Memory from the perspective of the many-minded Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas

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ABSTRACT

Memories encompass the most diverse individual and collective experiences, safeguarding a large list of experiences, recorded by facts, moments, events, knowledge and even by the dreams experienced, so that our way of using these memories is directly linked to our relationship with the world, with our learning and with our particular perception. When dealing with memory, Plato uses the idea of a block of wax present in the soul of each individual, where certain images are imprinted, which are not the same for everyone. For Aristotle, it is not memory, but the work of memory that distinguishes us from other animals, what he calls revocation. From the Aristotelian point of view, only human beings have the possibility of making the revocation. St. Augustine deals with a space that he calls "palaces of memory", making the reference that the spirit is the very memory of the human being. St. Thomas Aquinas considered that the object of memory would be the past, so that memory would be particularly, for him, an internal sensitive power and also an intellectual power. In fact, it can be said that memory, which also creates our identity, is lived and experienced in a very peculiar way within each human subjectivity.

Keywords: Memory, Classical Antiquity, Medieval Era.

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INTRODUCTION

Memory is essential, since literature is made of dreams, and dreams are made by combining memories.

Jorge Luis Borges

With memory one does not give knowledge, but the remembrance of what one has already known. Thus, without the actual, sensible and concrete presence of an object, we can remember and even reproduce it by means of any human power, as by means of art, as in painting, in music, or as by means of knowledge, in science in general and in history in a particular way, since the latter is par excellence a science of remembrance. Paul Faitanin

The theme of Memory is multimodal and multifaceted. According to Le Goff (2003, p. 471): "memory, in which history grows, which in turn feeds it, seeks to save the past to serve the present and the future". According to Halbwachs (2006, p. 100-101), "when the memory of a sequence of events is no longer supported by a group, [...] then the only way to preserve these memories is to fix them in writing in a narrative, for the writings remain, while the words and thoughts die." These are just two of the different ways, two of the different contemporary perspectives of thinking about memory. If we make a journey from the Greeks to the contemporaries, we will reaffirm the multimodal and multidisciplinary character of memory that justifies many theories of Memory.

In this article, however, we present a theoretical and bibliographic study on memory in Plato and Aristotle, on the one hand; and in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, indicating, to a certain extent, that the greatest thinker of patristics and the greatest thinker of scholasticism, medieval thinkers, were influenced by the two Greek philosophers.

MEMORY IN PLATO AND ARISTOTLE

According to Changeux (quoted by Jacques Le Goff, 2003, p. 420): "The process of memory in man intervenes not only in the ordering of traces, but also in the rereading of these traces". That said, in a reconstitution of the meaning and traces of memory in Antiquity, safeguarding history through writing, Le Goff (2003, p. 433) points out that "the Greeks of the archaic era made memory a goddess, Mnemosyne". For the Greeks, according to the author, the aforementioned goddess presided over the lyric and reminded men of the high deeds of the heroes of mythology. Thus, it can be said that for the ancient Greeks memory was something sacred, a privilege of only a few men, so that the poet (being endowed with memory) was the one who could come into contact with the world of the gods and glimpse the "magic" of the eternal.

This theme can be seen in the Platonic dialogue between Socrates and Theaetetus², where, as Plato (427-347 B.C.) wrote, human organs would be instruments for capturing impressions that would be interpreted by the soul, and among these organs would be memory, which was compared to

² PLATO. Diálogos I, 1999, p. 54

a block of wax, a gift from the goddess Mnemosyne, which could have different qualities, being of better or worse quality, harder or softer, purer or more impure.

This gift of Mnemosyne, memory, for Plato, in the work "Theaetetus", would be so important that it would even define the individual's capacity for judgment and discernment in relation to the facts of reality. Thus, for the Greek philosopher, those who possessed wax in the block of adequate consistency would have a good memory, clear impressions, and correct and wise opinions [as, perhaps, in an impression of ours, the sapient opinions of some of the characters (philosophers) found within the work "Scuola di Atenas" by the Renaissance Raphael Sanzio], and those who, on the contrary, possessed wax in the block of inadequate consistency would not have clear impressions, nor would they give a correct opinion, being ignorant (as, perhaps, in our interpretation, ditto, the too foolish character in the work "Laughing Fool" by the painter Jacob Cornelisz van Oostsanen).

In Theaetetus' dialogue with Socrates, therefore, Plato dealt with memory under different conditions, according to the impressions that would be left on the block of wax. According to the author himself, in verbis:

When the wax that is in one's soul is not only dense, but abundant and smooth, with the proper consistency, what comes through the perceptions is engraved in this Heart of the soul. As Homer enigmatically calls it, referring to the resemblance to wax. At this moment, the signs become pure in these people and have enough density to be lasting. Those of this type have, first, facility in learning, second, good memory, and, third, do not deviate from the signs of their perceptions, but have true opinions. In fact, since the signs are clear and well spaced, they are quickly distributed in each of the impressions, which are undoubtedly called things-that-are. And these people are called wise.

And in the same work, Plato, through the argument of Socrates, maintained that, ipsis litteris:

Those who have their wax hirsute and rough, as if it were made of stone, full of earth, or of dirt mixed with it, have impressions without clarity. Those who have it hard also have impressions without clarity, because they have them without density. And those that have it liquid, in turn, also lack clarity, because, by the action of fusion, they quickly become confused. And if, in addition to all this, impressions have fallen one upon the other, owing to lack of space, and if a person's soul is small, they are even more lacking in clarity than those. Consequently, all these are the ones who come to opine falsehoods, because when they see, hear or think something they are not able to quickly distribute the impression to each thing and are slow. And when they distribute what corresponds to the other, they not only see badly, but on top of that they hear and think badly, most of the time. These are the ones who are not only false, about reality, but are called ignorant.

In the Theaetetus, Plato makes use of the metaphor of a block of wax to talk about memory and show that there is a block of wax in our souls. Wax is neither as fluid as water, which does not allow it to be retained, nor as hard as iron, which does not allow it to be marked.

Plato also establishes the difference between memory and reminiscence, between natural memory and artificial memory, which is a voluntary recollection reinforced, through the metaphor of the aviary: in the aviary of memory, to possess science is to dispose of the bird in its aviary; To be aware is to hold the bird in your hands.

It so happens that, still in Ancient Greece, there was the secularization of memory and the birth of mnemotechnics, ceasing to be perceived merely as a divine gift. In this context, according to Yates (apud QUADROS; FONSECA-SILVA, 2016, p. 65): "Simonides of Ceos (cc 556-468 B.C.), a famous poet in his time, was the "inventor" of memory – in fact, he seems to have somehow compiled ancient techniques that had been taught orally until then." In this regard, Le Goff (2003, p. 435) states that the "secularization of memory combined with the invention of writing allows Greece to create new memory techniques: mnemotechnics. This invention is attributed to the poet Simonides of Ceos".

In view of this, Simonides to Le Goff (2003, p. 436):

He thus established two principles of artificial memory, according to the ancients: the remembrance of images, necessary for memory, and the recourse to an organization, an order, essential for a good memory. Simonides accelerated the desacralization of memory and accentuated its technical and professional character, perfecting the alphabet and being the first to make himself pay for his poetry.

In the context of Ancient Greece, still, with the striking figure of the philosopher Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), a disciple of Plato, with regard to memory, the issue of reminiscence was considered in the work memory and reminiscence (De memoria et reminiscentia), preserved among the Parva naturalia. For him, the future cannot be the object of memory because it represents conjecture and expectation. The present cannot be the object of memory, because in it there is only sensory-perception. He discusses the place of memory within the hierarchy of the soul's capacities, the objects of memory, and the distinction between memory and remembrance. It locates memory in the sensitive part of the soul and associates it intimately with two central operations of the sensible faculty: imagination and the so-called common sense.

In the distinction between memory and recall, operated by Aristotle, the first is a faculty that not only humans, but also several animals possess and which consists of the retention, storage and recovery of sensations in response to certain stimuli. In contrast, recall is a capacity confined to humans, as it is a kind of deliberative search for information that one knows to have acquired before, a type of reasoning (syllogisms) based on certain premises and leading to a conclusion.

Aristotle treated reminiscence differently from the way Plato treated. For him, reminiscence would be related to the idealism of a vague memory of what we glimpsed before being born. According to Plato's own words (1999, p. 60):

Let us suppose that, having acquired it before we were born, at birth we lose it, but then, using the senses in relation to those things, we reacquire the same knowledge that we possessed in a previous age; In this case, wouldn't what we call learning be reacquiring knowledge that is already ours? When we call it reminiscence, aren't we getting it right? (Plato, 1999, p. 160)

Ricoeur, in this regard, points out that Plato linked reminiscence to the world of ideas and mythologized it "linking it to a prenatal knowledge from which we would be separated by a forgetfulness linked to the inauguration of the life of the soul in a body" (RICOEUR, 2007, p. 45-46). Meanwhile, Aristotle moved away from this relationship, referring to reminiscence as something learned in natural life.

In view of this, it can be affirmed that Aristotle, despite having inherited from Plato a large part of his intellectual baggage, developed his conception of memory and recollection through a question more related to the practical experience lived. In this regard, Ricoeur (2007, p. 36) points out that: "unlike Theaetetus, who placed the impression "on souls" - at the risk of treating them as impregnable entities -, Aristotle associates the body with the soul and elaborates, on this double basis, a quick typology of the varied effects of impressions".

It is under this screen of principles, therefore, that Aristotle relates the question of memory to the tonic of experience in the real world, in a way that is as believable, as clear, as the perception of reality in a work of hyper-realism (as, perhaps, the image of oneself, in "Self Portrait", by the Chilean Claudio Bravo), as follows:

It is from memory that human beings acquire experience, because the numerous memories of the same thing end up producing the effect of a single experience. Experience seems very similar to science and art, but reality is through experiences that human beings obtain science and art, because as Polo rightly says, "experience produces art, but inexperience, chance" (ARISTOTLE, 2006, p. 43-44).

Having made the due considerations about the presence of memory in Ancient Greece (in Plato and Aristotle), we will now deal with memory in two exponents of the Middle Ages, who were greatly influenced by Greek philosophers, namely: Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

MEMORY IN AUGUSTINE AND THOMAS AQUINAS

Like their ancient predecessors, medieval philosophers also tried to answer questions related to memory. In this context, it is necessary to emphasize, from the outset, that, according to Le Goff (2003, p. 438), in the Middle Ages the collective memory underwent profound transformations, since what was essential in that period came into existence based on the diffusion of Christianity as a religion and as a dominant ideology, even dominating the intellectual field. The dominance of Christianity in the Middle Ages, for Le Goff, contributed to the preservation of memory, precisely because it was a religion of remembrance.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD), an exponent of Patristics in the Middle Ages, came very close to Plato's philosophical works (inserting himself in the core of Neoplatonic thought), defending the Christian faith and refuting, in the context of his time, paganism. In the field of memory, which is what interests us for this work, it can be said that Augustine (in his Confessions) positioned himself



as an explorer, an "investigator" of an immense place where there could even be secret hiding places. Thus, Augustine wrote:

I now come to the fields and vast areas of memory, where lie the treasures of the innumerable images of all kinds of things introduced by perceptions; in which are also deposited all the products of our thought, obtained through the enlargement, reduction or any other alteration of the perceptions of the senses, and all that has been spared and set aside or that forgetfulness has not yet absorbed and buried. When I'm inside, I conjure up all the images I want. Some present themselves at the same time, others make themselves desired for longer, almost extracted from the most secret hiding places (AGOSTINHO apud LE GOFF, 2003, p.440).

In Book X of the Confessions, Augustine speaks of the "palaces of memory", the caves of memory. Thus, as for the question of how something that did not enter through the door of the senses can be stored in memory, such as concepts, numbers, Augustine gives the same answer as Plato: these notions were hidden in our memory since our birth, therefore, we do not know, we recognize. He says that "it is one thing to think of my father, whom I have seen many times, and another to think of an ancestor whom I have never seen. ... The first thought is found in memory, the second in a certain movement of the soul born of what memory contains."

The Confessions show that Augustine dialogued with the depth of his "I" and that he treated memory as space, as a place, considering that each sense would be a "gateway" to the soul, and things could be in memory by image or in themselves. In Augustin's work it is clear that memory is not only understood as a deposit, but also as a kind of soil, a space on which the self dwells.

Augustine, with such a nature of thought, came to idealistically raise the idea that to reach God (and, therefore, to achieve a happy life) it would be necessary to go beyond the senses. In view of this understanding, Étienne Gilson (2010, p. 202) explained that, in Augustine:

The soul strives to seek its own nature, not because it is unknown to it, but, present and confusedly known, among countless sensations that camouflage its true nature, it simply seeks to know itself better, or even to discern itself better. Such a desire to know itself implies not only the presence of the soul in itself, but the presence of ultimate truth. To prove the existence of this presence, St. Augustine resorts to memory.

According to Quadros (2016), Augustine associates truth with God and claims that: "memory is a spiritual faculty that recognizes God as a transcendent being", who dwelt within himself and who would also be above him, the soul being a place, ditto, in need of purification by the divine Being. Quadros, mentioning Barros, points out that Augustine "was in opposition to Aristotle's ideas":

St. Augustine had rejected the ancient Greek thesis (redirected by Aristotle) that time corresponded to a "movement of the stars", and introduces the notion that "time is interior, passing through the soul", which allows it to impact this human soul with a triple presence: of the Past, through Memory; of the Present, through Vision; and the Future, through Waiting (or "expectation"). This experience of time corresponds to a profound human experience, but at the same time it is a non-communicable experience, because it is impregnated with subjectivity (BARROS, 2012, apud QUADROS, 2016. p. 6).

For him, God is a content of memory, foundational and sufficient. The first constitutive of memory is God: "How I wandered through my memory in search of you, O Lord! And it was not outside of it that I found you. And I have found nothing of You that I do not remember since I met You. For since I knew you, I have not forgotten you" (Augustine, 397/2004).

In the meantime, according to Le Goff (2003), Augustine even left as a legacy a Christian adaptation of the ancient rhetorical theory about memory. And, in addition to penetrating deeply into the inner man, he did so, in the bosom of his Christian restlessness, "looking for God in the depths of memory", as can be seen below:

But where are you in my memory, Lord, where are you in it? What cabin did you build for yourself? What sanctuary have you built for yourself? You have granted this honour to memory, that of remaining in it, but in what place of it you remain is what I am considering (Augustine, 397/2004).

As for Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 A.D.), known as the prince of scholasticism (a philosophy subsequent to the patristics, which sought to rationally explain the existence of God, the soul, heaven and hell, and the relations between man, reason and faith, substantially departing from Platonism and Augustinianism), he came very close to the Greek philosophy of Aristotle, introducing it into medieval philosophy. And, as is well known, in good conditions Thomas Aquinas made important comments on the work of the Greek philosopher, including with regard to memory.

In agreement with Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas considered that the object of memory would be the past, so that memory would be particularly, for him, an internal sensitive power and also an intellectual power. He, therefore, defined memory as that which orders and also retains sensible forms, such as remembering past facts. And the memory (imbued with cognitive capacity) identified in man, for him, would have the ability to judge information coming from the senses, comparing and creating individual image representations.

Thus, according to Sueli de Oliveira Castro (2017, p. 39):

Thomas shows reminiscence as a potential in the act of memorizing, capable of seeking by association what is hidden in memory. However, if on the one hand, imagination is the criterion for memory, on the other hand, thought is the form of expression of what has been preserved in memory.

Thus, Thomas Aquinas, agreeing with Aristotelian thought, wrote (in the work "Commentary on Aristotle's Memory and Reminiscence") that: "Whenever, therefore, the soul acts by memory, as has been said before, it simultaneously feels that which it has previously seen, or heard, or learned; but the before and after belong to time" (2016, p. 52).

Thomas Aquinas, it can be said, then, synthesized Hellenic thought and Christian thought, relying firmly on Aristotelian thought, concluding, in a very pragmatic way, that, in the context of



natural reality, human intelligence would be the only way to reach the truth. In this sense, Veiga and Faitanin (2016, p. 20-21) point out that in Thomas Aquinas:

The intellect, in addition to acquiring by perception, apprehension and learning of something, can preserve what it has apprehended and learn something, even remembering it completely without the presence of the object. Thus, it shows the reminiscence that the intellect, a cognitive spiritual power, has memory as an integral part.

And, as for the rest, as a fact of relevant importance, according to Spence (apud SMOLKA, 2000, n.n.):

It was Thomas Aquinas himself who solidly implanted the idea that memorization systems were part of ethics, being more than mere components of rhetoric... In his commentaries on Aristotle, Aquinas noted the importance of bodily similarities or images of memory in physical form to prevent subtle and spiritual things from escaping the soul... reinforced his arguments in favor of the use of place-in-memory systems... (SPENCE 1986, p.31, apud SMOLKA, 2000, n.d.)).

Thus, in Thomas Aquinas, as part of the scholastic doctrine, memory began to be debated, including as part of prudence and ended up moving to the realm of ethics, being closely linked, also, to the rules of artificial memory, in a perspective of resuming aspects of the art of Simonides of Ceos. Memory, within the intellectual sphere of the propositions of this medieval philosopher of scholasticism, therefore, has also revealed itself as one of the foundations of prudence and, consequently, one of the constituents of the rectitude of human action. On these aspects, therefore, Oliveira (2007, n.n.) states that:

When dealing with the issue of the Virtue of Prudence, Thomas Aquinas highlights the fact that forgetfulness can interfere with prudence to the extent that men forget how they should act and this forgetfulness can often be harmful to society. In this sense, the permanence of memory is something fundamental for society, as it would indicate the knowledge that men have of themselves or, in opposition to this, the ignorance that they have of their history, their laws and their past.

From the perspective of the content presented, finally, it should be emphasized that the thought of Thomas Aquinas took on great proportions in the medieval thought of his time (through scholasticism), assuming prominence in the university world of his time, especially with regard to philosophy and theology. In a comparison of different contexts, but with effective results, it can be said that as much as an impressionist painting sought to portray the effects of sunlight on nature, Thomas, with the resumption of Aristotelian concepts, shed light on his work trying to demonstrate that there could be compatibilities between the nature of the natural real and the theological real, resorting to rationality, valuing human intelligence, and revealing reason and faith to be additional and not suppressive.

CONCLUSION

In view of the above, it can be said that, according to Quadros and Fonseca-Silva (2016, p. 83), "if Plato does not deal with time and leaves memory almost confused with imagination, Aristotle believes that we only think through images and places memory as a result of this resumption in the thought of images in time."

Aristotle, therefore, a thinker considered a realist, developed his work, in several ways of thinking, in the opposite way to Platonic thought. In Plato, memory refers to the maintenance of a trace in the soul, of a printed memory (a prenatal memory), while in Aristotle the senses are important for the construction of knowledge, so that from sensations the records in memory would be created (thus making it possible to reason and gain experience). For Aristotle, memory is among the processes of our intellect, and the entire capacity of human knowledge is involved in it.

For Augustine, memory would be a passive place where we deposit things from the past and remove them when we wish, but which would also have, in some way, a function beyond deposit, because, for him, it would also be a link between man and God. Augustine, in his Confessions, invited us to explore memory with the conviction that in order to reach God it would be necessary to go beyond the human senses, and it would be necessary to go beyond the natural energies by the soul itself, reaching the domain of the "vast palaces of memory".

According to Dusilek (2013, n.n.), in the work Confessions Augustine "makes a Christian interpretation of the Platonic conception of reminiscence as a reminder of the world of ideas. For him, memory can be conceived as vast palaces where the treasures of innumerable images brought by perceptions of all kinds are located."

Memory, too, played a fundamental role in the work of Thomas Aquinas (who had the merit of condensing the Christian vision with the Aristotelian vision of the world), especially with regard to the diffusion of the culture of scholasticism (and, consequently, of the Christianity of that time). The philosopher of scholasticism dedicated himself to synchronizing Greek Hellenic thought and Christian thought, relying vehemently on Aristotelian thought, rereading it and reinforcing the capacity of human intelligence and reason (including the capacity for reminiscence). Thomas, in his work, highlighted memory as a power of human intellectual nature, which could direct the human being positively in his action in the world and, consequently, in society.

Finally, it is necessary to say that memory, and its study, has interested scholars and thinkers for several centuries, from the ancient Greeks to the present time, generating several and distinct theories of memory, because our way of seeing the world, and living in it, is closely linked to the learning of how memory should be used. In this context, the contributions of classical authors, such as Plato, Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, are of fundamental importance, because they allow a series of reflections on memory, on the meaning of our existence, on our identity, on our interiority, on our existential totalization, on the meaning of life...

Thus, it can be affirmed that memory is life lived and felt within each human subjectivity, that memory, beyond its notion, for some, collective, is fundamental for the construction of each unique experience in the field of the individual, and that, paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, "the lived event is finite, or at least enclosed in the sphere of the lived, whereas the remembered event is limitless, because it is only a key to everything that came before and after."

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