

Book Review

Remember Me: Memory and Forgetting in the Digital Age-By Davide Sisto.

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Memory and Forgetting in the Digital Age is a descriptive subtitle of the book, *Remember Me* by the Italian theoretical philosopher Davide Sisto. The book's central aim is to provide a philosophical argument on the consequences of digital networks such as social media and the internet in the way we remember and forget. Sisto does not subscribe to the well-known conception of memory and forgetting as opposites. He considers memory and forgetting to be the same thing; they have the same properties and are indistinguishable. This is because remembering is forgetting, and forgetting is remembering. Memory does not pose the assumption that the past can be recalled totally but tries to fictionalise the past. The past begins to fade and deviate, and this deviation requires the act of forgetting. However, the proliferation of technologies and the internet has changed how we conceptualise forgetting and memory. The internet has provided the past with the opportunity to emancipate itself from the present and autonomously own itself and set its own trajectory. The past no longer sits in a space to be forgotten but now has the power to influence and shape the present.

The internet and social media platforms have changed how we behave, interact, and tell stories in this current social milieu. This is because storytelling is a human phenomenon that goes concomitantly with our human history. From the evolution of the human species, human beings have always broadcasted their lived experiences to future and current generations. For example, our ancestors left stories of their existence and lived experiences to our current generation in sub-Saharan Africa through works of art such as paintings, folklores, and others. In Southern Africa, we see the paintings of the Khoisan on caves detailing how they went about their daily lives. This human storytelling phenomenon is beautifully demonstrated in the book's introduction, where Sisto cites Jonathan Gottschall's book *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. In Gottschall's book, he builds the argument that humans are storytelling animals. For Gottschall, storytelling is an inherent feature of human beings, making it our identity. Every episodic part of our existence is a

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story that we share about what we think, how we feel, where we have been, where we come from, and so on, just like the example of the Khoisan that I provided above.

However, in our current era, we no longer tell our stories through cave paintings like the Khoisan of Southern Africa but through the medium of recent technological innovations such as the internet and social media sites. In the first chapter of the book, Sisto takes us through the evolution of the internet and social media technology and how these technologies have influenced how we forget and remember. The author uses fiction, sci-fi movies, and short stories to drive this point home. For example, the coming of Facebook, one of the biggest social media platforms where humans share themselves through their stories, was predicted in Giorgio De Maria's novel *Twenty Days of Turin*, which Sisto cites. The novel speculates that human nature revolves around giving ourselves to others by sharing our personal stories and experiences.

For Sisto, through advancements in technologies, especially social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, we have been struck by an epidemic of memory creation by sharing ourselves with others. This constant sharing of ourselves now redefines memory by allowing the past to free itself from the present and autonomously exist as its reality while creating an overlap with the present. The past is now independent of the present and cannot be forgotten due to how it invokes itself in the present. The past carries itself into the present to create new memories in the present. This happens because of the memories that we have created on social media platforms and other internet sites that we leave traces of ourselves when we visit.

One such development, according to Sisto, is the *On This Day* innovations on Facebook. *On This Day* is an innovation created by Facebook and Instagram to help people look back at their journey and the memories they have created. These are memories that, in theory, should have been lost forever; however, Facebook and other platforms bring these memories to the surface in the present, thereby bringing the past and present into co-existence. This makes it difficult to distinguish the past from the present.

In Sisto's view, the proliferation and ubiquity of social media technologies have created the proliferation of digital souls, the extension of our biological bodies, which are immaterial, and scattered all over the web. These digital souls stem from the biological soul creating a duality of existence. This duality of existence is similar to the mind-body duality of the French philosopher Rene Descartes (2006)¹. In Descartes's (2006) meditations, the "I" as a thinking thing is the soul/mind, which is immaterial and can exist outside of the body. Unlike Descartes, who does not convincingly tell us where this soul is located, Sisto provides us with clear reasoning that the soul is the data we leave behind on the internet spaces we visit. Currently, the ubiquity of the online spaces makes it easier

for accessibility and entrance into these spaces. We create our digital souls by broadcasting ourselves using multiple devices and platforms on the internet. As a result, we produce so much data about ourselves through our online identities.

Our constant visits to the internet create our online selves, which are a multiplicity of a person's biological self which is coextensive of our physical body. This fusion between the online and offline selves creates what Sisto refers to as the "onlife" reality. Through the multiplicity of our online selves, we each become "information organisms (inforgs), mutually connected and embedded in an information environment (the infosphere)" (Sisto 2021:40)ⁱⁱ. We share this infosphere with other *inforgs*, thereby becoming a "protagonist of a post-individual and multi-identitarian mutation of the human being in which every human specimen becomes a collection of fragments that makes up an interconnected global mind"ⁱⁱⁱ. We have become algorithmic persons with our existence as solely constituted by the amount of data distributed across all internet platforms to which we contribute.

Given the creation of this multiplicity of our internet souls, the act of forgetting is reshaped and restructured so that forgetting seems to be a thing of the past. However, the irony here is that the past is no longer forgotten. The past now sits at a place of constant remembering. The past no longer depends on the present to come to light; the past comes to light whenever it wants and creates a present and a different trajectory of how an event is conceived. Through our scattered souls all over the internet, we create digital footprints that can be pulled out at any given instance. The internet has become what I will refer to as the "archaeologist working ground" that is similar to the Khoisan caves where we excavate traces of their existence. With the emergence of the internet and the quality time we spend on the internet, one can now excavate traces of our existence and define our behaviours from the different sites we visit.

At the moment, there are more than two billion biological persons on social media platforms such as Facebook. These individuals share a common space while writing each other's biography through the constant exchange of information about themselves on Facebook. This shared environment contributes to the reshaping of each person's biography. This space accounts for those still alive and those who are dead. For example, these spaces have been used to commemorate funerals of dead biological beings who used these platforms to share themselves, such as cancer bloggers and others. Currently, Facebook houses more than fifty million dead profiles belonging to users whose biological bodies have died. However, each of these profiles is packed with the information of these biologically dead users who continue to exist as both traceable and intractable data.

With the ubiquity of the countless digital "I's," the past is now made possible to be known and recounted through reconstruction. This is

because remembering means a reconstruction that begins from the present “and so inevitably at the same time when the memory is recalled, there will be shifting, distortion, revaluation, reshaping”^{iv}. Memory is no longer kept in a safe box; it now exposes itself and starts a moment of transformation. With the advent of social media, memory and our lived experiences are made active and armoured with the capability of resisting degradation and decomposition. This is because of the multiplicity of our digital identities, creating a unique psychophysical presence. The collection of our online footprints and the deposits of our online memories creates a representation of our physical presence, which continues to exist, thereby making our biological death not an end to our digital selves. A social media account owner’s biological death does not lead to their digital death. This is because the owner’s digital identity has become proliferated all over the internet. These online identities continue to exist autonomously and actively even when the biological presence of the owner of the account is no longer in existence. As a result, Sisto claims that the “interaction between data and digital identities is therefore also posthumous”^v.

But how does this relate to memory and the past? Sisto claims that the past overlaps with the present; as a result, when we recount our lived experiences, the memories of the past and present overlap. When we recount our past, we contaminate the memory through the words and gestures we use to recount this story. However, the advent of technology makes this contamination curable. Through technological innovations, our digital selves can now be represented in the present rather than that which existed in the past. Our digital identities can no longer be forgotten.

However, Sisto argues that there is a downside to our constant remembering that is brought to us by the proliferation of social media and technological innovations. These sites could stand as a place for retracting the digital souls of our loved ones who are biologically no longer present. Through these spaces, we can continue to share a bond with those whose biological presence we miss. Through this bond, we can create new memories. However, these spaces can also bring pain, regrets, and fear. For example, *On This Day* memory lane on Facebook generates some memories that people would not want to resurface because of the circumstances surrounding such memories. There are cases where people died tragically or gruesomely murdered, and their deaths were recorded, and so, when these memories resurface on the internet, they resuscitate new emotions in the present. These memories appear on our devices, creating a painful feeling for relatives of those these events happened to.

In as much as our digital presence creates digital immortality, which emancipates the memories of those who create them, it also, sometimes, creates an environment of pain and regret for those we leave behind when our biological self becomes corrupted. Maybe the deep philosophical question we should ask, according to Sisto, is whether we want to be

remembered forever by creating a past that has no end, a past that autonomously recreates itself?

Even though Sisto raises this philosophical question in the book, he does not provide us with deep philosophical resources to answer this question. But most especially, Sisto does not deal with enough philosophical resources to understand the memory-forgetting relationship. Undoubtedly, he provides a convincing narrative of how the memories we create on social media fill the gap between memory and forgetting. However, he does not spend time telling us why we forget in the first place and whether our memories on social media are cures to the actual mental pathologies of forgetfulness. For instance, I do not think that the memories an Alzheimer's patient creates on social media can cure the patient's forgetfulness. Let us imagine that we are all struck by Alzheimer's: I do not think that our memories on social media will be of any good towards remembering the past. I think the literature on the philosophy of mind and psychology could have played a massive role in the book. The book draws so much from fictional literature, which is important, but this fictional literature does not provide a strong philosophical base for his argument on how our current digital era has influenced memory and forgetting.

Similar to the aforementioned point, the book also differentiates the biological self from the digital self, where the latter comes from the former. However, even though digital identities are created from biological identities, digital identities are immaterial, and they continue to exist after the corruption of the biological self. In this sense, one can draw that the digital selves are the metaphysical representation of the physical self; they act as the souls of the biological self. However, the author does not go further to tell us what is philosophically conceived as the soul using philosophical literature. The works of Descartes and other philosophers of mind would have made a significant contribution here. In addition, I think that the book *The Character of Consciousness* by David Chalmers (2010)^{vi} would have also grounded the views on the consciousness of our online experiences. Currently, the book is more like a novel than a book with a philosophical force.

Lastly, I do not think the concluding chapter ends with a strong philosophical force. Throughout the book, Sisto aims to provide his readers with a plausible argument on the reasons why forgetting goes concomitantly with remembering and how the logic of forgetting and remembering has evolved with the advent of the internet. Given this union between forgetting and remembering, there is now an overlap between forgetting and remembering and between the past and the present. However, the conclusion chapter does not unify the above claim with all the ideas raised in the book. I think the book moves so quickly from the discussion on the relationship between forgetting and remembering towards educating us on death and the need to learn how to manage our digital souls scattered over the internet so that our families can trace us

when we die. I do not think this part of the book is the author's main aim. The concluding chapter does not reinforce the significance of the book and the main claim, which is the relationship between the technologies of this digital era and how we remember and forget.

Nonetheless, I do think this book stimulates some deep philosophical questions about how we remember and forget and the proliferation of our experiences and digital selves all over the internet through the ubiquity of technologies. The book offers some critical engagement about our internet behaviours and how we can be defined by the traces we leave behind on the internet. In addition, it also serves as a good start for researchers interested in issues around the philosophy of the internet and our online behaviours.

ⁱ Descartes, R. 2006. *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*. In: R. Ariew, & D. Cress (eds). Cambridge: Hacket Publishing Company, Inc.

ⁱⁱ Sisto, D. 2021. *Remember Me: Memory and Forgetting in the Digital Age*. A. Kilgariff (trans). Cambridge: Polity Press

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} Chalmers, D. 2010. *The Character of Consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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