

A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION OF THE
MISCONCEPTIONS AND LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Philosophy.

Whitman College
2015

Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Mary LeBlanc has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Philosophy.

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May 13, 2015

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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank each member of the Philosophy Department – Tom Davis, Julia Ireland, Patrick Frierson, Rebecca Hanrahan, Michelle Jenkins, and Mitch Clearfield – for their advising through this process. It meant so much to have each of you engage with my work and challenge me to continually move forward. To have all your support was an irreplaceable component in developing my voice, both in the thesis and in individual courses.

Next, I would like to acknowledge and thank Alison Ray. You were the first of many professors to teach me that I have much to offer in an academic sphere and that I deserve to share my work. I would not be here without your inspirational role in my academic life and your care as a personal mentor. I would also like to thank Tom Davis, my thesis advisor, for the abundant time and effort you have put in while helping me write and finish my thesis. Without your support I would not have been able to finish, let alone begin, this process that seemed absolutely insurmountable from time to time.

Finally, I am so grateful to my unbelievably supportive family for encouraging me to never shy away from all that I feel driven to pursue. I have been so lucky to share my life with each of you, residing somewhere between all our disparate interests, and feel so loved and supported at this point of transition and accomplishment. And a final *final* thank you is necessary for the welcome and love I have received from Julia Kuskin and Joel Bell, who never let me forget that, as Joel once put so eloquently, there is a piece of me that has the temerity to descend into work and dig in my own patch of soil—a bit of the garden that has always been reserved for me.

Introduction

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt puts forth an account of forgiveness as a remedy for the inevitable existence and constant occurrence of making mistakes and, consequentially, wronging others. She uses strong language, stating that forgiveness “saves man” from the inherent predicaments of action that man is “victim” to (The Human Condition, 236-7). This emphatic claim leads us to ask whether forgiveness is an unconditional solution for wrongdoing or, comparatively, maintains limits based on the nature of the trespass in question. Arendt briefly mentions the unforgivable, stating:

All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive [offensives of “radical evil”] and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance. The Human Condition, 241.

What she calls “radical evil” precludes any possible human response – but what *counts* as unforgiveable? Does only willed evil sit outside the limit of forgiveness? Or can even mistakes be considered unforgivable? I will assert that the limits of the unforgiveable are as variable as the conditions of forgiveness, both of which depend heavily on who was wronged and his or her conception of the wrong. As a highly variable and spontaneous event, the miracle of forgiveness cannot be conceived of as a duty or a moral imperative in response to any given wrong – even mistakes. Rather, it is to be understood as a potentiality of human action that has the ability to ameliorate the irreversibility of the past for the sake of *who* the victim and trespasser can become in the future. Forgiveness is an event that, as Arendt says, “saves man,” and thus we have a vested interest in it – however, given the deeply interactive nature of forgiveness, this does not mean it can, will, or should happen in any given instance.

Before arriving at the question of the unforgivable, I will develop a positive account of forgiveness that works out of an Arendtian framework to address a few misconceptions that may be leveled against forgiveness. Here I say leveled against to express the sense in which certain misunderstandings of forgiveness can either preclude it from occurring or create an aversion to the process. The first of these misconceptions, which I argue creates an aversion to forgiveness, is the assumption that the process is *only* applicable in a Christian context. This is not to say that practicing Christians misunderstand the nature of forgiveness by giving it soteriological importance – it is to say that forgiveness can be understood and enacted without religious significance. As Arendt points out, even within the Christian framework “it is not true that only God has the power to forgive, [and] this power does not derive from God” (The Human Condition, 239; Here Arendt cites Luke 5:21-24, Matt 18:35, and Mark 11:25). The assumption that forgiveness is merely a religious ethic fails to see the inherently social nature that forgiveness can take on. In light of Arendt’s conception of action as inherently political, one need not observe the religious tones of forgiveness in order to recognize its social dimensions. Here, I will explore a scene from the New Testament that can be taken to illustrate the secular concept of welcome, a critical necessity of forgiveness that I expand on when talking about forgiveness as conditional.

A second misconception, which I argue precludes the possibility of forgiveness, is the assumption that forgiveness functions as a performative speech act. The belief that forgiveness is something that one individual grants to another by will is a misconception that exemplifies what Arendt describes as substituting making for acting. The mere announcement, “I forgive you,” does not necessarily enact forgiveness by virtue of being

said – the statement must be an act of *disclosive* speech, functioning within the scope of plurality and initiative. A related misconception, which naturally attaches to the second assumption, is that forgiveness is an unconditional event. When one supposes that forgiveness is freely given as a unilateral act, it seems it can be given unconditionally to the unrepentant trespasser. However, upon seeing the necessity of cooperation in forgiveness, it becomes clear that forgiveness maintains certain conditions that must be fulfilled by both the offender and the victim – including but not limited to the welcome.

As I move into questioning what constitutes the unforgivable, I will introduce a final misconception of forgiveness – the supposition that, as a bilateral interactive event, forgiveness concerns only two persons. While forgiveness is interactive and occurs between two persons, it cannot remain isolated from what Arendt calls the web of human relations. Due to the web of relations, indirect parties and relationships become affected by forgiveness as well, creating unique complications in cases of wrongs that indirectly affect several parties, and especially in cases of mass atrocity. This issue of multiple forgiveness illustrates the near impossibility of forgiveness and leads to an interesting question: can forgiveness itself generate a wrong to a greater community? If so, how do we address the incompatible demands of not wronging a community and recognizing an offender's display of natality?

This bind between wronging a community and wronging a previous-trespasser leads me to my conclusion regarding the limits of forgiveness. There are certainly circumstances wherein a victim either feels that the wrong is unforgiveable, or feels that forgiveness would constitute an act of disloyalty to a greater community who were directly, indirectly, or symbolically affected by the wrong. The meeting of that affinity

with a genuine act of nality by the trespasser creates a bind between irreconcilable demands for the victim.

Thus, there exist circumstances where a wrongdoer *ought not* to ask for forgiveness given the impossible bind this creates for the victim. When a wrongdoer asks for forgiveness in these cases, the victim is suddenly made to be a wrongdoer, no matter the decision – the victim either welcomes her trespasser and wrongs a greater community or deliberately chooses not to welcome an act of nality and wrongs her trespasser. Forgiveness recognizes *who* was wronged and part of that recognition involves respect for the variable limits of forgiveness that are contained in each individual. This respect may oblige an offender to accept that his mistake is unforgiveable to the victim, regardless of *who* the offender may become, or that the possibility of forgiveness is complicated by the ties of loyalty that the victim holds. In cases such as this, the offender is not held captive or unable to change moving forward, but rather recognizes that a display of nality would create a disempowering bind for the already harmed victim.

Now, let us turn to Arendt's positive account of forgiveness, which will clarify the political nature of forgiveness, the necessity of cooperation as expressed by "plurality," and the concept of an individual's initiative to change as expressed by "nality." These terms will provide us with a working vocabulary to understand the misconceptions I have outlined above and ultimately the limits of forgiveness.

Arendt's Forgiveness

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt presents an account of action that incorporates the faculty to forgive as a remedy to one of the native problems of action itself: irreversibility. Human action is temporally bound, empirically fixed to the incessant progression of time. Thus, an action that has been released into the world is empirically crystalized in time – it is a metaphysical impossibility to turn back time and undo what one has done. Despite the empirical predicament of irreversibility, Arendt recognizes that humans constantly have the ability to act anew and generate a rebirth of possibility. Forgiveness is an event that renders the past irrelevant in light of a meaningful display of this ability, which she calls natality. In this display, the relevance of *who* is being disclosed through unprecedented actions meaningfully contextualizes the past as irrelevant to an individual's scope of future possibility. Through the interactive acknowledgement of an offender's natality, the offender is released from being reduced to their wrong and the victim is released from being reduced to a victim.

Arendt advances a radically original conception of action by first drawing a distinction between making and acting. Arendt describes making as “an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end” (*The Human Condition*, 220). Human action, by comparison, is entirely unreliable in these ways. The nature of action is fundamentally social, having the necessary qualifications of natality and plurality. Natality is the human capacity to act anew, but not merely in the sense of enacting a new action or series. Arendt explains: “it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself... something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before” (*The*

Human Condition, 178). Natality is the unique capacity in man to act unexpectedly, inspired by initiative and undetermined by empirical facts. Arendt describes plurality as the fact of “living as a distinct and unique being among equals” (The Human Condition, 178). The performance of action, as the introduction of initiative, necessarily happens among others who observe and interact with these actions.

Due to the plurality of agents, a would-be audience, men are able to “show who they are [and] reveal actively their unique personal identities” through speech and action (The Human Condition, 179). This disclosure of “who” an individual is *requires* a receptive audience because this “who” is always hidden from oneself but “appears so clearly and unmistakably to others” (The Human Condition, 179). The revelatory character of speech and action is a distinctly human possibility, enacted through man’s inherent capacity for natality and the cooperative interaction made possible with the plurality of agents. Arendt calls this space of interaction the web of relationships, into which every action is released and fated to mingle with the boundless consequences of other actions. With speech and action an individual can reveal *who* he is as opposed to *what* he is, which is expressed by qualities that cause “his specific uniqueness [to escape] us” (The Human Condition, 181). Given the web of relations, an act is *never* wholly isolated from its reception and boundless effects, generating the characteristic unpredictability of all action.

This interaction within the web of relations takes action out of our complete control. Due to the unpredictability of an action’s consequences and the empirical fact of the past, we all become tied to our previous acts by virtue of having set the process into motion. And importantly, when those unpredictable consequences result in an interaction

that wrongs another, we become bound to our *mistakes*, “unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing” (The Human Condition, 237). I misspeak and offend a friend, and regardless of whether it was a mistake it was still *me* who is attached to that wrong. In the sense of empirical irreversibility, an individual’s track record holds serious relevance over who he is understood to be – serious mistakes limit the future possibility of how an individual’s present actions are contextualized.

To illustrate with a fairly low stakes example, let us imagine an individual who has been consistently caught giving false excuses for missing deadlines. In the future, when the individual misses a deadline and provides an excuse, the supposed explanation is contextualized within a past of lies. Regardless of the excuse’s legitimacy, one has good reason (the pattern of the past) to *expect* that it is a lie. Nothing can erase the empirical fact of those previous lies, and this empirical evidence comes to create an *expected* future wherein actions are contextualized in light of what the past suggests will occur again.

However, in a very important sense, man is not irrevocably bound to the past given the capacity for natality. The irreversible past constructs one sense of possibility, by predicting what can be *expected* given what one has done. The capacity for natality can free every individual from that determinacy by constructing another sense of possibility that centers around “the fact that man is capable of action[, meaning] the unexpected can be expected from him” (The Human Condition, 178). Despite the empirical fact of irreversibility, the *relevance* of the past is not inherently fixed due to the human power to act unexpectedly.

In this moment it is critical that “power” be carefully understood. Arendt describes power as a potential that arises as a result of the cooperative interaction of persons. She writes: “Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength” (The Human Condition, 200). Commonly, power may express the character of a certain unfailing faculty that ensures a correlation between what one intends to do and the strict achievement of that task. This correlation can easily be observed in physical force and strength, as Arendt mentions, but is mistakenly extended to human capacities that exist independent of material factors. This reiterates Arendt’s emphasis on the distinction between making and human action. An expression of force or strength resembles “making,” whereas “power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse... power is to an astonishing degree independent of material factors” (The Human Condition, 200). Power is a potentiality that arises due to the plurality of persons, where individuals can express their distinct uniqueness among equals by virtue of being seen, heard, and responded to.

This sense of power exists in the display of natality, which takes plurality as its necessary condition. Arendt states: “power, like action, is boundless: it has no physical limitation in human nature, in the bodily existence of man, like strength. Its only limitation is the existence of other people” (The Human Condition, 201). When persons are willing to interact, there exists a power to radically alter the meaning of the past for both individuals and thus create a possibility for a context discontinued from the empirical past. Humans do not have the power, understood here as effective force, to erase the past; but they do have the power *potential* to act unexpectedly and generate a

sense of possibility that is unbound by what one cannot empirically erase. By virtue of natality, all humans have the capacity to respond to a self-resolved initiative to act outside the empirical projections and expectations of one's past actions. Man's inherent capacity to actualize potential and generate a rebirth of possibility is entirely independent of the empirical limitations created by the past. The capacity to *enact* a radically discontinuous sense of meaning that governs one's current and future actions is entirely unbound from the factual existence of the past, and appears as a miraculous rebirth that transcends the metaphysical impossibility of erasing the past.

This eventful display and recognition of a rebirth of possibility is what Arendt calls forgiveness. Forgiveness is a potential of action that recognizes *who* can move forward into the future by releasing agents from the empirical *whatness* of their past mistakes. Forgiveness is a regenerative potential of action, giving birth to a completely new scope of possibilities that are made possible through the welcome of an individual's capacity for natality. Arendt emphasizes the importance of forgiveness for all persons: "Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover" (The Human Condition, 237). All persons find themselves bound within the web of relations and hold the common ground of inescapable fallibility. We cannot undo the empirical crystallization of mistakes, and therefore must find another avenue to free persons from the limiting consequences of their past when they have *become* a person who is radically discontinuous from the actions of their past. Forgiveness acknowledges the social nature of action itself, creating a new possibility through interaction.

To revise one's context against forgiveness for both oneself and others – by denying we have trespassed against others, exacting revenge upon our trespassers, or perpetuating the misconceptions mentioned above – is to effectively deteriorate the conditions that enable individuals to remain “free agents” capable of “so great a power as that to begin something anew” (The Human Condition, 240). Here, forgiveness seems capable of truly ameliorating the empirical irreversibility of our mistakes, able to afford the possibility of a future unbounded by the past.

Understanding the Religious Context

The strong association between religious ethics and forgiveness can prejudice understanding forgiveness in a secular context. The prominent emphasis that Christianity places on forgiveness can lead one to assume that it can only be understood in a religious context; but whatever a person's religious beliefs and practices, and however true that forgiveness is religiously important, the miracle of forgiveness addresses the predicament of irreversibility, or at least that is the Arendtian assumption at the heart of my considerations. Arendt explains:

[There exist] certain aspects of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth which are not primarily related to the Christian religious message but sprang from experiences in the small and closely knit community of his followers, bent on challenging the public authorities in Israel[.] The Human Condition, 239.

Arendt argues that despite Jesus of Nazareth's status as "the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs," (which is, admittedly, subject to dispute), forgiveness can be understood as just that – an action taken in the realm of human affairs, which can include, but is not limited to, a religious realm (The Human Condition, 238). Forgiveness is an event of "possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility," absolving an individual from adverse ties to their past for the sake of a future of open possibility (The Human Condition, 237). This understanding of forgiveness, which is forward looking for the sake of *who* an offender and victim can become after moving past a wrong, has no necessary connection to religion. The assumption that forgiveness can only function within a religious context creates an aversion to the process for persons who have chosen to live outside that religious realm. When forgiveness is misunderstood as inextricably religious, it is easily dismissed under secular pretenses as "irrelevant" given the religious framework that is mistaken as a necessary foundation.

If forgiveness is to be understood secularly, as Arendt argues, it may seem strange that she also chooses to use a religious source as illustrative. The Christian context that emphasized forgiveness was *both* a religious and a political upheaval, certainly creating some room for political readings of forgiveness in relation to social justice and liberation from social oppression. However, Arendt goes a step further in asserting that religious examples of forgiveness need not be understood as dependent upon God as the redeemer, either – she cites Luke 5:21-24, Matt 18:35, and Mark 11:25 as passages that support that “it is not true that only God has the power to forgive, [and] that this power does not derive from God” (The Human Condition, 239). In Arendt’s interpretation, forgiveness figures into the Christian context due to the fact that a religious realm is still foundationally a realm of human affairs. Forgiveness pervades all realms as a potential of action that responds to the occurrence of trespassing, which itself is an inevitable consequence of action.

This very untraditional reading of biblical forgiveness is made accessible to Arendt through her larger notion of the interaction between history and tradition, which she articulates in the introduction of *Between Past and Future*. Arendt opens *Between Past and Future* with an assertion that man’s dwelling in the break between past and future, both of which press against him antagonistically, is “coeval with the existence of man on earth” (Between Past and Future, 13). This mediating role implicates man in thought that reconciles the counterintuitive tension between the past, pressing us forward, and the future, driving us into the past. Without a thinking being who can reconcile consistent meaning, there is no distinction between past and future and nothing to draw the continuity of time.

While this space must be navigated anew by each individual, “this gap [has been] bridged over by what, since the Romans, we have called tradition” (Between Past and Future, 14). Tradition has served as a “pre-established framework of reference” against which all lived experience has been compared, effectively providing boundaries within which all experience is understood and given continuity (Between Past and Future, 6). Until the modern age, man’s difficult insertion between past and future has been made easier through a framework that has been given to each individual as an authoritative guide. Now, the same tradition that used to appear as simply given has, in Arendt’s words, worn thin in the modern age and left man once again in a position of navigating the gap between past and future through thinking without the guiding banisters of tradition. We are in a position where history can *touch* us as teachings, rather than be preemptively understood through the tradition that history may fit within.

Once the reliability and authority of a given tradition has thinned, we “must remain bound to [incidents of lived experience] as the only guideposts by which to take [bearing]” (Between Past and Future, 14). This provides the opportunity to reread current incidents, and even the past, in ways that were not available when the authority of tradition placed limits on the possibilities of interpretation. In her book *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights*, Peg Birmingham hones in on what Arendt calls the “citability” of the past in her essay *Men in Dark Times*. Birmingham writes:

The transcendent force of citability makes the present a moment of deflection whereby the past becomes a projective force of the unknown and the unfamiliar; that is, a projective force of the new. Citability, therefore, offers a notion of historical narrative that is not descriptive but inaugurative. Its inaugurative force is derived precisely from its decontextualization, from its break with a prior content and its capacity to assume new contexts; it introduces a reality rather than reports on what already exists. And the paradox is that it accomplishes this introduction through a citation of what already exists. (Birmingham, 21).

The break in tradition has also been a loss of authority concerning how to understand the past. The past has become “citable,” lending itself to be reapplied and recontextualized through the thinker who finds himself between past and future without authoritative tradition. Birmingham explains that this seemingly counterintuitive re-understanding of the past “makes graphic a moment of transformation, not merely the continuum of history” (Birmingham, 21). As a concept that has been understood alongside a certain conception of Christianity, traditional illustrations of forgiveness become can become citable for a secular conception of forgiveness within Arendt’s understanding of history. While Christianity still certainly exists as a meaningful way of life for many persons, the tradition *as a tradition* (that is, a coherent and given frame of reference) has been broken down through a succession of thinkers reframing and rereading it, including but not limited to Kierkegaard, Kant, Nietzsche, and Heidegger.

Within an Arendtian framework, we find ourselves at a moment in history when the Christian tradition is no longer a pre-established framework of reference, despite the fact that it may still be a legitimate choice for persons who wish to practice. It used to be the case that lived experience was held against tradition, but now the fragmented tradition can be held against lived experience, allowing traditional concepts to expand past their earlier boundaries of interpretation. The phenomenal reality of forgiveness as a social interaction does not apply to Christianity without exception, but it certainly can be found in fragments of the tradition. Given man’s thoughtful mediation between past and future, these moments that bear witness to the lived experience of forgiveness can be abstracted from their previous limits and reread to inform the continuity of a secular experience.

Rereading the Religious Context

To explore the sense in which a religious passage can function as an illustrative source in a secular conception of forgiveness, let us look Luke 7:36-50. This passage bears witness to the necessity of a welcome in forgiveness; a concept that applies to the realm of human interactions both within and without a religious framework. Alongside the welcome that enables forgiveness to be acknowledged, we are also shown that an inability or refusal to welcome an individual precludes the possibility of forgiveness. The scene illustrates what a welcome looks like but, what is more, it makes explicit the extreme difficulty of welcoming one's trespasser or, on the other side, admitting one's wrongdoing. This passage illustrates the sense in which forgiveness is an impossible possibility – that which welcomes what is often defended against, goes against the expectations of the future, and prompts one to uproot everything for the sake of rebirth.

In the scene, Jesus has been invited to dinner with Simon, a Pharisee who wonders if Jesus is a prophet or merely a teacher. A woman who “lived a sinful life” heard that Jesus would be there and comes to anoint him (Luke 7:37). She reaches out to touch Jesus and begins to weep, wetting his feet with her tears. Continuing, she lets down her hair and wipes off the tears, kissing Jesus' feet and finally anointing them with perfume. Observing this scene unfold in his home, Simon thinks: “If this man were a prophet, he would know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is” (Luke 7:39). He deduces that Jesus cannot be a prophet because he has welcomed the touch of a sinner. In Simon's eyes, Jesus' welcome betrays an ignorance that could never be held by a prophet – an ignorance of her past, which defines *what* she is today and contextualizes the meaning of her current actions.

Jesus then creates a context for both Simon and the woman to re-experience the scene and understand what has transpired *in this moment*, divorced from the contextualization of the past. Jesus turns towards the woman and addresses Simon, “Do you see this woman?” inviting Simon to also turn towards her and thus asking the obvious (Luke 7:44). However, this obvious question is complicated upon his following statements:

I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Luke 7:44-47.

The supposedly sinful woman has ironically fulfilled all the requirements of a good host, none of which Simon has even gestured towards. In this moment, the woman’s clear disclosure as radically discontinuous from her previous sins was nonetheless misread by Simon as a continuation of her past. Simon has set a limit on what her actions can mean according to the missteps of her past, precluding him from recognizing the meaning of her actions in this moment and ensuring that he cannot *see* her display of natality. The woman’s actions could not speak for themselves because they were preemptively contextualized by *what kind* of woman she *has* been in the past and thus *is assumed to be* now.

The difference between Jesus’ and Simon’s understanding of the scene juxtaposes what a welcome can enable and what the absence of a welcome can prevent. The once sinful woman is able to display her natality when Jesus welcomes her initiative. Her display of natality follows naturally from the original intention that she came to meet Jesus with – by finding Jesus regardless of social convention, the woman has carried through the event that prompted her original initiative for rebirth, presumably hearing

Jesus speak at another time. The woman approaches Jesus with a genuine thankfulness that naturally yields a disclosure of her new sense of self.

Jesus' continual physical welcome, allowing the woman to touch him, enables her to continuously act in a way different than her past would predict, and the meaning of these actions is understood as an act of natality by the spirit of welcoming 'who' presents herself now. Without Jesus' welcome, the woman would not have been able to perform even one action, let alone the string that she displays. Forgiveness, as a release from the past for the sake of who the woman can become in the future, occurs as a natural result of the woman's ability to spontaneously disclose *who* she is now and Jesus' recognition of this disclosure. This interactive recognition illustrates Arendt's distinction between *who* and *what* a person is, and the sense in which forgiveness always takes who someone is in contradistinction to what their past may suggest about their future possibility.

Comparatively, Simon refuses to welcome the woman as she shows herself currently and hinders himself from understanding the meaning of her actions. Despite the woman's generosity towards Jesus, which spontaneously fulfill the requirements of a good host, Simon is unable to interpret these actions as discontinuous from her past as a sinner. In his piece *Beyond the Pale of Forgiveness: The Touchstone of Simon*, Thomas Davis explains: "[To Simon,] her *being* unclean is definitive. Seeing that way, how could Simon see her any other way? How could she become a person in her singular integrity, much less one for whom a new sense of possibility has been born?" (Davis, 305).

Simon's knowledge of the woman's past preemptively limits his understanding of her, creating a definitive boundary for her future possibility. According to the trajectory of her past, Simon has a certain expectation of how she *will* act in the future and, what is more,

how she *can* act in the future. In Arendtian terms, Simon understands the woman through *what* has happened in the past, effectively preventing himself from seeing *who* the woman has become – radically discontinuous from the trajectory of her past sins.

Simon forsakes *who* is standing in front of him when he uses the past to define *what* the woman is, preemptively denying her *capacity* for natality and thus unable to recognize her *current* display of natality as such. Denying the woman's capacity for natality effectively denies her humanity, by refusing to acknowledge that she holds the common human power to act anew. However, just as the woman's past wrongs are not definitively fixed, neither is Simon's current trespass. The moment of trespass simultaneously opens up an opportunity for him to become forgivable and start anew. If forgiveness could take place between the woman and Simon, with reference to his wrong, both are given the freedom to walk into their new sense of future possibility and leave behind their past missteps. When Jesus asks Simon to look again at the woman and her actions, he juxtaposes what the woman has done freely and excessively by virtue of *who* she has become, versus what Simon has not done though he *should* have and, as Davis explains, "reorients how each *may* be seen by way of the other" (Davis, 307). The woman's past actions have been rendered irrelevant in light of *who* she has shown herself to be.

Comparatively, Simon's actions have been *recontextualized* as a failure in light of what he should have done but did not, due to his thoughtless reduction of both Jesus and the woman to *what* they seem to be. Furthermore, Jesus' rebuke reveals Simon's initial understanding of the scene as a violent denial of this woman – he has denied her human capacity for rebirth to such a strong degree that her obvious disclosure of a new self is

seamlessly misunderstood as a continuation of her past. Simon has been radically thoughtless in letting the empirical evidence of the past obscure the obvious meaning of the present, refusing to welcome the ontological fact that the woman *can* act anew and the apparent fact that she *has* acted anew. The woman's new sense of self has been inaugurated through her interaction with Jesus, but now she meets an interaction with Simon wherein he becomes the wrong-doer and both Simon and the woman meet the possibility for a future through forgiveness.

In the moment after Jesus' rebuke, Simon cannot deny what has been clearly laid out: he has failed as a host and, what is more, he has wrongfully judged another who actually showed the nature of what he failed to perform. Simon has wronged the woman, and both may realize the nature of his wrong if they listen to Jesus' clear rebuke. Davis writes, "the juxtaposition shows the woman's [new sense of self] as who Simon may become next," namely, a person who enacts the spirit of hospitality and thankfulness so meaningfully that it is discontinuous from all bearing of past action (Davis, 311). Simon is faced with the option to disregard the rebuke and maintain his understanding of the woman and himself, truly meaning the trespass that he thoughtlessly took against the woman, or to realize a new sense of possibility for himself by taking the initiative to begin anew. The possibility of forgiveness opens up if Simon were to take the initiative to begin anew, fulfilled only by the mutual yielding of *both* individuals who, according to their respective pasts, should not welcome each other for asymmetrical reasons. Simon will resist welcoming the woman, because it will require abandoning not only his understanding of her but also his foundational understanding of himself. The woman will resist welcoming Simon, her trespasser, due to the empirical evidence that he *has*

wronged her and will *most likely* continue to because of the difficulty in changing one's mind.

If Simon seeks to render his past irrelevant he must entirely uproot his current understanding of meaning, truly abandoning his belief that this woman's past has made her perpetually unclean and welcoming her *touch*, physically or by way of her words. Here Simon is asked to terminate the interminable by acting neither in accordance with nor against his past actions, but in a way altogether discontinuous from his past understanding of meaning. What is called for to make this action possible, and is perhaps even more difficult, is the call to carry through the event that prompted an original initiative for rebirth. When the anointing woman takes initiative to find Jesus after hearing him speak, she responds to the call of forgiveness by following through with its prompt. She continues to allow herself to be called upon when she reaches out to touch Jesus. Jesus, as the 'other' is called upon to say, "yes," which he does by welcoming her touch.

For the 'other,' forgiveness asks the individual to welcome the unpredictable action of another, saying yes to their capacity for natality when all the empirical qualities and events justify saying no. As Davis states: "Jesus welcomes the sense of possibility that opens with her tears falling on his feet... Welcoming possibility opens between them; and what she lets herself do discloses who she *may* become" (Davis, 306). The mutual yielding of the woman and Jesus into the space of forgiveness is demonstrated over and over again when she continues to act, to reach out to Jesus, and he continues to say yes, enabling her to reach out again with a new action, unprecedented by her past.

When she reaches out, the affirmation of the space of forgiveness is at stake – she is entirely subject to the ‘other’s’ decision. The ‘other,’ Jesus, could say “yes,” completing what she put into motion by also yielding, or he could shrink away and say “no,” denying the existence of her human capacity for natality and thus thwarting the creation of the space in which it could be affirmed. The mutually yielding welcome necessary within the space of forgiveness requires faith that your loss of control, in yielding, will not simply enable the individual to trespass against you again. What is more, it is a willingness to reignite this faith if the individual *does* trespass again, as made possible by your yielding to him. Simon would have to reach out, honestly devoid of the feeling that touching her would make him unclean, and the woman who has been violently wronged by Simon just now would have to welcome his touch to enable the slight possibility that he will initiate a rebirth. Both individuals are implicated in an interaction that is neither controlled by the individual being forgiven or the ‘other.’ The eventful possibility of forgiveness implicates individuals into a space wherein neither controls the outcome but instead contributes to the fruition of the process.

The call of forgiveness that implicates us on its own terms is dizzyingly decentering. To open a possibility of forgiveness is always a risk because it acts drastically counter to the empirical evidence of the past and asks one to risk being trespassed against for the mere possibility of a future for the other. Going forward, the anointing woman must continue to carry through her original initiative for natality, continuously reaching out to individuals who will thoughtlessly say “no” as a result of her past. In order to open the space of forgiveness and continue to enact her new sense of possibility, she must also enable the possibility of another to commit the worst violence

to her—the reduction of “who” she is to “what” she has done and consequentially the denial of her capacity for natality. For the ‘other,’ the call of forgiveness likewise calls for a yielding; requiring a genuine “yes” when all empirical evidence suggests one should say “no.” Thus, both individuals must yield to a space wherein they actually risk *enabling* and *welcoming* an individual to trespass against them. This mutual yielding does not happen just once, after which it is heralded, “She has been forgiven!” The individual who *means* the change she has resolved to take on will be asked to disclose the new sense of *who* she means to be whenever she meets another person. This will prove to be particularly difficult with individuals who know of her past, and are not likely to yield in the way that would enable their seeing the new meaning of *who* she is. Forgiveness seems an impossible possibility – that which is entirely possible but radically difficult in light of our most intuitive impulses to distrust after being wronged.

Forgiveness as a Performative Speech Act

While the passage above illustrates the event of forgiveness as thoroughly interactive, there remains a commonsense assumption that forgiveness can also take on the character of a unilateral declaration. Initially it seems reasonable to understand the phrase “I forgive you” as a declaration that, once pronounced, serves as the utterance of definitive reconciliation. The victim does not need the offender’s permission or reception to “grant” forgiveness, and thus forgiveness remains a one-sided resolution that is wholly dependent upon the victim’s sentiments regarding her offender and the wrong she has suffered.

This assumption casts forgiveness as a performative verb: a verb carried out by speaking the verb itself. However, Arendt’s account of action renders this understanding nonsensical, showing that action itself is necessarily *interactive* and therefore cannot occur as a speech act (a statement that functions as a performative). To understand forgiveness as a performative speech act precludes the event from occurring by extinguishing cooperative interaction between the victim and wrongdoer. While the issuing of this one-sided performative may be indicative of a legitimate change in either the victim or the offender, these unilateral expressions are something other than forgiveness, which is a term reserved for an interactive moral relation.

When a victim assumes that forgiveness transpires after her utterance of “I forgive you,” it is understood as something that she *does* by will or grants to another despite his reception. The utterance of this speech act is simultaneously the accomplishment of the action, displaying a reliable and definite outcome that one can expect. Although speech acts are intangible, their nature is certainly conceived of as a measurable force. Arendt’s

account of action implies that this type of reliability cannot be expected from action at all. Due to the web of relations, no action can be understood as simultaneously being enacted and accomplished – the intention of an action may be realized in the moment it is enacted, but that intention never has full bearing on the end consequences of the action. The effects and end products of any action are never *wholly* attributable to the intent of the act, and to suggest that intention is a reliable force is to disregard the unpredictable nature of action itself.

Furthermore, action is a disclosive exchange between men within the condition of plurality, and thus cannot transpire in this sort of isolation. The disclosive quality of action has to do with the revelation of *who* someone is through her actions and words. *Who* the actor is, is inaccessible to the actor herself but constantly displayed to the receptive plurality with whom she speaks and interacts. It is incoherent to think of action in general as one-sided or calculable. Forgiveness is no different, requiring the reception of persons to express and acknowledge *who* is being revealed here and now. Arendt writes:

But the fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody can forgive himself; here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive. *The Human Condition*, 243.

Forgiveness takes as its object *who* an individual is, which no one can access from an internal perspective, and thus requires recognition from another individual. Forgiveness cannot be granted as a speech act because action itself is not measurably effective, and one cannot forgive herself unilaterally because the disclosure of the *who*, a necessary feature of forgiveness, can never happen in seclusion. Both conceptions of forgiveness in

isolation are rendered incoherent by the political nature of action itself, which takes the interaction between individuals as the catalyst that provides meaningful weight to acts.

Charles Griswold also argues that forgiveness is inherently interactive due to the social context that generates offenses and thus calls for a response. He writes: “the original context that gives rise to the issue is interpersonal or social, and that carries forward to the moral action of forgiveness whose purpose is to address that context. The dyadic character of the process permeates it from start to finish” (Griswold, 48).

Forgiveness cannot occur in isolation because the event itself is prompted by a social context. Forgiveness is a moral response to a social disruption that aims to modify the interactive realm by establishing a new sense of what is *between* the offender and injured party. Without that interactive relation between the offender and the victim, forgiveness risks becoming a façade that simply generates another offense. Griswold explains that an offender must await the victim’s response, asserting: “a claim to the contrary adds insult to injury, usurping the victim’s prerogative to pronounce forgiveness, and manifesting further disrespect for the victim because it communicates that the victim’s assessment and sentiments are irrelevant” (Griswold, 48). It may not be controversial to suggest that when an offender seeks forgiveness from the person she has wronged and that harmed party refuses to grant forgiveness, the offender has not yet been forgiven. It is simply not the offender’s place to release himself on behalf of the victim – this disrespects the victim’s right to take part in what *should* be a bilateral moral relation.

On the other hand, one may argue that self-forgiveness, if accompanied by contrition and regret, is emblematic of a very real change in the offender’s character. While this may be true, that isolated legitimate change does not constitute forgiveness,

although it may express an act of natality on the part of the offender. This unilateral change can be recognized as legitimate but deserving of another title. Griswold points out that while self-forgiveness may be a necessary step in fulfilling the conditions of becoming forgivable, it is more appropriately understood as letting go of self-hatred. An unreasonable or extreme hatred of oneself, even after having made legitimate changes in light of the wrong, seems to impede moral self-improvement and thus must be abandoned in certain cases of an offender's transformation (Griswold, 125-126). Comparatively, Arendt finds the concept of self-forgiveness absurd. She writes: "no one can forgive himself... [forgiveness] enacted in solitude or isolation remain[s] without reality and can signify no more than a role played before one's self" (The Human Condition, 237). She may allow the concept that an offender's feelings of contrition, regret, and resolve to act anew would accompany an exercise in natality, but she would not qualify this change as forgiveness.

It is, perhaps, more counterintuitive to suggest (as argued above) that forgiveness has not taken place either in the correlating one-sided event when an offer of forgiveness remains unaccepted by the offender. Let us imagine an interaction between two persons, say, Gus and Charlotte, wherein Charlotte has wronged Gus due to an unpredictable turn of events but does not believe she has done anything wrong. Gus eventually tells her, "I forgive you," but Charlotte is taken aback because she still does not think she has done anything wrong. Gus continues to insist that he has forgiven her and put the past in the past, despite her ignorance to her wrong. Charlotte responds by asserting that she does not accept, as she has done nothing wrong, and that he is being arrogant in doling out forgiveness where it is not necessary. Thinking back to Arendt's conception of action,

Gus does not have the *power*, as an effective force, to render Charlotte's past irrelevant because he cannot, by his own will or speech, forcefully enact a change of her heart. She must meaningfully enact the change herself, that is, understand the nature of her wrong and *mean* her resolve to act in a way radically discontinuous from the empirical trajectory of her past. There is a very real sense in which we want to believe that Gus, as the victim, has the right to grant forgiveness. However, this isolated façade of forgiveness likewise disrespects the offender's right to take part in the process as well.

Griswold points out that in these one-sided facades of forgiveness "one of the implicit ends of forgiveness would not have been accomplished, namely restoration of mutual respect and recognition between the two parties – the minimal state of civility that existed before the injury was done" (Griswold, 49). Forgiveness aims to modify what lies between the wrong-doer and the victim (an offense) by recreating the moral relation between the two persons. In an Arendtian sense, this involves recognizing a display of natality that renders the past irrelevant to *who* the offender shows himself to be now. For Griswold, this involves more specific conditions wherein both the offender and the victim undergo a legitimate change. It could be said that Gus's resolve to let the past pass is a *legitimate change* in his understanding of Charlotte going forward, and in that way actually does change her scope of possibility in that Gus has not condemned her to her past. However, this unilateral change of heart is closer to moderating resentment and what Griswold calls "re-framing" the wrong-doer by "distinguishing that 'part' of the [offender] responsible for the injury from the 'whole person'" (Griswold, 57).

To say that I can choose to grant forgiveness to an individual who has wronged me casts forgiveness only in reference to the individual who *forgives*, and says nothing of

the other who may or may not *seek* that forgiveness. This conception fails to capture the sense in which forgiveness is dependent on cooperation, not solely the forgiver or the forgiven, and is therefore an eventful process that cannot reach fruition without the mutual, cooperative yielding of two individuals.

Forgiveness Between Two Persons and Forgiveness in the Web of Relations

As a bilateral event that is made possible through the regenerative capacity of cooperation and interaction, forgiveness takes place between persons and modifies that space that springs up between persons. After a trespass occurs, what lies between the victim and the wrongdoer is the trespass that defines each individual as such in relation to each other. Forgiveness reconstitutes what exists between the two persons not only by releasing the wrongdoer into his new sense of self, reborn and separate from the past, but also by releasing the victim into a new sense of *who* is acknowledged and responded to in the process of forgiveness and thereafter.

Although forgiveness occurs between two people, it cannot remain isolated from the web of human relations. Within my Arendtian framework, the speech and action that constitutes forgiveness is released into the intangible web of actions whose “innumerable, conflicting wills and intentions” always meaningfully contextualize an action the second it is enacted (The Human Condition, 184). Once any action has been released into the web of relations, it is impossible to control its spread and reception, and thus forgiveness inevitably affects indirect parties as well as the two original agents involved.

In his book *Kingdoms of God*, Kevin Hart explores the complexity of this inevitable interaction post-forgiveness by way of an example within academia. The Department Chair, Professor Y, has slandered Professor X. As a consequence, Professor X and his family are forced to pick up and move to another city. Professor Y’s actions, only intended to affect Professor X, have also certainly harmed Professor X’s family indirectly. Professor Y’s wrong towards Professor X did not stay between just the two of them, but spread out to affect the tangential parties of Professor X’s personal life. Hart

explains that Professor X's potential forgiveness of Professor Y is not isolated between the two of them and affects a wider community, similar to the original wrong: "[Professor X's] act of forgiveness breaks solidarity with the injury of the entire family... [D]ifficulty emerges when forgiveness is offered by some members of an insulted community but not all" (Hart, 263). Let us imagine that Professor X and Y got together and in the course of their conversation Professor Y has revealed himself as discontinuous from his previous wrong. Professor X may welcome this display of natality and thereby enable Professor Y to enact his new sense of self through their interaction. However, as far as Professor X's family is concerned, the past still holds meaningful bearing over their understanding of Professor Y. Due to their inability or refusal to interact with Professor Y, the revelatory speech and action that could initiate a new meaning for both parties cannot take place. Thus, Professor X's forgiveness – which arose naturally from his interaction with Professor Y – may be nonsensical to his family, seeming to be a break in solidarity with his fellow victims.

This unique difficulty prompts a counterintuitive question: can forgiveness itself constitute a wrong to a greater community? While an act of forgiveness may create a new sense of possibility for the direct victim and wrongdoer, that same act effectively creates a fracture in the community's understanding of the wrongdoer. Certain victims may not want to forgive, and thus the forgiveness goes against an expectation that may be held between individuals in the larger community. Professor X is met with two incompatible demands – to maintain loyalty to a larger community of Professor Y's indirect victims, and to acknowledge *who* Professor Y has become.

To further illustrate the complexity of this tension we can turn to Simon Wiesenthal's short memoir, *The Sunflower*. Hart's example illustrates a case wherein forgiveness may constitute a wrong of disloyalty, but Wiesenthal's memoir introduces the added complexity of when the victim may also feel that the wrong is unforgivable despite being met by a changed wrongdoer.

A Further Example: *The Sunflower*

While at a work camp during the Holocaust, Wiesenthal is taken to the deathbed of a Nazi who asked for a Jewish prisoner to be brought to him in order that he may tell his story and “die in peace” (*The Sunflower*, 27). Karl, the dying SS Officer, tells of a particular experience where he and his fellow officers drove a couple hundred Jewish prisoners into an empty house, in which they placed cans of petrol and then launched grenades at. Karl expresses genuine horror at his direct involvement in the event and his failure to act despite knowing it was atrocious. Karl ends his story, saying: “[T]ime and time again I have longed to talk about [this] to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him... I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace” (*The Sunflower*, 54). Wiesenthal exits the room without a word and leaves only his silence, but no definite response of forgiveness or refusal to forgive.

At the end of his memoir, Wiesenthal poses the question: “Was my silence at the bedside of the dying Nazi right or wrong?” (*The Sunflower*, 97). This question wonders whether he *should* have forgiven the Nazi, placing himself and his agency at the center of the question – did I have the ability to forgive this man and, if not, who does? Wiesenthal could recognize Karl’s change in heart as a display of natality, but he is not in a position to grant forgiveness on behalf of Karl’s victims or on behalf of a greater community. However, there is no promise that either the Jewish community or Karl would not perceive even Wiesenthal’s recognition as speaking on behalf of an entire community – the reception of his act is not contained in the act itself. His position is particularly difficult due to the degree to which he may be perceived as breaking solidarity regardless of his own understanding of the event.

While it is certainly true that the best Wiesel could offer would be some form of third-party forgiveness, let us assume he could offer paradigm forgiveness to explore the tensions between the individual and a greater community. It seems that Wiesel has yielded to the possibility of harm by sitting in a room with a Nazi and listening to his graphic story, and it seems that Karl has expressed genuine remorse for his past and a desire to be unbound from its meaningful bearing over his future. However, one may wonder if Karl is getting off easy here in being forgiven for his thoughtlessly evil actions by merely expressing regret. Of course, at this juncture in his life, Karl is unable to prove his change of mind in action and so we must ask: what would it take for Karl to become forgivable and would this transformation necessitate revelatory action or merely speech? Through the earlier example of Simon, we get an idea of what would be at stake for Karl if he could move into his new life. Just as Simon would have to abandon the context of meaning that structures his understanding of his actions, Karl would have to move forward in such a way that he becomes painfully aware of the unbearable meaning of his wrongs. Simon will have to recreate a sense of meaning that will inevitably alienate him from his Pharisee community. Karl would have to feel the immense weight of understanding what he had enabled to happen through his thoughtlessness and also recreate his sense of meaning.

However, much is also at stake for Wiesel. If Karl displays a genuine radical discontinuity from his past in his interaction with Wiesel, Wiesel's denial to recognize and accept this clear display of natality would be a massive wrong against Karl. He would have to revise what he had clearly seen Karl enact *now* in light of what Karl has done in the past, denying Karl's demonstrated capacity for natality and thus

meaningfully denying his humanity. For Wiesenthal to deny Karl's display would be, as Davis states in reference to Simon, a decision "to uproot the very possibility of changing one's mind, of rebirth" (Davis, 305). This moment marks a crossroads that offers two configurations of spiritual death. The choice to ignore what is meaningfully obvious in order to maintain an incorrect, but empirically coherent, understanding of the world is to willfully extinguish one's own capacity for natality. By comparison, the choice to enact natality and move forward into a new sense of self requires dying to one's past for the sake of the possibility of a future. The choice to act in a way radically discontinuous from one's own or another's empirical trajectory is incredibly destabilizing: it uproots the entire structure of the world. While Wiesenthal's refusal to *hear* Karl would be a terrible wrong – constituting his own spiritual death and violating Karl's humanity – several complications including the issue of community solidarity and fact that Karl is on his deathbed create large tensions in what we think of Wiesenthal's action.

It seems that certain wrongs, such as that committed by Charlotte against Gus, could be candidates for forgiveness after the recognition of the wrong and a meaningful change of heart as demonstrated through *speech*. However, other wrongs such as those committed by Karl are of such a violent and drastic nature that we want to *see* Karl enact his change of heart before believing he has truly met the conditions for forgiveness to occur – it is harder to trust his speech. As I touched on above, what Karl's followed-through resolve would ask him to suffer is nearly unbearable – the pain of being unfairly and inextricably tied to one's past, given the constant displays of natality that one has resolved to enact. It is arguable that certain acts are of such a nature, so inhuman and evil, that the repentance of such acts *must* involve this type of suffering. However, to ensure

this suffering by deliberately choosing not to welcome an individual's display of genuine nescience is to wrong them. Additionally, we must remember that forgiveness is not an issue of justice, which functions on empirical evidence of the past. Forgiveness is radically unbound from the empirical evidence of the past and thus cannot be conditioned upon a certain preservation of the past as a punishment for an individual.

Arendt is emphatic that disclosure of an individual happens in *both* speech and action. While Karl could not *act* on his change of heart he could disclose it through his speech, which is arguably tantamount to action in disclosing *who* one is, if another will listen. This seems to be the response from one of Wiesenthal's comrades, who comments: "I don't think [Karl] was lying to you. When one is face to face with death one doesn't lie" (The Sunflower, 81-82). While Karl could not have displayed his change of heart due to his physical condition, that same physical condition seems to suggest that his disclosure was genuine. While it is merely speculative, because Karl's future is not long, it is difficult to *trust* that he could bear the immense weight that beginning anew would require of him. Choosing to act anew here is no easy task - imagine how nearly impossible it would be for Karl to show his direct or indirect victims that he has changed, and how equally unlikely for any victim to *welcome* Karl in order to enable Karl to disclose this change at all. Karl would have to break ties with everything that had given his life structure previously. What is more, because of his ties to the Nazi regime, Karl's enacting a new life would mean not only a spiritual death but also possibly a physical death as consequence of acting against an extremely powerful totalitarian regime. This inclination to *doubt* Karl makes explicit the sense in which not only Karl takes a large risk by initiating a new life, but the 'other' who is asked to recognize Karl's new self also

must take a risk for the mere possibility of Karl being able to enact his original initiative for rebirth.

In light of this exploration, it seems that Wiesenthal was wrong not to accept Karl's display of natality and grant forgiveness. But this leaves us in an incredibly counterintuitive space – it seems to be the wrong conclusion that Wiesenthal, having suffered a mass atrocity, could ever meet an *imperative* to forgive his trespassers. It also seems backwards to conclude that Wiesenthal's inability to forgive Karl would switch their roles and effectively make Wiesenthal the wrongdoer. According to Arendt's account of forgiveness, it seems that to ignore Karl's clear display of natality would actually be a trespass against Karl – Wiesenthal's walking out of the room is, in one sense, totally justified given his own affective holds, the fact that he was not a direct victim of Karl's, and that he has a loyalty to a greater community. In another sense though, Karl has displayed a new sense of himself that Wiesenthal chooses not to welcome wholly, effectively saying “no” to his display of natality. Wiesenthal is presented with an impossible bind between the irreconcilable demands to avoid wronging a greater community and to acknowledge a display of natality. While Wiesenthal's forgiveness may not speak on behalf of others, it is forgiving a person whose trespass was emblematic of a much larger, sustained, atrocity, complicating the reception by indirect parties.

Not only might Wiesenthal's forgiveness constitute an act of disloyalty to a greater community, but Wiesenthal may also hold the sentiment that Karl's acts or his general involvement with the SS is unforgivable. As Griswold acknowledges, “some injuries may be so profound that it seems humanly impossible, at least for now, that

resentment should be sent away” (Griswold, 94). There exist affective components of being wronged that do not simply go away when the perpetrator has experienced a change of heart. A victim and a trespasser are inextricably linked but their feelings of trust for the other do not necessarily correlate. A victim may not always be ready to participate in forgiveness despite the development of natality that a trespasser has gone through, and we want to make room for that very legitimate stance. Out of the observation that forgiveness may constitute a wrong (or perceived wrong) to a greater community, we come to understand that the possibility of forgiveness may also present a victim with irreconcilable demands.

The Variable Limits of the Unforgivable

I take this difficult bind as a clue for what constitutes the unforgivable. Forgiveness is not an event of logic or thought; it is an event of interaction and self-disclosure. Thus, the variable limits of forgiveness are reached when one agent cannot participate in that interaction for whatever reason. It seems that this may commonly happen in circumstances such as Wiesenthal's, wherein the victim may find himself surprisingly sympathetic to his offender but nonetheless still unable to interact in such a way as to truly release himself or his offender from the past wrong. However, it seems unreasonable to condemn the victim for feeling this way, labeling such sustained mistrust or resentment as holding an unwarranted grudge or vengefully denying the offender's humanity. If forgiveness was an objective process with objective conditions for forgivability, perhaps the inability for a victim to let go of the past could be morally criticized. However, forgiveness considers *who* was wronged, *who* the victim is, and *who* may move forward into the future post-forgiveness, thereby admitting to the imperfect context of the human variability of each victim.

As a highly personal interaction, forgiveness ends up being extremely variable – the objectively same wrong done to two different persons may necessitate completely different paths of interaction, depending on (but not limited to) the existing relationship or expectations between the two, the nature of the wrong in relation to past wrongs a victim has suffered, or the specific values that the victim holds. Because the wrong itself is received differently depending on *who* is wronged and *who* does wrong, what counts as unforgivable is as variable as the conditions for forgiveness. Due to the irresolvable bind that a victim can be placed in, as we saw with Wiesenthal, it seems to be that there are

circumstances where part of the offender's respect for his victim would involve *not* asking for forgiveness. Griswold explains that, as one condition to be forgiven, the offender must understand the harm done by the trespass from the victim's perspective. Part of sympathetically imagining the meaning of the wrong may involve understanding that the wrong is in principle unforgivable to the individual or that it is beyond the victim's ability to evoke the trust or welcome necessary for forgiveness.

The scope of wrongs that may be unforgivable in principle are highly variable, and could count as such for many reasons depending on the victim. Jean Améry writes about his maintained resentment after being tortured in Auschwitz: "to my own distress, I belonged to that disapproving minority with its hard feelings... I preserved my resentments. And since I neither can nor want to get rid of them, I must live with them" (Améry, 67). Here one may speculate as to whether his inability to rid his resentments causes his lack of desire to do so, or the other way around, but this guesswork is unimportant to the larger concept that Améry conveys. From Améry's perspective, he is unable to rid himself of an affective dimension that would enable him to let go of his past trespasses. For an offender to understand the wrongs done to Améry, he must understand what Améry feels about his experience of torture:

I am certain that with the very first blow that descends on him he loses something we will perhaps temporarily call "trust in the world." ... If no help can be expected, this physical overwhelming by the other then becomes an existential consummation of destruction altogether... [With the first blow,] a part of our life ends and it can never again be revived. Améry, 28-29.

Truly understanding Améry's perspective would involve respect for the fact that Améry cannot move past the wrong. Griswold explains this sentiment as the feeling that "the magnitude of the wrong done generates doubt that anything could *ever* 'make up for' a *truly* atrocious wrong whose effects on you are permanent" (Griswold, 94).

For the offender who has felt genuine regret and committed to acting anew henceforth, it may not be appropriate to ask for forgiveness of Améry. Améry seems to feel that his past wrongs are unforgivable, or rather still worthy of sustained resentment, and thus to ask him for forgiveness places him in an impossible bind when confronted with the offender's natality. Améry even recognizes the irony of his position:

It did not escape me that resentment is not only an unnatural but also a logically inconsistent condition. It nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. Resentment blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future. Améry, 68.

While Améry acknowledges that being unable to enable forgiveness is logically inconsistent and does, as Arendt also insists, restrict himself to the past, he articulates that his sentiments cannot simply be reasoned away. An unfortunate effect of being a survivor, that we certainly want to acknowledge and justify as a limit of forgiveness, is that the logic of why one *ought to* forgive may break down in light of the irreconcilable imprint that the wrong left. We want to make room for this right of the victim to declare his or her own conception of unforgivability, and this may be done by the trespasser understanding when not to ask for forgiveness, given the impossible demand it places on the already disempowered victim.

Birmingham explains Arendt's concept of the right to have rights as ontologically rooted in the event of natality and the principle of plurality. She writes: "Since the fundamental event, the beginning, carries its principle in it, the event of natality, the event of appearance, carries the principle of plurality – with its inherent publicness – within it. To violate this principle is a 'crime against humanity'" (Birmingham, 58). The right to have rights is secured for all persons by virtue of the principle of initium (natality) and appearance (plurality), both native to the human condition. Birmingham quotes Arendt's

conclusions in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* on why genocide was a violation of the principle of humanity: “[genocide] is an attack upon human diversity as such, that is, upon a characteristic of the human status without which the very words ‘mankind’ or ‘humanity’ would be devoid of meaning” (Birmingham, 58). The overarching wrong inflicted upon Améry was a crime against humanity and his distinctness, and thus it seems very strange that his response to an offender asking for forgiveness, by refusing to acknowledge his natality, could also constitute a serious wrong. The offender who asks Améry for forgiveness puts him in a strange position where after suffering a serious crime he too becomes a perpetrator of violating the principle of humanity. He is, effectively, disempowered again.

For Améry, or any other victim, to refuse to acknowledge his trespasser’s display of natality would be to deny the agent’s “right to appear” and to deny the “fundamental event of human existence – natality” (Birmingham, 57). Simply put, it seems wrong to conclude that Améry, or any other victim of a serious wrong, should be placed in this position given what he suffered before – he was previously disempowered through a crime against humanity, and now is disempowered by the impossible demand to acknowledge his offender’s natality. In circumstances such as these, I argue that the offender ought not to ask for forgiveness. A true understanding of the victim’s irreconcilable position should lead to a respect for that fact that the victim *cannot* move past the wrong and thus *cannot* participate in forgiveness. This inability should not be looked upon as a violation of the principle of humanity, but rather a justified bind that should not be further exacerbated by turning the victim into an offender.

Conclusions

Forgiveness seems to be an impossible possibility – a miracle that must be so spontaneously and perfectly timed that it can only be hoped for but never expected. It asks one “to turn one’s back on the direction that justice indicates to us,” and to act counter to the impulse to turn away from one’s trespasser for protection (Jankélévitch quoted by Hart, 252). Forgiveness is a miracle that offers a rebirth of possibility, but can never be considered as a moral imperative, given the variable nature of the event. Despite these difficulties we must not turn away from the call of forgiveness for ourselves or our trespassers, given the incredible possibility that can be created through this interaction.

The considerations brought up in my last sections come about due to our rootedness in the web of relations. It may be argued that these difficulties can be written off with the assertion that “as soon as a third person appears in a moral situation, there is a call for justice rather than ethics” (Hart, 263). However, something is lost in the administration of justice even when struggling with forgiveness seems insurmountable. While justice creates a definitive end, forgiveness continually renews itself. Here we must maintain hope for the human capacity for natality and the miracle of forgiveness, enabling our trespassers and ourselves to move into the future.

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