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To Forgive or Not Forgive: Philosophies, Limits, and Transitional Political Processes

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Abstract

Forgiveness, as a dimension of the transitional political process of reconciliation, appears in varied forms. The diversity of approaches to forgiveness paired with the doubled question of *Who can grant forgiveness and under what circumstances?* leads to conceptual and practical questions concerning the value of concept in transitional societies. In this article, I draw upon a range of perspectives to elaborate a trajectory of thought that situates forgiveness as an aporetic experience of the limit between the forgivable and the unforgivable. I argue that persistent reflection on this limit is required to achieve the hope and prospects of forgiveness, as well as preserve the judgment of forgiveness from a status that is heterogeneous to transitional political processes.

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It is only against the unforgivable, and thus on the scale *without scale* of a certain inhumanity of the inexpiable, against the monstrosity of radical evil that forgiveness, if there is such a thing, measures itself.

–Jacques Derrida, *To Forgive*

The meaning of a thing, as opposed to its end, is always contained within the thing itself, and the meaning of an activity can exist only as long as the activity continues.

–Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*

1. Introduction

In her widely discussed work *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence*, Martha Minow (1998) opposes forgiveness to vengeance as an alternative to the retributive economy of violence that often accompanies socio-political transitions. Forgiveness, as Minow traces the concept, arises within two registers of experience that correspond with private/subjective feeling and public action. As private feeling, forgiveness “marks a change in how the offended feels about the person who committed the injury,” (p. 15) and is characterized by a cessation of hate and retribution that accompanies the inclusion of offenders in social and moral reconstruction. As public action, forgiveness “often takes the form of amnesty or pardon,” and “institutionalizes forgetfulness” in the interests of moving on (p. 15). That there are public and private spheres of experience to begin with reveals a tension central to the idea of forgiveness.

Any attempt to theorize forgiveness from a philosophical perspective must necessarily confront a broad range of experiences that extend from interpersonal to society-wide relationships. The transitional political process of reconciliation is one setting of particular value for thinking through these experiences because reconciliation processes often work to promote forgiveness in an effort to shape the future of a society. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission provides a valuable example of how the two concepts are integrated in practice given the commission’s efforts to identify forgiveness as an important step in rebuilding the national fabric. There are, however, unresolved rifts in and between what “forgiveness” is and what theoretical and practical contribution it makes to the process of reconciliation.

In this article, I draw upon a range of perspectives to elaborate a trajectory of thought that situates forgiveness as an aporetic experience of the limit between the forgivable and the unforgivable. I argue that persistent reflection on this limit is necessary to achieve the prospects and hope of forgiveness, as well as preserve the judgment of forgiveness from a status heterogeneous to transitional political processes. My analysis moves through the works of Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, and Vladimir Jankélévitch to establish a philosophical framework for the concept of forgiveness. In the latter half of the article I briefly discuss this framework in the context of Desmond Tutu’s philosophy of praxis and its application in South Africa’s national Truth and Reconciliation Commission

(TRC). My ultimate goal is to chart a path for further thinking on the philosophical *and* practical limits of forgiveness within transitional political processes.ⁱ

2. Transitional Political Processes: The Relation of Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Under the subtitle “The disclosure of the agent in speech and action,” Hannah Arendt (1958/1998) tells us in *The Human Condition* that “to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin..., to set something into motion” and that we do so as “*initium*, newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth” (p. 177). Action along with speech, and in their shared character of beginning anew, exhibits the two-fold character of equality and distinction, which forms the basic conditions of human plurality. This is to say that although equality implies a general condition under which human beings are capable of understanding each other, they are also distinguished by the appearance of each human in intersubjective interaction, and reveal diversity by virtue of the fact that it is more than mere “signs and sounds [used] to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants” (p. 176). Interaction instead appears as the uniquely human process of starting something new, and doing so in a way that cannot be wholly, or even largely, anticipated by interactants within the flux of human experience.

The desire to counteract the anxiety of beginning anew manifests in the history of Western political philosophy as the assertion that there exists an inherently political substance common to biological human life, which establishes an absolute and pre-given foundation for politics.ⁱⁱ But because “humans” rather than “the human” appear to us in speech and action, no such foundation is possible; we are, rather, delivered into a web of relationality to which we add our own design in concert with others, and do so by virtue of our capacity to speak and to act. Arendt is thus careful to note that the beginning of the beginner as *initium* “is not the same as the beginning of the world; it is not the beginning of something but of somebody, who is a beginner himself. With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself” (p. 177).ⁱⁱⁱ This character of the human agent as a beginner reveals the inseparability of speech and action

because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer: ‘Who are you?’ ... Without the accompaniment of speech, at any rate, action would not only lose its revelatory character, but, and by the same token, it would lose its subject, as it were; not acting men but performing robots would achieve what, humanly speaking, would remain incomprehensible. Speechless action would no longer be action because there would no longer be an actor, and the actor, the doer of deeds, is possible only if he is at the same time the speaker of words. The action he begins is humanly disclosed by the word and though his deed can be perceived in its brute physical appearance without verbal accompaniment, it becomes relevant only through the spoken word in which he identifies himself as the actor, announcing what he does, has done, and intends to do. (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 178-179)

The disclosure of the agent in speech and action is one important instance of beginning anew. However, what characterizes this beginning is also what characterizes all beginnings in general, and that is the principle of uncertainty. When agents insert themselves into the world with word and deed in response to the question “Who are you?,” they do so without full knowledge or control over what they do in fact reveal, which is the essence of the new.^{iv} In antiquity, the decisive problem associated with any possible response to “Who are you?” was that of the impermanence of human experience. This quality of experience generated a manifold desire to reach beyond the now of human perception for the purpose of controlling and preserving that which appears naturally. The result is an intellectual emphasis on discovering the processes of nature as a way to overcome and understand what is outside of human control. Such concerns subsequently altered the path of human existence in a way that “uncertainty rather than frailty becomes the decisive character of human affairs” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 232). By turning to science to extend knowledge beyond a thoroughly perspectival account of what is, human culture embraced the uncertainty of discovery as a way to address the frailty of experience. This is to say, uncertainty, as the beginning point of science, embraced a view of process that was previously unobserved, but which is made possible precisely because humans are capable of starting our own processes, rather than being only subject to them. The uncertainty of every beginning is, accordingly, limited; rather than grasping uncertainty as an end, science treats it (uncertainty) as a means to an end; uncertainty is the beginning of the process of discovering what exists naturally and does so as a matter of control.

The control sought through an embrace of uncertainty results in a paradoxical condition. Although we manage uncertainty as a path to gain knowledge, like all beginnings it implies the character of that which we cannot undo and is “matched by an almost equally complete incapacity to foretell the consequences of any deed or even to have reliable knowledge of its motives” (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 232-233). Action thus has a two-fold character of uncertainty and irreversibility, which, together, mean that we always already begin anew without knowledge of what we do in fact begin, and without the capacity to undo those deeds. It is in connection with these facets of action that forgiveness becomes a necessity.

Forgiveness, for Arendt (1958/1998), arises out of a need to overcome both the uncertainty and the irreversibility of action. As a way of managing the uncertainty of the future we make and keep promises about what we will do, but such promises, because they occur in the present and concern that which has not yet happened, cannot be fulfilled to the fullest extent. Because action, both in the form of a promise and in the partial fulfillment of that promise, is irreversible, we would, without the capacity to forgive, never be able to release ourselves 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” (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 237). The implication of forgiveness as a necessary facet of action likewise relates to the human condition of plurality: Both action and its consequences serve a necessary role in politics by both promising the future and

maintaining the possibility of acting again, despite the potential for violating what we have promised.

In Plato's infamous "allegory of the cave" from the *Republic*, for instance, the quality of the enlightened prisoner's authority is one founded on speechless authority in which absolute standards (the Forms) endure a process of deformation that enables their application in human affairs. This view of action (i.e., one that begins with the assumption of absolute Truth) cleaves speech from politics as an unnecessary dimension of legitimate rule, which corresponds, instead, with an internal dialogue between me and myself "so that the right and wrong of relationships with others are determined by attitudes toward one's self, until the whole of the public realm is seen in the image of 'man writ large,' of the right order between man's individual capacities of mind, soul, and body" (Arendt, 1958/1998, pp. 237-238). However, as Arendt points out, forgiveness assumes a world of human action in which promises are made to others and so quite literally is only possible as a result of one's experience with others. This means that a subject's everyday being with others, in which forgiveness is a necessary facet, determines the "extent and modes in which one may be able to forgive himself or keep promises concerned only with himself" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 238).

Arendt (1958/1998) traces the history of forgiveness to Jesus of Nazareth who she credits with discovering the role and significance of forgiving in human affairs.^v She claims that it was he who corrected the view that only God can forgive and does so through the medium of human beings. Instead, she observes, Jesus taught that forgiveness "must be mobilized by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God also" (p. 239). Arendt understands forgiveness as a necessary dimension of the human condition, and in keeping with the biblical account that forms the ground of her view, also believes that there are actions that are unforgivable. She talks about such actions as "crime and willful evil," which are subject to retribution rather than forgiveness in the Last Judgment carried out by God. In the realm of human affairs, such actions are unforgivable not because they are understood as literally "unforgivable," but rather because such acts defy human sense, and are thus outside of understanding. Arendt shows us that punishment, which is an alternative to but not the opposite of forgiveness, shares with it a capacity to put an end to what could go on endlessly. But this shared structural character also shows that "men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish" and are also "unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable" (Arendt 1958/1998, p. 241). Such "radical evil," following Kant, "transcends the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they [acts of radical evil] radically destroy wherever they make their appearance" (p. 241). The unforgivable nature of this type of action thus arises out of a sheer inability to act productively, which is to say it forecloses the possibility of forgiving as a condition of its character as radical evil.

The kind of actions that Arendt (1958/1998) has explicitly in mind when she writes of forgiveness are those she names "trespasses," and are deeds that act in violation of the promises we make to secure the future. Without our ability to forgive and move beyond such acts it would be impossible to continue forward freely; "only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again can they [men/women] be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new" (Arendt, 1958/1998, p. 240). Forgiveness shares with the new a character of

uncertainty and unpredictability and thus retains the original sense of action in that it is outside of our control and always acts in ways never before considered.

Like Arendt, Vladimir Jankélévitch (1962/2005; 1996) takes the perspective that forgiveness is indeed a human thing, and more specifically, a way of responding to injustice. He discusses forgiveness in two distinct ways: One concerns a positive thesis, which describes the conditions of forgiveness that call it forward, and what it can do. His other, negative thesis concerns what forgiveness is not, and more specifically, the conditions under which forgiveness is impossible.

Jankélévitch's positive thesis concerning forgiveness parallels Arendt's view, although with divergent areas of focus. Like the turn that Arendt attributes to Jesus, Jankélévitch argues that forgiveness "forgives the man insofar as he is a man, and not with regard to this or that" (1962/2005, p. 95). This is to say, forgiveness is a human thing with a particular history that is a necessary condition of all action. In this line of thinking, he argues that what is "inexcusable is in fact not unforgivable; and that the incomprehensible is not unforgivable, either! When a crime can neither be justified, nor explained, nor even understood...there is no longer anything else to do but to forgive" (p. 106). This is where his argument diverges from Arendt's. For Arendt, what is without comprehension and understanding is precisely radical evil, which cannot be forgiven—or punished, for that matter—for these very reasons. However, what Jankélévitch means by that which is "inexcusable" is much closer to what Arendt (1958/1998) refers to as "trespasses," and shares with the latter the character of something like that of a sin for which repentance leads to absolution. The general character of forgiving, for Jankélévitch, is that of a "hyperbolic forgiveness...that forgives without reasons" and even "renounces justice itself" (1962/2005, p. 119). At the center of such acts is a selfless person who asks for and wants nothing in return.

Jankélévitch's (1962/2005; 1996) negative thesis, however, takes on a much different and decisive tone. Closer to what Arendt refers to as "radical evil," Jankélévitch speaks of that which is unforgivable as a "meta-empirical impossibility," as that which defies and stands in contradistinction to an original act of creation. It is that which eliminates the possibility of grace and inspiration.^{vi} Jankélévitch acknowledges that there is an infinite debate to be had about what falls into this category of activity, but the Holocaust is one manifestation of wickedness that is most certainly at the heart of the concept. In a work that follows his early treatise on forgiveness, Jankélévitch (1996) turns to an explicit discussion of the Holocaust and describes why it is unforgivable.^{vii} Jankélévitch describes crimes against humanity as "crimes against the human essence or, if you will, against the 'hominity' of human beings in general" (p. 555). Such action creates a meta-empirical impossibility in the sense that it has the quality of extermination; it does not allow life, but rather seeks to attack it at the most fundamental level. He draws a parallel between the

Inquisitors [who], by annihilating the heretics with exterminating fire, suppressed the Other, which existed only by some inexplicable inadvertence of God, and thus claimed to accomplish the divine will, and the Germans, who by annihilating the accursed race in the ovens of the crematoria, radically suppressed the existence of those who should not have existed. And thus the sadists who made soap from the cadavers of [t]he extermination of

the Jews is the product of pure wickedness, of *ontological* wickedness, of the most diabolical and gratuitous wickedness that history has ever known. (p. 556)

The meta-empirical impossibility of forgiveness in the face of this annihilating violence arises from two related sources. First, Jankélévitch (1996) argues that “everyone is free to pardon the offenses that he has personally suffered if he chooses to, but those others, what right does he have to pardon them?” (p. 569). And so those who have perished in the crematoria are precisely the only people who, according to Jankélévitch, can pardon their murderers, forgiveness is impossible.^{viii} A second, related dimension of this argument is that events such as the Holocaust, quite literally “deprive forgiveness of its daily bread” (1962/2005, p. 158) in their annihilation of human being. The impossibility of these conditions for forgiveness in the aftermath of the Holocaust lead Jankélévitch to argue that “pardoning died in the death camps” (p. 567) along with the victims who perished there.

An additional dimension of the impossibility of forgiving in the context of the Holocaust, according to Jankélévitch (1996), is simply that no one has ever asked for forgiveness for its atrocities. He shares with Arendt (1958/1998) a reading of the biblical account that requires that one ask for forgiveness as a necessary precondition for such a grant. This is a historically important step, in Jankélévitch’s view, because it symbolizes a memory of the wrong without simply letting it pass into the private hell of forgotten suffering. He likens forgiving without being asked to the process of forgetting, which insofar as it “overwhelms everything and the desperate intermittent protestations of memory is not a fair fight; in advising forgetfulness, the proponents of pardoning thus recommend something that does not need to be recommended. The forgetful will take care of that themselves” (p. 571). Although Jankélévitch situates this view of forgiveness in the particular case of the Holocaust, which he sees as not just one barbarous act amongst others, but rather barbarity in its most heinous form, he does so by drawing upon claims that are applicable across a spectrum of activity most generally defined as crimes against humanity.

3. Forgiveness as Horizon

For both Arendt and Jankélévitch, forgiveness is not only possible but objectively necessary, in some sense, for the social world of human beings. Without the capacity to forgive the trespasses of mundane action, Arendt (1958/1998) argues, we would be bound to, and never be able to move beyond, our first act. In a similar fashion, Jankélévitch (1962/2005) understands forgiveness as that which allows us to deal with injustice without resorting to vengeance. Both thinkers importantly posit an absolute limit of action—“radical evil” for Arendt and “meta-empirical impossibility” for Jankélévitch—beyond which forgiveness is a fundamental impossibility. Although they differ in their descriptions of the conditions that bring about this limit, they are both sure that such a limit exists and that we have encountered it in the Camps, if nowhere else.

Jacques Derrida (2001a; 2001b) addresses both views in his account of forgiveness as a horizon of knowledge characterized by *aporia*. In order to grasp what Derrida means by this, it is first

necessary to consider what an “aporia” is. At stake in the word is a

nonpassage, or rather from the experience of nonpassage, the experience of what happens [*se passe*] and is fascinating [*passionne*] in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such. It should be a matter of [*devrait y aller du*] what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where *it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem* [original italics], a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves. (Derrida, 1993, p. 12)

This notion of aporia is important to Derrida’s discussion of forgiveness because it situates, prior to the particularities of context, the condition for the im/possibility of forgiveness; this is to say that aporia, the experience of nonpassage in our approach of the other, is the interminable experience of “any event of decision or of responsibility” (p. 16). As a horizon of knowledge characterized by aporia, forgiveness is a type of irreducible presentation that never presents itself to consciousness or existence. To further develop what Derrida means by this we must turn to an example.

The aporia of forgiveness that Derrida (2001a) describes concerns that of giving, of being rendered

incapable of giving enough, or of being hospitable enough, of being present enough to the present I give, and to the welcome that I offer, such that I think, I am even certain of this, I always have to be forgiven, to ask forgiveness for not giving enough, for never offering or welcoming enough. (p. 22)

This moment of knowing that one never gives enough has yet another extreme or becomes more extreme “when one must ask forgiveness, on the contrary, for giving, forgiveness for what one gives, which can become a poison, a weapon, an affirmation of sovereignty, indeed of mastery” (p. 22). Derrida is here alluding to his study of the Maussian gift presented in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (1992). In an inconspicuous, unnumbered fold at the back of this book is a short allegory titled “Counterfeit Money” authored by Charles Baudelaire that tells the story of the gift in brief, and upon which Derrida configures his argument. Baudelaire recounts an event in which he and a friend have just left a tobacconist when they encounter a beggar to whom the friend gives a large contribution. Out of appreciation for the generosity displayed by his friend, Baudelaire remarks “You are right; next to the pleasure of feeling surprise, there is none greater than to cause a surprise.” The coin given by the friend, as he finds out, however, is a counterfeit; a false coin that could well land the beggar in jail or be the “germ for several day’s wealth.” Upon the friend’s reply “Yes, you are right; there is no sweeter pleasure than to surprise a man by giving him more than he hopes for,” Baudelaire realizes that his friend’s intention was “to do a good deed while at the same time making a good deal; to earn forty cents and the heart of God; to win paradise economically; in short, to pick up gratis the certificate of a charitable man.” The

act of for-giving, of giving one's forgiveness in the sense of a gift that is perceived and thus received as a gift is, for Derrida (2001a), a possibility that cannot be eliminated in any event of the decision and the responsibility to forgive. Our inability to pass beyond this possibility, which is also, coincidentally, the impossibility of forgiveness, renders forgiveness, if there is such a thing, aporetic.

Another example of an aporia Derrida (2001a) sees entangled in the question of forgiveness concerns the possibility of asking, in good faith and in line with the meaning of the act, a group or community for forgiveness. In the instance of Baudelaire's allegory, should his friend decide to seek forgiveness for his inhospitable gift of a counterfeit coin, he would surely entreat the beggar to whom he gave the coin. But in the very real circumstances of severe human rights abuses of whom does one ask for forgiveness? In other words, can one ask forgiveness outside of, or beyond, a wrong done to a specific other? Derrida takes us to specific examples of society-wide attempts at something like forgiveness that ultimately result, in his view, in the presentation of "excuses to certain victims of the past, the episcopacy in Poland and Germany proceeding an examination of conscience at the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz; the attempt at reconciliation in South Africa" (p. 25). It is no coincidence that these examples appear next to one another because, as he notes, state sponsored attempts at forgiveness invariably take place against the historical-juridical concept of punishment established for the Nuremberg Trials in 1945. This is to say that although reconciliation in South Africa is an example of an alternative to the trial process, it remains bound to a state-sponsored political act that draws upon the judicial precedent established following World War Two. A dimension of this association is, in the spirit of the gift, an economic calculation that always remains open.

The distinction that Derrida (2001a) wants to draw between forgiveness and politically calculated projects of reconciliation is that forgiveness, in its essence, is unconditional forgiveness; forgiveness that, as Jankélévitch (1962/2005) suggests, is hyperbolic, that forgives that which is unforgivable and does so without compensation. Projects of reconciliation, as Derrida sees them, are conceptually unassimilable to forgiveness precisely for the reason that they ask wrongdoers to confess, and succeed in achieving this aim by granting amnesty, by giving one back his/her life, by giving the time that would otherwise be lost. But herein lies an important distinction that Derrida wishes to make concerning forgiveness. Richard Bernstein (2006) argues that, for Derrida, the finality of the type of forgiveness suggested by reconciliation produces an economy of conditional forgiveness whereby "everything that one takes to be forgivable" is lumped "into one category...[and]...does a great injustice to the variety, diversity, and subtle differences among different deeds and persons that I judge to be forgivable" (p. 401). The situatedness of judgments of forgiveness thus calls for an interminable deliberative process that interrogates the border between the forgivable and unforgivable as an unstable gap that remains in perpetual flux.

4. Reconciliation, Forgiveness, and the Event of Decision and of Responsibility

Exchanges concerning the place of forgiveness in reconciliation continue to generate possibilities that operate outside of retributivist legal frameworks. The views of critics—especially those responding to the justifications for, and the accomplishments of, South Africa's Truth and

Reconciliation Commission—who find forgiveness to be wrongheaded and historically dangerous, as well as those who embrace a strong connection between acts of reconciliation and forgiveness, share in common an unduly constrained understanding of forgiveness. In part, constraint is traceable to a generalized belief that forgiveness lies in commonsensical experiences of apology and acceptance. For others, Derrida especially, the notion of a normative politics founded on forgiveness threatens to destroy the diversity of phenomena rendered forgivable or unforgivable in favor of an institutionalized limit. Those who reject forgiveness as an impossibility present it primarily through a deficit discourse that emphasizes the detriments of distortion, economic calculation and, ultimately, epistemological determination.^{ix} For this collection of reasons, the dangers of invoking the language of forgiveness in transitional political contexts is, for many, to invoke forgetting as a solution to history's most heinous crimes and the criminals who perpetrate them.

If we look to the concept and process of forgiveness as it arises within the discourse of the TRC, we see approaches that situate the concept in ways opposed to the idealized problematics envisioned by some. Instead of finality, forgiveness, for transformational figures, such as Tutu, takes on the quality of a beginning, rather than as a point of historical resolution, which is best described as a processual view of forgiveness. Its possibility flows from the fundamental relationality of human being, which he takes as the essence of existence to the degree that “we can be human only in fellowship, in community, in *koinonia*, in peace” (Tutu, 1984/1997, p. 121). Forgiveness thus takes the shape of relational renewal, of a rehabilitation of what has been broken between victim and perpetrator. Further supporting a processual account of the TRC's integration of forgiveness into the TRC's proceedings is the actual goal of the TRC. Tutu notes that the commission's official mandate was to “*promote* not to *achieve*” the worthwhile objectives of national unity, reconciliation, and forgiveness (Tutu, 1999, p. 165). From this perspective, Derrida's concerns about the dangers of epistemological determination of the boundaries of the forgivable appear lessened on the scale of the TRC's national political project when cast in this light.

To *promote* forgiveness and to *declare* forgiveness on the behalf of a polity represent two very different approaches. The declaration of forgiveness on behalf of others has the effect of constraining agency, of making an epistemological determination in the name of those spoken for. And it is surely this mode of forgiveness that Derrida (2001a; 2001b) envisions at the forefront of his concerns. These concerns are, however, transformed in Tutu's account. The focus on *promoting* reflection on rather than *determining* what is forgivable is to declare “our faith in the future of a relationship and in the capacity of the wrongdoer to make a new beginning on a course that will be different from the one that us caused the wrong” (Tutu, 1999, p. 273). Promoting individual acts of forgiveness takes on the quality of maintaining hope for the repair of intersubjective relationality in ways that larger reconciliation processes cannot directly accomplish. When put in the very practical frame of how citizens in transitional societies move through the experience of trauma, the possibility of a future unimaginable in the present provides nourishment for the decidedly human necessity of hope precisely at the point of its destruction.

In and between these perspectives on the place of forgiveness in reconciliation is a considerable amount of conceptual and lexical instability. If we take, for instance, the differences among

Arendt's (1958/1998), Jankélévitch's (1962/2005; 1996), Derrida's (2001a; 2001b), and Tutu's (1984/1997; 1994; 1999) views, we end up with positions that, if taken to their philosophical extremes, are quite literally incommensurable. Yet to those whose primary concern is to create time for peace in a historical moment that is outside of time, when the thinking being is annihilated, any notion of forgiveness enters an inviolable realm of the wound that forgiveness aims to address. What is thus called for is a way of thinking about forgiveness that bridges the strengths of these positions and heeds their cautions.

One dimension of forgiveness that is characteristic of the four views referenced above is the need for persistent reflection on the boundary between the forgivable and the unforgivable. As a place to begin conceptualizing the concept of the forgivable, this orientation suggests two possible contributions. First, it makes possible an understanding of forgiveness as a horizon of thinking rather than a prefigured category. Second, it leaves open a path to think and experience hope for the future. Together these contributions draw upon the instability that inheres in the meaning of forgiveness and directs that instability toward the reparation of relationality. Rather than treating forgiveness as a determinative process, the persistence of reflection exposes the process as one of subjective feeling. This kind of reflection, following Derrida, might be aptly described as aporetic, to the extent that the hope of forgiveness only guarantees a hope for a future that may never come, but for which we remain vigilant.

A secondary dimension of forgiveness opened up by the first is that unconditional forgiveness is, strictly speaking, never a possibility if for no other reason than that forgiveness is always conditioned by time. In preserving reflection as a necessity of forgiveness, we must also see this preservation as an opportunity to call radically into question the desirability, and even possibility, of some pure, immediate experience of forgiveness. Even if such an experience were possible, it would defy the fundamental character of forgiveness by transforming it into a definitive act, rather than a process requiring continual renewal. One specific problematic that this observation brings to the fore is that of judging the efficacy and overall value of forgiveness as it occurs alongside reconciliation processes. Measures of reconciliation and forgiveness, are, however, elusive. In the same spirit that forgiveness calls for a persistence in reflection on the limit of the unforgivable, it also calls for persistent, rather than definitive, reflection on the possibilities of constituting a societal discourse of forgiveness at a practical level. The turn to functional approaches open up space for understanding the diversity of forgiveness (acts, practices, conceptualizing, etc.), rather than relying solely on a single, limited notion of the concept.^x

Any response to the question "*Is there such a thing as forgiveness?*" is thus situated between affective experiences of hope and faith that hold open the possibility of forgiveness, and the lack of a determinative moment that marks the end of the process. This tension is complicated further when forgiveness is promoted alongside reconciliation projects and when third parties take an explicit role in the process. While it is certainly true that one cannot simply entreat an other or a collective to forgive, it also seems immanently possible to preserve the judgment of forgiveness from becoming completely heterogeneous to the political process of reconciliation. If we follow Arendt (2005) in asserting that "the meaning of a thing, as opposed to its end, is always contained within the thing itself, and the meaning of an activity can exist only as long as the

activity continues” (Arendt, 2005, p. 193), the place of forgiveness in reconciliation is not a final action, but a process that ceases to be the moment it is deemed complete. Forgiveness is, instead, a gap held open at the point of judgment; its possibility held open by a continuous process of decision and responsibility. As a type of action, forgiveness is no less vulnerable to the same lack of control that accompanies that which is new, in that we can neither predict nor control what follows.

ⁱ This article is part of a larger ongoing project that investigates the practical and philosophical relation of forgiveness and reconciliation. My current research focuses on using the philosophical framework I establish here to assess concrete practices of forgiveness as they are institutionalized within peace movements in transitional societies.

ⁱⁱ Arendt (2005) argues that the biological source of politics arises as part of an interconnection between the “assumption that there is something political *in* man that belongs to his essence” and the belief in a “monotheistic concept of God, in whose likeness man is said have been created. On that basis, there can, of course, be only *man*, while *men* become a more or less successful repetition of the same” (p. 95). This orientation toward the fundamental character of the political brings politics into the Western creation myth by locating an origin in the concrete facticity of human being’s existence with regard to natural, biological life.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have chosen to leave gender exclusive language unmodified in my quotation of sources to best reflect context and maintain readability. I support the continued struggle for the adoption of inclusive language and thus maintain that effort in surrounding text.

^{iv} This view parallels Peter Fenves’s (2001) argument that in the beginning we are confronted by the fact that we neither know what we want to communicate, nor that we want to communicate something other than that which we do indeed communicate.

^v It is relevant to note that Arendt’s (1958/1998) view of forgiveness is deeply invested in the biblical origins she traces through a multitude of passages from the Bible. See especially pp. 239-240.

^{vi} Jankélévitch’s (1962/2005) use of “meta-empirical” draws upon a broader technical development of the concept in relation to the “empirical.” For further reference see Smith (1957); Llewelyn (1998); and Lacoste (2004).

^{vii} Jankélévitch’s first work on forgiveness titled *Le Pardon* and translated as *Forgiveness* constitutes his primary treatise on the subject, which his later work, *L’Imprescriptible*, builds upon with specific discussion of the Holocaust. The portion of latter work which I quote from is confined to a chapter titled “Pardonner?,” which is translated as “Should we pardon them?” and

appeared in *Critical Inquiry* under that title.

^{viii} The French expression “*pardon*” and its variants “*pardonnez*” and “*pardonne*” approximate the meaning of the English expression “forgive” and its variant “forgiveness.” See Derrida (2001a), especially p. 24, for further reference on the French-English translation of the term.

^{ix} For further discussion of forgiveness in the tradition Derrida (2001a) affirms, see Kristeva (1989; 2002); Nelson (2002); and Weigel (2002).

^x See Borer (2004) for additional details on the problem of empirical claims concerning the efficacy of transitional processes.

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