

On Forgiveness and Justice: The Difficulties of Western Societies in Achieving a Coherent Discourse about Forgiveness*

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Forgiveness plays a main role in transitional justice, it is important to verify how forgiveness is justified by contemporary societies. No contemporary mentality can avoid the intuition that we are facing a reality that seems to belong to the field of religion. Hence, what interests us is precisely the moral consideration of this discussion. Facing the morality of forgiveness, the questions that are raised with respect to each type are: whether it is possible to forgive and whether one should forgive. The inherent contradiction of those who affirm the obligatory nature of forgiveness results in the supererogatory character of forgiveness. If all forgiveness is supererogatory in itself, then all forgiveness is always presented as something undeserved. Thus, we do not have supporting points to embark on a discourse about forgiveness. The result is that our political communities do not really know how to manage situations such as transitional justice.

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1. Introduction

Forgiveness plays an important role in the processes of transitional justice. However, when dealing with phenomena such as forgiveness, no contemporary mentality can avoid the intuition that we are facing a reality that definitively belongs to the field of religion. For that reason, for an occidental mentality and from a purely philosophical perspective, it would be very useful to be in possession of research that completely dealt with the pagan senses of forgiveness in the classic antiquity. A very recent monograph about forgiveness begins with the affirmation that such a study does not exist beyond some sectorial work about this question (Griswold 2007, 1). However, as a little proof of the first affirmation of this work we went in search of an Aristotelian doctrine about forgiveness; what we find just reinforces our mentioned intuition. The result was an almost total absence of references about forgiveness, and a concept of “forgiving” which is distinct from our common definition.

In fact, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says that “forgiveness (συγγνώμη) is bestowed, when one does what one should not under pressure which overstrains human nature and which no one could withstand” (III, 1, 1110 a 23-25), and also mentions pity and forgiveness (συγγνώμη) “since the person acts involuntarily

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by ignorance of particular circumstances of the action and the objects with which it is concerned” (III, 1, 1110 b 33-1111 a 1-2). With the same sense and purpose about incontinence (ακρασία), Aristotle maintains that “we forgive (συγγνώμη) people more easily for following natural desires, since we forgive them for following such appetites as are common to all men” (VII, 6, 1149 b 3-6). In a similar fashion, he maintains “if a man is defeated by violent and excessive pleasures or pains, there is nothing wonderful in that; indeed we are ready to forgive (συγγνώμονικον) him if he has resisted” (VII, 7, 1150 b 6-8). It can be seen that this all deals with understanding, excusing, or forgiving actions due to circumstances, and that in this context, there is not even a mention made of those who are the victims or who suffer from those actions.

This perception of what forgiveness meant for Aristotle is more complete with some references to magnanimity (μεγαλόψυχος). It means that person “who thinks himself worthy of great things, being worthy of them” (IV, 3, 1123 b 2), who possesses “greatness in every excellence that would seem to be characteristic of a proud man” (IV, 3, 1123 b 30-31). A magnanimous person despises dishonour (ατιμία) “since in his case it cannot be just” (IV, 3, 1124 a 11-12), and he always despises with justification. He performs good deeds but is embarrassed about being on the receiving end of them; he remembers the good deeds that he does but not those who benefit from them; he does not need anything (IV, 3, 1124 b 6-19). Above all, “he is not mindful of wrongs (μνησικακος); for it is not part of a proud man to have a long memory, especially for wrongs, but rather to overlook them” (IV, 3, 1125 a 3-5). Ultimately, the paradigm of the person who possesses this virtue to a great degree does not have any relation to what we understand as forgiveness, because it is neither necessary to ever ask for forgiveness nor necessary to grant it.

Perhaps, for that reason, those who have attempted to do integral research about forgiveness and keeping it in an area of speculation that is purely philosophical have chosen a descriptive reflexion about our common preconceptions or our most basic intuitions.

Thus, within this area, for example, includes an approach from phenomenology that first examines everything that is not forgiveness in order to establish afterwards what its objective is, what its conditions are, and finally what its characteristics are (Crespo 2004). Although, a more dialectic approach is also possible which considers practically the same problems (concept; relations with phenomena such as resentment, hate, pity, or retribution; legal, moral, and religious aspects). This is the case of the book jointly written by Murphy and Hampton, which has become the habitual reference of the last 20 years in the Anglo-American debate (Murphy and Hampton 1988). There are even those who have recently tried to combine a historical study with a philosophical analysis and a more modern political perspective (Griswold 2007).

However, among the *major* thinkers of the last few years, the majority of those who have occupied themselves with this subject have been *unclassifiable* philosophers. Unlike the previous group, they have not been methodical at all.

To cite a classic author from the last century, from a few pages of his work *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) emphasizes the importance of forgiveness as being the remedy of the irreversibility of the process begun by the act. It is that “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover” (Arendt 1958, 236-237). For that reason, although it has its origin in a religious context and language, it can be dealt with in a “strictly secular sense.” Even if, taking it one step further, we maintained the current conviction of the strong relationship between love and forgiveness, forgiving would have to remain outside the realm of politics. Arendt hardly made reference to that possibly secular way of understanding when he emphasized that respect

could be the correlation of love in a political relationship to forgiveness, because “respect is a kind of *friendship* without intimacy and without closeness” (Arendt 1958, 242-243).

Where this lack of methodology is most evident is inevitably in the fashionable French bibliography, with its proverbial appreciation of the literal essay. In this field, there is certain continuity amongst Jankelevitch, Derrida, and Ricoeur to the extent that each one comments on and expands on the others. The first one forcefully displays the paradox of the gratuitous and complete character of pure forgiveness, the only true forgiveness (Jankélévitch 1967). Later on, in a posterior work, he completely perplexes the reader by his absolute refusal to forgive. Jankelevitch accepts the contradiction and irresolvable character (Jankélévitch 1986). Derrida faces the problem in a seminar whose contents are known so far by means of an interview, which increases even more, as difficult as it seems, the fragmentary nature of what he sustains. He hardly discovers there an approximation to the Christian roots that permeate the terminology used in the public debate about forgiveness and some considerations around the works of Jankelevitch where the paradox of forgiveness is emphasized. Indeed, for Derrida, forgiveness is directed at what is unforgiveable, thus it is unconditional with neither exception nor restriction (Derrida 2000, 108 ff). Finally, Ricoeur follows Derrida in the defence of the unforgiveable nature of any misdemeanour and the resulting and paradoxical need of the unconditional character of all forgiveness. He concludes with the impossibility of forgiveness and the authentic political institutions of forgiving (Ricoeur 2000, 593-657).

In truth, at one moment or another, all of these philosophical essays and academic studies rely on the interpretation of one’s own personal experience with forgiveness, and they take for granted that it is a common and thus a shared experience. To say it in a more direct way, they assume that we all know what they are talking about. The proof is that all researches about forgiveness continuously try to be analogical; that is to say, it looks to compare some actions with others in order to situate forgiveness in its proper place. In this way, by comparing some situations with others, as we so often do in our daily lives, we tend to decide and judge our own actions as well as others concerning forgiveness. Precisely because of this continuous reliance on comparison, the studies about forgiveness are usually full of examples, either taken from real life or simply imagined. Concretely, those that form part of a general discussion about transitional justice tend to cite real cases while others talk about imaginary situations.

Everybody is capable of doing certain taxonomy on forgiveness based on his or her own vital experiences. For example, it is not difficult to remember from one’s own life that at some point (or points) forgiveness was requested from another person, who then either granted it or refused it. Moreover, something else that could be mentioned is whether having experiencing such a granting or refusal had any effect on the posterior behaviour of the offended. For example, sometimes forgiveness is granted in word, but not with deeds; and the opposite also occurs, sometimes forgiveness is refused in word, but not in deeds. In the same way, on other occasions we have been asked for forgiveness, and it is possible that we have granted it or refused it according to the situation, and our subsequent actions would sometimes be consistent or sometimes be inconsistent with what we said. Even more so, sometimes we have been requested to ask for forgiveness for a possible offense or for another person. Once again, the same already mentioned possibilities exist, that is to say, the success or failure of such a request. Another situation is us asking for ourselves or for others, with or without success, and consistent or inconsistent with the subsequent actions. As just seen, the possibilities are unlimited insofar as describing forgiveness according to the perspective of each involved person and the results that are achieved.

This is not the only possible taxonomy when dealing with forgiveness. In truth, any reflexion about one's own experience requires that we identify ourselves with a series of very diverse associated phenomena: hate, remorse, resentment, moral judgement, responsibility, guilt, reconciliation, retribution, punishment, redemption, confidence, love, etc.. In fact, such a framework of relations serves to demonstrate that this taxonomy is useful to the degree that it helps to morally judge the actions that are studied. That is because in the end, in one sense or another, what all the mentioned studies and philosophical reflexions ultimately seek is whether or not one should or should not forgive or if it is even possible to do so in determined situation, what conditions are necessary for the granting or the refusal of forgiveness in a particular situation, etc..

2. Contemporary Attempts at Justification

What interests us is precisely this last issue: the moral consideration of this discussion. If it means to verify how forgiveness is justified by our contemporary societies, it is important to research those who have dealt with this situation very recently, and more concretely, the ones who have faced the problem not from a previous philosophical system, but rather from common experiences. For that reason, the inevitable reference lies in the Anglo-American environment. It is also necessary to clarify another extreme. When I refer to liberal societies, I mean our contemporary occidental societies. Such western or at least westernized societies are widely understood as being democratic societies or societies of liberties. Ultimately, we are talking about the model of European and American society, which has also been put into effect in other places. Although there are multiple features and variations that exist in each place, it is possible to identify common traits that form the basis of those citizens' identity and their way of perceiving that identity. Perhaps the principal trait is precisely the core value of the freedom of a human being's will. In second place, as a complement, is the principle of harm, which states that the only time it is justifiable as interference in the freedom of another's action is for self-defence. Both principles are probably the most relevant of those that shape the political and constitutional *ethos* of contemporary liberal societies; that is to say, those societies containing the occidental mankind at the beginning of the third millennium. These principles exclude state paternalism, and from them, it is derived that public limitation of an individual's freedom is only acceptable if its only purpose is to prevent direct harm to the assets and the rights of others: in other words, it also excludes perfectionism. There is no place for an ethical concept of human perfection or of a comprehensive doctrine of goodness.

As has already been stated, when considering forgiveness, everybody knows from his or her own experience what we are talking about, although another thing is precisely how we characterize it. Ultimately, our point is to ascertain the possibility of the ethical predication of forgiveness, and where appropriate, on what basis it is sustained. In addition, it is precisely, as will be seen, the discussion about the ethical condition of forgiveness that can help to clarify its nature to some degree. Indeed, the foundation, the justification of forgiveness, will also provide us with elements to understand its sense. It is a reality that, as what happens with all human reality, its nature coincides with its *raison d'être*, its existence with the reason for its existence. From there, the questions that are raised with respect to each type are the common ones judging human actions: if it is possible to forgive and if one should forgive. As could be expected, all those who face the morality of forgiveness distinguish between two types: unconditional forgiveness and conditional (or conditioned) forgiveness. The obvious condition that separates these categories is the request for forgiveness on the part of the offender. Combinatorially, the resulting questions are the following: if one should forgive unconditionally, if

one can forgive unconditionally, if one can forgive conditionally, and if one should forgive conditionally. In this way, it is shown to what extent forgiveness is given, as well as its justification and meaning.

However, the first thing that one notices is the fact that it is not possible to find any kind of defence for the obligation of unconditional forgiveness. It seems evident that this type of obligation can only have a religious basis. This is a strict interpretation of religion, which means the existence of a mandate that comes from a divine authority or something similar. It is not even relevant to discuss the reasons that such an authority could have. It seems obvious that a strictly secular or profane predication of such behaviour is not possible. In any case, it is a field to be explored by theologians who could supply non-theological reasons for the appropriateness of unconditional forgiveness.

This is precisely the point of discussion that appears in the literature of use: the valid reasons for unconditional forgiveness. In truth, it does not deal with any kind of obligation but rather in proposing the mere possibility of unconditional forgiveness. We are therefore in the second of the already mentioned questions: if it is possible to forgive unconditionally, which is without a prior request for forgiveness.

Pettigrove, for example, has defended this possibility not so much by means of supplying direct reasons but rather arguing against contrarians. He especially rejects those who affirm that such forgiveness does not morally condone the offense (Pettigrove 2004, 192-193) or means a loss of self-respect (Pettigrove 2004, 194-198). The first problem is raised by Kolnai in an already classic work (Kolnai 1973/1974). Pettigrove replies by sustaining that forgiveness can be distinguished from the moral approval of the offense because this approval is not necessary for forgiveness to be bestowed. With respect to the second problem, he mentions that "self-respect" is a concept dependent precisely on the particular values of the subject, and that, therefore, forgiveness, on the contrary, can be a way of increasing respect for oneself. Murphy and Hampton (1988, 19, 26, 40, 83) have already offered the same answer that appears here now.

The most habitual, however, is finding those who supply valid reasons for the moral permissibility of unconditional forgiveness. Garrard and McNaughton want to make this emphasized aspect clear that, in any case, deals with supererogatory forgiveness, that, therefore, does not criticize those who choose not to forgive. They only assert that from the offended party's point of view, it is better or it might be better to forgive (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, 51). In their opinion, the basis of the possibility of forgiveness is our common, shared humanity, that is to say, both the one who offends and the one who is offended belong to the human community. On a general level, we are all capable of committing the same acts that were committed by the offending party, and perhaps in similar circumstances, we would have performed the same offensive act (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, 54). Although that person's moral judgement is "distorted," this does not apply to the offender's "human nature" (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, 55), which, like all of ours, is "weak, pitiful and degraded" (Garrard and McNaughton 2003, 59).

Allais also justifies being able to forgive unconditionally (Allais 2008, 37, 64). To do that, he relies on the emotions associated with the denial of forgiveness (hate or resentment, among others), saying that they are not obligatory to maintain. For that reason, it is possible to forgive unconditionally, as long as one does not identify with the pretension of leaving the offense without punishment (Allais 2008, 64-66).

Meanwhile, Holmgren asserts that it is possible to forgive the offender unconditionally because such forgiveness is compatible with respect for oneself, for morality, and for the offender as a moral agent (Holmgren 1993, 350). These same conditions have already been expressed and developed by Murphy (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 19). The basis of all of this is accepting the Kantian sense of dignity that makes one

recognize the same intrinsic value in everybody. It does not mean viewing the aggressor as a sad human being and trying to get closer to and empathise with that person, or judging the offensive action as being morally acceptable. Therefore, the recommendation to forgive is in the framework of a personal process that assures respect for oneself (Holmgren 1993, 349).

Wolfendale is not convinced of Holmgren's solution and he looks for a different one. In his opinion, not forgiving supposes considering the offender as being expelled from the moral community of human beings forever. This means considering the offender as inferior and subhuman (Wolfendale 2005, 358-359). The result is problematic because it reduces the subjects to their actions and by dehumanizing the offenders, in some way you are doing the same thing as they did. Still, this solution is similar to the already mentioned ones because it relies on the argument that bases unconditional forgiveness on the humble recognition of the victim as having the same identity as the offender (Wolfendale 2005, 359-361).

Finally, Benjabi and Heyd defend the possibility of unconditional forgiveness by means of a comparison to tolerance in relation to the one who has performed the negative act. This does not mean defending the obligation of forgiveness in all circumstances, but rather its supererogatory nature (Benjabi and Heyd 2001, 577). This is what makes it morally rewarding because it is not based on any moral obligation, but instead it is completely voluntary. These are the best moral reasons for forgiveness insofar as they facilitate and improve social relationships in general and interpersonal relationships in particular. It also supposes the exercise of one's patience, magnanimity, and self-control. Because it is a gift, forgiveness is never required by law and can never be forced (Benjabi and Heyd 2001, 579-580).

The third question makes reference to the possibility of forgiving conditioned on a previous request for forgiveness. In truth, we find ourselves faced with an unnecessary question when looking at the previously cited ones, because if it is possible to forgive unconditionally, *a fortiori* is also possible to forgive conditionally. Despite this logic, some of those who have defended the possibility of unconditional forgiveness have also expressly affirmed the relevance of conditional forgiveness. For example, Allais asserts that the distance between the offense and the offender is clearly shown by means of repentance and atonement (Allais 2008, 63).

Evidently, one can find the strongest arguments for the defence of the possibility of conditional forgiveness among those who have not dealt with the possibility of unconditional forgiveness. For example, Corlett sees in the petition of forgiveness a condition for granting it (Corlett 2006, 25), asserting that you can never talk about the moral obligation to forgive (Corlett 2006, 36). Quinn defends similar positions, asserting that sometimes it is virtuous not to forgive (Quinn 2004, 27). There is even an intermediate position such as the one defended by Haber, who asserts that there are strong moral reasons for forgiving when an apology is offered, but without affirming that the offender has a right to be forgiven (Haber 1991, chapter 4).

The fourth and the last mentioned question presents us with those who have defended the obligation to forgive conditionally in some cases. Tara Smith has sustained that, in reality, forgiveness depends on the imperatives of justice. For that, on occasions, when forgiveness is deserved, it is morally obligatory to forgive. We are dealing with something that is simply a problem of justice but not something others. Forgiveness must be earned (Smith 1997, 38-39). There are two conditions for granting forgiveness: In the first place, the offense is not evidence of the character of the offender; in the second place, as the first one demands a discretionary judgement which is part of practical reason, this judgement respects the requirements of justice (Smith 1997, 40).

Govier also asserts that, taking into account that a distinction has to be made between the offender and the offense and that the offender is a free moral agent, the offense is always forgivable under certain circumstances.

So, on one hand, it is morally justifiable not to forgive if there is no repentance. However, on the other hand, it is not morally defensible to declare that someone is absolutely unforgiveable (Govier 1999, 66-70). Therefore, the logical deduction is that if certain conditions are met there is an obligation to forgive.

Schimmel maintains that with forgiveness we are facing a problem of moral obligations. Forgiveness is either obligatory or not. For him, there is no place for unconditional forgiveness. In truth, if certain conditions are met on the part of the offender (principally in requesting it), then there is an obligation to forgive. If these conditions are not met, there is an obligation not to forgive (Schimmel 2002, chapters 2 and 3).

Before entering into a discussion about the correctness or incorrectness of the arguments made, it is worth indicating that, just as it has been commented on, the search for a justification for forgiveness contributes something about the very nature of forgiveness itself. What we can deduce from what has been seen is that proposing the moral possibility of forgiveness, whether it is unconditional or conditional, facilitates the observation of the fundamental difference between two postures about forgiveness. On one hand, there are those who defend the existence of some kind of duty with regard to forgiveness, and on the other hand, there are others who deny it. For the first group, forgiveness does not have a supererogatory nature. Apparently, this is the position of both Tara Smith and Schimmel, who consider forgiveness to be an issue of justice and consequently a question of moral duty. With less clarity, Govier defends something similar although leaving an opening to situations in which forgiveness would be supererogatory. In this way, it can be said that for the first two, forgiveness can never be supererogatory, while for the latter, it is not supererogatory only on occasions.

In the opposite situation, one can find practically the rest of the authors mentioned. They defend either expressly (Garrard and McNaughton do not see the refusal to forgive as being something negative (2003, 51); Benjabi/Heyd assert that only a religious approach such as that of Christianity justifies that type of forgiveness (2001, 577); as cited in Corlett, Quinn, and Haber (2006)) or just tacitly, the non-existence of a duty to forgive unconditionally. At the same time, according to some of them, there exists the moral option of forgiveness even when it is unconditional. To the degree in which forgiveness is seen as possible or permissible (even laudable) but not obligatory, an emphasis is put on the supererogatory condition of forgiveness.

Hampton also understands that the request for forgiveness cannot constitute a basis of the obligation to forgive. Beyond what can be considered reasonable in granting forgiveness in that case, forgiving someone continues to be a supererogatory act (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 41).

Others such as Bennett defend the possibility of forgiving even unconditionally, but only as a mere moral choice but not as an obligation (Bennett 2003, 138-140).

Beyond coinciding with the common perception that one cannot be forced to forgive, it remains to be demonstrated, at least, the inherent contradiction of those who affirm the obligatory nature of forgiveness. Digeser has expressed this in an especially concise and perceptive way. Given the absolute obligation to forgive, the victim has to forgive the offender and not doing so implies that the victim has done something wrong. Therefore, the offender has a right to be forgiven. Taking into account that forgiving is absolving, liberating, and relieving someone of a weight, and that there is, accordingly, a duty to absolve the other of what is owed, the offender also has the obligation of absolving, liberating, and relieving the victim from the obligation to forgive. In other words, what should be owed to the victim by the offender is to be absolved from the obligation to forgive. Therefore, the victim has in turn the duty to absolve the offender from the duty to absolve and the

victim from the duty to forgive. In this way, we continue into infinity (Digeser 2001, 78). We shall, therefore, pursue at the point of the supererogatory nature of forgiveness.

3. Assuming All of the Consequences

What conclusions can we come to from this brief overview of what has been said about the justification of forgiveness during the last few years? At the first place, nobody has tried to assert the obligation of unconditional forgiveness. Some try to assert a kind of obligation, but this is in the context of conditional forgiveness. However, such a proposal has been shown to be impossible if in the end one considers the supererogatory nature of forgiveness. In this sense, it can be argued whether in a particular situation or under what circumstances there will probably be certain consequences for the subject who agrees to forgive or who refuses to forgive. However, it does not seem like we can speak about any kind of obligation. For that reason, those who defend that true forgiveness requires having a negative moral judgement of the offense, and, as a consequence of this, of the offender as well (even if this is overcome later on), end up asserting that the recuperation of one's self-respect, which has been weakened by the offense, is a condition for the moral option of forgiveness. In truth, the reference to *self-respect* as a condition for the possibility of forgiveness is the only thing that completely makes sense. On one hand, "the possibility" does not suppose any kind of moral obligation. However, what is even more interesting for our purpose is the fact that it seems like the only condition that can be found in a liberal perspective. If all forgiveness is a gift, the only thing that has to be assured is that this gift does not diminish the subject's self respect, because it is precisely this self-respect that is the only thing that makes sense outside the context of obligation. That is to say, if there is no possibility of a universal judgement about the correctness or the incorrectness of forgiveness, the only relevant thing is that the subjective judgement be *subjectively* favourable. For that reason, the reference to self-respect is understood. The problem is that this argument does not lead us anywhere. When talking about self-respect, one is entering into the field of reflexivity itself, that is to say, in the judgement by oneself of oneself, and in this sense, something prohibited when considering universal character. We find ourselves in the depths of what is the most individual and the most personal. For that reason, such *self-respect* can be favoured as much by granting forgiveness as it is by refusing forgiveness. Insofar as we are talking about the respect one has for oneself, only that person can know what is favourable for that respect at a certain time, whether it is in granting or refusing forgiveness. It is also possible to pass from one situation to the other, from granting it to refusing it, as often as one considers opportune and at the moments one considers appropriate, in order to re-establish or maintain one's self-respect. In this way, we really cannot say anything more about forgiveness because it occurs as a pure, absolute gift, which is, above all, unexplainable and unjustifiable. It is unexplainable because it arises from a profoundly personal experience, a reflection of internal solipsism, and, therefore, incommunicable. From this point of view, it is more coherent to abandon all theories related to the morality of forgiveness. However, perhaps there is possibly one small exception. This would be a situation where there is certain reciprocity between two subjects who have been the offender in one case and the offended in another case, with both cases being of the same type and importance. If the outcome of the first case has been forgiveness on the part of the offended party, it seems that in the opposite situation and under identical circumstances, the offended party should then grant the forgiveness that was received previously. Beyond this hypothetical situation, from a liberal point of view, it is not possible to talk about moral duty.

What we have been asserting is even more evident when we observe the intent of relying on a concept of dignity that substantiates the possibility of forgiveness. In this case, the problem is constituted by the

deficiencies of a concept of human dignity arising from the liberal imagination. As has been noted, there are those who fall back on the Kantian version of the concept. There are others who appear to relate to it through the mere mention of the common human condition, ultimately on recognizing oneself in others despite the offenses they have committed. Finally, there are those who emphasize the *sameness*, that is to say, the condition or quality of being the same (identical) or equivalent (equal): perhaps it can be said that it is the equality in the identity, or having the same form of identity. In one way or another, there is some kind of common element shared by the offender and the victim.

However, although the mention of solidarity for belonging to the same species could make sense, the simple recollection of how that member of the species has offended us can serve not to highlight what we have in common but instead what makes us different from each other. It is that we do not always know our reactions, but we do know how the offender responded, and, therefore, we have motives precisely for forgetting our common condition and not for remembering it. For that reason, human solidarity, even the manifestation of the basis of that solidarity in the equality of identity, is nothing more than a naive argument: it is not known why precisely those common features shared by both the offender and the victim should lead us to any conclusions about forgiveness. If this were so, it would be enough to focus on the features that are different, which are revealed precisely when an offense is produced to conclude otherwise, namely, that one cannot forgive.

It is that in a certain way, both the mentioning of this solidarity and its small manifestation in the equality of identity fit perfectly in the liberal approach: we can realize equality. However, what we cannot do in any way, as bad as it is for the liberal approach, is basing anything on this equality, for the simple reason that such equality is never complete and it shares reality with inequality. In order to focus on specific manifestations of equality and not on manifestations of inequality, something more than just their mere confirmation is needed. However, this requires a substantial character judgement that justifies why in the case of forgiveness it is necessary to focus on what makes us similar and not on what makes us different. Such justification can only happen in the framework of a doctrine of goodness, which is precisely what the liberal imagination tries to avoid at all cost. Furthermore, even if it were possible to focus on what we have in common without betraying liberal principles, it would still be necessary to establish why the mere confirmation of some similar results in some kind of morality. For that reason, for the sake of accuracy, according to a purely liberal approach, the dignity that is attacked by the offense cannot be separated from the self-perception that the victim has as a consequence of the offense.

We are therefore facing a reality where there is only room for silence. Apparently, there is neither an obligation to forgive nor an obligation not to forgive under practically all circumstances. Forgiveness forms part of our common understanding of our own reality in an ethically empty space.

As has been seen, all forgiveness is supererogatory in itself. The problem is if we take seriously the impossibility of granting forgiveness when it is not a gift, a generous act, pure spontaneity and freedom, then all forgiveness is always presented as something undeserved, with the exception of the reciprocity mentioned previously. It happens like this with all forgiveness, from what is offered for the pettiest offense imaginable until the most serious. Strictly speaking, any affront is unforgivable. Only when there is perfect reciprocity, as mentioned previously, can we speak of something as being forgivable. This means that in practice there is no situation where the moral basis of forgiveness can fit.

Instead we should try to demonstrate the moral obligation of not forgiving under certain circumstances. For this reason, the research that supports the moral basis of forgiveness should not add more reasons to

forgiveness, beyond that of denying that those who defend the obligation of not forgiving have achieved their objective. The supererogatory nature of forgiveness makes it unnecessary to have any other kind of defence. In a certain sense, all the major reasons given to reinforce the possibility of forgiveness are superfluous and mentioning them is rather contradictory.

The principal problem that remains unresolved is that we do not have supporting points to embark on a discourse about forgiveness. In truth, we are left too much alone with our own problems in order to articulate something so vital to our own lives. If every offense, as minor as it is, can permit the refusal of forgiveness, human beings are really always at the mercy of others and vice-versa. It is understood that Aristotle can do nothing more than present magnanimity as a paradigm of virtue when faced with the offense: one who is not perturbed by the offense received. At the same time, being silent about the virtue and the vice of the offender in relation to the victim is also understood. What can be done? What should be done? Hence, the political communities do not really know how to manage situations such as transitional justice. As much as they do, the problem will only disappear with the death of the last victim and the last aggressor. In truth, this will not happen either as long as the institutions that made both visible persist with their objectives. These are political communities that are chained to their past, perhaps for all eternity.

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