



Spring 2017

Exploring the Notion of Forgetting

Nora H. Coyne
Gettysburg College

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Coyne, Nora H., "Exploring the Notion of Forgetting" (2017). *Student Publications*. 509.
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Exploring the Notion of Forgetting

Abstract

Ignorance and forgetting are similar in some regards, as both involve a state of not knowing. Often forgetting, like ignorance, can put us at a disadvantage in regards to a lack of retaining knowledge. Forgetting can lead to ignorance if not realized and remedied. However, just as ignorance is more than a lack of knowledge, forgetting is more than a lack of remembrance. There are many kinds of forgetting, each with different kinds memories lost and purposes served. Despite the inherent risks of forgetting, there are advantages, ones that make forgetting an essential part of human cognition. In fact, without the ability to forget, we could never remember.

Keywords

forgetting, memory, remembrance

Disciplines

Philosophy of Mind

Comments

Capstone Research produced as part of the Philosophy Senior Seminar.

Exploring the Notion of Forgetting

When viewed as a failure of memory, forgetting is considered a defect in human cognition, one that steals important knowledge or experience from us, putting us at a disadvantage. The negative effects of ignorance range in severity. We forget our email password and are forced to reset it or forget that a library book is due and must pay a fine. These instances are bothersome, but manageable. Most minor cases of forgetting are even avoidable. Harder to avoid are the extreme cases of forgetting, such as Alzheimer's Disease, where people forget entire experiences or identities. Despite some treatment options and preventative care, there is not yet a cure or vaccine for forgetting. Scientists are developing drugs that enhance the neurotransmitters and enzymes involved in memory, but currently results are minor and temporary.¹ This might lead one to think that if we could eliminate forgetting, life would be much easier. Yet, there are definite benefits to forgetting. Most people would agree that not everything is worth remembering. In addition to developing a memory-enhancing drug, scientists are also working to create drugs that interfere with the memory making process.² This could be incredibly useful for victims of extreme violence and trauma - if taken quickly after the incident, the drug might prevent any memory of the event, forcing forgetting. With both a need to remember and a need to forget, the epistemic value of remembrance is not entirely clear. The notion of forgetting is filled with complexities, and therefore, needs to be explored in depth.

¹ Klemm, William R. "Did You Take Your Memory Pill?" Psychology Today. February 09, 2013. Accessed March 8, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/memory-medic/201302/did-you-take-your-memory-pill>.

² Stromberg, Joseph. "A New Drug Could Help You Forget Long-Term Traumatic Memories." Smithsonian Magazine. January 20, 2014. Accessed March 8, 2017. <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/new-drug-could-help-you-forget-long-term-traumatic-memories-180949386/>.

This paper serves to introduce the various aspects of forgetting and memory in the hopes that forgetting will be viewed as more than just a cognitive defect in need of remedying.

Epistemology is dedicated to the discussion of knowledge and the wide array of issues concerning the topic. As such, the concept of forgetting is more complex than simply not remembering knowledge. It is important to look at the context of forgetting, including what is forgotten, how and why it is forgotten, and what specifically are the repercussions of forgetting. In order to fully understand forgetting, we must first look at the variability of the knowledge we forget. There is no universal consensus as to how many kinds of knowledge exist, but for present purposes, two commonly referenced types of knowledge, knowledge-how and knowledge-that, will be briefly explained. Knowledge-how refers to the possession of an ability or skill. It is an active kind of knowledge, such as how to ride a bike or paint a picture. Knowledge-that is more of a factual form of knowledge. Ancient Greeks called know-how *techne*, translating to craft or art, and had another word, *episteme*, for what they considered knowledge-that. Know-how can be further explained as a practical and procedural kind of knowledge, whereas know-that is more theoretical and declarative.³ Which form of knowledge is more important is mostly situational. In addition, there is much debate as to whether knowledge-how can be reduced to a kind of knowledge-that. Some believe that debates regarding kinds of knowledge are unimportant beyond philosophical discussions. However, these distinctions matter. There is a difference between knowing that CPR is an emergency technique used to save someone who has had a heart attack or stopped breathing and knowing how to perform CPR. In regards to memory and forgetting, these are relevant differences. There are two main types of memory, these being semantic memory and episodic memory. Semantic memory is the memory

³ Fantl, Jeremy. "Knowledge How." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. December 04, 2012. Accessed March 8, 2017. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-how/#ProDecKno>.

of facts and figures, and episodic memory is the memory of our past experiences.⁴ In cases of semantic memory loss, the forgetting may be mostly of knowledge-that, whereas episodic memory loss may apply to more knowledge-how forgetting. Depending on what kind of memory is lost, the repercussions of the forgetting will range in noticeable effects and consequences.

How something is forgotten is also important to discuss. Kourken Michaelian distinguishes “between forgetting in the sense of the permanent elimination of a memory trace and forgetting in the sense of the inaccessibility of a trace.”⁵ Most cases of forgetting are an inaccessibility, not complete elimination of a memory. This is because once something is stored in our long-term memory, it is difficult to eliminate the memory altogether.⁶ What is more common is that the memory is temporarily inaccessible, as is the case when you forget your email password, try multiple times, and eventually type in the right combination, or realize that you forgot to buy milk after coming back from the store. Information is temporarily inaccessible, but retrieved when triggered in a certain way. The complete elimination of a memory occurs when there is damage or disruption to the brain and its memory-forming processes. Examples of this interference include traumatic brain injury, alcohol blackouts, cognitive decline from aging, and the case of childhood amnesia, where children rarely remember their early years.⁷ In these cases, the memory may never be recovered. There are multiple kinds of knowledge and memory, and as such, forgetting is also more complex than just a lack of remembrance. Discussions and debates must take these complexities into account.

⁴ Michaelian, Kourken. "The Epistemology of Forgetting." *Erkenntnis: An International Journal Of Analytic Philosophy* 74, no. 3 (May 1, 2011): 399-424. *Philosopher's Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 8, 2017), 402.

⁵ Ibid., 403.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 403.

The oversimplification of memory is partly due to our reliance on technology and its influence on how we view memory. Technology aims to decrease our ability to forget. Computers serve as external memory keepers, freeing up both physical and mental space in our lives. Instead of keeping copies of papers in physical folders, we create folders on our desktop to store important documents and now even have things like iCloud to store documents on the web. Printing out photos is a rarity nowadays, as people are switching from photo albums on the shelf to photo albums on Facebook. There are certainly advantages to these technologies. Having everything in one place, on a computer, makes it easy to access things when we need them. There is less pressure on our capacity to remember when we use technology. Reliance on technology for memory capabilities has influenced how we discuss human memory. We now view memory based on a computer like model, where “memory’s role is to preserve information acquired in the past, making it available again for future use.”⁸ Memory certainly has this role, but to say that it is its only role is incorrect, and “as long as we take the computer model for granted, forgetting will appear to be obviously vicious – ‘forgetting’, in the computer case, is indeed always a memory failure.”⁹ Memories must reflect reality in order for them to be useful, but they do not necessarily have to be fully preserved. It has been proven that human memory is not an exact replica of that which it remembers. Witnesses to the same crime often give conflicting stories, and “the fact that our memories can sometimes deceive us erodes the value of recollections which we would otherwise be ready to stake our lives on.”¹⁰ In acknowledging that human distortions occur, we must accept that memories should not be relied upon as unaltered knowledge.

⁸ Ibid., 400.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Draaisma, D., and Liz Waters. *Forgetting : Myths, Perils and Compensations*. n.p.: New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2015, 179.

Not only is there a value in forgetting, there are multiple purposes of forgetting. Paul Connerton argues there are at least seven types of forgetting: repressive erasure, prescriptive forgetting, forgetting that is constitutive in the formation of a new identity, structural amnesia, forgetting as annulment, forgetting as planned obsolescence, and forgetting as humiliated silence.¹¹ Each type fulfills a different objective. Repressive erasure is the intentional destruction of a memory of something. The goal is that by eliminating all remnants of a person or event, the impact is also erased. This tactic is often used in repressive regimes to deny human rights abuses or minimize the influence of supposed enemies of the state.¹² For instance, the Turkish government has utilized repressive erasure in its denial of the Armenian genocide. The genocide occurred in 1915, shortly after Turkey entered the First World War. The war presented a screen to divert attention away from Turkey's mass killings and their cover-up attempts. By physically destroying public records and censuses, Turkey has been able to maintain that the Armenians are wrong to call the violence that happened a genocide. Instead, the government claims that Turkish citizens were attacked by Armenians.¹³ To this day, Turkey is still reluctant to admit any wrongdoings and the repressive erasure of the genocidal memory is to blame.

Prescriptive forgetting is similar to repressive erasure in that it is purposeful, but it is believed to be for the general good.¹⁴ Some things we are better off forgetting. It is the kind of forgetting advocated for in the phrase 'forgive and forget.' For example, best friends want to forget an argument they had, because it is the best way to continue their friendship. On a much larger scale, political reconciliation relies on a degree of forgetting. To move forward, we must

¹¹ Connerton, Paul. "Seven types of forgetting." *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (January 2008): 59. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 5, 2017).

¹² *Ibid.*, 60.

¹³ Whittaker, Anne Moreno-Riano, Gerson. "The Armenian Genocide: An Overview." *Salem Press Encyclopedia* (January 2016): *Research Starters*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 10, 2017).

¹⁴ Connerton, 61.

forget the past wrongs. Connerton states that this political technique goes all the way back to Ancient Greece. The Greeks “were particularly aware of this danger of remembering—of chains of vengeance just going on and on—and in fact they built, in their main temple on the Acropolis, an altar to Lethe, the goddess of forgetting, on the grounds that the life of the city-state was actually dependent on forgetting.”¹⁵ Not all forgetting is unwanted, especially when the possible memory can hold us back. In this way, forgetting is not a loss, but a gain and advancement.

Forgetting can help construct our identity, as is the case of the third kind of forgetting. Connerton defines this forgetting as one that emphasizes “the gain that accrues to those who know how to discard memories that serve no practicable purpose in the management of one’s current identity and ongoing purposes.”¹⁶ We remember information and events that strengthen our values and identity and are able to disregard information that does not. A case study will further explain. India gained independence from Great Britain in 1947. This independence led to the partition of India and Pakistan as two separate states, an event that created a large diaspora of movement based on cultural and ethnic ties. Conducting interviews coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the partition, Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj realized that forgetting played a huge part in constructing the identity of partition refugees who resettled in Delhi. Raj talked to first generation refugees as well as their children and grandchildren, getting a sense of how resettlement and India’s partition history has affected their lives. He argues that in forgetting aspects of the history, what is not remembered by the first generation leads to ignorance in the second and third generations. Understandably, “families do not want to recall bad times, people attempt to avoid the stigma of being a refugee and the nation state wants to focus on the newly

¹⁵ Kastner, Jeffrey, and Sina Najafi. "Historical Amnesias: An Interview with Paul Connerton." *Cabinet Magazine*, Summer 2011. Accessed March 10, 2017.

¹⁶ Connerton, 63.

established independent nation.”¹⁷ One recurring difference in narrative observed related to the shedding of the shameful label of refugee. The partition forced families to leave their homes and move to unknown territories, but many of the people Raj interviewed created successful new lives, raising the socio-economic status of themselves and their descendants from middle to upper class. This increase in status caused a forgetting of past hardships, even to the point where families did not consider themselves refugees, but migrants. Raj explains that “the elite have glossed becoming refugees as migrating, erasing the uncertainty of that period and retelling events as a planned trajectory. While many elite families did procure relatively safe passage out of Pakistan, the families did not want to move, their retrospective assertion has only become possible because of their subsequent collective success.”¹⁸ After refugees achieved a substantial degree of material wealth in their new lives, they were able to forget that their move was originally unwanted and supposedly temporary. Whether this forgetting is truly beneficial is debatable, but it does signify that forgetting does more than create an absence in memory. It can lead to new formations as well.

The fourth type of forgetting, structural amnesia, captures our tendency to forget things dependent on our cultural and societal structure.¹⁹ This forgetting comes from a deficit in emphasis on a type of information. In patrilineal cultures, one is more likely to remember the paternal family heritage as opposed to the maternal, but in a matriarchal culture, the opposite is true. Culture determines what is socially important. Structural amnesia is presently mostly in the context of oral memory, as humans can remember only so much. Physical storages of

¹⁷ Raj, Dhooleka Sarhadi. "Ignorance, Forgetting, and Family Nostalgia: Partition, the Nation State, and Refugees in Delhi." *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice*, 2000., 30, *JSTOR Journals*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 10, 2017), 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁹ Connerton, 64.

memory, like public records and databases, can retain much more information, but the culture may still prioritize a particular kind of knowledge over another. In this way, structural amnesia is not as purposeful or forceful as repressive erasure, but is nonetheless present.

When there is a superfluous amount of information, forgetting becomes a kind of annulment, constituting the fifth kind of forgetting. Information is categorized as important to access, but not necessary to remember.²⁰ We store seasonal items in the attic, retrieving only when we need them, and similarly, some information is only occasionally needed, or only needed temporarily. Actors need to memorize their lines for a performance, but after the show is over, it's not necessary to remember what line starts Act II Scene I. Remembering can be a temporary need, after which it is natural to forget. At a structural level, however, this forgetting can be dangerous. If groups or governments feel they have such an extensive amount of information, they may not take the time to truly learn all such information. Knowledge is set aside for a time when it will be needed, but without awareness of that knowledge, it will stay forgotten.

Capitalism embraces the temporary in the sixth kind of forgetting, which Connerton calls planned obsolescence.²¹ It is the driving force behind why we constantly buy new smartphones, with upgraded apps, professional quality camera lenses, and fingerprint security scans, even though an old flip phone would suffice to make a call. Products are created with a shorter life-span in mind, meaning that consumers buy more items, but keep them for less time. Newness is so important in our social hierarchies, that “distinction in a culture of mass consumption is demonstrated by acquiring an item that has just come onto the market before others acquire the same item; small time differences in the act of consumption exhibit social distinctions just as

²⁰ Ibid., 65.

²¹ Ibid., 66.

they demonstrate fine shades of physical prowess in a sport.”²² Planned obsolescence is imbedded into our culture.

Connerton’s final kind of forgetting is humiliated silence. This forgetting is a “widespread pattern of behavior in civil society, and it is covert, unmarked and unacknowledged.”²³ Paradoxically, humiliated silence can be almost impossible to forget, but consists of a persistent ignoring of a people or issue. Often this humiliated silence occurs after wars, when fallen soldiers are memorialized as heroes, but injured survivors are pushed to the background, left to suffer on their own. Soldiers returning home have a hard time finding jobs and struggle to heal from the traumas of war and adjusting back to civilian life. Unintentional forgetting can stem from a need to survive and the idea that acknowledging the memories creates an unbearable pain. Not a purposeful repression, this silence still causes harm for the ones it forgets.

Given the many forms of forgetting, it is clear there is an unrealized power in forgetting. Jorge Luis Borges’ *Funes the Memorious* illustrates the importance forgetting. It is the tale of a boy, named Ireneo Funes, who remembers everything and forgets nothing. He is fluent in many languages, can recall what the weather was like 10 years ago at the drop of a hat, and always knows the time, without wearing watch. Far from leading a happy life, though, he is constantly troubled by his inability to forget. As the narrator explains, “he was not very capable of thought. To think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract. In the overly replete world of Funes there were nothing but details, almost contiguous details.”²⁴ Forgetting is a natural and necessary part of human life. As the story shows, it is only through forgetting that true human

²² Ibid., 67.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Borges, Jorge Luis. *Ficciones*. Translated by Anthony Kerrigan. Grove Press, 1962.

thought is capable. Thinking, in its essence, is forgetting temporarily everything but that which you are focusing on. Without the ability to focus, if only for a moment, we would be paralyzed by a bombardment of sensory experiences, resulting in an overload of thoughts. It is one thing to be aware of the sound of the heater running, the sound of your roommate's alarm going off, and the sound of the cars outside your window, but it is another thing to be continually aware to the point that no sound stands out. Every sound would be unnoticeable white noise. Strangely, without the ability to forget, we could never remember. Forgetting is integral to remembering. Marc Augé compares the relationship between memory and forgetting to that of the ocean and the shore, saying "memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea," and that "oblivion is the life force of memory and remembrance is its product."²⁵ It would be pointless to remember every word we read in a textbook or how many steps it takes to get from our driveway to the front door. Human cognition allows us to summarize, pull out main ideas, and decide what information is applicable to our needs; part of this process involves forgetting.

Of course, forgetting happens even when we do not want it to do. We forget information that we know is important and that we want to remember. Society constantly grapples with this tension between forgetting and remembering, and "for us humans, forgetting has been the norm, and remembering the exception."²⁶ It often seems like it is harder to remember than it is to forget. We believe that remembering is more important than forgetting, because our energy is spent on developing ways to increase our memory capacities. However, memory is only valuable because it causes certain things to stand out in contrast to others that fade away.

²⁵ Augé, Marc. *Oblivion*. Translated by Marjolijn De Jager. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004, 20-21.

²⁶ Mayer-Schönberger, Viktor. *Delete: the Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011, 2.

Forgetting is an undervalued part of cognition. Its complexities have real-life implications for every aspect of human life, with both positive and negative effects.

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