

# IMPOSSIBLE FORGIVENESS

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## ABSTRACT

Insofar as the notion of forgiveness stems from the Jewish and Christian traditions, it seems to point at something very extraordinary. Although Christianity recommends or even commissions forgiveness to everybody, it nevertheless seems to consist of something which is not humanly possible: how could one remember the evil committed (and remember it *as* evil), and at the same time not blame the one who committed it? By ultimately reserving the entitlement and ability to forgive to God, by describing human forgiveness as a theological virtue, and by emphasizing the gratuitous or gracious character of forgiveness, this tradition seems most of all to show that forgiveness is generally speaking impossible. In this paper, this conception of forgiveness is presented with the help of Jacques Derrida. The question how this apparently impossibility nevertheless sometimes happens is first answered with the help of Thomas Aquinas. Against this background, the paper claims that a 'secular' interpretation of forgiveness is also possible, which does justice to its being humanly impossible. Such interpretation describes forgiveness as an intersubjective act.

## KEYWORDS

Forgiveness, Derrida, (theological) virtue, Thomas Aquinas.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I try to make sense of the paradoxical nature of forgiveness. I start with a description of this paradox. In the second section I indicate the reasons for stressing this paradox. And in the concluding third section, I will suggest an interpretation of it with the help of a glance at a traditional theological interpretation.

## 2. FORGIVENESS AS IMPOSSIBILITY

We know Jacques Derrida's paradoxical judgement on forgiveness, saying that only the unforgivable can be forgiven, or that forgiveness "must announce itself as impossibility"; "it can only be possible in doing the impossible" (Derrida 2000, 85). But his text on forgiveness, inspiring and challenging as it may be, does not argue very clearly *why* forgiveness would be so paradoxical and why this paradox would be insurmountable. I therefore want to spell out my own understanding of forgiveness, which – I think – concurs with Derrida's.

Let us assume that forgiveness is something that occurs between a victim and a perpetrator. Furthermore, let us assume that when someone forgives, the offence committed has not been forgotten, but the perpetrator is nevertheless no longer reproached for it, such that the relationship between victim and perpetrator will no longer be a matter of remorse and revenge. How could something such as this ever be possible?

If the harm done to a person is remembered *as such*, i.e., as a wrong, it will be something that still is being condemned. If, or insofar as the wrong continues to be associated with the perpetrator, the latter will *as such* (i.e., as perpetrator) also continue to be condemned. It seems as if forgiveness is only possible under the condition that either the wrong is undone, which in many (or at least in some) cases is simply impossible; or that wrong and perpetrator have become radically dissociated. The latter might occur when the perpetrator not only admits to the act, but also shows remorse and atones for the wrong. In that case, the harmful *act* could stay condemned, but this condemnation would no longer effect the *perpetrator* in the manner it previously had. Because of the confessional, remorseful, and atoning attitude, the former perpetrator would have become a different person, no longer stuck

to his deed. Should we consider these three acts – confession, remorse, and atonement – through which the perpetrator can become a different person, to be the conditions for forgiveness?

Do these conditions solve the problem and overcome the apparent impossibility of forgiveness? Or have we rather lost sight of the phenomenon altogether? Can we really still speak of forgiveness in a situation in which the perpetrator has radically dissociated himself from the act? Would we not rather call a person resentful, or obsessively tied to the past, if she would *not* forgive the former perpetrator in such a situation? And could we still speak of forgiveness if it is thus considered a norm or a matter of obligation? Should forgiveness not be something else (and more) than the opposite of a psychic or moral pathology? In other words: if there has been confession, remorse, and atonement, would it not be appropriate to say that the perpetrator does not *deserve* to be considered as a wrongdoer any longer? However, surely forgiveness is not a matter of ‘giving somebody what they deserve.’ It rather seems to be a completely free gift, a gift which cannot be necessitated or exacted by any merit.

If my presumptions are correct, we reach a paradoxical conclusion: either forgiveness is impossible (i.e., in cases where guilt or the connection between the perpetrator and the evil committed cannot be overcome); or there is no forgiveness (i.e., in cases where the connection between act and perpetrator has been cut and guilt has been confessed). Undeserved forgiveness seems to be impossible, while deserved forgiveness seems to be no forgiveness at all.

Must we not admit that forgiveness is a matter of ‘all or nothing’, and thus that in fact a little forgiveness or conditional forgiveness is not possible at all? Suppose that I forgive somebody, because, or assuming, it will be good for that person or profitable to myself. In that case, I would have to withdraw my forgiveness if the effect of it turns out to be different from what had been expected. If this is impossible, it suggests that forgiveness cannot be conditional. Remorse cannot be conditional to forgiveness either. It would imply that I could withdraw my remorse when the forgiveness unexpectedly did not follow. Just as remorse cannot be based on expected forgiveness, forgiveness cannot be based on the expectation of remorse. It seems that, as for remorse, also forgiveness cannot be exacted from someone – it cannot be necessitated by certain causes and it cannot be motivated by expectation. It is an act that is radically free and creative to such an extent that it seems highly improbable

and at least unintelligible and enigmatic.

To summarize my explorations so far in the form of an argument: since forgiving presupposes that one does not forget what is to be forgiven, but remembers it; and since what is being remembered is the perpetrated act as evil, and as being done by the perpetrator more or less intentionally; since therefore the perpetrator is being remembered as linked to his evil act and thus as evil and blameworthy himself; and since to forgive the perpetrator would mean that he would not any longer be blamed, and thus would no longer be conceived as evil, the conclusion seems to follow that forgiveness is a contradictory or at least paradoxical combination of seeing the actor as evil and at the same time not seeing him as evil. Whether we have to speak of a contradiction or a paradox is open yet. If Derrida says that forgiveness “can only be possible in doing the impossible” (Derrida 2000, 85), he seems to try to turn the (impossible) contradiction into a (possible) paradox. Before elaborating this a bit further in the last section, I first want to say something about why I want to stress this impossibility.

### 3. WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO STRESS THIS IMPOSSIBILITY OF FORGIVENESS

One might object that the conclusion only holds for a very strict or even extreme meaning of ‘forgiveness.’ I would agree, but add that it is important to underline this strict or extreme meaning of ‘forgiveness’, even if this would lead to a paradox or a contradiction. The main reason for this is philosophical. If philosophy is an effort to understand reality as it presents itself to us, then its first and main task can be phrased with Aristotle as: to save the phenomena (*diasooizein ta phainomena*). We should not collect too many (more or less) similar phenomena under one and the same name, before we know to what extent they are similar or different. We should at least start from the assumption, as even Derrida does, that there is “some ‘proper’ meaning of this word” (i.e., forgiveness),<sup>1</sup> and that it therefore should not be “confounded... with related themes [like]: excuse, regret, amnesty, prescription, etc.” (Derrida 2000, 81); nor should the phenomenon itself be confounded with “some therapy or ecology of memory” (Derrida 2000, 84).

Up to now I have not mentioned the political use of the term ‘forgiveness’,

which is the main target for Derrida's criticism. This political use might bring in an extra reason to be rather 'purist' with regard to 'forgiveness', because here 'use' very easily becomes 'abuse' in the framework of some kind of power strategy. But we don't have to refer to this political abuse, or to Desmond Tutu's Christianization of the work done by the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa (cf. Derrida 2000, 90), or to any "'ecological' imperative of social and political health" (ibid.) whatsoever, which attempts to present itself as some kind of 'forgiveness,' if we try to circumscribe what forgiveness really is, and how it should be distinguished from all kinds of 'finalized' acts that seem to intend some sort of healing. "A 'finalized' forgiveness is no forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psychological economy" (Derrida 2000, 96). "Forgiveness does not, it should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation" (Derrida 2000, 90).

We even may not have to refer to extreme (political or other) cases of forgiveness, such as forgiving 'on behalf of' the victim (e.g., in cases when the victim is killed), to get a view of this impossible 'proper' forgiveness: even forgiveness between two people, one of whom has offended the other, already seems impossible. Take the situation of two former friends or lovers, and suppose that one has deceived or behaved violently towards the other. The victim is hurt and disappointed and demands some form of apology before the relationship can be restored. The offender regrets what has happened, but since the victim *demand*s a confession of guilt, an apology, and the promise that the event will not recur, the reconciliatory act, which can only be performed as a free act and not as one of subjection, is made impossible. Moreover, the offender feels misunderstood, because the act has been condemned unconditionally. But the offender knows that he did not act without reason; he might want to explain why the event happened, and show that - although it cannot be justified - it can at least be explained and understood. However, the victim is only willing to forgive if the offender ceases to insist on the understandability of the event, while the offender can only change this interpretation and show remorse if the victim is willing to - at least momentarily - show some understanding and accept the understandability of the act. The offender requires the victim to understand that there were prior events which contributed to the action, but the victim cannot put herself in the position of the actor who made her into a victim. It seems that the conditions that must be met before the relation

can be restored are impossible to achieve. There can be no forgiveness without remorse, and only when the victim has proven to be forgiving can the offender show sufficient remorse to make forgiveness possible. Indeed: relations can get caught up in accusations and deaf ears because undoing the damage seems to presuppose that the damage is already undone. This does not exclude, however, that the relation between people can be clarified and improved on, or that they can start again and learn to forget about what happened. But this is all different from 'forgiveness' in a 'pure' and 'proper' sense.

This brings me to a final reason for keeping 'forgiveness' apart from other, more-or-less related phenomena. For maybe we should accept that the conceptual impossibility of 'forgiveness' does not exclude that forgiving sometimes happens. At least according to some, the impossible *does* happen, at least now and then. Acknowledging the impossibility or inconceivability of forgiveness might help us to understand what happened when people experienced this impossible forgiveness, and what they have done to give words to experiences they made with this impossibility. How did they account for the impossibility of what they did experience nevertheless? What can we learn from them?

#### 4. HOW THE IMPOSSIBLE SOMETIMES MAY HAPPEN

Stories by victims of war crimes, stories from the TRC in South Africa, as well as stories about interpersonal relational problems, suggest that sometimes (even if very rarely) real forgiving may happen between human beings.<sup>2</sup> People sometimes seem to be able to grant forgiveness, unconditionally, and despite the seriousness of the offence.

Practical philosophy should try to understand this and to interpret it in such a way that it gives a fair account of this experience as well as of the impossibility of what is experienced. In this concluding section I want first to point to a way in which religious thought has attempted such an interpretation, and secondly to suggest – even if only very tentatively – a more secular interpretation of the indicated experience.

For the religious interpretation, I refer to two points in what Thomas Aquinas wrote on forgiveness in his *Theological Summa* (cf. Van Tongeren 1996). The place where Thomas deals with 'forgiveness' explicitly in the *Theological Summa* is already revealing: not (or scarcely) in the ethical and anthropological

second part,<sup>3</sup> but in the theological, soteriological third part of the book (cf. III q. 84-90 and suppl. 1-27). Forgiveness is ultimately an act performed by God. It can be seen as an act of God, since it is a (non-retributive) answer to an evil act, and since all evil is ultimately a disruption of the good order as designed by God, and thus as a sin against God. Even David, who sent his general Uria to a hopeless war so as to take his wife, confessed to God: I have sinned against you alone, *tibi soli peccavi* (Psalm 51). And if the offence is ultimately directed against God, God is ultimately the only one who could grant forgiveness. This certainly is a way to solve our problem, since it saves both the experience of forgiveness (sometimes God does forgive in a completely gratuitous and gracious act) as well as its (human) impossibility. What is impossible to us, may be possible for God.

Could this also help to solve the problem of how *human beings* sometimes are (or seem to be) able to forgive? Still according to moral theology it can to some extent. For if we accept there to be so-called theological virtues, human beings sometimes can act themselves in a divine way. A theological virtue is a disposition which shows God's activity in at least two ways: not only does God act through us when we act from such a disposition, but the disposition itself is also not so much cultivated by us (as is true with the cardinal virtues) as 'infused' in us by God.

Forgiveness could be conceived as one of the parts of the theological virtue of charity (which Thomas Aquinas does not do, by the way). Charity (like all theological virtues) is from a human or 'terrestrial' point of view often a kind of madness: doesn't one have to be mad to embrace the lepers? If forgiveness is an act of charity, and if acts of charity are possible (and we do assume that they are, since we praise people like Mother Theresa of Calcutta for their charity), then we have found an interpretation of what Derrida writes: "if I say, as I think, that forgiveness is mad, and that it must remain a madness of the impossible, this is certainly not to exclude or to disqualify it" (Derrida 2000, 89).

But there is a further point in what Aquinas writes with regard to forgiveness, which we must take into consideration. Forgiveness is an answer to a sinful act. This sinful act (*offensa*) has a 'subjective' and an 'objective' side. The subjective side is the offence, the insult or affront to the victim or to God. This side can be answered by a magnanimous, generous and certainly supererogatory act of love and forgiveness. But there is also the objective side: the in-



jury that is caused by the evil act, the bond that is broken, the damage that is caused. For God it is rather easy to forgive, because He cannot 'objectively' be hurt by the evil act. He is 'subjectively' offended, but the harm caused by this offence is completely and only on the side of the sinner or the perpetrator. For Aquinas this is the reason that – even if God has forgiven – remorseful repentance and restorative penance are still needed, because without these, the objective disruption continues to exist. This also explains why he can recommend such uncompromising measures against heretics (IIaIIae 11.3). But what does this mean for human forgiving? Even if human beings are enabled to forgive by the help of divine grace and theological virtues, the 'objective' side of an offence between human beings is real harm for both and certainly for the victim. Should this not mean that between human beings forgiveness and repentance have to keep up with each other? But doesn't that mean that human forgiveness cannot but turn into something 'conditional,' whereas we took its unconditionality to be part of its essential impossibility?

In concluding, I can only very briefly point at the direction in which I would like to search for a secular interpretation of human forgiveness, which accounts for its impossibility as well as for the experience that forgiveness sometimes does happen nevertheless.

What in the language of theology and the theological virtues is expressed in terms of God's acting through us seems to be mirrored in stories about experiences of forgiving, when people say that they don't understand themselves how they ('suddenly') were able to do what they deemed impossible, or that their own forgiving rather happened to them in stead of being performed by them.

Especially this last expression could, philosophically speaking, refer to the phenomenon of inter-subjectivity. An intersubjective act is an act which is not so much performed by either subject, but which happens between them. I cannot greet you, without you understanding my lifted arm as a greeting. Without your appropriate understanding of my behaviour, my lifting my arm is only an effort to greet, at most. Not only do you have to understand and interpret it in the right way, you also have to accept it as a greeting, maybe even to answer the greeting, for it to be a greeting.

This sounds, however, once again as if there are conditions that have to be met, whereas we assumed that forgiveness had to be unconditional.



Maybe, but at least this is not a condition that has to be fulfilled *before* the act of greeting (or of forgiving) can take place. On the contrary: I have to *act* unconditionally as if I am greeting you, and you have to *act* unconditionally so as to interpret this behaviour of mine, and then the intersubjective act of greeting may *happen* between us. Something like this might be true for forgiving. But we might first need a stronger example of an intersubjective act; let's take running into someone. Both you and I have to do something to make this possible, but without this 'something' being conditional to what the other does. I did not make my walking around conditional to your being there, nor did you; but your and my walking around are conditional to the encounter that may (or may not) happen to both of us.

With regard to forgiveness, this would mean that both you and I have to do something unconditionally before there be a chance that something like forgiveness occurs. I have to remember your evil act as such, but at the same time to generously allow the possibility of a new turn to our common history; you have to do whatever you can to repair the harm done without doing as if this could ever make the deed undone; and then something like forgiveness may happen between us – even if it most probably will not happen, and it certainly will not happen very often. If this is correct, *forgiveness* may be called conditional, but without the acts to be performed being conditional.

Maybe we have to distinguish between (1) forgiveness as a virtuous disposition, an attitude which makes someone prepared to let stories take a new direction and to let former offenders be 'reborn', and (2) forgiveness as an event which might take place under certain conditions without ever being guaranteed, and (3) the act of forgiving. Maybe we should say that although the act is impossible, we are nevertheless summoned to prepare ourselves to the taking place of the impossible.

Finally, if along these lines we could produce a fair interpretation of what happens if forgiveness takes place, it will be obvious that it is at its most a very rare event between human beings. To transpose this to the public realm, let alone to organize or 'use' it for political purposes, is making out of this sublime impossibility an absurd reality.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We are surprised to find Derrida using this concept of a "proper meaning", since according to his theory of meaning, this would be a *contradictio in adiecto*. Maybe we should read the quotation marks as an apology or irony? However, he does not use quotation marks with the word 'pure' in the following passage: "I will risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the "forgiveness" is not pure – nor is its concept." (Derrida 2000, 84).

<sup>2</sup> Examples can be found in Van Tongeren (2000) and Van Tongeren (2005).

<sup>3</sup> There are some remarks on forgiveness in Iallae 108.4, 113.2, 113.6f and IIallae 32.2 and 67.4.