

RADICAL FORGIVENESS AND HUMAN JUSTICE

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The most substantial source for thinking about forgiveness is Christian ethics. Some Christians offer forgiveness even for atrocities in the absence of repentance and reparations. The paper critically examines Christian idealism about forgiveness, while looking beyond Christianity toward a humanistic approach that acknowledges the tragic conflict between forgiveness and justice. Christian forgiveness is part of a radical reevaluation of values regarding the goods of this world, personal identity, and temporality. Humanistic approaches, as found in Kant and the Greeks, do not embrace this radical reevaluation of values. But it remains useful to consider the benefits of forgiveness, even for those who are not willing to commit to such a radical reevaluation.

In October 2006, a gunman invaded a school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, in the heart of Amish country, shooting ten girls, killing five of them. The murderer finally killed himself. The world was astounded as the Amish community gathered together around the value of forgiveness.¹ The Amish reached out to the murderer's family and community members even attended a memorial service held for the gunman. The most extraordinary aspect of this expression of forgiveness is the fact that it was not possible for the dead gunman to make amends or repent. This is a clear example of what we might call 'radical forgiveness,' forgiveness that is offered even when the forgiven party remains unrepentant.

In our daily interactions, we routinely forgive those who admit fault, apologize, and make amends. In such circumstances, forgiveness is part of an economy of harms and reparations that can be understood in terms of rational self-interest and the social contract. It is often in the interest of the one harmed to offer forgiveness in exchange for reparations and repentance on the part of the wrongdoer. But radical forgiveness of the sort witnessed in the Amish case goes beyond any economic exchange that can be comprehended in terms of rational self-interest. This sort of forgiveness should be understood as grounded in a religious worldview that does at least some of the following: establishes a duty of forgiveness that is grounded in divine command, discounts the goods of the present world, does not view harms suffered in this world as significant losses, and hopes that in the long run justice and mercy are preserved within the mystery of divine omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. In short, this sort of forgiveness is understood as a religious duty for human beings that asks us to reevaluate our normal concern for retributive and retaliatory justice.² It is this religious basis that makes radical forgiveness difficult for humanists to comprehend. Humanists, such as Kant, doubt that forgiveness is even morally permissible. And prior to that, in the Greek tradition, there is little room for forgiveness in a worldview based on political and warrior virtues. Humanists generally reject the theological standpoint and its reevaluation of values. And when humanistic moral traditions permit forgiveness, it is often not the preferred option in

a system that values justice. At best humanistic forgiveness is based on pragmatic interests – psychological or emotional needs – and not on a radical revaluation of values.

1. KANT, DUTY, AND DIVINE COMMAND

The call for forgiveness is a common refrain for those in the Christian tradition.³ One interpretation of radical forgiveness would trace it back to its source in divine command ethics: we must forgive others because God commands it.⁴ Indeed, there seems to be an implicit spiritual exchange in this way of thinking: I should forgive the other so that I might be forgiven by God. The source for this way of thinking can be found in the Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6:12; Luke 11:4), where the idea seems to be that we should forgive wrong-doing so that we might also be forgiven. In his study of the Amish response to the Nickel Mines shooting, Donald Kraybill has noted that the Lord's Prayer is a central text used by the Amish to explain their forgiving attitude.

For the Amish, forgiveness is not a one-dimensional relationship between an individual and God. Rather, their acceptance of God's forgiveness means that they need to pass it on to others and, if they balk at forgiving others, they may jeopardize their very salvation. 'If we don't forgive, we won't be forgiven,' they say.⁵

This explanation appears to reduce forgiveness to an exchange with God, which seems to sully the transformative spiritual experience of forgiveness. The idea of forgiving others in order to gain forgiveness appears to conceive forgiveness as an instrumental value or a commodity to be exchanged. But a deeper explanation would emphasize how forgiveness transcends the logic of exchange. At the very least, one supposes that genuine forgiveness should be a free gift offered without hope of a return. Or, to use Kantian language, we would suppose that forgiveness should not be offered merely in conformity with duty but should arise from duty (*aus Pflicht*). If forgiveness is a duty, then genuine forgiveness (forgiveness that has moral worth) would have to be forgiveness that arises from duty. Forgiveness offered as an exchange would not count as genuinely moral. On such an analysis, we would then not count forgiveness that comes from hope of future gain or forgiveness that is offered as a result of exhaustion, apathy, forgetfulness or what have you (as when the effort to prosecute a crime is given up because it takes too much effort or because people no longer care about it or have forgotten about it). Genuine radical forgiveness is not merely a spiritual exchange. Rather, it is part of a reevaluated worldview in which harms and values in this world are reconceived from a standpoint that focuses on the mysterious union of justice and love in God. From this standpoint, forgiveness is not merely a moral duty; rather, it is a religious obligation.

The language of duty poses a problem, however, since forgiveness appears to be a violation of duty. At least that is Kant's idea: justice appears to require punishment and forgiveness runs counter to that duty. Moreover, where could a moral duty to forgive come from; how would it be grounded? A duty to punish appears to make more sense – in line with the logic of *lex talionis* that requires retaliation for wrongs done in order to re-establish the status quo ante. But forgiveness appears to neglect the wrong-done. It does not repair or restore the disruption created by wrongs that are done. Forgiveness is thus usually grounded in a religious worldview that reevaluates the more mundane approach to justice. In other words, when forgiveness is conceived as a duty, it is usually grounded upon some sort of divine command that points beyond the human sense of justice. And

when forgiveness is understood in this way it can even be divorced from a focus on repentance and restoration. Consider that the command to love one's enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27, 6:35) is not contingent on the enemy reforming himself or repenting.

This sort of radical love and forgiveness makes little sense when it is taken outside of the religious context. Humanists usually reject the idea that there is a duty to forgive because they reject the basic ground upon which such a duty can be established. Some will allow that forgiveness may be supererogatory or, at the very least, that it can be morally permissible. But a supererogatory or merely permissible sort of forgiveness would not be sufficient to motivate a whole community to respond to wrongdoing with the sort of forgiveness that the Amish displayed. In a worldview that does not include a divine command to forgive, it would be very odd to find much room for forgiveness, except perhaps as a pragmatic response to wrongdoing. And it would be quite odd for a humanist to maintain that forgiveness is appropriate for unrepentant (or dead) wrongdoers.

One problem, of course, for the divine command approach is that God appears to demand both punishment and forgiveness. And there are major disputes in the Christian tradition about how to interpret these conflicting demands – as seen, for example, in debates about the morality of the death penalty. This is one of the reasons that humanists may be skeptical of the religious tradition. How do we know whether God requires punishment or forgiveness? How do we know that by forgiving (and neglecting justice), we will somehow earn God's forgiveness of our own sins? As Jeremy Watkins has correctly pointed out, the philosophical tradition has little use for forgiveness, since this tradition focuses primarily on utilitarian and retributive conceptions of justice.⁶ Nonetheless, as Paul von Tongeren has concluded, it is useful for humanists to try to understand the spiritual power of forgiveness.⁷ And even without the deep sense of spiritual transformation elicited by Christian reflection on forgiveness, it is possible to make sense of forgiveness in a consequentialist approach to punishment: if forgiveness – as part of the broader approach to restorative justice – produces good outcomes for people, then it may be of use. This may explain why it is useful even to forgive the dead and the unrepentant: forgiveness can be psychologically beneficial to victims and communities. But such an interpretation of forgiveness as pragmatically useful cannot turn forgiveness into a duty, since it is possible that it is also useful to feel righteous indignation and a lack of forgiveness in the face of unrepentant evil.

It is difficult to find room for forgiveness in a retributivist framework. This point is made quite clearly by Kant. Kant thinks that forgiveness is unjust because wrongdoing deserves punishment. Kant hints that forgiveness may be appropriate if there is a genuine change of heart. But since humans cannot gauge such spiritual transformations, forgiveness is not up to us – it is up to God. Kant suggests that it is wrong to imagine that God forgives.

If God could forgive all evil-doing, He could also make it permissible and if He can grant it impunity, it rests also on His will to make it permitted; in that case, however, the moral laws would be an arbitrary matter, though in fact they are not arbitrary, but just as necessary and eternal as God. God's justice is the precise allocation of punishments and rewards in accordance with men's good or bad behavior. The divine will is immutable. Hence we cannot hope that because of our begging and beseeching God will forgive us everything, for in that case it would be a matter, not of well-doing, but of begging and beseeching.⁸

Kant's worry is connected to the larger set of worries found in the Lutheran Reformation. As Kant puts it, religion should not be about 'courting favor, but about leading a good

life.⁹ He is opposed to any sort of religion that makes it appear that one could purchase forgiveness and manipulate divine justice. Kant's unforgiving view of God's justice obviously runs counter to the more forgiving theology of those who defend the idea of universal salvation.¹⁰ But the Kantian vision of an unforgiving God can lead to unpalatable conclusions. For example, David Lewis argues that an unforgiving God who metes out eternal punishments is evil: if God does not forgive, then even minor sins can end up with major (i.e., eternal) punishments – and that seems to make God quite evil.¹¹ In this way, theological speculation about justice and forgiveness can lead us to give up on God all together. The argument goes something like this: if God forgives, then He seems arbitrary; but if He does not forgive, then He seems evil; since neither makes sense, it is best to leave God aside. Humanists thus focus on the more pragmatic and mundane issues of how forgiveness can work to repair broken communities and heal psychological wounds caused by wrongdoing. But humanists will also be compelled by arguments about how punishment deters crime, while also giving criminals what they deserve.

All of these complex issues in morality and theology help explain, perhaps, why the mainstream culture was fascinated by the Amish case and by other examples of radical forgiveness – such as the account of forgiveness after the Rwandan genocide, chronicled by Immaculée Ilibagiza.¹² Even humanists can acknowledge that forgiveness is an important aspect of the moral life. No one can deny that it is often useful to forgive minor transgressions. But can we forgive mass murder and unrepentant dead people without appealing to some deeper theological notion?

When we bring religion in, we end up with another problem: forgiveness only make sense within a particular religious context; and not all religions appear to require forgiveness. Consider, for example, the problem of diversity that is exemplified in Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*: different religious traditions – even different monotheistic traditions – teach different things about forgiveness.¹³ For the most part in Wiesenthal's 'symposium' – which includes comments from a variety of thinkers in diverse faith traditions – forgiveness comes through as a Christian virtue. But the Dalai Lama also contributes the idea of forgiveness in this symposium. He writes, 'I believe one should forgive the person or persons who have committed atrocities against oneself and mankind.'¹⁴ For humanists, it is much harder to forgive atrocities, since there is no larger framework in which suffering is redeemed. Humanists may claim that some acts are simply unforgiveable and may agree with Herbert Marcuse that 'the easy forgiving of such crimes perpetuates the very evil it wants to alleviate.'¹⁵ At least, humanists will claim that forgiveness – if it is acceptable at all – must be held together in creative tension with justice. At best, there is a delicate balancing act between justice and forgiveness. Justice requires that we take seriously our responsibilities toward the past while forgiveness aims to keep us open to the possibility of a new future. This can be cashed out in terms of Christian theology; but it can also make sense to humanists. And indeed multiple faith traditions recognize that justice and forgiveness must be combined.¹⁶

Christians do attempt to link justice and forgiveness. One attempt to do so is found in the effort to move toward a non-retributive conception of justice, such as the idea of 'restorative justice.' The goal here is to avoid dwelling in the past and focusing on ways of punishing past injustice (as retributive justice does) by looking forward to the future in which a community disrupted by wrongdoing will be restored. In his reflection on the Rwandan genocide, for example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu argued that Hutus and Tutsis should learn 'to go beyond retributive justice to restorative justice, to move on to forgiveness, because without it there was no future.'¹⁷ In his World Peace Day Address on

January 1, 2002, just months after 9/11, Pope John Paul II similarly focused on efforts to combine justice and forgiveness. As he put it in the title of his remarks: 'No Peace without Justice and no Justice without Forgiveness.' John Paul argues that forgiveness and justice must be combined: 'shattered order cannot be fully restored except by a response that combines justice with forgiveness.'¹⁸

While talk of forgiveness in the face of atrocity can be spiritually uplifting, such an approach is quite paradoxical and may only be suitable for moral saints. Justice and forgiveness cannot be easily combined. Justice appears to *require* that we punish wrongdoing, even if we would rather forgive and forget. Plato and Kant, each in their own way, maintain that it is our duty to punish, even if we'd prefer not to. From this perspective, forgiveness is unjust. Of course, others – like Tutu – will claim that restorative justice is also a legitimate conception of justice. There may in fact be good reasons to forgo the requirements of retributive justice and permit, or even require, official offers of forgiveness – mercy or clemency. This can stem from a utilitarian concern to heal the community (or the psyche of the individuals involved) and move forward. It can also come from a commitment to the dignity of the person, such that even a criminal is deserving of forgiveness if he expresses remorse and works diligently to make amends. In the Christian tradition there is a deeper theological ideal: even though all human beings are sinners, God forgives. Or perhaps the idea is that since God will in the end mete out justice to all, there is nothing to be lost if we were to offer forgiveness. The more important point is that we should reorder our values in such a way that forgiveness and love become the preferred response to wrongdoing.

The difficulty of religious approaches to the question is, however, that we are left with apparently paradoxical beliefs and antithetical demands about how God wants us to combine justice and forgiveness. Richard Holloway – an Episcopalian Bishop – argues that justice is one essential component of Christian religion and that forgiveness is another; and that these are antithetical.¹⁹ Religious approaches to such rival commands often fall back on the mystery of God or faith in resolution in the fullness of time. This does not make it any easier to dwell in the paradox – but it does provide hope that the paradox will find some resolution.

2. JUSTICE, FORGIVENESS, TRAGEDY, AND TEMPORALITY

It is more difficult to affirm any reconciliation of these antithetical demands from within a humanistic standpoint. Rather, from a humanistic standpoint the tension between rival goods is best described as a tragic conflict. For tragic conflicts of this sort, there is no easy resolution. In fact, to choose between justice and forgiveness is to sacrifice one substantial good for another. Justice and forgiveness represent two aspects of the human project of remaining true to the past while also looking toward the future. Justice keeps us true to the past, while forgiveness opens us toward the future. Since human life consists in negotiating between past and future, there will always be a significant tension between justice and forgiveness.

The difficulty of combining justice and forgiveness is found in basic tensions we encounter when thinking about time, personal identity, and ethics. In a sense, the Christian solution demands too much while also making things too easy. By claiming that there can be no justice without forgiveness, Christian thinkers such as John Paul II weave the two values too tightly together. Christianity allows us to resolve the difficulty of uniting these

values in the mystery of God who bears witness to changes of heart and who, in the long run, protects those who forgive from the onslaughts of those who might take advantage of their forgiveness. Trust in God's omniscient final judgment assures the Christian that radical evil will not, in the end, go unpunished. And Christianity maintains that any self-abnegation that occurs in forgiveness will ultimately be redeemed.

A humanistic approach recognizes the genuine difficulty of linking justice and forgiveness in a world without God. For the humanist, there are no guarantees that those who forgive will be rewarded; nor is there any assurance that changes of heart are authentic; nor is there any promise that evil will be punished in the next life. Thus for humanists, forgiveness can only be one virtue among others, held in creative tension with other virtues such as justice and self-respect. And sometimes we may have to make a tragic choice in which we choose justice or forgiveness.

Retributive justice takes the past as primary and it is unwilling to let past misdeeds go without rectification. From this perspective, respect – either for oneself or for others – demands that wrongs be righted. Forgiveness is less committed to the past and it allows for the possibility of changes of heart that create the possibility of a new future and a new identity liberated from the weight of the past. Hannah Arendt explained the importance of forgiveness in terms of the possibility of release from what we have done. For Arendt, forgiveness allows for the possibility of beginning again, creating something new, and moving forward into a future pregnant with possibility. Forgiveness liberates us from a cycle of vengeance that becomes reactionary, automatic, and un-free. And she maintains, with a special focus on the Christian tradition, that mutual forgiveness is essential to spontaneously creative social life. 'Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.'²⁰ Of course Arendt recognizes that we cannot actually undo the past.²¹ But Arendt also explains that forgiveness is one of the mechanisms that allow us to establish at least some freedom from the past. Forgiveness is a forward-looking concept that makes exceptions to the impartial demands of justice and the retrospective focus of memory.

Justice and forgiveness each represent important values in human life. But these values obviously conflict. It seems that it would be unjust to the victims to leave perpetrators unpunished. And indeed, some atrocities seem absolutely unforgivable.²² We seem to owe it to those who were harmed in the past to pursue justice; and it would be disrespectful of the victims of atrocity to forgive the perpetrators on their behalf. Perhaps forgiveness can only be authentic when it is offered by the victims themselves. Moreover, as Jeffrie Murphy has argued, 'a too ready tendency to forgive may properly be regarded as a vice because it may be a sign that one lacks respect for oneself.'²³ Since the past matters to us, it would be odd simply to disregard the past and the demand for rectification.

Christianity grounds forgiveness in a metaphysical account of the way that God structure the universe. It allows the drama between justice and forgiveness to play out into the afterlife. The Christian approach can advise forgiveness even for atrocity, trusting that the victims and the perpetrators will get their just and eternal reward. But humanists must admit, I think, that some acts are unforgivable. For a humanist, this life is the only one we have; and suffering will not be redeemed in the afterlife. Humanists must also admit that to offer forgiveness without the consent of the injured parties can be disrespectful, since injustice is a serious affront in a world of finite human beings, where there is no offer of redemption. This is why it is odd to speak of forgiveness as a social and political value, rather than as a virtue for individuals. We want our leaders to administer justice, not to

offer forgiveness. At best, one might argue that forgiveness is a value for Popes and other spiritual leaders. It might also be a virtue for individuals. But one wonders whether it can have any place in political life. One might go further and argue, following Nietzsche, that forgiveness is merely a part of the slave morality of the impotent. Nietzsche thinks that forgiveness is sublimated form of resentment – the way that the powerless and oppress respond to injustice is by claiming that the path of weakness is in fact the higher ground.²⁴ Now one need not be as cynical as Nietzsche to see that often forgiveness is the recourse of last resort for the weak, such as when an abused wife ‘forgives’ the man who beats her. We should be careful to avoid the taint of ‘slave morality’ that surrounds the discourse of forgiveness, when forgiveness serves merely to further disempower the oppressed.

But one should not throw the baby of forgiveness out with the bath water of resentment and impotence. It remains true that forgiveness does release us from our obligations to the past; it allows us to escape a cycle of vengeance and revenge; and it allows us to look forward toward the creation of a future not beholden to the crimes of the past. Humanists can admit the creative and liberatory power of forgiveness without buying into Christian metaphysics and eschatology or giving up on justice out of a sense of impotence. Christians and humanists can agree that forgiveness frees us from the domination of the injustices of the past. It is true, for humanists and Christians alike, that an obsession with retaliation, vengeance, and justice can give more power to wrong-doers than they deserve – in the sense that the criminal’s past injustice can continue to direct the victim’s actions in the present. Forgiveness is a way of acknowledging past injustice, while allowing us to move forward more freely into the future.

The tragic conflict between forgiveness and justice and the tensions created by our different ethical relations to the past cannot be eradicated. In fact, it is a sign of maturity to recognize the conflicting demands of justice and forgiveness. This conflict reminds us that human beings are continually negotiating the demands of the two conflicting horizons of time: the past and the future. Justice carries out obligations to the past, while forgiveness releases us from bondage to the past. Obviously, forgiveness does remain linked to the past to some extent, since history flows in only one direction. Forgiveness only occurs in response to a past mis-deed: for example, it makes little sense to speak of forgiving you for something you have not yet done. But rather than dwelling on the past and seeking to erase the misdeed through retribution, compensation, or retaliation, forgiveness allows the past to remain past by refusing to allow the demand for rectification to dominate action in the present. Human beings must look in both directions. We are temporal beings who are obliged to the past while also looking toward the open future. We need to fulfill our obligations to the past; but we also need to release the past and remain open toward the future. And so we must develop a set of virtues and habits that allows us dwell creatively in the present while acknowledging both the givenness of the past and the openness of the future.

Of course, this is not obvious or easy. Jacques Derrida has claimed that forgiveness is a sort of interruption of ‘the ordinary course of historical temporality,’ by which I take it that he means that forgiveness offers an alternative to the tit-for-tat of justice in the course of human history.²⁵ Some have claimed that the key to forgiveness is a radical alteration of our sense of personal identity over time, in a way that echoes Kant’s claims about the importance of the ‘change of heart’ that creates a ‘new man.’²⁶

This idea fits with the transformative spiritual power of forgiveness, as found in the Christian tradition. But we should also note that this transformation can be understood in contexts that are not specifically Christian. William Long has recently argued that the key

to radical forgiveness is a non-essentialist or ‘no-self’ view of personal identity. According to this point of view, to forgive is to admit that no injury – no matter how significant – can leave a permanent mark on the non-existent self; and the ‘no-self’ idea also allows for the possibility that wrong-doers can be radically transformed over time. ‘The core of forgiving is an understanding that there is no transcendent self that “owns” the past injuries and therefore, one is able to both acknowledge and to release an event, experience, memory, or intention and replace it with another that allows for a different view of self and other without destroying oneself.’²⁷

Forgiveness does rely on a radical reevaluation of time, the self, and the importance of history. But the normative question is which view of time, the self, and history is the one we should adopt? This question seems to push us toward an either-or: either one should focus on justice and the quest to ‘right’ past wrongs, or one should focus on the future and the project of healing, rebuilding, and renewing that is made possible by forgiveness. Both aspects are obviously important. From a humanistic perspective, the double-sided approach, which acknowledges a tragic conflict between justice and forgiveness – between the concern to fix the past and the desire to create a new future – is the best we can come up with. There are good reasons to pursue justice with a view to righting past wrongs; but other times, there are good reasons to direct our attention to the future with a view toward healing and rebuilding. The key is to recognize the importance of each approach and keep them in creative tension with each other.

3. GREEK AND CHRISTIAN VIRTUES

To understand how one might keep such seemingly opposed values in creative tension with one another, it is useful to consider the approach of virtue ethics. Virtues are habits which exist over time; and virtues exist in the character of an individual in just this sort of creative tension. One of the difficulties of virtue ethics is that discussions of specific virtues can become one-sided. But virtues belong together in a complex whole. We need courage, justice, temperance, *and* wisdom. It is unvirtuous to cultivate only one without the others. The goal is to create an integrated whole life in which virtues are balanced and combined. Perhaps justice and forgiveness must be balanced and integrated in this way.

It is important to note that the four cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy do not include forgiveness. One might argue that this is because Greek culture was an ‘honor’ culture focused on obligations to the past. One might also argue that Greek virtue was understood in a political context, where justice was a primary good. Christian culture allows for a radical break with the past and it focuses on hope for the future, while also turning away from the political and investing personal life with ultimate significance. The idea of Christ as the incarnation of God symbolizes the radical break from the past, the resurrection symbolizes hope for the future, and the anti-political message and example of Jesus shows us that justice is less significant than forgiveness.²⁸ It is telling that at his crucifixion (at least as explained in Luke), Jesus prays for forgiveness rather than for justice.

The dialectic between justice and forgiveness can be simplified in historical terms to a conflict between Greek and Christian virtues. Plato and the Greeks remind us of the importance of the virtue of justice, which is the tendency to give each thing its due or to give equal to equals, like for like. In this scheme forgiveness has no place. Charles Griswold explains that Greek moral perfectionism causes the Greeks to exclude forgiveness from the virtuous life: a perfectly virtuous man has no need of forgiveness,

since he does not do wrong.²⁹ At best mercy and clemency are gifts offered by the powerful to the powerless. There are times when it is expedient for the virtuous and powerful to tolerate the misdeeds of inferior sorts. But this sort of forgiveness is not a central value for the Greeks. Although thinkers in this tradition such as the Stoics Seneca and Marcus Aurelius more fully developed ideas about the importance of mercy and clemency, the Greek tradition remains primarily focused on justice.

The focus on justice continues today, primarily in thinking about political philosophy, with less emphasis on justice as a virtue of individuals. But justice as a virtue is regarded even by John Rawls, for example, as central to political life. Indeed, Rawls claims that 'being first virtues of human activities, truth and justice are uncompromising.'³⁰ In such an uncompromising schema there is little room for forgiveness. It is significant that Rawls links truth and justice in this way. Justice aims to deal openly and honestly with facts of the world. If there has been wrong-doing, truth requires that we admit it. Justice requires that we take steps to remedy these past wrongs.

Forgiveness must also be linked to truth. Forgetting or covering up, or merely condoning, is not the same as forgiving.³¹ Kolnai emphasizes 'reaccepting' the one who is forgiven; but reaccepting can only occur if we acknowledge that wrong has been done. In a response to Kolnai, Richards argues that reacceptance demands too much (especially if the one to be forgiven was never in relation to us prior to his offense against us); Richards argues that forgiveness is, at a minimum, banishing hard feelings.³² Others, especially Christians, will argue that forgiveness is linked to more positive virtues and dispositions such as compassion and love. Whether forgiveness is simply the negative act of refusing to act on hard feelings, changing or abolishing those feelings themselves, or a more positive acceptance of the other, the point is that forgiveness turns us away from the past and allows us to look to the future.³³

Forgiveness cannot, then, simply ignore the past. It is linked to truth insofar as it must admit the fact of wrong-doing. Like justice, forgiveness is a response to wrong-doing that must understand and admit the wrong that has been done. Forgiveness, like justice, must take account of the intentions, contexts, and harmful results of the misdeed. But rather than pursuing retribution, when we forgive we choose to turn away from the past and direct our attention toward the future. And in this sense, forgiveness is more Christian than Greek – to the extent that it is connected to ideas about hope, salvation, and redemption.

Like justice, forgiveness can be used to describe a virtue and not only an act.³⁴ But this virtue is primarily a virtue for thinkers in the Christian tradition. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that 'forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.'³⁵ And this permanent attitude or virtue is linked to other virtues such as compassion, peacefulness, and hopefulness, virtues that are central for Jesus and to his followers. Unlike the Greek tradition in which self-sufficient virtuous men do not need forgiveness and in which self-respecting men would pursue justice with courage, the Christian tradition is much more aware of human imperfection. As Arendt noted, it is the need for mutual forgiveness that is at the heart of the Christian approach: no one is perfect – we are all sinners – but we are also deserving of forgiveness.

It is possible to see the value of the so-called 'Christian' virtues even from within a humanistic world view, especially one that acknowledges finitude and imperfection. When we admit that no one is perfect, we also admit that each of us needs compassion, love, and forgiveness from others. However, if there is no God to grant forgiveness through His grace and to protect us from evil, then forgiveness becomes much more difficult to cultivate as a virtue toward others. It seems that in a world without God, we would be

more adamant about our need for justice and for swift and decisive responses to evil. But on the other hand, in a world without God, in which moral luck is an obvious factor, we might also reach the conclusion that forgiveness is needed.

Of course Christianity contains the same tension between justice and forgiveness. While some Christians emphasize the creative future of God's forgiveness, there is also a backward-looking retributive aspect of monotheism. Retribution in Christian monotheism is grounded in the idea that God punishes wrong-doers in a last and final judgment; and it shows up in the *lex talionis* of the Torah's 'eye for eye, tooth for tooth.' But in Christian thought, the idea is that God makes it possible to overcome the past via love and forgiveness. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus provides an argument – grounded in theology – that explains why forgiveness is important. Jesus concludes: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your father forgive your trespasses' (Matthew 6:14–15). Three points are important here. First, as Yoder has claimed, the model for forgiving debts was the Jubilee – the Hebrew custom of releasing debtors from their debts, freeing slaves, and leaving land fallow.³⁶ The point here is that it is possible for legal, social, and religious institutions to be set up in such a way as to allow for forgiveness. Second, Jesus models human forgiveness on divine forgiveness. God is understood as a forgiving God. Third, Jesus claims that God's forgiveness is conditional. Human beings earn God's forgiveness when they learn to forgive others. This implies that forgiveness is not unearned. Rather, to be forgiven, one must have some sort of change of heart. But what is interesting is that learning to forgive is central to the process that makes the change of heart possible. We begin to change our hearts when we learn to forgive. In other words, we become the sorts of persons who deserve forgiveness when we become the sorts of persons who are willing to forgive others. Or to put it yet another way, we find ourselves beyond the calculus of justice when we ourselves are willing to give up on the demands of justice. And to return to the first point, if social and legal institutions were set up with forgiveness as a possibility, then it would be possible for people to learn to develop a more forgiving disposition toward others.

This idea about the psychological and spiritual work that must be done in order to give and earn forgiveness is interesting even for those who are not Christians. But Christian thinkers are among the most important for understanding forgiveness. Consider Martin Luther King's reflection on Jesus' supposed words on the cross: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.'³⁷ King argued that the Christian path of 'aggressive love' is the way of a 'higher law.' King claimed that history is rife with vengeance and *lex talionis*. But hope for a new beginning is found in love and forgiveness. And King also claims that forgiveness is predicated on the fact that human beings are benighted by ignorance. The second part of Jesus' claim 'they know not what they do' is, for King, representative of most wrong-doing. And ignorance thus provides a reason to forgive.

King's reflections on forgiveness are linked to pacifism. He claims that Jesus 'knew that the old eye-for-an-eye philosophy would leave everyone blind.'³⁸ King claims that now we know that 'war is obsolete.'³⁹ And forgiveness is an essential part of pacifism. If we reject war, then the logical response to evil and injustice is forgiveness (either that or resentment). And this idea can be extended toward a Christian pacifist critique of the death penalty and the prison system. For a Christian pacifist such as Hauerwas, 'the telos of punishment must be reconciliation and forgiveness.'⁴⁰

But since Augustine, the Christian tradition also contains a strong commitment to administering justice as seen in the just war tradition and in Christian defenses of capital

punishment. Thus Christianity recognizes that there are two poles in moral thought: justice and forgiveness. In his advice after 9/11, John Paul acknowledges these two aspects. He says, 'Forgiveness is in no way opposed to justice, as if to forgive meant to overlook the need to right the wrong done. It is rather the fullness of justice, leading to that tranquility of order which is much more than a fragile and temporary cessation of hostilities, involving as it does the deepest healing of the wounds which fester in human hearts. Justice and forgiveness are both essential to such healing.'⁴¹ Such ideas can be grounded, for example, in the Christian parable of the prodigal son. A just and benevolent God is also a forgiving God. And we should model our behavior on this fact: justice and forgiveness should always work hand in hand. Moreover, deep in the Christian doctrine of atonement is the idea that a loving God makes it possible for sin to be forgiven. The problem for Christian theology is that the Christian emphasis on forgiveness can appear to result in a non-resistant pacifism of the sort advocated by Tolstoy, Yoder, Hauerwas, and others who view the original teachings of Jesus as radically pacifist. This pacifist conclusion is quite different from what we find in the Greek tradition and its warrior virtues.

4. CONCLUSION

Humanists can learn from Christians to see the value of forgiveness. But without a larger metaphysical story that provides for resolution, any attempt to combine justice and forgiveness will remain mired in tragedy. The moral life winds between two poles.⁴² On the one hand, the demands of justice obligate us right past wrongs. And in a world of violence, self-respect seems to demand that we fight for the right. On the other hand, the need for happiness, tranquility, and a new and open future can inspire us to give up justice and take up the task of forgiveness. Some actions – genocide, mass slaughter, and systematic oppression – are unforgiveable. But individual psyches and entire communities can be healed by developing the virtue of forgiveness even in the face of atrocity. This conflict is tragic: we need to move forward; but we also need to remain true to the past.

Part of the need for forgiveness is psychological and emotional. It is often more healthy psychologically to pursue tranquility in the face of radical evil than to beat one's head against the wall in pursuit of justice. Radical evil cannot be erased or transformed. But it is possible to let the past be, while turning toward the future. Wounds that would otherwise heal often remain open when we dwell in outrage or feel the need for vengeance. Moreover, forgiveness should not come at the expense of the victim's self-respect. Some degree of psychic progress can be made and some sort of emotional stability can be reestablished via forgiveness. The basic idea here is that it is often better to reside in a frame of mind that is positive, hopeful, and forward-looking than to dwell in the reactive emotions of moral outrage and the disappointment of injustice. It is often better to learn to tolerate perversity than to be offended and outraged by it. And it is often better to forgive than to pursue justice relentlessly. Outrage and a sense of injustice can lead to excessive reactions and equally excessive responses that only exacerbate wrong doing and break down human solidarity. And dwelling in outrage and the need for vengeance can keep wounds open that deserve to heal.

But on the other hand, too much forgiveness can result in a moral weakness. When we are too quick to forgive, we give up on the demands of justice and relinquish self-respect. And it seems that we should resist forgiveness when it leads to forgetfulness, when it is

merely an impotent accommodation of evil, and when it empowers criminals to literally get away with murder. It is unjust to the victims to forget their suffering and oppression. And forgetfulness can cause us to be inattentive to evil and not see the need for swift action in defense of justice.

We should endeavor to keep Greek and Christian virtues in balance. Forgiveness is virtuous when it contributes to personal tranquility and social solidarity and when it develops in conjunction with self-respect and justice. We must certainly take actions to prevent and deter wrong-doing. And we must act swiftly to defend the innocent and remedy injustice. But deterrence and the pursuit of justice must be guided by a cool and reasonable mind, unclouded with negative emotions such as anger and outrage. The spirit of forgiveness allows us to pursue justice in a more dispassionate way. Forgiveness functions as a means to promote personal tranquility and social solidarity, and it allows us to release the past and move into the future. When kept in proper balance, the virtues of justice and forgiveness are essential components of the moral life.

Notes

- 1 See Donald Kraybill, Steven Nolt, and David Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace* (John Wiley and Sons, 2007).
- 2 See Paul Lauritzen, 'Forgiveness: Moral Prerogative or Religious Duty' *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 15: 2 (1987), 141–154.
- 3 For recent discussion see Zenon Szablowski, 'Between Forgiveness and Unforgiveness' *The Heythrop Journal* 51: 3 (September 2009), 471–482.
- 4 I discuss some of the difficulties of divine command ethics in Andrew Fiala, 'God, Reason, and Ethics: Love and the Good Samaritan' *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 15: 2 (Fall 2008), 72–81.
- 5 Donald Kraybill, 'Amish Forgiveness at Nickel Mines' *Amish Country News* (2008) <http://www.amishnews.com/amishforgiveness.html>.
- 6 Jeremy Watkins, 'Forgiveness and its Place in Ethics' *Theoria* 71: 1 (February 2008), 59–77.
- 7 Paul van Tongeren, 'Impossible Forgiveness' *Ethical Perspectives* 15: 3 (2008), 369–379.
- 8 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 114.
- 9 Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 115.
- 10 See for example the essays in Robin A. Parry, ed., *Universal Salvation? The Current Debate* (Wm B. Eerdmans, 2004).
- 11 David Lewis, 'Divine Evil' in Louise Anthony, ed., *Philosophers Without Gods* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 12 Immaculée Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Hay House, 2006).
- 13 Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken and Random House, 1998).
- 14 Dalai Lama in Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, 129.
- 15 Herbert Marcuse in Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, 208.
- 16 The link can be found in other religious traditions – but the link appears most centrally in Christianity. See, for example, the variety of articles about restorative justice in diverse traditions found in Michael L. Hadley, ed., *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001).
- 17 Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 260.
- 18 Message of Pope John Paul II for World Peace Day, January 1, 2002 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011211_xxxv-world-day-for-peace_en.html). The quote is from paragraph 2.
- 19 Richard Holloway, *On Forgiveness: How Can We Forgive the Unforgiveable?* (Canongate U.S., 2004), p. 6.
- 20 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 240. Arendt speaks of the conflict as between vengeance (or punishment) and forgiveness. When I frame the conflict as between justice and forgiveness, I mean retributive justice of the sort that is tied to vengeance and retaliation, but also to a broader conception of punishment as compensation.
- 21 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chapter 33. For discussions of Arendt see Glenn Pettigrove, 'Hannah Arendt and Collective Forgiving' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37:4 (Winter 2006) and
- 22 For a useful discussion see Didier Pollefeyt, 'Ethics, Forgiveness, and the Unforgiveable After Auschwitz' in Didier Pollefeyt, ed., *Incredible Forgiveness: Christian Ethics Between Fanaticism and Reconciliation* (Peeters Publishing, 2004).
- 23 Jeffrie Murphy, 'Forgiveness and Resentment' in Murphy and Jean Hampton, eds., *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 17.

24 In the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche says that the impotent transform their impotence into virtue in a variety of ways including holding that the 'inability for revenge is called unwillingness to revenge, perhaps even forgiveness' (First Essay, Section 14). See Michael Ure uses Nietzsche to argue against Arendt. He claims that forgiveness is primarily a narcissistic way to heal our own past wounds, rather than a way to create a new future: Michael Ure, 'The Politics of Mercy, Forgiveness, and Love: A Nietzschean Appraisal' *South African Journal of Philosophy* 26:1 (2007).

25 Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (Routledge, 2001), 32.

26 Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 68. For discussion see Joanna North 'Wrongdoing and Forgiveness' *Philosophy* 62: 242 (1987).

27 William Long, 'A Philosophical Account of Radical Forgiveness' *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 15:1 (Spring 2008), 64-5.

28 I discuss Christian ethics in this context in Andrew Fiala, *What Would Jesus Really Do? The Power and Limits of Jesus' Moral Teachings* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007).

29 Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), Chapter 1.

30 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1971), 4.

31 The idea of 'condoning' is developed by Aurel Kolnai in 'Forgiveness' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 74 (1973-74).

32 Norvin Richards, 'Forgiveness' *Ethics* 9: 1 (1988). In this sense forgiveness is similar to tolerance. I discuss tolerance in more detail in Andrew Fiala, *Tolerance and the Ethical Life* (London: Continuum, 2005).

33 I should also note that the question of whether forgiveness can be willed, is beside the point for my analysis; as is the psychological inquiry into the steps and processes that allow for forgiveness. The idea that forgiveness can be willed is discussed by Jeffrie Murphy in 'Forgiveness and Resentment' in Murphy and Jean Hampton, eds., *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge University Press, 1988). The work of E.L. Worthington is representative of the psychological approach: see E.L. Worthington, *Forgiveness and Reconciling: Bridges to Wholeness and Hope* (Brunner-Routledge, 2006) or articles in E.L. Worthington, ed., *The Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Worthington's work is useful, since he reminds us that forgiveness is a sort of family resemblance term: there are a variety of ways of forgiving. Nonetheless, the aspect of forgiveness that I am focusing on here is the way that forgiveness turns us away from the past.

34 The virtue approach has been developed by David Novitz in 'Forgiveness and Self-Respect' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58:2 (1998). Novitz argues that forgiveness is a virtue but that too much of it is a vice. Also see: Tara Smith, 'Tolerance and Forgiveness: Virtues or Vices?' *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 14: 1 (1997).

35 Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength To Love* (Fortress Press, 1981), 40.

36 John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), Chapter 3.

37 These words are found in Luke 23:34. This passage is unique to Luke – it does not show up in the other gospels. And some have argued that it was not originally in Luke either. See William Klassen, 'The Authenticity of the Command: Love Your Enemies' in Hooper, Chilton, and Evans, *Authenticating the Words of Jesus* (Brill, 2002). King's discussion is in *Strength to Love* (Fortress Press, 1981), Chapter 4.

38 King, *Strength to Love*, 42.

39 King, *Strength to Love*, 44.

40 Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), 189.

41 Message of Pope John Paul II for World Peace Day, January 1, 2002.

42 Martha Minnow suggests that we are always trying to find our way between vengeance and forgiveness. Martha Minnow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).