

Paul Ricoeur's Anthropology of Forgiveness¹

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Abstract

In his philosophical anthropology Paul Ricoeur sees man's innate goodness, despite his propensity for evil, ramifying into many capacities, among them, forgiveness. The capacity to forgive, for Ricoeur, lies between the paralysis of the power to act due to human fault, and the possible lifting of this incapacity through the separation of the offending agent from his or her evil deeds. But if forgiveness obtains in isolating offenders from their evil deeds, their self-understanding, sense of responsibility, and identity might become distorted and inaccurate, and would make us question whether forgiveness should be horizontal, that is, conditional; or vertical, that is, unconditional. This article aims to address these problems using Ricoeur's narrative approach to understanding the self and his idea of forgiveness that intersects with justice and gift.

Key terms *Ricoeur, philosophical anthropology, narrative identity, conditional forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness*

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We often encounter arguments, in either praise or rejection, of forgiveness as an appropriate response to moral offence. Some claim that forgiveness is a moral duty, or an ideal like virtue or love that must be fostered at all times. Others judge it as either disfiguring of the personal identity of both offender and offended, or oblivious to the self-respect of the offended, and therefore ought to be avoided. Paul Ricoeur cuts through and mediates a polarized understanding of forgiveness in all its difficulty using the “grammar” of a philosophical anthropology that employs a narrative of selfhood. Ricoeur’s brand of philosophical anthropology contemplates “the capable human being” with the confidence that “man’s propensity to evil may be radical but his predisposition to good is original.” This predisposition of man to goodness ramifies into multifarious capacities, one of which is forgiveness. Ricoeur locates this capacity for forgiveness squarely within the balance of “the enigma of a fault held to paralyze the power to act of the ‘capable being’ that we are” and “the enigma of the possible lifting of this existential incapacity” that could unbind the wrongdoing from its agent. However, if forgiveness obtains in isolating the offender from his or her evil deeds, his or her self-understanding, sense of responsibility, and identity might become distorted and inaccurate. In addition, it would bring to the fore an *aporia* that undermines any merit that justified this restitution of the capacity to act: should forgiveness be vertical or horizontal? This article aims to address these problems by using an interpersonal perspective that considers moral relations between individuals who are capable of communicating with each other. Within this perspective the discussions in this article thus exclude such relations as those between state and individual, juridical persons or corporations and individuals, and the like.

Broadly, the article presents first Ricoeur’s narrative approach to understanding the self, followed by a discussion of forgiveness and

how it squares with recognizing one's identity and culpability. Explored in the third and final section are the horizontal path of forgiveness that involves both offender and victim in a cooperative reaching for forgiveness, and the vertical path in which the offended unilaterally forgives the offended.

Scaling Forgiveness

In situations where we find ourselves at the receiving end of a wrong deed committed to us by someone who could have chosen not to do so, we begin to consider after some deliberation whether it is best that we take revenge, bring our transgressor to justice, or grant her forgiveness. The first two responses to the evil of moral offence are options generally familiar. But the third one, if chosen, challenges us with the problem of pinning down an intellectually credible and emotionally satisfying theory and praxis of forgiveness. Many attempts at settling this challenge have yielded a quagmire of perspectives from religion, politics, psychology, law, and ethics that conflate,² contradict, and even dismiss forgiveness as hardly playing any valuable role in a just society. Glen Pettigrove describes a facet of this difficulty in David Hume's ordinary usage of the terms "forgiveness," "mercy," and "pardon" as synonyms.³ Hume often employs the term "forgiveness" when discussing situations in which one political figure seeks clemency from another.⁴ He describes forgiveness as overcoming "resentment" and involving "compassion"

² See, for example, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* showing the interchangeable use of mercy and forgiveness from way back the 14th century. Also predating this usage by around a millennium is how mercy and forgiveness are synonyms in Psalms 83, 86 and 103.

³ Glen Pettigrove, "Hume on Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," *Utilitas* 19, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 451.

⁴ Ibid. See David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688* (Indianapolis, U.S.A.: Liberty Fund, 1983), vol. 1, ch. 4, pp. 196, 201, 220; vol. 2, ch. 22, p. 473; vol. 3, ch. 25, p. 70; vol. 4, ch. 41, p. 186.

and “affection” on the one hand, yet he takes it as interchangeable with the terms “lenity” and “clemency,” on the other.⁵ The dilemma of comprehending forgiveness seems to rest on a gridlock of “grammars” that govern the articulation of diverse and at best non-bestial responses to the iniquities we suffer in our multifaceted existence. Paul Ricoeur recognizes that forgiveness is difficult to conceive of⁶ like an enigma that can never be fully plumbed,⁷ and confronts it with an understanding of selfhood arrived at via a grammar of the narrative⁸ approach. For him this approach establishes for forgiveness its point of departure in the very being of the human person—a platform that is in itself foundational to the political, cultural, and even religious determinations of each and every individual.

Not surprisingly, Ricoeur pays no greater attention to the question whether forgiveness is at all possible than to its palpable reality even under the crushing weight of immense and inexcusable evil. Although difficult, forgiveness is not impossible. It is not impossible to reach a grace-filled balance of actions and passions that are responsive to concrete situations of trespasses, without any trace of revenge. It is not impossible to go beyond mere appeasement of moral outrage, or the mending of betrayed relationships in the direction of *status quo ante*, and return to the core of our humanity rich in hope and vision for a better version of others and ourselves. As Ricoeur explains, “[t]here is forgiveness as

⁵ Ibid. See also *ibid.*, vol. 1, ch. 4, pp. 201, 220; vol. 2, ch. 12, p. 64; vol. 3, ch. 31, p. 224.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 457.

⁷ Ibid., 483.

⁸ The term “narrative” as Ricoeur uses it refers to “a mode of emplotment that synthesizes heterogeneous elements.” It is similar to what Aristotle calls *mimesis*. Cf. Richard Kearney, “Between Poetics and Ethics,” *On Paul Ricoeur, The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2004), 99.

there is joy, as there is wisdom, extravagance, love. Love, precisely. Forgiveness belongs to the same family.”⁹ Furthermore, he maintains that forgiveness cannot be ignored inasmuch as there is an anthropology that recounts how our selfhood is endowed with the capacity to *be more*, and the capacity to unbind our unjust aggressor from his malevolent act in the recognition of his power to do something other than his offences.¹⁰

However, problems in agency and identity could arise if forgiveness obtains in separating persons from their actions. The isolation of the forgiven person from his evil deeds could distort and render his self-understanding and sense of accountability inaccurate.¹¹ Another problem is that forgiveness seems to restore the forgiven and the forgiver to their identities prior to the conflict between them as if the act done by the former to the latter did not configure both of their identities.¹² It gives the impression that forgiveness digs a hole in moral rectification and retribution. In addition, if forgiveness is morally commanded and does not simply occur as passive forgetting,¹³ it would appear conditional and subject to some form of logic of exchange. This could mean that forgiveness is granted only because of something worth it, say a compelling plea coupled with sincere repentance, or a moving act of reparation. Naturally, this kind of forgiveness is diametrically opposed to vertical or unconditional forgiveness, which is gratuitous and far above retributive

⁹ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 467.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 493.

¹¹ Henry Isaac Venema, “Twice Difficult Forgiveness,” in *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the Work*, ed. Farhang Erfani (Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2011), 37.

¹² Henry Isaac Venema, “The Source of Ricoeur’s Double Allegiance,” in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 66.

¹³ Jeffrie Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment,” in *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 15. Trudy Govier, similarly, describes forgiveness as always freely chosen, and never to be understood as obligatory. See her *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 77.

considerations. But would it be out of step with just reasoning to simply move on unilaterally and forego punishing the culprit whose evil deeds have caused the horrors we suffer from? Is it not best to forgive—as the Apostle Paul advocates—in the name of love, which keeps no record of wrongs?¹⁴

Ricoeur's "geography of forgiveness," scaled to his narrative notion of selfhood, can help us gain the philosophical perspective apt for dealing with these questions. Highly important are the anthropological truths he elaborated which are necessary in giving forgiveness its fundamental human context rather than—though not opposed to—the usual political, cultural, psychological, or religious ones. Hence, the article explores Ricoeur's geography of forgiveness intertwined with his theory of selfhood.

At the Roots of Forgiveness

In his epilogue to his last major philosophical opus published before his death, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur highlights the serious asymmetry in moral standing that keeps the wrongdoer and his or her victim poles apart. The gap speaks of the altitudinal distinction between forgiveness and fault, where forgiveness is perched at a height far above the depth in which fault lies, making forgiveness difficult though not impossible to reach.¹⁵ What Ricoeur wishes to emphasize, though, is the irreducibility of difficult forgiveness to impossibility. Forgiveness has a locus in the horizon where imputability, fault, and evil are a recognized confluence inherent to our free action. Such is the case that "[t]here can, in fact, be forgiveness only where we can accuse someone of something, presume him to be or declare him guilty."¹⁶

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 13:6

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 457.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 460.

“Fault constitutes the occasion for forgiveness.¹⁷” As experience tells us, some form of ill will whose object must be a thinking being like us precedes forgiveness:¹⁸ a moral agent whose action causes us moral uneasiness.¹⁹ Pettigrove offers a scenario that illustrates this:

If a tree falls on my house, it may elicit . . . hatred [or spite if] I can attribute its fall to some agent whose defect I think has led to its [damage]. The agent on whom I place the blame might be my neighbour for having disregarded my welfare by failing to tend to his tree. Or it might be God, whom I blame for having made the tree so ineptly. Or it might be society, for arranging itself in such a fashion that tragedies of this sort must be borne so heavily by individuals.²⁰

The avowal of the reality of evil prior to forgiveness directs our attention to the mysterious co-existence in man of truth and falsehood, innocence and malice, which Ricoeur probes in his philosophical anthropology of the “capable human being.” This philosophical anthropology lays the groundwork for his approach to forgiveness as native to our being human.

Ricoeur’s phenomenological reflection on the capable human being hinges on a wish for a happy and peaceful life that reconciles human existence with its two-sided facticity of good and evil.²¹ Following Kant, Ricoeur traces to the heart of the capable human

¹⁷ Ibid., 457.

¹⁸ Pettigrove, “Hume on Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 448. See also David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Mineola, NY: Courier Dover Publications, 2003), Book 2, Part 2, Sec. 1, par. 6.

¹⁹ Pettigrove, “Hume on Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 448.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Leovino Ma. Garcia, “Paul Ricoeur’s Happy Memory: Remembering, Forgetting, Forgiving,” in *Thought the Harder, Heart the Keener: A Festschrift for Soledad S. Reyes*, ed. Eduardo Jose Calasanz et al. (Quezon City: Office of Research and Publications, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, 2008), 12.

being the ontology of power and act grounded on the insight that “[a]s radical as evil may be... it is not original. Radical is the ‘propensity’ to evil, original is the ‘predisposition’ to good.”²² Ricoeur’s idea of the capable man can be likened “to an envisioning of . . . being human as point of convergence of two movements—the movement of consenting to a necessity that limits us and the movement of affirming an origin of meaning that promotes us in our desire to be and effort to exist.”²³ Despite the privations that weigh us down and the occasional ill will they inspire, we strive for a trajectory to goodness from our core. Without discounting the fragility of the human condition—the vulnerability to errors—this anthropology joyfully gives account of capacities which human beings possess, namely,

the capacity to speak or the ability to produce a reasoned discourse; the capacity to act or the power to produce events in society and in nature; the capacity to narrate or the power to tell stories that reveal to us the hidden possibilities of our life; the capacity to be responsible for our actions; the capacity to promise [the ability to keep one’s word]; the capacity to forgive [the power to address a liberating word to the Other]; and the capacity to experience a “happy memory” with just enough remembering and just enough forgetting.²⁴

²² Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 491. Also cf. Paul Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Everson Buchanan (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1967), 156.

²³ Leovino Ma. Garcia, “The Meaning of Human Existence in Ricoeur’s Social-Political Writings: Part Three,” *Budhi* 2, no. 3 (1998): 64.

²⁴ Leovino Ma. Garcia, “Interpreting the Story of My Life, Paul Ricoeur’s Hermeneutics of Narrative Identity,” in *Paul Ricoeur Selected Readings*, compiled by Leovino Ma. Garcia (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Graduate School, 2012), 78–79. Cf. Paul Ricoeur, “Asserting Personal Capacities and Pleading for Mutual Recognition – John W. Kluge Prize in the Human Sciences Acceptance Speech of Paul Ricoeur,” Dec. 2004, <https://www.loc.gov/loc/kluge/prize/ricoeur-transcript.html>.

The interesting aspect of these capacities is that they co-belong in man with his fallibility, which likewise reveals that man's finitude is simultaneous with his unique openness to infinity.²⁵ This is what Ricoeur alludes to in *Fallible Man*, the second volume of his *Philosophy of the Will*, when he describes the human being as a tense junction or delicate mediation of finitude and infinity.²⁶ Infinite modes of *being* are inherent to us, which ironically we only realize in the fragments of daily life that make up our existence. Typically, this junction is magnified in our infinite yearning for endless and perfect love coursed through ordinary everyday affairs. From a different angle, the infinite–finite tension in us is also heightened in our countless alternating instances of failures and successes, the boundaries of which are made malleable each time we falter and begin anew. Needless to say, our freedom to bounce back, to act, and act in one way or another presents us with inexhaustible options or opportunities to change, where the *possible* appears infinite, larger, and more potent than who and what we *already* are.

The Power of the Possible

For Ricoeur, man despite his fallibility, vulnerability, and finitude, remains capable of meaningful *being*.²⁷ Man's limitations neither prevent him from significant self-determination nor reduce him to those episodes he has made of himself so far. Ricoeur believes that man's fragility is rather a fertile ground for the "poetics of the possible" that marries traditional (scholastic) ontology's "man the substance" with postmodern ontology's "man the being of

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur: *Philosophe de tous les dialogues* [Paul Ricoeur: Philosopher of All Dialogues] French Documentary DVD X1159, Disc 2.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Fallible Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

²⁷ Garcia, "Meaning of Human Existence in Ricoeur." I have also benefitted from discussions with Leovino Ma. Garcia on Ricoeur's concept of possibility at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) Graduate School, Manila, 4 Oct. 2012.

possibilities.”²⁸ The “poetics of the possible” shifts the general focus of metaphysics from *energeia* to *dynamis*, from *esse* to *posse*,²⁹ not for the sake of forgetting the former but in order to underline the strength of the possible, the things that we can still do, and the kind of person we may still become. After all, we are still far from being *completely done* and are rather *almost-always-in-the-making*.

Under the heading *Difficult Forgiveness*, Ricoeur draws our attention in his *Memory, History, Forgetting* to “the enigma of a fault held to paralyze the power to act of the ‘capable being’ that we are...” and “...the enigma of the possible lifting of this existential incapacity, designated by the term ‘forgiveness.’”³⁰ He highlights the drama of the *possible* by differentiating its two kinds. The first one tells of “what is already possible, described by means of a phenomenology of human capacity, expectation of what is predictable, or what Derrida calls ‘the programmable.’” The second kind concerns “the possibility for the ‘more than possible,’ the surplus that makes all things possible in hope and love, the arrival of something more than can be measured by expectation of what is possible.”³¹ It is the latter kind of possibility that Ricoeur liberates from and also appropriates—in a language shared by philosophy, theology, and poetry—the grace of “excess,” “surplus,” and “height” to the fallible ‘me’ and ‘you,’ and gives it the form of the utterance ‘I forgive you; you are far greater than your deeds.’

²⁸ Richard Kearney, “Capable Man, Capable God,” in *A Passion for the Possible, Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 49ff.

²⁹ Ricoeur: *Philosophe de tous les dialogues*. For this insight I am also grateful for discussions with Leovino Ma. Garcia on Ricoeur’s concept of possibility at the UST Graduate School, Manila, 4 Oct. 2012.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 457.

³¹ Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema, “Introduction – How Much More Than the Possible?” in *A Passion for the Possible: Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 3.

The kind of possibility which prefigures forgiveness complements the prospect that we can be more than what we generally *have been*, or *already are* and ushers us into an adventure of hope for a life of constant change for the better, no matter how bleak the situation may seem. This sense of the possible gives way to second chances in the thick of messy relationships that we have with our family or the larger community. It lets us break loose from straitjackets that confine the whole of our identity to our mistakes, while it clears our perspectives of occultations by a dark past as we find windows to a future of *I can*, *I may*, *I will*. This attention to possibility, however, presupposes an approach to understanding the self that gives more importance to the dynamic rather than static aspect of selfhood: that aspect which is identity woven by our own personal stories and those told by others.³²

Narrative Identity

Ricoeur's entire reflective enterprise aims at understanding self and others. It employs phenomenology and hermeneutics in a dynamic interplay that refuses to treat any material as a closed or dead text for interpretation. Ricoeur believes that understanding requires—more than rigid and limiting structures—a “liberal approach” that can unfold a wealth of meanings that an object of understanding might contain. This liberal understanding allows for the discovery of reality in its multidimensional condition, which opens to richer interpretations rather than a predictable one that plainly squares with dead-end customary patterns. In his words, “understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility for being. We must not lose sight of this

³² Kearney, “Between Poetics and Ethics,” 108–9.

point . . . to understand a text, we shall say, is not to find a lifeless sense that is contained therein, but to unfold the possibility indicated by the text.”³³

Ricoeur’s reading of the self in the way he does a text breaks the conception of identity as static. Identity as a narrative is as dynamic as a text remembered and retold countless times. It is not impervious to changes. Like a literary composition, identity emerges several times in the many different ways it pulls together a series of personal and public events into one coherent story. In fact, we mirror the same process in making sense of our daily experiences in every synthesis we make of the unexpected and surprising events that link sameness and difference into the single self in us.³⁴ The self that arises at the center of it all is the self of you and me who serve as both reader and writer of our own life. Hence, the self is largely a “composition” made of stories of ourselves from inside and out. We plot the stories on our own, even as we keep in touch with others who likewise read and recount similar stories. Ricoeur explains it thus,

The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates’ phrase in the Apology. And an examined life, is in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture. So self-constancy refers to a self instructed by the works of a culture that it has applied to itself.³⁵

³³ Paul Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” in *From Text to Action* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 66.

³⁴ Leovino Ma. Garcia, “On Paul Ricoeur and the Translation-Interpretation of Cultures,” *Thesis Eleven* no. 94 (Aug. 2008), 76.

³⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3 (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1984), 247.

Clearly, Ricoeur reflects on the human being in the way he treats a narrative unresisting to detours cathartic to the process of emplotment common to literature. His style departs from that with which one gets lost in introspection oblivious to time-tested principles of life. He plays it Socratic and keeps it well versed in the lessons of surrounding reality. This style is one reason why Ricoeur can see that new encounters continually reconstitute the human affairs that configure the self. Consequently, the self is hardly a perfectly stable once-and-for-all locus of meaning. Self-identity, just like any classic literary piece, is sustained in the horizon of retelling by oneself and others, and in the exploration of its possible modes of existence that reach out to varying contingencies of space and time. The self is unleashed in assuming the identity of *being more*, or *becoming*. Experience after all teaches us that the self remains always unfinished and thus, constantly *provisional*.³⁶

Difficult Height of Forgiveness

Ricoeur introduces the problem of forgiveness with the unquestionable entangling of offence, offender, and responsibility. Citing Nicolai Hartmann, he sheds light on the fault as that which “in its essence is unforgivable not only in fact but by right...” precisely because “[t]he tie between fault and self, guilt and selfhood seems indissoluble.”³⁷ The avowal of fault implies a structure of imputability found at the very core of its perpetrator’s selfhood. However, if forgiveness works by unbinding the action from the agent, he who forgives “removes” the attributed wicked action from the forgiven. The former would no longer hold the wrongful action

³⁶ Ricoeur, “Asserting Personal Capacities,” 2.

³⁷ Venema, “Twice Difficult Forgiveness,” 41. Cf. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 466.

against the latter thereby effectively denying the ascription of the evil action to—and the accountability of—its agent. In such scenario, is forgiveness not immoral in itself for abolishing the fault of someone and holding him no longer accountable for the malevolent act recognized to be his?³⁸

Furthermore, forgiveness appears to be destructive of selfhood, which is always fundamentally a relation between *who* one is and *what* one does, between agent and action. When the forgiven is bracketed off from his offences, there arises a difficulty in understanding who he is as he would be without reference to what he has done. So closely intertwined are our actions and our identity that identifying ourselves apart from our deeds renders us hardly recognizable. Nevertheless, forgiveness seems to do just that. Should someone forgive a person, and the forgiven person truly accepts and puts on that forgiveness, the latter would be at a loss in understanding himself. He knows he has a fault, but now throws that fault far away from him, as if it no longer counts toward his identity.

Yet Ricoeur trusts and insists there is a place for forgiveness, tucked in a paradox of binding and unbinding agent, action, and responsibility that constitute the self. He argues that forgiveness

hangs on the possibility of separating the agent from the action. This unbinding would mark the inscription, in the field of horizontal disparity between power and act, of the vertical disparity between the great height of forgiveness and the abyss of guilt. The guilty person, rendered capable of beginning again: this would be the figure of unbinding that commands all the others.³⁹

³⁸ Venema, “Twice Difficult Forgiveness,” 40. Cf. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 466.

³⁹ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 490.

In other words, Ricoeur imagines forgiveness far from the sort of unbinding agent and action that restores the offender to a clean slate. He asserts rather that forgiveness is that unbinding of agent and action that brings the offender from the depth of fault back to his feet hoping to start a new life for the better. This makes forgiveness

a more radical uncoupling than that supposed by the argument between a first subject, the one who committed the wrong, and a second subject, the one who is punished, an uncoupling at the heart of our very power to act. . . . This intimate dissociation signifies that the capacity of commitment belonging to the moral subject is not exhausted by its various inscriptions in the affairs of the world.⁴⁰

For Ricoeur, forgiveness is not an impossible *aporia*. It springs from the deepest level of selfhood⁴¹ that when “laid bare is nothing less than the power to unbind the agent from his act.”⁴² It is aided by working out memory (*Durcharbeiten*)⁴³ in sincere consideration of the power of the *possible* and the understanding of identity as spilling beyond what has been written about or remembered. These form the

⁴⁰ Ibid..

⁴¹ Ibid., 485.

⁴² Ibid., 459.

⁴³ “This process of overcoming resistances and of filling in the gaps of memory is a potentially interminable process that Freud labels “working-through”... The process of working a repressed memory is the process of coming to a “reconciliation with the repressed material;” it is a process of disarming the repressed material by making it understandable, acceptable and to some extent at least controllable. Put in narrative terms,” *Durcharbeiten*’s “...goal of analysis is to re-configure, to re-tell, the story of the patient’s life incorporating the once repressed memories” (Gregory Hoskins, “Remembering the Battle of Gettysburg, Paul Ricoeur and the Politics of Memory”, in *Paul Ricoeur: Honoring and Continuing the Work*, , ed. Farhang Erfani [Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011], 89). Cf. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 71ff. Also cf. Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 12, trans. and ed. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 147–56.

anthropological reasons that render forgiveness clear of the difficulties raised above. Central in them are the ideas of possibility and narrative approach to self (discussed earlier in the second part of this article) that may be summed up into a threefold bedrock of forgiveness. Firstly, in view of possibility: one may forgive a person because it is counterfactual to reduce him entirely to his wrong action. After all, it is not the sole deed he is capable of doing. Man is always greater than his action. Truth be told, there is hardly any action or sum total of actions that can fully exhaust the value and possibilities of a person (until he dies). Our actions may speak volumes about us, but they only do so as imperfectly as they themselves are. Simply put, our actions cannot embody who we are totally, once and for all.⁴⁴

The unbinding of the evil act from its agent in forgiveness is more of a refusal to imprison the agent to a particular action of his than to cut the ties between them or erase the act of and from the agent. The act of unbinding the agent from his action in a way allows the agent to recognize that he is not completely reducible to his action and that while he is still alive he *can still* choose to do something better in the future. In the words of Ricoeur, “[i]t is always possible to repent and turn away from a particular course of action. . . . One can always love again.”⁴⁵

Secondly, in view of narrative identity or the self: Ricoeur cogently argues that identity is not about staying the same or being stuck to

⁴⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, however, clarifies that the human person is capable of refusing love to the point of a definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed called “hell.” Cf. 1033 ff. Man, by virtue of his rational nature, has freedom. He has the power to govern and define his own personal existence. He can choose the overarching story of his life. Like a playwright, he can decide to turn his life narrative into either a tragedy or comedy. No one can do this for him. His autonomy is inviolable even before his Creator. God is perfectly respectful of man who is His own image. Man is free *to be* as he wants, as God made him so. He is free to choose heaven or hell as his eternal destiny. Like the Good Thief at Calvary, man can bring himself to heavenly peace or eternal sorrow by his own willingness or refusal to be with God.

⁴⁵ Venema, “Twice Difficulty Forgiveness,” 42.

what one has done, narrated about, or been known for. To unbind the agent from his act is not to edit out of one's understanding who the forgiven person was in reference to his misdeed. Rather, it is to affirm that there is some "distance" between the agent and his action. In a way, it is a kind of retelling the story in the hopes of unfolding new episodes, new involvements, or better yearnings from the depths of a person's mystery. It is a step to unleash *being* through the utterance: "... you are better than your actions."⁴⁶ Forgiveness allows us to witness that the story of a self is never finished in a single act or even a series of them. We must not forget that the self's reconfiguration continues each time it is recollected, retold and relived, allowing the knots of sameness and difference that constitute it to be tied anew. In Ricoeur's words,

The narrative form thus preserves the radical contingency of a historical status now irremediable but in no way inevitable as to its occurrence. This gap with respect to the state of creation holds in reserve the possibility of another history inaugurated in each case by the act of repentance and punctuated by all the irruptions of goodness and of the innocence over the course of time.⁴⁷

Lastly, in view of the recounting of self: being forgiven does not necessarily leave us without reference to what we have done wrongfully that we become lost in understanding ourselves more fully. Being forgiven rather translates an episode of sorrowful avowal of a wrongful action to a joyful epiphany about who and

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 493.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 492.

what we are. While the wrong we did is a fact and inescapably our responsibility, we are forgiven it nonetheless. Moreover, we learn something deeper about ourselves that was previously invisible to us but is now revealed, thanks to the forgiven fault. We come to know that we are being loved so much, and that the fault was a *felix culpa*.⁴⁸

Horizontal or Vertical Forgiveness?

The dilemma of forgiveness, however, does not end in finding its anthropological fulcrum. By Ricoeur's own account we "note a remarkable relation which seems to juxtapose the request for forgiveness and the offering of forgiveness on the same plane of equality and reciprocity, as if there exists a genuine relation of exchange between these two."⁴⁹ "The underlying hypothesis here holds that the request for and offer of forgiveness balance one another in a horizontal relation."⁵⁰ He argues, however, that

this suggestion deserve[s] to be pushed to its limit, to the point where even the love of one's enemies can appear as a mode of reestablishing the exchange on a nonmarket level.⁵¹ The problem then is to recover, at the heart of the horizontal relation of exchange, the vertical asymmetry inherent in the initial equation of forgiveness.

⁴⁸ On the part of the forgiver: Having forgiven our offender does not necessarily leave us without reference to what has been injuriously committed against us that we become lost in understanding ourselves more fully. Forgiving rather translates an episode of sorrowful avowal of a wrongful action to a joyful epiphany about who and what we are. While the wrong we suffered is a fact and we are inescapably its victim, we forgive nonetheless. Moreover, we learn something deeper about ourselves that was previously invisible to us but is now revealed, thanks to the forgiven fault. We come to know that we are capable of great love, and that the fault was a *felix culpa*.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 458.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Ricoeur acknowledges some relation between forgiveness and the offender's confession and repentance, but he likewise considers its nonreciprocal or unconditional limit. He believes that aside from horizontal "repentance-forgiveness-exchange" that takes after market transactions, forgiveness has an extent that can also reach the nonmarket level. This kind of forgiveness is vertical, which comes in the form of loving one's enemy, out of love. The ambivalence boils down to the problem of whether forgiveness ought to be horizontal (conditional) or vertical (unconditional). Do we grant forgiveness because it has been earned through reparations, repentance, and the like? Or should we do so even without them? If we insist that forgiveness must be vertical or unconditional resembling a "gift"⁵² we would have to deal with such questions as: "What is forgiving if the person forgiven does not care, fails to acknowledge blame, does not consider her acts as morally wrong, or worse, wants to be precisely that offensive type of person?" Most likely, forgiveness would simply bounce off in these cases.

The epilogue to *Memory, History, Forgetting* subjects forgiveness to a careful scrutiny and provides us with enough reason to take forgiveness to reflection very seriously. However, much as we want a neat prescription for forgiveness, Ricoeur only leaves us with a dizzying "geography of dilemmas" that could plague us once we consider forgiving.⁵³ Perhaps he leaves us with this geography hopefully for us to eventually discover when and how forgiveness can become an excellence (like virtue) in our own personal circumstances. I am more convinced though, following Gaëlle Fiasse, that Ricoeur at

⁵² A gift is something unconditionally given. It does not result from a demand or the like. Benedict XVI broaches the idea that it is something undeserved: "heaven is always more than what we could merit, just as being loved is never something 'merited', but always a gift." See Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), 53.

⁵³ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 478.

best recommends to us both the upholding of the unconditionality of forgiveness—in his words the height of forgiveness—as well as the honoring of the necessity to take into consideration the offender’s avowal and repentance.⁵⁴

Ricoeur’s insistence on the height of forgiveness cautions us against misused forgiveness animated by ulterior motives. Echoing Derrida, he says that forgiveness “is unconditional; without exception, and without restriction. It does not presuppose a request.”⁵⁵ Neither is it nor should it be “either normal, or normative, or normalizing. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary”⁵⁶ making it only possible “on the most secret level of selfhood.”⁵⁷ Forgiveness in this vertical form assumes the unmerited character of a gift and stands as counterfugue to offences equally unmerited. It defies the logic of commercial transactions and complements a person who asks for forgiveness “unexpected,” i.e., ready for any response whether positive or negative such as “no, I cannot forgive you.”⁵⁸ This captures the disparity of the height of forgiveness and the depth of fault, to which Ricoeur gives due attention.

Fault after all, which is the object of forgiveness, is essentially indelible not only in fact but also by right. If Nicolai Hartmann is correct, forgiveness does not abolish the wrongdoing that was committed. No one has the means to undo wrongdoing anyway. The offence remains morally injurious and its resulting damages stay

⁵⁴ Gaëlle Fiasse, “The Golden Rule and Forgiveness,” in *A Passion for the Possible, Thinking with Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Brian Treanor and Henry Isaac Venema (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 77–89.

⁵⁵ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 468.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 469. See also Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (New York: Routledge, 2001), 32.

⁵⁷ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 485. See also Christopher Cowley who closely follows the same thought in his “Why Genuine Forgiveness must be Elective and Unconditional,” *Ethical Perspectives* 17, no. 4 (2010): 556–79.

⁵⁸ Fiasse, “Golden Rule,” 86.

in need of repair, if at all reparable. One can arrive at comprehending the offender or the circumstances that culminated in her evil act, but no one can absolve her to reverse her offence. Furthermore, the guilt associated with the bad action cannot be suppressed for anyone, because it is inseparable from the guilty party. Forgiveness may only lessen the bite of guilt, its sting in relations between victim and offender, but not guilt itself. Forgiveness has no power to get rid of traces of evil. Even so, forgiveness can give us hope to be delivered from their unpleasant consequences branching out further into cycles of hatred and vengeance.

Although Ricoeur keeps in sight this depth of fault and height of forgiveness, he does not ignore the practical problem of forgiveness at the level of ethics closely conceived with justice, which demands that the moral agent of injury do reparations to her victim.⁵⁹ “We cannot deny that there is some sort of correlation between forgiveness requested and forgiveness granted.”⁶⁰ “We all know from experience that it is easier to forgive somebody who recognizes she is at fault”⁶¹ and does what it takes to offset the ill effects of her offence. Having the expectation of such an admission and reparation makes sense, as does the request for forgiveness. However, this equation does not represent forgiveness *in toto*. Ricoeur argues that

the place of forgiveness can only be at the margins of the institutions responsible for punishment. If it is true that justice must be done, under the threat of sanctioning the impunity of the guilty, forgiveness can find refuge only in gestures incapable of being transformed into institutions. These gestures, which

⁵⁹ Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 470ff.

⁶⁰ Fiasse, “Golden Rule,” 87.

⁶¹ Ibid.

would constitute the incognito of forgiveness, designate the ineluctable space of consideration due to every human being, in particular to the guilty.⁶²

Forgiveness is not limited by the structure of justice. It does not seek for—as it cannot exact—payment of damages, which is the job of retributive justice. Hence, forgiveness can depart from the legal formula that apply among penal or correctional institutions. Forgiveness is not convertible to justice, and vice versa. Furthermore, the response to evil cannot be justice alone. Too much justice is injustice.⁶³ Justice may put evil into check, but it does not overcome it.⁶⁴ Forgiveness (mercy and love) does.⁶⁵ Forgiveness responds to offences with the immeasurable wealth of good acts that overwhelm evil acts. Such “height” of forgiveness is not equivalent to a condescending superiority to justice. It means due attention to the narrative identity of persons. That is why it does not discount the importance of avowal, repentance, and even reparation.⁶⁶ It does not cancel the hope that one may ask for and receive forgiveness, which is objectively good. Forgiveness must be thought of in the fullness of it being a gift that answers to love; an act that may inspire a “giving back” but is not motivated by it, contrary to mere calculation and balancing of competing interests.⁶⁷ As Fiasse further explains,

While forgiveness acts first and foremost from the sole motivation of breaking the reaction of revenge,

⁶² Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, 458.

⁶³ Ibid., 474.

⁶⁴ Francis, “Mercy and Justice,” in *General Audience, Wednesday, 3 February 2016*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francescomobile/en/audiences/2016/documents/papa-francesco_20160203_udienza-generale.html.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Fiasse, “Golden Rule,” 87.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

and not because we initially want to be loved by our enemy, such an attitude highlights the power of action and does not discard the hope that a transformation will occur in our enemy as well. We are not motivated by what we will get from the other, but it would at the same time be wrong to have no wish or hope for a conversion.

Horizontal and vertical forgiveness, from the perspective of retributive justice, may initially appear to collide head on. Nonetheless, the truth is they share a natural trajectory to address evil, sans vengefulness. On the one hand, horizontal forgiveness has on its stretch the offender and the victim considering the equity of forgiveness and repentance in a cooperative mission to curb evil. On the other, vertical forgiveness takes on returning unexpected love to undeserved offence, no matter the cost, in the hope of breaking the cycle of evil. They are two sides of the same coin looking forward to a better mode of life. Fiasse describes these crossroads of horizontal and vertical forgiveness as reminiscent of Ricoeur's interpretation of the Golden Rule—a rule by which one would do to others what one would have others do to oneself. To Ricoeur this rule is not a clinical calculation, but which never neglects the wish for reciprocity.⁶⁸

To end let us look into an anecdote that quite reflects the spirit of forgiveness we just explored. It brings us close to the nexus of horizontal and vertical forgiveness.

In 1995 Sister Lucy Vertrusc, a nun from former Yugoslavia who lost her brothers in the Yugoslav wars, was raped by Serbian soldiers

⁶⁸ Ibid., 85.

and later on became pregnant. Yet she came to the realization that the best she could do after the unspeakable evil forced upon her was to *forgive*. In her letter to her mother superior, which an Italian newspaper published eventually, Vertrusc wrote: “The Lord had admitted me into his mystery of shame. What is more, for me, a religious, He has accorded me the privilege of being acquainted with evil in the depths of its diabolical force.”⁶⁹ Despite the trauma, she kept her child like an ordinary mother would but with extraordinary love. As she explained in her letter: “The child will be mine and no one else’s . . . though I never asked for him, nor expected him—he has a right to my love as his mother. . . . Someone has to begin to break the chain of hatred that has always destroyed our countries. And so, I will teach my child only one thing: love. This child, born of violence, will be a witness along with me that the only greatness that gives honor to the human being is forgiveness.”

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⁶⁹ See “A Vocation in Response to Evil,” *Roman Catholic Vocations*, 5 Aug. 2008, <http://romancatholicvocations.blogspot.com/2008/08/vocation-in-response-to-evil.html?spref=fb>.

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