

NOTES TOWARD THE DEFINITION OF MEMORY

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“Through memory, we receive and allow ourselves to be formed by the great treasures that belong to our history and culture, which are particular reflections of eternal truths, all as a gift from God.”



I. MODERNITY AS *DAMNATIO MEMORIAE*

It is not uncommon for new readers of patristic theology to find themselves in a bit of confusion regarding Augustine’s characterization of the *imago Trinitatis* in the human soul: the powers of memory, intellect, and will—each of which, for Augustine, is the whole soul considered under a certain aspect of its relation to itself—image the Father, Son, and Spirit, three persons in one God.¹ His account has been the most widely affirmed in the tradition among the many variations offered, both because it is inherently compelling and because it is illuminating in an especially fruitful way. Not only does the *imago* help us understand (to some extent) the unfathomable mystery of the Trinity, but the

1. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 10.4, in *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), pp. 300–02.

insight into the Trinity in turn casts a novel light on the powers of the soul, which opens dimensions in them that we have still scarcely begun to explore. The Son, as Logos, is very much like an act of the intellect; the light of the Son's procession, in turn, allows us to see something in the human intellect that, for example, Aristotle did not, or in any event not very clearly, namely, that this act always necessarily coincides with the procession of a word, a procession that may bear some analogy to the begetting of a child. Similarly, the Spirit clearly reveals something of the dynamic character we associate with the will, and this association in turn deepens our understanding of the human will, allowing us to see it as connected essentially to love, that is, to the fruitful bond of union, and to gift. But here the confusion arises: What connection could there be between the Father and *memory*? What does fatherhood have to do with what seems to be nothing more than the capacity to record and retain previous experience? Perhaps this is simply where the analogy fails, as they all eventually must when dealing with a mystery that transcends all human understanding.

For his part, Aquinas—who otherwise represents one of the great champions of Augustine's "psychological" or "intrasubjective" *imago Trinitatis*—eventually comes to ignore this part of it.² The Father, after all, does not *proceed* like an act of the intellect or an act of the will; he is the one *from whom* the Son and Spirit proceed. There are only two processions in

2. In his early texts, the *Commentary on the Sentences* (see bk. 1, dd. 3 and 28; and bk. 2, d. 16) and the *De veritate* (q. 10), Aquinas refers to the three *powers* of the soul—memory, intellect, and will—but by the time of the *Summa theologiae* he has come explicitly to deny that memory is a power of the soul. Instead, he describes the *imago* in terms of three aspects, namely, the principle of the mind and its two operations (the intellectual and volitional acts), even though he admits that this compromises the *imago* character to a certain extent. See *Summa theologiae* [= *ST*] I, q. 93, a. 7 ad 1 and 3. Aquinas's treatise on the Trinity in the *Summa* (I, qq. 27–43) makes no mention of memory, though it speaks at length about intellect and will. For an account of Aquinas's development from a more "static" account of the *imago* to a more "dynamic" account in terms of actual operations, see Br. Evagrius Hayden, OSB, "'*Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram*': St. Thomas Aquinas on the *Imago Dei*; Themes and Developments" (unpublished manuscript, May 6, 2019), available at https://www.academia.edu/41483468/St_Thomas_Aquinas_on_the_Imago_Dei_Themes_and_Developments.

the Trinity.³ In contrast to the other two persons, the Father is the *unoriginate origin*. From the perspective of the Father's "unoriginateness," it would seem to make sense to "imagine" the Trinity as a mind with its two essential acts, which have their origin in *it* while *it* does not have its origin in them.⁴ The "downside" of this approach, however, is that it runs the risk of a kind of "subordinationism": the Trinity is made up (so to speak) of *co-equal* persons, but a mind, as substance existing in itself, is radically and *ontologically* different from and prior to its (proper) accidents, intellect and will, even if it is inconceivable without these.⁵ Speaking, instead, of three distinct powers of the one soul would seem to present a way to mitigate the danger of a subordinationist heresy. But even this would be of no help as far as Aquinas is concerned, because, for him, the memory is in any event *not* a distinct power of the soul in itself; it is merely a subordinate "part" of intellect.⁶ Why does Aquinas appear at least at first glance to differ so basically on this point from Augustine? Could it be said that Aquinas has forgotten memory? Whatever judgment one makes here,⁷ it is the case that for Aquinas there

3. *ST I*, q. 27, a. 5.

4. Aquinas also speaks of memory as the habitual principle from which the acts of intellect and will arise, a principle that thus contains them virtually. See *ST I*, q. 93, a. 7.

5. *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1.

6. *ST I*, q. 79, a. 6; cf. *ST I*, q. 79, a. 7. It is interesting to note that two of the three objections in article 7 are from Augustine and his account of the *imago Trinitatis*. Aquinas explains that Augustine himself never called them the three "powers" of the soul, and thus he offers a different interpretation of them here: "memory" is the intellectual object habitually possessed, while "intellect" and "will" represent that object actually known and loved. To the objection that this creates a problem insofar as memory no longer represents a power comparable to the other two, Aquinas explains that it remains co-equal with the others, not as a power with respect to other powers but as habitual possession to actual possession (i.e., potency to act). Of course, this raises the question of subordinationism again insofar as Aquinas clearly subordinates the former to the latter.

7. One might take the "demotion" of memory in Aquinas's anthropology as evidence of his elevation of Aristotle as an authority in philosophical matters. One would also have to consider the connection between memory and the themes of potency, receptivity, and embodiment, not to mention the broader question of culture, all of which ought to be developed further in the continued reception of the thought of Aquinas.

are in the end only *two* basic spiritual powers of the soul, intellect and will.⁸ If this does not do full justice to the mystery of the Trinity, Aquinas's *imago* has nevertheless, even as a "limping" analogy, revealed enough to give theologians through the ages inexhaustible matter for reflection.

It is nevertheless worth pausing for a moment and reflecting on this point of difference. To oversimplify, we have, on the one hand, not only the inclusion of memory as one of the basic dimensions of the human soul but its *elevation* over intellect and will as their primal source; on the other hand, we have the subordination of memory to a "mere" part of one of the soul's faculties, namely, the intellect. One cannot help but wonder whether the different valuation of memory in the two cases implies in fact a basic shift in the conception of the human soul, or indeed the nature of human existence more generally. Our purpose in drawing attention to this difference (and no doubt exaggerating it)⁹ is not to open up a comparative study of Thomistic and Augustinian anthropologies, or, for that matter, their trinitarian theologies. Instead, we mean simply to set into relief the question of the meaning of memory and its role in human life. Thomas Aquinas himself, it must be said, had a very high regard for memory, even if he seems to have qualified its "status" in the soul.¹⁰ But whatever ambiguities one may find in the texts of the Common Doctor, things become much less ambiguous not long after him.

It is quite clear that memory loses its cultural significance as history passes from the Middle Ages, through the Renaissance, and into the modern era. Formal and modal logic tends to eclipse the traditional "memory-based" study of nature (*physis*) and being

8. *STI*, q. 79, a. 1 ad 3.

9. Augustine himself, who did not work out the *imago* or the nature of the soul in all of its technical detail, also reduces "memory" simply to "mind," in a certain respect: "When memory is called life, and mind, and substance, it is called so with reference to itself; but when it is called memory it is called so with reference to another" (*De Trinitate* 10.4, p. 301). Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.14. Moreover, the positions of Augustine and Aquinas would not be so different from one another if one gave a robust significance in one's interpretation of Aquinas to *habitus*, which is his primary category for memory.

10. Frances Yates calls Aquinas "the patron saint of memory" in the Middle Ages. See her discussion of his place in her classic work *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992), 63–93, at 93.

(*meta-physis*) in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries with the rise of nominalism, and Peter Ramus's revolutionary pedagogical theory casts a dark shadow of suspicion on memory in the sixteenth century.¹¹ At the dawn of the early modern period, the "Enlighteners" sought to clear out any such shadows.¹² Descartes, for example, determined that it would be necessary to wipe the slate clean, so to speak, and rethink things from the ground up, if we wish to organize existence in a truly beneficial way.¹³ It is not too much to say that the eradication of memory is the governing methodological principle of the pioneers of modernity. If there is already a kind of demotion of memory in its being reduced to a subordinate part of the intellect, the modern project, which continues to shape our world, represents a much more decisive step in its eclipse. Memory seems to have become for us an obstacle to genuinely free self-determination and rational thought. Looking back, then, from our time to the work of Augustine, we are thus led to ask: What *is* memory, after all? What importance does it have in human life? And what is at stake *if we lose it*?

There is, of course, an evident irony in suggesting that it is even possible to forget memory. In a lecture he delivered on the occasion of the anniversary of a thousand-year-old cathedral, Josef Pieper humorously quotes the child's definition of memory: "That by which I always forget things!"¹⁴ To forget is to *lose* something

11. Walter Ong, *Ramus: Method and the Decay of Dialogue* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

12. Michael Gillespie, for example, explains, "This entire debate [of the ancients vs. the moderns] points to the great importance modernity places upon distinguishing itself from what came before it. Robert Pippin has argued that modernity's need to demonstrate its originality is a reflection of its deep-seated belief in autonomy. One could go even further—modernity needs to demonstrate not merely its originality but its superiority to its predecessors. The idea of progress is a corollary to or extension of the idea of autonomy at the heart of the modern project" (*The Theological Origins of Modernity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008], 6).

13. See René Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), part 2, pp. 6–13. For a comparison of Descartes and Peter Ramus, see André Robinet, *Aux sources de l'esprit cartésien: L'axe La Ramée-Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1996).

14. Josef Pieper, "Corporeal Memory: The Concrete Things of History as Living Reminders," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 417.

that was previously there, “in one’s mind,” as we say, which means that forgetting presupposes memory. In this respect, to speak of forgetting, not just one item or another but memory itself, is to drift toward self-contradiction. However paradoxical the phrase may be, we can nevertheless intuit what it points to, and we cannot but be radically disturbed by it. What if we lose, not just some idea or experience, but the very capacity to receive these, to take them into ourselves, so that we are not even *able* to forget? Augustine refers to the memory as the “belly of the mind,” implying that the memory is that wherein we take thoughts and images *into* ourselves and *incorporate* them so that they co-constitute our very identity, our selfhood.¹⁵ If this is true—and of course we will need to elaborate what it means—then to forget memory itself would be to lose one’s self altogether. What kind of creature would result from such a radical forgetting other than some (literally) mindless automaton, which skips about the surface of things in an aimless fashion, unable to form any relationships with anything beyond itself, because it lacks even a self to which to relate? The loss of the past here would imply a loss of the future, and therefore arguably a loss even of the present, except in a radically reduced, an ultimately substanceless, sense.¹⁶ The horrifying *thing* that would be produced by the brutal excision of memory is not a human being, and certainly not a person.¹⁷ It may be unfortunate to forget something essential, but it is downright tragic to forget memory itself, since there is really nothing more tragic than the loss of the capacity even to experience tragedy.¹⁸

15. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.14 (p. 21).

16. For an attempt to defend the radical reduction to the present in contemporary culture, see Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Current Publishers, 2013).

17. Note that this does not mean that those who suffer from amnesia or Alzheimer’s, or those who enter into a condition wherein they are no longer able to access their memories consciously, are no longer human beings. This would happen only on a radically reduced subjectivistic interpretation of memory, and of human beings simply (thus, for example, John Locke argued that human beings without memory no longer have personal identity). We are going to argue that memory by its very essence exceeds individual subjectivity, which implies that even those who lose their own subjective access to memory continue to participate in it in a broader sense.

18. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that, for example, Wendell Berry points to the ability to experience joy *and grief* as essential to our humanity

Is this in fact a possibility that ought to trouble us? Are we really in danger of forgetting memory? One might argue that, far from running the risk of losing memory, the problem in our culture is that we have too much of it. Nietzsche worried in the last decades of the nineteenth century that Western man might bury himself in details from the past, through a hypertrophy of the historical sense.¹⁹ According to him, life requires not just a capacity to remember but also a capacity to forget, and the creative capacities of life can be smothered by the indiscriminate accumulation of facts from history—“too much information.” A century later, this danger has been realized to an extent far greater than Nietzsche could possibly have imagined. We have created devices to store information, and make it immediately available, to a nearly infinite degree: we are learning that all the hairs on our head are currently being counted, with the results being offered for sale; not a sparrow falls without some video record.²⁰ Though it makes us uneasy, it has nevertheless become a matter of course, a regular expectation, that our conversations, our movements, and in some sense our inner thoughts and wishes, no matter how trivial, are being registered and stored, whether they are made public or just kept for potential use by unknown agents, nefarious or legally sanctioned (or both). Instead of the small-souled scholars that Nietzsche complained were recording history without any capacity to distinguish what is important from what is not, what is great and life-affirming from what is trivial and life-denying, we have literally soulless machines—indeed, “machines” is too incarnational; let us call them “algorithms”—that are utterly indifferent to the question of importance and the value of life. The “capture of information” has become so totalitarian²¹ in scope that it has provoked grand lawsuits in Europe,

in his essay “The Body and the Earth,” in *Recollected Essays 1965–1980* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), 269–326.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 59–123.

20. See Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (New York: Public Affairs, 2019).

21. By “totalitarian” here we mean the obliteration of the distinction between public and private. See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*

championing the “right to be forgotten,” and, more generally, inventions of software and technologies designed to protect “privacy.” From this perspective, the loss of memory would seem to be a mercy.

In response to this state of affairs, it is important to understand that the mere “capture of information” is—or so we will argue in what follows—something radically different from memory. Plato saw this two and a half millennia ago when he confronted what was at that time a brand-new technology, namely, the carving of symbols representing intelligible sounds on an enduring external surface, or, in other words, *writing*.²² When told that writing was an “art of remembering,” a wise character in one of Plato’s dialogues retorted, “It is rather an art of forgetting!”²³ because, Plato argued, it removed the words from their proper place in the soul, so to speak, and transferred them onto an essentially soulless thing. This did not so much enhance memory as relieve the need for it. Plato worried that man’s memory would weaken the more the use of this technology for the management of thought grew. Interestingly, for reasons we will intimate, he thought it threatened to weaken man’s capacity for wonder and for philosophy.

In any event, Plato’s judgment on this score represents a good launching point for our reflections. We tend to think of memory simply as our mental capacity to retain information, whether that be ideas, facts, experiences, or simply images. In other words, we tend to “functionalize” memory, to view it as an instrument that serves a particular purpose, namely, storage. But, as Robert Spaemann has wisely observed in a different context, when we functionalize a thing we render it replaceable by something else.²⁴ In this respect, there would be no reason why a stone tablet, or for that matter an electric one, could not *substitute* for memory; such devices are, after all, in their modern variety significantly more capacious than a human mind, and

(New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 593–616.

22. Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c ff.

23. *Ibid.*, 275a.

24. Robert Spaemann, “The End of Modernity?,” in *The Robert Spaemann Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 218: “Functionalistic thinking thinks in terms of equivalences.”

perhaps more reliable. We have in fact become accustomed to think of the word “memory,” like the word “friend,” as principally a technical term, able to be quantified. The suggestion that the smartphone is like an externalization of the soul is becoming increasingly plausible.²⁵ What is the difference, one might ask, between *knowing* something and being able to *look it up* instantaneously, between pulling it out of one’s mind and pulling it out of one’s phone?²⁶

If we have trouble answering the question and worry that insisting on a difference could be evidence of some new, hidden, unjustifiable prejudice (“life-ism”? “soul-ism?”), it is a sign that we have indeed begun in truth to forget memory. The exponential proliferation of technological means for gathering and storing information is something like a diabolical substitute for the reality of memory, which, because of its apparent effectiveness, works against our ever recollecting it. The ancient Romans had a practice intended to erase a particularly ignoble figure from history: it was called *damnatio memoriae*, and might be thought of as the original version of “canceling.” *Damnatio memoriae* consisted in the removal of the person’s name from any written record, and lopping off the head of any statue of the person that happened to exist so that it could be replaced by the features of another, more favorable, person. The crisis of memory into which we appear to have fallen is a *damnatio memoriae* in a far more radical sense: it threatens to be not just the deforming of an artistic image but *the reality*, and not just of a particular man, but of man *simply*—a lopping off of the very thing that makes man human. The *damnatio memoriae* that defines the modern project presents itself as a *damnatio hominis simpliciter*.²⁷ A great deal is therefore at stake in

25. I make this suggestion in “Till We Have Facebook: On Christian Existence in the Age of Social Media,” *Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 306–14.

26. A few years ago *The New Yorker* had a cartoon in which an astonished wife asked her husband, who had just rattled off some unlikely bit of information, “Is that something you *know*? Or just *Google-know*?” This could be the beginning of an intriguing contemporary Platonic dialogue.

27. To the extent that modernity defines itself precisely in contrast to thought formed by tradition, it can be *defined* as a rejection of the significance of memory in all but functionalist terms. It is interesting that a rejection of the significance of the past tends to coincide with a rejection of the significance

the question of whether what has been lost can be retrieved. And this brings us finally to the question: how do we remember that by which we remember everything else?

II. "RE-COLLECTING" MEMORY

To retrieve or "re-collect" (*wieder-holen*) memory, it is not enough simply to repeat (*wiederholen*) what an earlier thinker said on the subject—in this case, Augustine, who presents the *locus classicus* for memory in book 10 of the *Confessions*. Instead, we need to recover not only the thing said but also the sources from which the author draws (consciously or not) to say what he says, to "re-present" the sources, that is, make them present again, so that they may be reappropriated, now in a new context. This is especially necessary if the thing recollected has lost its original wealth and thus appears only in a reduced form. In what follows, we do not mean to work through a detailed exposition of Augustine and his influences in the manner Nietzsche described as "historical." Instead, we will seize on certain indications from Augustine, the Christian, and flesh them out by drawing on the principal tributaries of Christian culture: the Greeks, the Jews, and the Romans. In this, we seek only to sketch out some of the basic dimensions, the broad outline, of an adequate Christian conception of memory—"notes toward a definition"²⁸—without claiming any final completeness.

It has long puzzled scholars why Augustine, after nine autobiographical books, should suddenly turn in the tenth book of the *Confessions* to an in-depth exploration of memory. One fairly straightforward explanation is that this, too, is an expression of the single desire that animates the whole of the *Confessions*: a desire to understand himself, which essentially coincides with a desire to lay himself bare before God, since the relation to God lies at the heart of who he is (and it is important to

of the future: in this respect, one might reflect on Rémi Brague's thoughts about the lack of *children* in contemporary Europe: *Curing Mad Truths: Medieval Wisdom for the Modern Age* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019).

28. The title is of course a reference to T. S. Eliot's *Notes Toward the Definition of Culture* (Eastbourne, UK: Gardners Books, 1972).

see that this relation does not exclude but in fact intensively *includes* all other relations).²⁹ Thus, after spanning the breadth of his own history, as an evolution in his ever-present relation to God, Augustine plunges into the depths of his own being—and this brings him directly into memory: for Augustine, memory is the innermost core of the person, and, precisely as such, it is the privileged place of encounter with God. Let us unfold briefly how and why this is so.

It would be difficult to understand how memory could represent the innermost core of the person if it were simply a capacity to store information. While “storage” certainly implies a receptive space, and therefore something like interiority, the assumption is that it is filled with “things” that are not the self, or in any event include the self only incidentally. But Augustine does not approach memory first of all *functionally* but *ontologically*; it is most basically for him a matter, not of what he can do, but of who he is, the nature and ground of his self. Thus, in this part of the *Confessions*, he is attempting to discover God, to enter into relation with God,³⁰ by considering how he relates in general to what is other than himself, passing first through his external senses, then his spiritual senses, until—“still rising by degrees toward him who made me”³¹—he reaches his most spiritual interior core, which he identifies as memory. Note the concreteness of this: it is not in a purely introverted way as abstract intellect, but through the bodily senses, that he enters into himself.³² To be sure, he immediately describes memory as a “place” wherein images are retained: “The fields and spacious halls of memory, where are stored as treasures [*thesauri*] the countless images that have been brought into them from all manner of things by the

29. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.1 (“Let me know thee, O my Knower; let me know thee even as I am known”), and 10.2 (“To thee, then, O Lord, I am laid bare, whatever I am”); cf. 10.4 (“I will declare, not what I was, but what I am and what I continue to be”).

30. More precisely, he comes to realize the relation that has always already preceded him, rather than initiating the relation himself, as we will show.

31. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.8 (p. 12).

32. For a contrast between Augustine and Descartes (and the Stoics) on this, see Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003).

senses.”³³ But, if Aristotle effectively *remains* in this dimension of memory—for Aristotle, memory is essentially the capacity to retain sense experience³⁴—Augustine proceeds to a deeper dimension. What interests him, first of all, in the phenomenon of image-retention is what it reveals about the soul’s capacity to liberate the sensible experience of things from the limitations of space and time, so that things that occurred in the past can be “re-collected” now, and thereby made present. This freedom indicates a new dimension of reality in the soul, so to speak, a transcendence of body that we recognize as spirit.

Let us pause here to make two observations. First, we said that Augustine approaches memory principally as an exploration of his own nature and identity. On the one hand, this means that the dimensions of memory reveal the structure, so to speak, of the human soul in a general sense. But, on the other hand, disclosing that structure specifically along the lines of memory reveals at the same time the “existential” dimension of personal identity: when he calls memory the “belly of the mind” (which he admits is a “ridiculous analogy” but nonetheless insists that it expresses something true),³⁵ he implies that his particular experiences, the various relations he forms with people and things, are “spiritually incorporated” into him, so that they become an inseparable part of who he is. This is why he can say that, in a certain respect, memory *is* the self.³⁶ The second observation, which is actually connected to the first, is that—again, in contrast to Aristotle³⁷—for Augustine the principal *tense* in his discussion of memory is not the past, as one might naturally think, but the present: “In the large hall of my memory, . . . heaven, earth, and sea are present [*praeso sunt*] to me, . . . and I can meditate on all these things as if they were

33. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.8 (p. 12).

34. Aristotle, “Memory and Reminiscence,” 1.450a12–25. Memory, he says, belongs “to the primary sense faculty” (τῷ πρώτῳ αἰσθητικῷ).

35. See Augustine, *Confessions* 10.14 (p. 21).

36. See Augustine, *Confessions* 10.17 (p. 26).

37. Aristotle, “Memory and Reminiscence,” 1.449b15. Cf. Thomas Aquinas’s *Commentary on Memory and Reminiscence*, lesson 1, §307.

present [*quasi praesentia*].”³⁸ As we will see in a moment, the emphasis on the present correlates to the Platonic dimension he explores.

Now, the arrival at what we might call a nonmaterial level of being beyond the limits of immediate sense experience leads Augustine to consider a different class of “treasures” held in the memory, namely, knowledge, the grasping of things not essentially dependent on sense experience: abstract notions, “liberal sciences,” numbers and mathematical relations, and so forth. But this class immediately presents a curious conundrum. The sensible things retained in memory were encountered *in* space and time, that is to say, in history, which is why we think of memory as connecting us to the past. Nonmaterial things, like mathematical objects, however, were *not* encountered this way. *When* were they thus encountered? In a sense, this is a misleading question, since it asks after their location in time, so to speak, which is a “category mistake,” insofar as these things transcend matter. Augustine does not attempt to resolve the puzzle of how immaterial objects entered his memory, but simply notes the mystery, describing it in what can be called Platonic terms. It may be the case, he says, that he learned about these nonmaterial truths, such as those of mathematics, at a particular time, but even at that moment, he did not receive what was taught to him simply on trust, as, we might say, one would receive the report of some purely empirical fact that one could not experience directly oneself. Instead, he *recognized* it as true, which is to say that, in some mysterious way, he discovered it as already having been there, so to speak, in his mind. It is important to note, however, that Augustine does not infer from this, in a modern rationalistic fashion, that the mind already precontains all the ideas it is meant to learn. Instead, he preserves an open wonder before the mystery, simply affirming, in one respect, the ideas he comes to know were “not in [his] memory,” but, in another respect, when he learns them, he “re-cognizes” them, which necessarily implies that “they were already in the memory.”³⁹

38. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.8 (p. 14); see also 15 (p. 23), 16 (p. 24–25), and so forth. This presence in memory is different from the immediate presence of actual experience; it is rather a “re-capitulated” present: spiritualized in the proper sense. The eternal objects in memory have no past, of course, but “just are.”

39. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.10 (p. 17).

2.1. Platonic ἀνάμνησις: *Recollection as the soul's path, "further up and further in"*

To clarify and deepen what Augustine briefly indicates here, let us turn to Plato, who is Augustine's principal Greek source, more fundamentally than Aristotle. As we have seen, Aristotle interprets memory as the capacity to retain sense experience. While Plato also accepts this definition of memory (μνήμη), he gives it very little attention, focusing instead on the verbal noun, which is formed by adding the prefix "ἀνα-": ἀνάμνησις, typically translated as "recollection."⁴⁰ The prefix "ἀνα-" has two basic meanings, from which secondary meanings are derived, namely, "to go upwards" (ἀνω) and "to go backwards."⁴¹ From the latter, we have the sense of "going back over," that is, "repeating," which resembles the English prefix "re-."⁴² In this respect, recollection means to "re-member," that is, to call to mind *again* something that was there before. But on the other hand there is the more basic meaning, the movement upward, which proves to be decisive for Plato. "Recollection," interpreted in relation to the primary sense, is an ascent toward what lies above. We might say that to recollect is not so much to (re-)call something to mind but to call the mind itself *upward*. As we will see, it is crucial to keep the coincidence of these senses in mind if we are to have a proper interpretation of Plato.

As is well known, the theme of recollection is central in Plato, and it has regularly presented a certain stumbling block for readers because it seems to be so implausible, at least at first glance. "All learning," he says with his usual flair for dramatic

40. See Plato, *Philebus* 34a: memory is the "preservation of perception." After defining memory thus, Plato immediately contrasts it with ἀνάμνησις, which he describes in terms of the soul's transcendence. This is clearly his principal interest (*Philebus* 34b ff. Cf. *Meno* 81c ff; *Phaedo* 72a ff; and *Phaedrus* 250a ff).

41. See the rich entry for the prefix ἀνα- in Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), available through Perseus Digital Library (<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/>).

42. Interestingly, in the ancient Greek "repetition" tends to mean not so much doing something again in a merely empirical sense, but "re-enforcing" something, renewing its inner strength.

and wide-sweeping claims, “is recollection,”⁴³ which is to say that knowledge is never introduced into the soul simply from the outside as a set of discrete (commodifiable) “objects” in the possession of experts—a view the sophists had a special reason to promote.⁴⁴ Instead, knowledge is drawn *out* of the soul, with the help of a suitable *midwife*, as always already latent within.⁴⁵ One of the more immediate reasons this proposal typically provokes objections is that it presents an anthropology fundamentally at odds with the “blank slate” empiricism that largely dominates our imagination (arguably because it fits so well with the sophistry of our politics and economics).⁴⁶ But there is also a more profound objection: Plato’s doctrine of recollection seems to imply a kind of monolithic conception of the soul, an ultimate solipsism, because the soul is thereby revealed as something fundamentally incapable of encountering anything *other* than what it itself already is, incapable of anything genuinely *new*. On this score, Søren Kierkegaard famously criticized “the Greek notion of recollection” for tracing out an essentially “unhappy” movement, endlessly repeating only what has always already been.⁴⁷

But there is another way to interpret recollection, which seems truer to the spirit of Plato. Like Augustine, Plato does not present his doctrine in a rationalist fashion as a set of discrete propositions; he intimates it, steeping it in an essentially religious mystery.⁴⁸ The mythological imagery in which he cloaks it, while perhaps evoking wonder, nevertheless frustrates logic,

43. Plato, *Meno* 81d.

44. Plato, *Republic* 518b–c.

45. Plato, *Theaetetus* 148e–151d.

46. John Locke is a principal figure here. I have argued elsewhere that there is an essential connection between the radical empiricism of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and the revolutionary political theory of his *Second Treatise on Government*. See D. C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

47. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. and trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 131. We will return to this.

48. Socrates classifies the doctrine among the “divine matters” (τὰ θεῖα πράγματα) (Plato, *Meno* 81a).

and thus demands properly philosophical interpretation.⁴⁹ Plato affirms that the apparently “a priori” presence of certain truths in the soul suggests that the soul must have learned what is true at some “time” before it was born—which is to say, at some time (ἐν προτέρῳ τινὶ χρόνῳ) before it entered time.⁵⁰ We saw a similar tension, not to say outright contradiction, in Augustine. With this affirmation, Plato is evidently attempting to hold together two opposed claims in a single paradox: on the one hand, the soul *does* come to learn, which is to say the knowledge it acquires is not simply a constitutive part of the soul but instead something it receives at a particular moment from outside of itself; on the other hand, the soul possesses this knowledge as something that has already lain within it. In other words, truth *enters* the soul precisely in the mode of *having already been there*. Plato emphasizes the paradox by drawing out what he takes to be the implication: rather than leading to the despair of stagnation, because the soul already has within itself what it most desires (which would in fact spell the end of any desire),⁵¹ or the despair of never being able to have in itself what it most desires (which would likewise spell the end of desire because the a priori impossibility of its goal would make desire both aimless and fruitless),⁵² Plato takes the “doctrine of recollection” to imply a noble search. It is noble because it requires constant effort, because it demands courage and sacrifice, because it is not set on the slackness of immediate gratification but celebrates the continuous call upward to what is excellent, and because it is teleologically structured, that is, it has purpose and meaning.⁵³

49. What summons thought (to a higher level) for Plato is the manifestation of contradiction, which demands some resolution (*Republic* 7.524d).

50. Plato, *Phaedo* 72e.

51. Francisco Gonzalez is right to connect Plato’s notion of recollection and his notion of eros: see his insightful essay, “How Is the Truth of Being in the Soul? Interpreting *Anamnesis* in Plato,” *Elenchos* 28, no. 2 (2007): 275–302; see also Lauro Candiotti, “The Divine Feeling: The Epistemic Function of Erotic Desire in Plato’s Theory of Recollection,” *Philosophia* 48, no. 4 (2020): 445–62.

52. In his famous book on love, Denis de Rougemont shows how such an a priori impossibility of consummation inevitably takes the form of narcissism: *Love in the Western World* (New York: Fawcett Premier Books, 1969).

53. Plato, *Meno* 86b–c. We might compare this to the “noble risk” that Plato discusses in *Phaedo* 114d–e.

If there is any doubt that Plato identifies recollection with this sort of self-transcendence, rather than simply with the endless repetition of the same, we ought to consider an aspect of his presentation that stands out more clearly than it does in Augustine, even while being in harmony with it. Plato's most vivid and dramatic account of recollection occurs in the famous "recantation" speech of the *Phaedrus*.⁵⁴ Here, recollection is depicted as the journey, upward *beyond the limits* of the cosmos, that is, the world of nature,⁵⁵ of the soul's winged chariot, which is driven by beauty, until it reaches the transcendent realm of truth. Recollection is clearly not the soul's "auto-erotic" indulging in what already belongs to it, but its "ec-stasy," its movement outside of what is customarily present. The journey motif is reinforced by the setting of the dialogue, which has Socrates—the only time in all of Plato's dialogues⁵⁶—venture out *beyond the city walls* to find a place of beauty, set apart from the mundane activities of the city. This insistence on the "ec-static" movement in the act of recollection—which, again, Plato emphasizes more clearly than Augustine, who focuses more evidently on the movement into the interior of the self—does not exclude the notion that self-transcendence is also, and at the same time, a journey inward, into the innermost depths of the soul. It *does* exclude, however, the notion that recollection is a mere self-enclosure, a "navel-gazing" or narcissistic preoccupation with the permanently stored and available contents of one's own soul. Whatever else it may be, Platonic recollection is clearly not a bourgeois retreat into privatized subjectivity.⁵⁷

54. Plato, *Phaedrus* 244a ff.

55. Plato describes it not as a place lying in heaven, and thus still within the natural world absolutely speaking, but "beyond even heaven" (τὸν δὲ ὑπερουράνιον τόπον) (*Phaedrus* 247c).

56. That is, if one excepts the story, recounted as a past event, of Socrates's military campaign in the *Symposium* (219e ff.). In the *Crito* (cf. 54b-c), he comes to the conclusion that he will never leave Athens—unless the Good commands it. Note the irony implicit in the *Phaedrus*: the dialogue that seems to lock the self inside its own limits through the doctrine of recollection is the very one that stresses the movement out beyond the boundaries of the self.

57. See Josef Pieper's interpretation in *Enthusiasm and Divine Madness* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2019).

How can we make philosophical sense of this strange paradox, in which the soul strives with all its might to reach a destination it has always already attained? One way is to say that truth, beauty, and goodness—the most transcendent realities, and thus the ultimate “objects” of recollection⁵⁸—do indeed enter the soul as something other than it, something the soul can genuinely *en-counter*. In this respect, they are radically different from any sort of Kantian a priori,⁵⁹ but they enter specifically *from above*, rather than merely *from without*, like a sensible image. Or we might say more generally that a genuinely transcendent reality, which as such lies above the soul as a matter of its essence, can *enter* the soul, to the extent that it does, only *from within*. It is difficult for us to grasp this because the modern imagination is virtually unable to avoid reducing the mind’s encounter with its objects to a collision, so to speak, of physical *things*. To the extent that the encounter is thus subsumed within a wholly materialist horizon, the mind’s objects would have to be either inside it (already) or outside it (as yet to be encountered). But a nonmaterial thing *can* be in two “places” at once, and it is not restricted to the sequentiality of time. It can “come into” me as being “already there.” In this case, its precedence, its “a priority,” is a kind of excellence to which the soul must elevate itself. We recall that the prefix to *anamnēsis* can indicate either the repetition of something already present or the ascent toward what lies above. The point is that these are inseparable.

Plato’s notion of *anamnēsis*, thus interpreted, helps us to see something only implicit in Augustine’s account, something that distinguishes it in a fundamental way from the Aristotelian notion: if memory is not simply that whereby we take into ourselves sensible images, bounded in space and time, but even more fundamentally that whereby we relate ourselves to the truth, beauty, and goodness that essentially *transcend* these bounds,⁶⁰ it

58. Although Plato will often illustrate the doctrine through mathematic objects, what seems to disclose the matter most essentially is the “divine madness” inspired by beauty, which leads to the eschatological realm of truth and goodness.

59. Kant’s a priori forms, categories, and ideas are structures that are constitutive of reason rather than realities encountered as other.

60. Note that this is *not* meant in a dualistic fashion; one can require the mediation of sense experience even for things that exceed the limits of the sensible.

means that memory ought not to be defined only in terms of a relation to the past, as it is in Aristotle and, at least apparently, in Aquinas.⁶¹ Instead, we can reinterpret memory more inclusively as implying a relation to “what comes before,” recognizing two senses to this phrase (which reflect the ambiguity of the prefix of *anamnēsis*). On the one hand, there is the more obvious chronological sense of precedence, but, on the other hand, there is what we might call a qualitative sense, a precedence in excellence (*aretē*), in dignity or honor—a quality that, for Plato, is essentially connected with transcendence.⁶² What “comes before” me is what is “greater than I,” which I acknowledge, so to speak, as laying a claim on me before I lay a claim on it, or, in other words, as presenting an authority to which I am in a certain sense subject. We may also interpret the “abidingness” that pertains to memory, in its capacity to preserve, not simply as a continuation within time, but as a transcendence of time altogether. Understood in this way, for Plato memory is what connects us to the transcendent order of truth, beauty, and goodness, supreme realities that present the proper measure of human existence, because they are realities of which we are not the governing origin but which instead we must receive in a spirit of gratitude.⁶³ Memory is that whereby these transcendent realities become effective in our actual life. Here, incidentally, we see the connection between memory and conscience that Joseph Ratzinger highlights,⁶⁴ as

61. It is ambiguous in Aquinas insofar as, in his mature writings, he locates memory in one respect in the intellect (which, qua spiritual, transcends time and space) rather than defining it as a sensitive power, but he nevertheless preserves the essential relation to the past connected with memory as a sensitive power. See *ST I*, q. 79, a. 6 ad 2.

62. The phrase “beyond being,” traditionally interpreted in an ontological sense, most directly runs thus: “the good is beyond being, surpassing it in honor [or rank] and power” (Plato, *Republic* 6.509b). But this does not mean that the traditional interpretation is false.

63. The good is the ultimate measure of all things precisely because it is the most complete and perfect. See Plato, *Republic* 6504b–c, and 504e–505a.

64. See Joseph Ratzinger, *On Conscience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007). Ratzinger connects the two by associating *anamnēsis* with Bonaventure’s notion of *synderēsis*. While it is indeed true that Bonaventure himself rejected the reduction of learning to recollection, as Robert Davis points out in “The Force of Union: Affect and Ascent in the Theology of Bonaventure” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012), 31–34; see Bonaventure, *2 Sent* d. 39, a. 1, q.

well as the connection between transcendence and tradition that lies so centrally in the work of Augusto Del Noce, and specifically in his diagnosis of the crisis of modernity.⁶⁵ At the heart of this connection lies memory. We will return to the cultural significance of memory below.

This “Platonic interlude” has placed us in a good position now to consider the principal aim Augustine was pursuing in his account of memory in the *Confessions*, namely, the relation to God. Again, because of our impoverished conception of memory as mere power to retain information, we tend to find Augustine’s pursuit of God along the paths of memory strange and perhaps even problematic, insofar as it would threaten to reduce our relation to God to a “thing of the past.” But the Platonic notion of *anamnēsis* has opened up for us why the path Augustine follows is not only possible but indispensable. The path of memory is one that leads not only backward, into the past, but at the same time, and even more fundamentally, *inward* and *upward*—“Further up and further in!”⁶⁶—into the transcendent order of truth, beauty, and goodness. There is, in fact, no other path to God. God lies “above” my highest heights and is “more inward” than my innermost being.⁶⁷ Here lies the paradox, which we have glimpsed in Plato, but which shines out with a particular brilliance in Augustine: God is not, so to speak, a “built in” part of the essence of the soul, always already there as a function of itself.⁶⁸ Instead,

2, concl. It should be noted that Bonaventure is here rejecting recollection as a banal, temporal repetition (i.e., recollection in the form we have criticized). In fact, we see that Ratzinger is justified in drawing the connection when we consider Bonaventure’s description of *syndērēsis* in terms that recall Augustine’s sense of memory (and through Augustine, Plato): *syndērēsis* is the “*apex mentis*.” See the sixth step of Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*.

65. See Carlo Lancellotti, “The Idea of Tradition in Del Noce,” *Humanum: Issues in Family, Culture, and Science* (2021), available at <https://humanumreview.com/articles/the-idea-of-tradition-in-del-noce>.

66. The phrase is taken from a well-known passage in C. S. Lewis’s *The Last Battle*, as a description of the eschaton.

67. Augustine, *Confessions* 10.6 (p. 11). It should be noted that this text (*interior intimo meo*) is often referenced without including the radical transcendence inseparable from it (*superior summo meo*).

68. The heresy of “ontologism” assumes precisely this, namely, that God is so inseparable from the soul as to be effectively a constitutive part, to which the soul has immediate cognitive access. The Church condemned various aspects

even more than the truths that lie beyond the bounds of space and time, God radically transcends the soul, infinitely exceeding its own most metaphysical depths. At the same time, when the soul encounters God, it does not encounter him as if he were a discrete sensible object (even if the encounter is essentially *mediated* by an experience in the flesh), present now but absent beforehand. Instead, the soul discovers God—and *can* discover God—*only as always already having been there*.⁶⁹ The path of memory that Augustine follows is one along which we pursue God only to (re-)discover ourselves as always already having been pursued by God. This reversal is of course a constant theme in the *Confessions* and arguably constitutes its most essential ethos.

2.2. Old Testament זָכַר: Remembrance as renewal

This discovery allows us to open up yet another dimension of memory, a (literally) surprising dimension that would have been wholly unanticipated by Plato.⁷⁰ One of the dangers of a “purely Greek” conception of recollection is that it tends to *absorb* memory, so to speak, into the relation to the transcendent. Augustine famously attributes to Platonism, as it were, his initial conversion *from* the materialism of Manicheism, but then, somewhat paradoxically perhaps, he criticizes the Platonists precisely for abandoning materialism, or in other words for forgetting the humble “flesh” of the Incarnation.⁷¹ The reversal we have just seen pres-

of what came to be known as ontologism at various times in the nineteenth century, most comprehensively in a formal rejection of a set of propositions drawn from the work of Rev. Antonio Rosmini in 1887.

69. See my critique of Thomas Joseph White for neglecting this dimension in “Discovering What Has Already Been Given: On a Recent Defense of Thomistic Natural Theology,” in *The Catholicity of Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 262–304.

70. One might argue that Plato intuits this dimension in his insistence on the philosopher’s “going down” into the cave, precisely as a fruit of the vision of the Good (*Republic* 7.519c–520a). The development of a kind of “theurgy,” or in other words a ritual and social *practice as essential* to contemplation, is in this respect not an artificial accretion to Neoplatonism, but rather a natural development of its internal logic. This becomes especially clear in the work of Proclus.

71. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9 (pp. 13–15).

ents essentially a “reconnection” of the transcendent and the immanent, in other words, a “recollection” of the finite on the basis of the infinite; it opens the contemplative dimension of memory to the field of *action*. When Kierkegaard expressed a dissatisfaction with the “Greek” notion of recollection (which we have seen was based on a misunderstanding, even if it intuited something true), he contrasted it with what he characterized as its opposite: in the place of “recollection,” which Kierkegaard interprets as a “repetition backward” and thus as the movement of an “unhappy love,” he proposed “repetition” (*Gjentagelsen*: literally, “to take again”), which is a “recollection forward,” and therefore essentially hopeful. He seems to have conceived this (too one-sidedly) as the Christian counterpart to Greek recollection,⁷² and described it as a happy love:

Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy.⁷³

We will offer reasons below for rejecting the identification of repetition with the Christian notion of memory without significant further qualification, and *opposing* it to the Greek notion of recollection, but Kierkegaard’s notion nevertheless bears an illuminating resemblance to the Hebrew sense of “remembrance”: *zeker*.

Memory plays a role so central in the Old Testament that the entire account of the relation between God and Israel may be said to revolve around it—on both sides, as it were: “Remember these things, O Jacob and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you, you are my servant; O Israel *you will not be forgotten by me*” (Is 44:21). On the one hand, every act of Israel’s obedient response to God takes the form of remembrance.⁷⁴ On the

72. We might see this as a sign of his debt to Luther, who absolutized the difference between the Christian and the pagan out of a concern for recovering the purity of Scripture.

73. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 131.

74. On the centrality of memory in Jewish life, see the authoritative text by Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989).

other hand—and here we see a radical difference from the world of Plato—God, too, remembers man: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or have no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you” (Is 49:15). In the Old Testament, memory is not in the first place a power in the merely cognitive order, concerned with the interiorization of images and, as we have seen, grasping the transcendent realities of goodness, truth, and beauty in a participatory way. Instead, for the Hebrew mind, memory is essentially connected with some form of “doing”;⁷⁵ “to remember” is, for example, “to have compassion for.” As Johannes Pederson explains, the request that God remember his servant is a request that he bless him, that he give him favor and bestow good things upon him—not simply that he think about his servant, or in other words place him before his mind in a state of intellectual indifference, in a merely “factual” way. To remember sins, from this perspective, is to punish them, which is why the sinner’s petition is “remember not our transgressions” (Ps 25:7). This does not mean, “Eliminate them from your knowledge!” which of course is not possible for the divine mind, but simply, “*Have mercy on us!*” If to forget in this case means to disregard the transgressions so that they do not amount to anything, so to speak, to remember would mean to allow a thing to retain its actual significance, to have its due effect.

For God to remember his covenant is to remain faithful to what he has (*actually*) promised, perhaps in spite of his partner’s faithlessness.⁷⁶ On the other hand, for Israel to remember God and his (covenantal) law is precisely to conform to it, and to God in it, in obedience: the most important Jewish prayer, the “Shema Israel,” is a listening that is itself an obeying, and the obeying is a remembrance founded on a recollection of the truth of God and his wondrous deeds: “Thus, you shall remember to observe all my commandments and to be holy to your God. I am Adonai, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am Adonai your God.”⁷⁷ In this regard, the act

75. See Johannes Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 106ff.

76. Gn 9:15; Ex 2:24, 6:5; Lv 26:42; Dt 4:31; Ps 106:45, 108:8; Ez 16:60; 1 Chr 16:15.

77. See *B'chol Ivavcha*, 3rd ed. (New York: CCAR Press, 2021), 117.

of memory is not so much a taking *in* to the soul of something that lies outside of it, so to speak, but instead a bringing of the whole of oneself, body and soul, from one's inner depths to one's outer surface, into a participatory unity with what remains other ("You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. . . . Bind [these] instructions as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead"). We note now in passing, though we will come back to this point, that these two dimensions, the interior and the external, or the taking the other in and the binding of oneself to the other, do not exclude each other in principle.

The reason for the emphasis on the active dimension of memory in the Old Testament is due to the nature of God: the God of Israel is one who *acts*, and his actions *remain* active, which is to say his deeds continue to bear fruit beyond themselves ever after.⁷⁸ In other words, he is essentially a *living* God, and life is always "forward looking" and "pro-ductive." God creates, which is to say that he brings something other than himself into being where before there was nothing; he blesses what he thus brings into being, which means he imparts to his creatures a repetition, so to speak, of his proliferating power: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gn 1:28). He does not first respond but *calls* his people, and his calling is a blessing that continues to call forth further blessings: "I will bless you," God says to Abraham, "and you will be a blessing, . . . and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gn 12:2-3). He does not come to his people except to *lead them forward*, delivering them *from* enslavement, *across* the Sea of Reeds, *through* the desert, and *to* a land that he will give to them. In this respect, the act of remembrance is not so much a "binding back," like the religion of the pagans (*re-ligio*, *re-ligare*: "to bind back"), as it is a liberation toward ever-greater life. And life is hope: "Remember the word to your servant, upon which you have caused me *to hope*" (Ps 119:49).

Remembrance as obedience is not an *ad hoc* activity, so to speak, the occasional calling of God to mind by an isolated individual at one moment or another, but by its very nature takes the form of ritual, which is to say the performing of prescribed acts, not just by the individual, but more fundamentally by the people,

78. See G. Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952).

that is, the family and the community. Thus, remembrance is not just related to action, as Pederson observed, but is specifically *re*-action, or to speak more adequately, reenactment. This makes sense, of course, if the God whom Israel remembers is one who has acted in history, in a particular way and at a particular time and place.⁷⁹ God's action is both particular and definitive: a "concrete universal." Israel's reenactment is therefore not simply the imaginative dramatization of a timeless myth, as it is for pagans, but an actual "repetition"—to use Kierkegaard's word—of a particular event that had, and will continue to have, real consequences. Thus, we find that all the essential Jewish feasts and holidays, all the basic acts of worship—from the most obvious in this context, such as Passover, to the most important, the High Holy Days, to the most regular, the keeping of the Sabbath—are lived as reenactments of actual realities or events.⁸⁰

But this repetition is also a "recollection *forward*." The ritual is not simply a mnemonic device intended to help the Israelites recall an event that once occurred at some time in the distant past, which is to say, it is not a "mechanical reproduction" of something otherwise absent. Instead, the remembrance is precisely a *re-en-act-ment*; it is a bringing of the past event once again *into the present*, a re-presentation, which is possible because, as we already said, the power of the living God does not fade away, but remains *effective*: "The chief function of the [Old Testament] cult was to actualize the tradition. Israel celebrated in her seasonal festivals the great redemptive acts of the past both to renew the tradition and to participate in its power."⁸¹ God's action is a permanent blessing. In this respect, the reenactment, by making the original event present again, is a *renewal* of God's blessing, which was given in a way that is both definitive, "once-and-for-all," and remains infinitely fruitful and thus ever open for further fulfillments. What *God* remembers is specifically *his promise*; when the Israelites remember God, they are thus not

79. See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 272.

80. See J. Robert Cosand, "The Theology of Remembrance in the Cultus of Israel" (PhD diss., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1995).

81. Brevard S. Childs, *Memory and Tradition in Israel* (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1962), 75.

being taken from the present into the past but, precisely to the contrary, opened up to the future. Thus, Jewish remembrance makes God effectively present in the world. This does not mean that the ritual is a form of magic or superstition, by which one would “cause” God to act as the result of one’s own activity. Instead, it is just the opposite: the activity here is precisely *not* one’s own; instead, one enters *into* an act that God himself has given, an act established by God to be repeated in a *given* way, at a *given* time, in a *given* place. Remembrance is thus a deferential entry into God’s precedence, into what has “come before” one, again both chronologically and in the order of excellence.

We will fail to grasp the depth of Jewish memory if we simply contrast it to the Greek form, as Kierkegaard effectively did. It is better to see it as a *fulfillment* of that form, which allows a greater insight into both. In Plato, we saw that recollection is memory’s participation in goodness, truth, and beauty, which is to say its (continual)⁸² ascent to what transcends it, and therefore always in some sense exceeds it. In this respect, we might say, somewhat paradoxically, that the soul properly speaking never (quite) catches up to what it recollects; it is never finished remembering. Thus, the movement forward does not run contrary to Greek recollection but instead makes evident the abiding transcendence of that *in* which the soul participates. It is not possible to recollect what transcends the soul simply by resting contemplatively within one’s innermost soul; instead, the contemplative participation requires the individual’s coming out of himself to participate with others in a greater reality, which continues thus to radiate its being greater, or, in other words, retains its blessing. In this respect, Augustine’s (re-)discovery of God through his journey into his memory is not an exclusive “intro-version” but coincides with his incorporation into the life of the Church.⁸³

82. Although in the *Symposium* Plato presents the “distance” of the Good, and thus the self-transcending of eros, as belonging to the “interim” state, and not to eschatological perfection, it is clear that transcendence defines the Good in its essence rather than being a merely transitional and relative aspect. In this case, there would have to be “wonder” all the way up. Thomas Aquinas derives just this implication in a remarkable text, *Summa contra Gentiles* 2.62.9.

83. For a recent correction of previous tendencies to “spiritualize” Augustine’s ecclesiology as the soul’s inward relation to God in a one-sided

Let us take a final step. The Jewish *zikkaron*, which is the memorial as record, as place, and as object, ought to be seen as a kind of “real-ization” of the abiding transcendence, a public embodiment of the presence of what is recalled. Reenactment thus involves both interiority and exteriority. On the one hand, the only way to receive God and the goodness, truth, and beauty he *gives*—and *is*—is through (“pre-scribed”) action, which makes God’s presence present; such action is thus not an empty “going through the motions,” repeated for no real reason other than social inertia, but it is precisely the form of profound inward participation in God’s goodness. The movement forward is a return back, and vice versa; one cannot take God into one’s soul without a movement outward, without involving the whole of one’s self, which is to say without *bodily* engagement. On the other hand, while memory does indeed lie at the innermost core of the self, it is at the same time an outward form into which one enters through one’s actual movements, and this of course involves the body, which means by implication it inescapably involves the *things* of the body. We recall, in other words, not just the *idea* of God but the *reality* of God, and we recall it not just with our idealizing mind but with the whole reality of our person—indeed, with the reality of *the people* to whom we belong—because the reality comes before us in history, in a form that God himself has instituted through his acts, which are definitive and infinitely fruitful. These remembered deeds reveal their definitiveness by remaining there, before us, in their concrete reality.

2.3. Roman monumentum as abiding power to remind

This brings us to a further dimension of memory, namely, the embodied, institutional aspect of what we have come to call “collective memory,”⁸⁴ or “cultural memory.” In an essay on the nature of authority, Hannah Arendt proposed that Augustine was able to recognize the significance of memory and give it the lofty

sense, see James K. Lee, *Augustine and the Mystery of the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), esp. introduction and chap. 2.

84. See Maurice Halbwachs, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en terre sainte: Étude de mémoire collective* (Paris: PUF, 1941).

place he did precisely because he was *Roman*.⁸⁵ According to the classicist Alain Gowing, “Romans attached a heightened importance to memory, which manifests itself in almost every aspect of their existence, from celebrations of the dead to oratory to law, suffusing and animating their art, their buildings, and their literature.”⁸⁶ What we have in this fundamental source of the Western world is what one might call the distinctively human dimension of memory, its *real* presence in human existence.⁸⁷ In contrast to the Greeks, and more in alignment with the Jews, the Romans grasped that what constitutes human identity is not (only) a relation to the transcendent order as eternal, but (also) the history of what precedes a particular people in time. What distinguishes the Romans from the Jews, however, is that their history is not in the first place what is *given* by God but what is made by man: the *artifact*. The Romans *make memory*, and the memory they make defines who they are specifically as a people. Roman memory is a *memoria publica*,⁸⁸ for them, memorializing and making culture are virtually identical.

When we say that history is artifact, we must nevertheless recognize that “artifact” means something different with respect to the Romans than it tends to do for us; there is an essential “depth dimension” in the Roman sense that is difficult for us to grasp, arguably because we have lost a sense of the substance of memory. While, for us, art has immediately “individualistic” and “subjective” resonances, for the Roman it is altogether at the service of something greater, namely, the city, the *res publica*, and eventually the empire of Rome. The *root* of Roman memory in this case is not, most fundamentally, transcendent truth or God’s deed, but an actual human doing, which has taken place in time:

85. Hannah Arendt, “What Is Authority?,” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 126. In fact, she claims he was the only great Roman philosopher.

86. Alain Gowing, *Empire and Memory: The Representations of the Roman Republic in Imperial Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 2.

87. Rémi Brague’s well-known book on the essence of European identity, *Eccentric Culture: A Theory of Western Civilization* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2002), is entitled, in the original French, *La voie romaine* (“the Roman way”), a title that could not be used because of the classic book by Edith Hamilton of that name.

88. The phrase is used by Cicero in *De oratione* 2.52.

the founding of Rome. We might call the city the “Ur-artifact,” the artifact in and for which all other artifacts are made. This original making is in this way perpetuated in ever-new remakings. Though the founding occurs in time, at a particular moment, it does not pass away with the passing of that moment but continues to “live on” through the human creations that “memorialize” it. Rome is of course “the Eternal City,” even if its immortality is not in the first place eschatological. It is part of the meaning of the event, precisely *as* a founding event, to be given a kind of “idealized” existence in art, which is why the origins of Rome were recounted so often,⁸⁹ and why these poetic creations remained so precious to the people. The *reality* of Rome is neither the actual historical event alone nor the poetic idealization alone, but a *tertium quid* that arises from the interplay between them.⁹⁰

Here we see the significance of the “monument,” understood in the broad sense and not merely in the most evident sense of a commemorative sculpture or building. A “monument” is a *thing*, a reality that is meant to endure, the purpose of which is, through its presence, “to bring something to mind” (from *monere*, meaning “to remind,” “to call to mind”; note the reference to mind, *mens*).⁹¹ One of the great manifestations of Roman genius (in many senses of the phrase)⁹² is the tableau Virgil paints in his recounting of the prehistory of Rome’s founding: Aeneas left for his mission to found what would eventually become the empire of Augustus carrying his now-aged father over his shoulder, while his father in turn carried the sacred objects of the household that Aeneas himself was not permitted to touch.⁹³

89. By Livy, for example, and most famously by Virgil, at the request of Augustus, who in a sense meant to “re-found” Rome, not as something utterly new, but as that which has a remembered history.

90. For an in-depth exposition of what is meant by this, see Catherine Edwards, *Writing Rome: Textual Approaches to the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

91. See Pieper, “Corporeal Memory,” 407.

92. See the fascinating exposition of the original meaning of the word “genius” in ancient literature: Richard Braxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 121–67.

93. Because he had killed enemies in battle, Aeneas was unclean. For the “tableau,” see Virgil, *Aeneid* 2.716–17.

Aeneas, the “present,” ventures into the future only by bringing along with him the burden, so to speak, of the past, and the past that he brings forward does not lie simply in the mind of his father but in the sacred objects taken by hand from the family home. The *things* that the Romans preserve in their culture contain in themselves, so to speak, the significance of the original act, and thus they have the power to remind those who dwell in their presence.

Now, what is most glorious, what most fully manifests the greatness of man, is the *deed*. But a human deed, as such, “effervesces,” even if its effects reverberate through time. Deeds have to be given a form that outlasts their particular appearance; as Kierkegaard said, every hero—to *be* a hero—needs his poet.⁹⁴ Aeneas, in this respect, is not just the present but a figure of Virgil himself, carrying forward the essence of Rome through the “sacred thing” of his literary creation. Again, because of our predominant “bourgeois metaphysics,”⁹⁵ we tend to envision poetic idealization, somewhat cynically, as a “self-glorification”: one cannot bear, in one’s self-love, to think of oneself as fading from significance, as here today but gone tomorrow, so one seeks some vehicle for a kind of immanent immortality. While there is certainly *some* truth to this view—though we would need to avoid a merely negative interpretation of the desire for immortality—it misses the deeper meaning of this artistic transformation of the ephemeral event, the transformation of deed into monument. The “memorialization” precisely *publicizes* the event, which is to say it gives the event a public reality, elevating it beyond the possession of a single individual, so to speak, and transferring it to the people. The idealization gives the thing a “suprapersonal” character, an endurance beyond the limited existence of the individual and a significance not only *to* the whole but *for* the whole: it becomes, literally, a *res publica*. Thus, the great lives of the Roman individuals—their *summi viri*—became *exempla* through the work of a Livy or a Plutarch, not to mention through the statuary that adorn their public spaces. This work idealizes those lives and precisely thereby offers them to the people as abiding models for

94. Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, 15–16.

95. This phrase is inspired by Robert Spaemann’s essay, “Bourgeois Ethics and Non-Teleological Ontology,” in *The Robert Spaemann Reader*, 45–59.

their own lives. We thus see why the Romans loved and cultivated processions, tombs, festivals, inscriptions, works of art, not to mention the institutions of law, and why they sought to *instantiate* their great souls or great deeds in (relatively) permanent stone, in statues and buildings.⁹⁶

Nevertheless, what is most enduring, and therefore dearest, to the Romans is literature, which can last even longer than stone: the great keepers, and indeed “curators,” of Roman memory were the orators, who embodied the culture in words.⁹⁷ It is interesting, in this regard, to consider one of the profound differences between the Greeks and the Romans: as Jacques Le Goff has observed, while the Greeks (as we saw) disparaged writing precisely in view of memory, the Romans celebrated it.⁹⁸ The reason for both is that writing *externalizes* memory, takes it out of the interiority of the soul, so to speak. For the Romans, this is precisely what constitutes its benefit, because, by rendering it thus “suprapersonal,” writing—or even better, *inscription*—plants the memory in the “collective mind” by putting it in the collective space, so to speak. Memory thus defines, not principally the individual but the people, giving them a transcendent and abiding identity that they can recognize and celebrate together. The individual, as a member of this community, is in this case never merely an individual but “contains multitudes”; in other words, he holds within himself, within his own participation in memory, the history of all those who went before him, even if he is not always subjectively conscious of this fact. Memory essentially exceeds subjective self-awareness. The point of a *monument*, in short, is that it represents the “deposit” of memory, an objective presence, a real thing, which is not simply dead “stuff” but contains, as it were, the spiritual reality, the idealized memory, of the deed, the event, and its “value” or “meaning.” We might say, in

96. Note here that the art of memory famously “maps on” to physical space. See Yates, *The Art of Memory*. Rather than seeing this technique as merely accidentally helpful, a good “trick” to help one remember, we ought to think of it as revealing something essential about memory: it is not simply a taking into the soul of some piece of information, but a reality that one inhabits oneself, an “in-habiting” that involves the whole person.

97. Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 16.

98. See Jacques Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 58–68.

general, that material culture is constituted by such monuments, not only memorials of particular events but embodied markers of the things that define a people, preserving their history, their traditions, and all those things they keep as “treasures” (*thesauri*): the “real-ization” of their love.

To say it again, it is not necessary to oppose the interiority of Greek recollection and the exteriority of the Roman monument as irreconcilable. Instead, we can see the Roman form as bringing the Greek insight to a certain perfection: the very transcendence of truth, beauty, and goodness means that these ultimate realities cannot be possessed by an individual *alone*, simply within solitary contemplation.⁹⁹ Memory, as the preservation of what abides, does not belong to the individual except to the extent that the individual binds himself to memory. Thus, just as such possession spills over into action, so too does it spill over into the definitive artifacts of culture, which makes their suprapersonality (effectively) permanent. At the same time, this “in-carnation” of the transcendent content of memory gives these universal ideas a distinctive historical mood and color, expressive of the unique circumstances of a particular people living at a particular time. Viewing the Roman monument along these lines, that is, as essentially connected to the Greek *anamnēsis*, allows us to see that, at its best, memorialization is not *vainglory*, an empty show, but is filled with a great truth, so that the monument does not simply reflect the people narcissistically back to itself, but it opens the people, as a whole, to an order that exceeds them. This dimension, no doubt, requires a transformation in order to be properly sustained;¹⁰⁰ specifically, it needs to be taken up into the (Jewish dimension of the) divine order, which is initiated by God as a grace; in other words, it needs to be received as a gift.¹⁰¹

99. It is worth noting that Plato already intuited this in his insistence that the philosopher “go down” into the public sphere as a fruit of his “individual” contemplation, which I have argued is what opens his thought to *writing*. See the Coda, “Restoring Appearances,” of my book, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 283–336.

100. It is well known that Augustine’s *City of God* is, to a significant degree, a critique of the *libido dominandi* that he takes to be inseparable from the Roman aspiration to empire.

101. The theme of self-affirmation *as gift*, or, in other words, the coincidence of dependence (self-reception) and independence (active self-becoming) is one

III. AN ATTEMPT AT A GENERAL DEFINITION

We are now in a position to begin gathering up the elements we have (quite schematically) unfolded here with the aim of reformulating, at least as an initial attempt, a robust definition of *memory* beyond the impoverished imagination of our age. We have come a long way from the notion of memory as mere “storage capacity for information,” but it is important to see that we have not simply left this aspect behind; instead, the reflection has deepened and expanded it beyond itself. Indeed, memory is a “great hall, filled with treasures,” as Augustine said, in which the various things one has experienced and learned are stored up and preserved, things that give substance to one’s life, give depth, gravity, color, and texture—in short, make one’s life *meaning-full*. There is a properly human way of retaining experience and ideas, which differs from the merely mechanical repetition of data. This way involves the recognition that what we hold onto, what we take into the center of our being, gives us life, connects us to others, opens us to the transcendent order—that is, to God. The lived experiences of the transcendent truth take flesh in us, and then we pass them on to others in an incarnate way. Thus, the “memorials” that bind us to God and transcendent goodness, truth, and beauty, at the very same time bind us to each other.

Interpreted in this way, memory is not a “storage container,” circumscribed within one’s individual being; it is, instead, much more something of an opening, within the innermost core of one’s being, to what *precedes* one, what is *already there*, what is *given*. On the one hand, as we have seen, this precedence is a priority in ontological dignity: in memory, one opens from within one’s being to the “permanent things,” to the transcendent realities of truth, beauty, and goodness, to the timeless meaning of nature, to the order of the cosmos, and ultimately to God. On the other hand, the precedence is that of actuality: memory is the reception of what comes before us in time, not only the basic experiences that have made each of us who we are, but the greater history in which we share, a history constituted by the “words and deeds,” the “works and days,” both great and

of the central themes of the thought of Ferdinand Ulrich. See, for example, his *Gegenwart der Freiheit* (Freiburg i.Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1974).

ordinary, of our forebears, and above all of God himself, who entered *into* history, ultimately in order to prepare a dwelling place, a “great hall filled with treasures,” in himself—which is to say, in the memory, the “bosom,” of the Father. This memory quite literally exceeds us in its actuality in being something we are given to repeat, to “re-live” again and again in the tradition we receive and pass on, and in the “deposit” of the material culture that provides the (literal) ground on which our existence has its place. Memory is *anamnēsis*, *zeker*, and *monumentum*; in short, it is that by which we participate in what is greater than ourselves.

A further aspect implied by what has emerged in these reflections is that memory is not simply opposed to forgetting. Instead, we have seen that a certain “normativity” is essential to it, once we have established that memory’s reference to what “comes before” is not simply empirical but even more fundamentally rooted in ontological dignity. Memory is *essentially* a matter of what is ideal, what genuinely warrants preservation. Here we see another radical difference between genuinely human memory and the merciless recording of any and every detail of what has been, which evidently governs our cyber-“culture.” Real memory is not indiscriminate but leaves behind what is not worth knowing; it tests everything and holds only onto what is best. Moreover, if we recall that the ideal at the heart of memory is a living reality, the blessing of the presence of God, we understand that, even in its honoring the past, memory does not imprison us in the despair of the “has been,” but is precisely to the contrary the deepest opening to the future. There is no genuine hope without memory.

To say it again, memory is that by which we participate in what is greater than ourselves. By characterizing this participation specifically as memory, we bring to light the fact that what is greater than us, which exceeds us as “higher than our highest heights,” nevertheless does not remain extrinsic to us as a merely abstract and ever-unattainable ideal, a merely external form that we observe by “going through the motions,” or mere outward trappings, empty possessions, so much “dead weight.” Instead, it is “more interior to me than I am to myself”; it is an always greater reality that I nevertheless recapitulate within myself *as my very own*. What is above us must penetrate into us and, at the same time, must be embodied in the things around us,

which are thus not mere “disposables” but reveal their abiding significance, their *transcendence*, in being inherited and passed on. Such a *traditio* is the moving image, so to speak, of the eternity of what is recalled.

Memory is thus the abiding presence of God and of the things that matter, a presence that radiates from the things around us, the material culture that establishes our home in the world. As we saw in Augustine, memory is that by which what is “other” than us is incorporated into our spiritual being, so to speak, and thus made present—present not only *to* us, but also *in* us, so that we ourselves become “monuments,” that is, witnesses that remind others of what we have all been given. In this way, memory thus becomes not only *a* source of life but *the* source of a life that is genuinely human. At the same time, it is not a source that we simply passively receive; instead, it is one that we are both called on and “in-spired” to keep alive in our life, which we do by passing it on to and sharing it with others in what we make and do, in what we receive, hold onto, and cultivate. Memory is an *Auf-Gabe*, both a gift and a task, which we receive most properly precisely *in* our giving it to others, and give best by properly receiving it.

If we recognize that the Christian form is a transformative synthesis of the Greeks, Jews, and Romans, which mediates the gift of each to the others and translates the others into itself, we come to see that a properly Christian, which is to say a fully and robustly human, sense of memory holds all the dimensions we have elaborated together in a fruitful, and quite distinctive, unity. We might say that the Romans, who glorify their ancestors and give a central place to their visible *tombs*,¹⁰² represent a preservation of the (human) past—which can degenerate into a certain “necrophilia” if isolated in itself;¹⁰³ the Jews, by contrast, with their affirmation of life through the “repetition forward”

102. Gowing, *Empire and Memory*, 17.

103. David Bentley Hart threatens to hollow out the notion of tradition by allowing *only* a “necrophiliac” preservation of the past, which he attributes to the pagans (Romans) and to which he sharply contrasts, or indeed opposes, the Christian “apocalyptic” orientation to the eschatological future. See his *Tradition and Apocalypse: An Essay on the Future of Christian Belief* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2022). A more adequate approach would integrate the two dimensions in a more comprehensive, and paradoxical, Christian vision.

in pursuit of the promise, represent a hope for the (divinely prepared) future—which can degenerate into a restless, utopian progressivism if isolated in itself; the Greeks, with their erotic ascent to the (meta-physical) “beautiful-and-good” (*kalokagathon*), represent a contemplative rest in time-transcendent truth and intrinsic meaning—which can degenerate into an abstract idealism and spiritualism if isolated in itself. Christian memory gathers all these dimensions together and fructifies them by one another: it is the *living present*, which is pregnant with eternity and full of promise for the future, because it gratefully and deferentially honors the life-giving past. It possesses both vertical depth and horizontal breadth. From the Christian perspective, we can see that memory is a matter of *mind*, *heart*, and *body*; it possesses an essentially theological dimension, a metaphysical dimension, and a cultural dimension, even while being essentially a “power of the soul.” Memory is not something that lies simply in our heads, as it were; it is that in which we live, that is, it lies equally in what we do and in the world we make even as it makes us. Through memory, we receive and allow ourselves to be formed by the great treasures that belong to our history and culture, which are particular reflections of eternal truths, all as a gift from God.

To return to our opening reflections, we can see, from the definition of memory thus proposed, why the forgetting of memory would represent the loss of what makes us human. It is such a loss precisely because it implies the elimination of any reference to what *transcends* the human; it represents a dimming of beauty, goodness, and truth, and indeed the “death of God,” in the sense that the presence of God ceases to be *re-presented* in the realities that constitute our actual existence.¹⁰⁴ A mere indifferent “storage capacity” can be replaced by the technological gadgetry that has colonized our culture so rapidly and so inexorably one cannot but see it as a desperate effort at compensation. But memory, properly speaking, is a “place of storage” only as an appropriative recapitulation, within the soul, of what transcends it in height, breadth, and depth. As such, it is what opens the soul to its life-giving source.

104. See David L. Schindler, “‘Keeping the World Awake to God’: Benedict XVI in America,” in *Ordering Love: Liberal Societies and the Memory of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 19–25.

We can thus return from this sketch to Augustine's *imago Trinitatis* without confusion or surprise. If we think of memory as that by which we receive what exceeds us and thus come to possess, in some sense our very substance, precisely as a gift, it is not difficult to see how the Father can bear the name "memory": a glimmer of the connection is, indeed, already revealed in the Hebrew word "memory," which is etymologically bound to the word "male" (זָכָר and זִכָּר) and thus essentially related to fatherhood. With respect to the mystery of the Trinity, there is in the end nothing but *precedence* that ultimately distinguishes the Father, who is unoriginate origin, from the Son, who possesses all that the Father is in the mode of having received it, drawn it, so to speak, from its "immemorial" source. When the Incarnate Son confesses, "The Father is greater than I" (Jn 14:28), he is articulating the truth of memory, and he expresses this truth in action, in imitation of the Father ("The Son can do only what he sees the Father doing," Jn 5:19), participating in a ritual inherited from the people, but filling it quite literally with new life, God's own life, and depositing it in a culture-generating reality meant to be repeated by human beings until the end of time: "Do this in memory of me." □

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