

# Is There an Ethical Way of Remembering War?

Written by Dominykas Broga

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DOMINYKAS BROGA, DEC 28 2012

*'All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory'*  
– Nguyen (2009: 149)

The death of the 'Other' in physicality, yet also in the nexus of contemporary thinking about ethics and war, inscribes the remembrance essentially aporetic. The promise to tell the truth, to reconcile with the past, is concealed under the banner of foundational subjectivity which limits us to the engagement of selective grief, mourning, remembrance and forgetting, denial and commemoration (Blanchot, 1995: 19). It is the aim of the paper to show how the embodiment of ethics within the individual as independent and sovereign bearer of ethical responsibility, or the underlying principle of subjective heterogeneity, dependent on social, cultural or political situatedness of the bearer of ethics in alternative theories, always leads to the exclusion, death in a discursive sense, of the silent, the enemy, the already dead or living victim of discourse – the Other – necessarily making perceivably ethical remembering conditional. By employing the case study of Japanese controversial remembering of the WWII through re-writing history textbooks, it will be argued that current allegations to ethics are necessarily susceptible to unconscious limitations, often leading to denial and forgetfulness of the past in order to construct the 'truth' of the Self, in which one is caught up, consumed and re-produced. This is not conditional for the perpetrator, who wants to forget in order to move on, but for the victim as well. In turn, arguing that thinking about individual ethics does not provide a promise for reconciliation with the past, the paper will aim to signify the re-capturing of essential change needed in the foundations of ethics to make remembrance meaningful, in terms of bringing reconciliation with the past for the 'Self', but more importantly, for the Other, the subject which is often elusive, mimetic and silent through the fault of grand narratives, capturing our preconceptions of ethics, identity and the past. Hence, Derrida's responsibility towards the 'Other', as the foundational ground for ethical remembering, will be shown to capture the essence of judging and constructing the remembrance in ethical terms.

To start with, Japan has been often criticised for failing to come to terms with its difficult Second World War past (Schneider, 2008: 113). Its efforts to overcome estrangement and to normalise its relations with others by drawing a curtain and engaging in a strategy of communal forgetfulness about the past, thus, selectively denying the perceived victims of the war the benefit of grief and mourning, seems to encounter an almost permanent impasse vis-a-vis its immediate neighbours in East Asia, notably, China and South Korea (Lawson & Tannaka 2011: 406). While many argue that approaches to the past, through dealing with atrocities caused to victims, rather than repressing them, offers a reconciliatory way for bringing peace, yet the deeper analysis of the Sino-Japanese affair over the release of the new history textbooks in 2001 April teases out a more foundational aporia of remembering, that, in itself, disallows anyone be solely ethical in its totality unless the wishes of the perpetrator, not only victim are being heard.

Firstly, while for about two decades, South Korea and China have been vocal about the need for a balanced portrayal of Japan's role in the Asia-Pacific region (Yoshimi, 2000), the release of the textbook has prompted an eruption of active confrontation. The new release has exhibited a general trend of departure from the imposed pacifism onto post-war Japan (Gutman, Brown & Sodaro, 2010: 8), and, according to Chinese, South Korean and American governments, has implemented the distorted and self-serving account of Japan's colonial and wartime activities. Hence, the new textbook minimised the issues of comfort women, Unit 731, engaged in biological experimentation on victims, and stressed Japan's efforts to modernise Korea and liberate Asian countries from Western domination, yet downplaying the brutality and war crimes of the Japanese (Beal et. al., 2001: 177). On the other hand, Japan

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insistently claimed that the textbook reform was, indeed, an attempt to provide a more balanced portrayal of the country in terms of its aims, actions and results amidst the events of World War II, which was distorted by the history of the victors (Li, 2003).

In turn, an attempt to put a positive spin on Japan's wartime role glossing over the worst aspects of the military's conduct, supporting the forgetfulness of the 'self-tormenting' elements of war history narratives, has received increasingly hostile reactions from neighbouring countries (Lawson & Tannaka, 2010: 406). As a response, South Korea temporarily recalled its ambassador from Japan; the President Kim Dae-Jung has made statements of his shock and disapproval; whereas in China, thousands of Chinese marched throwing stones to the Japanese embassy in Beijing to protest against the approval of a 'history according to Japan' (Lawson & Tannaka, 2010: 415). This denial of the past through the history textbooks and the subsequent Japan's Prime Minister Koizumi's visit to the Yasukuni Shrine – a shrine that honours known war criminals – has intensified Chinese public remembrance of the light sentences given by Japan to the convicted by the West class A criminals, and has led to the protests in China to expand to nearly forty major cities (Saaler, 2005: ch. 2).

One may be tempted to draw premature conclusions from the case study, arguing that the ethical way of remembering war seems to only need a constant remembrance of accountability to the memory of the victims of the war. Since forgetfulness is not possible as the memories of the victims resurface in ways that repressive regimes of truth cannot curtail, ethical remembering may seem to be possible through adhering to the tormented memories of the victim, giving them the ability to grieve and mourn. In turn, one may be tempted to assume that protests against these textbooks should not be seen as bashing Japan, but as the acknowledgment of the past and coming to grips with it, in turn, providing an ethical remembering of war. On the one hand, the memories of the war victims, indeed, tend to resurface. Thus, Japan's efforts to break its long-standing role of 'apologetic inferior' through the engagement of the politics of denial, or through assumption that it is not feasible to found a future on an unresolved past as to remember is to nurture grievance, indeed, nurtures non-reconciliatory relations (Chapman, 1999: 5). On the other hand, one has to take Japan's claim about subjective historicity seriously to uncover a deeper, masked, and often concealed under the banner of objectivity, aporia, which exhibits essential incompatibility between current ethical judgements and the construction of ethical memory that inevitably makes any such judgment on remembrance unethical, thus, fostering atrocities of the discourse, and, in turn, practice of remembering.

Japan has been criticised for re-defining the history, yet it claimed that the current imposition of historical narrative of the victor distorts the remembrance of the war as well, essentially imposing an unfair burden of responsibility onto present Japan, hence, not only ignoring the atrocities for Japanese, but as part of such discourse, according to Baudrillard, becoming part of the atrocities themselves (Minow, 2002: 16). While confronted with the past that had wrought devastation at home and abroad for which it constantly apologised, it was also confronted with a personal trauma, often unacknowledged in the narratives of the victors. Its claims that war was instigated by a small number of militants, of which ordinary citizens were also victims, and the unacknowledged image of the suffering from the American dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seems to underscore the sole guilt clause imposed onto Japan being objective (He, 2007: 47). Furthermore, accusations on subjective remembering of war in history textbooks should be seen in the light of history presented in the American schools, which glorifies the victimhood of Pearl Harbour (Mikyoung, 2008: 96), speaks of the decision to drop the atomic bombs and yet not of having dropped them upon people. Moreover, China's exclusion of Japanese suffering, yet insistence on Japan to include Chinese suffering, seems to offer a distorted image where the sacralisation of certain narratives insists on inclusion of the selective dead or victim, yet disallows the Japanese dead from the right to be part of American or Chinese memory (Bauman, 2004: 31). While Japan's sacralisation of its own past 'itself' seems to be a selfish act of the sacralisers since it refuses other groups the benefit they may derive from memorising the experience of others, the same should be concluded for the opposite, and the victimhood of the imposed historical discourse seems to perpetuate hostility, rather than reconciliation.

In turn, what can be drawn from these analyses is that each of the participants constructs its own discourse of truth, necessarily making reconciliation impossible as long as any of these narratives is imposed onto the other. Hence, it is important to ask whether there is an escape from this impasse of subjectivity, so that the objective remembering can be achieved, in turn, bringing peace and reconciliation for both sides. To answer such question, it involves the

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analysis of the interplay between memory construction and its engagement with traditional ethical foundations, on which we build our ethical judgements.

On the one hand, memory is always a discursive experience of the past, which, as Anderson argued, is contingent upon the boundaries of sociality in which the memory is created (Ashplant et. al., 2000: 8). Hence, memory is always a discursive and individual communication with the past (Lee, 2002: 3). It is a shifting process dependent on notions of the future and the images of the past, hence, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation (Nora, 1989: 8). Henceforth, if memory is 'unstable, plastic, synthetic, and repeatedly reshaped' (Winter, 2006: 3), if it is a process rather than a product, then, the notion of memory is never complete, for every finite present has its limitations of interpretation and selection, depending on who is remembering and how is the one remembering (Winter & Sivan, 1999: 6). In turn, while all the dead have no power to guide, let alone to monitor and to correct the conduct of the living constructed memory, its truth cannot depend on objectivity. Its reality is indebted in subjectivity and it can be conceived as a totality of the subjectivities.

On the other hand, our traditional philosophy begins with the metaphysics, epistemology and logic and then building ethics from these premises, essentialising the role of independent agent, be it group or individual, as the bearer of the intrinsic ethic foundation (Zlomislic, 2007: 83). This contemporary thinking, established on a stable, centred ego, centred in the world of Cartesian fiction, comes to impasse when dealing with an elusive, indeterminable and already impossible in its totality concept, such as memory, making the always conditional remembering objectifying (Nguyen, 2009: 150). It is essentially because this ethic cannot deal without stable ground, on which it is founded, the remembering war with the concealment of conditionality, on which our ethical grounds stand, inescapably makes the discursive atrocities for the certain memory, in turn, victimising all other narratives for the sake of the one arising from the agent's ethical standpoint. Deconstructing the processes of remembering shows how such thinking cannot deal with the truths as mediations rather than absolutions. Once faced with the relational and gradual truth in its own possible totality, embodied in memory, this individual foundation of ethic, always assumes the subjective objectification (Blustein, 2008: 24). In other words, the remembering based on normal foundations of ethics is often the very object which conceals symbolic violence towards the 'Other' rather than creates reconciliation (Campbell, 1994: 456).

Hence, if the current thinking about ethics cannot escape imposition of individual narratives, are we necessarily caught up in an inescapability of re-producing self-rectifying subjectivities, always and invariably making violations to the remembrance? Does it mean that there is no ethical way of remembering war in terms of bringing justice to all memories of the 'Others' always prioritising some and excluding other, thus bringing wars over memory? How are we to remember atrocities of war if any imposition of narrative means denial of undecidability of memory? If current ethics, arising as an intrinsic value of independent agent, does not offer a way for reconciliation, the way to truly ethically remember war depends on our commitments to re-define ethics as an undergoing aporia of a certain 'impossible' (Buckley-Zistel, 2006: 10).

Derrida has pointed out that ethic of remembrance construction would be respectable, responsible and meaningful if it did not live on a delusion and non-respect for its own condition of origin, namely, its indebtedness in subjectivity and undecidability (Zlomislic, 2007: 56). If anything constructed from this undecidability of subjectification gives rise to unethical behaviour, it seems that the primary foundation for ethics of remembering has to be different from traditional ethics, contained within this undecidable ground, if the reconciliation is to be achieved (Zlomislic, 2007: 84). Constructing remembrance in practice, with the constant adherence to this inescapability of undecidability, necessarily fosters responsibility. This responsibility is without limits, incalculable, before memory, that is, being pre-original, an-archic, since it derives from an 'infrastructural alterity' of difference embedded within undecidable (Campbell, 1994: 460).

Responsibility understood in this way refigures our attitudes towards subjectivity, and, thus, configures our commitments to the 'truth' construction within bounded communities (Shiver, 1995: 7). While the very origin of the subject now becomes found in its subjection to the 'Other' rather than independent individual – a subjection that precedes consciousness, identity, and freedom, and as such does not originate in a vow or decision, ergo, cannot be made possible by an imperative (Campbell, 1994: 461) – subjects re-imagined by this relationship with the Other

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have their very being called into question by the prior existence of the 'Other', which has an unremitting and even accusative hold on the subject. Hence, this re-articulation of ethics in compatibility with the needs of elusive memory makes the remembering ethical towards the subjectivity and the 'Other', since the one's construction of oneself and its truth has to be affirmed in terms of a right to be in relation to the 'Other' and this reproduces the cycle of responsibility towards the 'Other' and undecidability always and invariably reinforcing each other, thus closing any attempt to construct grand narratives of truth become unattainable or unethical.

Hence, this re-articulation helps to recapture the ethical remembering from the irresponsible subjection in terms of remembering and contestation of each other's truths, since it acknowledges the truth of one's own only through acknowledging the existence of the 'Other' prior to the 'Self'. The ethical 'I', thus, becomes possible precisely insofar as it kneels before the 'Other', sacrificing its own liberty of subjection to the more primordial call of the 'Other'. While this heteronomy of our response to the 'Other' precedes the autonomy of our subjective freedom of memory, together with the underlying construction of ethic within undecidability, it allows the mediation and acceptance of the other's truth to be acknowledged. This allows to acknowledge the existence of subjectivity in constructing history through memory, yet disallowing any particular memory become the master narrative, a signifier of the truth, since the truth is indefinitely obstructed from becoming real through the responsibility towards elusive 'Other'. In this sense, if we agree that we are already ethically situated, making judgements about the conduct of memory depends less on what sort of rules are invoked as regulations, and more on how interdependencies of our relations with 'Others' are appreciated (Campbell, 1994: 462). Constructed in this way, ethical remembering becomes non-totalising, responsible relation with the 'Other' in whichever shape it exists – dead or alive, victim or the perpetrator, for we have a primordial responsibility towards each 'Other' arising before subjectivity or the memory can be constructed. In turn, the focus on alterity and responsibility for each, prior to subjectivity as prior to thought and agency, is a structural possibility for ethics in the first place. Hence, it is through opening towards other, rather than closing in nothing that the reconciliation can be achieved in remembering war, since only in this way the respect for the plurality and indeterminacy of memory, divided among all who share particular experience, can be reconciled. In turn, if justice in ethics can be achieved only through the experience of the impossibility of master narrative, the ethical construction of remembering war can only be achieved through fostering undecidability, which truly captures the ethical relation between the 'Self' and the 'Other'. Not indeterminable, but undecidable, which brings the domain of possible into being and gives it the ongoing chance for transformation and re-figuration (Campbell, 1994: 472).

Indeed, comparing the previous release of the history textbook with the subsequent release of the May 2005 first joint history book, completed by all three countries, namely, China, Japan and South Korea, which seemingly reduced the animosities about the remembering of war, offers something elevating about possibility of remembrance being able to bring reconciliation through 'undecidable' even within the subjectivity always and invariably underpinning narratives of memory. Compiled by more than 50 different authors, it offered the reader a view of history from the interactions among all three countries. The book has included the controversies of Unit 731, mentioned comfort women, problems with Yasukuni Shrine visits by Japanese Prime Ministers, yet it also included Japan's suffering and atrocities of the wartime. (Schneider, 2008). More importantly, the book has compiled the sections on the textbook controversies themselves and of the subjectivity of history. Hence, this example, compared to the clash over narratives in the previous release of the textbook, signifies that the reconciliation, indeed, can only be achieved through the retention of the undecidability of memory within the very thinking about it.

To conclude, through the employment of the case study of Japanese attempts to come to terms with their Second World War memory by re-writing history textbooks, it has been signified that our insistence on stability of truth or existence of master narratives in memory politics essentially makes any attempt to fully reconcile with the past impossible. Shedding light on the contradictions on how memory politics cannot be subsumed by traditional approaches of ethics because of the essential memory contestability and indeterminacy, it has been shown that to re-capture the possibility of truly engaging with ethical remembering of war, the change is needed in the ethical construction of engagement with memory. By adhering to the primordial responsibility to the 'Other' which can serve to secure the ethical relations and reconciliation of competing memories within the realm of undecidability, the answer whether there is a way of ethical remembering of war depends on our willingness to respect this primordial relation and to prevent infinitely of any narrative claiming its right on the truth. In turn, ethical remembering is possible and existent. Japan's role in reconciliation, thus, will depend on the co-operative efforts of the China, South Korea

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and Japan to retain and foster this truly ethical political possibility of undecidability.

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Written by: Dominykas Broga  
Written at: University of Manchester  
Written for: Dr. Laura Mcleod  
Date written: 04/2012