences, hurting, traumas or illnesses focus the physical memory on the particular events which send the signal to the secondary memory and recollection. Eventually, to a greater degree, physical memory is filled with memories marked with feelings. The human brain evokes the memories of visited places, as well as remembered and reminded objects are also always connoted with places. Thus, not without reason do we say that something happened or something took place. This is the crucial element which is taken into consideration while creating the places of memory (ibidem, 59). Such places are like reminders, indicators or signs which support the weakening memory, fight against forgetting and replace the dead memory. These places are presented as inscriptions, monuments or potential documents, while memories are usually conveyed orally in words and are very elusive.

While Henri Bergson provides his readers with quite a clear view of the concepts of memory and time which is closely related to the Aristotelian ideas, another philosopher, Martin Heidegger, argues with them writing in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* that Bergson’s view rests on a misunderstanding of Aristotle’s way of understanding time (Heidegger 1988, 232). The main element which Heidegger faults Bergson for the misunderstanding of Aristotle is that the Greek philosopher limits the concept of time to space. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger presents time as a sequence of *nows* coming one after another in an infinitely long line which are continually present. Nevertheless, one now is *before*, while another now is *after* (Heidegger 1966, 121). He introduces the notion of *Dasein*, which means being in time and space. According to *Dasein*, being and living is like a task to be completed. If *Dasein* “is”, it means that it continually alters. The sense of existing can be understood only through existing. Numerous people have said that time passes, which means that it is connected with the past, and if something took place, it is irreversible and will not return.

The philosopher provides the notion of *continuum*, which means that the dimensions of time such as past, present and future are unified and have neither beginnings nor endings. Those three dimensions of temporality are called *ecstasies of time*. The notion was described in David Farrel Krell’s *Ecstasy, Catastrophe*. Using the term of ecstasy, Heidegger refers to the Greek equivalent *ec-
stase which relates to the dynamics of existence or the ability to go beyond oneself. In other words, the term refers to the past and future which humans experience interchangeably at present. In other words, due to the existence of memory, past events are re-experienced in the moment (Krell 2015, 11–20).

In *The Origin of Time*, Heath Massey, analysing Bergson’s works, confirms that even though memory belongs to the past, it exists in the present (Massey 2015, 197). Bergson claims that memory should be understood as a movement from the past to the present, then to the future and the other way around. The author of *Matter and Memory* adds that even if memory belongs to the past, it does not mean that it is fixed or stable. He refers to the unconscious memories which, according to him, are not the real images which were seen through the eyes, but a *thousand repetitions of our psychical life* (Bergson 2004, 160). Although humans possess fixed memories of events, places, people or objects, the mind is capable of expanding them and enriching through imagination.

Other phenomena worth mentioning which relate to the questions of both time and memory are forgetting and forgiving. Even though they are related to each other, they do not depend on each other. In case of forgetting, it refers to the issues of memory and being faithful to the past. However, forgiving is always the issue of guilt and becoming reconciled with the past. As Ricoeur emphasises in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, forgiving is the last phase in the cycle of forgetting (Ricoeur 2006, 547). Contrary to learning and remembering, forgetting is a very fast process which is immediately visible. It may be described as the process of attacking an infallible memory. At this point, the fairy tale “Funes the Memorious” (Borges 2011) by Jorge Luis Borges comes to my mind. It tells the story of a man who remembered everything and did not forget anything. Is it possible to remember everything? Does the human mind have borders or limitations? Can memory exist without forgetting? Ricoeur appeals to the times of Aristotle and suggests three types of signs. The first one relates to the written mark which has become a document or an evidence of history. The second one refers to the psychical mark which might be regarded as an impression, and the last one, which is the most significant, is a sign in the brain (Ricoeur 2006, 549). The difficulty in understanding the signs mentioned is, first and foremost, based on the attitude towards them. The sign in the brain is usually noticed from the outside perspective while getting knowledge, being without any characteristic feelings nor emotions. The same as we know that we see through the eyes, and we feel that we touch with our hands, it is hard to feel that we think with the usage of our brain. Since we use our brains all the time without feeling it, it is extremely hard to start feeling it and telling about this experience. In so far as the written sign is quite clear, the problem appears with the psychical marks and the durability of impressions which, although occur suddenly and last just a few seconds, they mark on the memories of people for all their lives.
The role of memory…

The term connected with all the notions mentioned in the article, which has been quite new yet has become very popular is postmemory. It was coined by Marianne Hirch and mentioned in her *The Generation of Postmemory Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. In other words, it is the second-generation memory. Traumatic memories of events live on to mark the lives of those who did not experience them directly (Hirsch 2012, 32). So far it has been a very young notion, and it usually refers to the topic of the Holocaust and World War II. Nevertheless, the second-generation memory does not only refer to the Holocaust times because it also may be referred to any kind of second generation memory. And actually, it might be seen not as memory itself but as the interpretation of someone else’s memories. Since, those are the words conveyed by one person to another, and those words are visualised in our brains. In other words, we just remember the words which have been visualised in our heads. The memories conveyed are usually so deep that they become the part of the memory of the passive listeners. The owners of postmemories grow up with the overwhelming histories heard in the past and visualised in their heads. Those people risk not having their own memories, deleting them or replacing them with the memories of the others. Sometimes postmemories may be so strong that forgetting them would be the best solution. In this case, we may say that deleting some memories could be a fortunate event.

As Ricoeur fairly observes, very often people talk about the fortunate memory but very rarely we may hear about the fortunate forgetting as if the very act of forgetting would be some kind of a weakness or disadvantage of the human mind (Ricoeur 2006, 661). The philosopher provides readers with a few reasons for that phenomenon. Firstly, he assumes that a single memory is usually stored and then recovered or recalled when we meet some person or see some object. The memory is recognised, and its appearance in the human mind is some kind of the event, whereas forgetting is not regarded as an event since it does not take place due to the occurrence of some human being or an object. Obviously, people notice that they have forgotten something, nevertheless, it happens at the very moment when remembering and recalling that thing is required. Humans recognise the state of forgetting in which they find themselves. It might be considered overestimated, saying that memory is a human strength, while forgetting is a human weakness. Nonetheless, it is purely and simply due to the existence of memory that human beings can forget things. In other words, forgetting would not exist without memory since it is a creation of it.

Taking all this into consideration, remembering and forgetting are both strictly connected with the notion of forgiving. One may ask whether it is possible to forgive something while still remembering it. As Ricoeur writes, memory is active when the feelings of grief, revenge, resentment and reparation appear (ibidem, 662). Such feelings might be regarded as memory activators. Forgetting suppresses previously mentioned feelings and makes them passive and
dormant. Is it possible to forget all things which take place in human life? This question seems to be especially crucial in case of those who were sent to the Auschwitz concentration camps. Is it possible for them to forget? Certainly, it is not possible. Considering their cases, we may only assume that they would wish to be able to forget, and definitely, it would be fortunate forgetting. Unfortunately, in people’s lives there are situations which are so powerful and which leave strong marks in their psyches that their memory turns out to be unerring.

Bibliography


**Rola pamięci w ludzkim życiu. Na podstawie idei filozofów i myślicieli XX wieku**

**Streszczenie**

W swoim dziele *Wściekłość i wrzask* William Faulkner pisze: „Czas jest martwy tak długo, jak odlicza go tykanie małych kółek; dopiero kiedy zegar staje, czas ożywa”. Przesłanie to nawiązuje do roli pamięci w ludzkiej egzystencji oraz rozpoczyna analizę idei filozofów i myślicieli dwudziestego oraz dwudziestego pierwszego wieku, takich jak Henri Bergson, Martin Heidegger, Paul Ricoeur i David Farrell Krell. Pomimo że artykuł skupia się na pojęciach filozofów modern-
stycznych, autorka sięga nieco głębiej, przypominając jedne z wcześniejszych koncepcji Platona, Sokratesa, Arystotelesa czy Protagorasa. W dalszej części artykułu analizie oddane zostały pojęcia związane z pamięcią, takie jak doświadczanie upływu czasu, przypominanie, zapominanie czy wybaczanie, a także termin postpamięci.

Słowa kluczowe: pamięć, czas, zapominanie, postpamięć, filozofia.