

# Memory, imagination and the human spirit

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**Abstract**

Learning from economic theory, the article proposes to differentiate and relate (episodic) micro-memory and micro-imagination and different types of macro-memory and macro-imagination. Drawing on several decades of discourse in historical and cultural studies (from Halbwachs to Lévi-Strauss and to A. and J. Assmann), it differentiates between communicative, cultural, collective and canonical memories. With reference to basic processes of moral communication and a more complex understanding of the human spirit than the one offered in the long tradition of post-Aristotelian thought, it sketches a route towards relating micro- and macro-memories and normative imaginations.

**Keywords**

human spirit, memory (canonical, collective, communal, cultural), micro- and macro-memory, moral communication

Economic theory and thinking differentiate between microeconomics and macroeconomics. Microeconomics deals

primarily with the individual parts of an economy, such as individual households, firms and industries. Each of these units represents a separate market, and the behavior of these units involving specific goods and services needs to be analyzed and understood.

‘Macroeconomics, on the other hand, deals with the sum of these parts ... Macroeconomic models are simplified descriptions of the relationship between some collections of macroeconomic variables ... used ... to chart the likely course of the aggregate economy’ (Magill, 1997: 973, 895). Both approaches are relevant for a circumspect economic analysis, and there should be no association of ‘macro and micro’ with ‘more or less important’.

In the following, I should like to propose that it might be useful to apply this differentiation to the field of memory and imagination, that is, to differentiate and to relate phenomena and theories of ‘micromemory, microimagination’ and of ‘macro-memory, macro-imagination’. Some of our

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contributions concentrate strongly on individual memory, person-to-person communication and the ‘episodic memory’ generated in these contexts. This concentration can come with the proposal that episodic memory – ‘connecting individuals to the past’ (Schacter and Madore, 2016) (in my terms ‘micromemory’) – is not only the guarantee for the accuracy of past experience but also the building block of all kinds of macromemories.<sup>1</sup>

Other contributions question these assumptions. They emphasize the fact that even autobiographical remembering operates in an ‘open system with multiple levels of social, cultural and historical variables’ (Wang, 2016) and that ‘episodic memories undergo a massive process of system consolidation’. This can even lead to the question, ‘How personal is personal memory?’<sup>2</sup>

The memory theories which so far have attracted me most set out with a macro-memory approach. They took up strong impulses from the sociologist Maurice Halbwachs, whose books *The Social Frameworks of Memory* and *The Collective Memory*<sup>3</sup> not only drew attention to the social limitation of individual and neuronal memory but also to the mental and cognitive achievements of a communal memory and its social, cultural and world-shaping effects.<sup>4</sup> Through a reception of Halbwachs’ thought but also through a focus on the work of the art historian Aby Warburg and in dialogue with other twentieth-century researchers on communal memory, Jan and Aleida Assmann offered a richly developed typology of different forms of memories – communicative, cultural and collective memories.

### **Differentiating communicative, cultural, and collective memories**

In his programmatic book *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, Jan Assmann distinguishes between what he calls ‘two memory frames ... “communicative” and “cultural” memory’. He suggests that they should be understood as forms of communal memory ‘that bridge the gap between the present and the time of origin’ (Assmann, 2011: 35, 36). He distinguishes the diffuse nature of ‘the group’s participation in communicative memory [which] varies considerably’ from the ‘highly differentiated’ but more purposeful participation in cultural memory. In contrast to the fluidity of communicative memory, cultural memory aims at ‘fixed points in the past’ and is ‘a matter of institutionalized mnemotechnics’ (Assmann, 2011: 37–39). At first, he groups these two forms of communal or social memory also under the subheading of ‘collective memory’, a term he takes from Halbwachs (Assmann, 2011: 34). In his later publications, however, Assmann attributes a different meaning to the term ‘collective memory’, when he distinguishes ‘collective or bonding memory’ from ‘cultural memory’. Through its common reference to ‘fixed points in the past’, collective memory imparts a strong ‘collective identity’. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, Assmann sees the collective memory primarily shaped through suffering, pain and trauma. On the one hand, this memory serves to tame us, or in Nietzsche’s words, to effect the ‘breeding of man into a fellow human being’ (Nietzsche, 1980: 291ff). On the other hand, it is ‘particularly susceptible to politicized [and even ideologized] forms of remembering’ (Assmann, 2005: 7). Assmann offers a thoroughly ambivalent view of the collective memory. He recognizes its susceptibility to being politically or morally emotionalized, being mobilized for political purposes, to the point where it promotes a propensity for violence and is expressed in retaliatory campaigns. And yet, he also wants to hold on to a vision of a ‘universal form of bonding memory that is committed to certain fundamental norms of human dignity’ (Assmann, 2005: 23).

The strengths of the differentiation between communicative and cultural memories lay in its sensitivity to the difference between two types of social circulation: Communicative memory takes individual (micro) memories and the routinized processes that recall, perpetuate and enrich these memories and connects them with continually new interactive abilities. It is this process that makes an emerging shared certainty of memory and expectation possible. It begins by drawing from a

constantly changing reservoir of topics, from which a core collection of themes then emerges, playing against each other across the most diverse social groupings; it is this process that leads ‘memory’ to become latent or emphatically self-referential. It is then that one can appeal to this shared memory and speak of a vague ‘social identity’ conveyed by memory. This identity shifts and changes due to the flow of events, in the process of experience, and with the changing influence of information and education, all of which impact the community of memory.

In contrast, cultural memory – with its thematic bonds and its more or less elaborated, consequential mnemotechnical bonds – reflects a more stable identity. The French Revolution, the Civil War, 1933, the Holocaust or 11 September – in such events, a particular shared memory impresses itself upon us. Admittedly, this memory is also modified and reworked through historical research, literary insight, political instrumentalization, through the editing and adaptation of the media and in many other forms that decisively shape the conditions of its reception and circulation. Its resulting relative stability of identity and clear identifiability are accompanied by normative, formative influences that become particularly evident in the phenomena which Jan und Aleida Assmann have called ‘collective memory’.<sup>5</sup>

## Cultural and canonical memories

In *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, Jan Assmann differentiates moulded and organized ‘cultural memory’ from what we might call a fluid and stable, also diminishing and enhanced ‘communicative memory’. He also takes a lead from Claude Lévi-Strauss’ work on ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ memories, distinguishing what he himself calls ‘hot and cold’ ‘options open to cultural memory’ (Assmann, 2011: 50ff). Societies with hot memories are characterized by a need for change; they internalize their history or the mythicized regions of history in order to make them a motor for social development. In contrast, societies practising cold memory are not simply collectively depressive or apathetic societies, but rather societies that have developed or discovered forms of memory that allow them to remove themselves (through the use of collective memory) from the cycles of continual change. Assmann points out, ‘Societies or cultures need not be completely cold or hot’ (Assmann, 2011: 53). Rather, they can develop ‘cooling and heating systems’ for managing the acquisition and use of history.

In a further step, Assmann then reflects on the repercussions that the emergence of written culture had on cultural memory.<sup>6</sup> He shows that the written transcription of tradition in no way necessitates a cooling down of hot memory. Rather, this process can instead set free a continuing stream of interpretations which shapes cultural memory and keeps it alive. To achieve this, written culture must take on a particular form that Assmann calls ‘canon’. On the one hand, ‘The term “canon” refers to the kind of tradition in which the content and form are as fixed and binding as they can possibly be. Nothing may be added, nothing may be taken away, and nothing may be altered’ (Assmann, 2011: 87). On the other hand, the canon demands and requires interpretation. Assmann suspects that the origins of the canon are rooted in the legal sphere, that it effects ‘the transposition of an ideal, rooted in the sphere of law, concerning binding obligation and faithful rendition throughout the central field of written tradition’ (Assmann, 2011: 89). The canon is the transcribed basis of a cultural memory, rendered into text – a cultural memory that is simultaneously both brought into flux and fixed through the text itself and its referential possibilities.<sup>7</sup>

But how does such a canon come about? Let me offer a systematic summary of the answer Assmann provided in a lecture he delivered when receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Münster.<sup>8</sup> The need for canonization (for taking normative guidelines and the powerful contents of memory and fixing them within collections of texts) arises from the experience of *radical historical discontinuity* and the shocks that often accompany such experiences. The exile

of the Israelites can serve as an example. Assmann avoids the debates between Old Testament scholars on whether the Israelites took an early form of the Torah into exile with them or whether they only developed the Torah later in response to the exilic experience. Rather, he firmly stresses the connection between the first attempts to build a canon and the shocking experiences of cultural and historical discontinuities. These experiences of discontinuity materialize in the potential canonical texts. And yet, this tightly grasped radical discontinuity demands interpretation. It is characteristic of the process of canonization that *a range of interpretations leads to a range of possible examples of explaining and bridging the discontinuity*.

These interpretive and mediatory possibilities develop into a (properly understood) ‘pluralistic’ (Welker, 2006: 1460ff) collection of texts that is more than just a simple ‘plurality’ of classics.<sup>9</sup> Only when a shared connection is established in this collection of texts, when this virtual library of different perspectives on a shared problem is developed and prescribed, do we have a canon. The canon bundles together a broad range of cultural memories and thus enables *a living cultural memory – indeed, a canonical memory* – to arise from this variously orchestrated polyphony. Here, stability and liveliness are not mutually exclusive, but rather release a power for continual renewal and yet focussed remembrance.

The canon is a great achievement. It allows for an interplay between cold and hot memories. Having a particular collection of texts dealing with a particular complex of events means, on the one hand, that cultural memory is bounded, its transformative possibilities constrained within borders. On the other hand, the peculiar plurality of perspectives in the canonical traditions stimulates a liveliness – a liveliness of permanent interpretation which in practice functions like hot cultural memory, only without devouring the underlying historical contents or transforming them beyond recognition.

In the future, we will likely need to distinguish two forms of canon. The first form of canon (maybe Graeco-Roman in style) presents a treasury of classics, of texts and artefacts that have attained a high level of resonance and are held in relatively stable esteem. Yet, it is a collection that remains, like communicative memory, always open to constant substitutions. We could say that this type of canon has an affinity to a particular zeitgeist. On the other hand, in the Jewish, Christian, Islamic, perhaps also in the Confucian canon, we find a relatively bounded canonical structure, with a high sensitivity for its boundaries and its connective points of focus, namely the experiences of radical discontinuity that Assmann identified. These experiences can only be kept alive and can only be handled and processed through a multitude of perspectival cultural memories.

## **Relating macro- and micro-memories and imaginations via processes of moral communication – and a new perception of the human spirit**

The memory processes we have analysed so far have focused on dramatic, even traumatizing events and highly elaborated historical, religious, educational and liturgical processes of preservation and communication. How can we relate these macro-memory findings to processes of episodic memory in everyday life, to semantic memory, procedural memory and implicit memory<sup>10</sup> that is not directly connected with great events and cultural memory or religious communication? The answer I propose might not only close the gap between macro- and micro-memory levels but also it points to a bridge between memory and (orientation- and action-guiding) imagination.

In moral communication, human beings influence each other by giving or by withdrawing respect.<sup>11</sup> We influence each other’s thinking, acting and behaving by giving or promising respect or by not paying respect, by threatening to withdraw it. The modes of pondering to give and paying

respect come in a broad spectrum from a 'sharp short view' on each other to vibrant admiration. The communication of respect starts in early childhood with seemingly simple operations: 'If you do this, your mom will be pleased. If you refuse to do that, your grandpa will be sad'. It is deeply rooted in processes of micro-memory and micro-imagination. Moral communication – from seemingly very basic attempts to teach a child up to the most elaborated functionalization of complex global media systems, from puberty mindsets to the categorical imperative – is indispensable for common human life. We have to attune our ways of thinking, acting and behaving. And we foster this attunement by moral communication, by giving or withdrawing respect, by promising to give or threatening to withdraw respect.

The indispensability of moral communication for social life is the reason why a naïve perspective associates moral communication automatically with a positive ethical orientation. But sadly, this is not necessarily the case. Quite negative and even life-endangering values and clusters of values can guide our moral communication. The other problem is the dissociation of processes of moral communication, often (wrongly) associated with the texture of our late modern Western pluralistic societies.

When most people, even scholars, think and speak of 'pluralistic societies' in our time, they as a rule still imagine a multitude of free and equal individuals and a multitude of groups and institutions with very different backgrounds of education and worldviews, with different political, moral, religious and professional interests and orientations. Some people see in this texture of a vague 'plurality' of individual orientations an enormous potential for colourful development and for flourishing human freedom. Other people evaluate this setting as a chaotic radical individualism and relativism, which endangers or even destroys any normative thinking and any potentials for moral education.

This view of pluralism as a vague 'plurality' of individuals and social formations, however, can only grasp one aspect of late modern societies in the West. It appreciates the affirmation of individual freedom, radical equality and the human right to participate at any time as a respected voice in all sorts of general and specific moral reasoning. However, this view does not see that at the same time pluralistic societies are heavily normatively coded. More than 30 years ago, the Chicago theologian David Tracy opened our eyes to the fact that all theological and moral discourses have to differentiate between academic, ecclesial and moral-political 'publics' and their different styles of communication and normative orientation. With his important book *The Analogical Imagination*, he took a first step towards a serious analysis of 'the culture of pluralism' (Tracy, 1981). Today, we analyse our pluralistic societies with a much more sophisticated multisystemic setting of systemic powers, which require the instruments of an equivalent to canonical memory and imagination in order to deal with the pluralistic societal setting not only on an academic but also on a common-sensical level.

In order to navigate with some ease between micro-memory and macro-memory, micro-imagination and macro-imagination, to steer our processes of gaining security of communal and cultural memories and related moral communication, we will have, above all, to move beyond the binarily coded understanding of the human spirit and related forms of self-understanding.

In the famous and culturally extremely influential Book XII of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle defines the spirit as the force that thinks itself, insofar as it participates in what is thought and becomes part of it.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the spirit is the power that does not lose itself in a relationship with 'the other', but rather receives and maintains itself in the thinking relationship to the objects of thought. Our understanding of the world and our understanding of ourselves are mediated through this spirit. The quality of all thought and understanding is the result of the heightening of self-understanding along with the simultaneous recognition and understanding of external reality. Aristotle connects this spiritual activity with self-actualization, freedom and one's own well-being. He even

calls this activity ‘divine’. For it is the perfect actualization of all knowledge about all reality, together with absolute self-knowledge that characterizes divinity. The best and eternal life belongs to it, and it does so in perfect freedom.<sup>13</sup>

Aristotle’s extremely influential philosophical theory of the spirit and its correlated view of freedom have not only blocked the path to a biblically oriented doctrine of the Spirit of God. They have also fixated us on reflexive, mentalist and often individualistic anthropomorphic concepts of the spirit, which caused great difficulties to adequately capture complex processes of memorizing and imagining. Rather, the human spirit is only in small (although important) parts reflexive rationality, binarily coded, that is, operating between two reference points or two realms of reality. In fact, it relates gigantic networks of memory and imagination.

In these processes, episodic micro-memory, individual identity formation and the activities of person-to-person communication are no less important than the achievements of macro-memory and macro-imagination which operate particularly successfully when they can be attuned to the orientation in natural space and along historical timelines. We do not yet possess an adequate theory and clear perception of the human spirit in its power to rule in and over vast realms of memory and imagination. But working together on ‘Memory and the Power of Connectivity’ might help us to take a remarkable step towards this goal.

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### Notes

1. Cf. Fivush and Merrill (2016).
2. Cf. Dudai and Edelson (2016).
3. Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire, 1925, and La mémoire collective, 1950; in some parts of the following, I refer to insights presented in Welker (2008: 321–331).
4. Cf. J. Assmann. ‘Zum Geleit,’ in Assmann (2002: 7–11); see also Namer (1987).
5. Cf. Assmann (2006: 29ff); yet, she also quotes Reinhart Koselleck’s objection: ‘There is no collective memory, but certainly collective conditions for possible memories’, see Assmann (2000: 19–32).
6. Cf. Assmann (2011: 70ff).
7. On the basis of these reflections, Assmann defines the canon as ‘the principle underlying the establishment and stabilization of a collective identity that also provides the basis for individual identity’ (Assmann, 2011: 108).
8. J. Assmann, ‘Five stages on the road to the canon: Tradition and written culture in ancient Israel and early Judaism’, in Assmann (2011: 63–80).
9. On the nature of ‘classics’, see Tracy (1981: 99ff).
10. Cf. Schacter and Madore (2016).
11. Particularly illuminating: Niklas Luhmann (1978: 8ff); for the interdependence of moral and religious memory, see Welker (2014: 225–235).
12. Cf. Aristotle (1935: XII, 1071b); and Welker (1994 [2013]: 283ff).
13. Cf. Aristotle (1935: XII, 1072b, pp. 19–32).

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