

## Book Reviews

### Bound to Remember

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Jeffrey Blustein. *The Moral Demands of Memory*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. \$24.99 pb. ISBN-13: 9780521709729.

The scope of Jeffrey Blustein's *The Moral Demands of Memory* is immense. His overall project in the book is to examine

[H]ow and why memory should be preserved and transmitted, ... the reciprocal relationship between memory and [individual and collective] identity and the moral significance of this relationship, and ... the moral responsibilities associated with memory. (2)

However, in the course of his investigations he takes up such substantive sub-issues as: the necessity and obligation for individuals and for groups to actively take responsibility for the past; the links between historical injustice and collective identity and the role of memory in doing justice to the past; the relations between myth, collective memory, and historical inquiry; the responsibility to remember the dead and especially those closest to us; and the obligation to bear witness to the past. In what follows I do not attempt to survey the entire book; rather, I limit myself to highlighting what I take to be three distinctive, significant features of his analysis: the necessity and obligation to actively take responsibility for one's individual, particular past; the obligation to remember the dead, and especially those to whom Blustein refers as the "dear departed"; and, finally, the possible role of shame in the context of attempts to do justice for past collective injustice. To underscore the timely relevance of Blustein's book, I will organize my review around two events reported in the general media during the Spring of 2009.



In February 2009 the *New York Times* reported in the “City” section of the paper on the strange case of Hannah Upp. Upp can remember going out for a jog along Riverside Drive on August 28, 2008, but she remembers nothing again until waking up in an ambulance on September 16, three weeks later, after having been fished out of the Hudson River. Her doctors informed her that she suffered from a rare condition called “dissociative fugue,” a form of amnesia in which a person forgets her personal identity from anywhere between a few minutes to several years. About the experience of which she has no memory, Upp commented, “It’s weird. How do you feel guilty for something you didn’t even know you did? It’s not your fault, but it’s still somehow you. So it’s definitely made me reconsider everything. Who was I before? Who was I then—is that part of me? Who am I now?”

Upp’s question, “Who am I?” captures the stakes of the link between memory and personal identity that Blustein explicates in the first and the second chapters of his book. Since John Locke, philosophers have recognized that memory constitutes a key component in the unity and continuity of the “biographical self,” of personal identity in the sense of “the characteristics, actions, and experiences that make someone the person she is” (41). A loss of memory would thus “confound our sense of who we are,” as evidenced in Upp’s questions (43). Not only is memory a necessary component of personal identity, but being responsible and taking responsibility for our past are essential features of the ethical life, of self-knowledge and of self-respect and esteem. To quote Blustein at length:

[T]aking responsibility for one’s past is morally important and desirable for the individual to do ... For it is also a way of taking oneself seriously and is necessary if one is to have a realistic, responsible conception of oneself. Its importance is to be explained, therefore, partly in terms of what is essentially to leading a good human life, because these are plausibly regarded as constitutive ingredients of it. A person who does not come to terms with and take responsibility for important aspects of his past, or who selectively and defensively takes responsibility for only certain portions of it, will likely have only a superficial understanding of his abilities, inclinations, and attitudes. (40)

It is a curious feature of Upp’s experience that she feel ethically impli-

cated for presumably the difficulties she caused for her family, friends, and the authorities: “It’s textbook that you feel shame, you feel embarrassed, you feel guilt—all things I’ve definitely felt.” We can make sense of her feelings of responsibility to some extent if we attend to the process of taking responsibility for one’s past.

In chapter two, titled indeed “Taking Responsibility for One’s Own Past,” Blustein explicates key features of this process. Unlike merely *accepting*, however willingly or grudgingly, one’s responsibility for the past, *taking* responsibility for the past is an action implicating one’s agency that has “forward-looking” dimensions. He explains, “As a forward task, it involves two stages: a voluntary undertaking and a commitment to follow through, and it entails a readiness to answer for or give an accounting of our failures to do so” (65). There are, for primarily analytic purposes, three elements of taking responsibility for the past. First, taking responsibility for the past involves the “retrospective construction of meaning” (66–69). The specific details of the past are not changed—this is not an aspiration towards affecting an impossible backward causality—but the significance, the point or lesson, of the past is altered in light of “one’s present choices and actions.” For instance, the lesson a person derives from a particularly uncomfortable memory of a failed venture may change from “never try that again” to something like, “try that again, but be careful not to make the same mistakes.”

The second element of taking responsibility for the past involves “appropriating” it (69–74). This process of appropriation involves “actively taking up the past and annexing it to and integrating it with the present.” A person can appropriate past events in which one’s agency is directly or indirectly implicated. To mitigate the undeniable voluntaristic character of taking responsibility for one’s past Blustein points out that we can take responsibility for past events in which one suffered some event or the actions of another or others, and he associates this entire process with having a proper sense of “humility,” with recognizing that “one’s agency is impure and that one’s control is limited, not only by one’s physical characteristics and the things that befall one but also by one’s prior exercises of agency” (90–91). Although it would be morally perverse to claim, for example, that Upp is directly responsi-

ble for her actions during the lost time, she seems to be compelled to become, in Blustein's words, "active with respect to it by what [she] does now, by including it within the ambit of [her] agency." Finally, the process of taking responsibility for the past involves "thematization" (74–76). To thematize one's past is to narrate it; it is to organize the events in one's life into meaningful patterns, to identify "motifs and patterns" in one's past and to draw connections between them. We "make sense of the present in the light of some aspect of one's past," he explains. That Upp is appropriating and thematizing her past is evidenced in part by her claims that in the weeks following her return,

I've gotten a time to really appreciate what normal life is like. I've never had a moment in my life where I've just stopped and said, hold on, let's re-evaluate everything ... If you work through it, you can usually go on to live a normal life.

It is not a coincidence that Blustein's explication of the process of taking responsibility for one's past primarily concerned taking responsibility for what we might call the difficult past. People are much more likely to embrace their past achievements and moments of joy and to attempt to evade, elide, or otherwise ignore past suffering or failure. Therefore, the most original, I believe, and provocative component of Blustein's project is a sustained analysis of our obligations of remembrance in relation to those with whom the language of "obligations of remembrance" loses whatever negative connotations it might carry: our friends and especially the "*dear departed*, person we have loved, cherished, and/or esteemed, and who have not just been significant in our lives but have mattered to us, and who have now passed away" (245; Blustein's italics). Citing Kierkegaard, Blustein argues that the efforts to remember the dear departed are a work of love in which we value the person now dead as she was when alive (253–257).

Blustein divides the arguments for our obligations to remember the dead into two categories: consequentialist and expressivist arguments. With the first category of arguments, the possible benefits of fulfilling the obligation are decisive. There are, for example, political and/or therapeutic reasons to remember the dead because "doing so can be expected to promote or embody a better state of affairs [now and in the future] than available alternatives." With the second category of

arguments, the character or quality of our various relationships to the living and the dead are significant. According to Blustein, “we ought to remember the dead not (or not only) because we ought to bring about certain consequences ... but because certain attitudes are called for toward the dead and we express them in how we remember” (266). Blustein offers three expressivist arguments for the obligation to remember the dear departed (261–266). The first argument is the “rescue from insignificance view.” We remember the dead in order to express respect for the dignity of that person having existed and thereby to affirm “that their lives had a point not even death can reduce to insignificance” (272–273). The second argument is the “enduring duties view.” We have, he argues, “duties appropriate to the dear departed flow [that] from or instantiate duties of love and honor, among others” (273). Finally, Blustein argues for the “reciprocity view.” We remember the dead because we too hope to be remembered. Although the reciprocity view resembles a consequentialist argument, it is not (simply) one because in desiring to be remembered as well a person expresses a “fidelity to the tradition of remembering” itself (280).



In the same month that Blustein finished writing the preface of his book—February 2007—the International Committee of the Red Cross submitted a confidential report to the American Central Intelligence Agency on the treatment of fourteen “high value detainees” in CIA custody. That report was leaked to Mark Danner, a professor of Journalism at Berkeley and of Foreign Affairs, Politics, and the Humanities at Bard, who then made the findings public in the Spring of 2009. The descriptions of detainee treatment in that report, along with descriptions of treatment included in the US Senate Armed Services Committee’s investigation titled “Inquiry into the Treatment of Detainees in US Custody” released in April of 2009, include, in the words of the ICRC report, “descriptions of treatment and interrogation techniques—singly, or in combination—that amounted to torture and/or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.”

Although the practice of torture was officially ended by President Barack Obama on his first day in office in January 2009, the issue,

explains Danner, “could not be more important, for it cuts to the basic question of who we are as Americans.” The issue also goes to the heart of Blustein’s analysis contained primarily in chapter three, “Doing Justice to the Past.” In this chapter he is concerned with understanding the relationship between collective identity, past injustice, and the processes of taking responsibility for, of doing justice to, that past. To his credit, Blustein does not uncritically draw an analogy between individuals and groups, but he does argue that the processes by which individuals take responsibility for their past can “illuminate” the processes by which groups do justice to their past:

Collective appropriation of the wrongs of the past is similar in the following (limited) respect: it opens up possibilities for managing the influence of the past and enables the construction of a future that is not merely an uncritical recapitulation of the past. Furthermore, although it may be unfair to blame a group for wrongs done in the past, we may be justified in blaming a group for failing to collectively exercise its capacity to determine what its influence and significance will be and for failing to fulfill its duties of response. (148)

It is not possible to summarize all of the issues raised and arguments offered by Blustein in this chapter and in the fourth, “Ethics, Truth and Collective Memory,” and so in what follows I offer an outline of what I take to be one of the most significant and under-theorized issues that he analyses: the possible role of collective shame in motivating the process of doing justice for past injustice.

The notion of collective shame, according to Blustein, does not entail a commitment to some mysterious “collective consciousness that exists independently of human minds.” Rather, it is “a function of the understanding, psychological resources, and common knowledge of members of a group” (151). Following Bernard Williams, Blustein explains that shame concerns what a group *is*—it implicates the identity of the group, and it follows upon the recognition of a debt and responsibility that we receive—whereas guilt concerns what a group *has done*—it implicates collective agency.

Blustein’s analysis of collective shame is nicely nuanced. He elucidates the genuine notion of collective shame by distinguishing it from other, inadequate characterizations of group shame. Collective shame is not

“aggregated individual shame,” the shame “experienced by people who happen to be members of the same group” (152). What is missing from aggregated individual shame is mention about what specifically the individuals are ashamed and how this shame specifically concerns being a member of that group. However, collective shame is also not “aggregated membership shame,” shame “experienced by members of a group in relation to some (the same) action or practice of it” (154). The intensity of identification with a group can vary, and members who do not feel a strong allegiance to the group may not be disposed to feel anything in relation to it. More importantly, aggregated membership shame can occur even if only a few members of the group know or are aware of that about which they are ashamed. Genuine collective shame, in contrast, is “openly communicated and communally shared” (155). Consequently, Blustein defines genuine collective shame in the following manner:

Shared membership shame: group shame is truly collective when and only when there is shame over something the group has done that is widespread among the members of the group, the shame is publicly expressed and socially unifying, and it is aroused by actions or practices that call into question the group’s fidelity to its collective normative self-conception. (156)

The question of the guilt of those who authorized, carried out, or who had the power to try to prevent (doctors, lawyers) the torture of detainees in American custody to one side, it is of course very much an open question whether the majority of Americans have or will experience a shared membership shame that motivates them—that motivates us—to do justice to those we tortured. It is to Blustein’s credit that he has emphasized the vital importance of these issues and has provided us the conceptual tools to think through them.



In the opening pages of *The Moral Demands of Memory*, Blustein identifies his target readership: philosophers working in the analytic, or the Anglo-American, tradition. Although, as he acknowledges, the subject of memory has a long history in certain branches of philosophy, such as in metaphysics and epistemology, “evaluative inquiry about memory

has been curiously neglected” by these philosophers (1). Philosophers trained in traditions that have not, for the most part, neglected evaluative inquiry about memory—for example, existential phenomenology, hermeneutics, or critical theory—will likely find many of the rudimentary moves, and especially the work in the first chapter, “Memory as a Subject of Evaluative Inquiry,” unremarkable though competent. Further, philosophers not accustomed to confining their thinking within strict disciplinary boundaries will likely be surprised by the absence of references to important thinkers of memory and identity who blur the distinctions between philosophy and theology. Blustein credits John Locke with linking identity to memory, but Augustine of Hippo also raised these issues, over a thousand years earlier, in Book X of his *Confessions*, as he wandered through the vast fields of his memory in search of himself and his God. Furthermore, along with Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin deserves credit for insisting that we late/post-moderns should attend to the demand for rectifying justice. Benjamin’s famous observation on the moral-political call for justice that comes out of the past—“Our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply”—could have served as an apt header for Blustein’s third and fourth chapter. Despite these limitations, Blustein’s book could productively be read alongside Paul Ricoeur’s similarly concerned but simultaneously more comprehensive and more detailed study *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004).

Given his range of concerns, it is perhaps inevitable that Blustein’s analyses are frequently schematic. However, this lack of detailed argumentation is mitigated to a large extent by a clear, accessible exposition supplemented with copious, detailed endnotes. Large sections of *The Moral Demands of Memory*, and particularly those outlined above, are thought provoking and insightful. Blustein’s book deserves a readership greater than the one he intended.

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