

Why Forgive? In Search of a Pure Motive

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Abstract

In conversation with some of the prominent voices in recent continental and analytical philosophy, including Jacques Derrida, Vladimir Jankélévitch, and Charles Griswold, and theologians Charles Williams and Nigel Biggar, this paper seeks to articulate what a pure motive for forgiveness might look like. What guarantees the genuineness of forgiveness and how can it be spoiled by false motives? What are some of the limits of forgiveness and how might the prospect of full reconciliation be problematic? In addressing these questions I will propose an important amendment to the philosophically deconstructed forgiveness of Derrida by introducing a distinction between an external motive and an internal one. I will argue that, even if full reconciliation is not always possible or desirable, forgiveness is ordered to reconciliation with the other. Just as love says ‘I love her simply because she is herself’, so, forgiveness continues to love, or resurrects love, in the face of hurt and guilt ‘simply because she is herself (her guilty self)’.

Introduction

The task we set ourselves in this paper is to identify what is a pure motive for the offer of forgiveness. Like with the giving of a gift, many of us will tend to think that the offer of forgiveness should be made freely, with ‘no strings attached’. There are numerous ways in which my motive for giving can become impure. For example, I can give hoping to elicit something in return. I can give in order to be admired by others, or in order to prove my superiority. When it comes to forgiveness, my intentions can be clouded in similar ways. We will conduct this exploration in conversation with Jacques Derrida, whose deconstruction of ‘forgiveness’ attempts to take certain commonly held assumptions about the concept to their logical conclusion. Then with the help of Vladimir Jankélévitch, Charles Williams, Charles Griswold, and Nigel Biggar, we will trace an amended vision of forgiveness which finds its primary motive in the other.

The Non-Motive of Derrida

Derrida’s account of forgiveness takes the ‘no-strings-attached’ intuition to its extreme. For him, any finality¹ whatsoever undermines the purity of forgiveness. “[E]ach time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or Redemption, reconciliation, salvation)... then the ‘forgiveness’ is not pure – nor is its concept.” (Derrida, 2002, pp. 31-32). How does having a finality make forgiveness impure? A finality or end suggests that forgiveness is being instrumentalised - used as a means to an end. It means that forgiveness becomes a strategy or a tool, offered not for its own sake, but for the sake of something else. Is this necessarily a problem? It is certainly easy to imagine examples of finalities that would cast a shadow over the whole enterprise of forgiveness. Since I was so gracious in forgiving you

¹ Throughout this argument I will employ the term ‘finality’ to designate the intended outcome of an action, and will use it interchangeably with ‘motive’, ‘goal’, ‘end’, and ‘aim’.

today I expect you to be equally generous in pardoning me tomorrow. In other words, my aim in pardoning you was to store up moral credits for myself. Or, this great act of forgiveness will show the world how kind-hearted I am. My aim in forgiving you was to establish a good reputation for myself. Or again, to pardon the offence is nothing to me, I will forgive and prove that I am the better man, that I am not petty like you. My motivation for forgiving was to show my superiority. In these cases forgiveness appears to have lost its original purity and become a vehicle for selfishness, vanity and pride. In so doing it loses its true character and therefore does not deserve to be called forgiveness. My gesture of forgiveness was empty. I used it simply as a means to achieve some other end, but that end turned the gesture of forgiveness into a lie.

The question that we must raise in response to Derrida is, how can a finality like reconciliation pollute the practice and concept of forgiveness? Is this not what forgiveness is ultimately for? Imagine I had a falling out with a friend – she cheated me, lied to me, and disrespected me. Then suppose I find it in my heart to forgive her. Am I to say to my friend, ‘I forgive you for what you have done, but I do not wish this forgiveness to restore our friendship’? Or again, am I to say, ‘Let the guilt of your crime be taken away but let us continue to treat one another as enemies’? Actually, Derrida does not counsel this. He would not “dare to object to the imperative of reconciliation.” (Derrida, 2002, p. 50). In fact, he has nothing against reconciliation, as such, nor any of the other aforementioned finalities. The point he is trying to make is that while these might be good things, they do not constitute pure forgiveness. He wants to distinguish forgiveness very clearly from these other things, so that, for example, the more an act aims at reconciliation, the less it is to be regarded as an act of forgiveness. Derrida is intent upon recognising the radical nature of forgiveness, to show that it stands out from all other moral acts.

Just as Derrida wants to separate forgiveness from any notion of finality, he also insists that pure forgiveness is without conditions. It is not, he asserts, a transaction in any shape or form. Forgiveness is a one-way movement. Therefore, he thinks it should not demand the repentance or reform of the guilty one, for to do so would make the act into a transaction. It would be to say, ‘I will not forgive until she comes to me and makes a sincere apology. She must cast herself down before me in sorrow before I agree to cast myself in the vulnerable position of forgiving, of relinquishing my right to hold anything against her.’ Again, Derrida does not think reform and repentance are things to be avoided. He simply wants to separate them from the notion of pure forgiveness. “Imagine”, he says,

...that I forgive on the condition that the guilty one repents, mends his ways, asks forgiveness, and thus would be changed by a new obligation, and that from then on he would no longer be exactly the same as the one who was found to be culpable. In this case, can one still speak of forgiveness? This would be too simple on both sides: one forgives someone other than the guilty one. (Derrida, 2002, pp. 38-39).

This line of thought calls to mind a comment of one of my past professors, crudely summarising the epistemology of Kant, that ‘you can’t eat an oyster’. That is, you cannot know a thing as it is in itself. The moment an oyster is placed in the mouth it begins to mix with the saliva, to be cut to pieces by the chewing teeth, before it finally enters the stomach and passes beyond any resemblance of its proper and original state. It was an oyster before, but now it has become something else. And so it seems you cannot eat an oyster, because the moment you try to eat it, it ceases to be the ‘pure’ oyster that it was. Similarly, Derrida asserts that you cannot forgive a sinner who has repented and reformed because the repentant and reformed one is not the same as the one who committed the offence. A process has already begun by which the guilty one,

the only true object of pure forgiveness, has been changed into something else, and is no longer a fitting candidate for forgiveness. The central claim that Derrida seems to be making here is that conditions such as repentance and moral reform detract from the purity of forgiveness because they take away the need for it. The more they are present, the less work there is for forgiveness to do. If the offence is a raging river, then repentance and reform are like stepping stones which make the great leap of forgiveness unnecessary.

We may wish to regard repentance and reform as parts of the process of forgiveness just as salivation and digestion are parts of the process of eating. But, for Derrida, pure forgiveness is a great leap – it is not a process but something spontaneous. This will be problematic if we want to think of forgiveness as a good that brings about a better state of affairs. For, if forgiveness is so one-sided that it leaves no room for anticipation or response from the guilty party, then it does not appear to achieve anything at all. In order to understand why Derrida insists so heavily on an unconditional and non-finalised ‘pure forgiveness’ we need to see what sort of offence he has in mind for forgiveness to overcome:

There could be, in effect, all sorts of proximity (where the crime is between people who know each other): language, neighbourhood, familiarity, even family, etc. But in order for evil to emerge, ‘radical evil’ and perhaps worse again, the unforgivable evil, the only one which would make the question of forgiveness emerge, it is necessary that at the most intimate of that intimacy an absolute hatred would come to interrupt the peace.
(Derrida, 2002, p. 49)

In light of this statement Derrida’s notion of pure forgiveness starts to make more sense. Derrida is drawing our attention to the very real fact that many of those who wrong us – especially those who are guilty of evil – are not basically decent people. And if forgiveness is

going to be available to victims of serious wrongs, it will often have to be directed toward nasty people who still pose the threat of future wrongdoing. And since it is a matter of ‘radical evil’ and ‘absolute hatred’ it should no longer surprise us that he wants to separate forgiveness from notions of repentance and reform. For Derrida, forgiveness is the very thing that comes into play when repentance and reform are not forthcoming.

What, then, does this pure forgiveness, this pardoning of radical evil, look like? “In order for there to be forgiveness”, says Derrida,

must one not forgive both the fault and the guilty *as such*, where the one and the other remain as irreversible as the evil, as evil itself, and being capable of repeating itself, unforgivably, without transformation, without amelioration, without repentance or promise? (Derrida, 2002, p. 39)

It is clear that for Derrida the act of pure forgiveness does not achieve anything outside of itself. The guilty one is forgiven, yes, but that forgiveness is not given in order to change her, and it is not given on the condition that she shows remorse for what happened or makes a commitment to avoid a repeat of the injury in the future. Derrida (2002) transcends the question of what an offer of this kind of forgiveness could possibly mean. “[P]ure and unconditional forgiveness, in order to have its own meaning, must have no ‘meaning’, no finality, even no intelligibility. It is a madness of the impossible.” (p. 45). In other words, if the notion of forgiveness is to be reserved for the pardoning of radical evil, then it must be considered meaningless, aimless, unintelligible, and indeed, ‘impossible’.

Pushing Beyond the Non-Motive

At this stage in the discussion it is worth turning our eyes back to the original question regarding purity of motive. What is the right motive for forgiveness? According to Derrida, as we have seen, pure forgiveness does not carry any motive. However, there may well be a way of moving beyond this conception of pure forgiveness set up by Derrida. It will be very interesting to compare his position to that of Vladimir Jankélévitch, whose philosophical writings on forgiveness in the wake of the Nazi regime were of great interest to Derrida. On the question of motive, Jankélévitch appears to make the same point as Derrida when he says that:

forgiveness forgives because it forgives, and again it is similar to love in this respect: for love too loves because it loves... And we say again, the lover loves his beloved because it is he and because it is she: – as if that were a reason for loving! But yes, it is a reason for loving; for a reason without reasons is the most profound of all.
(Jankélévitch, 2005, p. 147)

This means, we can suppose, that forgiveness has no external motive at all. And yet it is important to note that these words of Jankélévitch enable us to make a distinction that is not found in the reflections of Derrida. The lover loves the beloved, not arbitrarily, but “because it is he and because it is she”, and therefore we might say that there is a motive for loving after all. It is only that the motive and the object of love are the same. The finality of love *is* the beloved. Why do I love her? I love her simply because she is herself. It seems, then, that while love has no external motive, it does have a motive that is internal to the act of love itself – the beloved. Analogously, the words of Jankélévitch may permit us to distinguish between external motives for forgiveness that would render it less pure, and an internal motive that does not compromise its purity. Following this logic, the internal motive for forgiveness *is* the guilty

person. Just as love says, 'I love my beloved because it is she', forgiveness says, 'I forgive her because she is her (guilty) self.' This would permit us to speak of forgiveness as love that is sustained, or perhaps, love that is resurrected in the face of hurt and guilt – even in the face of Derrida's 'radical evil'.

This identification of an internal motive enables us to overcome the dividing wall between forgiveness and reconciliation erected by Derrida. If forgiveness is love sustained in the face of the rupture caused by wrongdoing, then by its very nature it appears to be aimed at restoring the relationship, or what Milbank (2003) calls "that order of free unlimited exchange of charity which was interrupted by sin." (p. 57). Such a view also eliminates the need to separate forgiveness from repentance and reform. These may or may not be necessary in order for forgiveness to take place. In fact, they may take place only after the offer of forgiveness is made. In any case, the point is not that forgiveness precludes any sort of transaction but that it is the act that re-establishes the sort of relationship which will allow for a free and loving interaction. The chief concern of the forgiver is not to maintain a pure motive. Derrida is right to point out that forgiveness is not concerned with (external) motives. Nor is forgiveness concerned with performing a pure act of forgiveness. The concern of forgiveness, rather, is to break down the barrier that separates the victim from the guilty one. This pursuit of reconciliation, as I am putting it forward here, is not an external motive. Rather, it is a motive that operates at the interior of forgiveness. It is like the chicken that crossed the road in order to get to the other side. The aim of getting to the other side does not make the chicken less of a road-crossing purist. Getting to the other side is not some external consequence of crossing the road like getting a promotion might be an external motivation for being friendly with the boss. Rather, getting to the other side is what it means to cross the road (successfully). In a similar way, the reconciling of enemies is not an external effect of forgiveness. Rather,

assuming it is both offered and received, this is what forgiveness directly accomplishes. Reconciliation is central to the meaning of forgiveness, and so, does not compromise its purity.

False Motives

Having proposed the desire for reconciliation as an internal motive for forgiveness it is worth spending time looking at what might constitute a contaminating, external motive. In Charles Williams' classic text, *The Forgiveness of Sins*, he identifies three such distortions as he reflects on the temptations of Christ in the Gospel according to Matthew (4:1-11). The temptation to turn stone into bread is interpreted here as an image of the false motivation of comfort:

The first temptation of Forgiveness then is to procure, through its own operation, some immediate comfort. ... Our natural hunger desires immediate comfort. Yet any haste after this comfort is apt to destroy the whole act of forgiveness. (Williams, 1942, pp. 52-53)

Love of comfort becomes the substitute for love of the guilty one. And so the rupture remains hidden under a veneer of cordiality. The would-be forgiver lacks the courage to properly address the evil that has taken place and to make herself vulnerable before the offender.

The second temptation is linked to pride. It is relying too heavily on one's own nobility of soul, on one's own power to forgive. It hastens to take the initiative and grant pardon to the wretched wrongdoer before she has a chance to repent. "‘Cast thyself down,’ the devil murmurs, ‘the angels will support you; be noble and forgive. You will have done the right thing; you will have behaved better than the enemy.’" (Williams, 1942, p. 54). Here, the desire to take the moral high ground takes the place of love of the guilty one. The rupture is actually deepened, for this feigning of forgiveness is really a form of revenge. It is a subtle retaliation

against the original misdeed, clothed in humility but designed to humble the offender and exalt the victim. In so doing it bypasses that middle plain on which the two may have met and been reconciled. This distortion becomes a danger especially when forgiveness is severed from reconciliation. In the absence of a genuine finality outside of the self, the love of self naturally comes to fill the void. If the main concern is reduced to 'my pure motive' then the successful act of 'forgiveness' is just another occasion for self-congratulating smugness. Williams interprets the third temptation as the seeking of freedom for its own sake:

In some sense Forgiveness is promised the kingdoms of the world; and how? Precisely by being set free from grudges and resentments, from bitterness and strife. This certainly is the proper nature and the proper result of Forgiveness, but... Forgiveness which *primarily* desired this would not be forgiveness at all... one would be completely free, one would no longer be hurt by others. To be, or to desire to be, free from being hurt by others, is to be, or to desire to be, free from the co-inheritance of all human souls, which it was the express intention of Christ to redeem. (Williams, 1942, pp. 54-55)

This distortion of forgiveness is a danger for the one motivated to forgive for therapeutic reasons. It is evident in popular psychology and the wisdom of the talk-show. Just as weight loss offers greater freedom of physical movement, forgiveness gives greater freedom of movement in the moral sphere. It helps one to 'move on' from failed relationships, to climb out of the pit of heartbreak and bitterness and to face the world again.

Lewis Smedes' *Forgive and Forget* (2007) is a good example of the kind of therapeutic approach to forgiveness that we are talking about here. According to Smedes, readers of *Forgive and Forget* discover:

that the person who does the forgiving gets the first benefit from doing it. They may have heard that forgiving is a hard duty God lays on Christian people. Then they discover that forgiving is an opportunity for injured people to heal their own wounds. They discover that forgiving is something that happens inside the injured person's mind, and that sometimes the person they forgive never even hears about it. That if we wait to forgive people until they say they are sorry we make ourselves hostages to the very person who wronged us to begin with. They discover that forgiving does not turn us into doormats. And that when we forgive, we set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner we set free was us. (Smedes, 2007, Foreword, p. x)

Here in just a few sentences we are given a picture of forgiveness that appears to relate exclusively to the wellbeing of the victim. In the act of forgiving, the forgiver benefits first, achieves self-healing, is set free, and avoids remaining a hostage. Most astonishing of all is that these benefits can all be attained from the comfort of one's own mind. The guilty one need not be involved at all except as the absent object of our forgiving thoughts. Presumably this means that the guilty one need not benefit either. Such a conception represents a one-dimensional view of forgiveness because it occurs solely within the forgiving party.

Earthly Limits of Reconciliation

Even if, while rejecting these external motives, we consider reconciliation as the proper internal motive of forgiveness, we must acknowledge at the same time that such an outcome may not always be possible or desirable. We need to allow for cases, on the one hand, where intimate friendship cannot be restored and, on the other hand, when the offence is committed by a stranger and so there is no prior relationship to be restored. For an example of the latter, let us

say I am assaulted by a stranger. He strikes me from behind, snatches my wallet and runs off. There is no relationship, no contact, except for the fleeting moment of the offence. Now suppose he is caught and I have the chance to meet him face to face, what would forgiveness accomplish in this case? We are talking here about what it would mean to be reconciled with the stranger, with whom I had no previous relationship. On the other hand, it is not as if the stranger and I have nothing at all between us. The stranger is related to me already as a potential friend. I cannot deny that those who I now call my friends were all once strangers to me – that they were once only potential friends. And so there is something to be restored in forgiving the stranger. By forgiving him I restore him to that status of potential friend, though, of course, he will have some work to do in order to win my full trust.

Aside from the question of the stranger there is also the question of what motivates forgiveness when full reconciliation is not possible or not desirable. Charles Griswold (2007), by distinguishing between different understandings of reconciliation, offers a thoroughly reasonable answer:

If “reconciliation” is taken to mean “acceptance,” in the minimal sense of non-interference, then we may say that forgiveness may lead to it. But if reconciliation means “affirmation” – the relevant sense of which here would be something like friendship and support or a renewal of any previous ties of affection – then there is no reason to believe that forgiveness must lead to “affirmative reconciliation” as one might call it. Such an outcome might be neither warranted nor desirable. For example, one could forgive one’s partner for infidelity but no longer wish to remain together as a couple; forgiveness does not necessarily restore the love that was destroyed by infidelity, even if it does restore a certain level of mutual respect, and dissipate resentment and guilt. (Griswold, 2007, pp. 110-111)

When the desire to restore the relationship to its previous fullness is absent, as it can be in the collapse of a marriage, the result of forgiveness may just be a peaceful distance. The fear of a repeat offence might prevent the restoration of intimacy and trust, and therefore a very minimal form of reconciliation may be all that is sought. As Biggar (2008) affirms:

[t]he oft-used word “reconciliation” is one that connotes a certain completeness, a certain conclusiveness, a certain closure. It conjures up the classic image of the reconciling embrace... Now I do not doubt that there may be moments of completion, but most of the time... reconciliation remains frustratingly incomplete... So ours is an age of compromise and much unfinished business... (Biggar, 2008, p. 568)

Conclusion

In this paper on the proper motive for forgiveness we began by exploring Derrida’s conception of pure forgiveness and by identifying its underlying logic, we showed why it is sharply separated from notions of repentance, reform, and reconciliation. Then, with the help of Jankélévitch, we were able to establish a distinction between external and internal motives. We argued, against Derrida, that forgiveness is directed towards reconciliation, which operates within forgiveness as an internal motive. Having arrived at a more satisfactory response to our question we then spent time exploring some false motives that arise when the desire to be reconciled with the other is lost or replaced with some other ultimate motive. We ended with a brief look at the limits of reconciliation as the intended outcome of forgiveness. In the case of the stranger we concluded that there is still a disposition, the openness to friendship, albeit unrealised, that forgiveness can serve to restore. We also acknowledged that there are cases

when relationships are damaged seemingly beyond repair, and that sometimes the most that can be achieved is a peaceful distance.

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