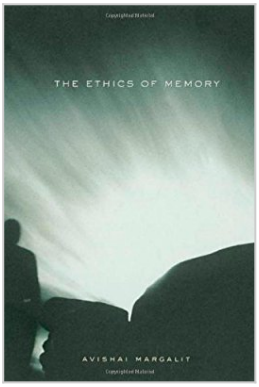

The Ethics of Memory

By Avishai Margalit

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Much of the intense current interest in collective memory concerns the politics of memory. In a book that asks, "Is there an ethics of memory?" Avishai Margalit addresses a separate, perhaps more pressing, set of concerns.

The idea he pursues is that the past, connecting people to each other, makes possible the kinds of "thick" relations we can call truly ethical. Thick relations, he argues, are those that we have with family and friends, lovers and neighbors, our tribe and our nation--and they are all dependent on shared memories. But we also have "thin" relations with total strangers, people with whom we have nothing in common except our common humanity. A central idea of the ethics of memory is that when radical evil attacks our shared humanity, we ought as human beings to remember the victims.

Margalit's work offers a philosophy for our time, when, in the wake of overwhelming atrocities, memory can seem more crippling than liberating, a force more for revenge than for reconciliation. Morally powerful, deeply learned, and elegantly written, *The Ethics of Memory* draws on the resources of millennia of Western philosophy and religion to provide us with healing ideas that will engage all of us who care about the nature of our relations to others.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly
Plato taught that the search for knowledge is tied up with memory, the effort to recall something we collectively knew. Freud took memory even further, positing that repressed memories are the key to shaping us as individuals and as a society. Margalit, a professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and author of The Decent Society, takes up these issues in respect to an idea of communal memory. Acknowledging that historical religions "can make a bid on moral memory," he instead poses a question: "Is there an ethics of memory?" His answer is a qualified yes, but it's the exegesis that is most compelling. Discussing memory's relation to emotions, morality, ethics and forgiveness, Margalit reads the Bible, writers (such as Wordsworth, Edward Albee and E.M. Forster), myths and other philosophers (Kant and Max Weber) in order to make his finely nuanced argument.

From Library Journal
Margalit (philosophy, Hebrew Univ., Jerusalem) maintains that people sometimes have ethical obligations to remember past persons and events, but he is anxious to guard his own thesis from over-expansion. He distinguishes his position from religious doctrines that are bound up with the past, holding that an ethics of memory has secular sense. Further, he does not support traditionalism, that is, the retention of past institutions as a value in itself. He also warns of "moralism," by which he means "the disposition to cast judgments of a moral kind on what is unsuitable to be so judged." To counter moralism, he distinguishes between ethics and morality. The former deals with our relations to those with whom we have special ties; the latter, our obligations to humanity as a whole. Margalit maintains that we have ethical obligations to remember particular people and, more controversially, that a community can have, and ought to have, collective memories. The stricter obligations of morality involve issues of memory only in unusual circumstances. We are, for instance, obligated to remember the evils of the Nazis, since they endeavored to undermine morality altogether. This illuminating study is highly recommended. David Gordon, Bowling Green State Univ., OH

From Booklist
In an analysis that limns sophisticated distinctions with rare clarity, philosopher Margalit explores the way we rely on memory to give meaning and substance to the "thick" ethical relationships of family and friendship. In the case of monstrous crimes against humanity--such as the Nazi mass murder of Jews or the Communist liquidation of the kulaks--he argues that memory should shape a renewed and universally shared understanding of morality. Exceptional moral witnesses to such crimes can preserve harrowing memories that will galvanize others to act against social and political evil. But in recognizing how emotionally charged memories can kindle a firestorm of revenge, Margalit wrestles with the question of how and when to forgive and forget past offenses. He approaches such questions with a humanist's insistence that human beings constitute the only justification for ethics and morality. Yet he respectfully acknowledges the historical importance of relevant religious doctrines, and he soberly concedes that such doctrines frequently confront us with glaring inadequacies in our social thinking. A timely challenge to assess the meaning of what we individually and collectively remember--and forget. *Bryce Christensen*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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