

## Chapter 8

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# Elements of a phenomenology of evil and forgiveness

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### 8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I highlight the topic of trauma, truth, and reconciliation from the perspective of a phenomenology of evil. My basic intuitions are threefold. First, acts of evil have affective, interpersonal, political, and existential components (among others). The power and destructiveness of extreme acts of evil can, nevertheless, not be understood entirely as the sum of what happens in all these spheres. Second, the destructiveness of evil suggests that there is a dynamic at work that manifests itself as denial (in perpetrators) and speechlessness and powerlessness (in victims). Finally, denial and speechlessness have self-perpetuating tendencies that make victims vulnerable to repeating the evil themselves (cf. Card, 2002, p. 214).

I describe what I mean when I use the term ‘dynamic’ by exploring acts of evil and their consequences from different angles, mainly psychological and philosophical. I draw on literature on splitting, denial, and shame to gain a better understanding of the denial of perpetrators and the speechlessness of the victims and witnesses of acts of evil. I also compare acts of evil and acts of forgiveness with respect to their underlying existential patterns. My hypothesis will be that such patterns exist and that these patterns oppose one another.

The term phenomenology in the title of this chapter is used in a rather loose way. Phenomenology usually refers to an approach to science and philosophy—developed in the early twentieth century—that aims at describing as accurately as possible how the world appears to us. The word comes from the Greek verb ‘*phainomenai*’, which means ‘to appear.’ This understanding is contrasted with knowledge of essences of things. Some phenomenologists (such as Edmund Husserl, 1922) move in an idealist direction by saying that appearances (phenomena) only exist in one’s consciousness and that their reference to a world outside consciousness must be put in brackets. Others (such as Max Scheler, 1916) see these appearances as the result of an interaction

between the person and the world. The experience of sadness is then seen as a quality or value that emerges as the result of the interaction between a person and a particular object or event. On this account, my experience of sadness comes neither completely from within (as if sadness were a quality I add to things/events), nor completely from without (as if sadness were a quality of a thing, or event, that has nothing to do with my appreciation of that thing/event). It is an experience that should be attributed to the appreciating and experiencing relation between me and the world (the loss of a loved one; being traumatized). Phenomenologists of the latter type try to unravel the patterns and structures of these interactions.

It is in the latter sense that my approach can be called phenomenological. Phenomenology, here, consists of the careful description and analysis of the interactional dynamic between the person and the world in which he or she lives. However, I am not adopting a strictly phenomenological position, because I do not believe that there is such a thing as pure description. Descriptions are always in some way influenced by one's point of view and certain predilections. Another reason for being reluctant with respect to a straightforward phenomenological position is that I do not concur with the underlying assumptions of some existential phenomenologists, such as the assumption that phenomena such as evil and reconciliation should be approached from the perspective of an already existing and morally neutral 'fundamental ontology' (as suggested by Martin Heidegger, 1927) or be based on an analysis of freedom in which freedom is seen as merely negative (such as in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, 1943). So, I share the phenomenological approach to a certain extent, but not all of its underlying assumptions.

I begin descriptively, by trying to depict as unbiased as possible how evil appears—how it feels, what it does to people, and how it affects their lives. This chapter is limited to excessive forms of evil and their consequences, because they typically exemplify what I consider to be a relatively neglected aspect of evil—its nontransparency, the speechlessness to which it leads and is so characteristic for the atmosphere in which evil spreads out, almost like an infectious disease. In the course of this description, we will discover two points. First, we will recognize that, after a while, reporting on evil touches the dynamic of evil itself in the sense that it becomes more and more difficult to just say what evil 'is' and that it is tempting to evade this 'area of speechlessness' by addressing more concrete issues, or by taking an overly neutral and objective stance, or by letting one's attention be diverted to superficial issues.

The other point is that this 'speechlessness' is not only negative but also revealing, in the sense that it brings us to the dynamical core of evil or, at least, close to it. The guiding idea of this chapter is that something exists in the

nature of evil itself that resists being spoken about and thought about. It is precisely this resistance that can be analyzed in terms of a dynamic operating in acts of evil and their aftermath. The nontransparency of evil is, then, not just a (static) feature of evil. Nontransparency does not point primarily to our difficulty in describing evil acts and evildoers' motives. Instead, it is a dynamical category: something occurs during the process of experiencing and telling and analyzing that manifests itself in malfunction of one's very capacity to experience, in inability to verbalize, and in the ineffectiveness of the systems with which we categorize our moral world. In other words, it is by concentrating on the nontransparency of evil that we are in a better position to detect the dynamical pattern in the effects and transmission of evil.

In my use of the term 'evil,' I will take Claudia Card's recent definition as the point of reference. She states that 'evils are foreseeable intolerable harms produced by culpable wrongdoing' (Card, 2002, p. 3). This definition combines two points of view: the suffering (harm) and the deed (culpable wrongdoing), and it ties the two together by a relation of dependence or 'causation'. The wrongdoing 'produces' the harm. There are cases in which there is suffering, or harm, without wrongdoing: earthquakes and other forms of natural disaster, for instance; or sufferings produced by (excusable) innocence, coincidence or fortuity. There are also cases in which culpable wrongdoing only leads to moderate harm or suffering. In all these cases there is no evil, according to Card. Evil entails wrongdoing, but it is not identical to wrongdoing. Evil entails harm, but is not identical to harm or suffering. In short, the term 'evil' should be saved for situations in which intolerable harm is caused by culpable wrongdoing.

One important point in this definition is that it does not require intentions or other motivational states in the perpetrator to count a certain act as evil. Intentions do matter, but not for the definition of what it is for an act to be an instantiation of evil. Card accords here to a view held by Neiman, Arendt, and others, which places Auschwitz in the centre of philosophical reflection on moral evil. Auschwitz ruined the assumption that the extent of evil is proportional to the badness of the intention. The morally disturbing effect of mass destruction in the concentration camps was that so much evil could be produced by so little malice and forethought, says Neiman (2002, p. 271). She builds on Hannah Arendt's famous argument on the 'banality of evil,' an idea Arendt originally developed in *Eichman in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1965). Eichman did not appear to be the monster that many had thought he was. He did not seem to act on the basis of plainly evil motives; he was simply 'thoughtless' (Arendt, 1965). With Arendt's and Neiman's work, the issue of the relevance of motives and intentions has certainly not been

settled. Richard Bernstein, for instance, places a cautionary note by suggesting that there may be different forms of evil. At the end of a thoughtful discussion he says: ‘The banality of evil is a phenomenon exemplified by only some of the perpetrators of radical evil—desk murderers like Eichman’ (Bernstein, 2002, p. 232).

I nevertheless take Card’s definition as a pragmatic starting point. We will proceed, therefore, as if the volitional (or: intentional) aspect—malevolence—is not necessary for an act to be qualified as evil.<sup>1</sup> In the course of this chapter, we will see whether this approach fits the facts or needs refinement. There are, after all, victims for whom it does seem to add to their suffering that the perpetrator deliberately intended their pain and even death. We may expect that descriptions of the harms produced by these intended wrongdoings differ from nonintended (but culpable) wrongdoings, such as acts of recklessness or negligence. This would imply that there are different types of evil—at least at a psychological level. None of the philosophers cited thus far would disagree with this, I think. The question is whether and to what extent such psychological differences matter philosophically. Card’s definition is not psychological, but philosophical. It serves as a conceptual umbrella for the more severe cases of culpable wrongdoing, intended or not, that lead to intolerable harm. My pragmatic use of Card’s definition of evil entails, nevertheless, that I allow myself to speak of intentions and to refer to acts of malevolence, even if this would not make any difference with respect to what most philosophers consider to be evil.

Philosophy, however, is not the only field that has difficulty in determining the role of intentions in evildoing. Psychiatry and psychology do so too. This is discussed in the next section.

## 8.2 Two objections against the possible contribution of behavioral sciences to the understanding of evil

Psychiatry and psychology traditionally have been reluctant to define and study acts of evil and malevolence. What is the role of these professions in understanding these acts? Do psychiatry and psychology have the conceptual resources to describe and analyze the nature of evil? Do they have anything to contribute to the debate about moral evil? And, if not, *should* they have anything to contribute? What role do psychiatrists, psychologists, and

<sup>1</sup> Behind the question whether psychological differences with respect the presence or absence of intentions have philosophical significance, lurks the problematic issue of the conceptual status of intentions. We cannot go into this issue deeply, here.

psychotherapists have with respect to the wrongdoings and sufferings of their patients? Do they have any specific responsibility regarding evil and, if so, how is this responsibility accounted for in their professional codes?

Carl Goldberg (1996) argues that there are two assumptions underlying the relative neglect of the topic of evil by behavioral scientists. According to defenders of the *moral* objection, evil is a moral issue better left to theologians and philosophers. Acts of malevolence may be studied in an empirical way, but the nature of evil is such that it resists psychological scrutiny. One can study its superficial layers, such as behavioral and affective expressions of evil or personality dimensions contributing to these expressions but not the moral and existential core of the malevolent person. One can, in other words, study the personality but not the person.

On the other side, there are scientists who deny the existence of malevolence as a moral concept. On this view, malevolence should be discarded and replaced by more neutral behavioral and psychological terms, such as 'behavioral disorder.' Defenders of this view use what Goldberg calls the *psychological* objection. This objection represents a rather crude form of reductionism and scientism. It suggests that there is nothing in the phenomena of evil and acts of malevolence that cannot be expressed and, in the long run, explained by the behavioral sciences.

These objections can be seen as two sides of the same coin. They represent a positivist approach to science that either leads to the separation between moral and other aspects of behavior or to the reduction of moral issues to behavioral or biological facts. Positivism denies that there is a reality beyond what is 'positively' given, that is, beyond what can be described and analyzed in terms of some basic science. All other phenomena are subjective. On this view, morality is either subjective but nonreducible, or subjective and reducible to science.

Both objections are questionable, according to Goldberg, and I think he is right. With respect to the first (moral) objection, it could be argued that it is practically impossible to keep the moral aspects of evil at a distance in clinical practice. Even if we think that the proper object of psychiatry does not entail evil and acts of malevolence, psychiatrists and psychotherapists still have to deal with a reality of which these acts form a part. They treat perpetrators and victims of the acts of perpetrators. I cannot understand how such treatment could take place without the assumption that something terribly wrong has occurred and that this has produced harm for which someone is morally accountable.

One can try to exclude this moral aspect by saying that it is outside the scope of these professions and that practitioners should adopt a professional stance. This professionalism would at least imply neutrality with respect to moral

issues. However, the moral aspects of evil cannot be separated from their affective and interpersonal effects on the therapeutic relationship. Attempts to do so may even backfire. An example is the situation in which a patient's explicit questions about the therapists' thoughts about the harm done to her by the wrongdoing of another person remain unanswered on the basis of an overly strict interpretation of professional neutrality. The therapist's unresponsiveness on moral issues may come across to the patient as indifference. This indifference is then interpreted as sign of rejection and lack of attention and can lead to a terrible sense of isolation. It is clear that this outcome is undesirable for many reasons, moral ones included. Efforts to keep psychiatry and psychotherapy free from any moral concern may lead to a backlash in patients, or patients may knock on the clinician's door even more vigorously, not only because they need the emotional and practical support but often, and more importantly, because they want the clinician to take a stance politically and morally. This is one of the reasons why Judith Herman in her classic *Trauma and Recovery* (Herman, 1992) has been so explicit about the fact that personal and political aspects of traumatization cannot be separated.

The second (psychological) objection says that evil and acts of malevolence are reducible to mental disorder. This is, of course, a huge claim that puts a high burden on future scientific research. I am skeptical about this claim. This approach would not solve the problem of how to account for the immorality of evil deeds but would merely transfer it to the domains of psychiatry and psychology. Within this domain, all normative issues with respect to the nature of the ethical would return in disguised form—for instance, in discussions on the boundaries of the concept of disorder. What types of behavior are we going to consider as normal and what types as abnormal? Trying to discard the moral dimension of evil by reducing it to mental disorder will fail, because there is no convincing theory of mental disorder that can avoid the normative, and at least partly moral, questions of what to count as normal or abnormal behavior.

At present, we have many theories about aggression, feelings of inferiority, and shame. But there is a difference between aggression and shame, on the one hand, and sadism and torture, on the other hand. Sadism and torture presuppose a level of deliberateness that is not accounted for in standard theories on (pathological forms of) aggression and shame (however, cf. Baumeister and Vohs, 2004).<sup>2</sup> But even if we could explain the conditions

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<sup>2</sup> Baumeister and Vohs (2004, pp. 96–100) distinguish four roots of evil, violence as: (1) means to an end; (2) in response to threatened egotism; (3) in a misguided effort to do good; and (4) as means of gaining sadistic pleasure.

under which people are inclined intentionally to inflict intolerable harm on others, this explanation still would not answer the normative question of why we consider these deeds and the suffering caused by them to be morally unacceptable. By thinking that we could, we would fall into the trap of the so-called genetic (or: naturalistic) fallacy. Those who make this mistake think that the moral rightness or wrongness of behavior can be accounted for in terms of the causal antecedents of behavior. However, that belief is just as odd as condemning a television program and thinking that its unacceptability can be explained in terms of the electronic processes going on inside the television. Positively stated, behavioral theories describe and explain what occurs when people act, think, and feel. Morality, however, not only concerns what occurs but also who we are and should be. That is, ethics is not primarily about what we do but about who we are and who we take ourselves to be by what we are doing. This point is more fully developed by Paul Ricoeur in his *Oneself as Another* (1990). More generally, this view is true for virtue ethics (and not for Kantian or utilitarian ethics; see Potter, 2002).

### 8.3 Evil

I will now describe three aspects of evil that strike me as important and as related to one another. These aspects do not, of course, exhaust the list of possible features of evil. There are many forms and different degrees of evil. Nevertheless, the aspects of evil described below capture a number of important and related characteristics.

‘Evil’ is a very general term that lends itself to reification—as if evil were a thing or substance apart from the deeds, suffering, and relationships in which it is embodied. In my usage of the term, however, I am not aiming at qualities of a thing-like entity but at the affective, interpersonal, and existential dynamic in acts of evil and the suffering that is caused by these acts. The aspects of evil I delineate try to give an impression of how acts of evil exert their influence. They aim, in other words, at the dynamic core of evil. I identify the aspects of speechlessness, of splitting and denial, and of shame.

I am very much aware that the few cases I describe below are sketches and far from sufficient to support some of the claims I make with respect to evil’s dynamics. These examples should, therefore, be seen as provisional attempts that suggest an approach and should be supplemented with others. At the same time, it should be noted that evil perhaps will always retain its nontransparency (or: incomprehensibility; impenetrability; darkness). All attempts to describe evil are, therefore, somewhat paradoxical and have intrinsic limitations. They will always remain partial and insufficient.

As I stated above, the three aspects described below are attempts to give a more concrete idea of how evil works, first, in the malfunctioning of language (speechlessness), then in the intrapsychic and interpersonal manifestations of splitting and denial, and finally, in the effects of shame. The first point is cardinal: speechlessness is the most concrete manifestation of the dynamic of evil. It also comes closest to what I call the nontransparency of evil. It is in speechlessness that evil's power comes to expression; it is the way evil effaces its own footsteps. Splitting and denial are hardly purely descriptive concepts. These concepts, like the concept of shame, are introduced to understand better why the dynamic of evil is such that it seems to offer resistance to being put into words.

### Evil as revealed by speechlessness

One of the intriguing things about the way traumatized people deal with their past is that they may keep silent for a very long time about what has happened to them. Victims of prolonged childhood sexual abuse, women and children who suffer from domestic violence, and people returning from concentration camps are alike in that they often try to forget and to return to normal life. There are many possible explanations for this: fear that perpetrators and others will deny wrongdoing or exact reprisals; avoidance of the stress of remembering; disgust about what happened; or unwillingness to let one's existence continue to be determined by the meaninglessness of what happened. Speechlessness is an aspect of the dynamics of evil that is related to all this, but it highlights a slightly different point: a pervasive sense that what one has lived through is so absolutely different from normal life and represents a reality so totally 'out of joint' that one cannot effectively communicate about it. The victim becomes speechless, because the reality she has gone through is so unreal in the real world that it feels as if words lose their meaning and become futile and powerless. In the presence of normal people with their normal lives and all the tiny occurrences that make human existence human, what happened to her seems unreal, impossible, and of a totally different order. Some people would speak here of the powerlessness of language or the inability to communicate 'the incommunicable' or 'unthinkable.' I would like to suggest that it is not the powerlessness of language, but the dynamic of evil itself that offers resistance to being fully expressed and witnessed.

Nonvictims may experience the same kind of estrangement and powerlessness—but incomparably less intense, of course—when they hear perpetrators report on their crimes. The denial of some perpetrators may have seductive qualities, even sometimes after many years. I give an example that is based on the 8-hour long documentary *Shoah* by Claude Lanzmann (1985a, b). The



documentary includes an interview with Walter Stier, former chief of the Sondertransporte (Special Transportations) in Nazi Germany. Challenged by the interviewer, whose biting sarcasm he apparently fails to notice, Stier relates one detail after another of the great logistical and financial problems he faced during wartime and how he successfully overcame them. Every train wagon had to be paid for, and interdepartmental battles made it difficult to build up an efficient transportation system. When one hears Stier speaking, it seems as if time has stopped during the 40 years that passed since then: in his voice, we hear the old excitement. At a certain point in his story he uses a significant phrase—Umsiedlertransporte (removal transports) (Lanzmann, 1985b, p. 168). The term suggests how Stier saw, and still sees, his work during World War II—that is, as a magisterial administrative operation resulting in a ‘change of residence’ for millions of Jews and others. Of course, he knew about the mass extinction in the gas chambers and about the level of coercion that was needed to organize the transportations. But even 40 years after the events took place, he refuses to use terms that refer to deportation, coercion, and personal responsibility for his enabling of mass extinction. Stier’s language suggests that the realities of the Holocaust did not exist.

My point is not to emphasize this denial as such, but to underscore its effectiveness and its seductive qualities. It is the combination of thoughtlessness and ease with which the term ‘removal transport’ is used that is revealing. By listening to this former Nazi chief, one gets a glimpse of how it once worked and might work again, how lies can support one another and weave together in ideology, how evil deprives persons of their language, and how difficult it is in such a bureaucracy not to let oneself be deprived of verbal means of giving testimony about what is going on—in short: to *not* become speechless.

Nazi bureaucracy’s language was permeated with such euphemisms and falsehoods. It is the language itself that is disturbing, but also disturbing is the ease with which it is used after so many years—as if nothing special happened at that moment and as if nothing special has happened since then. Stier’s denial is not primarily a negation of something that took place but rather the suggestion that there is nothing to deny. It is instructive to notice the persistence of this (self-) suggestion in former war criminals like Stier. And it is not difficult to imagine how the same mechanisms could work today, both at an individual and a societal level.

The silence of trauma survivors and the denial of perpetrators complement one another. Their behaviors represent two forms of speechlessness. There are many understandable reasons for this speechlessness, as we saw: anxiety, disgust, avoidance of pain, and unwillingness to talk, in the case of victims; self-deception, ideology and lack of judgment, in the case of perpetrators.

Victims sometimes seem to be caught in a self-perpetuating cycle in which all these aspects play a self-destructive role. To speak is the first step in breaking this cycle, whereas speechlessness confirms the victims' expectations that attempts to do so are futile. Therefore, speechlessness is both the expression and the source of a self-destructive dynamic. It is an expression of this dynamic because to speak would mean to resist the dynamic and to take a first step toward a return to the 'normal' world. It is a source of this dynamic because the longer lies are tolerated and remain unaddressed, the more effective the suggestion of their effectiveness may become. Speechlessness, therefore, gives us a clue to understanding the power of the self-enhancing destructiveness of evil.

Perpetrators are caught in a similar way: their speechlessness is the corollary of their lies. They cannot talk about the unsaid, because that would refute their lies. Their lies confirm that what really is occurring has no name and is unspeakable. Lies exert their suggestive influence at least as much by what they conceal as by what they try to lead us to believe. Evil's fertile soil is the lie, but also what comes with the lie: the effective suggestion of the unreality of truth.

To speak in a context in which lies prevail is also, therefore, a moral act. To speak is to witness; it is to give testimony to what has happened based on a conviction that relationships are not meant to be exploited in the way one has experienced. Such testimonies require courage. When traumatization occurs on a larger scale, as in domestic violence or war rape, those who testify also need political support. This is the reason why authors like Herman and Card put so much emphasis on continuity between the personal and the political dimension of traumatization.

### **Splitting and denial as psychic defenses and as mechanisms consolidating the silence and incapacity to speak**

In the previous section, I discussed the importance of lying and the denial that is necessary for lying to become effective. So far, I used the term 'denial' in a specific sense, not just as equivalent to uttering a negation, but in an almost hyperbolic sense as the 'effective suggestion that there is nothing to deny.' In this section, I build on this notion by turning to the intrapsychic dimensions of denial and its underlying mechanisms. Theories about these intrapsychic dimensions are mainly psychoanalytical. Psychoanalysts see splitting as the key mechanism enabling denial. Splitting refers to the processes by which intrapsychic contents are kept apart. So, denial and splitting are closely related concepts; denial is the descriptive term and splitting denotes the explanatory mechanism sustaining denial. I give an example.

Psychiatrist and journalist Robert Lifton is one thinker who attributes a key role to splitting in trying to understand what took place in the minds of physicians who were responsible for the selection and mass execution of people in the concentration camps. In his book *The Nazi Doctors* (1986), Lifton begins with the observation that doctors who supplied the arguments for genocide and who were involved in the execution of it appeared not to be the sadists others assumed them to be. On the contrary, they were often persons who in daily life were reasonable and friendly and respected for their expertise. According to Lifton, genocide and mass murder were not so much the result of individual sadism as of the collective embrace of a medical metaphor. The ulcer of Jewry (and other degenerates) had to be excised from the sick body of humanity.

The adherence to this metaphor, however, came at a price. It could only be sustained by denial, and this in turn by splitting, according to Lifton. The assumption of such splitting processes makes sense of the fact that these physicians maintained their mental stability when confronted with the results of their deeds. In the end, splitting became consolidated in their personalities. Lifton speaks of a split in the personality of some of the most prominent figures. One of them, Joseph Mengele, stroked the heads of children, spoke friendly words to them, and gave them candy. A few hours later, he witnessed their deaths in the gas chamber. The horror of these scenes, Lifton suggests, can only be tolerated by the perpetrator by the artificial separation of different states of mind. It is splitting that can bring about such separation. One state of mind was under the influence of the medical metaphor and all other Nazi propaganda. It denied vital aspects of interpersonal relationships and could only be maintained by splitting off almost all emotions and interpersonal inclinations, like tenderness, compassion, empathy, and the need to attach to others. This splitting is reflected by the emotional numbing and the flattening of affect when these persons were functioning as Nazis. Another state of mind seemed to be operative when these physicians were present in the inner circle of friends and relatives and, perhaps, also in the presence of nameless and unknown children in the camps. In this state of mind, a relatively normal pattern of behavior and feeling emerged—however, at the expense of a proper valuation of what was going on in the world outside.

Lifton does not suggest that physicians like Mengele were suffering from mental disorder. The split in their personality did not conform to what we now call dissociative identity disorder. Even less does he suggest that splitting as a defense mechanism could be the sole explanation of the behavior of these physicians. Lifton is very much aware of the hazards of any attempt to explain the horrors performed by Nazi doctors: explanations would almost inevitably

be interpreted or be used as an excuse. But Lifton's primarily descriptive approach gives us the opportunity to suggest another possibility: one might say that splitting is one of the processes that made the genocide psychologically possible. This is what Lifton suggests. However, we also may read this proposition in another direction—that splitting is not only a psychological condition for evil; it is also a *vehicle* for the expression of evil. If this is true, it is by the process of splitting that evil exerts its intoxicating and emotionally and morally numbing power.

I realize that, by these remarks, I leave the realm of psychology proper and enter a domain of existential and, perhaps, metaphysical concerns. However, we are not far from our previous statement about denial as the 'effective suggestion that there is nothing to deny.' All I have done is replace the term 'denial' by 'evil.' Evil consists, then, of the effective suggestion that there is nothing to deny (provided that there is some intolerable harm). This false but effective suggestion is both a condition and a vehicle for evil to break out and to manifest itself in actions. This suggestion is maintained by the process of splitting. Evil's power consists of the efficacy of the suggestion that there is nothing to deny and to feel worried about. This treacherous suggestiveness is a form of (culpable) denial. This denial, in its turn, can be explained by the process of splitting as an inner mechanism of defense.

Moral conflicts cannot emerge in such a context because of the efficacy of the splitting process and the denial to which it leads. Splitting is a condition for the emergence of evil, Lifton hypothesizes. My suggestion is to take the other option just as seriously—the hypothesis that it is evil itself that comes to the surface by the mechanism of splitting and insurmountable denial. I admit that this suggestion is very tentative and may only apply to some perpetrators and to some severely traumatized people with a tendency to overt (self-) destructiveness. It could, however, shed some light on the question of how to understand the destructiveness and power of splitting processes both in traumatized and in traumatizing people.

### Evil and shame

I now turn to the topic of shame. Shame can be interpreted as an important psychological source that sustains splitting processes. The prototypical case of shame is a situation in which the person feels exposed and embarrassed by the look of a critical or devaluing other (Lewis, 1995). The typical inclination of the shameful person is to hide and to avoid the look of others. Shame is a complex emotion and there are different types of shame. One can feel ashamed about not meeting the expectations of others with respect to a certain task. Shame may be related to one's body shape or one's way of expressing oneself

verbally or emotionally. One may feel shame about who one is and about the fact of one's existence. Shame may be related to actual looks and remarks, but also to what one expects others might think or remark. People who feel ashamed typically show a diminishment of spontaneity and a heightened awareness of interpersonal distance. The most intense experiences of shame are accompanied by a deep sense of isolation and of being pinned down by one's own misery. These intense experiences are sometimes accompanied by feelings of depersonalization. Depersonalization occurs when one looks at oneself through the eyes of the other without the capacity to bridge the gap between the observing ego and the experiencing self. The concept of depersonalization is complex but, in cases of shame, it denotes the incapacity to reconcile the intensely humiliating look of the internalized other with one's basic sense of self. Phrased in these terms, one can understand how early experiences of intense shame may lead to an internalization of the gap (or: split) between the internalized critical other and the experiential self and to the denial of feelings and needs that belong to the experiential self. This internalization, in its turn, is reflected by a predilection for the use of splitting as an inner mechanism of defense. This defense mechanism is activated when the person experiences signals of humiliation or devaluation.

In situations of shame with moderate intensity, we are inclined to respond to our own shame by hiding ourselves and to the humiliation of others with compassion, consolation, and support. Intense shame, however, seems to be related to experiences that cannot be shared with and tolerated by others—at least not in the imagination of the person who feels shame. If one lacks the capacity to bridge the distance between expectation and reality, how could one expect others to do so? I will illustrate this again with a fragment from the documentary *Shoah*. The fragment shows a person struggling with intense shame (Lanzmann, 1985, pp. 207–21).

When Jan Karski, the liaison officer between the Polish resistance movement and the Polish government in exile, is asked about his experiences in the Warsaw ghetto, he is initially unable to speak. He struggles with his emotions. He had never spoken of his experiences in the ghetto. The questions burden him too much and he seems to be embarrassed. On his request, the camera is put at a distance and he begins to talk, stammering and with many hesitations. This, together with his diminished spontaneity, is fairly typical for feelings of shame. After a while, he relates how he had been invited by two Jewish resistance fighters to visit the ghetto in order to be a witness later. The stammering of this Polish aristocrat gives us some insight into the reality of the ghetto and how it alienated and depersonalized people, including those who were not victims but only witnesses. Karski speaks of the heaps of corpses along the

road, of the animal looks in the eyes of people, and of the stench that hung there. He recalls the almost absurd joy of children who played on the square despite everything that was going on. In trying to find words for these experiences, he reveals a glimpse of a world that is so different from ours that it defies one's imagination. Faced with the horror and absurdity, every word seems to be inadequate, and therefore a distortion, or—worse—even an excuse, an attempt to lessen what really went on and to go back to normality. This is why the philosopher Theodore Adorno wrote that poetry after Auschwitz would be barbarism (quoted in Neiman, 2000, p. 238).

Shame is not simply an affective state in this case; it is not merely the awareness that one does not meet the expectations of others. It is, in its most intense form, an alienating experience of disarray and of loneliness—a loneliness that is effectuated by having been part of a reality that cannot be shared with others. Why not? That is a very difficult question, a question perhaps with more than one answer. Some memories may be too horrible to speak about. Perhaps it is the intensity of one's feelings of helplessness and vulnerability that lead to shame; or, that one's very existence is demeaned; or, the assumption that nobody will ever understand what one has gone through and that others, because of their incapacity to understand, will try to distort or smooth out or normalize what has happened. Returning to these memories may be shameful because one feels exposed again. Shame may become mixed with anxiety in such cases.

Shame, like splitting, is related to denial. The existential experience of the real or imagined incapacity to share one's most troubling experiences is at the basis of denial and splitting, but also of shame. These experiences are warded off by splitting and denial, but may emerge later in situations where one feels exposed and humiliated again, actually or in imagination. Shame, in other words, points at another dimension of the incapacity to share one's most pervading experiences, the dimension of feeling exposed and of having been part of a totally different world, a world that is horrible and disgusting. Even the memory of having been part of this world is humiliating. Parallel to my hypothesis about splitting, I suggest that these experiences of intense shame and their devastating consequences are both a vehicle of evil and at the root of new forms of evil. If this is true, shame is both a result and a cause of evil. It is, like splitting, one of the vehicles by which it spreads out and exerts its influence.

Some authors point to this intermingling of existential, interpersonal and affective aspects of shame. Goldberg (1996), for instance, argues that early experiences of intense shame lie at the root of the development of the malevolent personality and may lead to a recurrent cycle of shame, powerlessness, hatred, violence, and again shame—the 'anger–shame cycle.' This cycle is not

just affective; it may influence important interpersonal relationships and, in the end, dominate one's entire existence. Shame is, therefore, also an existential phenomenon. People with such intense shame perceive their existence as totally worthless and as intolerably vulnerable. Their answer to shame is to withdraw and hide and, if this no longer tolerated, to break out with destructive self-defense.

To summarize, we began with the speechlessness of victims and the denial of those responsible for evil and its workings. We signaled how difficult it is to not let oneself be made speechless in the presence of evil. Speechlessness was a first indicator of the dynamics of evil. In the sections on denial and splitting, we explored this dimension further. Denial and splitting refer to inner psychological processes that help to sustain the 'silence' and incapacity to speak, I suggested. Here I played with the idea of a reversal of perspective in at least some extreme situations—a reversal that suggests that denial and splitting are not only conditions for the occurrence of evil but also expressions of evil, or, better, vehicles for evil to come to expression. This idea was further developed in the section on shame. Shame reveals an interpersonal dynamic that is sustained by splitting processes and that leads to denial, speechlessness, and withdrawal. But perhaps, I suggested, we may again reverse our view by interpreting the interpersonal dynamic of shame as an expression of evil itself, at least in the most severe cases of dominance and humiliation. Purely descriptive, psychodynamic, or interpersonal approaches do not seem adequately to grasp this dynamic aspect, even when analyzed in terms of the so-called shame-anger cycle. We need overarching existential and philosophical concepts to retain a feel for the power and inherent destructiveness of (acts of) evil.

#### 8.4 Forgiveness and reconciliation

I now proceed with an investigation of some of the features of forgiveness and reconciliation. My hypothesis is that the foregoing description of the dynamic of evil may also give a clue to our understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, and vice versa, especially with respect to their dynamical features. I am interested in the heuristic value of a perspective that considers forgiveness as a way to overcome the dynamics of evil. So, what are the typical features of the dynamic of forgiveness?

There is a large body of extant literature on the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation (see Murphy and Hampton, 1988; Jones, 1995; Enright and North, 1998; Worthington, 1998; McCullough *et al.*, 2000; Murphy, 2003). Most authors agree that forgiveness refers to a motivational state or to 'a motivation empowered by basic emotion' (Worthington, 1998, p. 129). Jeffrie

Murphy considers it as a change of inner feeling that consist of 'the overcoming, on moral grounds, of the vindictive passions' (2003, p. 16) or, more extensively, it is 'the overcoming, on moral grounds, of the intense negative reactive attitudes that are quite naturally occasioned when one has been wronged by another—mainly vindictive passions of resentment, anger, hatred, and the desire for revenge.' (Murphy, 2003, p. 13).

Others add the element of giving: 'Forgiveness exists as a gift that is granted to someone who has harmed one' (Worthington, 1998, p. 129; cf. also Hampton, in: Murphy and Hampton, 1988, p. 37). North (1998), Enright *et al.* (1998), and Worthington (1998) describe stages in the process of forgiveness. North includes stages the wrongdoer must complete, thereby suggesting that forgiveness cannot entirely be seen as an inner process in the forgiver.

For our discussion, forgiveness is the central concept, but to understand its complex dynamic it may help to turn first to the broader and more diffuse concept of reconciliation. Reconciliation differs from forgiveness. It typically happens within a relationship instead of within a person or regarding one person. It refers to the end point of a process between two (or more) persons as a result of which they are able to live and work together again. Enright *et al.* write: 'Forgiveness is one person's response to injury. Reconciliation involves two people coming together again. The injurer must realize his or her offense, see the damage done, and take steps to rectify the problem.' (1998, p. 49).

Most authors agree that there can be reconciliation without forgiveness, that is, without a change of inner feelings and attitudes toward the wrongdoer or on grounds other than moral ones. Reconciliation is, therefore, not inherently a moral concept, whereas forgiveness by definition is one. Reconciliation may, in other words, be pursued for merely instrumental reasons. Parties of which one has wrongly injured the other may, for instance, agree that to break up would cause more harm than to try to find a way to live or work together. Forgiveness does not seem to be compatible with such an instrumental approach. One may try to give up one's feelings of resentment because it seems wise or in the interest of both parties. These interests may be very practical, for instance, financial or familial. One can even defend these motives on moral grounds other than a duty to forgive or a virtue of forgiveness—for instance by using utilitarian reasoning to the effect that reconciliation will provide the greater benefit for all parties in the long run and does not require a change of the inner feelings and inclinations of the persons that are involved. But most people would not think of these situations as instances of forgiveness. Either resentful feelings are not overcome or the grounds on which the feelings are given up are not appropriate to the feelings. In the first situation, we might speak of pseudo-forgiveness. One example is the victim who says she



has overcome her resentful feelings but continually reminds the offender of the injury inflicted on her. In the second situation, the victim has overcome his negative feelings and attitude toward the offender (or at least claims to have done so), but the reason is not rooted in the desire to bring about a change in one's relationship with the offender. So differences exist between reconciliation and forgiveness. Reconciliation allows utilitarian reasoning and absence of change of inner feelings and attitudes towards the wrongdoer. Forgiveness does not. Forgiving on other grounds than the moral impetus to change one's relationship with the offender seems to violate the logic of emotions and attitudes that are involved in the process of forgiving.

There are grey zones, however. In many situations, the moral grounds people have are mixed—mixed with other moral grounds and with instrumental purposes. It seems safe to recognize that cases exist in which both forgiveness and reconciliation occur and cases in which there is reconciliation without forgiveness (restoration of the relationship for instrumental purposes) and forgiveness without reconciliation (forgiveness without the intent of restoration of the relationship).

Let us now turn to a more detailed analysis of different layers or dimensions of reconciliation or reconciliatory behavior. This will also pave the way for a clearer view of forgiveness and its dynamics.

## Reconciliation

Rituals of reconciliation are said to exist in animals. They are extensively studied in ape colonies where these rituals function as a form of peace-keeping (de Waal, 1988). Grooming and greeting rituals calm down pent-up emotions that otherwise could lead to intraspecies aggression. These rituals instill a feeling of superiority and of being valued that members higher in the group hierarchy need. Ethology and animal psychology may help to recognize analogous behaviors in humans. I am inclined to emphasize the differences between animal and human reconciliation and to view animal forms of reconciliation as precursors of human forms. When animal precursors are built into human functioning, they gain new significance. These human behaviors can, for instance, now be evaluated in normative terms. Are these behaviors genuine? What do they say about the person and who she wants to be? Are they merely the expression of self-interest or do they serve overarching purposes? Animal psychology can at best only partly account for these normative aspects. It seems realistic, however, to keep in mind that forgiveness and reconciliation are seldom totally pure and unaffected by complicated motives and free of any form of pretending. We may deceive others by pretending to conform to their social and moral order for the sake of our own interests.

Reconciliation-like behaviors in humans may be displayed without and with the explicit intention to reconcile. An example of the latter form of behavior is an employee who, after having been threatened with dismissal, deliberately tries to establish a 'positive' relationship with a supervisor by the display of submissive and pleasing behavior. It is a matter of definition whether or not to count these behaviors as variants of reconciliation.

Reconciliation between humans minimally requires the restoration of an interpersonal relationship, according to Enright *et al.* (1998). For this restoration to occur, it may help to give up feelings of hatred and resentment and the inclination to take revenge. This is the affective and inclinational dimension of reconciliation. It depends on one's definition of reconciliation whether or not to include this dimension as a necessary condition for reconciliation between humans. For now, it is enough to see that reconciliation in humans often involves an affective and inclinational dimension that can be distinguished from the behavioral, cognitive, and moral dimensions.

The same holds basically for change of opinion about the wrongdoer and/or his deeds. It is easier to try to heal a relationship if the wrongdoer can be seen against the background of his biography, education, and social circumstances. However, this does not mean that change of opinion is a prerequisite for reconciliation. This will depend on the persons and the circumstances that are involved. Moreover, understanding the wrongdoer better is not the same as excusing his behavior. One can understand the person of the wrongdoer and his deeds without denying his responsibility. Change of opinion and understanding should, therefore, be distinguished from the moral dimension of reconciliation.

An interesting feature of reconciliation consists of the fact that acts of reconciliation may have moral meaning even if they are not performed on moral grounds. This is so because restoration of interpersonal relationships requires that claims for punishment have been given up and that there is an agreement on compensation. In other cases, punishment has already taken place. Reconciliation is the end point of a process in which parties have negotiated about such claims and have reached some form of agreement. Such agreement forms the basis for restoration of a minimally required amount of trust and may imply punishment or other forms of (lasting) compensation. However, the achievement of such a result implies also that one has given up one's right for further compensation, moral and nonmoral. Moral compensation is the most interesting case for our purposes. It may take different forms: making an apology, showing remorse, feeling repentance, or acting responsibly by solving the problems that led to the infliction of harm. I admit that these latter examples come close to forgiveness. But it is worth at least

a thought experiment to imagine situations in which moral compensation is given on nonmoral (for instance, practical and/or utilitarian) grounds. Some of the activities of the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa could be interpreted in this sense: as events with a moral meaning even in cases in which the reconciliatory acts themselves were not primarily based or performed on moral grounds.

To sum up, reconciliation is an interpersonal process in which two parties come together again on the basis of restoration of the relationship to a level that both desire. There are forms of reconciliation that come close to mere negotiation and—at the other end of the spectrum—forms that include forgiveness. Reconciliation involves affective, interpersonal, cognitive, and moral aspects that play a different role, depending on the context.

### Forgiveness

Forgiveness differs from reconciliation (at least) in that it requires moral grounds and the overcoming of vindictive passions (Murphy, 2003). This overcoming of one's passions is an inner process. Let us now make this more precise, by summarizing points of criticism against Murphy's definition that were raised by Jean Hampton (Murphy and Hampton, 1988). Hampton's criticisms will prepare us for a discussion of the dynamics of forgiveness.

Hampton's main concern is that forgiveness involves much more than just a change of one's feeling state. She interprets Murphy's position as arguing for an understanding of forgiveness as primarily a change of feeling on moral grounds. For the present purposes, it is not relevant whether or not this interpretation is right (cf., for instance, Murphy, 2003, for a refinement of his earlier position). Hampton agrees that a change of feelings usually includes change of opinion (judgment). However, this is not enough, in her view. Central to the concept of forgiveness is a change in the relationship to the wrongdoer by which a person is able to absolve the wrongdoer from guilt. Like Worthington (1998, p. 129), Hampton describes forgiveness as a gift. The gift consists of absolution from guilt. We speak of forgiveness as 'bestowed upon' or 'offered to' the wrongdoer, she says (cf. Hampton, in: Murphy and Hampton, 1988, p. 37; cf. pp. 36–43 and pp. 79–87). The change in the attitude of the forgiver leads to an offer to the wrongdoer that allows the latter to re-enter the community. This is a pretty strong position, so we have to see how Hampton builds up her argument.

Hampton's reasoning about forgiveness is of the same type as our attempt in the previous paragraphs to unwrap the different dimensions of reconciliation. Changes of feelings (on moral grounds) are not enough, she says. Feelings may change because we want them to change (for moral reasons) or because

they fade away (with our moral consent). But we may still think about the wrongdoer as an evil person. To forgive involves more than no longer being angry; it is more than suppressing one's feelings or letting them fade away.

Changes in both feeling and judgment will also not suffice to account fully for forgiveness. Change of judgment would involve the acceptance of the moral wrong, according to Hampton. This statement needs explanation. The example Hampton gives is of the instrumental or utilitarian type mentioned above. A stern and rigid father criticizes his daughter-in-law for her sloppy housekeeping; the son advises his wife to give up her resentment (the feeling) and to think well (the judgment) of her father-in-law for the greater good of family peace (utilitarian reason). It is questionable, I think, whether Murphy would count this case as an example of forgiveness in terms of his own definition (overcoming vindictive passions on moral grounds). Even if family peace is considered as a moral ground in this case, and even if the daughter-in-law really would change her feelings and attitudes, Murphy could still maintain that the example does not suffice as an example of forgiveness on his account, because the grounds on which the feelings are given up are not appropriate to the feelings.

Let me explain what I mean here with appropriateness of moral grounds. The issue is intriguing, because it focuses our attention on the nature of the feelings that are overcome and on the quality of the moral grounds for changing one's feelings. For the daughter-in-law, it would, for instance, be inappropriate to give up her anger if it included *moral* indignation. Moral indignation implies that the daughter-in-law's conviction that the father-in-law has done something really morally wrong toward her by blaming her for her inadequate housekeeping. Giving up moral indignation for a reason not related to the indignation implies that she accepts the moral wrong. Asking the daughter-in-law to drop her judgment about the father for the interests of the family and to respond as if no offense had occurred is asking her to drop the moral element of her protest too and to accept a situation that is morally wrong. Such change of opinion under pressure may in the end amount to self-deception. Think, for instance, of a situation in which the daughter-in-law discovers that all family members think her husband is right and in which she finally surrenders her opinion. Would this count as forgiveness? I think that both Murphy and Hampton would answer negatively. Murphy would argue that the grounds are inappropriate to feelings: family peace is, even as moral ground, inappropriate to overcome indignation about what someone else has wrongly and culpably done to us. Hampton would say that changes of judgment under pressure are, in fact, a form of self-deception. Prolonged self-deception undermines one's sense of self-worth and is morally unacceptable as well.

It is in this context that Hampton introduces the concept of condonation, which she defines as ‘. . . the acceptance, without moral protest (either inward or outward), of an action which ought to warrant such protest, made possible, first, by ridding oneself of the judgment that the action is wrong [. . .]; and second, by ridding oneself of any attendant feelings which signify one’s protest of the action.’ (Hampton, in: Murphy and Hampton, 1988, p. 40. The distinction between forgiving and condoning was first introduced by Kolnai, 1973–74).

The latter part of this definition is important. The (moral) protest is already present in feelings: indignation about the father-in-law is a feeling that includes a moral element. The person who is asked to condone is asked to give up such opinions (judgments) and feelings and to accept as moral that which has been experienced as immoral. In short, to condone is to accept the moral wrong, whereas forgiveness does not accept it.

At this point a new problem emerges: if it is true that to forgive differs from to condone and that to forgive is to absolve someone from guilt, how can one remain committed to the idea that the actions of the wrongdoer were wrong and unacceptable? How can one forgive and, by doing so, give up one’s moral protest and still think that the actions of the wrongdoer were wrong? Hampton’s response to this question is complex and involves a thorough analysis of such emotional states as resentment, indignation, and hatred. I can only summarize her conclusion here. Forgiveness is a process that—after the psychological preparation—involves a change of heart, which change is such that it creates inner room to see the wrongdoer in a different and more acceptable light and to consider him, to some degree, as distinct from his deeds. The victim comes to see the wrongdoer as ‘still decent; not rotten as a person, and someone with whom he may be able to renew a relationship’ (Hampton, in: Murphy and Hampton, 1988, p. 83). In spite of the fact that the harm cannot be undone and that the moral judgment about what has happened does not change, the person who forgives experiences a change of inner attitude that enables the victim to accept the wrongdoer as ‘still decent.’

Repentance and gestures of regret on the part of the wrongdoer may help to bring about this change of inner attitude. But forgiving is not just a reaction to another’s repentance, according to Hampton. Acceptance of repentance may still be a proportionate reaction, which is performed because it seems reasonable to do so, or because one thinks one ought to, or because it is what people expect one to do. Such motivations are not inherently moral. They are not distinctive for the concept of forgiveness.

For Hampton the crucial elements of forgiveness are the change of heart and the decision to see the wrongdoer in a different light, namely as still

decent. To forgive is to absolve the wrongdoer from guilt and to approve him as a person despite what he has done. This absolution and approval are, in fact, a gift.

Coercive measures to prompt someone to be forgiving change forgiveness into something very different. How could an act that is meant to absolve another from guilt and possible retribution, and that has the potential to liberate the offender from a circle of shame and self-denial, be performed when this liberating act itself is not free? The question is rhetorical: forgiveness is a free act, and it cannot be offered on demand. Coercion and forgiveness exclude one another.

So, those who forgive give up their claims of retribution and compensation but do not condone or excuse the deeds of the wrongdoer. The wrongdoer is still held blameworthy and responsible for the misery he has brought about. These ideas explain why the process of forgiveness is so delicate. It is delicate because the wrongdoer may interpret the attitude of the victim as expressing moral superiority. This perception will keep the wrongdoer from admitting his shortcomings. On the other hand, the victim may give in too soon and on inadequate grounds.

## 8.5 The dynamics of forgiveness

Section 8.4 provides the necessary preparatory work to suggest in what way the dynamic of evil is counteracted by the process of forgiveness and how this process is related to the points we discussed earlier: speechlessness, splitting and denial, and shame. The hypothesis I investigate in the remainder of this chapter is that, indeed, forgiveness is a process that overcomes the dynamic of evil on these three critical points. First a disclaimer again: I can give here only the skeleton of an approach that would need much more detail to be convincing. What follows is a sketch with many loose ends. I can only hope that the general approach, as well as the loose ends, raise sufficient questions and interest to stimulate thinking on our subject.

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted the nontransparency of acts of evil and their consequences and connected this nontransparency with features of the dynamic of evil. I interpreted the speechlessness of the victim and the denial of the wrongdoer both (but in a different way) as manifestations of evil (in cases of intolerable harm) and as possible sources of new evil. Later, I suggested that splitting and shame fulfill a similar double role. They can be seen as enhancing and as expressing evil. Neither side of the interpretation was favored above the other. The simultaneity of both aspects suggests they are part of a dynamic process with a cyclic, or spiral, nature. Evil produces

speechlessness, denial, shame, and violence, which, in their turn, are at the root of new manifestations of evil.

My attempts to discuss the nontransparency of evil in more detail remain necessarily incomplete and ambiguous: when it is in the nature of evil to deprive us of our language and to shake our moral order to the extent that we feel lost and disoriented, then a certain amount of nontransparency will always remain. I reiterate that speaking has a moral meaning in such circumstances. It means resisting the power of denial and giving witness to the unheard. We have to remember that the dynamic of evil to a large extent consists of the suggestion that there is nothing to deny. In other words, the dynamic itself is 'empty,' like the eye of a hurricane. This emptiness, in other words, reveals both the dynamic power of evil and the speechlessness surrounding acts of evil.

Richard Bernstein, at the end of his book on radical evil, speaks of a 'black hole' in our understanding:

We seek to comprehend the meaning of evil, its varieties and vicissitudes. We want to know why it is that some individuals choose evil and others resist it. We want to know why some individuals adopt goods maxims and others adopt evil maxims. There is much we can say about someone's background, training, education, character, circumstances, etc. The social disciplines and psychology all contribute to this understanding. But it never adds up to a complete explanation of why individuals make the choices they do. There is always a gap, a 'black hole,' in our accounts.

Bernstein (2002, p. 235)

I have explored this 'black hole' by viewing it as an existential dynamic. Hannah Arendt, while using different terminology, seems to refer to a similar dynamic when she writes about the 'empty space' around friends and loved ones in the year 1933, when the Nazi regime gained power: 'The problem, the personal problem, was not what our enemies did but what our friends did. In the wave of Gleichschaltung (co-ordination), which was relatively voluntary—in any case, not yet under the pressure of terror—it was as if an empty space formed around one.' [*Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954* (ed. J Kohn), pp. 10–11. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1994; quotation via Bernstein, *ibid.*, p. 22].

This 'empty space' suggests another dimension of evil we have encountered: the erosion of trust and the isolation and unconnectedness to which acts of evil lead.

By invoking forgiveness, I do not mean to say that acts of evil—and especially not the horrible acts of evil we discussed in more detail—should be forgiven. The question of whether and how and when to forgive, is practical,

clinical, and theological, but not primarily philosophical. My interest here is conceptual and philosophical—the kind of philosophy that is informed by psychology and psychiatry.

Before finishing my analysis of the dynamics of evil and forgiveness, I want to point out why the contrast between the two is so challenging. I use the concept of forgiveness in its strongest sense, like Hampton, as an inner act that includes the gift of absolving guilt and of approving the person of the wrongdoer; as an act that is more than a change of feeling and judgment; an act that differs from condonation; and is not merely a reaction to the wrongdoer's repentance. Just as the dynamic of evil cannot become completely transparent, the dynamic of forgiveness also retains an element that impresses us as almost unexplainable. I am not saying that acts of forgiveness as such cannot be verbalized or understood, or that the interpersonal and affective dynamic of the process of forgiveness is inexpressible. My point is that, despite all description and conceptual refinement, acts of forgiveness still seem to be groundless to an extent. First, they are groundless in the sense that the forgiver does not have any warrant about the outcome of his offer of absolution to the wrongdoer and, second, they are groundless in the sense that there may be a shortage of grounds to base the gift of forgiveness on. To forgive is to take a risk—a risk that the offer is declined or is interpreted as a sign of weakness, with all the dangers that come with this (humiliation; repetition of abuse; adoption of a submissive attitude).

I take this groundlessness not as a cognitive or evidential error but as a sign that indicates the dynamic of forgiveness. This dynamic is as rich as the dynamics of evil and seems to manifest opposite tendencies compared with the dynamic of evil. What I call 'dynamic' is, again, not distinct from but interwoven with the affective and interpersonal dimensions of forgiveness. But these affective and interpersonal aspects cannot completely account for the way this dynamic works. The gift of forgiveness is ultimately moral, or even religious. Forgiveness in its most mature forms may have a power that is strong enough to absorb not only the feelings and judgments about someone who behaved immorally toward us but also the dynamic of evil that comes with these feelings and judgments. I am not saying that these feelings and judgments as such are evil, of course. What I suggest is that the dynamic of evil is such that it may make use of these feelings and judgments, for instance, by locking the victim in his world of pain and hatred and by instilling insuperable feelings of shame in the wrongdoer.

I now return to the three characteristics of the dynamic of evil: speechlessness; denial and splitting; and shame. Forgiveness is impossible without recognition of what has gone wrong (cf. Sharon Lamb, Chapter 10 in this volume



shows how difficult this task may be for women). This recognition may take many different forms: remembering, recounting, writing down what has occurred, sharing one's experiences with someone else, or explicit acknowledgment of having suffered from an immoral act. Overcoming speechlessness does not necessarily entail that one speaks. However, some form of internal monologue and of sharing one's thoughts and feelings with someone else seems needed. To recall the hurt is the first step in Worthington's model of forgiveness (Worthington 1998, p. 113). For the victim, the difficult element in this part of the process is not the speaking itself, but the overcoming of the strong feelings and inclinations that amount to speechlessness, such as the tendency to avoid the anxiety and pain of facing the full burden of what has gone wrong; and the intense feelings of powerlessness, disgust, and shame that may emerge by reliving one's experiences of traumatization. In the offender, similar processes are important; however, here they take the form of giving up one's lies and overcoming denial and, behind this, shame. This is also painful and may go against one's inclinations. In short, to speak and to recognize what has gone wrong is both for the victim and for the wrongdoer a difficult, hazardous, and courageous step in the process of forgiveness. To forgive is to succeed in conquering a dynamic that is still active in oneself.

The same dynamic is possibly also operative in one's dealings with natural evil. In his book on God, medicine, and the problem of suffering, the American theologian Stanley Hauerwas (1990) speaks of 'naming the silences.' The silence he considers is the speechlessness that results from having to deal with incurable cancer or the sudden loss of a child. Such events are not only hard to face and seem to lack meaning: the speechlessness is a kind of paralysis at a more primordial level—a lack of language with respect to the brute facts themselves (instead of to their meaning or interpretation). It is a stammering in the confrontation with the contingency of one's existence.

To forgive is also to give up splitting and denial. One of the interesting questions here is what it means to give up one's defenses. If denial is the result of the workings of a primitive defense mechanism, how is it possible to give it up without giving up oneself? What kind of power is needed to achieve such change and avert self-destruction?

From a clinical point of view, it is sometimes impossible to give up splitting or any other defense mechanism that helps to keep pain and emotional chaos at a distance. Giving up these defense mechanisms may overwhelm the person with undigested traumatic memories, intense negative feelings, and suicidal and other self-destructive thoughts. There is an extensive literature on how to deal with these situations in patients with borderline personality disorder, dissociative identity disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder, and it is not

necessary to discuss this literature here (cf. Herman 1992). For our purposes, it is sufficient to point at a factor that is common to most psychotherapeutic approaches, and that is the development of trust—trust in the patient by the therapist; and trust of the patient in himself, partly as a result of the trust of others (for a philosophical analysis of trust and trustworthiness, cf. Potter, 2002). Trust plays an immensely important role in any therapeutic endeavor. Common to most psychotherapeutic approaches is the powerful assumption of the therapist that the patient will improve, even if there is nothing in the patient's present situation and, even, of the therapeutic encounter that points in that direction and that may guarantee such success. Patients are likely to improve because their being trusted by the therapist helps them to trust themselves.

Forgiveness is not compatible with denial. Giving up denial is essential preparatory work for forgiveness to take place. A special form of denial consists of the use of metaphorical exaggerations and of pseudo-poetic language. Such language transforms horror into something aesthetic. Hannah Arendt (1965) warned against such use of language. The reality of what has occurred is denied once again, which doubles sadness. Arendt is aiming at expressions in which Eichman is called a 'devil' or 'beast' and in which there is an 'Eichman in everyone of us.'

I now investigate the dynamic of the overcoming of denial in nonclinical cases. Here, trust is needed too, both for the wrongdoer and for the forgiver. Trust acquires a more specific meaning here, a meaning that is preparatory for the way we will deal with the next point (shame). The wrongdoer, who gives up his lies and overcomes his denial, is vulnerable to moral criticism and (shame-inducing) rejection. The victim who opens her mind for the horrors of the past makes her self vulnerable for repetition of the dynamics of the interpersonal relationship in which the traumatization occurred or the harm was inflicted. Forgiveness embodies a dynamic of trust that opposes (fear of) moral rejection and repetition of the past.

Trust seems, therefore, similarly 'groundless' as forgiveness. To trust is to place one's fate in the hands of others, at least to a certain extent. Absolute trust is rare, of course. Less absolute forms certainly are not. Think of all those situations in which there is a discrepancy between realistic expectation and the expectations that are based on trust. It seems as if the trusting person acts on a cognitive and moral 'error' because there is insufficient cognitive and moral 'evidence' to warrant the trust of the other.

The same holds for forgiveness. There are many reasons and grounds to forgive (as there are reasons and grounds for trust). But in the end, to forgive is to take a decision that suffers from the same lack of cognitive and

moral evidence as in the case of trust. But it is precisely this lack of calculation that indicates where we have to locate the dynamic of forgiveness: in the offer of acceptance in spite of the harm that has been inflicted by the wrongdoer and in spite of the lack of evidence that the offer will be accepted.

Trust seems to be an important intermediate element in the process of forgiving, an element that opposes the existential dynamic that keeps the victim caught in her cycle of pain, avoidance, and denial, and the wrongdoer in his state of guilt. When the wrongdoer trusts the victim with respect to the genuineness of the offer of absolution of guilt, the victim's feelings of self-worth may increase and, with this, her confidence that she can achieve a better life. When the victim offers his or her trust to the wrongdoer, the wrongdoer is asked to view himself as a person that does not coincide with his guilty version. In short, trust may bring about a dynamic that counteracts some of the self-perpetuating moments in the dynamic of evil, most notably the elements of self-closure, denial, and avoidance.

Finally, I focus on how forgiveness counteracts shame. Shame adds a (both real and imagined) interpersonal dimension to the process of forgiveness. The transition to this topic seems natural, because the processes we discussed in the previous paragraphs also include an interpersonal element. By recognizing guilt, the wrongdoer sees himself through the eyes of the victim and may experience his moral inferiority. Guilt is related to acts that caused the harm. Shame goes deeper and is related to one's person or, better, one's core sense of self. In the face of the victim, the evildoer may feel degraded and deprived. The offer of forgiveness confirms his depravity and, at the same time, offers a way out. The wrongdoer teeters between these two. To decline the offer would save his independence: one does not owe anything to anyone. To accept the offer would imply that he acknowledges his immorality and trusts that the forgiver will nevertheless persist in his offer of forgiveness. This is a highly critical moment in the process of forgiveness. It is especially shame that makes it difficult to accept the gift of forgiveness. The power of shame undermines one's belief in the genuineness of the offer and, at the same time, leads to self-absorption and lack of awareness of the real other. Nevertheless, the gift of forgiveness can stop the cycle of shameful and angry disconnectedness and can help the wrongdoer to overcome his isolation and to view his existence as not totally deprived.

To forgive, we saw, is to recognize the extent of the harm. By offering forgiveness, the victim indirectly discloses her pain and vulnerability. For the victim, it is the interpersonal dimension of feeling vulnerable that heightens the shame. Being weak in the presence of strong and dominant others (with

sometimes dubious motives) may induce anxiety and shame—*anxiety*, because of the risk of repetition of trauma; and *shame*, because of the subtle connotation (and also risk) of humiliation. To feel vulnerable in the real or imagined presence of the evildoer is, therefore, a highly critical moment in the victim's process of forgiving. However, forgiveness is precisely the power that enables the victim to overcome the inclination to hide and to avoid the gaze of others and to make herself invisible. Instead of shrinking back in her private world, the forgiving victim opens her arms and offers her embrace. Forgiveness counteracts evil by this power to open up the victim's closed self and to liberate the wrongdoer from his self-imposed isolation. The power of forgiveness consists precisely in its capacity to break the destructive cycle of shame, anger, and violence and in the healing effects of sharing the person's isolation.

To summarize: it is characteristic for forgiveness to have insufficient grounds; this is not a weakness but indicates forgiveness's power, which manifests itself as courage in the overcoming of speechlessness, as trust in the battle against denial, and as openness and embrace in the context of shame.

## 8.6 Dealing with evil: beyond philosophy and psychology

Throughout this chapter, I have tried to do justice to the idea that there is a nontransparent element in the phenomenology of evil. This nontransparency was interpreted as an expression of the dynamic of evil. The dynamic of forgiveness runs counter to this dynamic and appears to possess its own nontransparency. Those who forgive hardly ever have sufficient grounds for forgiveness. However, this is not a weakness but indicative of the power of forgiveness to overcome speechlessness, isolation, denial, and shame.

I have built my case from the bottom up. I tried to ascertain the legitimacy of speaking of the dynamic of evil and of forgiveness. Once ascertained, new questions emerge: what 'is' the dynamic of evil and of forgiveness? Where do these dynamics come from? What is their ontological and metaphysical status? What is the place of a religious understanding of evil and forgiveness? And what is the function and value of forgiveness, if evil and its consequences cannot be undone?

This last question is, perhaps, most relevant in our context. As Hampton suggests, it is an issue that leads us to the metaphysical and religious dimensions of evil and forgiveness. How is forgiveness possible, and what could it mean if evil cannot be undone? I close this chapter by sketching two contrasting paradigms with respect to this question, in an attempt to highlight the importance of such paradigms for discussions in the applied sciences and the professions. I first

briefly summarize Friedrich Nietzsche's position in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Nietzsche 1883/1985) and then continue with some remarks on how classical Christianity treats the concepts of evil and forgiveness.

Nietzsche argues that acts of evil cannot be undone and will exist forever. If evil persists and adds up in history, it does not make sense for us human beings to perish under the burden of guilt. We would be better off if we could eradicate the language of guilt and, more radically, if we could deny that such a thing as evil exists. This is indeed what Nietzsche says. The problem of evil is invented by the weak, by people who cannot stand the real world and flee to an idealized version of it. Instead of fleeing, we need a 'will to power' that enables us to embrace our fate. We should eliminate the language of guilt, self-surrender, and love, and replace it by an idiom that takes life as it is and encourages the will to live.

If Nietzsche is right, to restore a relationship with another person who inflicted harm on us, by forgiving that person, is at best a childish form of submission and self-deception. In worse versions, it amounts to 'ressentiment', Nietzsche's favored French term that points at the hidden anger and masochistic destructiveness in the acknowledgment of, and response to, guilt. On Nietzsche's account, we should bear the burden of existence and try to transform it by the will to power. The ultimate consequence of this transformation would be that one has to embrace Auschwitz in order not to fall back into an attitude of weakness and resentment. Embracing Auschwitz is impossible, however, according to Neiman (2002, p. 265).

There is no greater contrast than that between Nietzsche's heroic and naturalistic philosophy and the Christian approach to evil and forgiveness. Central to this tradition is not the will to power, but the weakness of human beings with respect to evil. Evil is not directly undone by forgiveness, but 'brought away' and 'covered.' The latter terms are metaphors that refer to the Old Testament ritual of atonement by the sacrifice of two goats of which one was sent away into desert and the other was killed in order to shed its blood in the temple in the face of the Almighty. Jesus' death announced the final overcoming of evil 'in the last days.' So, evil is not undone in the present era, though there is hope that it once will be.

Nietzsche locates the Christian approach to suffering, guilt, and evil at the level of the so-called ethical world view (a term invented by Paul Ricoeur). The ethical world view, according to Nietzsche, connects evil with sin and failure and is, therefore, doomed to circle around in guilt, powerlessness, suppressed anger, and destruction. Thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard (1844/1980, 1849) and Paul Ricoeur (1955, 1969, 1990) emphasize that the final word about the nature of evil should be spoken at a level beyond the

ethical, that is, at a religious level. At this level, suffering and guilt are also inevitable and cannot be undone in the present state of the world, but their burden is taken away by a suffering divine being. The offer of forgiveness is foreshadowed in the self-giving love of the son of God who became 'son of man' and whose suffering on the cross symbolizes his identification with human frailty and sin. The doctrine of incarnation is, first of all, meant to express God's goodness, that is, his will to be part of this world with its suffering, wickedness, and evil. The notion of atonement builds upon this recognition in that atonement is acquired by the acceptance of God's self-giving love.

The Christian tradition suggests that the dynamics of evil and of forgiveness belong to a spiritual reality that can be best approached by faith. To accept the gift of forgiveness is not easy; it is a real 'stumbling block,' because it requires that we give up our presumed moral righteousness. This is painful, humiliating, and shameful. We can overcome this pain, humiliation, and shame by self-surrender and by trust in God's embrace (Volf 1996, pp. 99–166).

So, I end this exposition with the description of two radically divergent paradigms of dealing with evil. Philosophy cannot find in itself the sources that are needed to choose a direction. However, it can bring us to the point where the consequences of our choices become as clear as possible.

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