
Imperfect forgiveness

The pragmaticity, prudentiality and ethicality of human forgiveness

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I. Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to approach the act and process of forgiveness as an imperfect human ability for peace, exploring the pragmaticity, prudentiality and ethicality of human forgiveness before moral wrongs.

To conduct my research, firstly I will assume the epistemological turn that has been developed at the UNESCO Chair of Philosophy for Peace from Universitat Jaume I. This epistemological turn means we no longer work with a negative definition of peace but a positive one, that is, we do not define peace as the absence of violence, but as the presence of social justice.

Secondly, I will establish a dialogue between the Philosophy for Peace approach and Christian theology as a key element for grasping a deeper understanding of the act and process of forgiveness, since this imperfect human ability of forgiveness has been a core theme of the Christian religion during the last two thousand years.

It is argued that imperfect human forgiveness is pragmatically, prudentially and ethically adequate when we need to address different moral wrongs in different contexts of violence. Therefore, fostering forgiveness in those settings may help us to build more peaceful societies, as in the same way that we have learnt to hurt each other, we can learn to forgive one another.

Key words: Christian narrative, divine forgiveness, epistemological turn, human ability, human forgiveness, imperfect forgiveness, imperfect peace, moral wrongs, philosophy for peace, post-conflict.

II. Introduction

Forgiveness is a mysterious and complex concept. It is difficult to define because it is part of popular culture and has different connotations depending on the context in which it is used. It is one of those topics that academic researchers from varying fields have been studying in recent years, precisely because forgiveness places itself across different disciplines, or using Wittgenstein's terminology, we could say *forgiveness is uncircumscribed* (Bash, 2015), without definitive boundaries. Therefore, to grasp some of its different implications it is helpful to approach forgiveness from multiple perspectives such as philosophical, psychological, political or theological.¹ In this paper we will consider what a Philosophy-for-Peace perspective may contribute to forgiveness, by defining

¹ I have approached the political aspects of forgiveness in a recent book (Jiménez, 2017), and some aspects of the psychology of forgiveness in another publication (Jiménez, 2018).

forgiveness as an imperfect human ability for peace.² We will also look at contributions from Christian theology, since Christianity has been imparting the importance of forgiveness from its inception, following the message of Jesus of Nazareth.

In this regard, the Valencian theologian José Ignacio González Faus (1993: 180) states: «forgiveness enters into human history through Christianity».³ The philosopher Amelia Valcárcel (2010: 62) also stresses that the greatest contribution of Christianity is the relevance it give to forgiveness, something missed in the Ancient World, a world regulated by the idea of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’ and by the definition of justice made by Plato: ‘Justice is treating friends well and enemies badly’.

It is important to notice that although Christian theology does not have the same epistemic status as natural sciences, other epistemologies are possible, such as those that are based on human intersubjectivity (Comins and Albert, 2012: 6) or reformed epistemologies (Plantinga, 2000). Furthermore, Christian theologians would defend that they find certain epistemic validity in the historical figure of Jesus, who would be the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1: 15, Bible).

Combining the philosophical approach and the Christian perspective we will see that human forgiveness, although imperfect, is pragmatically, prudentially and ethically adequate to face moral wrongs such as different types of violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990).⁴

III. Objectives

We think it would be helpful to reconstruct a normative framework from where the competence or ability of imperfect forgiveness can be rebuilt,⁵ so we could understand and foster forgiveness in post-conflict violent settings. In this regard, I propose that fostering forgiveness can create a more peaceful world, where the safety of our future will not be based on the quantity and quality of our weapons, but on the quality of our relations.

Due to the limited space to develop a normative framework for the act and process of forgiveness, my main objective in this paper is to examine some of the qualities of this imperfect human ability for

² Human forgiveness would be imperfect in the same way that human peace is imperfect; that means it is unfinished and in a continuous movement (Muñoz, 2001: 21). Human forgiveness imperfection is linked to eschatological or final orientation, since only at the moment of death does our forgiving (or not) of another reach a point of perfection and irreversibility (Voiss, 2015: 386).

³ Own translation.

⁴ The Norwegian author Johan Galtung writes about three types of violence: direct, structural and cultural. This categorization has been widely accepted in the field of Peace Studies.

⁵ The philosopher Glen Pettigrove (2012) has been working on a normative framework for forgiveness during the last years, but as he acknowledges, this normative framework is still in its first stages.

peace, such its pragmaticality, prudentiality, and ethicality, in order to encourage its implementation before moral wrongs performed by individual or collective agents.

IV. Material and methods

To conduct my research and to achieve my objectives I will use different bibliographic resources, assuming the epistemological turn of the UNESCO Chair of Philosophy for Peace (Martínez Guzmán, 2000, 2001, 2005),⁶ which defines peace not just as the absence of direct violence such as wars or terrorism (Galtung, 1969), but as the presence of social justice. Moreover, the Chair defend we have human competences or abilities for peace, such as tenderness and care (Comins Mingol, 2003, 2009) or forgiveness and reconciliation (Jiménez Robles, 2009, 2016), among others.

We will bring together the philosophical and the theological approach in regards to forgiveness, and we will explore three different qualities of this imperfect human ability for peace.

V. Findings

The pragmaticality of forgiveness

Human relations are fragile; we hurt and are hurt by others easily. Our natural reactions in the face of violence are to run away or contra-violence, when we choose the latter option, either as individual or collective agents, we fall into spirals of violence which lead us into increased hurt and pain. In order to overcome this reality we need a third option; neither running away nor contra-violence, but using different imperfect human abilities for peace such as forgiveness.

We learn from Hanna Arendt (1958) about the potential of forgiveness to break the cycles of violence that undermine human development, since the author depicts forgiveness as a human faculty that allows us to undo the irreversibility of our violent actions.

Considering we live in a world where violent conflicts are commonplace (Fisas, 2015; Pettersson and Wallensteen, 2015; Philpott, 2012; Rogers, 2016), learning about the imperfect human ability of forgiveness, and promoting it, could be one of the greatest contributions of Christianity for our current turbulent time, because as Hannah Arendt (1958: 238) stated:

⁶ The UNESCO Chair of Philosophy for Peace was established in 1999 at Universitat Jaume I (Spain) in partnership with the University of Granada (Spain), the University of Innsbruck (Austria), the University Federal of Sergipe (Brazil) and the University Autónoma of the State of Mexico (Toluca, Mexico), in order to promote constant work on the building and dissemination of cultures to create peace.



The discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth. The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense.

The prudentiality of forgiveness

When victims forgive they desist resenting the wrongdoers. In that sense, in individual or group post-conflict violent contexts, imperfect human forgiveness would be prudentially adequate by liberating the victims from their anger and resentment, and by strengthening the resilience of the victims for the future.

The first person to identify the impact of forgiveness on the health of the victim was the theologian, philosopher and preacher Joseph Butler in a couple of sermons delivered in 1718 in London (Butler, 1970). He was inspired by Matthew 5: 43-44 from the Bible, and he pointed out that forgiveness is the forswearing of revenge, which would be a consequence of resentment. A number of psychologists (Enright, 2001, 2012; McCullough, 2008; Worthington, 2003, 2005, 2009) and philosophers (Digeser, 2001, 2004; Griswold, 2007; Murphy, 2003; Strawson, 1980) who have been researching forgiveness have accepted this point suggested by Joseph Butler 300 years ago. For example, the psychologist Everett Worthington (2003: 22) writes a few provoking words on resentment that point to the prudentiality of forgiveness for the victims of moral wrongs:

Resentment is like carrying around a red-hot rock with the intention of someday throwing it back at the one who hurt you. It tires us and burns us. Who wouldn't want simply to let the rock fall to the ground? You'll be healthier and happier if you forgive than if you stew in your unforgiveness.

On the other hand, being forgiven is also prudential for the offenders, since when they repent and receive forgiveness they rid themselves of their uncomfortable feelings produced by the effect of their immoral actions. The relief for the offender comes through the covering of the immoral action by the work of forgiveness. That does not mean that through human forgiveness the past is forgotten, but that it is transformed, liberating both victim and offender from the negative effect of the immoral action. Following the thoughts of Nicolai Hartmann in *Ética* (2011), we could say that when victims forgive an action that was morally wrong, although imperfect human forgiveness neither undoes the historical fact nor removes the moral guilt of the wrong action, it would have the power to reshape the



past. This opens the doors to a human reconciliation,⁷ which although imperfect, may help us to live in more peaceful societies.

Hannah Arendt (1958) was aware of the creative and healing power of forgiveness, she also knew that no one before Jesus taught as clearly about loving our enemies (Matthew 5:44, Bible), and it is precisely through forgiveness that this love towards enemies will be shown more clearly. Loving people will open the doors to forgive them when they act morally wrong, as philosopher Glen Pettigrove suggests in his book *Forgiveness and Love* (2012).

Loving wrongdoers does not mean necessarily liking them, but wishing them well and showing kindness according to their needs. Loving and forgiving enemies is difficult, however continuous hate and resentment controls the lives of those who persist in keeping hate and resentment in their hearts, not allowing them to move forward. Desmond Tutu captured the essence of this reality in the title of his book *There is no future without forgiveness* (1999), which he wrote after chairing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission from South Africa.

The ethicality of forgiveness

Forgiveness provides a new opportunity to the offenders by allowing them to be reintegrated into their communities. As the Spanish philosopher Javier Sádaba (1995: 89) writes: «to forgive is to embrace, in one, the whole humanity».⁸ From this perspective offenses do not exhaust the value of offenders, since human value is inexhaustible as Immanuel Kant taught more than two hundred years ago when he wrote *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), where he affirmed that human beings have intrinsic value or dignity rooted in their capacity for autonomous rational agency, which makes them worthy of respect in spite of their immoral actions. Taking this idea of human dignity into account may be helpful for enabling victims to forgive their offenders and perpetrators, assuming there is room for moral transformation.

On the other hand, the Christian narrative would consider human beings worthy of respect too, but from a different perspective. The Bible states in Genesis 1: 26-27: «God created mankind in his own image», therefore, as Danish author Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his *Works of Love*, every human being possesses an *inner glory*. That means each person is born with a special dignity, which makes them worthy of honour. For those who share the Christian faith, being aware of this may help them when

⁷ Victims can forgive unilaterally their offenders, independently of the attitude of those offenders, but reconciliation would not be advisable until the offenders repent of their immoral actions, otherwise, the victims would be placing themselves in an unnecessary dangerous position.

⁸ Own translation.

they struggle to forgive their enemies, since even their enemies would be made in the likeness of the God they worship.⁹

Consequently, either from a philosophical point of view or from a Christian perspective, human beings would be worthy of honour and respect even when they commit immoral acts, therefore offering forgiveness to an offender would be ethically adequate. Nevertheless, we also need to notice that forgiving is supererogatory, that means that usually offering forgiveness is ethically good and advisable for the victims, but it is not compulsory. In other words, offering forgiveness is the victims' prerogative.



VI. Discussion and conclusion

Deepening into the Christian narrative of forgiveness

Biblical forgiveness has two levels: a human-horizontal (imperfect) and a divine-vertical (perfect): we could say human-horizontal forgiveness towards enemies would be part of an ancient Christian wisdom for a violent world that needs healing and restoration. When victims forgive their enemies, they break the cycle of violence that comes from seeking revenge (pragmatic and prudential aspects of forgiveness), and this means they are not allowing the evil to be spread into the world, because by forgiving, by turning the other cheek (Matthew 5: 39, Bible), that evil is absorbed and dyes in the victims.¹⁰

Besides this imperfect/human-horizontal forgiveness, the Christian narrative also refers to a transcendent or perfect/divine-vertical forgiveness available for every person.¹¹ In this regard, Christianity defends we live in a world affected by evil and sin, which has permeated everything, including human beings.¹² Using Donald Shriver words' (1995: 22):

Something went wrong in the world before any one of us arrived in it or had time to think about the nature of that wrong. Whether in families that impose the faults of a previous generation upon their

⁹ On this account, offenders could also take the initiative in seeking forgiveness from their victims and enemies. John Paul Lederach (2014: 29-43) refers to a biblical story that illustrates this point: when Jacob takes up the journey toward his victim, his brother and enemy Esau, Jacob 'sees' the face of God when he meets Esau (Genesis 33: 10, Bible).

¹⁰ Pamela Hieronymi (2001) is unique among the philosophers addressing this aspect of forgiveness.

¹¹ Divine forgiveness from a Christian point of view would be perfect, in theological terms we could say it would be eschatological or final (Volf, 1996).

¹² The philosopher Jeffrie Murphy (2003: 100) writes: «Both Augustine and Kant regard our actual world as fallen and sinful –a world in which even those seeking to promote justice and order and even love will risk having their efforts corrupted by the evil and depravity latent in their own natures». Vicent Martínez (1995: 85) also points to some Kantian thoughts on this: «From Kant, we can learn about the painful experiences of human beings [...] or how the human nature imposes on us the idea of human beings as *twisted trunks of wood*» (own translation).

children or in political communities that do the same, we never have the luxury of a truly fresh choice of the battlefield of our own struggle with evil. This is what Christian theologians chiefly mean by original sin [...] in our most reflective moments we are bound to acknowledge that, in indefinite regress, wrong arrived before we did.

Sooner or later everyone would fall prey of that original evil and sin to commit a moral wrong, usually in the form of attacking the dignity of another person using violence against their physical or psychological integrity. Christianity affirms that attacking the dignity of another person implies attacking God himself, since every person was created in God's likeness. In that sense, the offender would need to be forgiven by God too, who is able to wash offenders clean from their immorality and sinfulness.

As we said before, Nicolai Hartman (2011) points out that human forgiveness removes the sting of an immoral action, although it does not have the power to remove the moral guilt; nevertheless, the Christian perspective says that God has the power to remove the moral guilt of an immoral and sinful action too, as we could read in some Bible passages (Psalm 51: 1-7; John 1: 29; Colossians 1: 13-14).¹³

Christian teachings encourage victims to forgive offenders horizontally after an immoral action or offense has occurred (Matthew 18: 21-22 and Colossians 3: 13, Bible), which would allow them to be reconciled if the offender repents and both parts wish to reconcile (ethical aspect of forgiveness). This opens the doors to a human imperfect peace. Nevertheless, there is a stronger emphasis on divine forgiveness (1 John 1:9 and Acts 3: 19, Bible), which would enable people to be reconciled with God and also in a deeper sense to other human fellows.

This divine forgiveness would be possible only through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross.¹⁴ Since Jesus would be the only innocent or sinless person that ever lived, he would be the only one that could take over him the sins of others. Anyone else should die for their own sins, but Jesus would be in the position to die for the

¹³ One of the reasons Christians believe Jesus is God is because he forgives sins as God does (Mark 2: 1-12 and Luke 7: 36-50, Bible). According to the Christian narrative, Jesus' forgiveness would remove the sting and the guilt of an immoral and sinful action.

¹⁴ The theologian James Voiss (2015: 298) explains the atonement as follows: «Humankind had committed an infinite offense in sinning against God, because God's dignity is infinite. Consequently, it was necessary that one of infinite dignity who was guilty of no offense should make satisfaction for us. Thus God had to become human to make the necessary sacrifice to save humanity from permanent alienation from God». In this line of thoughts Oliver Crisp (2015: 14) writes: «Christ somehow brings about human reconciliation with God, buying us back, as it were, at the great price of his own life in an act of vicarious supererogation». This atoning death of Jesus on the cross would be God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22-24, Bible), the innocent and sinless dying on behalf of the guilty, since only someone innocent could die on behalf of others.

sins of others.¹⁵ Therefore, it would be through Jesus' death that God's arms would be open to forgive people, or using Miroslav Volf's (1996) words: «God's forgiveness creates the space for humans to receive God's embrace».

Christian theology would say forgiveness is a gift available for every person, but as any gift, it needs to be accepted. In other words, and metaphorically speaking, the Christian God would offer forgiveness like a cheque for the offenders to be forgiven, so they would need to cash the cheque of forgiveness in the bank of repentance, where forgiveness can be credited to the offenders. Accordingly, although God would offer forgiveness to everyone through the death of Jesus on the cross, divine forgiveness would be experienced in the life of those persons who accept it with an attitude of repentance (1 John 1:9, Bible),¹⁶ which means that the offenders agree with God in condemning the immoral and sinful action as such, detaching themselves from it, and trying not to repeat it. Then, and following the Christian teachings, offenders would be forgiven and reconciled to God (Romans 5: 9-10, Bible), enjoying the perfect peace that blossoms from this divine-vertical reconciliation, in this life, and in a future new heaven and new earth.

Concluding

Taking into account the epistemological turn developed at the UNESCO Chair of Philosophy for Peace, we have said forgiveness is an imperfect human competence or ability for peace. That means, human beings can forgive each other horizontally after an immoral action has occurred if they want, having access to a sort of imperfect peace by doing so, and to an optional reconciliation if both parts want to reconcile; although reconciling would not be advisable for victims until their offenders repent of their wrongs.

We have also said that offering forgiveness would be adequate for individual and collective victims after harmful actions take place, which could help to break the cycles of violence that undermine human development. Nevertheless, since forgiveness is a victims' prerogative it cannot be demanded from them, just suggested for prudential, pragmatic and ethical reasons.

Furthermore, we have considered the theological Christian perspective, which has been taught during the last two thousand years that we should forgive each other horizontally as human beings on a regular basis. At the same time, this perspective states there is a divine-vertical and perfect forgiveness available for anyone that by

¹⁵ It is interesting to notice that the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (2001: 29) wrote that only those who are innocent can judge others, and therefore forgive them.

¹⁶ Former Professor of Theology and Ethics Lewis B. Smedes said: «God asks us to repent not as a condition he needs, but as a condition we need to bring his forgiveness full circle into our own experience» (*Bråkenhielm*, 1993: 39).

attacking the dignity of another person, indirectly would be attacking the God who created them too. That divine-vertical forgiveness would be offered by God to humankind through the atoning death of Jesus, the only innocent and sinless person that ever lived, and therefore the only one able to take upon himself the immoral actions of others. Those who accept that divine forgiveness through repentance could be reconciled to God, in whom they would find perfect peace and rest.

In conclusion, the pragmaticity, prudentiality and ethicality of human forgiveness is something worthy to explore deeper in the coming years, since we live in a world where violent conflicts are commonplace. In the near future, learning and gathering the findings from different disciplines about forgiveness, such as Philosophy, Christian theology, Psychology or Politics, among others, could help us to develop a working normative framework for forgiveness. Reconstructing and promoting this imperfect human ability of forgiveness in post-conflict violent settings, would open the doors to break the cycles of violence that undermine human development, allowing us to live in more peaceful societies.

VII. References

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