

## 5. ἐπιλήθομαι (epilelesthai) and λήθη (lethe): On Plato's philosophy of forgetting

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### Abstract:

*Scholars H. N. Fowler, R. Waterfield, J. McDowell, D. Davidson and J. M. Cooper translate both ἐπιλήθομαι (epilelesthai) and λήθη (lethe) into "forgetting". Yet it is problematic, as they designate two different meanings of forgetting. Only J. C. B. Gosling, in his translation of Philebus, translates λήθη into "oblivion" and ἐπιλήθομαι into forgetting respectively. However, he does not explain why the difference matters. This paper aims at explaining the ambiguous meaning of forgetting in Meno, Phaedo, Theaetetus and Philebus. The one hand, ἐπιλήθομαι (epilelesthai) means the loss of memory in our ordinary life. On the other hand, λήθη (lethe) means the loss of memory before-life or before we are born. I conclude by drawing attention to Paul Ricoeur's critical examination of Plato's philosophy of forgetting that he fails to provide an effective resolution to the ordinary forgetting as an attack on the reliability of memory.*

### Keywords:

*Plato; Paul Ricoeur; Forgetting; Oblivion; ἐπιλήθομαι; λήθη*

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# ἐπιλήθομαι (epilelesthai) and λήθη (lethe): On Plato's philosophy of forgetting

In our common sense, the past refers to something being no longer. For example, I am now 28 years old, so my childhood in 8-15 years old is no longer. The time now is 18:00 24 March 2016, so 14:00 24 March 2016 is no longer. Though it is no-longer, I could still somehow reflect or remember what has happened at 14:00 24 March 2016. I was comfortably sitting on a chair and joyfully reading Plato's *Republic* alone. Does it mean that I can comprehensively remember every detail of the past experiences? To a large extent, I cannot fully remember which pages I have read or every single word I have read. I cannot fully remember what happened when I was an 8 years old child. Since the Greek philosophical heritage, forgetting is experienced as an attack on the reliability of memory.<sup>1</sup> How and why is forgetting experienced as an attack on the reliability of memory?

This paper has two aims. Firstly, it aims at explaining the ambiguous meaning of forgetting in *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Theaetetus* and *Philebus*. Forgetting refers to two Greek, namely ἐπιλήθομαι (*epilelesthai*) and λήθη (*lethe*). I explain the difference between ἐπιλήθομαι (*epilelesthai*) and λήθη (*lethe*) in Plato.<sup>2,3</sup> Some English translators like H. N. Fowler, R. Waterfield, J. McDowell, D. Davidson and J. M. Cooper translate both ἐπιλήθομαι (*epilelesthai*) and λήθη (*lethe*) into "forgetting". Only Gosling, in his translation of *Philebus*, translates λήθη into "oblivion" and ἐπιλήθομαι into forgetting respectively. However, he does not explain why the difference matters. Thus, the philosophical justification is missing. Secondly, I conclude by drawing attention to Paul Ricoeur's critical examination of Plato's philosophy of forgetting that forgetting cannot be completely understood if the meaning of memory is not explicated. The aporia of memory, the representation of the absent, remains enigmatic in Plato's philosophy. Therefore, Plato is insightful to address the ambiguous meaning of forgetting, but he is inaccurate to offer resolution towards the tension between forgetting and memory.

<sup>1</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 536; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 413.

<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, I will often use Greek words, e.g. λήθη, ἐπιλήθομαι, μνησις and ἀνάμνησις. It is because English translation might sometimes distort the very meaning of the words.

<sup>3</sup> Although I make references to some English translation of Plato and Aristotle's works, I translate some Plato and Aristotle's works by myself. Those problematic English translations will be discussed in a detail when the English translations are rejected in the following sections.

## 1. The dialectic between having forgotten and recollection in Plato's *Phaedo*

In *Phaedo*, Socrates (under Plato's writing) does not thematize forgetting [ἐπιλήθομαι]. Instead, he discusses having forgotten [ἐπελέληστο]. He not only draws attention to having forgotten [ἐπελέληστο], but he also clarifies the relationship between forgetting [ἐπελέληστο] and recollection [ἀνάμνησις/ anamensis].

Let's consider having forgotten [ἐπελέληστο] first. There are two linguistic characteristics. On the one hand, the term ἐπελέληστο is derived from επιλανθάνομαι. Both are verbs in the middle voice. The middle voice is a set of inflexions different from the active and passive voices, as it is syntactically active but semantically passive. When a verb in the middle voice is used in a subject-predicate statement, the subject cannot be categorized as either an agent or a patient. Instead, the subject is in-between an active agent or a passive patient. Accordingly, the middle voice has a reflexive sense: the actor is affected by his own action. Besides, ἐπελέληστο is an indirect verb. The characteristic of an indirect verb is that the subject acts for (or sometimes by) himself or herself or in his or her own interest. For example, καὶ ἐνοσφίσατο ἀπὸ τῆς τιμῆς in *Bible* Acts 5:2. It means that "and he kept back (some) of the price (for himself)". The subject (he) acts (kept back) for himself.

On the other hand, ἐπελέληστο is in past perfect tense. ἐπελέληστο is always followed by a genitive object.<sup>4</sup> Genitive objects refer to things which are past and is not attentional. The past perfect tense is of critical importance because what had been forgotten is able to be recalled through recollection [ἀνάμνησις] although it is absent. In 73e, he discusses that recollection "takes place with regard to things which have already been forgotten [ἐπελέληστο] through time and inattention [μὴ ἐπισκοπεῖν]". So the most proper translation of ἐπελέληστο is "having forgotten".

Now we turn to recollection [ἀνάμνησις]. Recollection is the status of re-minding or re-gaining something absent in the past. Simmias believes that we have knowledge through learning. Knowledge can be taught. Nonetheless, both Cebes and Socrates argue against Simmias' second claim, knowledge can be taught. Knowledge can be recalled only for "our learning is nothing else than

<sup>4</sup> Steadman, G. 2015. *Plato's Phaedo Greek Text with Facing Vocabulary and Commentary*. Geoffrey Steadman: 63. This edition is last updated on 25 June 2015 from <https://geoffreysteadman.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/phaedo-25june15w.pdf> This is downloaded on 20 Dec 2016, 10:30 a.m.

recollection [ἀνάμνησις]” (72e).<sup>5</sup> Learning is not based on teaching but recollection. More importantly, learning is equivalent to recollection. Socrates offers an argument to justify this claim,

“Can a person on seeing a picture of a horse or of a lyre be reminded of a man, or on seeing a picture of Simmias be reminded of [ἀναμνησθῆναι] Cebes?”

“Surely”

“And on seeing a picture if Simmias he can be reminded of Simmias himself?”

“Yes,” said he. (74b)

When a person sees a picture of a horse, he is reminded of a horse. Seeing a picture is at the same time reminding of something else. The thing is seen and the thing reminded is known as equal because of the third element. In this case, the third element is the knowledge of abstract or absolute equality. Equality itself is itself abstract and cannot be perceptually seen. However, what we see is equal things, which is not itself abstract and can be perceptually seen. There is a distinction between “equal things” and “equality in the abstract”. Socrates continues to argue that the latter is prior to the former. We know equality before we perceive any equal things by the senses. He states that,

“Before we began to see or hear or use the other senses we must somewhere have gained a knowledge of abstract or absolute equality, if we were to compare with it the equals which we perceive by the senses, and see that all such things yearn to be like abstract equality but fall short of it” (75d).

In the passage, the knowledge specifically refers to the knowledge of abstract or absolute equality. Without the knowledge of abstract or absolute equality, we are not able to judge things as equal. The knowledge of abstract or absolute equality is a necessary condition for judging things equal. Before we begin to perceive things and judge them as equal, it is necessary for us to know equality beforehand. So we must somehow have “learned” the knowledge of abstract or absolute equality. The knowledge of abstract or absolute equality is based on recollection. It follows that “whenever the sight of one thing brings you a perception of another, whether they be like or unlike, that must necessarily be a recollection [ἀνάμνησιν]” (74d). Whether they are like (equal) or unlike (unequal) is based on the recollection.

In this regard, the recollection is a way to *recall* or *remind* of what we have before our perception. It is one of the most important Plato’s dialogues concerning the relationship between forgetting and recollection. Throughout the dialogue, we have two conclusions. First, from the ontological point of view, having forgotten [ἐπελήληστο] is a necessary condition for recollection

<sup>5</sup> This translation is based on H. N. Fowler with my modification. Please see Fowler, H. N. 1999. *Plato, Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 253. It is noteworthy that Fowler translates both ἐπιστήμην and ἐπιστήμη into knowledge.

[ἀνάμνησις]. Without having forgotten [ἐπελέληστο], nothing can be recalled through recollection [ἀνάμνησιν]. Just imagine, someone recalls the happiest memory of having a wedding ceremony. This recollection [ἀνάμνησις] is possible if and only if the happiest memory of having a wedding ceremony has been forgotten. Having forgotten something, in this circumstance, means the loss of something in the past. Because of the effect of having forgotten, someone can *re-call* or *re-gain* what was lost or has been forgotten [ἐπελέληστο]. The second point is deduced from the first point. Having forgotten [ἐπελέληστο] presupposes the existence of memory before one was born. According to Plato's theory of recollection, the existence of memory refers to the possession of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, one has knowledge before he was born. In this regard, it is justified that learning is nothing else but recollection.

## 2. The connection between recollection [ἀνάμνησις] and knowledge [ἐπιστήμην] in Plato's *Meno*

The claim, learning is nothing else but recollection, is further justified in *Meno*. In the text, Socrates (under Plato's writing) not only clarifies recollection [ἀνάμνησις], but he also makes a connection between recollection [ἀνάμνησις], true belief [δόξα ἀληθής] and knowledge [ἐπιστήμην].<sup>7</sup> To understand the connection, it is necessary to clarify true belief [ἀληθεῖς] and knowledge [ἐπιστήμην].

In 97e-98a, Socrates draws two differences between true belief and knowledge. First, true belief does not stay long and escapes from our soul. However, the knowledge stays long and does not easily escape from our soul. The first difference is based on the second difference. True belief is something yet made with causal reasoning, whereas knowledge is something that has not made with causal reasoning. In this way, Socrates concludes that "this is why knowledge is more prized than true belief: the one transcends the other by its trammels". Knowledge has a greater value than true

<sup>6</sup> The aprior existence of memory in Plato's theory of recollection is confirmed in *Meno*. Scholars like N. Gulley and O. Hansing establish the tone of discussing Plato's theory of recollection that it is necessary to look at *Meno* as well. Gulley finds three Platonic dialogues, including *Phaedo*, *Meno* and *Phaedrus*, argue for the aprior existence of memory. O. Hansing pays special attention to *Meno*, for the most significant argument, the slave-boy, can be found in *Meno*. See Gulley, N. 1954. "Plato's Theory of Recollection". *The Classical Quarterly* 4 (3/4): 194-213; Hansing, O. 1928. "The Doctrine of Recollection in Plato's Dialogues". *The Monist* 38(2): 231-262.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars Fine and Vlastos point out that there is a distinction between "true belief/ the truth" and "knowledge". In Greek, the truth or true beliefs refer to ἀλήθεια (aletheia), whereas knowledge refers to ἐπιστήμην (episteme). See Fine, G. 2004. "Knowledge and True Belief in the *Meno*", in David Sedley, *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy: Volume XXVII*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 61-62 and Vlastos, G. 1996. *Studies in Greek Philosophy: Socrates, Plato, and their tradition, Volume 2*. NJ: Princeton University Press: 155. It is true for the reviewer to remind that the distinction can also found in the Republic Book V (Πολιτεία), Gorgias (454d) and *Meno* (98a-d). Yet the notion "forgetting" is not thematized in the Republic Book V (Πολιτεία), Gorgias (454d). Therefore, I do not mention these texts in this paper.

belief, as it transcends the other by making with causal reasoning. So P. Ricoeur correctly addresses that on the one hand, “true belief is not a degree of knowledge”. On the other hand, “true belief is an unstable and fleeting state of the soul, an *Einfall*, a fleeting impression of truth”.<sup>8</sup> To turn true belief into knowledge, one has to make a true belief with causal reasoning. How can one make the causal reasoning? His answer is “recollection” [ἀνάμνησις]. Recollection is the way of making the causal reasoning and turning true belief into knowledge.

In 82d, Socrates demonstrates how the slave-boy turns the true geometrical belief into the geometrical knowledge. By means of the demonstration, it also shows how one makes the causal reasoning through recollection. First of all, the slave-boy knows nothing about geometry and mathematics. Then Socrates asks the slave-boy questions and requests for responses. Finally, the slave-boy somehow knows that “he does not know, at least he does not believe that he knows”. Ricoeur addresses that “it is not simply a negative matter”, because “the point of the passage is to show that the slave is capable of participating in the questioning and of responding correctly without the use of an argument from authority”.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the dialogue (questions and answers), the slave is capable of coming up with answers. In this regard, Socrates argues that the discovery of the answer is spontaneous. The slave recognizes the truth as “internal” to himself and not as the outcome of an “external” teaching. Socrates concludes “the existence of truth is in the soul” (86d). The slave boy's geometrical belief is anchored in reasoning. “And this anchoring is recollection [ἀνάμνησις]” (98a). It demonstrates that Socrates does not teach the slave-boy, and the slave-boy has never learned anything from Socrates. All the effort is nothing but recollection. What is the connection between true belief, knowledge and recollection?

Ricoeur points out that “Plato himself reduces his myth of recollection to an encouraging of effort: one can find (heurein = εὐρεῖν) the truth because one possesses it in oneself”.<sup>10</sup> Recollection is identical a search or the process of learning because all these can be considered as a *recovery* of what has remembered. Socrates explicates that,

“For since all nature is akin and the soul has learnt everything, there’s nothing to stop a man recovering everything else by himself, once he has remembered [ἀναμνησθέντα]– or ‘learnt’, in common parlance– just one thing; all he needs is the

<sup>8</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1982. *Être, Essence et Substance Chez Platon et Aristote*. Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement Supérieur: 31; 2013. *Being, Essence and Substance in Plato and Aristotle*. Cambridge: Polity: 32.

<sup>9</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1982. *Être, Essence et Substance Chez Platon et Aristote*. Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement Supérieur: 29; 2013. *Being, Essence and Substance in Plato and Aristotle*. Cambridge: Polity: 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ricoeur, P. 1982. *Être, Essence et Substance Chez Platon et Aristote*. Paris: Société d’édition d’enseignement Supérieur: 29-30; 2013. *Being, Essence and Substance in Plato and Aristotle*. Cambridge: Polity: 31.

fortitude not to give up the search. The point is that the search, the process of learning, is in fact nothing but recollection [ἀνάμνησις]... And now, just when I'm insisting that there's no such thing as teaching, only recollection, you're asking me whether I can teach you something. You're trying to catch me out in an immediate contradiction" (81a-82d).<sup>11</sup>

There are three assumptions in his argument. First, before a man is born, the soul has naturally learned everything.<sup>12</sup> This why Socrates claims that "a man has remembered" everything. Second, after a man is born, the soul has lost all he has learned from the past.<sup>13</sup> Up to this point, we could now reaffirm the main thesis mentioned in *Phaedo*: a man learns everything before he was born, but a man loses everything when he was born. Yet in *Meno*, it further distinguishes what has learned before he was born and what has regained through recollection after he was born, namely true belief and knowledge. Third, to regain the true belief, man has to search. This regaining or research is what most scholars called "theory of recollection".<sup>14</sup> The theory of recollection, in this context, designates the doctrine of a search of something from the past. What does "something from the past" refer to? It refers to the true belief (what was learned before a man was born, but what has been lost after a man was born). However, recollection is not simply the way to search the true belief, but the way to turn the true belief into the knowledge by means of making the causal reasoning so that one is capable of

<sup>11</sup> This translation is based on R. Waterfield with my modification. Please see Waterfield, R. 2009. *Meno and other dialogues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 114.

<sup>12</sup> It is what R. E. Allen and N. Gully called "innate knowledge". This argument can be found in several scholars. For example, Allen, R. E. 1962. "Anamnesis in Plato's 'Meno and Phaedo'". *The Review of Metaphysics* 13 (1): 167. Gully, N. 1962. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. NY: Barnes & Noble, Inc.: 12. However, I argue that the term "innate knowledge" is misleading, as it does not distinguish true belief and knowledge. The reviewer suggests that this assumption is closely relating to *Phaedrus* and the concept of "ἀληθείας πεδίων". I agree with the reviewer's suggestion. In *Phaedrus* 248B, Socrates mythologically states that souls have wings without bodies before they are earthly born. Souls is in a journey to the field of the truth (ἀληθείας πεδίων), they behold what truly is, namely the Forms or the Ideas. In this regard, it is necessary to make a proper reference in the theory of Forms/ Ideas in order to explain the assumption. However, the aim of this paper is to explain the notion of forgetting. To avoid off-track, this paper will not discuss this assumption in a detail.

<sup>13</sup> It is what D. Scott called "forgotten knowledge". Scott, D. 1987. Platonic Anamnesis Revisited, *The Classical Quarterly* 37 (2): 346. However, I argue that the term "forgotten knowledge" is misleading, as it does not distinguish true belief and knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> See also Anderson, D. E. 1971. "The Theory of Recollection in Plato's *Meno*". *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 9 (3): 225-235. Ebert, T. 2007. The Theory of Recollection in Plato's *Meno*: Against a Myth of Platonic Scholarship, in Brisson Erler (ed.), *Menon. Selected Papers from the Seventh Symposium Platonicum*. Academia Verlag: 184-198. Cornford, F. M. 1935. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Ackrill, J. L. 1997. in *Essays on Plato and Aristotle*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, especially the chapter "Anamnesis in the *Phaedo*: Remarks on 73c-75c".



coming up with the true belief in his soul with a longer period of time. Consequently, the outcome of recollection is knowledge instead of the true belief itself.

### 3. The double role of forgetting [ἐπιλελήσθαι] in Plato's *Theaetetus*

*Theaetetus* continues the discussion between recollection and knowledge. Throughout the discussion, the role of forgetting [ἐπιλελήσθαι] is explained in the aporia of knowledge. So forgetting not only plays a role in the aporia of memory but also in the aporia of knowledge. At the very beginning, Theaetetus believes that knowledge is identical to perception. In a contrast, Socrates (under Plato's writing) doubts if they are identical. He tries to make the distinction between knowledge [ἐπιστήμων] and remembering by raising an aporia: "Can a man who has learned something not know it when he is remembering [μυμνήσκω] it?" (163d)

Theaetetus replies Socrates that when a man who has learned a thing remembers what has learned, it is impossible for him to have no knowledge of it. Socrates then tries to step by step justify his claim. To begin with, he admits there is such a thing as memory [μνήμην]. In addition, he investigates the nature of memory: memory is of something [ᾧ τινός] rather than nothing [οὐδενός]. Last but not least, he confirms the chronological order between the act of remembering [μέμνηται] and having forgotten [ἐπελάθετο]. He makes a conversation with Theaetetus,

SOCRATES: Well, you acknowledge the existence of memory [μνησις], don't you?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Does one remember [μέμνηται] something or nothing?

THEAETETUS: Something, of course.

SOCRATES: Something learned, something perceived – that sort of thing?

THEAETETUS: Of course.

SOCRATES: And sometimes something known?

THEAETETUS: Yes.

SOCRATES: Even when one's eyes are closed? Or does that make one have forgotten [ἐπελάθετο]?

THEAETETUS: No, Socrates. What a strange thing to say! (163e)<sup>15</sup>

It is confirmed that there is the existence of memory. The nature of memory is that it is something rather than nothing. More importantly, memory is something known. Even when one closes his eyes, it does not make one have forgotten the memory. It seems that the act of remembering and memory is so powerful that memory could not be effaced once it happens. Although Socrates appreciates the

<sup>15</sup> This translation is based on R. Waterfield with my modification. Please see Waterfield, R. 1987. *Theaetetus*. NY: Penguin Books: 31.



powerfulness of remembering and memory, he does realize the “fallibility” or the “uncertainty” of memory. Forgetting plays in role in the aporia of memory.

In 191d, Socrates addresses the role of forgetting in the aporia of knowledge. He thanks Mother of the Muses for her gift, namely the capacity of remembering. He claims that,

“Let us call it the gift of Mnemosyne, Mother of the Muses, and say that whatever we wish to remember something what are seeing or hearing or even thinking in our minds we hold this wax under the perceptions [αἰσθήσεσι] or thoughts and imprint them on it [ἀποτυποῦσθαι], as we might impress the mark of a singlet ring. Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know so long as the image [εἶδωλον] remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget [ἐπιλελῆσθαι] and do not know [ἐπίστασθαι].”

This text can be divided into two parts. The first part is the command of Mnemosyne, and the second part is the Socrates’ interpretation of the command. The command is an analogy of the imprint. In the analogy, remembering a wax consists of two steps. The first step is to hold the perception or thought of a wax. The second is to stamp the impression in our minds. The latter is also called “impressing the mark”. It is why Plato draws the conclusion that whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember. The wish of remembering is achieved through impressing the mark. The command clearly explicates that impressing the sign is a necessary condition for remembering. Without impressing the sign, one cannot remember. In the second part, Plato aims at responding another question: why is impressing the mark a necessary condition for remembering? The reason is that the image [εἶδωλον] remains in the wax through impressing the mark. Socrates uses “ἄν”. According to *Greek-English Lexicon*, “ἄν” is a subjunctive conjunction.<sup>16</sup> It does not specify whether the subjunctive means “if” or “only if”. In the English translation, the conjunction “so long as” means “only if”. It means that only if the image remains in the wax, then it is whatever is impressed upon the wax. If the image does not remain in the wax, then it is not whatever is impressed upon the wax. The image remaining in the wax is a necessary condition for impressing the mark. In Ricoeur’s French translation, the conjunction “aussi

<sup>16</sup> Liddell, H.G. & Scott, R. 1891. *Greek-English Lexicon*. Oxford: Clarendon Press: 46.

It is noteworthy to point out the differences among Hamilton and Cairns’ English translation, Ricoeur’s French translation and the English translation of Ricoeur. In Hamilton and Cairns’ translation, “imprint” is a verb in the present tense translating the Greek, ἀποτυποῦσθαι. In Ricoeur’s French translation, “imprimons” is a verb in the present tense. In the English of Ricoeur, “take a stamp” is a phrase in the present tense translating the word. Hamilton and Cairns’ English translation is the most faithful translation of the Greek because of two reasons. First, ἀποτυποῦσθαι is in the present tense. So Ricoeur’s French translation is incorrect. Second, the English translation of Ricoeur reserves both “imprint” and “marks” for the Latin, sēmeia. It may lead to an ambiguity that “imprint” can be understood as a verb or a noun.

*longtemps que*” means “as long as” or “if”. It means that if the image remains in the wax, then it is whatever is impressed upon the wax. If the image remains in the wax, then it is whatever is impressed upon the wax. The image remaining in the wax is a sufficient condition for impressing the mark. Thus, it is unclear the role of the image, that is to say, whether the image remaining in the wax is a necessary or a sufficient condition for impressing the mark.

Furthermore, Socrates’ interpretation conjoins the aporia of memory and that of knowledge. On the basis of the second statement, he does not only discuss remembering but also forgetting and knowing. It is stated that “whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget [ἐπιλεσθαι] and do not know [ἐπίστασθαι]”. Ricoeur’s French translation is almost the same. If whatever is obliterated [effacé] or is incapable of being impressed, then it is what we forget and what we do not know. Obliterating is the opposite of remaining; incapable of being impressed is the opposite of impressing; forgetting is the opposite of remembering, and not knowing is the negation of knowing. To reformulate the statement, if whatever is “not remaining” or is incapable of being impressed, then it is what we do “not remember” and what we do not know. It means that remaining or impressing the mark is a necessary condition for remembering and knowing. Yet why do we not know whatever is obliterated or is incapable of being impressed? Precisely, why do we not know whatever is forgotten?

Ricoeur follows Burnyeat that Socrates proposes “the model of the aviary” to answer the question. In 197c-d, he gives a metaphor,

“If a man catches wild birds and he should arrange an aviary at home and keep them in it, we might in a way assert that he always has them because he possesses them. And yet in another way that he has none of them, but that he has acquired power over them, since he has brought them under his control in his own enclosure to take them and hold them whenever he likes, by catching whichever bird he pleases, and to let them go again; and he can do this as often as he sees fit.”.

Keeping birds in an aviary presuppose the possession of birds, but acquiring power over birds does not presuppose the possession of birds. Holding a bird in the hand differs from keeping it in an aviary in two ways. Firstly, the former (Holding a bird in the hand) brings birds under his control without an aviary, whereas the latter (keeping it in an aviary) simply keeps birds in an aviary. Secondly, and more importantly, in the former case, the man can catch and release birds whenever it fits. But in the latter case, the man can never freely do so. Socrates explains that the birds represent the varieties of knowledge. Burnyeat calls this model “the model of the aviary”. The metaphor introduces a distinction between two moments, namely the moment of knowledge and the moment of the

acquisition of the imprint.<sup>17</sup> In 197e, Socrates argues further that “whatsoever kind of knowledge a person acquires *and shuts up in the enclosure*, we must say that he has learned or discovered the thing of which this is the knowledge [ἐπιστήμη] and that just this is knowing [ἐπίστασθαι]”. If it is knowledge, then it is necessary for someone to acquire it *and* to arrange it in a closed aviary. So the moment of knowledge differs from the moment of the acquisition of the imprint in the sense that the latter does not require the former, but the former requires the latter.

Ricoeur follows Burnyeat that the moment of knowledge refers to the moment of “possessing knowledge”, whereas the moment of the acquisition of the imprint refers to the moment of “actively using it”.<sup>18</sup> The former directly relates to the problem of knowledge, whereas the latter directly relates to the problem of memory. The problem of knowledge and the problem of memory is intertwining, they are mixed together in *Theaetetus*. Yet Socrates has not yet explained how the image remains in the wax or how the mark is impressed. He accidentally shifts his focus towards in what sense we *know* the imprint or the impressed. The aporia of knowledge turns Plato away from the passivity of memory to the capacity of the memory in relation to knowledge. As Ricoeur stated, “we have moved from the apparently passive metaphor of the imprint left by a seal to a metaphor that stresses power or capacity in the definition of knowledge”. In this way, the two moments are mixed together.

Worse still, the aporia of knowledge becomes much complicating. In 194a, Socrates responds to the problem of knowledge by assimilating knowledge to an exact fit and false opinion to a bad match. According to Socrates, knowledge is opposite to mistake or deception. He elaborates his view,

“Now when perception is present to one of the mark [σημείων] but not to the other, and the mind applies the mark of the absent perception to the perception which is present, the mind is deceived [ψεύδεται] in every such instance”.

The mind is deceived whenever the mind applies the mark mistakenly. Ricoeur proposes that “Socrates develops a sort of phenomenology of mistakes, where one thing is taken for another”.<sup>19</sup> Considered the phenomenology of mistakes, the failed fit and the faulty grasp is two figures of mistakes. The two figures of mistakes designate two moments, namely fail to fit and falsely grasp.

<sup>17</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 11; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 10.

<sup>18</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 10; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 9.

<sup>19</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 9-10; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 8-9.

How can a mis-fit and a mis-take be possible? A mis-fit and a mis-take are possible in two ways: (1) the absent is falsely grasped as the present; (2) whenever the present is falsely grasped as the absent. Both share the same characteristics that they mis-fit their own properties *and* mis-take another for itself. In his example, if the perception is present to one of the mark but the mind fails to match the perception and the mark of the absent perception, then a mistake or deception takes place.

#### 4. Memory [μνησις] and imprint [σημείων /τυπος] in Plato's *Philebus*

The words forgetting [ἐπιλελήσθαι] or having forgotten [ἐπελέληστο] cannot be found in *Philebus*. However, words like forgetting and forgetfulness can be found in H. C. Fowler and J. Bernet's English translations because they translate λήθη into forgetfulness and λήθηθῆναι into forgetting. Some scholars thus take for granted that ἐπελέληστο is identical to λήθη. Only J. C. B. Gosling implicitly distinguishes the two words by translating λήθη into oblivion. His distinction is implicit as he does not provide any justification. Nevertheless, the distinction is significant that it marks the demarcation between Plato and post-Platonic analysis of forgetting. Why is there such a distinction? And what is the difference?

To clarify the nature of oblivion [λήθη], Plato firstly distinguishes without-perception [ἀναισθησία] and oblivion [λήθη]. Both without-perception [ἀναισθησία] and oblivion [λήθη] are the statuses that one has no memory. Although we have no memory in both cases, only oblivion [λήθη] can be understood as a kind of forgetting. The distinction is not only based upon the present-past distinction, but it is also based upon the soul-body distinction. In 33d-e, Socrates assumes both the present-past distinction and the soul-body distinction,

“Take the way the body is acted on. Let's assume sometimes the action is extinguished before it reaches the soul [ψυχή], so leaving it untouched by experience, while others penetrate the body and the soul too and as it were set up a disturbance in each and both together”

On the one hand, it is assumed that the moment of an action reaching the body and the soul respectively are two different moments. On the other hand, it is assumed that an action firstly reaches the body, then reaches the soul. The moment of an action reaching the body is prior to that of an action reaching the soul. In this regard, the soul-body distinction is made through the different moment of penetration. Based on this assumption, Socrates and Protarchus agree that “the soul is forgotten [λανθάνω] those only penetrate as far as the body, but not of those that penetrate both”.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, the penetration of the body is a necessary condition for the penetration of the soul.

<sup>20</sup> Λανθάνω is the perfect tense of the verb λεληθῆναι.

On the other hand, the soul-body distinction relates to the problematic of memory and forgetting. He introduces two scenarios to illustrate the relationship.

(1) Λήθην: The penetration of both the body and the soul, and it does not retain

(2) Ἀναισθησία: The penetration of the soul but not the body

In case (1), it is undeniable that we have perception. What does Plato mean by perception? When the soul and the body are jointly aroused with the affection [τὰ παθήματα], it would surely be right to call this arousal perception (34a5). The penetration of both body and the soul with the affection is a necessary and sufficient condition for perception. For example, when a beautiful thing is perceived, an affection (e.g. pleasure) is received together with the perception of a beautiful thing. In this way, the perception with the affection penetrates not only the body but also the soul. In 38e-39a, Plato uses a metaphor to explain it,

“It seems to me that [...] our soul is like a book [...] It appears to me that the conjunction of memory with perceptions [αἰσθήσεσι], together with the affections [τὰ παθήματα] consequent upon memory and perception, may be said as it was to write words in our souls. And when this experience writes what is true [ἀληθῆ], the result is that true judgments or statements, while when the internal scribe [γραμματεὺς γράφῃ] writes what is false [ψευδῆ], we get the opposite sort of opinions and assertions” (38e-39a)

The nature of our soul is like a book because of two similarities. Firstly, the combination of memory and perception with the affections is imprinted or written in my soul. The process of imprinting in my soul is similar to the process of writing a book. Secondly, if we imprint what is true in our soul, then the opinion or assertion is true. If we write what is true in a book, then the judgments or statements are true. In a contrast, if we imprint what is false in our soul, then the opinion or assertion is false. If we write what is false in a book, then the judgments or statements are false. In this way, Plato argues that our soul is like a book, and the process of imprinting in the soul is like the process of writing a book. Apart from this metaphor, Ricoeur finds that Plato offers another metaphor, namely the metaphor of painting. Both metaphors propose that perception follows the scribe and provides imprints [graphei] in our soul. Consequently, imprints are “the image formed inside oneself” (39b).<sup>21</sup> One has a perception if and only if imprints are made internally or the images are formed inside oneself. Yet do we have memory in case (1)? Plato defines that memory is a “retention of perception” [σωτηρίαν τοίνυν αἰσθήσεως] (34a10). It means that the penetration of both body and the soul with the affection is a necessary but not sufficient condition for memory, as retention is also a necessary condition for memory. In case (1), imprints are made in the soul but they do not retain. As a result, in the case of without-perception [Ἀναισθησία], we have no memory.

<sup>21</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 17; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 14.

In case (2), it claims that an action does not penetrate the body but the soul only. Socrates rejects ἀναισθησία as forgetting because it violates not only the nature of perception but also the nature of memory. First, it violates the nature of perception in the sense that it has no penetration of the body, which is a necessary condition for the penetration of the soul. Second, it violates the nature of memory in the sense that the imprints do not retain in our soul, which is a necessary condition for the retention of perception. So we have no perception as well as memory in case (2). In this regard, Plato argues that “instead of calling the soul forgotten when it undergoes nothing from the disturbances in the body, I want you to substitute ‘lack of perception’ [ἀναισθησία] for ‘forgetfulness’ [λήθη]”. Αναισθησίαν can be literally divided into ἀν and αισθησίαν. Ἀν means both against and not. Αισθησίαν means perception. So ἀναισθησίαν means “lack of perception”. It is the status that perception is unaffected [ἀπαθής] in the body [σώματος]. Since the penetration of the body is a necessary condition for the penetration of the soul. So ἀναισθησίαν does not designate “a loss” but designates “nothing”.<sup>22</sup> This is why Plato asserts that “it would be absurd to speak of the loss of something that does not exist, nor has existed” in 33e.

Throughout the clarification of ἀναισθησία, the distinction between ἀναισθησία and λήθη can then be drawn. What makes the essential difference between the two is that ἀναισθησία has no connection with memory, whereas λήθη has a connection with memory. What is the connection? Here λήθη as having no memory designates the status of being “loss of memory” or “without memory” [μνήμης ἔξοδος] (33e). Ἐξοδος means loss or death. According to Plato’s *Phaedo*, existence is a necessary condition for death. Precisely, the loss of existence (death) presupposes existence. So λήθη as μνήμης ἔξοδος (the loss of memory) presupposes the existence of memory.

In conclusion, Plato’s philosophy of forgetting suggests two types of forgetting, namely ἐπιλελήσθαι and λήθη. The former is the ordinary forgetting which experienced every day, whereas the latter is the oblivion which experienced before-life. Plato is insightful to distinguish the two forgetting. However, his analysis of forgetting is inaccurate, as it leaves the aporia of memory behind. Without the explication of memory, one cannot fully understand forgetting because forgetting is defined as “loss of memory”. What is the aporia of memory?

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<sup>22</sup> To illustrate the difference between “loss” and “nothing”, we could make good use a story in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. A mouse argues that Alice owned a tail. His argument is that what you have not lost, you still possess. Surely, you have not lost a tail. So, you still possess a tail. His argument is valid but problematic. The problem is the ambiguity of the word “lose”. The meaning of “have not lost” in the first premise refers to the status that you possess x, and you have never experienced ‘possessing x at a certain time and then not possessing x at a later time. Yet the meaning of “have not lost” in the second premise refers to the status that you have never experienced ‘possessing x at a certain time, and then not possessing x at a later time’. To avoid the ambiguity, I specifically use two words in my claim. For me, “loss” refers to the status that you possess x, and you have never experienced ‘possessing x at a certain time and then not possessing x at a later time. And “nothing” premise refers to the status that you have never experienced ‘possessing x at a certain time, and then not possessing x at a later time’

The aporia of memory is that: how can recollection be possible after the forgetting? Precisely, it is obvious that we have the experience of recollection. Yet if forgetting is nothing other than the loss of memory, then how can something lose reappear again? According to the command of Mnemosyne in *Theaetetus*, the original impression loses but its image remains. It is said that if the image remains, then there is the imprint. In other words, if the image does not remain, then there is no imprint at all. There is a connection between *ēikon* and *tupos*. What is the connection? Ricoeur interprets that “there is between the *ēikon* and the *tupos* a dialectic of accommodation, harmonization, or adjustment that can succeed or fail”.<sup>23</sup> The image [*ēikon*] and the imprint govern the success and the failure of memory. Yet how is the dialectic possible?

The dialectic is possible through recollection. However, the dialectic has never been fully explicated because of two reasons. First, Plato “does not even mention the moment of recollection, treated as the recognition of an imprint”.<sup>24</sup> Here Ricoeur does not criticize Plato has no theory of recollection. Instead, he criticizes that the doctrine recollection can be divided into different moments. And the moment of recognition of an imprint is missing in Plato’s theory of recollection. The moment of recognition of an imprint explains that recollection does not randomly recall something from the past, but recalls something from the past with “causal reasoning”, as *Meno* and *Phaedo* mentioned. Yet what is causal reasoning? How does the causal reasoning distinguish the truthfulness of memory from a phantasma? On the one hand, memory corresponds to what occurs in the past. In *Sophist*, a likeness-image [εἶδωλα/ *ēikon*] is introduced to confirm the view. On the other hand, memory turns out to be more than what occurs in the past. In *Theaetetus*, memory attaches the anteriority of marks [*semia*], namely the mark of being the past. This initial formulation of the problem makes all the more remarkable Aristotle’s statement that “all memory is of the past”.<sup>25</sup> It is true that on many occasions past verb tenses are explicitly employed, but there is no separate reflection devoted to these indisputable deictic forms. All these remains unknown in Plato’s philosophy because “the fate of *eikōn* has been lost from sight”.<sup>26</sup> In *Sophist*, the discussion shifts to the problem of non-being. As a result, “we have reached the endpoint of the entire regressive

<sup>23</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 15; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 12; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 10.

<sup>25</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 8; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 12; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 10.



analysis".<sup>27</sup> Memory and imagination share the same fate. It is at this point that Aristotle's analyses will mark a clear break.<sup>28</sup>

Despite Plato's weakness, in opposition to Krell, Ricoeur argues that Plato's contribution is not to introduce any resolution towards the aporia, but raises the aporia.<sup>29</sup> So he argues that "there is no reason to return the discovery of this paradox against Plato and to discern in it a foretaste of the ontology of presence; the paradox seems to me to constitute the very enigma of memory".<sup>30</sup> What is the paradox? How does the paradox constitute the very enigma of memory? How do the paradox and the very enigma of memory defend Plato from the ontology of presence?

The paradox is that memory appears to be an absence and a presence. In *Theaetetus*, the metaphor of the wax connects the absence and the presence in the sense that memory attaches the anteriority of marks [*semia*]. The anteriority of marks not only signifies the presence, namely the affection of the body and the soul, but it also refers to the absence, namely the previous perception which aroused the affection. Memory bears the paradoxical character, that is to say, both the presence and the absence. In other words, memory denotes the enigma of the presence in an image of a passed past. Similar to the idea of a trace, memory is in the present, on the one hand; memory presupposes that it is in the absence as it was or left behind, on the other hand. Ricoeur argues that the paradox is not Plato's own fault. Instead, the paradoxical character is the constitutive feature of memory. It is true that not until Aristotle's doctrine of recollection, the paradox is solved. Yet because of the paradoxical nature of memory, Plato can be defended himself from the ontology of presence.

It is here that the problem of forgetting unexpectedly springs up. Whatever took place in the past is absent, how could we guarantee our memory is not a mis-fit? I may fall into the mistaken consequence that I fail to grasp or falsely grasp the memory. For example, when I recall the telephone number of my friends, it has been so often that the imprint of the number is incorrect. In *Theaetetus*, mistake "is assimilated either to an erasing of marks, *semia*, or to a mistake akin to that of someone

<sup>27</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 15; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 13.

<sup>28</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 12, 14; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 10, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Ricoeur finds that what Krell concerns the most is the origin of the written traces: can be the truth of memory once past things are irrevocably absent? Does not memory seem to place us in contact with them through the present image of their vanished presence? What about the relation of the presence to the absence that the Greeks explored under the guidance of the metaphor of the imprint [*tupos*]? So the Platonic notion of paradoxical memory could not serve as the origin of the written traces. See Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 9 footnotes 2; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 507 endnotes 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 12 footnotes 8; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 508 endnotes 9.

placing his feet in the wrong footprints”.<sup>31</sup> Forgetting has a double meaning at two different moments. At the moment of erasing the mark, forgetting is defined as the effacement of traces. At the moment of placing the feet in the wrong footprints, forgetting is defined as a defect in the adjustment of the present image to the imprint left as if by a seal in wax.

In this regard, forgetting plays a double role “as the effacement of traces and as a defect in the adjustment of the present image to the imprint left as if by a seal in wax”. The former connects to the problematic of affection-imprints. It inquires “how is it preserved, how does it persist, whether or not it is re-called?” The latter connects to the problematic of sign-imprints. It inquires “what meaningful relation does it maintain in relation to the marking event?” To fight against the effacement of traces, re-collection is held to make the search a *relearning* of what has been forgotten. He addresses that “forgetting is thus designated obliquely as that against which the operation of recollecting is directed. The work of *anamnēsis* moves against the current of the river *Lēthē*”.<sup>32</sup> Yet forgetting is like a ghost in the sense that it appears as a defect in the course of recollection.

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<sup>31</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 8; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 8.

<sup>32</sup> Ricoeur, P. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil: 33; 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press: 27.

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