Documentality, Emotions, and Motivations. Why We Need a Kind of Internal Memory

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Abstract

Memory, as is well known, makes up a large part of our identity (even though the criterion of this “identity” is controversial). Documents – understood as inscriptions – make up our external memory in a peculiar way: they constitute both a stable anchor and a reference-point for our personal transformations over time. There is, however, also an internal memory, residing in our brain. This is based in part on external documentation; but it is of course not exclusively tied thereto. Rather it evolves dynamically over time, in part reflecting ethical debates which we carry on within ourselves and which is influenced also by emotional factors, for example as we try to erase memories that are unpleasant. If, for example, the internal memory of some offense against our person is erased, then the motivation to testify against those who offended against us no longer exists or is greatly reduced, and this is so even though the documents that record the offense remain. Our motivations here depend on the emotional factor in our memories; once this has been lost, even though the autobiographical, episodic memory still remains, then the value-significance of the event fades from our view, and with it the impulse to act. Emotions are in large part responsible for creating a bond with documents; they make it possible for our internal and external memories to have significance. There must be some degree of emotional resonance in inscriptions relating to events in the past, which arises out of our own experience of these events and from our memory of these experiences, for these inscriptions to have significance in our lives. Documents are thus fundamental. But for ourselves and for our social lives, they must be supplemented by internal memories.

1.

In the pre-Internet era, it was not unusual that someone cleaning out their basement would open a trunk whose contents they had forgotten about. One would find, say, an old photograph of the awards ceremony for a sporting event they had competed in at college. The photograph would then bring to mind a
day of sports and intense competition between students, an episode that was forgotten. Perhaps the trunk would also contain a parchment bearing the name of the winner, i.e. the supposed owner of the trunk. Documents of this kind help “cement” real events that other people witnessed as well. They place before us, externally, a portion of the events that make up our biographic history. The person in question may no longer remember that she participated in the sporting event, but the photograph certifies it with a sufficient degree of reliability¹.

But there is also the parchment bearing the winner’s name. This document does something more than merely certifying an event (the student competition). It also creates a context and gives social significance to the event, which is inter-subjectively acknowledged beyond direct testimony. What does the parchment tell us? Much more than what we would normally think. First of all, it tells us that the sporting competition was not a spur-of-the-moment initiative on the part of the students, but was rather an event organized by a subject – the university – which in turn is an entity based on conventions that rest upon documents². Indeed, there must have been someone entrusted by university officials (i.e. the expression of an institutional-documental chain) who set up the competition, established the rules and requirements for participation, and made sure it unfolded accordingly. At the end of the competition, the university certified and proclaimed a winner, giving a public and widely acknowledged dimension to the sporting event.

The basic idea behind the theory of documentality (Ferraris 2013) is that it is not enough for an act to be uttered in order to produce an object; the act must be recorded. A marriage or a promise could not be objects without an inscription (presumably external), while the same cannot be said of a mountain. Therefore, social objects cannot exist outside the text. Society is not based on communication, but on inscription. Papers, archives, and documents are the fundamental elements of the social world: inscription is the necessary condition for the creation of social objects.

The ontology of social objects presents itself as documentality, a theory that sees documents as the condition of possibility of social objects. They are divided into strong documents (inscriptions of acts) and weak documents (recordings of facts). The spirit dwells through internal and external inscriptions. This is true for the subjective spirit (the soul as tabula), the objective spirit (the world of institutions), and the absolute spirit (art, religion, philosophy). Nothing produced by the spirit could exist without the written word, inscriptions, and documents. And the spirit finds its condition of possibility in the written word, in inscriptions that constitute themselves as social beings.

¹The reliability of documents is not a crucial question for the topic discussed here. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that there are no major issues regarding the reliability of the documents I shall refer to. These documents will be “pertinent” to the context in question.
²See Ryle 1949.
From this perspective, the relevant form of memory is the external and public one, although the memories stored in the minds of individuals also play a role in documentality. However, if – paradoxically – someone were to lose their memory, they could return to the social world by accessing the documents they underwrote during their life, which would continue to exist. Their relation to such documents might be different from what it was in the past: as we shall see, they may regard them as alien, but would not have the authority to reject them. Such documents would then be a means to partly recover what has been lost, as they somehow help us pinpoint an objectified sense of the self regardless of the changes we undergo as subjects.

This dialectic with documentality can take place in situations that are neither exceptional nor pathological: as individuals we are constantly involved in a process through which we change and evolve, and the external traces we produce, along with the inscriptions/institutions we are involved in, give us an objective point of reference against which to measure ourselves. On the other hand, however, this dialectic between “ourselves” and documents can only work if we emotionally identify with our direct experiences as they are deposited in the inscriptions concerning us. If that bond is broken, documents may “bind” us socially, but only in a “neutral”, “impersonal” way. In other words, they may cease to be a social extension of ourselves.

2.

According to an influential tradition that dates back at least to Locke, memory is what (mostly) constitutes our personal identity. Those who agree with this position maintain that we as persons *are* our memories: our identity is made up of our past experiences (to the extent that we can remember them), which shape our current behavior, thoughts, desires, and goals. As Locke argues in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1689), the personal identity of each individual depends on the continuity of her conscious experiences, that is, the ability to recall stored memories, although this store of memories is not fail-safe and oblivion lures in perennial wait. Identity thus extends as far as our memory allows it.

But what happens when an event is forgotten altogether? Am I not the same person that did those things which are now irrevocably lost to the conscious mind (whatever the cause)?

But if it be possible for the same man to have distinct incommunicable consciousness at different times, it is past doubt the same man would at different times make different persons; which, we see, is the sense of mankind in the solemnest declaration of their opinions, human laws not punishing the mad man for the sober man’s actions, nor the sober man for what the mad man did – thereby making them two persons\(^3\).

\(^3\)Locke, 1689: II, XXVII, 20.
In other words, as summarized by Levy\textsuperscript{4}, the identity criterion proposed by Locke implies that a person at time $t$ is the same person she were at a previous time only if that person, at time $t$, remembers the experiences she had at the previous time. Nevertheless, as Butler (1736) argued, this is, to some extent, a circular argument, since the presence of memory presupposes personal identity, and thus cannot be its founder. I can only remember things that really did happen to me, according to the very definition of autobiographic memory: that is, the things that happened to me. But that “me” must be specified before memory comes into action.

Locke’s criterion concerns the persistence of identity over time. Let us consider the “identity crisis”, when we ask ourselves whether our actions are truly those we want to identify with, and whether we feel them as genuinely ours. If our answer is negative, we tend to say: “I wasn’t \textit{myself} when I threw that dish; I don’t recognize \textit{myself} in what I did”. In this sense, our identities are largely made up by memories – beliefs, values, and projects that extend over time. Identity is a diachronic entity, the sum of our plans and efforts. We strive for a goal, we understand ourselves through our personal history, in virtue of our experiences and our sense of belonging: from religion to family, from nation to community, from language to a shared culture. Memory is a necessary bridge linking all of these things. We can thus ask ourselves whether we would be the same person if our memories were totally removed or modified.

This is the so called Psychological Approach or Criterion to personal identity, a modified version of the Memory Theory. Reid (1785) famously criticized Locke’s criterion maintaining that identity is transitive while memory continuity is not (the elderly general is the same person as the young lieutenant though the former does not remember the latter’s deeds) and that memory is neither necessary nor sufficient for personal identity. Reid believed that personal identity was basic and simple; memory only provided first personal evidence of sameness of persons. Contemporary philosophers have consequently tried to amend Locke’s theory. In particular, S. Shoemaker (1970) and Parfit (1984) proposed a somehow different memory relation, the quasi-memory, or q-memory, which does not presuppose identity. Having a q-memory of past experiences happens when those experiences occurred to someone and the memory of the experiences was properly caused by the experience the person now remembers. The Psychological Criterion implies psychological continuity, which consists in overlapping chains of strong psychological connectedness. But this approach is open to criticism as well, being personal identity (and its criteria) one of the most controversial topics in philosophy\textsuperscript{5}.

The photograph and the parchment found in the basement undoubtedly play a role in enriching the biography of the person who finds them. However, one could argue that the two items do so differently. The photograph, by itself, only

\textsuperscript{4}Levy 2007: ch. 5.

\textsuperscript{5}See Olson 2010; D. Shoemaker 2014.
brings the event back to its protagonist’s mind. It gives her an external clue to the event and reactivates a memory that was no longer conscious, or it gives that person an impulse – the initial elements – to reconstruct that event if her memory does not come back even after seeing the photo. For example, at the end of the competition that person may have hit her head and suffered from retrograde amnesia, preventing her from remembering what happened during the previous four hours. But the photograph, the stories told by her friends at the time, and perhaps a snippet from a university newspaper found in the library will help her reconstruct the event, at least in part.

In this sense, the documentative role of the photograph is the expected one, and is not particularly significant from a philosophical point of view. The case of the parchment certifying the person’s victory is different. It is a document that turns the competition into a social event, perhaps a “social object” according to Ferraris’s documentality. But a clarification needs to be made: social objects depend on subjects acting in space and time. Beliefs of the subjects and a set of intersubjectively accepted social rules determine the act of being. Without social subjects able to recognize social objects, the latter would not exist.

In this respect, the collective intentionality postulated by Searle (2010) is not enough. According to Ferraris, the solution can be found in documentality, since its ontology is a theory of social objects expressed through the founding rule «Object = Inscribed Act». Social objects are the result of social acts that involve at least two people and are characterized by their being inscribed, whether on paper or on electronic files. Society is not based on communication, but on recording. Papers, archives, and documents make up the key element of the social world: recording represents the condition for the creation of social objects.

Without the parchment and the codified social acknowledgment it represents (on the part of the university, but also of the competition’s referee), there would not have been a sporting event won by the person in question. Therefore, the person finding the parchment in the trunk merely “re-finds” herself in a context of recognition that has been there all along. Indeed, the equivalent of the parchment in the trunk can be found in university archives, the winners list of that year, and other documental contexts that constantly “produce” and “keep alive” the given social object. It is still possible to identify that person as the winner of that university sporting event on that particular year even if the person in question does not remember it. And the latter could not reasonably or credibly deny it, even if she truly has no memory of it.

3.

The increasingly pervasive concept of documentality and its related ontological theory are undoubtedly a step forward in understanding our personal and social reality. But it seems they do not tell the whole story. Indeed, we need to consider both the actual functioning of personal memory, with its emotional aspects, and
the motivational features behind the person’s attitudes and actions, which arise within the individual but have strong social repercussions. One could argue that the ontological theory of documentality needs to be completed, at least in part. First of all, this needs to be done with regards to our understanding of memory and its relation to our biographical identity, which—as we have seen—documents significantly and undoubtedly contribute to.

It is legitimate to state that behavioral traits and dispositions can partly arise on the basis of experiences, but that once they are well-rooted they are less dependent on them. If instead we were to replace our memories with new ones, as in Philip Dick’s short story and its movie adaptation Total Recall, we would still be ourselves, with our own faculties and potential (albeit still to be “fulfilled” through decisions and choices on the basis of prior decision and choices). But we would also be somehow different, since experiences shape us and change us, affecting our faculties and potential.

The role of memory is also affirmed by David Hume, albeit with a different philosophical approach with regards to personal identity. «The memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions. The case is the same whether we consider ourselves or others»⁶. For Hume, however, the subject is anything but unitary, a mere bundle of perceptions, a theater on whose stage the most disparate plays are performed. This heterogeneous multiplicity of experiences is conveyed to our “external” eyes by conceptual categories that establish a norm regarding the existence and persistence of the self as we commonly understand it.

Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation. And in this view our identity with regard to the passions serves to corroborate that with regard to the imagination, by the making our distant perceptions influence each other, and by giving us a present concern for our past or future pains or pleasures. As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, ‘tis to be considered, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person⁷.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that we are not merely the memory of our past. We are also made up by our personality, our inclination and our attitude towards what happens to us, independently from what we have gone through in the past. Personal identity is also awareness, tension, the structure of our self, the ability to establish relations, to make connections between different concepts, to explore, to restrain oneself, to treasure what one encounters; it is the ability to change and start over from scratch, if necessary. Of course, the above is still the outcome of our existential evolution, changing over time in an often gradual and undetected

⁷Ibidem: I, IV, 6
way. The fact remains, however, that in any single moment we can be ourselves without explicit memories of our past. Our personal identity is then constructed by reason and emotions, as potential capacities that are actually fulfilled.

One could posit that this idea of an “innate identity” actually arises from another memory: the ancestral memory of our species, the information encoded in our DNA. Even without adhering to the perspective of genetic determinism, and leaving room for other concurrent explanations, part of our character and behavior is undoubtedly driven by the specific configuration of our individual genetic heritage. The idea of rationalism proposed by Immanuel Kant fits right in with the anti-Lockean concept of human freedom and identity as independent from memory. According to Kant, a central role is played by reason, purified of all memories (biological, individual, social, cultural, and religious), as the organ providing the criteria he defines as universally valid in free, moral, and just individual choices.

Closer to our time, one can consider the original position developed by John Rawls (1999), which in this specific context can be considered an extension of Kantian anthropology. This position was set out, for other purposes, in *A Theory of Justice*. The choice of the principles of justice shaping the basic organization of society is envisaged in a hypothetical situation in which individuals act rationally in a condition of equality, and where the equality of the “original position” arises from the so-called veil of ignorance, which implies the forgetting of one’s specific biography. In that hypothetical situation,

it is assumed, then, that the parties do not know certain kinds of particular facts. First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the special features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or liability to optimism or pessimism⁸.

Additionally, under the veil of ignorance,

the parties do not know the particular circumstances of their own society. That is, they do not know its economic or political situation, or the level of civilization and culture it has been able to achieve. The participants have no information on the generation they belong to⁹.

The only details they know regard the determination of their society on the basis of the circumstances of justice. In other words, semantic memory is free, while there are constraints on autobiographical memories, except perhaps for minor personal events (which Rawls does not refer to).

⁸ Rawls 1999: 118.
⁹ Ibidem.
The point is that it could be seen as philosophically plausible to imagine ourselves as the people in the original position under the veil of ignorance, expressing their views with regards to the most important issues and making decisions – in the highest and most noble sense – concerning the future of their society. We could very well do this on the basis of our values, and especially our reason, “without memory” of our own selves. According to critics, however, this thought experiment is highly implausible. Indeed, something of this sort seems almost impossible, even though different cerebral mechanisms underlie semantic and episodic memory, and rare cases of selective lesions or dissociation for one type of memory and not the other are not to be a priori excluded.

4.

But let us go back to our photograph and our parchment. What do they not tell us? If the person in question still has retrograde amnesia concerning the period when the competition took place, what is missing from the possible document-based reconstruction made through papers and eyewitness accounts? There is a passage in Rousseau’s *Confessions* where this is summarized quite effectively:

All the papers I had collected to aid my recollection, and guide me in this undertaking, are no longer in my possession, nor can I ever again hope to regain them. I have but one faithful guide on which I can depend: this is the chain of the sentiments by which the succession of my existence has been marked, and by these the events which have been either the cause or the effect of the manner of it. I easily forget my misfortunes, but I cannot forget my faults, and still less my virtuous sentiments. The remembrance of these is too dear to me ever to suffer them to be effaced from my mind. I may omit facts, transpose events, and fall into some errors of dates; but I cannot be deceived in what I have felt, nor in that which from sentiment I have done; and to relate this is the chief end of my present work.\(^{10}\)

Indeed, our so-called internal memory – which “resides” in our brain and needs no other support when we are consciously aware of it – is inextricably tied to the feelings that accompanied the events we experienced, both when they happened and when we remember them. It could be argued that, in some way, external documents are associated with a neutral, episodic “photographic” memory. On the contrary, our personal, cerebral autobiographic memory is always suffused with emotions and typified by a subjective feeling, which can be linked to a specific emotion – from anger to kindness, from surprise to dissatisfaction – up to a general and indefinable sense of well-being or malaise, positivity or negativity.

Let us imagine that the winner of the sporting competition is able to recall the events upon finding the photograph and the parchment. And let us suppose this was an important, perhaps decisive, moment for her. Let us picture

\(^{10}\) Rousseau 1903: 260.
this background story: our protagonist, a brilliant medicine student, had lived in symbiosis with another student, sharing everything, in spite of the fact that they were both highly competitive. Ambition had led both to want to win in any activity they were engaged in. And so, on the day of the competition, the girl took a performance-enhancing drug and won. After the event, perhaps due to the effects of the drug, the student fell and suffered a concussion, which later provoked retrograde amnesia. But after that undeserved, fraudulent victory, she decided to abandon her plans that – as she understood right then – could only be fulfilled by sacrificing her values and friends. She thus decided to give up a university career in medicine to become a small-town medical officer.

Behind those facts, as recounted by official documents, there is thus something deeper and more crucial that documentality fails to grasp. In some ways, however, this is prosaic, and it certainly cannot invalidate the value of documentality as such, since the secrets and actions that one wants to shield from “official records” have always existed and continue to do so, in spite of the pervasive presence of documents. Nevertheless, we can make our hypothetical tale more complex and philosophically interesting if we imagine that our brilliant medical student had the possibility, once she had cheated in the sporting competition, to remove the memory of this act from her mind, so as to continue her university career free from remorse – perhaps even saving her friendship with the student whose trust she betrayed.

Pharmacological means to remove unpleasant memories are currently being experimented in numerous labs worldwide, fueling a wide-ranging neuroethical debate on the consequences of such interventions and their moral legitimacy. However, it appears to be impossible to remove – either technically or conceptually – an individual autobiographical memory from the highly interconnected web that is our memory. For instance, the sporting competition in question involved the university, which at the time occupied most of the student’s thoughts, as well as her friend, who loomed large in her personal life: how could such an interconnected event be removed from memory? What could be done – and this is indeed beginning to happen in some experiments – is to blunt the emotional resonance of memories. This is mainly done thanks to a molecule called propranolol, which can interfere with the complex biochemical process behind memory consolidation if taken immediately after the traumatic experience one wants to remove. One of the first studies conducted on human subjects examined the relationship between emotions and declarative memory, identifying the mechanisms through which, at the cerebral level, stress hormones increase the clarity, intensity, and duration of a given memory. This and other experiments found that propranolol removes the emotional and motivational scope of the memory.

\[\text{Note:}\]

\[\text{It should be pointed out that the purpose of such experiments is mainly to alleviate the suffering of patients affected by serious and invalidating forms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which manifests itself in the re-emergence of painful memories – such as being assaulted, or wartime episodes – with debilitating physical consequences.}\]

\[\text{Cahill et al. 1994.}\]
An eyewitness account given by a treated subject can helpfully illustrate the process in a more immediate manner, although this should not be considered the typical outcome of the treatment\textsuperscript{13}. The owner of a pet supplies store was robbed by a gang of hoodlums, who tied him up and threatened to kill him if he did not give them the keys to the cash register. Upon his refusal, he was pistol-whipped on the back of the neck and he would surely have been killed had someone not disturbed the thugs. The man laid semi-conscious on the floor, bleeding from his wound and scared to death. In the following years he suffered from nightmares and panic attacks provoked by potentially threatening situations; a severe form of depression made it impossible for him to work, he lost his friends, and his fiancée – to whom he reserved his last thoughts before his likely execution – left him.

For these reasons, he did not hesitate to participate as a volunteer in the experiments of a group using propranolol in Canada. He was first asked to write an account of his traumatic experience. Later, he was administered six doses of propranolol, once a week, and immediately after each dose he read aloud his own account of the aggression he was a victim of. It was a painful experience, which caused his nightmares to resume, and he considered stopping his treatment. But during the fifth week, in his own words, “as I read my story, I suddenly felt as if it didn’t concern me, as if I were reading a novel or watching a movie”. This is a clear example of dissociation between autobiographical memory and emotional memory.

Had the winner of the sporting event decided to resort to propranolol, she may have enjoyed a similar outcome. The memory of the competition, of the use of the performance-enhancing drug (a clear violation of the rules and of the university spirit), and of the fraud against her friend/rival would somehow remain – portrayed in the photograph of her facial expression, altered by the drug she took, and made official by the parchment. However, the memory would have not produced strong feelings of remorse and repulsion towards the deed, perhaps preventing her from choosing a different approach to life.

A memory free of personal feelings – a purely objectified memory, as if it belonged to a neutral spectator – would have been far less likely to cause her to question her choices. Perhaps she would not have suffered remorse for cheating in order to win the competition, nor would she have altered her career path to remain faithful to the values she had re-discovered. No document could have provoked such internal turmoil. More importantly, it should be noted that the outcome of this painful memory had public consequences. Indeed, the brilliant medicine student’s choice to abandon her university career to serve as a small-town doctor had tangible consequences that affect other people as well\textsuperscript{14}.

\textsuperscript{13} Piore 2012.

\textsuperscript{14} It might be argued that we could find, say, a truly moving document about an old criminal trial that could make us want to change the law (for instance), even though the events took place before
In some ways, a parallel can be established between the removal of the emotional component of autobiographic memories and a case described by Adina Roskies (2006). It has been observed that damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex produces personalities typified by impaired moral judgment, other cognitive functions remaining normal. The significant fact is that, while being able to express abstract moral judgments when assessing hypothetical situations, people with a damaged ventromedial prefrontal cortex (the so-called VM patients) show major limitations in their ability to act effectively in morally “critical” situations, namely those typified by an ethical element. On the basis of this neuropathological evidence, Roskies considers the moral theory of internalism, according to which if an agent believes or determines that he should accomplish X, this very belief motivates him to effectively carry out X.

The VM patients’ dissociation between their ability for moral judgment and their motivation to act morally seems to show that internalism is not always true by definition. Further research on VM patients revealed that they tend to adopt detached, utilitarian behaviors even in situations which normally trigger a “self-identification” response mediated by the emotional component, which in their case has been damaged by a focal lesion. The most famous VM patient is the 19th century US. railway worker Phineas Gage, whose skull was pierced by an iron rod. He recovered from this accident without apparent cerebral damage, except for the fact that his conduct became profoundly anti-social. Additionally, there are more recent similar cases that are easier to analyze using modern tools.

There are thus subjects with highly efficient memories, who achieve high scores in standard psychological tests, who nevertheless show deeply altered behaviors both in the professional and in the personal sphere.

To a certain extent, one could argue that such subjects, even in the presence of “full documentality”, do not have the motivations to act. These are pathological situations, which are not in any way representative of people in general. They are nevertheless evidence of a possible outcome that manifests itself even in cases that would be considered normal, or in the behavior of people who have no evident lesions or deficits, but who merely chose to voluntarily and consciously manipulate their memory.

we were born. But consider the change in criminal law that took place in the age of Enlightenment. As Lynn Hunt showed (2008), it was partly due to a change brought about by novels and literature, capable of triggering empathy, which is vital in order to cultivate human rights. In other words, it wasn’t only a rational reconsideration of cruel punishments. It was instead an empathic movement more similar to an (imaginary) personal relationship or to a vivid emotional situation.

15 Koenigs et al. 2007.
17 A.R. Damasio et al. 1990.
There are very salient examples in which the hypothetical elimination of the emotional resonance of memory can lay bare the inadequacy – at the descriptive level – of pure documentality for a full account of our social lives, and – at the prescriptive level – the need to integrate it with the emotional and motivational elements. Let us consider the paradigmatic example used during the neuroethical debate on the possible elimination of memories. The example concerns Holocaust survivors. Generally speaking, it is easy to believe that those who went through as terrifying and inhuman an experience as concentration camps are the most natural candidates for a drug that could blunt or eliminate the memories of the atrocities they witnessed or were subjected to. Concentration camp survivors saw their companions die from hardships or executed in gas chambers; they witnessed the disappearance of any human empathy or pity. Holocaust survivors – some for years, some for their entire lives – were scarred by this ordeal. By the same token, those who had the fortitude and luck to survive and return home are the only eyewitnesses of these atrocities: they are the only ones able to testify the depths of depravity that took place, so that no one shall forget and that nothing of that sort shall ever happen again.

Let us imagine, however, that some Holocaust survivors – or perhaps the majority of them – chose to take propranolol. Would they not have the right to reduce their suffering over the rest of their lives, after having lived through absolute evil? The consequence might be that the memories of their suffering would fade, giving them the ability to reconstruct the facts in an objective manner, without the associated emotions and feelings. Of course, they would not become inhuman robots, but they would no longer be heartfelt eyewitnesses and guardians of burning memories that will spark indignation in any listener.

Then, would the documents not suffice for the purpose of keeping this memory alive? First of all, we cannot overlook the fact that many publicly-acknowledged documents of the Holocaust did not surface until several years after the end of the war. Early on, the memories were kept alive by the survivors, who also managed the search for evidence and for those responsible. Only later did documentality – for instance, the effort to depict the Jewish people as the “main enemy” of the German people and the resulting codified bureaucratic protocol of death – highlight the monstrosity of the Holocaust and bring about a permanent warning against genocide.

Secondly, certain difficulties concerning the transmission of memories underline the fundamental importance of first-hand, emotional/motivational experience (precisely that which the elimination of personal memories would target) even in the presence of objective documents. This emerges quite effectively in Elie Wiesel’s novel *The Forgotten*, which tells the tale of a Holocaust survivor who attempts to convince his son to memorize his life story. Initially, the young man refuses, but when his father gets Alzheimer’s disease and begins to lose his memory, he changes his mind. The son thus tries to carry out his father’s wishes, but soon discovers that memory is strictly personal and cannot
be “transferred” from one individual to another. If one has not lived through a certain event one cannot fully understand it, nor can one remember it with the power and precision of an eyewitness.

On a more mundane level, the law scholar Adam Kolber (2006) was one of the first to show how the use of a memory-weakening substance can create a conflict between society’s right to protect itself from criminals (by making it illegal to destroy evidence) and the right of people to control their own memories (or their own minds). If the victim “erasers” the assault they were subjected to, or even just its emotional impact, they may lose both the will and the ability to effectively testify against the perpetrator. Society is thus also deprived of important information to make sure that the perpetrator is prosecuted and its members protected against other crimes. A physician who prescribes propranolol for a rape victim, with the consequences described above, risks being charged with obstruction of justice.

Sticking to the field of penal law, the example below can help us understand the idea of documentality as the idea of an inscription that gives rise to a social construct, and thus to a social ontology intersubjectively accepted, e.g. crimes to be prosecuted. Let us see why. Imagine a person undergoing sexual harassment, a felony that in the criminal codes of some countries is still only prosecutable if the victim presses charges against the offender (otherwise, there is nothing the police and prosecutors can do). Let us suppose that a victim of severe sexual harassment immediately decides to erase from her mind the sensations and feelings that went along with the harassment, in order to avoid additional anguish. If the pharmacological manipulation of memory is successful, the victim will only have a vague memory of the event, as if she had been a mere spectator. And therefore, she will probably not press charges against the offender. But let us suppose that one of the offender’s friends should come to know of the matter and convinces the offender to make a full written judicial confession of his misdeeds. At that point, the written document would turn a private matter into a public event of penal relevance, as it certifies that a felony has taken place. Nevertheless, even in this case, the harassment victim would still have to be motivated to press charges, and the written confession may not be enough for a trial to take place. And as we have seen, without the pain, anger, and desire for punishment and justice evoked by the event, the victim may decide that the costs of taking part in a trial exceed its expected benefits, much in line with the rational calculations of someone who is not personally involved in a specific matter.

Finally, we can briefly cite another case that is relevant to our topic, which concerns forgiveness. Paul Ricœur talks of forgiveness as «active oblivion». He encourages delving into memories while moving the focus away from events and evidence thereof—which should in fact be protected and preserved—and instead concentrating on guilt, whose weight paralyzes memory and, by extension, the ability to creatively project oneself into the future.
If, indeed, facts are indelible, if what has been done cannot be undone, and if past events cannot be changed, by the same token the meaning of what has happened is not set in stone: not only can events from the past be interpreted in different ways, the moral burden associated with guilt over past events can be lessened or augmented, depending on whether the accusation imprisons the culprit in a painful sense of irreversibility, or whether forgiveness paves the way for an unburdening, which is equivalent to changing the meaning of the past itself. One can consider this reinterpretation phenomenon – both in moral terms and as a simple tale – as a case of retroactive action\textsuperscript{18}.

It would not be remiss to point out that an amnesty is a \textit{documental} amnesty, namely an inscription through which it is established that certain facts “did not take place” or “must no longer be taken into account”. This holds true both at an individual level (forgiveness) and at a political level: think of the many peace treaties from ancient Greece to the beginning of the modern era, stipulating that both parties would “forget” each other’s wrongdoings in order to put the war behind them and start life anew. But, as is quite evident, it is extraordinarily difficult to pretend that one’s relative was not killed, or that one’s possessions were not destroyed. Unless true forgiveness is achieved, or unless military or police measures are implemented, peace treaties or amnesties often do not hold.

Along these lines, morally speaking, one could envisage a positive use for drugs that cause the elimination of memories. The use of propranolol (or substances with similar effects) to extinguish or blunt the emotional load of memories could be the final phase of a process aimed to revise the meaning of certain painful events and to subsequently modulate their personal resonance in biological terms as well. This would not be oblivion, but (even physical) relief, in accordance with the cultural and moral re-interpretation of the events in question. Ricœur calls this «reversible oblivion». Indeed, in this case, despite there being documents testifying the wrongs committed and endured, the motivations for the parties to continue on the path to conflict and violence would be blunted or eliminated altogether. And therefore, the documentality of the conflict would be less likely to give rise to new clashes.

In the final analysis, what appears to be relevant both in motivational and in existential terms is emotional memory: once it has been lost, even in the presence of episodic memory (which partly overlaps with documentality), the value we give to the considered event decreases or disappears, and so does the impulse to act. Emotions are largely (although not exclusively: I am not denying the existence of forms of moral rationalism) what bind us to documents, allowing our internal and external memories to become meaningful. There must be some degree of \textit{our own} emotional resonance in inscriptions, arising out of our direct experience with the events in question and our memories of that experience. For this reason, documents are fundamental, but \textit{for ourselves and our social lives} they are not necessarily sufficient.

\textsuperscript{18} Ricœur 1996.
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