Forgiveness in a Political Context: The Challenge and the Potential

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Forgiveness in A Political Context: The Challenge and The Potential

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Abstract
In this article I examine the challenging question concerning whether communal forgiveness is possible. In order to show that it is in principle possible I articulate and then respond to two of the most powerful objections to communal forgiveness that have been formulated to date, namely: (1) the argument that only victims can forgive; and (2) the argument that forgiveness is unconditional and thus outside the scope of such things as communal or political deliberation.

I argue that communal forgiveness is a process of transformation that requires at the practical level an institutional framework in which a representative of a community can initiate the process of forgiveness, like Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu did in South Africa. Because forgiveness is a process of transformation, it cannot be assessed at the level of acts or commitments alone, but is a wager on the future that will indeed show whether the communities involved have accepted the transformation.
People can sometimes escape the consequences of their actions by being forgiven, thereby being spared continued guilt or shame. As the opposite of a promise, which creates a commitment to a future course of action, forgiveness undoes what was done and wipes the perpetrator’s slate clean, allowing a relationship between former victim and former perpetrator to be restored.

The question I would like to ask is whether a political process can harness such highly useful social energy so that a community or a group could forgive another group or another community. The political benefit would consist in freeing a community from the crushing weight of an awful history and give it a chance to restore a relationship with another community that it has harmed or by which it has been harmed. Indeed, it would allow a relationship of trust, peace and concord between communities previously at odds with each other to be restored. The question is thus more specifically whether a group or a community can make a decision in common to show repentance while another community commits itself to a certain type of action toward the community of perpetrators.

Although there is no universal agreement on a definition of forgiveness, I see at least two features that are often, although not always, accepted and lend themselves to being transposed into the realm of politics: (1) forgiveness is an interaction between victim and perpetrator; and (2) forgiveness aims at the restoration of a relationship. In forgiveness the victim makes a conscious decision to release the perpetrator from the consequences of her or his actions and thus at least considers the perpetrator as a partner in the interaction, even in absentia. In addition, in forgiving, the forgiver makes the commitment to be ready to enter into a relationship with the perpetrator which had been broken or destroyed by the crime. The readiness in question does not mean that after forgiveness the torture victim has to embrace the tormentor and live side by side. It only means that in principle they can re-enter a relationship as two decent human beings, even if does not entail living in close proximity.

While the goal of living together is at the heart of the attractiveness of communal forgiveness, it is also its potential doom. The main difficulty is to move from an interaction between victim and perpetrator, which is limited to a face-to-face situation, to a fully disclosed process between two groups. This is a difficulty Hannah Arendt closely examined, but nevertheless could not satisfactorily resolve. In The Human Condition Arendt links the notion of forgiveness to action, one of the three components of the vita activa, besides labor and work. She argues that forgiveness is essentially linked to plurality, which is for her a key concept of the political life. Plurality is ‘the fact that men, not Man, live on earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically the condition – not only the conditio sine qua non, but the conditio per quam – of all political life’ (Arendt, 1958: 7). What forgiveness does is to cleanse the realm of action and restore plurality. However, according to Arendt, because there is an evaluation involved, the unconditionality of forgiveness is significantly limited: we can only forgive what we judge to be forgivable. Arendt says somewhat obscurely: ‘Men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable’ (ibid.: 241). Since Arendt understands the plurality restored in forgiveness only in terms of the face-to-face encounter between the perpetrator and the victim, forgiveness on her account remains a semi-private affair that could be irremediably hurt by public disclosure. Although she wishes forgiveness to play a role beyond the boundaries of religion and thus enter into the public sphere, Arendt’s own treatment nevertheless seals the fate of communal forgiveness. Derrida has also emphasized that forgiveness is only between perpetrator and victim, maintaining even that it is ‘unjust’ for a third party to presume to forgive in the name of the victim (Derrida, 2000: 124; 2001: 50).
The difficulty of transposing forgiveness into the public sphere is not to be downplayed and could support Bråkenhielm’s unilateral statement that ‘forgiveness in the relationship between larger groups – for example nations – is almost an unknown concept’ (Bråkenhielm, 1993: 7). This negative view is supported by Paul Ricoeur who wrote that ‘there is no politics of forgiveness’ (Ricoeur, 2000: 635). In order to counter this negative view, I examine more closely what I take to be two major objections to communal forgiveness and thus to the political potential of forgiveness.

(1) Only victims can forgive. Since the crimes committed between communities have often resulted in the killing of the victims, it may be that nobody is left among the victims to do the forgiving. In the absence of victims entitled to forgive, these crimes, which are often said to be against humanity, will continue to haunt communities with the desire to keep alive the memory of the victims, a desire that can perpetuate revenge from generation to generation. This memory also cultivates the guilt of those who happen to be associated with the perpetrators due to their shared ethnicity, nationality, or religion.

(2) Forgiveness is unconditional in the sense that it is performed in the absence of any calculation toward a reward or benefit, which makes it distinct from reparation or reconciliation. If a group comes to an agreement to forgive, this will involve some form of discussion about why and for what purpose the group should forgive, which would turn forgiveness into a process of reconciliation or reparation. Without calculation, discussion, or anticipation of a good that can be part of the process of forgiveness, forgiveness is a useless political act and cannot even be political.

While these objections are powerful, with the first one often even passing as self-evident, I do not consider them to be insurmountable. Let me address each of these objections in turn and offer a reply.

1 First objection: Only victims can forgive

This is the most vocal objection to communal forgiveness. As Martin Golding puts it, ‘the general principle [is] that only the injured party is in a position to forgive, which frequently is taken as axiomatic in treatments of forgiveness’ (Golding, 1984–5: 122, cited in Digeser, 2001: 83). The obvious consequence of such a view is that ‘an act that by its consequences makes it physically impossible for the person harmed to grant forgiveness becomes in that sense morally unforgivable’ (Lang, 1994: 107).

If the objection holds, the political role for forgiveness is drastically if not fatally limited: the greatest need for forgiveness is found in precisely those situations where such horrors were committed by a group of people against another group that many of the victims were annihilated, but where the need for both surviving victims and victimizers to find a new way in which to live with each other nevertheless obtains.

However, this objection has some weaknesses. One of them is the assumption that harm inflicted is reducible to the direct experience of the person submitted to it. Against such a view it can be argued that harm and suffering are also social, because they can be experienced at different degrees by people who may not be the direct victims of harm and suffering. In this regard Trudy Govier introduces the useful and meaningful distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary victims, the secondary victims being the immediate family and the tertiary victims being the community at large or people not directly linked to the victims. It would thus be socially unfair and even wrong to deny family members – the secondary victims – a share in the forgiving process.

A second weakness is that this objection takes away most of the significance of forgiveness. Forgiveness aims at freeing the future of both the perpetrator and the victim. If the victim is dead, not only would the perpetrator wallow in his or her own guilt and shame, but the victim would also be socially mummified in victimhood, forever robbed of the possibility to be remembered as a person. Forgiving on behalf of dead victims, in the
proper settings and according to the proper procedure, could have the benefit of also freeing the souls of the
dead victims in the sense of reintegrating those souls among us as people whose murders and tortures have
been acknowledged and whose story can now be told.

And a third weakness is the fostering of revenge. If communal forgiveness is not possible, horrible crimes will
roam unencumbered, continuing to torture the memory of the living and encouraging them to remain vengeful:
‘To restrict all forgiveness to primary victims is, in effect, to recommend non-forgiveness and enduring hatred
and resentment, for the many large-scale political offenses characterized by killing’ (Govier, 2002: 94). To
cultivate the memory of genocides without the possibility of forgiveness comes dangerously close to revenge by
proxy.

The usual reply to the extension of the right to forgive to secondary or tertiary victims consists in saying that
forgiveness should be proportional to the harm inflicted. While not denying that there may be indirect victims
like the family or even the community, objectors argue that secondary or tertiary victims should only forgive in
proportion to the harm done to them, not the harm done to the victim. ‘Someone who is indirectly the victim of
a wrongful act (for example, the child of a person who has been murdered) might forgive the killer for the harm
done to him; but this would not bear one way or the other on forgiveness on behalf of the dead person’ (Lang,
1994: 107). Haber, too, considers that if a mother forgives her son’s murderer, ‘the mother’s forgiveness is really
for her own injury’ (Haber, 1991: 49). Piers Benn calls it quasi-forgiveness on the part of indirect victims (Benn,
1996). I find this type of argument inconsistent and excessive.

The inconsistency consists in appealing simultaneously to two types of forgiveness: (1) releasing the
perpetrators from the consequences of their actions; and (2) psychological cleansing. Clearly, to argue that only
victims can forgive means that only victims can release perpetrators from the consequences of their actions.
However, when the mother forgives for the harm done solely to her, we have a mere psychological act of
overcoming one’s anger, gaining some peace of mind and moving on with one’s life. If the mother were to
qualify her forgiveness to the murderer accordingly by saying that she releases him from the consequences of
having harmed her psychologically, there is a good probability that the repenting murderer would not be
relieved. In addition, this right to forgive in the sense of a psychological process of overcoming one’s anger is
obviously not available for the dead victim. Thus, the claim that only the victim can forgive takes forgiveness to
mean a freeing of the perpetrator and not just the overcoming of anger, since those who would be angry are
dead. The notions of forgiving by the victim and of quasi-forgiving or indirectly forgiving are two different
notions that are in fact incompatible. In sum, to claim that only victims can forgive entails that there are no
secondary or tertiary victims and, conversely, to recognize secondary or tertiary victims entails that forgiveness
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The view that only victims can forgive is also excessive for at least three reasons. (1) It unwittingly banalizes the
unforgivable by making it an empirical determination – if the victim is dead – regardless of the magnitude of the
crime committed; a petty insult becomes as unforgivable as torture if the victim happens to be dead. (2) It
banalizes the wrong inflicted upon family and community members by dissociating it from the wrong inflicted
upon the victim, as if a mother could meaningfully entertain the distinction between the wrong of her son being
murdered and the wrong of her being deprived of her murdered son. This distinction would amount to saying
that her wrong is merely psychological, and this does literally add insult to injury. And (3) it victimizes the family
and the community a second time by preventing them from being freed from pain and humiliation, from
reaching closure and re-entering a relationship with perpetrators, which is sometimes necessary for people who
must live in close proximity to each other.

It will be helpful to contextualize the issue and work from examples in order not to be paralysed by conceptual
analysis. The first example I bring forward is the situation of Simon Wiesenthal, who hunted Nazis around the
world and was instrumental in bringing to justice more than 1,100 of them. While he was a prisoner in the hands of the Germans, Wiesenthal was assigned for a brief period to a hospital. He once was called to the deathbed of a 21-year-old SS soldier who wanted to confess to a Jew the atrocities he had committed: throwing grenades into a house full of gasoline in which Jewish families had been packed and shooting those who tried to escape. After his confession he asked Wiesenthal for his forgiveness: ‘I know that what I have told you is terrible. In the long nights while I have been waiting for death, time and time again I have longed to talk about it to a Jew and beg forgiveness from him. Only I didn’t know whether there were any Jews left … I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace’ (Wiesenthal, 1997: 54). Wiesenthal summarizes the situation quite forcefully: ‘Here was a dying man – a murderer who did not want to be a murderer but who had been made into a murderer by a murderous ideology. He was confessing his crime to a man who perhaps tomorrow must die at the hands of these same murderers’ (ibid.: 53). But despite what he saw as ‘true repentance’ (ibid.), Wiesenthal refused: ‘I stood up and looked in his direction, at his folded hands. … At last I made up my mind and without a word I left the room’ (ibid.: 55). He later learned that the soldier had died the next day. This episode haunted Wiesenthal who continued to wonder afterward, asking his friends in the camp whether he was right not to forgive on behalf of the dead victims. To one of them who said: ‘You would have had no right to do this in the name of people who had not authorized you to do so’, he replied: ‘But aren’t we a single community with the same destiny, and one must answer for the other?’ (ibid.: 65).

In this case, one can argue that Wiesenthal was justified in not forgiving, but for reasons other than the one he mentions. I see two: (1) the perpetrator must show that he would no longer do what he says he regrets. Saying so is not enough. He would have to separate himself from the other SS soldiers and the Nazi ideology. Although in this case he is blind and dying, he regretted what he had done long before, when, one can assume, he was still able-bodied, but he decided to remain in the Nazi uniform. The fact that he asked a nurse to ensure that nobody would come to the room and see his encounter with a Jew was, we can assume, not only meant to protect Wiesenthal, but himself, to prevent the repentance from becoming public. In this sense, he is still a member of those who plan to kill Wiesenthal and as such a murderer when asking for forgiveness. And (2) the victim or proxy must be a free person capable of restoring a relationship. A victim still attached to the torture table or, in the case of Wiesenthal, doomed to die in a concentration camp, is not recognized as a person capable of restoring a relationship and thus capable of forgiving. To ask to be forgiven by a soon-to-be-dead victim and in his capacity as a current victim without first acting to free the victim indicates that the perpetrator did not do his part.

Now, regarding the arguments used by Wiesenthal, that he cannot forgive on behalf of the victims, a contrast is offered by the story told by Geiko Muller-Fahrenholz who recounts the trip of some former German soldiers to Belorussia in 1994. They had built a home for children harmed by the Chernobyl nuclear accident and went to the Chatyn memorial. While gathered with their Belorussian hosts, one of the former German soldiers tried to apologize for what they did during the war, but started to cry. An old woman stood up and embraced him (cited in Govier, 2002: 94). She may have been a niece or granddaughter of the victims, but clearly was not a direct victim. Yet, she forgave, embracing a person who had perhaps been the murderer of her uncle or grandfather.

Thus, it would seem that the fact that forgiveness on behalf of the victims is extremely difficult is not enough to qualify it as impossible. Using the distinction between primary, secondary and tertiary victims, Govier argues that ‘a group may be morally entitled to forgive in virtue of the harms done to secondary and tertiary victims’ (Govier, 2002: 95). Regarding this right of tertiary victims to forgive, it is worth noting that Maimonides in the 12th century recognized a limit to the power of victims. If a victim refuses to forgive someone who has asked three times to be forgiven, the person, Maimonides says, loses his prerogative and the community is then entitled to forgive (see Digeser, 2001: 83). The wrongdoer ‘is forgiven even if the person wronged continues to
reject his pleas. At that point, too, the latter is guilty of wrongdoing, of being “unforgiving.” Here the community assumes the role of agency, granting forgiveness’ (Lang, 1996: 43, cited in Digeser, 2001: 95).

What can help the discussion move forward is to break down the notion of guilt in the same manner we broke down the notion of victimhood. Parallel to the distinction between levels of victimhood, a distinction must also be made on the side of the perpetrators. While it would be unfair to speak of secondary or tertiary perpetrators without a careful review of how they may have been accomplices of the primary perpetrators, it is undeniable that crimes committed by ancestors or contemporaries in the name of the group bring a sense of guilt, shame, or opprobrium on descendants or contemporaries. If perpetrators cannot ask for forgiveness any more, because they are dead, why would descendants and other people who have a stake in the crimes committed, either because they feel ashamed for what some of their own did or because they are blamed for being associated with them, not be entitled to ask for forgiveness on behalf of the perpetrators? Clearly, the transformation of perpetrators can be made public by descendants or people otherwise associated with the perpetrators who would repent in the name of the primary perpetrators. The difficulty here lies in assessing what the transformation is and who has been transformed. While, for example, the apologies of the Japanese prime minister for the atrocities committed by the Japanese in China and Korea are a necessary first step, he also has to demonstrate that what he is saying has the authority of more than the formal political status of prime minister and that he is the spokesperson for a community that has come to grips with its guilt or that he challenges his community to come to grips with this issue. I shall come back to this later.

Ronald Reagan’s 1985 visit to the cemetery of Bitburg illustrates the problem of a leader initiating a process in the name of his fellow countrymen. As part of the effort to establish a new relationship between the USA and Germany, Helmut Kohl invited Reagan and asked him, as part of the official state visit, to make a symbolic gesture of reconciliation by visiting the cemetery of Bitburg. Among the 2,000 Nazi soldiers buried at Bitburg, there lay close to 50 SS soldiers, the SS being those who ran the concentration camps (Govier, 2002: 81; D’Souza, 1997: 233). Reagan, who knew what it meant for a US president to honor the memory of SS soldiers, accepted the invitation including the visit to the cemetery. An uproar ensued in the United States. Jewish leaders were enraged, as were some groups representing war veterans. Protests took place in several American cities. Fifty-three senators sent a letter to the President asking him to cancel the visit and passed a resolution asking him to reassess his plans. In a press conference at the White House Reagan defended his decision, saying: ‘I think that there’s nothing wrong with visiting that cemetery where those young men are victims of Nazism also, even though they were fighting in the German uniform, drafted into service to carry out the hateful wishes of the Nazis. They were victims, just as surely as the victims in the concentration camps’ (Reagan, 1986: 240). During his stay in Germany Reagan also visited with Kohl the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. At Bitburg Reagan laid a wreath from ‘The President of the United States’. Shortly afterward, two generals who had fought in the Second World War, General Matthew Ridgway from the USA and German Lieutenant-General Johannes Steinhoff, shook hands as a symbol of the reconciliation between the USA and Germany.

The fact that Reagan failed to rally a community to forgive should not conceal the fact that he opened a possibility for communal forgiveness toward which many people are silently sympathetic. His decision and action, although not successful, indicate how the process of communal forgiveness could take place.

2 Second objection: The unconditionality of forgiveness

Already in the gospels, where forgiveness is articulated for the first time as a positive attitude, we are told to forgive without condition being set and satisfied. ‘If he sins against you seven times in a day and seven times comes back to you and says “I repent,” forgive him’ (Luke 17: 4). In his essay ‘Le pardon’ [Forgiveness] Vladimir
Jankélévitch understands this unconditionality of forgiveness in a strong sense. Forgiveness, he says, is ‘an event which has never happened in history, an act that takes place nowhere in space, a movement of the soul that does not exist in current psychology. ... However, even if forgiveness were not a given of psychological experience, the gesture of forgiving would still be a duty. Even more, forgiveness is only at the imperative, because it is not at the indicative’ (Jankélévitch, 1967: 7; my translation). This is the gratuitousness of forgiving: ‘Forgiveness never forgives “because of”, neither because of innocence nor because of guilt’ (ibid.: 185; my translation). Jankélévitch takes over the Christian difference between the crime and the perpetrator: ‘In fact, forgiveness does not so much forgive the wrong as the wrongdoer’ (ibid.: my translation). Jankélévitch draws the natural conclusion from unconditionality: ‘Forgiveness ... goes to the infinite. Forgiveness does not ask whether the crime is worth being forgiven, whether atonement has been sufficient, whether rancor has lasted long enough. ... Which amounts to saying: there is an inexcusable, but there is no unforgivable’ (ibid.: 203; my translation).

However, Jankélévitch, like many others, sees forgiveness as linked to an act of judgment: although unconditional, it must remain intelligible. And this leads Jankélévitch in his letter to Le Monde of 3 January 1965, ‘L’imprescriptible’ [The Imprescribable], arguing against applying the statute of limitation to crimes committed by the Nazis, to take a position, as described by Derrida, diametrically opposite to the one he defends in Le Pardon. Despite his inspired description of forgiveness as infinite, he now argues that some acts, like the Holocaust, cannot be forgiven. ‘Forgiveness died in the death camps’ (cited in Derrida, 2000: 113; 2001: 37). What are unforgivable are those acts by which the perpetrators have put themselves beyond the human community.

Jacques Derrida has taken issue with this type of unconditionality in On Cosmopolitanism and Forgivenness. If forgiveness is an absence of calculation, as Jankélévitch acknowledges, then, contrary to what he claims, forgiveness cannot depend on a preceding judgment. If indeed forgiveness is not based on any expectation of reward or benefit, if it takes place outside the realm of calculation, then it is at its root unpredictable and, according to Derrida, impossible.

Each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble or spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then ‘forgiveness’ is not pure – nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality. (Derrida, 2000: 107–8; 2001: 31–2)

One cannot thus peremptorily enunciate, as Jankélévitch does, criteria for what is forgivable and unforgivable. ‘Pure 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’ (Derrida, 2000: 119–20; 2001: 45).

The advantage of Derrida’s view over Jankélévitch’s is that a communal forgiveness is not necessarily impossible. If, as Derrida claims, impossibility is what defines forgiveness, then, there is no unforgivable deed and in principle communal forgiveness belongs to the realm of the possible, precisely because it is unpredictable and as such impossible before it actually takes place. To the question of Michel Wieviorka in the French original (not included in the English translation): ‘And can forgiveness be collective, that is to say: political and historical?’ Derrida immediately answers: ‘In principle, there is no limit to forgiveness’ (Derrida, 2000: 103).

The new difficulty in Derrida’s account is that forgiveness must be totally without calculation, anticipation and preparation. It is, he says, a madness of the impossible. While this characteristic can work in the case of forgiveness between two individuals, it likely seals the fate of communal forgiveness: if a community forgives, it
needs to decide to do so and thus must engage in a discussion, evaluation, agreement and anticipation of risks and benefits for the community. For, the community must come to an agreement on what is to be forgiven and to whom and by whom. However, this, for Derrida, would undermine forgiveness: ‘As soon as a third party intervenes, one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc., but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense’ (Derrida, 2001: 42). Derrida criticizes the Algerian president for having used the word ‘forgiveness’ with regard to the atrocities committed in Algeria.

I believe that the word ‘forgiveness’ which was pronounced on that occasion was inappropriate, in particular by the Algerian head of state. I find it unjust at once with respect to the victims of atrocious crimes (no head of state has the right to forgive in their place) and with respect to the meaning [sens] of this word, the non-negotiable, aneconomic, apolitical, non-strategic unconditionality that it prescribes. (Derrida, 2000: 124; 2001: 50)

Analogous to Jankélévitch’s contradiction that forgiveness is unconditional, but some acts are unforgivable, Derrida maintains both that ‘in principle, there is no limit to forgiveness’ (Derrida, 2000: 103) as his answer to Wieviorka’s question about the possibility of collective forgiveness, and that ‘In principle … forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty … and the victim’ (Derrida, 2001: 42). Let us note the qualification in both instances of ‘in principle’: on the one hand, in principle there is no limit, but on the other hand, in principle there is a limit: the situation of encounter between two individuals.

Besides its apparently incoherent component, this position is so extreme that it is easy to drive a wedge in the massive concept of unconditionality. Unconditional, for Derrida, means that it is totally deprived of reason and a completely spontaneous act. But, against Derrida, unconditional can also mean non-strategic in the sense of: not permeated by a calculation of an anticipated benefit. In this last sense, forgiveness can aim at restoring a relationship with the perpetrator without thereby becoming a quid pro quo. To desire closure, to strive toward restored harmony, can be legitimate goals of forgiveness. Pursuing a goal does not necessarily amount to aiming at a quid pro quo: if I forgive, what do I gain?

In response to Derrida’s claim to exclude a forgiveness that has a goal, we can appeal to Arendt who sees forgiveness as a Christian discovery with a purpose: to do God’s will. On the birth certificate of forgiveness a goal is clearly inscribed. We are certainly entitled to, and in many instances we should, appeal to forgiveness without religious connotations, just as we can appeal to democracy without adopting the whole Greek framework, which excluded women and accepted slavery. But if we appeal to forgiveness and strip it of any goal or purpose – love being the crucial one for Arendt – it is no longer forgiveness, but something else. And since we cannot define that something else by its intelligibility, nobody can actually know what it is. Derrida’s qualification of forgiveness as madness is, well, absurd: if it is totally unpredictable and impossible, who would trust the forgiving persons that they actually forgave? For, they would not be understood by the perpetrators or even by themselves.8

As soon as an act is public, I submit, it must have a goal and that is what renders it intelligible. In the case of forgiveness the goal is to be ready to restore a relationship. I thus agree with Ricoeur, who for the most part follows Arendt and Derrida, when he claims: ‘While there are reliable institutions for promising … there are none of forgiveness’ (2000: 634), but do not accept his conclusion that ‘there is no politics of forgiveness’ (ibid.: 635). Such a conclusion is not only unwarranted, but also at odds, as in Derrida, with his characterization of forgiveness as unconditional.

In the preceding sections I responded to the two objections to communal forgiveness and showed that it is not conceptually impossible. But the next question obviously is whether it is pragmatically feasible, and for this question I have no answer. What I can show is how communal forgiveness is not only an act of commitment that
a leader can perform, but a process of transformation at the level of the community itself, so that the indefinite aspect of communal forgiveness is also its condition of possibility as a process stretching into the future.

The institutional nature of forgiveness

Even forgiveness between two individuals involves a public disclosure through which both the victim and the perpetrator are transformed, released from their previous status and set free to enter or re-enter a relationship. The main difficulty of communal forgiveness is precisely this twofold transformation. The prime minister of Japan, as mentioned above, can apologize and the president of Algeria can forgive, but this only initiates the process of forgiveness. We want to know if the people on behalf of whom these heads of state spoke recognize the acts performed by theirs leaders and partake in them. The possibility that all members would individually repent or forgive can be eliminated as both unrealistic and only nominally communal, as a retrospective qualification. That is the reason why we need a special institution. While a president is indeed more than a private citizen and thus engages more than his or her own person, the institution that would warrant a felicitous repentance and forgiveness needs to represent the group not formally, but substantially, so that the community would be taken to speak through its representatives.

It is often the case that I am bound by what an institution does on my behalf. Even if I did not individually vote on a new law, the fact that my representatives did binds me to abide by this new law, even if I disagree. My government could thus make a promise on my behalf, for example, to grant asylum to Hmong people who fought against North Vietnam, and I would be obliged to abide by this promise. What is lacking in the case of forgiveness is an institution analogous to the institutions of an already established democratic framework. This automatic binding power proper to a democratic system – if you elect representatives, you are bound by what they decide as your legitimate representatives – does not occur in the case of forgiveness. Nobody is elected or officially designated as the executive officer in matters of repentance and forgiveness.

But maybe the institutional aspect of forgiveness is not the same as the institutional aspect of promising. I noted above the central role of transformation in forgiveness. While a head of state can make a promise engaging the responsibility of his citizens, no transformation of the promiser or the promisee occurs or is needed. The head of state acted as an elected executive officer within the boundaries of her authority. In the case of forgiveness the one who would ‘represent’ the victims would need some legitimacy within the community, but would also need to challenge that community to transform itself from a community of victims to a community of forgivers. This would mean not just a self-transformation in a collective psychological sense of overcoming individual and collective anger, but a challenge to be disposed to enter or re-enter into a relationship with former perpetrators, thereby significantly changing the community.

The very notion of transformation includes a temporal dimension that cannot be encapsulated in an act. Although forgiveness, like a promise, is indeed an act, the act even between two individuals is a commitment toward a process stretching into the future: to follow a certain course of action and to adopt a certain attitude. Since it is both an act of commitment and a process of transformation, forgiveness cannot be deemed felicitous or infelicitous as an act only, in the manner a promise can be deemed broken if the promiser did not do what he said he would do. The institutional aspect of communal forgiveness should thus not be assessed in its commitment alone, but also in the process of transformation it tries to initiate in the community. Since it is not the present act of commitment but the future transformation that makes communal forgiveness both communal and truly forgiveness, it will remain in process as a constant work in the making.

This dual aspect of communal forgiveness at the institutional level – act and process, commitment and transformation – has been missed by many observers, very often also critics, of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in South Africa in 1995. I understand both Nelson Mandela, who appointed the
committee, and Desmond Tutu, who chaired it, as taking tremendous risks in staking all their enormous personal prestige, moral authority and credibility in order to challenge their country, both whites and blacks, to admit guilt and to grant amnesty when appropriate. Tutu has defended the legitimacy of the commission by reminding us that the negotiators of the transition and settlement had also suffered, were themselves victims of harassment, detention and humiliation, and in addition had been appointed by a democratically elected government (Tutu, 1999: 56). But the legitimacy of the institution cannot precede the actual work of the institution; legitimacy and success will result from the transformation of the new community. Hence Tutu’s and Mandela’s appeal to a future that will justify retroactively the legitimacy of those who formulated the challenge of such a future: what the ‘new’ South Africa will be. It was in many respects a leap of faith of two forceful leaders trying to put into motion the interaction between a new institution and a national conversation, convinced that, according to the title of Tutu’s book, there is No Future without Forgiveness. The future as transformation is the essence of forgiveness.

Notes
I want to thank Nathan Blackerby and Matthew Peters for their editorial skills. I am also indebted to Arun Iyer for his critical insights and helpful suggestions.

1. Parents know that very often the suffering of their child is probably worse for them than for the child, and they would readily endure the direct suffering rather than see their child suffer. It is also a well-documented fact that most people do not like to see others suffer. Harm or pain as a strictly private experience seems more like an intellectual construct. This is also confirmed by the avidity with which most families follow the trial of someone who hurt one of their members. In some courts in the USA, family members even have a hearing in the penalty phase of the trial.

2. Desmond Tutu tells the story of a young woman in South Africa who had been jailed, tortured and repeatedly raped, but who managed to dissociate herself from her body by putting her soul in a corner of the jail. She later noted that ‘she had not yet gone back to that room to fetch her soul’ (Tutu, 1999: 141).

3. Eduard Klain, a Belgrade psychoanalyst, provides us with the example of the battle of Kosovo in 1389, which saw the cruel victory of the Turks over the Serbs. In the Serbian collective memory, which, as it turns out, is not supported by facts, the Turks killed all males and raped all young females. In the name of those alleged atrocities the Serbs inflicted the same fate on Muslims 600 years later under the name of ethnic cleansing. Muslims were made to pay for what other Muslims had purportedly done centuries before (Klain, 1998: 288–9, quoted in Govier, 2002: 34).

4. Griswold gives other powerful examples of forgiveness against all odds (Griswold, 2007: 95 f.). The deep emotional involvement of those who are related to victims of trauma explains in part why it is so difficult to forgive on behalf of victims. The trauma re-enacts a relation to the victims and runs the risk of keeping victims encapsulated in their victimhood. As Dominick LaCapra notes: ‘One’s bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. This situation may create a more or less unconscious desire to remain within trauma’ (LaCapra, 2001: 22–3). If victims, even dead, are not allowed to be reintegrated into the community as dignified persons, forgiveness by descendants or friends is practically impossible. Trauma may also radically prevent forgiveness by annihilating any desire to restore a relationship if the trauma becomes what LaCapra calls a ‘founding trauma’:

Even extremely destructive and disorienting events, such as the Holocaust or the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, may become occasions of negative sublimity or displaced sacralization. They may also give rise to what may be termed founding traumas – traumas that paradoxically become the valorized or
intensely cathected basis of identity for an individual or a group rather than events that pose the problematic question of identity. (LaCapra, 2001: 23)

5. Thomas Sebald gives a powerful account of such internalized guilt in documenting the self-imposed silence of Germans about the atrocities committed against German civilians by the Allies (Sebald, 2003). Indeed, it is only recently that someone like Günter Grass dares to remind us in ImKrebsgang [In Crab walk] (Grass, 2002) of the largest maritime catastrophe, the sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff by the Russians in 1945 that killed between 6,000 and 9,000 German civilians (1,500 hundred people died in the Titanic catastrophe). Even now apologies by Germans, more than two-thirds of them born after the Second World War, are not met and seem vain. 'The enormity of the Nazi wrongdoing and the related fact that the primary victims cannot speak for themselves contribute to a conflicting sense ... that whatever efforts Germans may make – corporately or individually – these do not remove the burden of Germany’s past. To this extent, that past remains unforgiven and arguably unforgivable' (Lang, 1994: 113).

6. The controversy worsened. As an example, Elie Wiesel, during an honor ceremony at the White House, took the opportunity to admonish the President: 'That place, Mr. President, is not your place. Your place is with the victims of the SS' (Wiesel, 1985: 243). Reagan stood firm. His biographer Dinesh D'Souza writes: 'The conventional explanation [for the visit] is that he had told Chancellor Kohl he would come, and Kohl was very insistent' (D'Souza, 1997: 234). But, according to D'Souza:

Reagan believed it was unjust and corrosive for the guilt of the Holocaust to be transmitted to generations of Germans who were not even born during that time. They cannot be held responsible for the crimes of others simply by virtue of their German descent. Reagan sought to vindicate a spiritual insight, which is the destructiveness of forcing a nation to bear a perpetual, collective guilt complex. He understood the harmful effects of compelling successive generations of Germans, who had come a long way in building a free and democratic society, to wallow in the psychosis produced by the accusations of complicity in mass murder. (D'Souza, 1997: 235)

Reagan himself in his autobiography, which includes excerpts from his diary about the visit, maintains, ‘I didn’t think it was right to keep on punishing every German for the Holocaust, including generations not yet born in the time of Hitler. I don’t think all Germans deserve to bear the stigma for everything he did’ (Reagan, 1990: 380). Reagan added about the visit:

I have never regretted not canceling the trip to Bitburg. In the end I believe my visit to the cemetery and the dramatic and unexpected gesture by two old soldiers from opposing sides of the battlefield helped strengthen our European alliance and heal once and for all many of the lingering wounds of the war. General Ridgway had volunteered to go with me to Bitburg after the furor had erupted over my plans to visit the cemetery. It was time, said this man who was among the greatest of our warriors, to make peace. (Reagan, 1990: 384)

7. This is also echoed by Govier: ‘We do not forgive deeds; we forgive people who have committed deeds’ (2002: 109).

8. By not taking into consideration the public character of forgiveness, Derrida is even led to eliminate the condition that the perpetrator repents, another point on which Ricoeur agrees with him: ‘[Forgiveness] is unconditional, it is without exception and without restriction. It does not presuppose a request for forgiveness’ (Ricoeur, 2000: 605). If I forgive under the condition that the other repents, Derrida argues, he is no longer exactly the same as the perpetrator. Forgiving him would be too easy:

... one forgives someone other than the guilty one. In order for there to be forgiveness, must one not on the contrary forgive both the fault and the guilty as such, where the one and the other remain as irreversible as the
evil, as evil itself …? Must one not maintain that an act of forgiveness worthy of its name, if there ever is such a thing, must forgive the unforgivable, and without condition? (Derrida, 2000: 114; 2001: 39)

Ricoeur in part shares his view: ‘To forgive a guilty person while condemning her action would be to forgive a subject other than the one who committed the deed’ (Ricoeur, 2000: 638). In a footnote Ricoeur tempers Derrida’s radical view: the person to be forgiven is ‘the same, I would say, but potentially other, but not another (ibid.: 638).

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