

Special Issue: The Ontology of Memory and the Horizon of History, Part III

Setting the Stage: Outlining the Symposium's Thematic Landscape

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1. Introduction

History is replete with events that defy our comprehension. The past few years have revealed a staggering array of events that we might term as “impossible events.” These events often ignite intense debates over their factual nature owing to the extent of human cruelty and mercilessness that they exhibit. The core of these debates stems from the potential of such events to fundamentally challenge ethical perspectives and worldviews. The following central question emerges: “Did these events actually occur, and if so, to what degree were they cruel?” Common responses include denying events outright, dismissing them as implausible, or doubting the severity of their brutality.

For example, consider the traumatic events from the 20th century, such as the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps and the suffering of the atomic bombing survivors, which were initially dismissed as inconceivable. Gathering corroborative evidence is essential to establish the veracity of these events. This task became more challenging when perpetrators, like the Nazis, sought to destroy evidence or when physical proof deteriorated over time. In such cases, the memories of survivors who endured these events became invaluable as the only link to the truth. Therefore, perpetrators often attempt to silence witnesses. However, veracity of memory remains a contentious issue. This concern extends beyond the credibility of specific recollections to the fundamental reliability of memory as a record of past reality. If memory itself is unreliable, can historical events that cannot be verified and recorded be erased from collective consciousness?

¹ In this paper, Japanese names are presented in the original order used in Japan, with the family name followed by the given name.

2. Aporia of Memory

When memories emerge as images, they resurrect aspects of the past that no longer exist in the present reality. This raises a critical question: “Can we claim that these images are authentic representations of what once happened?” Determining whether they are faithful accounts of the past or mere figments of the imagination is a complex challenge. Ricoeur (2004: xvi), in his phenomenology of memory, notes that recollection in the form of images possesses the characteristic of being “the presence of an absent thing,” just like the imaginary. Although memory presupposes the moment of imprinting (of events and experiences), and therefore its referent is past reality, this similarity between memory and fantasy makes it difficult to distinguish between them. On the representational plane, it is challenging to determine whether they signify a past event or imagined reality.

This dilemma leads us to question the nature of the memories that arise as images in our minds. Are they authentic traces of real events or fictional constructs? The “aporia of memories,” a concept Ricoeur (2004: 10) derived from his analysis of Plato and Aristotle’s texts, continues to challenge us. This ambiguity not only provokes intellectual discomfort, but also sparks contention, particularly when the events in question seem “impossible,” surpassing our conventional understanding and imagination. Such disputes often escalate and question the reality of these memories: “Were these events real? If so, what evidence would support their existence?” Scrutinizing memory becomes more intense as it not only involves the reality of the past, but also the identities and existence of individuals and groups.

3. Agents of Memory

The dominant view of memory studies in the humanities and social sciences is that memory represents the past in its present context. This “reconstructivist” approach (Haaken & Reavey, 2010) often leads to skepticism about the accuracy of memory in reflecting on the past, suggesting that it might be an unreliable source for verifying historical reality. However, memory has been instrumental in documenting the history of oppressed people and restoring their dignity. Its significance does not stem from its ability to precisely reflect the past or because the narrators focus on factual accuracy. Memory—which is distinct from narratives or representations—is not controlled by the subject’s will. It has its own inherent power and dynamic quality and is capable of enveloping, speaking through, or bearing witness to the past on the subject’s behalf. This brings us to what might be called an “ontology of memory,” an issue that has been explored recently through the lens of “traumatic memory.”

Traumatic memory offers an approach to events that elude empirical understand-

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ing. However, emphasis on the nature of traumatic memory, which does not always link remembered events and their outcomes with clear causality, can also lead to the denial of these events. The problem arises when we rigidly interpret traumatic memories as concrete evidence against historical revisionism, which attempts to erase the histories and memories of the oppressed and traumatized. This approach limits our understanding of the broader significance of memory and negates the expansive realms of knowledge that memory can reveal (e.g., the agency and psychic life of the traumatized). Therefore, this reductionist view oversimplifies the complex and multidimensional nature of memory.

4. Symposiums: Ontology of Memory and Horizon of History, Parts I to III

Driven by profound concerns about memory, two pivotal public symposiums, “The Ontology of Memory and the Horizon of History,” Parts I and II, were convened in Hiroshima in November 2019 and Kyoto in December 2020, respectively. Distinguished scholars, such as Tomiyama Ichiro from Doshisha University, Kakigi Nobuyuki from Seinan Gakuin University, and Tsuiki Kosuke from the Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, and I explored memories as vestiges of the past in them. Our collective expertise in history, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and sociology enabled us to scrutinize the complexities and potentialities of extracting historical narratives from the memories of “oppressed beings/things.”

Building on the discussions of these earlier gatherings, we extended our exploration with the third symposium, “The Ontology of Memory and the Horizon of History, Part III,” on December 3, 2022. At this event, held in Kyoto, we were honored to host Janice Haaken, Professor Emeritus at Portland State University. Professor Haaken, who has an extensive background in psychological research, clinical practice, and documentary filmmaking, provided invaluable insights into our discussions. The third symposium was dedicated to investigating the intricate epistemological, political, and ethical issues that arose from memories, particularly those related to traumatic events and sexual abuse. This special issue presents an account of Professor Haaken’s keynote lecture, including my responses and the views of Hanada Ryoko from Tokyo Woman’s Christian University, to further enrich our understanding of this critical subject.

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