

IV. Enlightened Forgetting

1. REASONABLE THINKING, METHODOLOGICAL FORGETTING (DESCARTES, THOMASIIUS)

At the end of the Renaissance the professors of rhetoric had once again stepped forward and promised to bring under control, by means of a (final?) mighty effort of memory, all the old and new knowledge now available to humanity. One of these professors was Lambert Schenkel, who wrote a learned treatise on memory (*De memoria*, 1593).

As Frances A. Yates showed, the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) had read Schenkel and took an amused interest in his mnemotechnical advice.¹ Clearly Descartes had recognized that Schenkel's method was not at all appropriate for him. Descartes was intent on blazing a new path of his own and tried to sharply distinguish the problem of memory from traditional mnemotechnics and in a way opposed to its arts. In his *Cogitationes privatae* (1619–91) he wrote:

When I read Lambert Schenkel's provoking stupidities, I reflected that I could easily comprehend everything I had discovered within my powers of imagination, if only I always reduced things to their causes (*per reductionem rerum ad causas*). And if they could be reduced to a single cause, then it becomes clear that for knowledge as a whole no memory is needed (*patet nulla opus esse memoria ad scientias omnes*). . . . Therein consists the true art of memory (*vera ars memoriae*), and it is completely opposed to the one that block-head practices. It is not that his art is completely pointless, only that he wastes far too much paper on it because he does not adhere to the right order. The latter consists in putting memory images in a relationship of mutual dependency. Schenkel, in contrast, has intentionally or unintentionally failed to see wherein the key to the whole mystery (*clavis totius mysterii*) lies.²

Descartes
opposed
to
mnemonics

Taken all together, Descartes's comments on Schenkel's "erroneous" mnemotechnics can be understood as the criticism that this art of memory is not rational. If the philosopher appeals instead to reason, then with its help he can "easily" resolve the whole problem of memory in another way, namely a strictly rational way.

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Descartes did so a few years later, in 1637, in his *Discours de la méthode* (*Discourse on Method*).³ Yet in this fundamental document (written in French) of philosophical rationalism memory is dealt with less explicitly

X Art of Memory not valid because it is not rational.
Comparatively Forgetting (intentionally) would be viewed as an
irrational impulse?

than in the previous and the subsequent writings in Latin on the same subject, the *Regulae ad directionem ingenii* (*Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, 1628) and *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (*Meditations of First Philosophy*, 1641), so that here we will take the latter work into account as well.⁴ So far as the *Discours de la méthode* is concerned, the line of thought that Descartes proposes to his readers consists of two stages.⁵ In the first Descartes forces himself to take the unprecedented step, which can be recommended only for very strong minds, of eliminating from his consciousness all elements that can in any way be false or deceptive. This includes all ideas proceeding from the senses, the imagination, or the memory as well as all the opinions handed down by the philosophical schools of antiquity and since the Scholastics habitually attached to these ideas. Descartes concedes that not all these contents of consciousness deserve this kind of radical rejection, but even the slightest doubt must lead a philosopher who is proceeding consistently to prefer to reject (*rejeter*) too much rather than too little.

When this process of critical examination has been completed, the skeptical mind is left with a single certainty: the intuitive certainty that he exists as a conscious being (*res cogitans*), expressed in the formula "I think, therefore I am" (*je pense, donc je suis*; later put more precisely in the Latin *Meditationes: sum cogitans*). This immediate certainty of one's own existence is characterized by a "clear and distinct idea" (*clara et distincta perceptio*) that cannot be shaken by any doubt. With such self-certainty—which can moreover be made definitively illusion-proof through the equally certain knowledge that God is not a deceiver—Descartes moves on to the second stage of his method. In this stage he brings back into his consciousness, step by step, all the contents that he had earlier, perhaps through excessive scrupulousness, rejected from it, but only insofar as they can meet the criterion of constituting "clear and distinct ideas."

What does this method of rational thinking have to do with memory and forgetting?⁶ Let us begin by examining this question in relation to the first step of the Cartesian method. This initial step is conceived wholly in accord with a comprehensive strategy of forgetting. Not only those elements that are provided to consciousness by memory but also all contents stored up in this "house" of the mind are handed over to a methodically regulated oblivion. Have they therefore completely disappeared from consciousness? This question cannot be answered unequivocally with the means of thought that Descartes puts at his readers' disposal. Descartes is thinking not psychologically but metaphysically. To some extent this can be taken into account by saying that the contents of consciousness rejected in the first stage are deposited in an intermediate storage place where they are temporarily inaccessible to consciousness. But this does not mean that they cannot be recalled to consciousness, for after the critical review conducted in the second stage of the method all or at least some of them can be "re-

called." Only the primary certainty of one's own existence as *res cogitans* and the equally immediately illuminating divine certainty that is bound up with it are exempt from the necessary passage through this intermediate place far from consciousness, and they constitute without any temporary quarantine the foundations of the new consciousness.

Descartes attributes a special role to the will ("the God-given power of the will") in this thought process.⁷ Before the beginning of the critical thought process the mind is "occupied" by all sorts of ideas and opinions that have settled there "against the will" of the subject. They do not go away by themselves but rather must be driven out by an act of will. Descartes's methodological forgetting is consequently a willed forgetting.

In contrast to this first stage of the Cartesian method, the second—and essential—stage is bound up in a special way with memory, as Descartes makes abundantly clear in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* and *Meditations*.⁸ For if rational thought is to move beyond its primary certainties to further knowledge it has to pass—inductively or deductively—through long argumentative chains whose "clear and distinct" connecting links can be perceived intuitively only if memory has been expressly trained for this purpose. For this to occur successfully, not only a new memory but also to some extent a new mnemotechnics is required.

In another and perhaps more fundamental respect Descartes puts memory in the service of his rationalist philosophy. Cartesians may never have sufficiently noticed how much emphasis the *Discours de la Méthode* lays on various circumstances whose rational relevance is not at first discernible. Long passages of Descartes's philosophical "discourse," including the crucial ones about self-certainty, are an autobiographical account of the life circumstances under which he once made his great discovery.⁹ These narrative passages can be described in Descartes's own words as a "history of his mind." They include statements addressed to the reader, such as the one in which Descartes says that he could have wished for a far better memory than the one he was given. But why does Descartes elaborate at such length on episodic details from his life history that would be more appropriate in a novel than in a philosophical treatise of the greatest importance? For example, he tells us in detail about how, when he was twenty-three, he spent the winter of 1619–20 in Germany in the service of Count Maximilian of Bavaria. His winter quarters, which consisted of an overheated room, offered nothing new and different, so that the young man, instead of spending his time on all the distractions appropriate to his condition as a nobleman, was able to devote his leisure entirely to reflecting on himself and his thinking—with the well-known result that he saw this period as the great turning point in his philosophical life. But what interest do these details hold for readers today, since the method discovered in Descartes's German winter quarters has already warned us against

relying on "mendacious memory" (*mendax memoria*)?¹⁰ Is not this warning even more valid with regard to the "episodic memory" Descartes struggles with here than to a "semantic memory"?¹¹

I think one must here take both stages of the Cartesian method into account, along with the turning point constituted by the certainty of the self's existence that lies between them and that divides the first stage of methodologically induced forgetting from the second stage of methodologically controlled remembering. For if the metaphysical yield of Descartes's reflection in his winter quarters was really to have such far-reaching significance for philosophical thinking, then this intellectual event obviously cannot in any way fall prey to oblivion but rather must, as Descartes writes, "be so deeply engrained in the mind that it can never forget it."¹²

To bring this about, the will is once again called on. To be sure, while during the first step in the method it was already relied on to provide a methodological forgetting, it now provides a secure guarantee that the progress that has been made along the path of this new way of thinking will not be lost through forgetting. Here, Descartes appears to have instinctively entrusted more to the narrative-episodic memory than to the systematic-semantic memory—even though this distinction is not part of his own philosophical terminology.

In the works of later Cartesians thinking seems much more Cartesian than in Descartes, and yet they share his slight regard for the memory. As an example, let us take the Cartesian "doctrine of reason" (*Vernunftlehre*) published in 1691 in German—this was then a sensational novelty—by Christian Thomasius (1655–1728), a professor at the University of Halle.¹³ This was—for those times—a rigorously conceived treatise on logic, in two parts. The first part, entitled "Introduction to the Doctrine of Reason," can in modern terms be called a pure or theoretical logic; the second part is entitled "The Practice of the Doctrine of Reason" and deals with applied or practical logic. This second part is composed chiefly of the author's reflections on the role of the memory in the thought process.

Thomasius was, as his bold use of the German language already shows, a pedagogically gifted professor. He asks himself how he can teach thinking if his own teaching method promotes not reflection but repetition. He complains bitterly about professors who merely dictate propositions to students instead of discussing the validity of these propositions with them. Rote memorization of such propositions may indeed strengthen the students' memories, but above all it promotes the *praeiudicium auctoritatis* and consequently weakens the power of judgment (which Thomasius still calls *iudicium*). He will therefore "dictate little or nothing," and his most important advice is: "In searching for the truth, never rely on the *authority* of anyone, no matter who he is!"

In this connection Thomasius, like Descartes (whom Thomasius calls

"Cartesius"), reflects on the art of memory, which he calls *ars mnemoneutica*. Is this art really good for anything? Yes, Thomasius replies; one or another of these "handholds" may help the memory, but one must beware of the many "pedantic and fantastical tricks" that have over time been attached to this art. The art of memory must not be overestimated, and in no case must one see in it a "storehouse of wisdom" (*thesaurus sapientiae*). For in scientific knowledge it is never chiefly a matter of a choice of words but rather always of "the thing itself." A thing that has been correctly identified can be expressed by any number of words. However, Thomasius adds, it is unfortunately true that this rule is often grossly violated, and many students parrot back things they do not understand, "like nuns repeating their psalters." In this context the parrot (in Thomasius, *Papegoye*) serves as an emblem of false knowledge learned by rote, especially among children. Thought is measured by another standard, for "an ounce of judgment is more worthy of respect than a pound of memory."

For the century that followed the work of Descartes and Thomasius, which has been called the Age of Reason, it is henceforth clear that reason has to follow its own path and stay as far as possible from memory and the art of memory. From then on, memory's place was no longer alongside judgment (*iudicium*) but was rather alongside prejudice (*praeiudicium*, *préjugé*), against which the Enlightenment had declared war. During the Enlightenment the association of memory and prejudice became so strong that at the end of this historical period Hegel was able to remark that mistrust of the memory had itself become established as a prejudice.¹⁴

2. REGULATED AND UNREGULATED EXPERIENCES WITH FORGETTING (LOCKE, VOLTAIRE)

The empiricists could not dispose of memory as quickly as the rationalists could. If all knowledge stems from experience, as John Locke (1632–1704) maintained in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689–90),¹ and in fact either from external experience, that is, from sensation, or from inner experience or reflection, then there must be a storehouse or repository in the mind where ideas can remain for a time. Memory thus retains ideas and makes it possible to retrieve them when they are needed, although toned down by the accompanying idea that they belong to the *past*. In this way past and present ideas can be compared and taken into account: an important condition for the acquisition of experience and knowledge. At the same time it is not difficult to distinguish between past and present ideas. For example, if the present impression is associated with pain, it can simply be disassociated from it when it is later remembered.

But is memory also well equipped to perform such functions? Here,

X Memory = prejudice, enlightenment era

Locke has serious doubts. He knows a few people whose memories are as permanent as if they were engraved on marble, while the contents of other people's memories are written on sandstone or even sand. These individual differences are based in the brain: "The temper of the brain makes this difference." However, in his *Essay*, Locke tries to disregard these differences and observes in a general manner only that all human memory is subject to "decay in time," so that it can be compared with a tomb whose inscription is gradually worn away. Moreover, illnesses of all kinds can hasten the progress of oblivion.

Forgetting is thus part of memory as its constantly threatening "defect." And when it appears, it is a serious lack, for without the cooperation of the memory the other faculties of the mind are, in Locke's view, "in large part useless."

Apart from England, Locke's most faithful followers were in France. Among all these I shall choose one author who won recognition for the Englishman's doctrines not by argument but by wit: Voltaire (1694–1778). Voltaire's presentation of Locke's ideas also elaborates the latter's otherwise rather cursory treatment of memory and forgetting. However, we must first acknowledge that for Voltaire as well these questions are not of central philosophical interest. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764), for example, "memory" and "forgetting" are not listed. However, in his old age (1775) Voltaire wrote a short prose work entitled "The Adventure of Memory" (*Aventure de la Mémoire*) that could be described as a philosophical fable. In it the English philosopher—called, with typically British understatement, simply *un Anglais*—is said to know almost the whole truth about memory.²

At the beginning of his fable Voltaire briefly rehearses the mutually incompatible doctrines of memory associated with the Cartesian innate ideas and Lockean sense impressions. Is memory metaphysically insignificant, since ideas are already innate in the soul at birth as the Cartesians teach, or does memory have, as Locke's empirical followers maintain, an important mental function in storing sense impressions? The Sorbonne (transmogrified by Voltaire into *Nosobre*, "unsober") quickly condemns first one and then the other opinion, but it is always condemning something. For "thinking humanity," on the other hand—for Voltaire that is one person in a hundred thousand—it is clear that only the English party can be right. Lady Memory herself—Mnemosyne in Greek—the mother of the Muses, endorses this view. And now the whole thing turns fabulous. The Muses, at their mother's request, set up a more or less Cartesian "adventure" that consists in totally depriving humanity of memory for a few days and casting the whole world into oblivion. Chaos immediately breaks out, even worse than after the confusion of tongues at Babel. Men no longer remember even how they can satisfy their most elementary needs, which in-

clude not only taking in food but also excreting it. And of course no one has any moral inhibitions about stealing or fornicating. People cannot even name a theft because the meanings of words have also fallen into oblivion. The result: "Everything was mixed up, everything was going to perish from misery and hunger, because they couldn't understand each other" (*Tout était confondu, tout allait périr de misère et de faim, faute de s'entendre*).

After a few days of chaos the Muses and their mother Memoria/Mnemosyne show some understanding and take pity on forgetful humanity. The poor mortals, deceived by their Cartesian philosophy and led by their noses by the Sorbonne or Nosobre, now seem "enlightened" (*éclairés*) enough to recognize what they could have learned from Locke more easily and quickly, namely that it is not really possible to get along without memory. *Quod erat demonstrandum*.

3. NO LONGER HAVING TO LEARN BY ROTE (ROUSSEAU)

According to his own assessment, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) had only "a little memory" (*mon peu de mémoire*).¹ This fact, if it is one, should probably be examined in relation to its psychological basis. One can easily imagine how Jean-Jacques, who might have naturally had a perfectly normal memory, could have come from his Swiss homeland to Paris and quickly seen that there everything he had brought with him in his provincial memory was of little worth. For example, in order to hold one's end up in conversations in the literary and philosophical salons one had to have organized one's memory so that a given key word or buzzword promptly evoked a witty reply. It appears that Rousseau's attempts to perform such feats of memory in the service of brilliant conversation were less than successful, and he timidly drew the conclusion that his memory had totally failed him. Inwardly, however, he rebelled against this *conditio obli-vionalis* and made hesitant attempts to force his memory to serve him even in the Parisian salons. Thus, for example, he watched actors to see how they learned their scripts by heart, and he tried to imprint quotations and fine passages from ancient and modern writers on his rebellious memory. But this was all in vain, for under these conditions his memory understandably froze up even more and refused to perform in such an unnatural way. Thus Jean-Jacques's "pathological" forgetfulness must be explained from the point of view of a modern psychology of memory.

Such an explanation is also encouraged by the fact that when he drew on his memory in accord with the laws of his own psyche Rousseau seems not to have been bothered by any unusual forgetfulness; this allegedly so

forgetful writer also became, as his *Confessions* and *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* show, one of the great masters of autobiography. How can an author fascinate readers with events drawn from his life if he cannot properly remember anything? In fact, the parts of his books most prized by his many readers consist precisely of extremely vivid memories, whose beauty often lies in the details of their "memory signs" (*signes mémoratifs*), so that Jean-François Perrin was able to praise Rousseau for having succeeded in making visible "the whole of memory in the nihility of the anecdote or the apparently uninteresting detail."² Did Rousseau, lacking authentic memories, give his imagination free rein in these passages? Did a notorious forgetter simply invent his memories here?

A man who had made sincerity the fundamental principle of his life story could never burden his conscience with that kind of forgetting.³ And so he not only strives to deviate as little as possible from the truth of memory in his *Confessions* but also uses his later *Rêveries* to assess the degree of poetry and truth in his autobiographical narratives. It is probably true, he now admits in all sincerity, that not every detail in his autobiography is an authentic remembered fact. The law of forgetting has interposed itself between earlier events and present representations of them, and so many of his memories have been erased or extinguished. The writer has no choice but to fill in the "gaps" in his memory with the products of his imagination. The memory-man and the forgetful-man have to write this book together.

Is it true, then, that we do not have Rousseau's "sincere" confessions, at least not in a form comparable to Saint Augustine's confessions, which were also written with sincere feeling? Here we have to believe Jean-Jacques when in speaking of his memories he distinguishes between a memory of facts and a memory of feelings. Jean-Jacques the author willingly admits that he may often have forgotten the actual events in his life, but the positive or negative feelings that are attached to them in the reality of life are so deeply engraved on Jean-Jacques the man that when he writes about them he is agitated by them as violently as he was when they first occurred. Even now his quill shakes with the earthquake that earlier shook his soul.

Therefore it is in the constancy of his feelings (*sentiments*) over many years that lies the truth of the memory that Jean-Jacques Rousseau was granted by his Creator, and that has now freed itself from any kind of mental tension. What difference does it make if a great many facts have fallen prey to oblivion? What was actually forgotten deserved to be forgotten.

In our commentary on the life history of Jean-Jacques Rousseau we have leaped from the arrival of the young, provincial citizen of Geneva in the great, cosmopolitan city of Paris to the *Confessions* and *Rêveries* written in his later years. In between lies a long stretch of life full of and marked by critical reflections on the world in which this author had to live and in

which, as he realized, young people were going to have to live in the future. We must now discuss the treatise on education to which Rousseau gave the young pupil's name: *Emile* (1762). The question as to how memory is to be dealt with in the simultaneously natural and rational education of this young man plays a key role in Rousseau's treatise.⁴

The reader is informed from the outset that previous practices of education in school and in knowledge suffer from the hereditary disease of an exaggerated emphasis on training the memory. Look at all the things young people have to learn by heart during their joyless childhoods! In history, the long series of kings and all the other historical events, and in geography and astronomy, the countless names and terms—and of course first of all, ancient languages and all the memory-work associated with them! How proud teachers and parents are when they have succeeded in making of their children little prodigies (*petits prodiges*) of memory!

That is all fundamentally false as pedagogy. Rousseau passionately argues that this memory pedagogy, which he explicitly connects with ancient mnemotechnics, reflects a disastrous educational misunderstanding. If *Emile* is to be brought up in accord with nature and reason his education has to be altered from the ground up, and the first thing to do is to throw out the knowledge of words (*science des mots*) as a whole, along with all the memory material that burdens it. This includes the heretofore so highly prized languages, which he simply abolishes as "useless elements in education" (*inutilités de l'éducation*). A single language suffices for the beginning of education; every additional one only causes further confusion in the student's brain. Only in later school years would Rousseau allow advanced students to study Latin.

Finally, Rousseau's educational plan does away not only with mere rote learning but also with the whole curriculum in elementary literary studies, represented here by La Fontaine's fables, which in France long constituted the classical object of literary memory-building (in Italy, the *Divina commedia* and in Germany, Schiller's ballads were used in the same way). Rousseau makes his view on this clear:

Emile n'apprendra jamais rien par coeur, pas même des fables, pas même celles de La Fontaine, toutes naïves, toutes charmantes qu'elles sont. . . . On fait apprendre les fables de La Fontaine à tous les enfans, et il n'y en a pas un seul qui les entende; quand ils les entendraient ce serait encore pis, car la morale en est tellement mêlée et si disproportionnée à leur âge qu'elle les porterait plus au vice qu'à la vertu.

Emile will never learn anything by heart, not even fables, and not even those by La Fontaine, as naive and charming as they are. . . . All children are made to learn La Fontaine's fables, but there is not a single child who understands them; and if children did understand them it would be still worse,

X Rousseau's pedagogical model vs. Plato's republic vs.
No child left behind . . . how is memory considered

for the fables' morals are so ambiguous and disproportionate to the pupils' age that they would be more likely to lead them to vice than to virtue.

To properly assess Rousseau's view on this subject we have to realize that these children who are made to learn fables have in his opinion not yet reached the age of reason (*l'âge de la raison*). Consequently they have either no judgment or one that extends only to objects and actions suitable to their age, that is, to the world of childhood. The true "moral" of the fables, which concerns good and evil, trickery and violence, dominance and slavery, has no place in this world of childhood. When children are nonetheless urged to learn such fables by heart and absorb their morals, ideas are taken in without being subjected to any rational criticism, and they therefore work to the advantage of "dangerous prejudices" (*dangereux préjugés*).

Will young Emile read nothing at all, then? Rousseau has a clever answer to this question. Emile may peruse as much as he wants the great "book of Nature" and by observing nature shape his mind by things (*choses*) rather than by words (*mots*). Emile's memory will therefore be at first a "memory of things" (*mémoire de choses, memoria rerum*) and only later a memory of words (*mémoire des mots, memoria verborum*) since if one is well informed about a subject the appropriate words come by themselves. As the Roman statesman and orator Cato the Elder put it: "Master the thing, and the words will follow" (*Rem tene, verba sequentur*).

A single book escapes Rousseau's ban on reading: Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Emile can read this story; indeed he should read it as proof that a person can create his own world without anyone else's help. The shipwreck that throws the adventurer up on a lonely island and cuts him off from civilization also leads him to make demands on his own powers to achieve things that he would never have achieved in the comfortable life he earlier led. Crusoe's story is thus an allegory suggesting that Emile will be able to find his own way in life without having to depend on the previous achievements of civilization.

Will Emile thus be raised to forget? That is not Rousseau's explicit intention. According to him Emile, as an active person, must instead discover his "true memory" (*la véritable mémoire*). Nonetheless, having been brought up in this way, Emile will remain—and this is the personal risk he runs—"an amiable foreigner" (*un aimable étranger*) in the world around him, for this world, so long as he is not prepared to adapt to it, will continue to treat him as a man who has forgotten everything generally recognized as cultural memory. With regard to this collective memory he is a culturally forgetful foreigner—though with the distant hope that one day, when all people are educated as Emile has been, it will not be he but rather the

prodigies of word-memory who will be the true foreigners in their cultural environment—and this has in fact happened in the Western world.⁵

4. WHY MUST THE NAME “LAMPE” BE COMPLETELY FORGOTTEN?

(KANT)

Many sources inform us about the life and death of the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Among them, the three biographies published in the year of his death by his students Borowski, Jachmann, and Wasianski are particularly valuable. Thomas De Quincey's *The Last Days of Immanuel Kant* (1827) is based on them, as is Philippe Collin's experimental film *Les derniers jours d'Emmanuel Kant* (1995).¹

From these and other sources we also learn that during much of his philosophical life, which was not disturbed by wife or children, Kant had a faithful servant named Martin Lampe, who assumed all the responsibilities of managing his household, including waking him punctually at five o'clock ("Time to get up!"), serving him his midday meal at precisely one o'clock ("Lunch is on the table!"), and every evening putting new points on the quill pens that the philosopher would need for his next day's work. The somewhat disrespectful report on the strict organization of the philosopher's daily life found in Heinrich Heine's *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* (1834) suggests what else Lampe's duties consisted of:

I believe that not even the large clock of the Königsberg cathedral performed its daily work more dispassionately and regularly than did its countryman Immanuel Kant. Getting up, drinking coffee, writing, reading works by his colleagues, eating, going for a walk—all these had their allotted times, and the neighbors knew that it was half past three when Immanuel Kant came out his house dressed in his gray tailcoat, with his cane in his hand, and walked toward the little lane under the linden trees, which is still called the "philosopher's walk" in his honor. He walked back and forth eight times, in every season, and when it was cloudy or threatening to rain, his servant, old Lampe, was seen anxiously walking behind him with a long umbrella under his arm, like a picture of Providence.²

Providence did not prevent Kant from one day dismissing his servant. This happened in 1802 when Kant was seventy-eight years old and showing clear signs of aging. Wasianski reports this incident in detail but can offer no explanation for Lampe's dismissal. Kant told his biographer only that Lampe had so gravely offended him that he was ashamed to talk about it.

X Martin Lampe

Find this

Nonetheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that Wasianski, who was Kant's trusted representative and companion in his last years, and later the executor of his estate, was not only the witness but also the agent of this dismissal. Lampe had apparently been unable to get used to the new master in the house and was "insubordinate" in some way or other. In any case, when Lampe finally left, his substitute had already been chosen by Wasianski: a veteran soldier named Johann Kaufmann. However, Kant was not able to accustom himself to his new servant, mainly because Kaufmann had such a loud military voice. Had the decision to change servants been the right one for the old bachelor (Heine calls him a *Hagestolz*, a "confirmed bachelor")? We may doubt it. The old servant had apparently become so firmly bound up with the philosopher's everyday habits that Kant simply could not get Lampe's name out of his head. He had to make a special effort to drive the familiar name out of his memory. Thus everything indicates that Kant not only firmly resolved to forget Lampe completely but also put this "must" on paper. Among the notes the elderly Kant used to help his memory there is one on which he has written: "The name Lampe must now be completely forgotten."³

Wasianski was extremely surprised to find this note among Kant's papers, and he saw in it "a striking sign of Kant's weakness"—which in this context must be interpreted as referring to the debility of old age. Everyone knows, Wasianski explains, that one writes things down when one wants to preserve them in memory and not forget them. Urging memory to forget something seems to Kant's student Wasianski a contradiction in terms that is not appropriate for a professor of logic.

However, in our post-Freudian era we cannot so easily dispose of Kant's disturbing behavior. For example, could not this note be an interesting "Freudian slip" that Kant made for reasons that remain to be determined? Or perhaps his behavior resembles that of his fictitious successor Professor Kien (he was originally to be called Kant) in Elias Canetti's novel *Die Blendung* (1935), who had, because of his "truly phenomenal memory," acquired the habit of writing down in a notebook all the foolishness he wanted to forget.⁴ What service or disservice does writing offer forgetting, *ancilla oblivionis*?



In his private and professional life Kant apparently had no problems with his memory. Borowski says that Kant had a marvelous (*herrliches*) memory, and Jachmann says that it was "enormous" (*ungeheuer*). In his old age he could still recite long passages from Greek and Latin authors that he had learned by heart as a young student. According to Borowski he also knew many works by recent German authors such as Bürger, Hagedorn, and es-

pecially Haller, also "largely by heart." In addition his memory provided him with a large storehouse of anecdotes on which he drew cleverly during lively conversations with his guests around the dinner table. Kant was, though one would never know it from reading his philosophical works, a brilliant host and conversationalist whose urbane and witty talk, even with women, was much appreciated in Königsberg social circles.

As a university professor as well he could rely on his memory. He lectured *ex cathedra* without notes (Jachmann). He apparently developed his own mnemonic technique for his activities as a scholar and recommended it to his students to exercise their own powers of memory. According to Borowski this technique consisted in imagining their stock of knowledge as "distributed in different containers in our heads," so that the knowledge stored in this way could be drawn out of the appropriate "compartment" when needed—a regular topics in the sense of the rhetorical art of memory but tailored to philosophical needs.⁵

Kant's philosophical and pedagogical views also leave no doubt that memory has a necessary contribution to make if one is to participate in culture and scientific knowledge.⁶ Thus he believes that the memory must be exercised at an early age and that in particular learning a language requires a constant effort on the part of memory. Disciplines such as history and geography also seem to him to demand "a certain mechanism" in the use of memory. For the whole realm of pedagogy Kant endorses the old maxim "We know only as much as we hold in our memories" (*tantum scimus quantum memoria tenemus*). He even expressly warns against learning only for a specific examination, that is, "with the intention of forgetting in the future" (*ad futuram oblivionem*).

However, in Kant's philosophical work these are all peripheral observations. For alongside the three critiques—*The Critique of Pure Reason*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and *The Critique of Judgment*—there is no fourth critique dealing with memory. Memory and forgetting are examined in greater detail only from a practical point of view, in his lectures on anthropological teaching methods and on general pedagogy. In any case, he did not find it necessary to complete his philosophical system by developing an explicit theory of memory. In his work, as in that of other thinkers of the Enlightenment, memory is not a central object of reflection.

When he deals with memory at all he is therefore much concerned to emphasize the rational principles of the Enlightenment at the expense of memory. Hence he suggests that one should distinguish three forms of memory: mechanical, ingenious, and judicious.⁷ For Kant, these three forms of memory correspond to three levels of value: a way of using memory that is wholly without value, one that is of problematic value, and one that is in accord with reason.

The lowest level of memory, "mechanical" memory, can in no way win

the approval of enlightened philosophers, not even for teaching young children in school. When children "merely" (*bloß*—Kant loves this word!) learn mechanically by heart, that is, when they are merely trained like animals, one can hardly expect that this kind of instruction will "teach them to think."

1st level
Kant's criticism of mechanical memory bears with particular force on religious instruction. If the latter consists solely in teaching children to repeat rigid formulas by heart and in this way to become accustomed to "mere imitation and aping alone," then they are being given a false conception of piety. "Mere word-for-word repetition" must not be confused with real education. This is particularly true for higher levels of instruction. Thus when Kant gives a lecture on general or natural philosophy it is clear to him that the knowledge he is communicating is not yet a completed doctrine and cannot be acquired through memory. One can approach this kind of knowledge only by means of an "investigative" (*forschende*) method.

To be sure, as Kant has to admit, some disciplines are more dependent than others on stocks of knowledge that can be memorized. In these disciplines many humanists and philologists have proven themselves to be "memory supermen" (*Wundermänner des Gedächtnisses*). Such authors, Kant writes, use their memories to deliver whole wagon-loads of subject matter that can be worked on by others who have learned to think. To this extent Kant is disinclined to speak ill of such memory artists but ends up doing so when he notes that a memory of this kind is one of the lower mental faculties and ultimately rather contemptible:

Die untern Kräfte haben für sich allein keinen Wert, z. E. ein Mensch, der viel Gedächtnis, aber keine Beurteilungskraft hat. Ein solcher ist dann ein lebendiges Lexikon. Auch solche Lastesel des Parnasses sind nötig, wenn sie gleich selbst nichts Gescheites leisten können, doch Materialien herbeischleppen, damit andere etwas Gutes daran zu Stande bringen können.

The lower mental powers have little value in themselves, for example, a man who has much memory but no judgment. Such a man is a living dictionary. Such beasts of burden are necessary for the ascent to Parnassus; while they cannot produce anything intelligent themselves, they nonetheless provide materials from which others can produce something worthwhile.⁸

2nd level
In Kant's conception, the second kind of memory, which is located on the middle level of intelligence, is the ingenious memory. The latter corresponds to the ancient mnemotechnics ascribed to the *ingenium*, which still had adherents in Kant's time. What should we make of this rhetorical art? Not much, or nothing at all, Kant replies, insofar as it relies on arbitrarily associating with other ideas the memory contents that are to be protected

against forgetting, on the assumption that these other ideas are more easily retained in the memory. For Kant, this is a contradictory method since it amounts to putting a double burden on the memory in each case. The psychic paradox involved in the notion that two or more associated objects can be retained more easily and longer than the same objects taken individually makes no sense in Kant's rational mode of thinking. Perhaps his predilection for metaphors that represent the contents of memory as burdens and cargoes also hindered his reflection on such matters. However that may be, in this kind of arbitrary "pairing up" (*Zusammenpaarung*; Kant's German translation of the technical expression "association") Kant can see only a procedure that is completely unjustifiable and confused from a rational point of view. No wonder, then, that after making these critical observations Kant categorically asserts, "There is no such thing as an art of memory (*ars mnemonica*) as a general doctrine."

In third place, and on the highest level of intelligence, there remains the judicious memory. This takes its name from the faculty of judgment (*iudicium*), understood here as the ability to make a rational selection among the contents of memory as a whole. This power of judgment thus has a reductive function in relation to memory. As an example of judicious memory Kant first mentions the Linnaean system of the natural arts, which still involves memory but in all its complexity is so constituted that of all the conceivable perspectives of botanical and zoological taxonomy only one, reproduction, is made the basis of the whole system. In this connection Kant mentions as another example the "topics" of a well-organized library, as well as the abstract art of cartography. Here we must surely add the previously mentioned, quasi-rational image of "compartments" or "containers" in the head that belonged to Kant's own mnemotechnics. Kant hoped that all these forms of judicious memory would not only significantly reduce the memory contents to be stored but also help recall to memory quickly and reliably whatever had been forgotten.

These reflections show how in Kant's thought memory, insofar as it is dealt with at all, is constantly called before the tribunal of reason and otherwise restricted in its own psychic life. Memory must constantly prove itself before the monitoring authority of reason, and in most cases its legitimacy is found insufficient. In particular, both "mere" mechanical memory and the "mere" art of memory that associates its contents must ultimately accept being driven out of the realm of the scientific disciplines. Only memory that is strictly subordinated to the faculty of judgment and thereby forced to give up many of its claims is considered by the enlightened philosopher sufficiently rationalized to collaborate in the critical enterprise of "thinking and drawing conclusions by oneself." In Kant's work one almost has the impression that the critical philosopher is more at ease with forgetting than with memory; for when one forgets, there is at least

3rd
level

X

no "rote repetition" and "blind aping," and thus the forgetful man, since he is not burdened with any false opinions, can become active in "thinking for himself" and in this way become "truly enlightened."

In order to assess more precisely the scope of these observations of Kant they should be seen in the context of practices of writing. Here again we shall start out from the "thought and memory notes" (Borowski) that Kant used to aid his memory in his declining years, including the enigmatic note in which Kant wrote down what had urgently to be forgotten. Is this an appropriate way of at least helping out memory? Kant may well have been convinced that it was since in his work on anthropology he calls writing a "marvelous art" that can simply compensate for the failures of natural memory. Here this must be understood in a practical sense: Kant had developed the habit of carrying a writing tablet in his pocket, especially when he went on his daily walk (during which he did not allow anyone accompanying him to talk), so that he could immediately jot down his insights. He called this kind memory aid "a great convenience." The note about Lampe also seems to be connected with this kind of practical memory. Even today we find this kind of connection plausible since we can, if we have read Wasianski's memories of Kant's last years, recall along with the reports on the philosopher's life the name of his servant Lampe, and this would probably not be possible were it not stored in writing and print.

But now we must consider the converse, which so disturbed Wasianski. Could Kant have hoped to better and more quickly forget Lampe's name by writing down his intention to do so? Can one promote not only memory but also even its opposite, forgetting, by writing something down? Kant seems to have been clearly aware of the problem involved in this paradox. On the connection between writing and forgetting, rather than on that between writing and memory, he once wrote, alluding to Plato: "One of the ancients said that the art of writing had led to the decline of memory (had made it in part unnecessary)." Kant comments: "There is some truth in this statement."⁹

There is in fact some truth, and even a great deal, in the claim that the discovery of writing brought about, in pre-Homeric Greece, an unprecedented extension of the human race's cultural memory, but it also necessarily struck a heavy blow against a memory that had hitherto functioned "orally." If one is thinking only of this natural memory, then writing appears to be an ally more of forgetting than of memory. The "literate revolution" (Havelock) made natural memory lethargic, and often the act of writing or at least of writing down is associated with a simultaneous ex-

tion of the natural memory that competes with the use of writing. As the French writer Bernardin de Saint-Pierre put it in the eighteenth century: "Whatever I put on paper, I take out of my memory, and as a result I forget it" (*Ce que je mets sur papier, je l'ôte de ma mémoire, et par conséquent je l'oublie*).¹⁰

The next thrust or blow absorbed by natural memory occurred as a result of the discovery and spread of printing in the late fifteenth century. Thereafter books, which Borges calls "simulacra of memory" (*simulacros de la memoria*), were necessary and easily available to everyone. Ever since then numerous public and private libraries have made the cultural memory available in material form, and if now many things are no longer known by heart, we know where to find them.

The memory culture also replied epistemically to each of the two phases of innovation that gave first handwritten and then printed memory a cultural advantage over natural memory. The response to the innovative impulse connected with the invention of writing was the mnemotechnics developed by rhetoric. This mnemotechnics goes along with the transition from the fixed forms of traditional poetry (in the widest sense of the word) to the rhetoric of prose literature. For the rhetorical art of memory was made for prose, which had to forego the meter and rhyme that are so helpful to memory.

In the second phase the epistemic reply to the invention of printing and the associated shifts in the storage of knowledge was the intellectual critique of memory found first in the moralists (Montaigne) and later in the thinkers of the Enlightenment, from Descartes to Kant. In an ever more radical way it challenges the naive accumulation of knowledge and considers valid only information that fits into the "compartments" and "containers" provided by reason. Thus the natural memory is subordinated to the rational criteria of the faculty of judgment. In the works of many Enlightenment authors, and especially in Rousseau's new pedagogy, one can speak of a genuine war between reason and memory that will be clearly decided in favor of reason and to the disadvantage of memory.

In Kant as well the opposing fronts are clear. On the side of the memory are the "rote learners"; on the other side are those who "think for themselves," among whom Kant counts himself. The latter are distinguished by the fact that—as Borowski says of Kant—"without the slightest regard for authorities . . . they seek out the truth, the pure truth, and then convey what they have found to others." For Kant, this constitutes the difference between merely teaching philosophy and authentic philosophizing. Only by turning away from memory, in the form in which it was still dominant in the academic philosophy that preceded him, could Kant become the "great destroyer in the realm of thought" (Heine) and "all-crushing"

Very
brief
history
of
technical
advances
and
cultural
responses

(Mendelssohn), even if these violent metaphors are not really suited to the character of the man of whom Borowski said, "the word 'childlike' sums up Kant altogether."



Back to Lampe. What kind of memory did a simple man named Lampe have in this age of enlightenment? On this subject biographies that were naturally concerned with Kant's life and not Lampe's have little direct information to offer. Wasianski, who had sought out Lampe's successor, the loud-voiced Kaufmann, tells us only that after a certain time, Kauffmann was already able to complete without error Kant's Latin quotations when they no longer came to him as a whole. Was Kant happy about this?

However, in Kant's philosophical writings we can find a few clues that may shed light on Lampe's memory and thus indirectly on his own remembering and forgetting. The problem that leads the philosopher to make these remarks is forgetfulness, which in his philosophical language he also calls *obliviositas*.¹¹ Kant describes forgetfulness quite vividly as a condition in which the head "is like a barrel full of holes." In his experience elderly people are particularly subject to this malady; while it does appear as a naturally developing sign of old age, it is often the result of having destroyed one's memory from an early age by indulging in all sorts of distractions. Kant is firmly convinced that unrestrained reading of novels, for instance, is an occupation that accustoms the mind to amusement and thereby ruins it for reflection. Consequently even in the schools one must take care to prevent pupils from establishing any "habitual distractions" in their heads because otherwise one is educating them for forgetfulness.

Now so far as Kant and his servant Lampe are concerned, one might be tempted to say that in the course of his long life the philosopher, who can hardly have been an inattentive pupil or a "culinary" reader of novels, must have learned how to deal with absentmindedness and forgetfulness, although one might well be concerned about Lampe in this regard. But the opposite seems to have been the case. Kant indicates that in his experience the "common man" (and here we may immediately think of Lampe), in going about his daily business, apparently has no difficulty putting the contents of his memory in order—Kant says: *auf die Schnur*—without a lot of ratiocination (*vernünfteln*). The educated man's reflection, by contrast, is constantly plagued by distractions that divert him from his clear line of thought. According to Jachmann's biography Kant illustrated this. When he was lecturing, a missing button on a student's jacket or—even more—the new fashion of long, "genius-style" hair could distract the philosopher in this way. And on higher levels he was not spared such distractions either, for according to Borowski, Kant found that even the office of rector, which

he twice held at the University of Königsberg and whose duties he faithfully performed, was full of distractions for him. Thus it was a good thing that a learned man of this kind, surrounded by diversions, had a servant like Lampe—that the “theoretician” had a “practitioner,” as Wasianski put it—who as a common man could relieve his learned master of everyday memory tasks. Clearly this is exactly what took place, as we can see in reading Jachmann. For example, when Kant once scolded Lampe for wearing a yellow tailcoat instead of the white livery he was supposed to wear, he learned not only that on the morrow Lampe was planning to get married in these clothes but also, to his great surprise, that Lampe had already been married for many years.

When one day the philosopher, for whatever reasons, dismissed this convenient servant who had such a straightforward memory, it is evident that distractions, and in particular the “many odd side issues” connected with “domestic occasions,” confused him more than ever before. Indeed, the memory of Lampe, the convenient, comfortable memory servant, might well have become a great, inordinately agonizing distraction that crippled the philosopher’s thinking to the point that if he were to continue philosophizing at all he had first to forget Lampe’s name.



Up to this point we have not mentioned one aspect of Kant’s life and philosophical work that may be able to throw a quite different light on the note about forgetting Lampe’s name. One of the reasons that three biographers all published lives of the philosopher in 1804, the year of his death, is that toward the end of his life Kant was afflicted with a weakening of his mental powers that deeply concerned those around him in Königsberg and that ended, according to Jachmann, in a complete “mental incapacity” (*Geistesohnmacht*). This debility was evident above all in the gradual waning and then an increasingly rapid decline of his memory, which might perhaps be diagnosed, if the symptoms can still be correctly identified, as Alzheimer’s disease *avant la lettre*.¹² The masterful, enormous memory that had been so highly praised earlier in his life fell into ruins, and along with it the mind of the “greatest philosopher of his time” (Jachmann). His friends encountered a pitiful hulk of the man they admired, and Jachmann—deeply disturbed after his beloved teacher had failed to recognize him—wrote: “The man whose teachings astonished all the wise men of Europe is now forced to let his elderly sister, who never used to understand what her brother said, supply the words to express the most ordinary thoughts.” However, Jachmann also emphasizes in this connection that Kant’s condition must not be seen as a “mental disease” (*Geisteskrankheit*) but rather only as “mental weakness” (*Geistesschwäche*). This reminds us of the diffi-

culties with his colleagues the “crazy people’s physician” Aloïs Alzheimer faced about a hundred years later when he tried to diagnose and treat as a normal disease the set of symptoms now known as Alzheimer’s disease.

When did Kant’s frailty—whether a weakness or a disease of old age—begin? Here the evidence varies. Wasianski goes the furthest; in any case he never set much store by Kant’s memory, and regarding its decline in his old age he points out that Kant wrote that even in his earliest youth he was rather “forgetful.” In fact, while playing after school he once went off and left his satchel with all his books in it on the playground! At an advanced age he continued to remember events in his early life very well while sometimes remembering more recent events much less well—which from a modern point of view seems a normal variation on the well-known theme “old men forget” (Shakespeare, *Henry V*).

However, we find in the same biographer a few symptoms that are described with greater precision. Thus he notes, for example, that in his increasingly depressing conversations with Kant the latter had the most difficulty with everyday language, while he retained his mastery of professional terminology. This seems to have been particularly evident in conversations around the dinner table, where Kant had imposed a strict prohibition on any talk about philosophical subjects, and least of all about his own books. Finally, Wasianski mentions another event that occurred in 1802, that is, at a time when both Kant and his biographer had noticed a certain “decline in his memory.” For this very reason Kant had already developed the habit of writing notes and keeping notebooks “to avoid repetitions and to make provisions for a great diversity of conversations.” When in the summer of that year Kant’s study was to be newly whitewashed and the philosopher had to move out his things, he intended to burn the whole stock of notes that had accumulated up to that point. Whether or not we interpret this intention as an expression of his desire for order or as a deliberate strategy of forgetting, the burning did not take place because Wasianski asked that he be allowed to keep the papers as mementos. Since at this point Lampe had been gone for six months, the note concerning him may have been among the papers given to Wasianski. In this way the result of Kant’s note about forgetting Lampe’s name was precisely the opposite of what he intended, at least so far as posterity is concerned; today we remember this more or less faithful servant primarily because such a “remarkable” (*merkwürdiges*) light is shed on him by Kant’s remembering to forget him.

What effect the same note had on Kant, whether it led to remembering or forgetting, we cannot know, chiefly because at about the same time the symptoms of Alzheimer’s spread dramatically. The forgetting or not-forgetting of Lampe is lost in the general forgetting characteristic of this disease. Or may we even presume, perhaps, that in Kant’s life it was the not-

to-be-forgotten separation from his familiar Lampe that struck the final blow that set the philosopher on the road into the darkness of forgetting? Could it be that the note about Lampe was not a reminder of a pragmatic imperative but rather an expression of pious resignation with regard to the disaster of forgetting that was overtaking him with fatal necessity, and into whose darkness he now *had* to sink?