THE MORAL DEMANDS OF MEMORY

Despite an explosion of studies on memory in historical and cultural studies, there is relatively little in moral philosophy on this subject. In this book, Jeffrey Blustein provides a systematic and philosophically rigorous account of a morality of memory. Drawing on a broad range of philosophical and humanistic literatures, he offers a novel examination of memory and our relations to people and events from our past, the ways in which memory is preserved and transmitted, and the moral responsibilities associated with it. Blustein treats topics of responsibility for one’s own past; historical injustice and the role of memory in doing justice to the past; the relationship of collective memory to history and identity; collective and individual obligations to remember those who have died, including those who are dear to us; and the moral significance of bearing witness. Relationships between the operations of personal and collective memory, and between the moral responsibilities attached to each, are highlighted and this discussion ties together the various strands of argument in a unified framework.

Jeffrey Blustein is Professor of Bioethics at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Adjunct Associate Professor at Barnard College. He is the author of Parents and Children: The Ethics of the Family; Care and Commitment: Taking the Personal Point of View; and most recently, Ethics for Health Care Organizations and Handbook for Health Care Ethics Committees (both with Linda Farber Post and Nancy Dubler). He has published numerous articles in journals such as the Journal of Applied Philosophy, Metaphilosophy, Journal of Social Philosophy, Journal of Value Inquiry, and Bioethics.
THE MORAL DEMANDS OF MEMORY

Jeffrey Blustein

Albert Einstein College of Medicine
To Joseph and Eva, whom I have forgotten
To speak the name of the dead
Is to make them live again.

Ancient Egyptian Belief
# CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>page x</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Memory as a Subject of Evaluative Inquiry ............ 1
   1. Elements of a morality or ethics of memory 1
   2. Nietzsche on the misuses of memory 5
      (a) Monumental history and the influence of the past 7
      (b) Antiquarian history and nostalgia 8
      (c) The moderating role of critical history 12
   3. A surfeit of memory 15
   4. The dynamic of remembering and forgetting 19
      (a) Collective memory 19
      (b) Personal memory 24
   5. Memory as obligation 29
   6. Responsibilities of remembrance and taking responsibility for the past 34
   7. Memory, identity, and responsibility 41
   8. Going forward 50

2. Taking Responsibility for One’s Own Past ............ 57
   1. A case example 57
   2. Some preliminaries about taking responsibility 62
   3. Three elements of taking responsibility for the past 66
      (a) Retrospective construction of meaning 66
      (b) Appropriation 69
## Contents

3 Doing Justice to the Past ........................................ 110

1. A historical example: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 110
2. Types of groups 119
   (a) Collections 119
   (b) Socially unified groups and their importance 120
   (c) Organized groups 123
3. Collective responsibility for past wrongdoing 125
   (a) Senses of collective responsibility 125
   (b) Group identity over time 127
   (c) A note about “different people choices” and groups 131
4. Wronging groups 132
5. Making sense of the past: Reconstruction and complications 138
6. Responsibility and the construction of group identity 144
7. Collective guilt and shame 148
8. Doing justice to the past: The role of memory 158
   (a) Memory and the demand for recognition 158
   (b) Symbolic reparation and memory 166

4 Ethics, Truth, and Collective Memory ........................ 176

1. Memory and history/History and myth 176
2. Collective memory and individual memory 182
3. History, myth, and collective memory 188
4. The interplay of history and myth in collective memory 199
5. Margalit on the ethics and morality of memory 204
6. Morality and collective memory 211
7. Ethics and collective memory 222
8. Conclusion 228
## Contents

5 The Responsibility of Remembrance .............. 240  
1. Raising the issues: Absent friends, deceased friends 240  
2. Qualities and modes of remembering the dead 247  
3. Evalative attitudes and remembering the dead:  
   The case of love 252  
4. Consequentialism and an expressive account 261  
   (a) Consequentialism 261  
   (b) Expressivism 266  
5. The moral imperative to remember: Three arguments 269  
   (a) The rescue from insignificance view 269  
   (b) The enduring duties view 273  
   (c) The reciprocity view 276  
   (d) The three views in tandem 281  
6. Mourning and the death of parents 282  
7. Rituals of remembrance 287  
8. How long we must remember 291  

6 Memory and Bearing Witness ..................... 301  
1. Witnessing in the contemporary world 301  
2. The concept of bearing witness 307  
   (a) Testimonial authority 310  
   (b) Address and audience 314  
   (c) The need for testimony 320  
3. Some typological remarks 322  
   (a) Bearing witness to right and wrong, good and bad 322  
   (b) The witness’ relationship to wrongdoing 325  
   (c) Bearing witness to one’s convictions 327  
4. The symbolic value of bearing witness 328  
5. Witnessing, self-representation, and moral agency 337  
6. Proxies and the authority to bear witness 345  
7. Final thoughts 355

Select Bibliography 365  
Index 367
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A number of philosophers read and commented on portions of this manuscript while it was going through various stages of development or shared their thoughts with me on topics I discuss here. These include: Jonathan Adler, Sue Campbell, Maudemarie Clark, Chris Gowans, David Heyd, Tziporah Kasachkoff, Eva Feder Kittay, John Kleinig, Lukas Meyer, Hilde Lindemann Nelson, James Nelson, Ross Poole, Joseph Raz, William Ruddick, Michael Stocker, and Margaret Walker. I thank all of them for their help and, perhaps most of all, for their encouragement and support of this project.

An early version of Chapter 4 was read as part of an Invited Symposium on Memory and Morality, Pacific Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, March 26, 2004. Chapter 2 draws on material that first appeared in my article, “On Taking Responsibility for One’s Past,” in the Journal of Applied Philosophy, 17, 1, 2000, 1–19 (used by permission of Blackwell Publishing, Ltd.).
Two personal experiences led me to think more deeply about issues that are taken up in this book. The first concerns my father, who died in 1982. Although we were never particularly close, especially in the last decade of his life, I never doubted that the way I saw the world and my place in it owed much to his influence. My weekly calls, brief and perfunctory though they might be, and my occasional trips back home, underscored for me how much I resembled him, for better or for worse. But in the years after his death, I thought less and less about him. Except in rare moments, he quite literally vanished from my conscious life. I had, for several years, lit the yearly Yahrzeit candle in his memory but even that small gesture lapsed. Perhaps my failure to hold on to his memory, and therefore hold on to him, said something about our lack of intimacy while he was alive. Perhaps it was just the more or less inevitable erosion of memory by the passage of time and the accretions of a life lived forward. Whatever the explanation, I was troubled not so much by his death as by my failure to keep him in mind after he was gone. Vaguely, I felt that perhaps I had done something wrong, that I ought to have done more to preserve my father’s memory, and that I had somehow been disloyal to him and what he meant to me by the apparent ease with which I forgot him. I wondered if others had similar experiences of forgetting and, if so, whether they had similar feelings. These thoughts were as yet inchoate, and I was unsure if they were even coherent. But believing that the thoughts and feelings relating to my deceased father were probably not idiosyncratic, I wanted to find out – to think philosophically about – whether and to what extent they were warranted.
xii

Preface

The second concerns a trip to Eastern Europe that my wife and I and another couple took in the fall of 2004. We visited Prague, Budapest, and Krakow, and, understandably, given the history of these places, memory was much on my mind. One afternoon in the Jewish quarter of Prague, where we were visiting several of the synagogues that had been spared Nazi destruction, my friend complained about what he characterized as the “wallowing” of some Jews (I was clearly included in his indictment) in the horrors of the Nazi past. “What good does all this remembering do, anyway?” he protested. “Shouldn’t we stop dwelling on the past? What’s done is done, what’s past is past. Why keep exposing oneself, in this masochistic fashion, to what can only be intensely painful memories? To what end?” I did not necessarily disagree with him that Holocaust remembrance was an inordinate preoccupation of some contemporary Jews. I knew, too, that in saying what he said, he had no intention of denying or downplaying the significance of the Nazi atrocities. But I could not agree with the sentiment he expressed, and I felt strongly that he had not properly appreciated the value and significance of memory or correctly understood what limits there might be to how much and how long we should remember. I had already started to think about these matters, but the episode in Prague, echoing views I had heard from many quarters before, brought home to me why this inquiry was of more than just theoretical interest.

These two experiences stand out in my mind as I try to account for my personal interest in the subject of this book. I am sure there have been others as well that have played a role. But memory, as I shall have more than one occasion to point out in what follows, is highly selective, and I am willing to concede that 10 years from now, if I think back to the circumstances surrounding the writing of this book, I might tell a different story.

Jeffrey Blustein
February 22, 2007