

The mistake of taking political for moral forgiveness and reconciliation:

An Arendtian approach

Introduction

In recent decades the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation have proved their importance in many post-conflict politics (such as The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, the Gacaca Community Courts in Rwanda, the politics of reconciliation in Somalia, El Salvador and Chile). These practices are considered being crucial in conflict-resolution as they enable victims and perpetrators to live with each other again in the future, without being chained up to the past (Tutu, 1999). However, many practical and conceptual problems and objections have arisen. Most objections mainly concern the applicability of these initial moral and even religious concepts in a political context grounded on liberal principles. As they require a 'change of the heart' or at least need to initiate some kind of healing process between victim and perpetrator, those practices seem to put high moral and psychological demands on individual citizens. Such a moral and psychological claim may be considered to be in conflict with one of the main principles of a liberal constitutional state: its principle of neutrality and moral pluralism. This has cast doubt on the possibility of a political conception of forgiveness and reconciliation on the one hand, and on the appropriateness of building political institutions on the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation on the other.

I, however, intend to point out that the problems with the practices of forgiveness and reconciliation are even much more profound, as long as we remain caught in a moral interpretation of those concepts. In the first section I clarify how, despite its introduction in political theory, most theoretical accounts on forgiveness and reconciliation explicitly or implicitly hold on to its moral meaning. In order to demonstrate why this is problematic, I then point at a crucial difference in the presuppositions of morality and politics. While morality takes all humans to be essentially the same, the necessary condition for politics is human's plurality. In reference to Hannah Arendt I continue making clear why ignoring this plurality as an essential part of human existence not only prevents us from understanding political relationships, but also from understanding and replying adequately to political evil. Additionally, reducing political plurality to moral sameness may be concerned to lie exactly at the root of severe political evil. I therefore argue that political conflict precisely incites to take political plurality seriously. In the last section then, I discuss the role of forgiveness in politics and point out how it differs from moral forgiveness.

The moral interpretation of forgiveness and reconciliation

Let's thus first turn to the following questions: how could a moral interpretation of the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation in a political context be problematic at all? Isn't it precisely the task of post-conflict politics to heal past wrongs and injuries? Why would it be necessary to distinguish between moral and political reconciliation, or between moral and political evil? And if it is necessary, is it even possible to draw such a complete distinction between morality and politics?

Hannah Arendt introduces forgiveness and reconciliation as sheer political concepts in political theory in the 50's of the previous century. However - perhaps because she explicitly refers to their initial moral and religious context - most accounts on the political meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation that are developed ever since, hold on to a moral interpretation. In most cases these references to morality and religion are explicit.¹ Nevertheless, in several debates on political forgiveness and reconciliation the reference to a moral interpretation also remains rather implicit.² In those cases, the reliance on its moral meaning is demonstrated by the use of terms such as 'reparation', 'healing' and 'restoration'.

Andrew Schaap notices in his book *Political Reconciliation* that the use of concepts as 'restoration' is problematic because it presupposes the existence of a moral community preceding the political conflict.³ In many cases of political conflict, however, such a pre-existing harmonious moral relation seems far from self-evident. Referring to Antjie Krog, Schaap remarks that in societies divided by state wrongs, there might be 'nothing to go back to'.⁴

By pointing at the crucial difference between a moral and political community, Schaap gives an important indication about what is at stake. However, his account only takes us halfway. The difference between morality and politics is even more profound than he suggests and concerns the presuppositions both rely on. In order to understand why a moral interpretation of forgiveness and reconciliation, when practiced in a political context is problematic, we should clarify these presuppositions in much more detail.

Sameness versus plurality

When we analyze the theoretical accounts on political forgiveness and reconciliation in more detail, it becomes clear that they all refer to humanity as a kind of moral community every human being by birth is impart to. This pre-existing human community is considered to be some kind of moral fact, which is known by everyone and needs no further clarification. This points to the

¹ See for instance: D. W. Shriver Jr., *Forgiveness in Politics. An Ethic for Enemies*, 1995; M.U. Walker, *Moral repair. Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing*, 2006; M. R. Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution. Responding to wrongdoing*, 2012

² See for instance: P. E. Digeser, *Political forgiveness*, 2001; D. Philpott, *Just and Unjust Peace. An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*, 2012

³ A. Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

main presupposition of all morality: the idea that, as a mere consequence of the fact that he belongs to the human race, every human being naturally shares some kind of 'sameness'. We are all considered to be brothers and sisters, or are supposed to share the same moral abilities, and thus are belonging in one way or another to the same natural human moral community.

Let's first consider some examples of how this presupposition of morality is implicitly operating in the theoretical accounts on political forgiveness and reconciliation. In *The Ethics of Forgiveness* Christel Fricke refers to forgiveness as a path for setting up a new social relationship and redefining its normative foundations. She immediately continues however, describing forgiveness as an act of mutual acceptance of each other as members of the same human community: "At the least, the involved parties will be able to accept each other as members of the same human community, bound by norms which should have authority over all people."⁵ She thus assumes that if the more political solution of founding a new community seems to be hard for one reason or another, it always remains possible to rely on the fact that we all share the same humanness. This means that in any case morality has some kind of self-evident authority over us: merely because we are human, we are able to understand the moral call following from pre-existing and self-evident moral norms that apply to all of us.

But if that is true, why would there be any need to look for a more complex social or even political solution? If we could just rely on the fact that we share a set of moral norms, as a plain result of our humanness, why would there be any reason for making social appointments and for building political institutions? According to Hannah Arendt there is one crucial reason for human beings to engage in politics: their plurality. In Arendt's view this plurality may not be conceived of as something that disturbs or obscures moral human relationships, it is the very condition of humanity itself. For this reason Arendt distinguishes between humans as all being part of the same human race (which we may call humanness), which is the presupposition of morality, and humans as being essentially determined by their individual presence in the world and thus by the condition of plurality (which we may call humanity), which is the presupposition for their engagement in deliberative politics.

As a result of this essential difference in the presuppositions of morality and politics, it must become clear that morality and its reliance on a shared humanness can never be a foundation for politics, not even for a restorative politics. In order to clarify this in more detail, let's consider another example.

In *An Ethic for Enemies, Forgiveness in Politics* Donald W. Shriver Jr. refers to a 'fractured human community'.⁶ This notion expresses the idea that the wholeness of the human community is continually threatened and broken by conflict and enmity. Forgiveness and reconciliation enable

⁵ C. Fricke, *The Ethics of Forgiveness*, p. 1.

⁶ D. W. Shriver Jr., *Forgiveness in Politics. An Ethic for Enemies*, p. 35

to overcome mutual alienation of human beings, caused by conflict and social habit, and to settle some form of co-existence or to form a new community.⁷ In Shriver's view, politics is thus conceived of as a response to some kind of evil, which consists of the fact that the diversity of humans necessarily leads to alienation and conflict. The task of forgiveness and reconciliation is to heal the wounds and to enable a new, artificial community: a political one. (cf. social contract theory)

What's interesting about Shriver's approach is that it does not intend to heal some kind of pre-existing harmonious moral state, but that it gives account of the fact that something different and new needs to be established. At the same time however, as is indicated by his use of the term 'alienation', Shriver still assumes his moral sameness to be the real condition and essence of man. Due to social relations and conflict he is alienated from this original moral state. Politics is thus conceived of as offering a mere necessary solution for the inevitable chasing away from the moral paradise on earth. Consequently, Shriver does not recognize the political singularity of men. He does not give account of the fact that plurality is just as much an essential condition of existence of human beings as their belonging to the human race and to a shared human moral community. However, ignoring this plurality as an essential condition for politics is exactly the source of the kind of political evil that rises in serious political conflict. This implies that if we want to be able to understand and prevent such political evil, we must be very much aware not only of the difference between the presuppositions of morality and politics, but also of the difference between a moral and political relationship, and between moral and political evil.

Political relationship and political evil

In order to point out why not respecting the difference between the political presupposition of plurality and the presupposition of 'sameness' of morality may be problematic for understanding political relations and for combating political evil, let's consider one last example. In a very recent book by Daniel Philpott, *Just and unjust peace*, political reconciliation is considered to be a concept of justice: "The concept of justice that I defend here is political reconciliation. Its core content is the restoration of right relationship within or between political communities. Integral to the ethic [of political reconciliation, sic.] is also the idea of human rights, which define political injustice and right relationship."⁸

Philpott's account thus supposes that there is, or may be found, some consensus about how to define right political relationship and political injustice. Furthermore, this consensus entirely relies upon the assumption of a shared idea of human rights. In Philpott's account, political reconciliation is thus defined as a concept of justice that founds its judgments about justice and

⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

⁸ D. Philpott, *Just and unjust peace. An ethic of political reconciliation*, p. 16.

injustice and about the rightness of a political relation on some self-evident consensus about what is 'human'. Consequently, in what Arendt would call 'political emergency situations' we are left with a description of political justice and political reconciliation as something we are already supposed to know and understand. It's hard to see how this could help us any much further in preventing and combating political evil. More than that, it will even become clear that founding a political relationship on a pre-established moral truth is exactly the source of political evil and terror.⁹

Philpott's account is a plain example of how a political relationship is basically defined in moral terms. But just as we clarified that the presuppositions of morality and politics differ crucially, we also need to point at the essential difference between a moral and a political relationship. According to Hannah Arendt the difference between both consist of the fact that the moral relationship is one established between me and myself, while a political relationship is founded in experiences which nobody could ever have with himself, but which are entirely based upon the presence of others.¹⁰ This implies that if we do not respect the difference between a moral and a political relationship, we ignore what is crucial in politics: the mere fact that humans, as political beings, always necessary exist in the plural. This ignorance or the reduction of political plurality to moral sameness may lie exactly at the foundation of what Arendt describes as the most dangerous source of political evil: loneliness.

According to Arendt loneliness crucially differs from solitude. In solitude one may be alone, but not deprived of plurality. In the silent dialogue with oneself, which is thinking, the world and its different perspectives remain present. In loneliness however, one may be together with others, but the space between them, necessary to generate a plurality of perspectives, has disappeared. People are then pressed together into one mass. Their loneliness consists of the fact that they lose the possibility to share a world -constituted by a plurality of perspectives- with others and to take their unique position in it.¹¹

It must have become clear that the danger of relying on the moral presupposition of 'sameness' in political conflict-situations thus exactly consists of losing this necessary plurality. The existence of political conflict demonstrates that you and I share the same world by holding a different view on it. Such conflict changes into political evil as soon as a plurality of perspectives is ignored and reduced to one and the same perspective. In serious political conflict, one people, considered to behave and think alike, is set against another. The remedy may be worse than the disease, if one tries to solve such evil by taking all humans to be part of the same human moral community. By considering humans as part of one race or people and thus as part of one human moral community, one presses together all different individuals and their unique perspectives on the

⁹ See also: H. Arendt, *On Revolution*.

¹⁰ H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.238.

¹¹ H. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. See also: H. Arendt, *Thinking*, p. 185.

world they are born in into one human body. A body that is considered to act, behave and think alike, as if it were one and the same person.

Moreover, as Hannah Arendt magnificently pointed out, morality cannot provide a sufficient guard against political evil. Totalitarianism has demonstrated that morality turns out to be nothing but customs, which have no more power of resistance than other customs, when they are no longer founded in lawfulness and shared citizenship. Therefore, we need a political answer to political evil, an answer that is able to resist the moral perversions that can go along with it.¹²

The greatest challenge in dealing with political conflict is thus to take the essential political condition of plurality seriously. This means that instead of trying to settle conflicts by relying on a supposed shared humanness, the political institutions that need to prevent and reply to political evil and injustice and that have to enable reconciliation, should in one way or another reflect real political plurality.

Political forgiveness

But if we conclude that morality cannot be a foundation for politics, why would we then introduce a morally laden term as forgiveness into politics? Isn't the need for forgiveness in politics a clear evidence that in the end morality and politics cannot be pulled apart that easily?

Although forgiveness may indeed primarily be a moral and religious term, Hannah Arendt explicitly introduces it into politics because of its political strength. This implies that she radically transforms its meaning and goal. Moral forgiveness is mainly concerned with restoring the human moral community. It starts from the point of view that all humans are the same and theoretically all are capable of committing the same sins. The need for granting forgiveness thus rises as a consequence of the wish to union again with those we are alienated from as a consequence of several worldly circumstances.

Political forgiveness however, is founded on the political idea that every individual human being is able to make a difference and to start something new. Nonetheless, the need for forgiveness indicates the limits and conditions of this human freedom. Forgiveness in its political meaning is considered to be an ultimate human reaction to another human action. Without the possibility to be forgiven, one remains forever bound to his acts and their consequences. Granting forgiveness interrupts such a deterministic course of events and enables to renew a fellow men's freedom. This demonstrates how the human capacity to act and to start something new is entirely dependent on the existence of others. Consequently, the mutual dependency on political forgiveness points at the main condition for political relationships and political freedom: human's plurality.

¹² M. Canovan, "Morals and Politics in a Post-Totalitarian Age" in: *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of her Political Thought*, p. 159-161.

Conclusion

By pointing at the difference between the presuppositions of morality and politics, I have made clear why an explicit or implicit moral interpretation of political forgiveness and reconciliation is problematic. I have demonstrated that the accounts that rely on a moral interpretation misunderstand the meaning and character of a political relationship and the danger of political evil. I therefore argue that in order to combat political evil and solve serious political conflict it is necessary for political institutions to take human plurality seriously. Consequently, I have also called attention to the crucial difference between moral and political forgiveness. While the first is aimed at the reestablishment of human moral sameness and wholeness, the latter precisely points at the opposite: the necessary political condition of plurality. Consequently, I have also clarified that the peculiarity of political forgiveness and reconciliation is more profound and need to be taken much more seriously than is suggested by most discussions about the compatibility of both practices with liberalism and moral pluralism.

Thank you

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah, *Denktagebuch. 1950 bis 1973. Erster Band*, München – Zürich: Piper, 2002, p. 3 – 8.
- , *On revolution*, New York: Viking Press, 1963, 350 p.
- , *The Human Condition*, Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1958, 349 p.
- , *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New York – London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc., 1973, 576 p.
- Canovan, Margaret, *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, 298 p.
- Digeser, P.E., *Political Forgiveness*, Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2001, 224 p.
- Fricke, Christel, *The Ethics of Forgiveness. A Collection of Essays*, New York – London: Routledge. Taylor and Francis Group, 2011, 212 p.
- Holmgren, Margaret, *Forgiveness and Retribution. Responding to wrongdoing*, Cambridge - New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 297 p.
- MacLachlan, Alice, “The philosophical controversy over political forgiveness” in: Van Stokkom, Bas, e.a. (eds.), *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts*, Cambridge – Antwerp - Portland: Intersentia, 2012, p. 37-64.

Philpott, Daniel, *Just and Unjust Peace. An Ethic of Political Reconciliation*, Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 352 p.

Schaap, Andrew, *Political Reconciliation*, London-New York: Routledge, 2005, 176 p.

Schraver Jr., D. W., *Forgiveness in Politics. An Ethic for Enemies*, New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995, 283 p.