

THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS
AN ARENDTIAN TURN

DE MACHT VAN VERGEVING
EEN ARENDTIAANSE WENDE



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Introduction

In recent decades there has been a surge of philosophical interest in the role and meaning of forgiveness in moral and political life. This interest is inspired by an increasing secularization of Western moral and political life and is accompanied by a growing philosophical interest in liberal justice, law, equality and fair punishment. Consequently, on the one hand, much of the contemporary philosophical research on forgiveness is inspired by questions concerning the compatibility of forgiveness with liberal justice and equality. On the other hand, philosophers have become engaged in a secular and rational examination of the moral value of forgiveness. Simultaneously, in view of practices such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, there has been an increasing interest in the political role of forgiveness. The emphasis on forgiveness in the religious politics of Desmond Tutu and Pope John Paul II has gained attention not only from philosophers, but also from researchers working in the areas of Development Studies, Criminology, and Peace and Conflict Studies.

Within this growing body of contemporary research on the possibilities and limits of forgiveness, Hannah Arendt's account of forgiveness is often referred to. However, I argue that the implications and opportunities of her view on forgiveness are not sufficiently brought to the fore.

In contemporary thematic accounts that discuss the moral value and conditions of forgiveness, Arendt's view is largely ignored or only referred to superficially.¹ Accounts that do take her view more seriously are those that examine the possibility of forgiveness as a political practice. Within this research domain Arendt's emphasis on the political meaning of forgiveness and the ability to start anew does not remain unnoticed. In the literature on political reconciliation and forgiveness her account is mentioned in almost every piece of research. However, since her discussion of forgiveness fits in a peculiar theory about action

¹Joram Graf Haber, for instance, merely quotes her stating that the reference to Jesus of Nazareth as a discoverer of forgiveness is no reason to take it less seriously in its strictly secular sense, but he does not discuss her view. Joram Graf Haber, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Study* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), 3. See also Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15, 73, 148. Arendt's view is not mentioned in the paradigmatic moral accounts of Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton: Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press) 1988.

and politics her account is often only mentioned *en passant*.² There are some important exceptions. In some contemporary thematic accounts her view is discussed in more detail. Yet, in these accounts, the extent to which Arendt's conceptions of forgiveness are diametrically opposed to most common conceptions is not sufficiently appreciated. Despite involving Arendt's work in the discussion, it remains unnoticed how her view poses serious challenges to many of the accepted assumptions about the themes under discussion.³

Perhaps surprisingly, even among Arendt scholars, the implications of Arendt's account on forgiveness for contemporary philosophical debates on this topic are not sufficiently examined and brought to the fore. One reason might be that Arendt's discussion of forgiveness is confined to approximately a mere eight pages in *The Human Condition* and a few remarks throughout the rest of her works. As a result, in Arendt scholarship, the discussion of her view on forgiveness is mostly limited to a discussion of these specific pages and remarks. Moreover, it is often only discussed in view of the examination of her theory of action.⁴ And while some Arendt scholars discuss her view on forgiveness in a more substantial manner, they often emphasize its relation to the activity of promising.⁵ In those accounts, it is regularly stressed that the activity of promising should be understood as a fundamental part of the ability to forgive and start anew.⁶ However, as Arendt explicitly claims, the intrinsic political meaning and value of forgiveness is much harder to grasp than the political meaning of promising. Consequently, stressing the close connection between forgiveness and the far more evident and unproblematic political activity of promising may be a way to escape the peculiar challenges and opportunities Arendt's account of forgiveness poses.

² See for instance Claire Moon, "Prelapsarian State: Forgiveness and Reconciliation in Transitional Justice," *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 17, (2004): 185-197; Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ See for instance P.E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2001); Glen Pettigrove, "Hannah Arendt and Collective Forgiving," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 37, 4 (2006): 483-500.

⁴ See for instance Dana Villa, *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵ See for instance Marguerite La Caze, "Promising and Forgiveness," in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. Patrick Hayden, (New York: Routledge, 2014); Catherine Guisan, "Political Forgiveness, promise, and the 'understanding heart' in Hannah Arendt's theory," in *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts*, eds. Bas Van Stokkom, e.a. (Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland: Intersentia, 2012). Andrew Schaap, *Political Reconciliation* (London-New York: Routledge, 2005); Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2006).

⁶ See also Paul Ricoeur, "Difficult Forgiveness," in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004): 457-506.

Hence, I argue that Arendt's relevance for the contemporary debate on forgiveness is not sufficiently brought to the fore. Although her philosophical vocabulary may appear idiosyncratic due to its specificity, she is not operating on a philosophical island. Her specific understanding and use of concepts are, rather than idiosyncratic, the result of the active involvement with some of the obstacles, limitations and problems their standard philosophical use poses. Her view should therefore not be isolated from the contemporary views on the moral and political value of forgiveness. Rather, by discussing the meaning and implications of some of her conceptions, it becomes possible to bring her into a welcome dialogue with the contemporary views on these topics.

Hence, the central aim of this dissertation is to mobilize some of Arendt's key concepts in order to demonstrate how her view on forgiveness offers some remarkable solutions for the most controversial issues in the contemporary literature on forgiveness. I will reconstruct Arendt's concept of forgiveness from a specific angle, namely her uncommon view on action and freedom. I will bring to the fore precisely these aspects of her account that elucidate what is taking place and at stake in forgiveness. In addition, I will examine the most prevailing contemporary assumptions about forgiveness and critically evaluate their implications. This enables me to bring them in contact with Arendt's view and to discuss in great detail the significant shift in perspective that results from her alternative conceptions. I will argue that this shift in perspective offers some critical solutions for the problems that arise in the literature on forgiveness. Hence, in this dissertation I will examine the implications of an Arendtian approach of forgiveness for the contemporary debate in great detail.

To reconstruct Arendt's account of forgiveness and its critical relevance for the contemporary debate, it is crucial to go beyond the few pages and remarks in which she discusses the activity of forgiveness. In order to do so, I will start from her radical shift in perspective regarding the philosophical notions of human action and freedom. Importantly, by embedding her discussion of forgiveness in a specific understanding of these notions, I do not mean to imply that Arendt's view is idiosyncratic and can only be understood on her own terms. Rather, in reference to Arendt's view it becomes possible to tackle the most important problems that the prevailing moral assumptions about forgiveness give rise to. These moral conceptions do not only hinder the development of a sheer political concept of forgiveness and to grant it a substantial political role, but they also create more fundamental and essentially unsolvable problems. As a result, the contemporary debate on forgiveness is

entangled in a cluster of conceptual questions and paradoxes that render forgiveness either impossible or pointless. Consequently, the debate not only gets stuck in its own paradoxical conceptions of forgiveness - like a dog that is chasing his own tail -, but the philosophical understanding of the practice of forgiveness also becomes both unnecessary complicated and moralistic. Once one starts to think about the meaning and value of forgiveness from the standard philosophical perspective on this topic, one gets involved in a conceptual tangle of interrelated moral assumptions, conditions and justifications that are taken to be self-evident and from which no escape seems possible. One of the central aims of this dissertation is therefore to demonstrate that a profound discussion of Arendt's view and its implications enables to disentangle the practice of forgiveness. In doing so, I show that her account dissolves some of the major perplexities that are supposed to be an intrinsic part of forgiveness.

In the first part, 'Disentangling Forgiveness' I will first bring to the fore the most prevailing topics of discussion in the contemporary literature on forgiveness and address their problems. I will point out that, although many accounts hold that forgiveness is a response to responsible wrongdoing, their conceptions of what enables forgiveness rather tend to lose sight of the wrongdoer's responsibility.⁷ Moreover, the moral conceptions of forgiveness lead to a moral paradox. On the one hand, moral accounts assume that forgiveness is a moral act that reaches out for a wrongdoer and grants him the possibility to re-integrate in the moral community. On the other hand, it is held that one has to properly condemn the wrongdoing from a moral point of view. This raises the question as to how both can be reconciled. In the contemporary literature, there are two types of responses to this moral problem. The first response, entertained by, for instance, Derrida, puts forward forgiveness as an exceptional act of moral virtuosity which has to do the 'impossible'.⁸ The second response posits that it is only possible and justified to forgive when there are moral reasons to do so. However, these moral reasons trap forgiveness in a second paradox: 'the logical paradox of forgiveness'.⁹ When good moral reasons are absent, forgiveness becomes unjustified. Yet, when there are moral reasons, forgiveness becomes redundant. I demonstrate that most accounts on forgiveness do not succeed in finding a convincing way out of this logical paradox. I will

⁷ See for instance Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); David Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58, 2 (1998): 299-315.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London - New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁹ Aurel Kolnai, "Forgiveness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, 74, (1973-1974): 91-106.

argue that this is a result of the failure to give sufficiently account of the peculiar activity of forgiveness.

Therefore, in the second chapter of the first part, I will put forward that Arendt's account of human action implies a radical 'turn to the act'. Her view enables to tackle one of the main assumptions in the contemporary literature: the assumption that forgiveness is to be defined as a subjective moral-psychological process. I will point out that, in Arendt's view on human action, rather than the rational moral subject, man as an initiator is central. This enables to perceive of the wrong that is done as a tangible, objective and irreversible occurrence, rather than merely a moral threat or offence. I will argue that, within this view, both the wrongdoer and the victim are able to take responsibility for the consequences of this occurrence, irrespective of their intentions, aims, circumstances and human weaknesses. Furthermore, Arendt's account enables to conceive of the act of forgiveness as a spontaneous new initiative that rather escapes all kinds of moral reasons and incentives. Consequently, I argue that this clarifies that forgiveness is not a mere act of moral restoration, but a meaningful political practice.

In the second part of this dissertation, 'Liberation Through Forgiveness', I will examine the implications of this shift in perspective and the possibilities it opens up. First, I will tackle the implicit conceptions of the liberation that is brought about by forgiveness in the standard account of forgiveness. In the standard account, the liberation of forgiveness is conceived as resulting from an inner process of transformation in which one liberates oneself from certain moral sentiments and judgments. I will argue that these conceptions rely on a concept of freedom as self-mastery. However, this liberation, which ties up liberation to an inner process of moral justification, does not only turns out to be unsuccessful, it also overlooks the other person as a concrete and distinct person.

Therefore, I will contrast this conception of liberation and freedom with Arendt's concept of freedom. I will point out that her view on spontaneity enables to conceive of forgiveness as a sheer unprecedented and unexpected interruption, instead of as a process of moral transformation and justification. Moreover, Arendt's critique of inner freedom reveals that freedom only becomes a meaningful experience in acting with others. Taken from this perspective, it becomes possible to bring to the fore the real transformative power of forgiveness. As a transformative act, it not merely liberates the forgiver from certain sentiments and moral judgement about the other, but it liberates the other as a concrete

distinct and acting person. Consequently, forgiveness becomes a real interdependent practice and the orientation at the other receives a substantial meaning.

Finally, I will demonstrate that Arendt's account enables to respond to the questions and doubts that have arisen in regard to the appropriateness of a moral concept in a political context. I will argue that making sense of the political meaning of forgiveness does not imply discussing how a moral and interpersonal practice is to be transferred to the political domain. Instead, one must make sense of the meaning of interpersonal relations as political relations on the one hand and the role of forgiveness for these relations on the other. Arendt's view on action, freedom and politics enables to draw a crucial distinction between moral and political relations. In moral relations we rely on our fundamental sameness, on shared moral capacities and sentiments. In political relations, in contrast, we appear as distinct and unique persons. I will argue that this distinction is fundamental for understanding forgiveness as an intrinsic political practice. Moreover, Arendt's view on the unforgivable makes clear that the limits of forgiveness do not pose an ultimate moral challenge for the virtuous person. It rather reveals that human power and the power of forgiveness are not omnipotent. Forgiveness requires taking responsibility for what has been done. It is not an 'escape button' that brings salvation for every imaginable human sin.

Throughout this dissertation, my argument will be developed relying on two different philosophical methods. On the one hand, I will take part in the thematic debate on forgiveness and discuss the contemporary conceptions on their own terms. On the other hand, I will reconstruct Arendt's view by an extensive examination of specific notions in her philosophical oeuvre. I doing so, I will also continually discuss the most common contemporary assumptions about forgiveness and critically examine them. This enables me to contrast them with what can be gained from Arendt's views.

In the first chapter of the first part, 'The paradoxes of Forgiveness', I will unpack the implications of the existing moral assumptions about forgiveness by a thematic discussion of the related practices of forgetting, excusing and condoning. This enables me to examine and discuss the contemporary accounts of forgiveness in their own right. My discussion will start from distinctions that are assumed to be crucial for understanding the particularities of the activity. This will enable me to give proper account of the existing debate and to reveal how its problems are entangled with its assumptions.

In contrast to this thematic discussion in the first chapter, I will start from a thorough hermeneutic examination of Arendt's view in both the second chapter of the first part and

the entire second part. I will examine and discuss some of Arendt's notions in great detail in order to demonstrate how these notions are constitutive for her specific view on forgiveness. This thorough investigation will not only enable me to further elucidate the main problems of many contemporary views, but it will also reveal the implications and promising philosophical opportunities and prospects of Arendt's account.

A great majority of scholars share the moral assumptions about forgiveness. This results in a debate that seems vivid and intuitive at first sight. However, as I aim to show, this debate has essentially been stuck in its own paradoxical conceptions. Arendt's view offers some excellent opportunities to tackle these prevailing assumptions. But as I stated above, the meaning and implications of Arendt's view remain quite underexplored in the contemporary academic literature on forgiveness. Her assumptions about forgiveness are also far less self-evident than the prevailing ones and therefore, at first sight, they also seem less operable. Therefore, I deem it necessary to clarify Arendt's assumptions in much detail. This enables me to point out where they bring us when we deploy them in order to tackle some of the prevailing presuppositions of forgiveness. This is, admittedly, not an easy undertaking. At first sight, the assumptions of the moral-psychological approach seem so closely related to common and unproblematic intuitions that the problems and limitations that are actually there are not easily brought to the surface. And while, some scholars do criticize the emotional model of forgiveness,¹⁰ the discussion of the problems, assumptions and implications remains, in my view, too superficial. Therefore, one of the major aims of this dissertation is to delve deeper into the implications and assumptions of the different models and provide some alternative views by an extensive discussion of specific aspects of Arendt's account.

¹⁰ Alice MacLachlan, "The philosophical controversy over political forgiveness," in *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Contexts*, eds. Bas Van Stokkom, Neelke Doorn and Paul van Tongeren (Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland: Intersentia, 2012); P.E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

PART I

DISENTANGLING FORGIVENESS

Introduction to Part I

In this part I will discuss and call into question the prevailing philosophical assumption that forgiveness should be defined as a subjective mental process. This common assumption entails that, as a subjective mental process, forgiveness can only be discerned from other mental processes and illegitimate subjective responses by relying on certain moral conditions, values and attitudes. In contrast with this assumption, I will bring to the fore how Arendt's theory of human action enables a radical turn to the act. I will argue that Arendt's account of human action is the key to a crucial shift in perspective. This shift in perspective enables to view the wrong not merely as a threatening moral offence to one's worth, but as a tangible and irreversible object. Moreover, as a response to an irreversible occurrence, forgiveness does not require special individual moral attitudes. It implies the courage to take shared responsible action and to interrupt the further consequences of a wrongful act.

In the first chapter, 'The Paradoxes of Forgiveness', I will first discuss the common conceptual distinctions that are used to disentangle forgiveness from the related practices of forgetting, excusing and condoning. Here, my aim is twofold: on the one hand, by tackling the debate on these distinctions, I will isolate some of the main features of the activity of forgiveness. On the other hand, I bring the main presuppositions to the fore that underlie and guide the debate. My aim here is to address some of the main contemporary assumptions about forgiveness and to demonstrate how they give rise to insolvable moral and logical paradoxes. By tackling these assumptions I aim to offer valuable new perspectives.

In 'Forgetting' I discuss the paradoxical relation between forgiveness and memory. It is generally accepted among philosophers that forgiveness should be distinguished from forgetting. Forgiveness is conceived as an active effort to let go of the past. However, as Vladimir Jankélévitch points out, this letting go also requires a good memory. To clarify this, I refer to Paul Ricoeur's distinction between a good and a bad use of memory. A good use of memory is not a compulsive repetition. It is a labour of remembrance, which takes history to be open-ended instead of closed and determined. This remembrance is closely related to the labour of mourning. It enables to forget and to remember at the same time. The paradoxical role of remembrance points to forgiveness' transformative character. The transformation of

forgiveness implies not necessarily a change in one's individual mental and emotional state, but an active and unburdened open dialogue with the past.

In 'Excusing' I discuss the general philosophical assumption that forgiveness can only be granted for responsible wrongdoing and therefore has to be distinguished from excusing the wrong. In view of this, I call into question the strong emphasis in the literature on the role of empathic understanding and human fallibility as facilitators for forgiveness. I argue that any reference to understandable motives and circumstances evades or minimalizes responsibility for the wrong. Furthermore, I contest that forgiveness can only be granted for intentional, accountable wrongdoing. I point out that there is a prevailing tendency in the literature on forgiveness to take wrongdoing as primarily entailing a moral offence to the victim's worth. However, in my view, forgiveness deals with that part of the wrong, namely the real tangible harm, which cannot be elevated by excuses and good intentions. It is this part of the wrong for which one may feel responsible and ask forgiveness, even when excuses are available and the wrong turns out to be unintentional.

In 'Condoning' I discuss that in contemporary accounts of forgiveness the worry prevails that forgiveness may slip into a form of condonation. This worry results from the assumption that forgiveness involves an 'impossible' or paradoxical effort to overcome in a moral way what at the same time should not be overcome from a moral point of view. However, the attempts to escape this moral paradox by relying on good moral reasons trap forgiveness in a second paradox: 'the logical paradox of forgiveness'.¹¹ The logical paradox resides in the fact that forgiveness is either condoning the wrong or becoming redundant as a result of a prior act of repentance. However, in disentangling the underlying assumption of these paradoxes I shed another light on the problems of both redundancy and condonation. First, I point out that the problem of redundancy results from the problematic assumption that wrongdoing primarily implies a moral offence, which can be withdrawn by the repentance of an offender. Furthermore, I demonstrate how this distorted conception of wrongdoing is accompanied with a distorted conception of forgiveness, i.e. forgiveness as a response the wrongdoer has to deserve. Secondly, I discuss how the precondition of self-respect is used as a mark to distinguish between forgiving and condoning a wrong. Many philosophers argue that the condition of self-respect helps to solve the moral paradox or 'impossibility' of forgiveness. In my view, however, the emphasis on this precondition precisely points out that the activity of forgiveness has not sufficiently been grasped and articulated. Therefore, I conclude that, in

¹¹ Kolnai, "Forgiveness," 95-99.

order to conceive of forgiveness as a real transformative human practice, it is necessary to untie the act of forgiveness from any moral motivation and attitude that may either morally legitimize it or take it as an unconditional ultimate moral challenge.

In the second chapter, 'Arendtian Forgiveness: The Turn to the Act', I reveal how Arendt's account of human action is the key to a double shift in perspective. First, I discuss some crucial notions of her theory of human action. I reveal how her account of action brings two crucial aspects of action to the fore: the ability to take initiative - which she calls spontaneity - , and the dependence on distinct others - which she calls plurality. I point out how this view on action also enables her to draw attention to the irreversibility and non-sovereignty of action.

Consequently, I demonstrate how her account of human action entails a radical shift in perspective on both wrongdoing and the act of forgiveness.

First, Arendt's account of human action implies a shift in *what* requires forgiveness. I point out that in Arendt's view action results from the sheer capacity to take initiative and the ability to act with others. This way, she disentangles action from its sheer moral classification as resulting from certain moral intentions, considerations and attitudes. In Arendt's view, all kinds of acts and consequences may result from the capacity to take initiative among other acting persons. Consequently, Arendt conceives of forgiveness not as a response to an intentional offence of one's moral integrity but as a response to the irreversibility and incontrovertibility of what has - literally - taken place. In her view, forgiveness is not a response to the exceeding of certain moral boundaries, but to the act as a tangible, objective occurrence among people.

This brings with it a second shift in perspective. This shift relates to *how* one forgives. Arendt's theory of action enables to perceive of forgiveness as a spontaneous response. It no longer requires a description of moral attitudes and their justification. Instead, it shifts to a description of the ability to take a responsible new initiative in response to the obstacle of what has irreversibly taken place. As a result, it also becomes possible to tackle the assumption that forgiveness is an extraordinary virtuous act, requiring either an extraordinary mental effort or special moral conditions. Consequently, I conclude that Arendt's theory of human action enables to disentangle forgiveness from its prevailing moral assumptions, descriptions and paradoxes and to revise its practice.

I. The Paradoxes of Forgiveness

I.I. Forgetting

“Forgive and forget” is a common expression suggesting that forgiving may be identical with, or at least closely related to, forgetting. It refers to a state of affairs that entails a ‘tabula rasa’. One wipes the slate clean. One chooses to continue one’s life or relationship and forget about what happened. Intuitively this idea makes sense. If one decides to forgive, it does not seem appropriate to come back on what happened and to drag up old matters. Forgiving seems to entail an effort to drop a matter, to sink one’s differences, to let bygones be bygones. Sometimes we use the expression “Let’s forget about it” in a way that insinuates we forgive someone for an offence.

Despite this, most philosophers hold that forgiveness needs to be distinguished from forgetting. Jeffrie Murphy, for instance, argues that forgetting is entirely passive. One has no control over it. It just happens to us in a non-voluntary way. He claims that it is possible that at some point we lose a vivid memory of old wrongs, become bored with our resentments and forget.¹² In his view, this clearly differs from forgiving. Forgiveness, he holds, is something one actively *does*.¹³

David Novitz makes a similar argument, stating that “[t]he passage of time and the development of new interests and a new lifestyle, may gradually displace feelings of bitterness and the desire for revenge.”¹⁴ He concludes that this is not to forgive, rather to forget. One’s attention is simply diverted and one develops new and different priorities. Consequently, the wrong and the suffered harm gradually lose their sting. According to him, that process is entirely passive.

Joanna North also points to a distinction between the passivity of forgetting and the activity of forgiving when she describes the effort of forgiveness in the following passage: “[H]e may refuse to dwell upon the thought of his friend’s rude departure, and the unanswered letters. This is not to say that he forgets them. He will turn his mind to other things and take steps to

¹² Jeffrie Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

¹⁴ David Novitz, “Forgiveness and Self-Respect,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998): 304.

avoid nursing and nurturing his resentment.”¹⁵ In her view, forgiveness entails an active and conscious effort not to let one’s emotions about a certain event play a role here and now. These demarcations in Murphy’s, Novitz’ and North’s account are pointing to a first fundamental feature of forgiveness. Whereas forgetting seems to be rather a result of disinterestedness, forgiveness apparently entails more. Simply ceasing to care about an offence is not forgiveness. For the very same reason it is believed that taking a pill to reduce one’s resentment about an offence is not forgiveness.¹⁶ Forgiveness is a conscious act. Somehow, one chooses or decides to forgive. It does not just happen to us. Avishai Margalit for instance claims:

If it occurs through forgetfulness, it is not real forgiveness. Forgiveness is a conscious decision to change one’s attitudes and to overcome anger and vengefulness. Forgetfulness may in the last analysis be the most effective method of overcoming anger and vengefulness, but since it is an omission rather than a decision, it is not forgiveness.¹⁷

This point is pursued to the extreme in the account of Vladimir Jankélévitch. In his view, forgiveness needs to be granted before forgetfulness erodes the offence. Sometimes, we seem to suppose that forgiveness needs time. If, during the years, we have ceased to be angry about an offence we are tempted to assume that we must have forgiven the offender. Is this true? Are there arguments to state that time helps us to forgive, that it softens the pain that makes one eager for revenge? Does the consolation of time enable to reach out for the other and to forgive? In Jankélévitch’ view, time only makes us forget, not forgive. He points out that time is a condition of change, of a process of becoming. It is not time itself that transforms things, but the operation of certain physical factors in time. Decay, for instance, is a natural effect of duration.¹⁸ He believes forgetting to be an unavoidable consequence of time and duration, which one cannot willfully resist:

No, nothing resists this silent, continuous, and implacable force, this truly infinite pressure of progressive forgetting. No *ressentiment*, no matter how stubborn it is, can

¹⁵ Joanna North, “Wrongdoing and Forgiveness,” in *Philosophy* 62, 242 (1987): 506.

¹⁶ Pamela Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” *Philosophy of Phenomenological Research* 62, 3 (2001): 530.

¹⁷ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 193.

¹⁸ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 13.

hold fast in the face of this mass of indifference and disaffection. Everything counsels forgetting!¹⁹

Jankélévitch holds that at some point, the offended person becomes tired of holding a grudge against the offender.²⁰ Time is relentless. It erodes mountain chains. It levels all harshness and consoles all pain. It is the dimension by which the past becomes less and less alive.²¹ Consequently, Jankélévitch holds that forgiveness needs to anticipate forgetting and be immediate and instantaneous. It must remain ahead of forgetting. If forgiveness takes time, forgetting overtakes it. Jankélévitch holds that, as soon as time erodes the pain of the offence, there remains almost nothing to forgive:

[T]he morphine of time attenuates old pains and makes old sorrows sleep. But it does not follow that the temporal medicine of pain is, in one fell swoop, the moral medicine for sin: [...] if costly heartbreak is, as we think, the condition of true forgiveness, then the time that soothes the wound must render this forgiveness less true, less authentic, and less meritorious. There is almost nothing left to forgive, therefore nothing is really forgiven.²²

Forgetting is thus not only different from forgiving. Forgetting also renders forgiveness redundant, since it effectuates the loss of its *raison d'être*. Jankélévitch's position consequently points to a second central feature of forgiveness: in order to be able to forgive an offence, the offence must be vividly remembered.

1.1.1. Paradoxical Remembrance

Jankélévitch not only posits that forgiving and forgetting ought to be distinguished. Even more, he claims that forgiving requires the opposite of forgetting – remembrance. Forgetting is not always merely a result of disinterestedness, a change in priorities or a result of time. In some cases of wrongdoing it seems easier to try to forget about it than to confront it.

¹⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁰ Ibid., 23-24.

²¹ Ibid., 24.

²² Ibid., 41-42.

Consequently memories are sometimes actively suppressed and pushed aside. But this is also not forgiveness.

Jankélévitch is not alone in positing a relation between forgiving and remembrance. In his book *Forgiveness and Remembrance*, Jeffrey M. Blustein points out why most accounts take memory as a fundamental, even necessary element of the process of forgiveness.²³ Blustein argues that memory enables to overcome the emotions that are engendered by the wrong, without relinquishing the judgment that one was wronged.²⁴ Forgiving someone for a committed wrong does not involve retracting or setting aside or repressing the judgment that one was wronged by a specific responsible person. It rather consists in overcoming certain emotions that accompany the judgment. But in order to retain the judgment one must retain to some extent the memory of having been wronged by this person.²⁵ Charles Griswold claims that memory is crucial for forgiveness as it is necessary for recognizing the wrongdoer's responsibility for wrongdoing.²⁶ Some argue that the commitment to forgive doesn't necessary imply that it should never be mentioned again. Eve Garrard and David McNaughton for instance hold that if an offence repeats itself, it is not necessarily inappropriate to hold it against the offender again after forgiveness took place.²⁷ This is possible only if forgiveness does not blot out the memory of an offence. Although it is generally assumed that forgiving means making the past rest, forgiveness does not forget. It also does not entail that one must remain silent about it forever. If it is necessary for understanding and dealing with other elements in the entire story, one may bring up the forgiven offence again.

Since remembrance is thus assumed to be necessary for confronting a wrongdoing, it is sometimes even believed that on a political and communal level there is some kind of duty to

²³ Jeffrey M. Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance: Remembering Wrongdoing in Personal and Public Life* (Oxford - New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 70. Blustein refers to those accounts as the standard account of forgiveness. In his book, he proposes a revision of the standard account, partly because it does not go far enough in elaborating how exactly memory is involved in forgiveness.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁶ He also holds that "the pertinent and accurate remembering is inseparable from allegiance to the truth of the matter". Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge - New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 49-50.

²⁷ Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104 (2003): 48-49. According to them, it is not an indication that the forgiveness back then was not sincere. It only means that the new offence cannot be forgiven in light of what happened before. Or, one could argue, it brings new elements to the fore that puts the forgiven offence in a new light. Glen Pettigrove argues that the reoccurrence of the offence may reveal something about the offender's character that was not obvious before, when the first offence and the forgiveness of it took place. See Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 50-51.

remember. Some argue that forgetting some radical or far-reaching crimes ought to be considered immoral. Jean Baudrillard holds that forgetting the extermination of a people is part of the extermination itself.²⁸ For Milan Kundera, the struggle against forgetting is an active and moral struggle: “The struggle against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”²⁹ In his book *The Ethics of Memory* Avishai Margalit examines the communal obligation to remember. He argues that the moral duty to remember is a constitutive part of maintaining ‘thick’ ethical relations with others.³⁰

But what kind of remembrance is involved in forgiving? The notion of a duty to remember points out that it might not be a self-evident remembrance. It requires a conscious effort and should somehow remain vivid for generations. How does this work? The emphasis on remembering past wrongdoings precisely entails the risk that one remains a prisoner of the past, that one is caught up in painful memories forever, even across generations. This is precisely what forgiveness aims to avoid. Consequently, the idea that forgiving entails forgetting seems not totally misguided. There may be a way in which forgetting also becomes a necessary part of the act and commitment to forgive. How can one leave the past behind if one is tied to a duty or commitment to remember?

Margaret Holmgren points both to differences in modes of remembering and the paradox in the relation between forgetting and forgiving. She emphasizes that forgiveness does not entail amnesia. In forgiving we do not forget the wrongdoing, but we also no longer remember it in a vindictive manner. Consequently, she claims that there is an element of truth in the familiar phrase ‘forgive and forget’:

An attitude of resentment tends to keep the incident before our minds in a way that an attitude of forgiveness does not. When we forgive, we make peace with the past

²⁸ Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness. Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 118.

²⁹ Milan Kundera cited in: Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 118.

³⁰ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 105-106. Margalit distinguishes between two types of human relations: thick relations and thin relations: “Thick relations are grounded in attributes such as parent, friend, lover, fellow-countryman. Thick relations are anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory. Thin relations, on the other hand, are backed by the attitude of being human. Thin relations rely also on some aspects of being human, such as being a woman or being sick. [...] Ethics, in the way I use the term, tells us how we should regulate our thick relations; morality tells us how we should regulate our thin relations.” Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 7-8.

and no longer feel a need to concern ourselves with it, beyond drawing on it in ways that are beneficial in planning for the future.³¹

Martha Minow points out that, in dealing with the past, memory is a double-edged danger, since one may have too much and too little memory. According to her, this leads to paradoxical claims about the remembrance of the past. She refers to Dullah Omar, one of South-Africa's former ministers of justice, who holds that "we want to put the past behind us but we don't want to forget, we want to remember".³² This finding results in one of the most pressing questions in dealing with the past, formulated by Ariel Dorfman: "How do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without risking its repetition in the future?"³³

This is a central question regarding forgiveness. How can we forgive without losing sense of the offence, without taking steps to avoid its reoccurrence? And conversely, how can we keep the memory of the offence alive, without being carried away and imprisoned by old feelings of resentment or disappointment? How does this paradoxical relation between forgiveness and memory work? And how does it relate to the common expression that forgiveness entails forgetting?

Blustein describes the risk of too much memory as a tendency to rumination. It means that one dwells on the wrongs one has suffered. They become the focus of ruminative thinking.³⁴ Therefore, he emphasizes that despite the sound observation that we should not confuse forgetting with forgiving, it may be necessary to forget in order to forgive. One can only move forward with one's life without being dominated by memories of ill-treatment if one disengages sufficiently from the past. Consequently, he asks how forgetting can facilitate forgiveness if forgiveness depends on not forgetting? He claims that to answer this question we have to take a closer look at precisely how memory is implicated in forgiveness.³⁵

It is conceptual of forgiveness that a wronged party can only forgive if she does not cease to believe in the wrongness of what was done to her and the culpability of its agent, hence only if she remembers that she was the object of some culpable wrongdoing. This is correct as far as it goes, but like much else in the standard

³¹ Margaret Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 40-41.

³² Martha Minow citing Dullah Omar in Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 119.

³³ Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 119

³⁴ Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance*, 100.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

account, it doesn't go nearly far enough. We must also identify the kind of memory we are speaking about and explain why a theory of forgiveness should do this [...]. One way to make the point that forgetting is an important or even vital part of the process of forgiving is to draw a distinction between remembering and remembering *well*. Forgiveness is only possible, it might be suggested, if one remembers being the object of culpable wrongdoing and does so well, and this presumes that there are good and bad, better and worse, ways of remembering.³⁶

As Blustein points out, remembering well apparently also implies in part forgetting. How precisely does this work?³⁷ And how does this mode of forgetting differ from the temporal forgetting that is described and repudiated by Jankélévitch? The question thus not only turns out to be what kind of remembering is involved in forgiving, but also: what kind of forgetting is required?

1.1.2. Transformative Forgiveness

For a further description of the kind of forgetting that is involved in forgiving and how it relates to memory, Jankélévitch' account is illuminating. As pointed out above, Jankélévitch warns not to replace forgiving by forgetting. Therefore, he holds that forgiveness should be given before forgetting starts to dissolve the offence. Nevertheless, he also strongly affirms that forgiveness amounts to a form of forgetting. But the kind of forgetting forgiveness amounts to differs crucially from the unavoidable temporal forgetting that results from decay. According to Jankélévitch the difference between them stems precisely from the transformative power of forgiveness. He calls forgiveness a transfiguring virtue that has in itself no relation to temporality.³⁸ Nevertheless, in forgiving, one needs to be conscious of time and temporal decay and transform memory before it is transformed by time. One needs to take responsibility for and control over forgetting by forgiving. In forgiving one anticipates

³⁶ Ibid., 101.

³⁷ For Blustein it is a matter of emotion regulation. He discusses several techniques and methods. The idea of self-regulation as essential to human flourishing, and thus also crucial to forgiveness, is part of a virtue ethical account subscribed by Blustein. See Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance*, p. 100-101. In the second part of this thesis I will tackle this connection between forgiveness and self-regulation or self-mastery.

³⁸ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 30. Moreover, Jankélévitch argues that the moral problem that forgiveness has to resolve is situated outside of time. According to him, not only values are atemporal, but also sin. Sin began in time, but is atemporal *a parte post*. See *ibid.*, 55, 47.

forgetting and recognizes the unavoidable decay of memory. It is a decision to take the fate of memory in one's own hands.³⁹

Jankélévitch describes this process of transformation as an active confirmation of the phenomenological mode of becoming. The phenomenological mode of becoming in time, of which temporal and passive forgetting is a result, is both futurition and preterition.⁴⁰ Although it transforms in opposite directions, towards the future and to the past, becoming consists of one singular movement:

[D]epending on whether one looks toward the future or toward the past, becoming ceaselessly posits a future, and with the same stroke and at the same time it deposits a past behind it. Successively, it makes the future present and makes the present past, and it does this in the same movement and with the same continual renewal. Indeed, to construct a becoming, a *recollection* and an *appearing* are necessary at the same time.⁴¹

In Jankélévitch' view, forgiveness needs to actively confirm this process of becoming, instead of being a result of it. He argues that temporality in any case will be the strongest. Forgetting will one day or another take place and memory is thus a lost cause. Therefore, one might as well forgive forthwith and finish once and for all with the lost cause. Forgiveness recognizes the invincibility of inexorable destiny:⁴²

In order not to be crushed by the machine of the temporal process, the good memory anticipates its certain defeat, it takes the part of forgetting without getting to the point where becoming compels it, and as a consequence it hastens to forgive. It does not persist stubbornly in conserving outdated modes, in keeping in circulation decirculated currencies, in remaining stuck on outdated hatreds: it favors becoming by accelerating it.⁴³

Forgiveness thus turns out to be an act of remembrance. But in order to realize this it needs to cooperate actively with the unavoidable process of becoming in time. The tendency to stubbornly hold on to the past may be considered a bad way of using memory:

³⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 14

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 18.

⁴³ Ibid.

[T]he man of *ressentiment*, being similar to the remorseful man, clings and clutches to the preterit and stubbornly hardens against futuration. Aggressive rancor resists becoming; and forgiveness on the contrary, favors becoming by ridding it of impediments that weigh upon it, it cures us of rancorous hypertrophy.⁴⁴

The good memory thus cooperates with the unavoidable process of becoming in time. It confirms the general direction of becoming. Or to use Jankélévitch' words: it helps becoming become.⁴⁵ Rancor and resentment, in contrast, aim to prevent temporal change. This is obviously not implied in forgiveness.

In Jankélévitch' view, forgiveness is a gracious act and needs the trampoline of an unshakable, good memory.⁴⁶ In forgiving one relies on memory in order to set off and jump in the direction of becoming. This way forgiveness accelerates forgetting.⁴⁷ The good memory enables to project the offended above the offense and confers on grace the *élan* and spring of which it has need:⁴⁸

The discontinuity of forgiveness is rendered possible by the fullness of memories. Nothing could be more evident: in order to forgive, it is necessary to remember.⁴⁹

It is also important to illuminate that for Jankélévitch forgiveness not only helps becoming to become. Becoming also helps to forgive.⁵⁰ But obviously, the right order is crucial. Becoming only sustains forgiveness, if forgiveness anticipates becoming and thus remains an act. Forgiveness must remain ahead of time. For this reason, in Jankélévitch' view it needs to be granted immediately, right after the offence.

Jankélévitch' discussion of rancor points out that he not only distinguishes between two modes of forgetting, but also between two modes of remembering. In fact, the metaphor of the trampoline points out that it is not only necessary to have a good memory, but also to make good use of it, to use it in a transformative, gracious way.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 56

⁴⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 15.

In “*Le Pardon peut-il guérir?*” Paul Ricoeur also makes a distinction between two modes of remembering. He describes the active and transformative use of memory, arguing that it entails a certain kind of labor: the labor of remembrance. Ricoeur is also dedicated to the view that one can only forgive what is not forgotten, although forgiving also entails an effort to forget. For him, forgiveness is situated at the intersection point between the labor of remembrance and the labor of mourning, which implies a capacity to forget.⁵¹

Ricoeur wonders how it is possible that on the level of common or shared memory, some peoples seem to suffer from a surplus of memory, as if they were haunted by their memories, while others suffer from a lack of memory, as if they aim to flee from their own past. According to Ricoeur, both are in fact ways of escaping real remembrance. In reference to a text by Sigmund Freud, *Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten*, Ricoeur draws a distinction between compulsive repeating and the labor of remembrance.⁵² On the individual level, Freud observes that some patients are repeating instead of remembering or recollecting their past. The repetition has taken the place of memory. It is an obstruction to Freud’s psychoanalytic cure, and above all against the work of interpretation. As a result of this resistance against memory, remembrance becomes a real labor.⁵³ Ricoeur expands this observation concerning compulsive repetition in individual patients to the historic consciousness of peoples, cultures and communities. Peoples or communities that seem to have a surplus of memory, take a pleasure in this compulsive repetition. But Ricoeur thinks that it also makes some peoples escaping their past, as they fear to lose themselves in this frightening compulsion. Consequently, Ricoeur asks what may be the historical equivalent to Freud’s therapeutic labor of remembrance. He believes it to be a critical use of memory. According to him, the critical use of memory is possible on the level of narration. The critical aspect concerns taking care to tell history in a different way, to tell it also from the viewpoint of the other, one’s friend or one’s enemy.⁵⁴ But Ricoeur argues that such a rewriting of history is only possible if one confronts the presupposition that only the future is indefinite and open, while the past is determined, fixed and closed. He argues that the mere facts are indeed ineffaceable. But the meaning of what happened is not established once and for all. Events not only remain open for interpretation, they are also affected by our current projects. According to Ricoeur, it is possible to change the moral load of the past, the burden of debt

⁵¹ Paul Ricoeur, “Le Pardon peut-il guérir?” *Esprit* Mars/Avril (1995): 81.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 78-79.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

that presses upon one's project and one's present.⁵⁵ For Ricoeur, this kind of remembrance has a close tie with forgetting. It is not a fleeing forgetting, but an active, releasing forgetting. Ricoeur connects the labor of remembrance to the labor of mourning, another Freudian notion. The labor of mourning implies a slow release, till the point the object of loss can be interiorized again. For Ricoeur, forgiveness is situated right on the point where labor of remembrance and labor of mourning meet. It implies both forgetting and remembering: One can only forgive what is not forgotten. On the other hand, forgiving also implies an active forgetting.⁵⁶

This active form of forgetting turns out to be another feature of forgiving and constitutes its transformative power. Forgiveness entails an act of conscious and careful release, an active letting go. It does not result from disinterestedness, but it takes an interest in working through the past towards the future. Ricoeur places forgiveness at the intersection point between the labor of remembrance and the labor of mourning. The transformative power of forgiveness is a result of its mediation between active remembering and active releasing.

In Ricoeur's view, we thus find a further elaboration of the use of memory and of the double meaning of forgetting that is also pointed to by Jankélévitch. The intersection point between memory and forgetting lends forgiveness its transformative character, represented in Jankélévitch' image of a gracious jump made on the trampoline of an unshakeable, good memory.⁵⁷ As such, forgiveness enables the conscience to liquidate old objects of rancor and to become a voyager without baggage: it goes out to meet life, with a light step:⁵⁸

Conscience, lightened of the weight of memories and *ressentiments*, surmounts the weight like an astronaut and raises itself toward a height in one leap, after having jettisoned the ballast. Make way for novelties! In this way, forgiveness undoes the last shackles that tie us down to the past, draw us backward, and hold us down.⁵⁹

But again, this is not a reckless, careless freeing. It is a conscious confirmation of change and becoming:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 79-80.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 81.

⁵⁷ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 56.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 15.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

By allowing the coming times to come to pass, and, in doing so, accelerating this coming, forgiveness indeed confirms the general direction and the sense of a becoming that puts the tonic accent on the future.⁶⁰

This clearly illuminates how we should understand the relation between forgetting and forgiving that is exemplified in the expression “forgive and forget”. They are both separate, but related activities that need to sustain each other. The effort to disentangle forgiveness from forgetting points out that forgiveness requires memory. But, since forgiveness also amounts to a kind of forgetting, it comes to the fore that forgiveness has a crucial mediating and transformative role in dealing with the memory of an offence. The transformation of forgiveness enables a future that is discharged of the past without blotting out history. It enables a remembrance that is neither a compulsive repetition nor a stubborn clinging. It is founded in memory, but it also entails the active decision to go along towards the future and to dare to let go of the past. This, in turn, enables to look back at the past from a distance, from a different angle and to re-interpret history in light of what the future has brought. It enables an open conversation between past and future. In that way, it also enables to respond to Ariel Dorfman’s concern: “How do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without risking its repetition in the future?”⁶¹ The transformation of forgiving operates not as a fence between past and future, but as a gate. It is founded in memory and reaches out for the future. It facilitates the remembrance of a vivid past, without being dragged down in it, without being in need of its endless repetition and remembrance. Simultaneously, it enables a free and light future, without wiping out the stupidities and offences of the past. In forgiving, the past sustains and informs the future. It enables its change and to make other and better choices.

In disentangling forgiving from forgetting we pointed at three fundamental features of forgiveness. First, we revealed it as an activity. Secondly, we discussed that forgiveness requires memory. Thirdly, we pointed out how forgiveness takes part in forgetting. The combination of these three features reveals and illuminates the specific transformative power of forgiveness. Within that transformative power, a capacity for novelty comes to the

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 119.

fore, which will be of great concern in our further elaboration of forgiveness as an interruptive, spontaneous act.⁶²

1.2. Excusing

We often hear utterances like “I know you couldn’t help it, I forgive you” or “you should forgive him, he didn’t know what he was doing”. Utterances such as these suggest that in order to forgive someone the context of the wrongdoing needs to be illuminated. It asserts that grasping the conditions and situation in which the wrong took place helps making the transition towards forgiveness. Conversely, it also suggest that one is somehow entitled to your forgiveness, as soon as there are certain reasons, causes and circumstances that explain, extenuate or contextualize the wrong. In these cases, withholding forgiveness would be conceived as harshness.

These presuppositions are also found in the philosophical literature on forgiveness. In contemporary debates on the meaning and possibilities of forgiveness there is a strong emphasis on the development of an understanding heart, the cultivation of a capacity for empathy and the recognition of one’s shared human fallibility. At the same time, it is also explicitly stressed that forgiveness should be distinguished from excusing a wrong. The illuminated circumstances that need to soften the forgiver’s heart and prepare him for forgiveness are thus not fully absolving a wrongdoer from his responsibility.

However, the strong emphasis on the role of understanding and empathy obscures the peculiar role and work of forgiveness. Even if certain explanations and illuminations of the wrong do not entirely absolve someone of their responsibility, they are still aimed at mitigating the offence. This way they tend to extenuate the experience of the wrong. If they are effective, they do not help to forgive, but on the contrary leave not much to be forgiven.

In what follows I will point out that forgiveness is not enabled by explanations and clarifications, but has to deal with that aspect of the wrong that remains after all possible excuses and explanations are given. I argue that this is not sufficiently grasped and endorsed in the contemporary literature on forgiveness, resulting in serious confusions about its practice.

1.2.1. (Ir)responsible Wrongdoing

Scholars working on the topic of forgiveness mostly assert that forgiveness needs to be distinguished from excusing. What difference in meaning and scope does this conceptual distinction reveal? What happens when we excuse someone or when we are offering excuses for a wrong? And how does it differ from granting and asking forgiveness?

Philosophers mainly agree that excusing means absolving someone of the responsibility for a wrong. Although they usually not give explicit account of their concept of excusing, one can identify three recurring constitutive elements. First, a given excuse implies that someone is not (fully) responsible for an occurred wrong. Second, it does so by pointing at certain circumstances that compromise one's responsibility. Third, the circumstances lift the guilt and blame of the irresponsible agent.⁶³ One may also identify two types of circumstances that reduce or absolve someone's responsibility. Either a responsible moral agent is compelled by external circumstances - he acted involuntarily - or there are circumstances that compromise his general ability for making moral decisions, for instance in the case of insanity. In either case, it is acknowledged that a wrong took place or someone is harmed, but the judgment that the agent was culpable is revised.⁶⁴ Jeffrie Murphy for instance claims:

To regard conduct as excused (as in the insanity defense for example) is to admit that the conduct was wrong but to claim that the person who engaged in the conduct lacked substantial capacity to conform his conduct to the relevant norms and thus was not a fully responsible agent.⁶⁵

Some scholars, like Trudy Govier and Norvin Richards, further distinguish between exculpatory excuses and mitigating excuses.⁶⁶ Whereas exculpatory excuses eliminate one's responsibility altogether, a mitigating excuse merely diminishes the agent's responsibility for

⁶³ See for instance Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 20; Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 13; Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 7; North, "Wrongdoing and Forgiveness," 499-508. For a more in-depth discussion of the concept of excusing and its relation to responsibility, see Andrew Eshleman, "Moral Responsibility" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 2016-); Sanford H. Kadish, "Excusing Crime," *California Law Review* 75, (1987) 257-289; H.L.A. Hart, "Legal Responsibility and Excuses" in *Punishment and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁶⁴ In some cases someone else can be blamed, for instance if someone made you complicit in a robbery by threatening you by a gun. In other cases the culpable wrongdoing is diminished and becomes unintentional harm.

⁶⁵ Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even*, 13.

⁶⁶ Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London-New York: Routledge, 2002), 164; Norvin Richards, "Forgiveness," *Ethics* 99, (1988): 84.

the wrong.⁶⁷ One may argue that there are only limited clear-cut examples of wrongs to be entirely excused. Being late on a date without notification can be exculpated when your bus was stuck in traffic and your phone was stolen the evening before. But if you were neglected and abused in your childhood by an alcoholic father and, as a result, you experience difficulties in life and become a brutal thief, your troubled youth counts as a mitigating circumstance, but it does not absolve you of the responsibility for your criminal behavior. Govier holds that in the case of mitigating excuses, some culpability remains, since one is not entirely determined by the circumstances:

[T]he existence of mitigating excuses, does not show that [the wrongdoer] was *forced* or *compelled* to commit these crimes and thus does not remove him from the arena of moral choice and responsibility.⁶⁸

Richards puts it as follows:

[A]lthough the insanity excuse perhaps does erase all responsibility, not every excuse is so powerful. Commonly, excuses do not exonerate, but only mitigate by showing that one acted less badly than it appears. [...] [But] the excuse leaves it the case that the agent did wrong the person. [...] [A] wrongdoer with the common sort of excuse is still a wrongdoer.⁶⁹

Since they do not entirely determine one's behavior, mitigating circumstances only diminish one's responsibility and do not entirely absolve it.

Most philosophers agree that exculpation is not what is involved in forgiveness. Whereas excusing fully or partially absolves someone of blame and guilt, forgiveness is a response to clear-cut wrongdoing. Margaret Holmgren, for instance claims that forgiveness is only at issue "when a moral agent commits an offense, without justification and in the absence of an exculpating excuse".⁷⁰ This act must have been negligent, reckless or willfully wrong: "Where there is no wrongdoing, there is nothing for the injured person to forgive".⁷¹ David Novitz

⁶⁷ Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 164.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 167.

⁶⁹ Richards, "Forgiveness," 84.

⁷⁰ Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

holds that one can only forgive people if it is believed that they are responsible and if they are therefore blamed for the wrong that was done. Forgiveness, he continues, is called for “in precisely those situations where the emotions that we have are appropriate to the wrong and the harm that we believe to have been done.”⁷² Similarly, Jeffrie Murphy argues that we may forgive only what is initially proper to resent. According to him, resentment is a justified moral emotion in reaction to culpable wrongdoing and forgiveness entails the overcoming of that justified resentment. He argues that if a person did nothing wrong or was not responsible for what he did, there is nothing to resent, although there may be much to be sad about.⁷³ “Resentment – and thus forgiveness – is directed toward *responsible wrongdoing*; and therefore, if forgiveness and resentment are to have an arena, it must be where such wrongdoing remains intact.”⁷⁴ Joanna North puts it as follows: “[O]ne cannot forgive when no wrong has been done, for there is no breach to be healed [...]. Forgiveness requires that a wrong not be disregarded, overlooked or dismissed.”⁷⁵ Trudy Govier asserts that “[f]orgiveness presupposes *responsible wrongdoing*, which is not present if the agent has an exculpatory excuse.”⁷⁶ Charles Griswold holds that to forgive someone assumes their responsibility for the wrongdoing: “[I]t represents a change in the moral relation between wrong-doer and wronged that accepts the fact that a wrong was indeed done, and done (in some sense) voluntarily.”⁷⁷

Responsible wrongdoing thus turns out to be a fundamental presupposition of forgiveness. This feature marks the distinction with excusing. One cannot forgive when no wrong has been done. Forgiveness can only take place when no excuses lift the blame and dissolve the wrong. As soon as the wrong disappears, the possibility of forgiveness also dissolves.

However, in order to address the peculiarity of the practice of forgiveness one should delve a bit deeper into this conceptual distinction. This helps to clarify and evaluate some important confusions and assumptions that arise in the debate on forgiveness. It is possible to make three critical comments in regard to the conceptual distinction between excusing and forgiving:

⁷² Novitz, “Forgiveness and Self-Respect,” 305.

⁷³ Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 20. The strong influence of the assertion that forgiveness entails the overcoming of justified resentment on the debate on the meaning of forgiveness will be discussed in more detail in the section on condoning.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ North, “Wrongdoing and Forgiveness,” 502.

⁷⁶ Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 164.

⁷⁷ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 7.

a) The presupposition of responsible wrongdoing also implies that the act of forgiveness involves an accusation. The wrongdoing is not only not wiped out, but it is rather made explicit. This feature is excellently discussed by Glen Pettigrove. He argues that forgiveness does not only presuppose a moral failing. The wrongdoing is also explicitly thematised and communicated in the language of forgiveness. He argues that for this reason we may take offence when someone aims to forgive us when we do not believe to be responsible or at fault.⁷⁸ Certainly, if I say “I forgive you” to someone who fails to offer me a seat on the bus while I am heavily pregnant, this person may take my forgiveness as an accusation, as a reference to a wrong. If I grant forgiveness to my colleague for being too late in a meeting after he told he was stuck in traffic, he may either be offended by my forgiveness or take it as a joke. Since it suggests that I either don’t believe or accept his excuse for being late or try to be funny by overstating it as a serious wrong he committed. If I forgive my neighbor, who is a Muslim, for the attack that is perpetrated by a Muslim terrorist days before, he may be hurt or outraged by my forgiveness, since it suggests that I automatically hold him, as a Muslim, co-responsible for the committed murders.

This points out that there may be cases in which forgiveness is inappropriate. If there are valuable excuses that annul a wrong or if someone is simply not involved, forgiveness is not only unnecessary, but also misplaced. It also reveals that forgiveness is not neutralizing or wiping out a wrong. It rather draws explicit attention to it.

b) The general description of excusing as the dismissal of the agent’s responsibility for the wrong leaves under-exposed how a valid excuse also affects the character of the wrong that is done. A valid excuse that absolves someone of the responsibility of the wrong also entails a disappearance of the wrong as an offence or deliberate violation. In some cases, however, there may remain considerable harm, for which reparations may be requested. Yet this harm no longer has the character of an offence.

In view of the further development of my argument it is important to emphasize and discuss the distinction between an offence and a wrong. The term ‘offence’ points at the deliberate, invasive and offensive aspect of the wrong. Some believe for instance that an offence entails a claim about the victim, namely that she is not worthy of respect.⁷⁹ It points at the moral transgression that is committed by harming someone, suggesting that the other deserves no better treatment. In contrast with this, the term ‘wrong’ points at the fact that the violation or

⁷⁸ Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 4-5.

⁷⁹ See for instance Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” 546.

misbehavior constitutes a certain reality or harm that can never be fully restored. But it is not determined whether the suffered wrong results from a deliberate moral transgression.

The offence as a violation that is willy-nilly done to someone dissolves as soon as excuses absolve the blame. This is also expressed in the language we use when we absolve someone of blame. When we excuse someone or accept the excuses someone is offering, we mostly do not say "I do no longer blame you" or "I know you're not responsible or guilty". Instead, we tend to emphasize the fact that we no longer take offence by stating: "That's ok", "It's no problem" or "Don't worry about it". These utterances demonstrate that excuses -once accepted- not only lift the blame of the offender. Their acceptance by the victim implies that at one fell swoop the offence, as a moral transgression, is wiped out altogether. In some cases, when there are no further consequences and no damage, this will also make the wrong disappear, since it turns out that there was no violation. There may for instance only have been an uncontrolled but not harmful bodily movement or an innocent remark. Yet when there are further consequences attached to the offence and there is suffered considerable harm, the wrong does not disappear. Whereas an offence may be withdrawn by a valid excuse or by offering apologies, the wrong as an irreversible occurrence leaves its marks and cannot be wiped out.

c) We have discussed thus far that most accounts subscribe the idea that exculpation, implying a full exoneration of blame, is not what is involved in forgiveness. But with regard to the role of mitigating circumstances that merely lessen the blame for the wrong, positions are less clear. Some philosophers believe that a clarification of the mitigating circumstances fosters forgiveness. But it must become clear that any excuse, even if it is only a mitigating one, is working as an extenuation. It still aims at exonerating someone, although only partially, of the blame for the wrong. The conceptual difference between what is released by excusing someone and what needs to be dealt with in forgiving is easily blurred in those cases. Let us therefore unpack how this confusion arises and unfolds in the debate on forgiveness. The analysis and evaluation of the underlying assumptions and confusions are required to develop a proper account of the task of forgiveness.

1.2.2. *To Understand All is to Forgive All*

A central topic for discussion is the role of understanding in forgiveness. Some philosophers believe that understanding facilitates forgiveness. This is also suggested in the common expression “To understand all is to forgive all”. Trudy Govier for instance argues:

Understanding a person’s circumstances and history may give us a sense of how a person could have come to commit some wrong – how the act might have seemed necessary or acceptable to him or her – or how frustration and bitterness could have affected that person’s motivation. Some degree of understanding and empathy may make it easier to understand what made this wrongdoer ‘tick’ – and in doing so, facilitate forgiveness.⁸⁰

Govier holds that understanding circumstantial factors makes it easier to distinguish the agent from his acts and thus makes forgiveness easier. In the process of forgiveness, she claims, we come to understand the wrongdoer as a person who is more than his evil deeds, a moral agent capable of more than just wrongdoing. Nevertheless, she argues, the possibility of partial understanding, which implies the existence of mitigating excuses, does not show that the wrongdoer was compelled or forced to commit those crimes. Consequently, it “does not remove him from the arena of moral choice and responsibility”.⁸¹ Thus she clearly affirms that forgiving entails responsible wrongdoing. She also aims to subscribe the distinction between forgiving and excusing when she posits:

The familiar saying that ‘to understand all is to forgive all’ will mislead us if it makes us think that when we fully understand any human act we will fully excuse it and then, as a result, be committed to forgiving. An argument against the claim that understanding must result in forgiving is that we can understand acts without fully excusing them.⁸²

She claims that acts may be explained in such a way that understanding these acts is fully compatible with holding the agent responsible for committing them, and thus also with

⁸⁰ Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 164-165.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 162-163.

forgiveness. To make her argument, she relies on the distinction between mitigating and exculpatory excuses. She argues that mitigating excuses merely diminish the agent's responsibility. When there is an exculpatory excuse instead, one's responsibility is eliminated altogether.⁸³ According to Govier, a mitigating excuse can be connected to forgiveness, as the victim should more easily forgive the wrongdoer if she understands the mitigating factors. In the case of an exculpatory excuse, the issue of forgiveness does not arise, since the agent has not committed a culpable wrong.⁸⁴

Govier correctly distinguishes between excusing as an absolving of the wrong on the one hand and forgiving as a response to responsible wrongdoing on the other. However, the connection she makes between understanding the mitigating factors of a wrong and forgiveness precisely blurs the distinction she aims to endorse. In supposing that excuses may somehow support forgiveness, she fails to see that forgiveness precisely deals with that aspect of the wrong that can't stand any excuses whatsoever. Even if there are valid excuses that mitigate someone's responsibility, forgiveness is precisely dealing with the wrong that remains after all possible excuses and explanations did their work. It is a wrong of which the wrongdoer cannot clear himself. It is precisely because he cannot exonerate himself by referring to certain circumstances that he is in need of the victim's forgiveness. The idea that excuses of a mitigating sort somehow help to forgive only reveals that sometimes they mitigate the wrong to only a minor violation, so that there remains not so much to forgive. Moreover, in some cases, the appeal to mitigating excuses does not make it particularly easier, but even harder to forgive. If a wrongdoer keeps insisting on his troubled youth, on the difficulties he experienced in his life, on the overwhelming emotions he felt, the bad friends he met, it may become very hard for the victim to forgive him. For the victim, the insistence on the mitigating circumstances may indicate a failure of the offender to recognize the wrong. It may point to a neglect of both his own role in the wrongdoing and the harm that is caused with it.

To address the problems with the notion of understanding in further detail, it is helpful to discuss David Novitz' account of forgiveness. David Novitz' view on the role of understanding resembles the way in which it appears in Govier's account. In his article "Forgiveness and Self-Respect" Novitz argues that the effort of seeking understanding is an

⁸³ Ibid., 163 -164.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 164.

essential part of the task of forgiving. He holds that seeking out the other side of the story is a way of seeking to undermine one's grievance as a victim. It entails placing the wrongdoer's wrongful action in the context of his life and needs:⁸⁵

By trying to see events from your point of view, I grasp, sometimes 'from the inside', what motivated you, what errors of judgement prevailed, and why they had such a grip on your imagination. Any such attempt to identify imaginatively with your situation, and the resultant (perhaps imperfect) understanding of what it was like to be in that situation, may help to destabilize my attitudes towards you. For my new understanding places your actions in a different perspective and may enable me to feel, for a moment at least, as you must have felt. I may feel the urgency of your needs and so see differently why you acted as you did. The willingness and the ability to see things differently and to depart from our own settled perspective is, I think, a necessary part of the task of forgiving, and requires some degree of empathic thinking.⁸⁶

At first sight, seeking out the other side of the story seems to be an unproblematic way of performing what Ricoeur calls the labor of remembrance. Instead of sticking to one's own story and point of view, compulsively repeating it, one should reach out for the other. One should be open to his side of the story and allow history to receive a different meaning. Novitz argues that people can fuel their resentment by offering a history that fixates on one's own grievances. One may emphasize only those events that reinforce one's sense of injustice and bruised pride. He holds that in fueling one's resentment one marginalizes the other's point of view and neglects elements that might otherwise have helped explain the offending behavior.⁸⁷ The openness to the other's point of view may indeed be a precondition for forgiveness, as it amounts to a kind of remembrance that avoids rumination. However, this does not imply that in itself it either explains the behavior or facilitates forgiveness, as Novitz assumes. To some extent he seems to be aware of this difference when he posits:

[O]ne cannot forgive unless one tries to understand the other side of the story; unless, that is, one attempts to construe events from the point of view of the person

⁸⁵ Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 309.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

who has acted wrongly towards you. But while this is a necessary component of the task of forgiving, it cannot itself ensure forgiveness.⁸⁸

He argues that, first of all, one may fail to see things from another's point of view. One may for instance mistakenly believe to understand things from the other's point of view, when one does not. Or the effort may just be insufficient to resolve one's bitter feelings, since one remains baffled by the motives and beliefs of the other. Or, secondly, one may be successful in empathic thinking but as a result of it, come to see just how selfish and cruel the offender's behavior was. Thirdly, one's empathetic understanding may also lead to a kind of *Schadenfreude*, one may take pleasure in the offender's discomfort, his guilt and contrition.⁸⁹ Certainly, this cannot be called forgiveness, but reveals instead one's commitment to revenge. Unfortunately, Novitz seems to be insufficiently aware of the consequences this has for his account. In fact, it undermines the entire idea that understanding is somehow part and partial of the effort or task to forgive. It clearly reveals that in order to forgive, we cannot rely on the ability to take the point of view of the other. We need another extra step. Taking this other step is precisely what forgiveness is about - it cannot be accomplished by or reduced to understanding.

This demonstrates that forgiveness is a totally different activity than understanding. To forgive, we need to do something else, something that crucially differs from all other methods we use for getting along with people and for achieving reconciliation. We rely on forgiveness because it accomplishes something we cannot achieve by any other means. The activity of forgiveness thus demands for a peculiar description. In translating forgiveness to the activity of understanding, one precisely fails to describe the peculiarity of its task.

In the cited passage, Novitz also argues that taking the point of view of the other and seeking understanding of the situation he was in, helps to destabilize one's attitude and undermines one's grievances. He suggests that this amounts to forgiveness. In his view, forgiveness not merely entails the renunciation of one's claims against the wrongdoer, but must also result in the dissolution of one's negative feelings.⁹⁰ But the idea that understanding decreases negative feelings and is –as a result of this- constitutive for forgiveness contradicts, in an odd

⁸⁸ Ibid., 310.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 310-311.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 303. This emotional view is very prominent in philosophical literature on forgiveness and is founded on Joseph Butler's account of forgiveness. I will further discuss this view in depth in the upcoming chapters and in the second part of this dissertation.

way, how he describes the act of forgiveness as a response to responsible wrongdoing. In a passage we already partly cited in the section on responsibility, he claims:

One can forgive people [...] only when they are believed to be responsible and so are blamed for the wrong that was done. Certainly, excuses [...] do not always exonerate; sometimes they mitigate, and when they do, we may cease to feel quite so strongly about the people who harmed us. But this [...] does not amount to forgiveness. Forgiveness is called for in precisely those situations where the emotions that we have are appropriate to the wrong and the harm that we believe to have been done.⁹¹

In this passage Novitz thus admits that the diminution of negative feelings about a wrong is not a reliable indication at all that it was forgiveness that took place. The diminution of negative feelings is often precisely a result of certain excuses. Nevertheless, it is remarkable that Novitz takes understanding the point of view of the other to cause a weakening of one's attitudes and, furthermore, takes this kind of understanding as a necessary precondition of forgiveness.⁹² But if forgiveness is dependent upon the prior weakening of emotions, which is a result of the act of understanding, is it still forgiveness that is at work? Or is it overtaken by something else? Isn't its activity overruled by the mitigating act of excusing, as Govier at least partly admits? If forgiveness is considered to be dependent on the understanding of reasons that clarify one's action or put it in a different light, one blurs the distinction between the activities of excusing and forgiving.

The problems of Novitz' conflation of the peculiar activity of forgiving with the activity of understanding are also excellently addressed by Pamela Hieronymi. She argues that Novitz' conception of the role of understanding as a facilitator of forgiveness replaces the act of forgiving by the act of excusing. Consequently, it also misrepresents the peculiar and irreplaceable task of forgiveness. She demonstrates that the difference between understanding and forgiving becomes especially apparent in a detailed analysis of what precisely is asked for in the speech act of asking for forgiveness:

⁹¹ Ibid., 305.

⁹² A similar argument on the 'preparing' role of understanding for forgiveness can be found in Glen Pettigrove's account. He argues that understanding and taking the viewpoint of the other, namely by recounting his story from the viewpoint of the protagonist instead of the antagonist, supports and 'promotes' forgiveness. See Glen Pettigrove, "Understanding, Excusing, Forgiving," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74, 1 (2007): 156-175. See also Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54-73.

If I ask for forgiveness, I am not asking you to understand why I did the deed, from my point of view. [...] To ask you to understand things from my point of view is to hope for an excuse, not to ask for forgiveness. [...] I am instead asking you to believe me when I say that I no longer see what I did to you as acceptable, to recognize and so ratify my change of heart. I am also, importantly, asking you to willingly absorb the damage that I have done and which I cannot repair, both the damage in our relationship and the broader material or financial damage, which is an offense to you and which testifies against my change of heart. I don't want your pity. Not even your compassion will suffice. I need something at once more intimate and more costly. I need your forgiveness.⁹³

Hieronymi draws attention to the peculiarity of the activity of forgiveness by pointing out that none of the circumstances or reasons for someone's wrongdoing can be constitutive for it. As soon as reasons or situations are brought in, forgiveness collapses into excusing.

Vladimir Jankélévitch holds a similar view, when he claims that any act of intellection and understanding compromises the possibility for and the task of forgiveness. According to Jankélévitch, a proper description of the 'heart of forgiveness' depends on its strict distinction from other related activities, since it can only be given *via negativa*.⁹⁴ It is only in marking its distinctiveness that some positive features may come to the surface. For him, a form of "forgiveness' that is founded on an excuse is reduced to the simple admission that there never was an offence and that the idea of fundamental wickedness is an entirely illusionary mirage."⁹⁵ Such forgiveness would be merely and paradoxically a recognition of the fact that there is nothing to forgive, since the obstacle (the misdeed) is what requires forgiveness. In "obliterating the obstacle, we get rid of forgiveness itself".⁹⁶ This illustrates again what is discussed before: that excusing is not merely a matter of changing one's attitude towards an offender or changing one's feelings about a wrong, but it also fundamentally alters the character of the wrong. A valid excuse takes precisely the transgression or offence out of the misdeed or wrong. It makes its offensiveness disappear. This brings Jankélévitch to the conclusion that forgiveness precisely needs to forgive the inexcusable. It is a response to what cannot be dissolved by the act of excusing:

⁹³ Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 554.

⁹⁴ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 56, 105.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

First of all, the excuse excuses only what is excusable. As for the inexcusable, restrictive indulgence abandons it to the rigor of laws. It is forgiveness that takes charge in the inexcusable, for the inexcusable can be forgivable even though it is not excusable. The excusable is, a fortiori, forgivable, but it is [sic] does not need for us to forgive it since the rational excuse suffices to demonstrate its innocence.⁹⁷

Jankélévitch thus holds that since forgiveness deals with a wrong that cannot be withdrawn by excuses, it cannot rely on any reasons that might be given for the wrongdoing. It can only forgive what cannot be explained and is thus not excusable. Jankélévitch provides an excellent phenomenological description of the way in which forgiving and excusing mutually exclude each other. This does not imply that an offence that seems excusable at first sight cannot turn out to be blameworthy after all. The need for forgiveness arises as soon as the given reasons turn out to be insufficient. Perhaps Novitz is right in stating that one should first of all seek understanding. But he is wrong in taking this to be a step towards forgiveness. It is important to examine whether one's accusation of the other is right, whether there are compelling reasons for assuming that the wrong was in fact not really an offence. Scrutinizing one's beliefs and presuppositions is a necessary step in getting along with other people. Mostly, this will do most of one's reconciliatory work. Forgiveness is only a required possibility when there are no excuses that completely annul the wrong. Since the proper description of forgiveness also compels to describe the wrong it deals with as what it is, namely an inexcusable evil act, forgiveness may seem a lot more difficult, perhaps even impossible. Derrida, for instance, emphasizes its impossibility by pushing Jankélévitch's conceptual distinction even further. Jankélévitch believes that in exceptional cases there exists evil - for instance the so-called crimes against humanity - that is simply unforgivable. It is irreparable and inexpiable and therefore forgiveness would lose its meaning and wouldn't make sense.⁹⁸ Derrida, by contrast, assumes that the unforgivable is the only thing to forgive. It is the only thing that calls for forgiveness:

If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church calls 'venial sin', then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there is something

⁹⁷ Ibid, 93.

⁹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London - New York: Routledge, 2001), 36.

to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm.⁹⁹

Consequently, in Derrida's view forgiveness not merely forgives the inexcusable, but precisely the unforgivable. It is a paradoxical activity, formulated in the following aporia:

[F]orgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself. It can only be possible in doing the impossible.¹⁰⁰

Derrida aims to emphasize the extra-ordinary moral activity of forgiveness. Forgiveness is precisely dealing in a moral way with that which is morally unacceptable and thus principally impossible to overcome, to process or to deal with. Therefore, he assumes that forgiveness can only reveal its peculiarity in absurdity: it is "madness of the impossible".¹⁰¹

It is not necessary, however, to push the activity of forgiveness into this moral absurdity to emphasize that it deals precisely with the evil that remains unexplained, unprocessed and unwarranted. In distinguishing forgiving from understanding and excusing it becomes clear that forgiveness is perhaps not what it is often assumed to be. This, however, does not necessarily renders it uncommon or exceptional. The activity of forgiveness may simply not be properly articulated. I agree with Derrida when he claims that forgiveness needs to forgive the fault and the guilty as such.¹⁰² But this is not the same as assuming it is absurd.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 32-33.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰² In order to point this out, Derrida claims that forgiveness, in principle, needs to be granted unconditionally: "In order for there to be forgiveness, must one not on the contrary forgive both the fault and the guilty *as such*, where the one and the other remain as irreversible as the evil, as evil itself, and being capable of repeating itself, unforgivably, without transformation, without transformation, without amelioration, without repentance or promise? Must one not maintain that an act of forgiveness worthy of its name, if there ever is such a thing, must forgive the unforgivable, and without condition?" Ibid., 39. However, he also admits that, in practice, this ideal is often unattainable and forgiveness thus needs to be granted conditionally. Yet, he claims, one must never lose the connection with the ideal of forgiveness, which is unconditional. Ibid., 44-45. The problems of conditional forgiveness will be discussed in the next section on condoning.

1.2.3. *The Human Fallibility Condition*

The distinction between excusing and forgiving also plays a prominent role in another related contemporary debate. The debate revolves around the recognition of shared humanity and shared human fallibility. In the previous section we revealed that most contemporary accounts describe forgiveness as a response to responsible, culpable evil. However, the proneness to evil is a condition all humans share. No human being is immune against the possibility of deliberately wronging another. For this reason, some philosophers assert that the recognition of shared human fallibility compels to moral modesty and amounts to an attitude of mildness, generosity and forgiveness. But again, if forgiveness is dependent on the recognition of our shared humanity and fallibility, does it not collapse into excusing?

In his influential account of forgiveness, Charles Griswold puts forward the recognition of one's shared humanity, human frailty and imperfection as a necessary, though not sufficient, step towards forgiveness.¹⁰³ Griswold perceives of the recognition of our shared humanity as a remedy against the tendency to see a wrongdoer as a moral monster, in whom we no longer recognize anything right or human.¹⁰⁴ He points out that there may be two interpretations of what it means to depict a wrongdoer as a monster. In the first interpretation, one speaks of a monster in order to say that someone became an automaton, or completely and criminally insane, no longer able to exercise agency.¹⁰⁵ In a second interpretation we mean by a moral monster that the wrongdoer has many of the characteristics we would ascribe to any person, including sanity and rationality, but we see nothing morally good in that person. He or she is injuring others without giving them a second thought.¹⁰⁶ But Griswold points out that the language of monstrosity occludes the distressing and perplexing thought that part of what is so disturbing in some offenders is that they are so recognizably human. To point this out he refers to an interview with Primo Levi. In this passage Levi asserts that during his time in the concentration camp he never saw a single monster. He met people like you and me, who were acting the way they did because there was Fascism, Nazism in Germany. Therefore, he warns:

¹⁰³ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 79.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

Were some form of Fascism or Nazism to return, there would be people, like us, who would act in the same way, everywhere. And the same goes for the victims, for the particular behavior of the victims about which so much has been said, mostly typically by young Israelis who object “but we would never act that way.” They’re right. They would not act that way. But if they had been born 40 years earlier, they would have.¹⁰⁷

According to Griswold this points out why the use of moral monster as a term should be abandoned. He argues:

[S]uch accusatory phrases feed much too easily into the tendency, natural to a rapidly accelerating sense of resentment, to dehumanize an offender and thereby to justify inappropriate harsh retaliation. The dangerous potential of this rhetoric is all the more evident at the political level, where it may be woven into narratives of innocence and “justified” revenge that sustain violence for generations.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, Griswold notes that from this we do not need to infer that the abolishment of labels such as ‘moral monster’ makes all offenders forgivable. It might still turn out to be impossible to forgive a non-monstrous offender.¹⁰⁹

However, Griswold does not merely abandon the image of a moral monster. He goes one crucial step further. He uses the inappropriateness of the image of the moral monster to point out that in order to forgive, we need to acknowledge the common humanity we share with the wrongdoer. He emphasizes that this recognition is not a sufficient condition, but a necessary first step. He acknowledges that the recognition of shared humanity brings with it a train of other related notions and capacities, such as the notion of fallibility, the capacity for sympathy and the ability to understand the other. He takes these notions to be intuitively and classically clustered together.¹¹⁰ They do not suffice as conditions for forgiveness, but

¹⁰⁷ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 75. Primo Levi cited by Griswold.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.* Griswold argues that the fact that a wrongdoer retains tinctures of humanity is in itself not a reason for believing that he or she will change: “In denying that there are ‘moral monsters’ I am not affirming that everyone is in fact able to mend their ways.” *Ibid.*, 76-77.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 77.

they enable to hold a truer perspective on the offender, to see the offender in a new light and to obtain right judgment."¹¹¹

To illustrate the importance of the recognition of shared humanity, Griswold refers to a passage in Homer's *Iliad*. He discusses the moment at which Achilles and Priam, mortal enemies in the Trojan War, meet for the first time in person. Achilles has killed Priam's son, Hector. In his overwhelming rage he has also attempted to defile his corpse. Priam declares that he now must do the impossible, namely to kiss the hand that slew his beloved son. Although they have every reason to hate and kill each other, they decide to dine together instead of taking revenge.¹¹² During the conversation they acknowledge similarities: they are both members of a family and care deeply for their homeland. Moreover, they discuss the unfortunate circumstances the Gods have placed them in and contrast their shared imperfection and humanness with the omnipotence of the Gods. According to Griswold, the example illustrates that the recognition of our shared human fallibility is an important condition for forgiveness, as it enables to commiserate with one another or at least to imagine the world from the other's point of view.¹¹³

It is crucial to note that Griswold thus assumes that the recognition of one's shared humanity also entails the recognition of one's shared human fallibility. Consequently, he takes this as a starting point for the possibility of forgiveness:

The analogies of situatedness and kinship, and the contrast of mortals and gods, implicitly invite a sympathetic recognition of the enemy as one-like-us. The facts of our shared interdependence, embodiment, finitude, emotive make-up, subjection to forces beyond our control – in short, facts about our imperfection – allow us commiseration with one another, or at least imagine the world from the other's point of view.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Ibid., 82. Griswold argues that although forgiveness requires sympathy, it is not a sufficient condition. He admits that having sympathetically entered into the situation and motives of the offender one might experience even more resentment. Ibid., 79. This resembles Novitz's argument we mentioned above. See Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 310-311. The problems with the reliance on the capacity of sympathy for understanding the task of forgiveness will be discussed in more detail in the fourth chapter of the second part.

¹¹² Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 77.

¹¹³ Hailey Huget, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Accountability: A Critique of Charles Griswold's Forgiveness Paradigm," *Philosophia* 40, (2012): 345-346.

¹¹⁴ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 78. Griswold's conception of human fallibility is thus very broad. It includes our general condition of interdependency, affectivity and vulnerability: "Our interdependence as social and sympathizing creatures; our embodiment and our affective character; our vulnerability to each other; our

He takes forgiveness to be a virtue operating “against the background of a narrative about human nature and its aspirations that accepts imperfection as our lot.”¹¹⁵ It is responsive to a context of imperfect creatures like you and me, rooted in a world that is fractured and threatening. In response to the demands of such world, it helps the possessor of the virtue of forgiveness to live a good life.¹¹⁶

In a response to Griswold’s account, Hailey Huget argues that Griswold’s reliance on the shared condition of human frailty threatens the possibility of holding an offender accountable.¹¹⁷ To point this out Huget evaluates Griswold’s citation of Primo Levi. As revealed above, Griswold uses the quote to point to the uselessness of the image of a moral monster. However, according to Huget, Griswold’s argument that theoretically no person ought to be excluded from sympathy – which she takes to be an innocuous argument – carries with it some implications that could deprive a victim of the ability to hold an offender accountable. She holds that in Levi’s quote Nazis are not only understood as potential objects of sympathy, but also as victims of historical and political circumstances. Moreover, she argues, they are envisioned as morally equal to the Holocaust victims, because the victims are supposed to have perpetrated the same atrocities had they been born 40 years earlier.

It must be noted that Huget misunderstands Levi’s quote on this last point. Levi is not claiming that the victims would have perpetrated the same atrocities, but that they would react in the same meek way as the victims did 40 years ago.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, it does not hinder the point she aims to make. She argues that preventing anyone from claiming that she might

mortality; our standing to demand respectful treatment from one another; as befits creatures of equal dignity, and our obligations to one another; the pervasiveness of suffering – most often unmerited where it is intentionally inflicted – and of pain, violence, and injustice: these are part and parcel of that imperfection.” Ibid., 14-15.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 14. He contrasts this to the virtues present in perfectionist ethical schemes, in which the perfected person is nearly or totally immune from mistakes in judgment. Consequently, there is nothing in the past he wishes to undo, reframe or accommodate. This perfectionist virtue ethical view inspires Nietzsche’s view on forgiveness. Nietzsche holds that forgiveness is not a virtue since the perfected soul is immune for receiving or doing injury. He sees forgiveness as part of a slave morality revolt. Just like pity, benevolence and prudence it is a value that operates in a system in which the weak and ignoble are empowered. Control is exercised through sentiments such as guilt. Ibid., 14-16.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹¹⁷ Huget, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Accountability,” 337-355.

¹¹⁸ After the war, Holocaust victims have sometimes been accused of having been too slavish, as it is often believed that they have not tried sufficiently to protest the wrongs that were done to them. Hannah Arendt is also falsely accused of holding this opinion because she criticized some Jewish organizations for the agreements they made with the Nazi’s, which gave rise to outraged reactions in the Jewish community. See the introduction of Amos Elon to Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report of the Banality of Evil* (New York-London: Penguin Classics, 2006), xi-xiv.

not have done the same prohibits holding an offender (and perhaps also a victim) accountable for how he reacted under these circumstances. In fact the idea that the circumstances determine one's responses entirely, compromises the possibility of moral judgment and of moral accountability all at once:

That primary culpability is attributed to the circumstances prompts the victim to conclude that, given the same circumstances, she might have done the same. Likewise, it prevents the victim from determining that, given the same circumstances, she would definitively have *not* done the same. [...] While this does not deny the perpetrator's responsibility for crimes, it does compromise the overall goal of holding them accountable [...]. To mitigate resentment, the victim concludes that the offender is not really accountable for the wrong action – or at least the circumstances are more to blame than the offender himself.¹¹⁹

Griswold's reference to our shared humanity is thus used to point out that we share the same human fallibility and as a logical consequence of this fallibility nobody could resist the compelling circumstances the Nazi criminals were in. In this form, it clearly works as an excuse.

Huget also evaluates the second example given by Griswold to discuss the importance of the recognition of one's human fallibility: the story of Achilles and Priam. Huget takes it to be significant that after the conversation their ways part again and the war continues. There is neither forgiveness nor lasting reconciliation. In the end they both get killed. Griswold treats the continuation of the story somewhat arbitrary, but it is in fact telling. Huget argues that their conversation of shared humanity seems to remove the structure of victim and offender. Both parties come to understand one another as victims of human fallibility and imperfection. The conflict is no longer situated between them, but between them and the Gods. Consequently there is no need, and even no possibility, of forgiveness between Achilles and Priam. As the antagonism is shifted towards the circumstances and away from one another, their sympathetic connection is established by realizing that they are both victims of their circumstances.¹²⁰ In my view, instead of an attitude of forgiveness, the recognition of shared human fallibility thus seems to foster a kind of fatalism in Achilles and Priam. They do not resist the mentioned circumstances and continue the war.

¹¹⁹ Huget, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Accountability," 347.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 346.

Griswold explicitly holds that the context of shared fallibility should not function as an excuse for wrongdoing. In a response to his critics, published before Huget's response, he emphasizes that our shared human fallibility should not be presented as a reason for forgiveness, since this amounts to excusing. For this reason, he assumes that the unilateral forgiveness of the Amish people after a school shooting cannot be paradigmatic for forgiveness.¹²¹ According to Griswold, the Amish are inspired by Jesus' utterance on the cross: 'Father forgive them for they do not know what they do'. But in line with Jeffrie Murphy, he takes this as an example of excusing:¹²²

If we are to 'forgive' on the grounds that we are all fallible, erring creatures, who know not what they do, then forgiveness does collapse into comprehensive, across the board, unconditional excusing. Perhaps that is a defensible response to wrongdoing; but it is not forgiveness.¹²³

In his view, the Amish reliance on Jesus' plea on the cross is thus not an example of unilateral forgiveness. Instead, Jesus cites a reason that turns forgiveness into excuse.¹²⁴

In his book on forgiveness, Griswold similarly argues that if X forgives Y in view of the fact that X too has been guilty of causing injury, this would lead to across the board excusing. It would entail the conclusion that since we are all fallible creatures liable to doing that sort of

¹²¹ In a response to Griswold's account, Michele Moody-Adams used the example of the Amish people to contest Griswold's assumption that forgiveness requires a conditional dialogue between victim and offender and can therefore not be unilateral. See Michele Moody-Adams, "Reply to Griswold, Forgiveness: a Philosophical Exploration" in *Philosophia* 38, (2010): 433-435. In her view, the forgiving attitude of the Amish people is not a case of unconditional forgiveness, but of an unconditional willingness to forgive. It exemplifies a readiness to forgive "even in the midst of very great suffering at the hands of others". *Ibid.*, 434.

¹²² Griswold refers to Jeffrie Murphy in *Getting Even*. Here, Murphy argues against the claim that Christianity teaches universal and unconditional forgiveness, a claim made on the basis of two biblical passages. One claim refers to Jesus' plea on the cross. The other expresses the prayer to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". Murphy claims: "Jesus' words from the cross are surely *not* offering universal forgiveness. Indeed, Jesus takes trouble to offer a *reason* why forgiveness should be bestowed on *these particular wrongdoers* – namely, their ignorance that they are sacrificing the true son of God." Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 36. In regard to the second passage, the prayer to "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us", he argues that there is no explicit reference to forgiving unconditionally. He claims that if 'as' means 'in the manner of' it makes sense to translate it as follows: "If I will not forgive them unless they repent, I do not expect you to forgive me unless I repent." *Ibid.*, 36.

¹²³ Charles Griswold, "Debating Forgiveness: A Reply to My Critics," *Philosophia* 38, (2010): 462.

¹²⁴ Griswold refers to Murphy's remarks on this in his essay "Forgiveness and resentment". Here, Murphy claims: "'Father forgive them for they know not what they do' would be better as 'Father *excuse* them for they know not what they do'." Murphy "Forgiveness and resentment," 20.

thing, none of us is really responsible.¹²⁵ Therefore, he argues that the relevance of shared fallibility for forgiving should be supported by two other considerations. First, he argues that it amounts to reasonableness: if you expect to be forgiven for the injuries you caused to others you ought to forgive the injuries caused by others to you. He thus perceives of it as a kind of rational moral exchange. He continues arguing that one should not make claims of others that one is unwilling to make of oneself. The idea of a moral exchange is thus supported by the moral modesty argument. Furthermore, he asserts that a story about shared fallibility “would naturally enter into the explanation of the wrongdoing”.¹²⁶ Secondly, Griswold assumes that forgiveness implies seeing the offender in a new light. In order to do see the offender in a new light, it helps to recognize that he is embodied, imperfect and fallible just as you are. Again, he claims that the wrongdoing can be understood in part by reference to his fallibility. This avoids imputing to him a permanently rotten or monstrous character.¹²⁷ Griswold concludes that right judgment and the appropriate attunement of the sentiments requires that one is sensible to the context, “the ineliminable imperfection of the human world”.¹²⁸

Griswold explicitly claims that the kind of understanding he refers to should not be understood as excusing, but rather as making the wrongdoing intelligible.¹²⁹ However, as discussed above, making a crime intelligible is always part of an explanation that somehow tends to mitigate and thus alter the wrong. Whatever the aim of the explanation may be, it always has the effect of making the wrong seem less blameable. As revealed before, lifting the blame from the offender is exactly what is implied in excusing. If the condition of shared fallibility becomes part of such an explanation, how could we not interpret it as an argument aimed at lessening someone’s responsibility, and by extension of the responsibility of all wrongdoers ever and everywhere? Even if the given circumstances perhaps only function as a mitigating excuse and not as an exculpatory excuse, they are still aimed at minimalizing or reducing one’s culpability. Such an explanation always focuses on traits and circumstances that we may recognize as by themselves quite innocent or not especially culpable. Therefore, it always tends to reduce the indignation about the wrong on the basis of those elements. Putting wrongs into a context of general fallibility thus always distracts from what actually

¹²⁵ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 82.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 82-83.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

happened and from the offender's responsibility for what happened. Similarly, the entire idea of 'seeing the offender in a new light' equally shares the tendency to put the emphasis on those characteristics and circumstances of the wrongdoer that testify against the idea that he is to be blamed. Although it may be a very legitimate thing to do with regard to judging a wrongdoer appropriately in court, it is questionable whether it has anything to do with forgiveness. In spite of what some arguments and concerns in the literature on forgiveness may suggest, forgiveness is not a matter of court.¹³⁰ Forgiveness explicitly affirms the wrong of which the offender –whoever he may be- cannot be exonerated, whatever mitigating reasons he may have.

It is also questionable whether Griswold's argumentation suffices to avoid that his account of forgiveness, as rooted in the recognition of shared fallibility, collapses into excusing. It is one thing to assume that the awareness of our shared humanity avoids the delusion of moral superiority, but it is quite another to claim that the recognition of our shared human fallibility helps us to understand the wrongdoing, to put it in a context that helps us to judge the wrong appropriately, and thus to forgive. Even if the notion of fallibility is not presented as a clear-cut reason, Griswold still takes it as a mitigating factor that paves the way for forgiveness. One may ask what is exactly the difference between bringing forward the fallibility condition as an argument or a reason for forgiveness and presenting it as an illuminating context, the recognition of which provides a preparing ground for forgiveness? This last formulation just seems a way of creating a smokescreen.

It is very significant that Griswold describes understanding not merely as a pre-condition but also as the aim of forgiveness. Consequently, if the effort of understanding the other as a fallible human being with whom we should principally sympathize should not be understood as being a reason for forgiveness, what to think of the idea that it is its aim? In formulating his explicit ambition to distinguish forgiving from excusing, Griswold claims:

[I]f [rationalization] exempts the wrong-doer from responsibility for the wrong action, it amounts to excuse. [...] But the aim of forgiveness is something quite

¹³⁰ The compatibility of forgiveness with justice is an important concern in contemporary literature on forgiveness. See for instance Murphy, *Getting Even*; Paul Muldoon "The Moral Legitimacy of Anger" *European Journal of Social Theory* 11, 3 (2008): 299-314; Bill Wringe, "Punishment, Forgiveness and Reconciliation" *Philosophia* 44 (2016): 1099-1124; Brandon Warmke, "Two Arguments against the Punishment-Forbearance Account of Forgiveness" *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 3 (2013): 915-920.

different: to understand, to relinquish revenge and resentment, all the while holding the offender responsible.¹³¹

But, in my view, this is not an accurate description of the aim of forgiveness. I argue that the aim of forgiveness is not to understand. As pointed out before, forgiveness is precisely aimed at dealing with that part of the wrong that appears as not understandable. If a wrong keeps on disturbing a relationship or keeps on evoking all kinds of negative feelings, reproaches and reprisals, this may demonstrate that there is something about the wrong that resists to be understood. It may precisely demonstrate that all understandable reasons that are given for the wrong are not strong enough to annul the wrong. This may point out that understanding thus not suffices to remove the obstacle the wrong constitutes for the future. Precisely for this reason something else, something quite unfamiliar and odd like forgiveness is called upon. Surely it is the aim of forgiveness to remove the obstacle of the wrong. But as I already revealed in the previous section, forgiveness is appealed to precisely because all efforts to understand somehow fall short to perform that task.

Moreover, one should be aware of the further implications Griswold's assumptions have regarding the consistency of his argument. If understanding is both a precondition for and the aim of forgiveness, his argument becomes circular. If understanding the other as a fallible human being is already presupposed in being able to forgive, how can it also be its aim? If such understanding already presents itself as an available option to rely on, what would we need forgiveness for if its aim also consists of understanding? Within this view, forgiveness thus becomes redundant and pointless.

It is thus clear that in referring to a shared condition of human fallibility as both a means for and aim of forgiving Griswold is not appropriately giving account of what is implied in forgiveness. Instead, he relies on mitigating factors that may reduce one's resentment, indignation or outrage about the wrong in some other way. In fact, it doesn't matter whether the mitigating circumstances are called upon as straightforward compelling and exculpatory reasons for forgiveness or whether they are referred to in order to foster a general attitude of moral modesty. In either case they are used to draw the attention away from the offender's responsibility and the wrongness of the act by concentrating on certain unfavorable circumstances of which the offender may be a victim. Consequently, the mitigating

¹³¹ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 47.

circumstances also draw the attention away from what the peculiar activity of forgiveness needs to deal with: the inexcusable wrong that turns out to be an obstacle for future engagements. One does not need to believe in the existence of moral saints in order to require that the wrong is recognized as such. As soon as the human fallible condition is used as a means for reducing this requirement, it compromises the possibility of forgiveness and amounts to excusing.

To further examine the role of a sense of agency and responsibility in forgiveness it is helpful to refer to an illuminating experiment. The experiment examines the effects of a common victim identity in Israel-Palestine as a strategy for undermining competitive victimhood and compares it to the effects of a common perpetrator identity.¹³² The researchers emphasize that they are the first to examine the common perpetrator identity intervention empirically. Thus far, studies merely focused on the effects of a common victim identity.¹³³ The comparison between the common victim identity intervention and the common perpetrator intervention shows remarkable differences in relation to one's willingness to forgive. First of all, the experiment points out that an active effort to cultivate a common victim identity reduces competitive victimhood between Jews and Palestinians. The researchers found the same effect in inducing a common perpetrator identity. The induction of a common regional identity failed to obtain the same results. Remarkably, in the common victim intervention, the researchers found decreased moral defensiveness. However, in the common perpetrator intervention, an increased sense of agency was found.¹³⁴ The study also found that there was a difference in how both interventions related to forgiveness. In the common victim intervention there was no direct path to increasing forgiveness, whereas in the common perpetrator intervention the direct link with increased forgiveness was significant.¹³⁵ Consequently, in the common perpetrator intervention an increased sense of agency may be linked to the probability of forgiveness. This may reveal that it is not the awareness of one's

¹³² Nurit Shnabel, Samer Halabi and Masi Noor, "Overcoming competitive victimhood and facilitating forgiveness through re-categorization into a common victim or perpetrator identity," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 49, (2013): 867-877.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 875.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 867-877.

¹³⁵ In the *common victim* intervention, the indirect *common victim identity* - Moral-defensiveness - Competitive victimhood - Forgiveness path was statistically significant. But the direct effect of the *common victim* intervention was non-significant. This means that, once Moral defensiveness and Competitive victimhood were controlled for, the *common victim identity* on itself did not increase forgiveness. In the common perpetrator intervention, both the indirect and direct path turned out to be significant. The researchers point out that they were the first to investigate the potential benefits of an inclusive representation of perpetration. *Ibid.*, 873- 875.

shared human fallibility that prepares someone for forgiveness, but rather the ability to take common responsibility for what happened. By asking and granting forgiveness, both victim and offender fight the current circumstances and aim to deal with the past without evading one's responsibility for it.

In my view, one needs to make a clear distinction between being a victim of the circumstances and being a responsible person acting in certain unfavorable circumstances. In the first case one shifts the blame. In the second case, one operates as a responsible agent and is prepared to acknowledge guilt. For Jankélévitch, this acknowledgment of guilt is essential for forgiveness:

Before there can even be a question of forgiveness, it is necessary that the guilty person, instead of protesting, recognize himself as guilty, without pleas or mitigating circumstances, and especially without accusing his own victims; not at all!¹³⁶

Since the human fallibility condition is a permanent and unavoidable condition, any reliance on it tends to draw the attention away from one's individual responsibility. As Griswold rightly remarks, the concept of voluntariness is quite complex. In fact, Griswold posits, "[o]ne could argue that there are always mitigating excuses, that wrong-doing is never just voluntary; there is always a story about how one ended up doing the evil deed."¹³⁷ Probably, he argues, this is why people hold that "*tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*". However, he continues, the common saying is mistaken if 'pardonner' means to forgive.¹³⁸ Griswold thus not only clearly subscribes the need to distinguish forgiving from excusing, but he also seems clearly aware of the fact that all kinds of circumstances and stories for the wrong amount to mitigating one's responsibility for the wrong. Nevertheless, he believes that presenting the human fallibility condition as something that merely prepares someone for forgiveness avoids that it amounts to excusing. Anyhow, as already pointed out above, the fallibility condition is used to demonstrate that as human beings we do not have entire control over our acts. It serves to point out that in some sense we share a kind of victimhood. Griswold asserts that as a result of this awareness a victim of wrongdoing will find it less difficult to forgive an offender. However, as the experiment I referred to shows, it is highly questionable

¹³⁶ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 157.

¹³⁷ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 7.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

that there is a direct link between shared victimhood and the kind of moral modesty that results from it on the one hand and forgiveness on the other.

Thus, the distinction between forgiving and excusing also points to a crucial difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. While shared victimhood may induce reconciliation, it also compromises taking responsibility for the crime and the conflict. Apparently, forgiveness at least requires that neither the victim nor the offender escapes the shared responsibility for what happened. Naturally, in some exceptional cases, the circumstances may be so compelling that they compromise their entire agency. However in those rare cases, which exculpate and thus annihilate the wrong, forgiveness simply disappears out of view. The only remaining possibility is to repair the harm that is suffered.

1.2.4. The Peculiar Task of Forgiveness

Having addressed the conceptual distinction between forgiving and excusing and having discussed the problems with the notions of understanding and human fallibility, it is now possible to illuminate in further detail what the peculiar task of forgiving might be.

Above I pointed out that a minimum degree of accountability for the wrong is a presupposition for granting someone forgiveness. However, this does not imply that forgiveness is a response that is concerned with questions of accountability. This is an important, underestimated and often neglected difference between forgiving and excusing. Whereas excusing is concerned with questions of someone's responsibility for the wrong, forgiveness focuses on the existence of the wrongdoing as such. Forgiveness focuses on the wrong and its consequences, on how it appears as an obstacle and a problem for future relationships and actions. It does not deal with the intentions, explanations, circumstances and apologies of offenders. These matters should be dealt with in court. Forgiveness is not a matter of court procedures. It is a way of overcoming the obstacle and tangible harm that is posed by the wrong. It deals with the claim that is made on future action and mutual trust, not with claims on individual responsibility and the legal proceedings attached to it.

Surfing the internet in search for articles mentioning the aim of forgiveness, I came across an interesting remark made on *Quora*, a website where questions are asked, answered, edited and organized by a community of users. In his reply to the question what the purpose of

forgiveness is, user Shay Joshua Garnett gives a quite accurate theological interpretation of the divine commandment to forgive. He explains what he assumes that will happen when some victim, Janet, holds a grudge against her offender, Roger, and is asked by God to forgive. Garnett posits:

When Janet forgives Roger . . . then Roger is still accountable (and in trouble) with GOD . . . and Roger has to answer to GOD . . . but Roger no longer has to answer to JANET. When we hold a grudge, the other person has to answer TO US, and we are not happy until WE get the punishment and the torment that we wish handed out to that other person.¹³⁹

He refers to the fact that questions on accountability and responsibility are dealt with in the Last Judgment. When we forgive we hand over the judgment on the offender's responsibility to God's Last Judgment, he claims, instead of taking the law in our own hands. In a secular interpretation of the invitation to forgive, we could argue that the judgment about someone's responsibility is handed over to a secular and impartial court. When one hands over this judgment, one refrains not only from taking revenge, but also from being concerned with the offender's responsibility for the wrong. Therefore, it could be held that forgiveness acknowledges and communicates the wrongdoing, but leaves the judgment about responsibility, intentionality and mitigating circumstances behind. It deals with the consequences and appearance of the wrong as such. The activity of forgiveness is thus also situated beyond all possible explanations of one's intentions. Therefore, the question: "Should or can I forgive this person" also does not depend on an understanding of how the wrong came about, but on an estimation of the possibilities for removing the obstacle that the wrong poses.

A misleading tendency in the literature on forgiveness is to assume that the distinction between forgiving and excusing corresponds to a distinction between a response to intentional wrongdoing and a response to unintentional wrongdoing. However, this correspondence is far from self-evident. This is very well captured by Gaëlle Fiasse. She holds that forgiveness can also be at stake in some cases of involuntary wrongdoing. At first sight, this seems to contradict the assumption that forgiveness presupposes responsible

¹³⁹ Shay Joshua Garnett, August 23, 2016, answer to "What is the purpose of forgiveness?", <https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-purpose-of-forgiveness>.

wrongdoing. But I will point out that a focus on the harm that is caused by a wrong does not necessarily eviscerate the presupposition of responsible wrongdoing.

Fiasse puts forward an example in which someone goes hunting and ends up hurting one of two lovers, who were hiding in the bush. The hunter did not know they were there, since he was told that the woods were private. Consequently, no one was supposed to be in there.¹⁴⁰ The injury of the lover in the bush was thus clearly an accident on the part of the hunter. Nevertheless, Fiasse argues that it is not clear why the wounded person would merely need to excuse the hunter. She explains that the victim may be overflowed with resentment, since what matters to her is not only the intention of the hunter, but also the repercussion of the hunter's action on her life. Fiasse argues that real wrongdoing has been committed, insofar as she is now paraplegic.¹⁴¹ In her view, forgiveness is thus not merely a response to the degree of voluntariness in the performance of an action, but also, and even most importantly, to the damage that is suffered:

The one who caused damage to a person should not ask for forgiveness only in regard to the degree of voluntariness in one's own action, but also in regard to the harm done to the other person. This situation often arises in cases of involuntary accidents which have terrible consequences. The solution, however, is not to make people guilty of what they are not responsible for, but to emphasize the need for recognizing situations where their actions are the origin of suffering.¹⁴²

Fiasse's view thus excellently illustrates the fact that forgiveness is not concerned with evaluating the intention to do wrong, but with overcoming the harm and damage that is caused by it. The idea that involuntary actions sometimes require forgiveness does not make the assumption that forgiveness requires responsible wrongdoing invalid. If someone is acquitted for the wrong in front of the court, it does not necessarily mean that they no longer feel responsible for their actions. As Fiasse points out, we even feel regret in particular for those actions that were involuntarily. If someone plans to injure someone else, they will not feel regret if they succeed, since it was their choice.¹⁴³ The impact and awareness of one's role in involuntary wrongdoing is for instance demonstrated by cases in which motorists have

¹⁴⁰ Gaëlle Fiasse, "Revisiting Jankélévitch's Dichotomy. Between Excusing the Ignorant and Forgiving the Wicked," *Philosophy Today* 56, 1 (2012): 8.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* Fiasse relies on an Aristotelian notion of regret.

run someone over and killed them. Even when the motorist is completely innocent, a strong awareness of the harm that is done may remain. This may foster the need to be forgiven for what happened. Especially when children are involved, the innocent motorist may feel a strong need to ask the grieving parents for forgiveness or to offer his apologies.¹⁴⁴

For Fiasse, the insight that involuntary actions may require forgiveness is a reason for giving up the sharp conceptual distinction between excusing and forgiving. I do not follow her in this conclusion. I do not take the conceptual distinction to be the problem, but the conclusions that are derived from it. In my view, the distinction between excusing and forgiving precisely helps to illuminate where some conclusions go wrong.

Fiasse's rejection of the conceptual distinction between forgiving and excusing results from the manner in which Jankélévitch and Derrida put the distinction to its extreme. Both Jankélévitch and Derrida take the sharp conceptual distinction between excusing and forgiving to imply that only the most pure and wicked evil can be forgiven. Jankélévitch holds that forgiveness can principally do everything. Even when the crime is so severe that no proper atonement is available, forgiveness remains a possibility:

Forgiveness is there to forgive precisely what no excuse would know how to excuse: for there is no misdeed that is so grave that we cannot in the last recourse forgive it. (...) Forgiveness can in this sense do everything. (...) For if there are crimes that are so awful that the criminal who commits them cannot atone for them, then the possibility of forgiving them still remains, forgiveness being made precisely for such hopeless and incurable cases.¹⁴⁵

As revealed before, Derrida also claims that if there is something to forgive, it must be the mortal sin, the worst unforgivable crime or harm.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ This is often explicitly discouraged by the police or by insurance companies. See for instance Nathalie Carpentier, "Perte Totale: Onschuldige daders getuigen. 'Ik ben een moeder die het kind van een ander heeft doodgereden,'" *De Standaard Weekblad*, January 23, 2016, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20160121_02082532. For other testimonies of innocent perpetrators of traffic accidents, see Cocquyt Sabine, *Mij overkomt het niet. Ontmoetingen met veroorzakers van verkeersongevallen* (Antwerpen: Epo, 2010). See also the television program of the same name on the Belgian national television channel Eén: <https://www.een.be/mij-overkomt-het-niet>.

¹⁴⁵ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 156.

¹⁴⁶ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32. It must be noted that Derrida relies on Jankélévitch's views on forgiveness, but alters his vocabulary in a significant and often intended paradoxical way. While Jankélévitch argues that for forgiveness everything is possible, Derrida claims that forgiveness must do 'the impossible'. While Jankélévitch argues that there is in principle no unforgivable - although he takes some acts to be *de facto* unforgivable -, Derrida claims that forgiveness forgives the unforgivable. Jankélévitch argues that in fact all offenses are venial, the more mortal they are the more venial they are. But what we readily call 'venial', in the current sense of the word, is not in need of forgiveness. Since, he argues, forgiveness is not made for

But it is questionable whether those conclusions are right. If the distinction between forgiving and excusing is taken seriously, one should be able to excuse what is excusable about an offence and forgive the wrongdoing that remains despite all excuses. In my view, it would be a mistake to assume that there are crimes that are exclusively excusable, and crimes, mortal sins for instance, that are exclusively forgivable. The existence of mitigating excuses, which I take to be the most common form of excuses, demonstrate that when something is excusable, it is not necessarily *only* excusable. The ‘inexcusable’ Jankélévitch refers to, could be considered to be that aspect of the wrong that cannot be removed by excuses. It refers to the damage and suffering that result from a wrong. It is the remaining testimony of that aspect of a wrong that cannot be lifted by excuses and explanations.

In my view, the distinction between forgiving and excusing is thus not a distinction in its object, namely between voluntary and involuntary wrongdoing. It is a distinction between dealing with the consequences of a wrong and dealing with the accountability for the wrong. Naturally, forgiving requires some degree of responsibility, since it is an agent one is forgiving. We are forgiving the agent for actions he actually performed. It doesn’t make sense, as Jeffrie Murphy points out, to forgive a sudden storm that soaks me.¹⁴⁷ Similarly, in some cases, one’s responsibility may be compromised to such an extent that one’s actions are reduced to bodily movements and responses. These are exceptional cases. But even in some of those cases, when the consequences are horrible, it may make sense to seek forgiveness. A few years ago a cousin of my husband died after falling from stairs. A friend fell on top of him. The weight of the friend’s falling body may have caused the cousin’s broken neck. The friend survived the accident. It would not be absurd if, at some point, he would ask the parents of his dead friend for forgiveness, even when he is not to be blamed. It is clear that the parents somehow have to deal with the tragic and unsettling fact that a friend of their son, who is still alive and well, may have involuntarily caused the death of their son. They probably would not accept the friend’s plea for forgiveness since forgiveness – as we commonly understand it – is taken to be a response to guilt. It would suggest that the friend is to blame for what he did, which would be unacceptable in this case. The parents rather made this horrible fact bearable for themselves by taking another perspective on the story. They believe that the body of their son has broken the fall of the friend and therefore their

insignificant matters. He claims that indulgence suffices. Derrida simplifies this in stating that it are specifically mortal sins that call for forgiveness. See Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 156-157; Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32-33.

¹⁴⁷ Murphy, *Getting Even*, 13.

son has given his life saving the life of his friend. This also points out that, by conceiving of forgiveness as a mere response to guilty wrongdoing, we somehow deprive forgiveness of its power to deal with the inevitable tragic of human life and action and thus with the consequences of wrongdoing as such.

In most cases of wrongdoing, even those for which we are not held accountable and thus cannot be prosecuted, some sense of responsibility remains. It is the responsibility that is tied to the fact that we act in a world we share with others and in which the most innocent acts may have far-reaching consequences. As I will discuss below, forgiveness deals precisely with the consequences of this responsibility that comes with the unpredictability of acting among others. This also points out that there may be a way in which the sentence “I know you couldn’t help it, I forgive you”, makes sense without implying that the wrong is merely extenuated or mitigated.

1.3. Condoning

A pivotal and influential theme in the literature on forgiveness is the distinction between forgiving and condoning. It is often believed that in order to distinguish forgiving from condoning, it needs to be granted with some conditions attached, such as repentance of the offender. These conditions are assumed to guarantee that forgiving does not mean letting a wrong pass or refraining from taking offence. However, Aurel Kolnai argues that the condition of repentance renders forgiveness redundant. Since the offender’s repentance entails a reaffirmation of moral value and a withdrawal of the moral offence, there is nothing left to do for the victim. Forgiveness therefore loses its point. As a result, Kolnai argues, forgiveness is suffering from a logical paradox: either it is granted unconditionally and therefore unjustified and at risk of condonation, or it implies a rational response to repentance and becomes therefore redundant. A current solution for the underlying moral paradox of forgiveness, namely the paradoxical effort to overcome in a moral way what is at the same time unacceptable from a moral point of view, is found in the precondition of self-respect. However, I argue that the reliance on the precondition of self-respect points at an inadequacy to articulate the peculiar activity of forgiveness and precisely mistakes forgiveness for condonation. Moreover, I argue that which Kolnai perceives as a problem of

redundancy actually results from his problematic assumptions about both wrongdoing and repentance.

1.3.1. *The Moral Paradox of Forgiveness*

In the literature on forgiveness there is a prevailing worry that forgiveness may somehow slip into a form of condoning a wrong. Since forgiving implies releasing the offender, fear exists that one may fail to morally condemn the wrong. One may somehow refrain from communicating disapproval of the wrong, either to oneself, to the offender or to other members of the moral community. Forgiveness, it is argued, cannot be morally acceptable if it means that someone goes scot-free.¹⁴⁸ When forgiveness fails to condemn a wrong it may even become complicit in the wrongdoing.

This worry has deeply influenced the contemporary debate on forgiveness. The worry rises from what is believed to be an inherent moral paradox of forgiveness. This moral paradox is put to its extreme in Derrida's account and results from the assumption that forgiveness entails an effort to overcome in a moral way what is simultaneously unacceptable from a moral point of view. This causes an insolvable moral conflict. Derrida therefore calls forgiveness intrinsically paradoxical or 'impossible'.¹⁴⁹

Generally, two routes are taken in the contemporary debate on forgiveness to avoid condonation while granting forgiveness. The first route is taken by conditional accounts of forgiveness. They assume that forgiveness can only be morally justified if at least one condition is fulfilled on the side of the offender. The most common condition is the condition of repentance. The second route, taken by both conditional and unconditional accounts of forgiveness, entails a precondition on the side of the victim, namely self-respect. This precondition is for instance put forward by Jeffrie Murphy. It is believed to be essential for defining forgiveness as it marks soundly the distinction between forgiveness and condonation.

¹⁴⁸ See for instance Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 46-47; Murphy "Forgiveness and resentment," 17-18; Joram Graf Haber, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Study* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991), 59-60; Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104, (2003), 49.

¹⁴⁹ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32-33.

A large part of the contemporary literature on forgiveness entails a discussion on the moral role of the condition of repentance and the precondition of self-respect.¹⁵⁰ However, many of the assumptions that guide the debate on these conditions are deeply problematic. One of these problematic assumptions is the basic idea that forgiveness is intrinsically at risk of condoning. Therefore, in order to disentangle this and other related assumptions and conclusions and to evaluate them, I have to partly reconstruct how the discussion on these conditions has taken shape.

1.3.2. *Repentance and the Problem of Redundancy*

The idea that forgiveness is somehow at risk of condoning an unacceptable moral offence is constitutive for most conditional accounts of forgiveness. The condition of repentance is the minimal condition put forward by these conditional accounts.¹⁵¹ These accounts claim that when forgiveness is granted without explicit repentance, regret or even an apology of the offender, it is unacceptable from a moral point of view, as it may imply or at least signal condonation of the wrong.¹⁵² The concern that forgiveness, when it is granted unconditionally, might be an impermissible form of condoning is what Glen Pettigrove calls the condonation objection.¹⁵³ Aurel Kolnai takes the condonation objection to be one side of what he calls the logical paradox of forgiveness. He formulates the objection as follows:

Forgiveness is objectionable and ungenune inasmuch as there is *no reason to forgive*, the offender having undergone no *metánoia* ('Change of Heart') but persisting in his plain identity *quâ* offender. The contrast lies between genuine forgiveness with its backbone of a crystal-clear *pro* response to value and *con* response to disvalue on the one hand and condonation with its innuendo of spineless accompliceship, or 'compounding with' disvalue, on the other.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Brandon Warmke and Paul M. Hughes, "Forgiveness," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Stanford: Stanford University, 2017-): 41-44.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁵³ See Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 110-111.

¹⁵⁴ Kolnai, "Forgiveness," 97. Clearly, Kolnai has the more (morally) objectionable understanding of condoning as approval in mind.

Kolnai thus assumes that forgiveness can only avoid slipping into condonation when one has good moral reasons for forgiving. Although he takes it to be self-evident that genuine forgiveness is an act that is supportive to moral value and disapproving of what disesteems morality, he believes that forgiveness should only take place if it is informed by good reasons. In all other cases one is merely condoning the wrong. In line with the conditional view, Kolnai takes these reasons to depend on the offender and his behavior.¹⁵⁵ The offender needs to give at least some indications that he went through a ‘change of heart’. He needs to repudiate his act and needs to convince that he is a person worthy of forgiveness by showing some form of regret. By doing so he reaffirms the rules of morality. Only when he does so, it seems no longer unacceptable to forgive him.

But Kolnai also points out that as soon as there are reasons to forgive, because the offender has undergone a change of heart, forgiveness tends to lose its point. This is the other side of the logical paradox of forgiveness he draws attention to. Since the wrongdoer himself repudiated his act, the offence no longer poses a treat to the victim and the moral community. He is no longer devoted to disvalue. Kolnai assumes that, as a result, the attitude of the victim also automatically alters. If a wrongdoer, Ralph, has credibly mended his way, this also automatically changes the attitude of Fred, the victim, towards Ralph. He gives up his own retributive position. Even more, if he would not forgive, this would be a reason for calling him vindictive. Kolnai points out that the change in Fred’s attitude towards Ralph, the victim’s change of heart, is ordinarily called forgiveness, but he questions whether this is correct. He argues that, at this point, the objection arises that forgiveness has lost its ground. It no longer has a *raison d’être*, since, due to the wrongdoer’s change of heart, there is nothing left to be forgiven.¹⁵⁶

The logical paradox of forgiveness Kolnai describes thus entails that at the one end of the spectrum, by forgiving the undeserving, forgiveness threatens to collapse into condonation. But at the other end of the spectrum, when a change of heart on the side of the wrongdoer already took place, forgiveness seems to become redundant and pointless. Kolnai summarizes the consequences of the paradox as follows:

Either the wrong is still flourishing, the offence still subsisting: then by ‘forgiving’ you accept it and thus confirm it and make it worse; or the wrongdoer has suitably annulled and eliminated his offence, and then by harping on it you would set up a

¹⁵⁵ Cheshire Calhoun, “Changing One’s Heart,” *Ethics* 103, 1 (1992): 76.

¹⁵⁶ Kolnai, “Forgiveness,” 98.

new evil and by ‘forgiving’ you would only *acknowledge* the fact that you are no longer its victim. Briefly, forgiveness is either unjustified or pointless.¹⁵⁷

Kolnai’s paradox has been very influential in the contemporary debate on forgiveness. However, it entails at least two presuppositions that are highly problematic, which I will tackle in the following pages. First of all, Kolnai presupposes that forgiveness can only be morally acceptable and avoid condonation when one has good reasons to forgive. He also assumes that only a repenting offender can provide these reasons. Second, he assumes that wrongdoing can be reduced to a merely moral threat. As a result, he also holds a very narrow view on repentance as the mere removal of this threat. In my view however, it is precisely because of this presupposition about wrongdoing that the problem of redundancy of forgiveness arises.

The idea that forgiveness presupposes good reasons can be found in many contemporary conditional accounts of forgiveness.¹⁵⁸ However, as Cheshire Calhoun points out, this view makes forgiveness entirely dependent on desert. It implies that forgiveness should only be granted when it is deserved. One needs a description of the offender that warrants the victim’s change of heart.¹⁵⁹

The distinction between deserved and undeserved forgiveness is ultimately a distinction between changes of emotional attitude that are warranted by their objects and ones that are not.¹⁶⁰

Asking whether someone deserves forgiveness thus entails asking whether there are any facts about her that make continued hard feelings unwarranted and inappropriate.¹⁶¹ This way the moral justification of forgiveness also becomes dependent on what it makes psychologically possible to forgive.¹⁶² But according to Calhoun this also implies that forgiveness is no longer freely chosen, or elective:

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

¹⁵⁸ Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 23-24; Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 47; Pamela Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, 3 (2001): 530; Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 124-125.

¹⁵⁹ Calhoun, “Changing One’s Heart,” 76.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 78.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 76.

Once the desert question is raised there will be no choice to forgive, no generous granting of forgiveness. Reason requires changing one's heart, and forgiveness thus ceases to be elective.¹⁶³

Consequently, the notion of desert not only makes the question on the moral justifiability of forgiveness shift towards a question about psychological possibility, but it also makes the process of granting forgiveness a matter of giving another his due rather than a free act that brings about a transformation. Kolnai's idea that forgiveness is unacceptable if one has no good reasons for forgiveness, thus precisely denies a concept of forgiveness as it is revealed thus far. Moreover, it leads directly to the paradox he describes. However, this paradox is not an inherently logical problem of forgiveness. Instead it results from founding forgiveness logically on desert. If a wrongdoer repents, he gives the victim reasons for forgiveness, since it makes it possible to see him as a person apart from his wrongdoing. However, on the other hand, as a result of the offender's repentance, forgiveness becomes redundant. If the repentant's change of heart breaks the connection between her wrongdoing and her true self, this makes her someone who will not injure the victim this way again. The reformed person is therefore no longer an appropriate object of resentment. This way the notion of desert creates Kolnai's paradox:

The tension between wanting to forgive only the deserving but at the same time recognizing the minimalism of restricting forgiveness this way yields a variant of what Kolnai calls the paradox of forgiveness: if only the deserving ought to be forgiven, then 'forgiveness is either unjustified [in the case of the undeserving] or pointless [in the case of the deserving, since there is nothing to forgive]'.¹⁶⁴

Whereas in Kolnai's view the redundancy results from the removal of the moral threat of the wrongdoing, Calhoun argues that it is a sheer and direct result of the notion of desert. Seeing forgiveness as a matter of desert means that, as soon as the offender gives the victim certain reasons to give up resentment, she is committed to do so. Just as it is inappropriate to blame someone when the wrongdoing turns out to be excusable, it is unwarranted to resent someone after she repented:

¹⁶³ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 80. Calhoun cites Kolnai.

To give up my hard response upon discovering that your action was excusable or justified is to give you no more than your due. It is to admit that there was nothing to be angry about, nothing to forgive. Similarly, to stop my hard response after you have repented, or made up for things, or suffered enough is to do nothing more than I ought.¹⁶⁵

Calhoun argues that presenting the condition of repentance as a reason for forgiveness makes forgiveness both risk free and rational. The problem of redundancy is thus caused by the necessity that is involved in the notion of desert.

To further discuss the problem of redundancy, it is necessary to address the specific implications of the second presupposition of Kolnai's paradox, namely the assumption that the condition of repentance removes the moral threat the wrongdoing poses.

The idea that repentance removes the moral threat and thus renders forgiveness redundant is based on a problematic view on wrongdoing. As I also briefly discussed in the chapter on excusing, there is a tendency in the literature on forgiveness to conceive of the wrongdoing that requires forgiveness as primarily making a threatening claim about the victim. The wrong is described as posing a threat to one's moral worth. The victim is wronged, because she is undeserving of this or that treatment. It does not respect her as a moral person. Jeffrie Murphy puts it as follows:

One reason we so deeply resent moral injuries done to us is not simply that they hurt us in some tangible or sensible way; it is because such injuries are also *messages* – symbolic communications. They are ways a wrongdoer has of saying to us, “I count but you do not”, “I can use you for my purposes”, or “I am here up high and you are there down below.” Intentional wrongdoing *insults* us and attempts (sometimes successfully) to *degrade* us – and thus it involves a kind of injury that is not merely tangible and sensible. It is moral injury, and we care about such injuries.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 79.

¹⁶⁶ Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 25. Pamela Hieronymi holds a similar view, but she connects the claim that is made on the victim's worth to a lack of any form of acknowledgment and condemnation of the wrong: “I think that resentment is best understood as a *protest*. More specifically, *resentment protests a past action that persists as a present threat*. The levelheaded among us might now ask, how can a past action pose a present threat? I suggest that a past wrong against you, standing in your history without apology, atonement, retribution, punishment, restitution, condemnation, or anything else that might recognize it as a *wrong*, makes a claim. It says, in effect, that you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable. That - that claim - is what you resent. It poses a threat. In resenting it, you challenge it. If there is nothing else that would mark out that event as wrong, there is at least your resentment. And so resentment can be

It thus seems to be assumed that the wrong that needs to be forgiven is primarily a moral wrong, a transgression against one's personal moral rights and value. Jean Hampton, for instance, puts forward the following analysis of what makes a human action not only a harm to a person but also a wrong:¹⁶⁷

*A person wrongs another if and only if (while acting as a responsible agent) she treats him in a way that is objectively demeaning. On this definition those responsible agents whose treatment of others literally degrades or diminishes them (in either sense) commit wrongs, as opposed to mere harms, if (but only if) doing these things is itself objectively demeaning, that is, disrespectful of these individual's worth.*¹⁶⁸

But in distinguishing a wrong from *mere* harm in this manner, Hampton disregards that it are precisely the concrete irreversible sufferings one endured due to someone's action that constitute the wrongdoing. If one blows another's brains out with a gun, it is not quite the demeaning treatment that is the problem. One commits a wrong, not merely in offending someone's moral status, but also in harming someone in an objective and existential sense. In contrast with a moral offence, which may be withdrawn or settled, the enduring harm and the various consequences for one's life are not just wiped out by the repentance or change of heart of the offender. Therefore, clearly something remains to be forgiven, even when the offender has withdrawn his moral claim about the victim and has offered his apologies.

Kolnai assumes that, if a wrongdoer repents, he already distinguishes himself from his act. He has thus withdrawn the claim he made with his act. He already condemned it and as such he has re-affirmed himself as a moral person. Kolnai argues that, if we are committed to a moral principle that condemns and shuns disvalues and responds to value wholeheartedly,

understood as protest." Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 546. In my view, it is only in relation to the lack of acknowledgement or any condemnation whatsoever that wrongdoing may primarily be conceived as entailing a claim or threat. In absence of any acknowledgment the wrongdoing in fact continues. But I consider it to be a misconception to take every (intentional) wrong as being primarily about a claim that is made about the victim's moral worth.

¹⁶⁷ Jean Hampton, "Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred," in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 52.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-53. It should be noted that for Hampton, this definition does not exclude unintentional wrongdoing. Since one may not have the intention to harm, but do it as a result of carelessness, one may still be blamed. Those are negligent actions, which are immoral. She claims that a wrong presupposes a *mens rea* (a guilty mind), but it is unclear what this legal term implies philosophically. She holds that a wrong is committed when one is somehow responsible. If one is not responsible, as in the case of insanity, the harm committed is merely a harm, but not a wrong. See Jean Hampton, "Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred," in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton (Cambridge – New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 52 footnote 13.

this principle also provides a self-sufficient maxim of interpersonal conduct.¹⁶⁹ If a wrongdoer thus greets moral value in repenting his offence, there is no need of something like forgiveness, since interpersonal morality already requires responding affirmative to value. Consequently, Kolnai assumes, there remains nothing to forgive, since it would entail merely registering moral value in place of previous disvalue.¹⁷⁰ As a result, forgiveness ends up in a paradox.

Kolnai aims to offer a way out of the paradox by pointing at the hope and trust that can be offered in forgiving the undeserving on the one hand, and by arguing on the other that, despite one's change of heart, a permanence of guilt remains.¹⁷¹ This guilt has not ceased to exist and thus remains the object of forgiveness.¹⁷² But in my view, there is not merely a permanence of guilt. Despite one's change of heart, there also remains a suffered wrong and its further consequences. As I discussed already in the chapter on excusing, it is often presupposed that forgiveness deals with someone's guilt and responsibility for the wrong. But I argue that this is a misconception. Forgiveness does not respond to matters of guilt, but to the consequences of the wrongdoing. The fact that an offender has acknowledged his guilt and perhaps repents or apologizes for it does not alter the fact that a wrong took place and leaves its marks. Consequently, forgiveness may still be necessary after the wrongdoer's repentance and does not only respond to a mere permanence of guilt.

Moreover, it must be pointed out that Kolnai's problem of redundancy results from a problematic conception of repentance.

This conception entails the idea that one may repudiate one's acts in view of a pre-existing distinction between an act and the person who commits the act. As Calhoun points out, if we appeal to good reasons for forgiving someone, we typically rely on a story that distances the offender's misdeed from the biography of his 'true' self.¹⁷³ It is what is often called, in reference to Augustine, the distinction between sin and sinner or between the act and its

¹⁶⁹ Kolnai, "Forgiveness," 98.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Kolnai explicitly claims that the hope of achieving an improving effect on the undeserving offender by forgiving her should merely add to the moral value of one's forgiveness. Holding that the moral value of forgiveness resides in its improving effect would be crass utilitarianism. One should also not forgive with the intention of proving and aggravating the beneficiary's wickedness. In this case it would be a bad act. There are reasons to assume that it would not be true forgiveness, but an act of crafty and perverse resentment. *Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 100, 105. It must be noted that, in contrast to the description of the logical paradox, the solution Kolnai offers with the argument of a permanence of guilt is often neglected in the literature on forgiveness.

¹⁷³ Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," 76.

agent. Augustine's statement that one should 'hate the sin and love the sinner'¹⁷⁴ is often used to explain that in order to forgive, we need to distinguish the agent from his act. It entails the view that we should not reduce a person to his wrongful act. Instead we should conceive of him in his pure essence, as a person who is capable of more than just wrongdoing. We should condemn his wrongdoing, not him as a moral person.

But Calhoun argues that the distinction between the agent and his act on which the condition of repentance relies makes it impossible to forgive a wrongdoer for the wrong he committed. In forgiving the offender because of who he 'really' is we are not forgiving him for what he did, but we 'forgive' him for what he is despite of what he did. Calhoun therefore argues that such a distinction between the act and the 'true' agent is the same distinction on which excuses rely:

[I]nsofar as one's change of heart is grounded in features of a person that make her non- or less culpable, forgiveness is being offered for the absence of full culpability and not for the culpability itself.¹⁷⁵

She argues that the insistence on a distinction between the agent and his act, as a ground for forgiveness, precludes granting forgiveness for the wrongness of the wrong. Nevertheless this is precisely the forgiveness we need. Calhoun holds that the forgiveness we aspire to get is forgiveness for culpable, unrepentant, unpunished, and unrestituted wrongdoing:

We want forgiveness for the culpability that remains after all excuses, justifications, restitution, and repentant reforms have been made and accepted – a culpability that warrants our continuing to be resentful. When I ask aspiringly forgiveness, I ask you to forgive me for something that renders me undeserving and entitles you to hard feelings towards me.¹⁷⁶

This kind of forgiveness is not redundant. It is necessary, precisely because it is unwarranted and undeserved. With this, Calhoun joins Derrida's position that we should forgive the

¹⁷⁴ "Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum". Augustine, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2 (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2011), letter 211. The quote is often translated as "hate the sin, love the sinner". However, a more adequate translation is "with love for mankind and hatred of sin". In addition, Griswold remarks that, one should translate vitiorum as "vices" rather than as "sin". Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 54 footnote 13.

¹⁷⁵ Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," 80.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

guilty as guilty.¹⁷⁷ According to Calhoun, the reliance on someone's initial good character, good intentions or repentance in pointing out that she is not that evil as it seems, indicates a failure to make sense of the idea that persons can choose evil. Consequently, she claims, we are driven to explain these choices away, or simply refuse to think about them:¹⁷⁸

As Daniel Dennett puts it so clearly, 'our assumption that an entity is a person is shaken precisely in those cases where it matters: when wrong has been done and the question of responsibility arises. For in these cases the grounds for saying that the person is culpable (the evidence that he did wrong, was aware he was doing wrong, and did wrong of his own free will) are in themselves grounds for doubting that it is a person we are dealing with at all'. In order to make sense of the knowing, unjustified choice to harm, we find ourselves driven to tell stories denying that the agent is fully a person.¹⁷⁹

The change of heart of the victim that results from a distinction between the committed act and the agent is not one that forgives the choice of evil itself. Calhoun claims that genuine forgiveness requires telling a story that makes the choice of evil intelligible and permits a change of heart of the victim towards the persons making that choice.¹⁸⁰ It means that one stops demanding that the person differs from who she is. It is the choice not to demand of her to improve. One chooses to respect another person's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards.

Calhoun argues that the fear of condoning which results in the stipulation of the condition of repentance is largely "a fear of undermining the social practice of morality by not conveying and enforcing the rules and by not improving improvable characters".¹⁸¹ Moreover, she doubts whether resentment and protest, which are supposed to be crucial to avoiding condonation, are helpful for improvement:

As a point about human moral psychology, the idea that resentment, protest, and punishment best effect moral improvement is surely misguided. The last thing some need is yet more resentment and punishment. Furthermore, as a point about ordinarily decent but flawed person's moral psychology, the idea that moral

¹⁷⁷ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 39.

¹⁷⁸ Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," 89.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. Calhoun quoting Daniel Dennett in *Conditions of Personhood*.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 77.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 84.

improvement requires other's tutelage or punitive sticks is equally misguided. To be a moral agent is to be capable of self-correction.¹⁸²

Moreover, as Margaret Holmgren points out, withholding forgiveness from the unrepentant may rather be a form of manipulation than a sign of properly condemning the moral wrong.¹⁸³ Martha Nussbaum also points out that imposing conditions, such as the condition of repentance, on an offender to make him deserving of forgiveness, constitutes a form of transaction. She therefore calls it transactional forgiveness.¹⁸⁴ In both the Jewish and Christian tradition there exists a necessary transaction between repentance and confession on the one hand and forgiveness on the other. But in contrast to Christianity, there is no explicit abasement or humbling oneself in Judaism and repentance pertains not to wishes or desires but to acts and omissions-to-act.¹⁸⁵ In Jewish tradition there is also no room for generosity or spontaneity regarding forgiveness: it is a requirement of religious law and should not be given freely.¹⁸⁶ In Christian transactional forgiveness there is a much greater emphasis on humility and lowness, as essential features of the human condition.¹⁸⁷ The process of forgiveness is a practice of self-abasement, self-obliteration and shaming. As sins of the mind are considered to be the most fundamental, the confession tends to be endless. There is never a point at which one can be confident that one has truly confessed every hidden sin, as sins are extended to the inner domain of the uncontrollable and ungovernable.¹⁸⁸ Nussbaum portrays it as a harsh inquisitorial process. It demands confession, weeping and an awareness of one's lowness and essential worthlessness.¹⁸⁹ She takes transactional forgiveness to be the temporary prize held out at the end of an intrusive process of self-denigration.¹⁹⁰ The forgiveness that results from such a moral transaction can hardly be called a moral value.

¹⁸² Ibid., 85-86.

¹⁸³ Margaret Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, 4 (1993): 348.

¹⁸⁴ Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 58. For my extended review of Nussbaum's book on Forgiveness and Anger, see Els Van Peborgh, Review of *Anger and Forgiveness. Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, by Martha C. Nussbaum, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77, (2016): 342-347.

¹⁸⁵ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 63-64.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 71.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 70.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 73.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 72. She thus also concludes that, far from being an alternative to the two errors of anger she points to, transactional forgiveness actually involves both. The payback error is implied in the idea that the confessor's

Clearly, grasping forgiveness in terms of a warranted change of heart of the victim and desert leads to an absurdity, exemplified in the problem of redundancy. It is absurd to try to understand forgiveness as a deserved or warranted change of heart of the victim since forgiveness is precisely at stake when one has absolutely no reason and also no right to be forgiven. As pointed out in the chapter on excusing, forgiveness precisely deals with the wrong that remains after all possible explanations and reasons for the wrongdoing are given and did their work. Forgiveness is thus by definition nobody's due. Nor has one a right to be forgiven. Precisely for this reason one needs to ask for it. One needs to ask whether the person who is wronged by them is prepared to forgive them, although they have not the least entitlement to it.

But if an offender has to go down on her knees and beg for forgiveness, is she not also brought into the humiliating position we attached to the condition of repentance in the previous section? Is asking for forgiveness not also a form of expressing remorse and repentance?

Although there certainly is a form of regret involved in asking for forgiveness, it is important to note that it crucially differs from the kind of repentance conditional accounts of forgiveness put forward. As pointed out above, the condition of repentance relies on making a distinction between the act and its agent. In requiring repentance of a wrongdoer, one in fact requires that she repudiates her act, openly condemns it and show that as a person she differs from her bad act. She thus needs to demonstrate that the act is not representative for who she 'really' is. She needs to give at least an indication that, as a person, she possesses a pure core that is unaffected by her evildoing. She thus needs to demonstrate, to put it in Griswold's terms, that she is not a moral monster but retains a morally good essence. As I pointed out above, the condition of repentance creates the problem that in forgiving a repentant wrongdoer one is not forgiving the wrongdoer and her choice for evil, but her pure and unaffected 'good' essence. One is not forgiving her for committing evil, but because she gives evidence of being good. Clearly, this creates the problem of redundancy discussed above, since forgiving someone for being good is in fact only an unnecessary registering of a commitment to value.

pain somehow atones for pain inflicted. Likewise, there is the error of narrow status-focus in which lowness and abasement compensate for a lowering or status-offense inflicted by the offender. *Ibid.*, 74.

But likewise, Gaëlle Fiasse holds that wickedness as wickedness can also not be the object of forgiveness.¹⁹¹ It is possible that, if an offender is unaware of or indifferent to his wrongdoing, forgiveness cannot reach him and may therefore also lose its sense. Instead of putting forward the condition of repentance, one may thus argue that forgiveness only makes sense if the offender acknowledges the wrong and asks to be forgiven for it. But how does asking forgiveness differ from merely repudiating one's acts?

In my view, the form of regret and remorse involved in asking someone for forgiveness is not necessarily relying on a distinction between one's bad act and one's good essence. As pointed out by Gaëlle Fiasse, the notion of regret may also apply to involuntary actions that do not require a distinction between the sin and the sinner. This kind of regret is in fact an acknowledgement of the suffering and harm caused to the other. Fiasse points out that it is not "ridiculous to say that we are terribly sorry even when our actions were completely involuntary because it shows that we are sensitive to what the person endures."¹⁹² She argues that regret in the Aristotelian sense can be common to involuntary and voluntary actions. In Fiasse's view, the Aristotelian use of regret and the stronger psychological dimension of remorse share the commonality that the agent expresses their wish to have acted differently in that situation.¹⁹³ Such a conception of regret and remorse avoids to rely on a pre-existing distinction between oneself as a good moral person and one's immoral acts. It precisely entails the acknowledgement that one is unable to distinguish oneself from one's act and therefore asks for forgiveness. As a result, the problem of redundancy disappears.

¹⁹¹ Fiasse, "Revisiting Jankélévitch's Dichotomy," 4.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 9. Fiasse thus concludes that forgiving and excusing share a commonality. She points out that in apologizing for a remark that is offending someone unintentionally, one acknowledges the misunderstanding and apologizes for having hurt someone involuntarily. *Ibid.* I do not agree that this points to a commonality between forgiving and excusing, rather, it points to the double meaning of apologizing. In some cases an apology is meant to explain that one was not at fault or didn't have the intention to harm and in offering one's apology one aims to extenuate oneself. But this is not the kind of apology Fiasse is referring to in her example. An apology can also be meant, rather than to point to one's true intentions for performing the act, to show one's regret about the fact that someone was harmed, despite of what one's intentions were. In my view, it thus rather points out that forgiving and excusing perform a different task. They do not merge, but coexist in fulfilling different aims.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 10. Aristotle makes an opposition between agent-regret and remorse that is not followed by Fiasse. *Ibid.*, 9.

1.3.3. *The Condonation Objection and the Precondition of Self-Respect*

In contemporary literature on forgiveness there is also taken a second route to avoid the objection that forgiveness may imply condonation. This route entails a precondition on the side of the victim, the precondition of self-respect. This precondition enables to morally justify the granting of forgiveness, independent of the attitude of the wrongdoer. Therefore it is put forward by both conditional and unconditional accounts of forgiveness. Most contemporary philosophers assume that forgiveness can only be a solid moral value that avoids the objection of condoning if it is in accordance with one's self-respect.¹⁹⁴ Proper self-respect is supposed to be a basic minimum and necessary criterion for guaranteeing that one is not just accepting an unacceptable wrong. Self-respect is mainly presented as a Kantian notion, implying that one respects the moral person in oneself and acts accordingly. Compromising one's self-respect means compromising one's absolute value as a moral person and is unacceptable from a moral point of view. It is assumed that being too willing to forgive signals a lack of self-respect and is thus a vice rather than a virtue. Martha Minow for instance holds that "some acts of forgiveness raise questions about whether the victim has enough self-respect or strength to view the injury as a violation".¹⁹⁵ If one forgives as a result of a lack of self-respect, it turns out to be a mere failure to protest the wrong that is done and not a moral effort to overcome the wrong.

But how are we supposed to know whether someone is not compromising one's moral value as a person and thus one's self-respect in forgiving another? According to Jeffrie Murphy, respect for the moral person in oneself constitutes a form of moral anger when confronted with a violation. In reference to Joseph Butler, Murphy calls this moral anger justified resentment. But while for Butler resentment is a response to all moral violations, in Murphy's view it primarily rises in response to wrongs against oneself and in defense of one's self-respect:

¹⁹⁴ Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton were among the first to argue that forgiveness can only be morally acceptable and avoid condonation if it doesn't compromise the victim's self-respect. See Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*. The condition of self-respect has a central place in the accounts of Margret Holmgren, David Novitz, Pamela Hieronymi, Eve Garrard and David Mc Naughton, and Joram Haber: Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons," 341-346; Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect,"; Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,"; Garrard and Mc Naughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness,"; Haber, "Forgiveness," 89-90.

¹⁹⁵ Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, 17-18.

Butler stresses that the passion of resentment functions in a defensive role - defensive of the rules of morality and of the social fabric those rules define. [...] In my view, resentment (in its range from righteous anger to righteous hatred) functions primarily in defense, not of all moral values and norms, but rather of certain *values of the self*. Resentment is a response not to general wrongs but to wrongs against oneself; and these resented wrongs can be of two sorts: resentment of direct violations of one's rights [...] *or* resentment that another has taken unfair advantage of one's sacrifices by free riding [...]. Only the immediate victim of crime is in a position to resent a criminal in the first way; all the law-abiding citizens, however, may be in a position to resent the criminal (and thus be secondary victims) in the secondary way. [...] I am, in short, suggesting that the primary value defended by the passion of resentment is self-respect [...].¹⁹⁶

Murphy does not only suppose that the initial presence of justified resentment in response to wrongdoing is an indication that one possesses sufficient self-respect. He also makes a stronger claim. He holds that resentment is necessary in order not to compromise one's self-respect. Therefore, he also claims conversely that a failure to resent a suffered moral injury points at a lack of self-respect:

[P]roper self-respect is essentially tied to the passion of resentment, and [...] a person who does not resent moral injuries done to him [...] is almost necessarily a person lacking self-respect.¹⁹⁷

Moreover, Murphy claims that a failure to respect oneself as a moral person entails a failure to care about morality. Resentment is defensive of morality by defending the moral person in oneself:

If I count morally as much as anyone else (as surely I do), a failure to resent moral injuries done to me is a failure to care about the moral value incarnate in my own person (that I am, in Kantian language, an end in myself) and thus a failure to care about the very rules of morality.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 16.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 18.

Consequently, Murphy holds that forgiveness can only be in correspondence with one's self-respect if the forgiver has first experienced justified resentment about being wronged. Since self-respect entails respect for morality in general, he takes the initial presence of justified resentment to be a precondition of forgiveness to be morally justified. It is crucial in order to avoid that one becomes complicit in the wrongdoing. He equals a lack of resentment to a hasty readiness to forgive and claims that it "may reveal a lack of respect, not just for oneself, but for others as well".¹⁹⁹ Consequently, he concludes:

Forgiveness is acceptable only in cases where it is consistent with self-respect, respect for others as responsible moral agents, and allegiance to the rules of morality (i.e., forgiveness must not involve complicity or acquiescence in wrongdoing).²⁰⁰

In Murphy's view, the presence of self-respect, and thus the presence of initial justified resentment, enables to discern forgiveness from condoning. Consequently, in line with Butler, he defines forgiveness as the overcoming of initial justified resentment.

This definition of forgiveness and the attached precondition of self-respect have become very dominant and influential in contemporary literature on forgiveness. The precondition of self-respect has also become a central theme of discussion among conditional and unconditional accounts of forgiveness. Whereas conditional accounts assume that one only demonstrates to have sufficient self-respect when one requires repentance of the offender,²⁰¹ unconditional accounts assume that self-respect provides an independent ground for forgiveness.

Margaret Holmgren for instance argues that if one truly respects oneself, one is able to affirm one's intrinsic value independent of what the wrongdoer does. She points out that unconditional forgiveness is compatible with self-respect, respect for morality and respect for the wrongdoer as a moral agent.²⁰² Nevertheless, she holds that the victim first needs to

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 19.

²⁰¹ See for instance Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 46-50.

²⁰² Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons," 345. First, she points out that the objection that unconditional forgiveness is incompatible with self-respect is founded in the common belief that wrongdoing involves a claim about the victim. She refers to Murphy and Haber, who believe that in order to show self-respect the victim must protest this claim in experienced resentment. Not to do so is a sign of servility. The victim thus ought not to forgive her offender, unless he repents. In this case the wrongdoer separates himself from his abusive act and the victim can join him in condemning the violation. Forgiveness becomes then permissible and desirable. Holmgren argues that this argument attaches too much importance

take certain steps that secure her self-respect. One needs to be involved in an internal preparation process that affirms one's self-respect and precedes one's unconditional forgiveness of a wrongdoer.²⁰³

However, the assumption that the condition of self-respect is necessary for distinguishing forgiveness from condonation precisely reveals a failure to give a proper description of the act of forgiveness. It neglects that the language of forgiveness already bears within it an acknowledgment and condemnation of the wrong. In stipulating a precondition of self-respect, one refrains from examining why this is the case. This way, the inherent conceptual distinction between forgiveness and condoning is precisely neglected. Instead of assuming that forgiveness is intrinsically at risk of condoning, one should precisely stress and clarify the fundamental conceptual distinction between both.

Therefore, in what follows I will develop three different arguments in regard to the precondition of self-respect. First, I clarify the fundamental conceptual distinction between forgiving and condoning. I demonstrate how Murphy's reliance on the precondition of self-respect, and the definition of forgiveness that results from this, reveals precisely an illegitimate conflation of forgiveness with condoning. Second, I argue that the precondition of self-respect is not even a reliable criterion for distinguishing forgiveness from condoning. I

to the wrongdoer's beliefs. One who has real self-respect doesn't allow oneself to be dominated by other people's opinions, recognizes one's own worth and trusts one's own judgment. Secondly, against the argument that unconditional forgiveness wouldn't respect morality, Holmgren argues that it is perfectly possible to condemn the wrong without resenting the wrongdoer. For this argument, she relies on the separation of sin and sinner, put forward by Augustine. Thirdly, in response to the objection that unconditional forgiveness doesn't respect the wrongdoer as a responsible moral agent, Holmgren argues that it is not necessary to sit in judgment on the state of one's soul in order to regard someone as responsible. For this she refers to a Kantian conception of the intrinsic value of persons. According to her, the appropriate response to the fact that we are sentient beings is compassion and sympathy. The appropriate response to the fact that we are also autonomous beings is respect. As autonomous beings we are able to make choices and hence mistakes, but we also have an inherent capacity for goodwill and moral growth that exists independent of our moral track record. *Ibid.*, 345-350.

²⁰³ According to Holmgren, this preparation process requires six well-defined steps. In order to forgive, the victim of the wrongdoing must first recover her violated or at least threatened self-esteem. In Holmgren's words: "She must recognize that she is just as valuable as every other person and her needs and feelings matter very much." *Ibid.*, 343. According to her, recognizing one's own status as a person is needed in order to understand the nature of the wrongdoing and to avoid condoning the wrong. The second step implies that she recognizes that the perpetration against her was wrong. She must recognize that she has certain rights and that anyone who violates those rights wrongfully harms her. Third, the victim must acknowledge her feelings, such as anger and grief, and must honor these feelings and allow herself to experience them in full. It will help her to understand what bothers her about the incident. Fourth, it may be important also to express these feelings and beliefs to the offender. Fifth, she needs to take steps to avoid further victimization. Finally, she must determine whether she wants to seek restitution. Holmgren emphasizes that once these steps in the internal preparation process are taken, forgiveness is always appropriate and desirable from a moral point of view. Its appropriateness is independent of whether the wrongdoer repents and independent of what he has done or suffered. *Ibid.*, 343-344.

point out that condonation is not always resulting from a lack of self-respect. There may be cases in which condonation is a perfectly morally legitimate response. Third, I comment on the specific interpretation of the notion of self-respect that is involved. I argue that the notion is conceived in a very liberal manner. Furthermore, I briefly discuss the presupposed connection between anger and self-respect. Finally, I point out that, since unconditional accounts take the precondition of self-respect as an inviolable condition, it renders the victim principally morally inviolable. I call into question whether moral inviolability has anything to do with forgiveness.

a) Condoning implies overlooking a misdeed, acting as if it never happened, although it is acknowledged as a responsible wrong. It differs from excusing in that it does not rely on exculpatory or mitigating reasons and explanations that may absolve someone of the responsibility for the wrong. However, it is related to forgetting, since by condoning one decides to ignore the wrong, to leave it behind without paying much attention to it. One pushes aside the memory of it. The idea that it somehow neglects or disregards a committed wrong also becomes manifest in related synonyms, such as tolerating, allowing, accepting or permitting. These synonyms reveal that one is confronted with a fault or offence, but decides to remain silent about it. One does not want to take proceedings and turns a blind eye. One ignores it, lets the wrong pass by and hopes it is finally forgotten.

As I revealed in the chapters on excusing and forgetting, this is not what is implied in forgiving. First of all, forgiveness does not forget. Forgiveness of a wrong requires that it is remembered well. As Vladimir Jankélévitch puts it, the wrong is at once remembered and left behind in the act of forgiveness.²⁰⁴ Forgiving a wrong only makes sense as long as the wrong poses a present and tangible obstacle to one's relationships and actions. Forgiveness also neither neglects nor turns a blind eye to the wrong, but precisely deals with the damage that the wrong left behind. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize and communicate that a wrong took place and that it caused considerable harm. As I revealed in the chapter on excusing, the language of forgiveness not only presupposes that a wrong is done, but also makes this explicit. In using the phrase 'I forgive you', one thematizes and communicates the wrong. For this reason, one may take offence to be forgiven by someone if one believes that one is not responsible for a wrong or at fault.²⁰⁵ But even when one refutes or protests that a

²⁰⁴ Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 56.

²⁰⁵ See Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 4-5.

wrong is done, the forgiver at least claims that it is, that she personally suffered from it and that the one she forgives is responsible for it.

I claim that the examination of the speech act of forgiveness helps to illuminate the crucial conceptual distinction between forgiving and condoning a wrong. Forgiveness releases someone of a wrong through the utterance of the words 'I forgive'.²⁰⁶ Those words do what they say. They acknowledge that there is a wrong that requires forgiveness and that this forgiveness is hereby granted. In my view, condoning, in contrast, can never be a speech act, since making it explicit would undermine its aim of overlooking and ignoring the wrong. If one says 'I condone the wrong you did to me', one does exactly the opposite of condoning. One draws special attention to the fact that one believes the other person wronged her and communicates this belief to the other. In my view, condonation requires that one remains silent about the wrong. If one claims to be condoning, it precisely indicates that the moment has come to break the silence. It is brought up when one decides to condone no longer or when one calls up another to stop condoning.

The stipulation of the condition of self-respect thus indicates precisely an unwarranted conflation of forgiveness and condoning. The notion of self-respect as a criterion for forgiveness entered the literature on forgiveness as a result of a specific abuse of the concept of forgiveness. Murphy opens the discussion on the appropriateness of forgiveness in his influential article "Forgiveness and resentment" with a passage from a book by the feminist Fay Weldon, *Female Friends*. In the passage Fay Weldon testifies how, as a young woman, she was always taught to keep silent, to understand and to 'forgive'. Her protest involves a specific feminist concern. She resists the way in which certain moral virtues are used to oppress woman:

Understand, and forgive, my mother said, and the effort has quite exhausted me. I could do with some anger to energize me, and bring me back to life again. (...)
Understand, forgive, accept, in the light of your own death, your own inevitable corruption.(...) Oh mother, what you taught me! And what a miserable, crawling,

²⁰⁶ Whether these words should be uttered towards the offender, or whether they could also be silently uttered for oneself, or whether they could/should not be uttered at all, is up for discussion. Such a discussion would imply an intervention in the debate on whether forgiveness is a dialogical activity or whether it can also be unilateral, which I will not carry out here. But the least one can say is that the activity of forgiveness at least requires the words. It cannot be performed without somehow using the vocabulary of forgiveness. Whether it is *only* a speech act or whether some other elements are involved is also up for discussion.

snivelling way to go, the worn-out slippers neatly placed beneath the bed, careful not to give offence.²⁰⁷

Her protest thus results from the existence of a specific era in which the virtue of forgiveness is misused to force and keep woman in a submissive role. This reveals a lot about a catholic tendency to misuse certain moral values for creating and sustaining a patriarchal society.²⁰⁸ It also reveals a lot about the inappropriateness of just condoning anything to keep the family peace. But it does not reveal anything about what forgiveness actually is.

Nevertheless, Murphy uses precisely this example to point out that forgiveness may be intrinsically at risk of condoning if it is not preceded by justified resentment. The example needs to illustrate that if one is not experiencing resentment about the moral wrong that is done, one is just condoning the wrong by 'forgiving' it. Murphy thus departs from a conflation in common language of forgiving and condoning in order to define the conditions of forgiveness. From the sheer possibility to misuse the high moral reputation of the value of forgiveness for morally questionable practices he derives the problematic conclusion that forgiveness is conceptually always at risk of condonation.²⁰⁹ Murphy thus precisely fails to disentangle forgiving from condoning since he is in fact discussing the problems of condonation instead of the features of forgiveness. Weldon is not protesting against forgiveness, but against her mother's tendency to condoning and excusing. A description of the criteria that serve to avoid this kind of condonation, such as resentment and self-respect, do not bring about an understanding of what forgiveness is about or should be about and what it requires.

In my view, the description of forgiveness as a speech act is crucial for revealing its fundamental conceptual difference with condonation. In contemporary literature however forgiveness is rarely defined by reference to its speech act. As a result of Murphy's influence, forgiveness is commonly defined by the internal emotional change that is supposed to take place. This emotional change is often referred to as a 'change of heart'.²¹⁰ In line with

²⁰⁷ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 14

²⁰⁸ Clearly, this tendency may also be present in other institutions and societies.

²⁰⁹ This argument also applies to Kolnai's condonation objection, constituting the logical paradox of forgiveness.

²¹⁰ See for instance Kolnai, "Forgiveness," 97; Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart,"; Griswold, "Forgiveness," 53. Exceptions to this view are those accounts that perceive of forgiveness as a speech act entailing the release of a debt. See for instance P.E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.

Murphy it is most often defined as an internal ‘overcoming of resentment’.²¹¹ However, the reference to a mere emotional change does not enable to distinguish it from either condoning or excusing or forgetting. As a result, it is assumed in contemporary literature that “ceasing to resent will not constitute forgiveness unless it is *done for a moral reason*.”²¹² Forgiveness, Murphy claims, cannot be the overcoming of resentment *simpliciter*, it rather is the forswearing of resentment on moral grounds.²¹³ The definition of forgiveness as implying a certain transformation or state by relying on moral reasons thus also constitutes the problems with the notion of desert we discussed above. Therefore, in my view, the reliance on extra conditions that need to guarantee it is forgiveness we are dealing with and not condoning, reveals that the standard definition of forgiveness as the ‘overcoming of resentment’ is inadequate and problematic. It fails to describe the peculiar activity of forgiveness on its own terms.

b) Moreover, the precondition of self-respect does not only point at a failure to properly recognize the conceptual distinction between forgiving and condoning, it also is in itself a problematic and unsuccessful moral criterion for enforcing that distinction.

In putting forward the condition of self-respect as a demarcation tool, Murphy and many of his followers assume that condonation is always objectionable from a moral point of view and by definition results from a lack of self-respect. But this is highly contestable. Not all cases of condonation necessarily entail a lack of self-respect. Condoning may sometimes be a perfectly legitimate and acceptable response to some cases of wrongdoing. Taking too much offence at every fault may disturb a relationship unnecessary. If one finds fault with everything it is barely possible to maintain good, sustainable moral relationships with other people or to collaborate in reaching a certain moral goal. Moreover, if you wish to be taken seriously when taking offence, you also need to pick your battles. Otherwise, you risk becoming the boy who cries wolf too often and consequently is ignored when there is real danger. Condoning may thus be a necessary instrument to get along with other people, to participate in a larger shared project and to avoid over-sensitivity. In cases of conflict, it may often suffice for the general goal of reconciliation in a way that is not necessarily morally

²¹¹ This definition was originally formulated by Joseph Butler and has been adopted by Jeffrie Murphy, Jean Hampton and subsequently many other philosophers. See Warmke and Hughes, “Forgiveness,” 13-25.

²¹² Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 23-24.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

objectionable. In those cases, the one who condones a wrong not necessarily lacks self-respect or respect for morality.

As Glen Pettigrove remarks, in discussing the risk of condoning for forgiveness, there is a tendency to understand condoning as entailing an unacceptable approval of a wrong.²¹⁴ However, Pettigrove argues that there are in fact at least three different interpretations of what may be implied in condoning, which all have a different moral weight.

To clarify the first meaning he refers to a passage from 1858 in the Oxford Dictionary, stating that condoning implies “a blotting-out of the offence imputed, so as to restore the offending party to the position which she occupied before the offence was committed”.²¹⁵ This first definition suggests that condoning is not about finding a way towards reconciliation between both parties, but is merely concerned with the status of the offender. The reason of the remission is avoiding the relationship to be disturbed by the wrong. It signals an avoidance of change and a concern for restoration. Whether or not it signals a lack of self-respect depends for instance on how often an offence occurs. If one tolerates all the verbal and physical transgressions of an aggressive husband, this may be a sign of a lack of self-respect. It may also be a sign of fear, oppression, confusion and even hope for better. But if one tolerates an unwarranted snarl at the end of a long and tiring day, one may have good reasons for not pouring oil on the fire. Instead of a lack of self-respect, it may signal that one values the relationship and the peace in the family. Clearly, there is a problem if one aims to restore the relationship and the family peace at all costs, but this is not necessarily the case for every condoning act.

The second definition of condonation Pettigrove is drawing attention to is closely related to the previous meaning. It involves overlooking the misdeed, in view of some more important goal.²¹⁶ It thus entails a form of reconciliation, which may serve another goal than the mere restoration of the previous relationship. Moreover, whereas ‘blotting-out’ an offence is like literally wiping it out, making it inexistent, ‘overlooking’ seems to leave some room for continuing to experience something as unpleasant. Nevertheless, one decides to ignore this or to push it aside. It is not denied that something has happened, but one does not want to take too much offence. In this case, one may experience resentment or anger, in accordance to one’s self-respect, but there may be more important things to worry about. Or it is just

²¹⁴ Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 110

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, III. Pettigrove citing the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

considered to be ‘part of the game’. If one wants to participate, one should not be too touchy.²¹⁷

According to Pettigrove, the third sense in which condonation may be used implies not simply a toleration of the wrong but also some kind of approval of the wrongdoer’s actions.²¹⁸

Paul Hughes also makes a further important difference between condonation as merely neglecting while disapproving on the one hand and condoning in the sense of approving on the other. He defines the difference as a difference between tolerating and accepting.²¹⁹ Condoning as tolerating overlooks while nevertheless disapproves of the wrong. Hughes points out that condoning as accepting, in contrast, is overlooking and thereby also approving of the wrongdoing.

Nevertheless, it is sometimes argued that – regardless of what the judgment of the victim may be – condoning always communicates approval to the wrongdoer. Kolnai for instance assumes that in condoning one does not only fail to communicate the wrongness of the offender’s behavior, but as a result of this failure, one also supports the behavior and thus makes it worse.²²⁰ Consequently, the victim may even be accused of being complicit in the wrongdoing, apart from what her own beliefs about the wrong may be. We find this kind of argument in the common expression “Silence gives consent”. Clearly, the interpretation of condonation as approval may pose more problems. It may cast doubt on someone’s self-respect or respect for morality. But it may also reveal a more consequentialist concern, stating that one’s moral intentions, integrity and actual conditions do not matter that much. What matters are the outcome and the consequences of one’s condoning action for society at large.

These definitions reveal that in condoning someone, it is also possible to disapprove of the wrong, to retain one’s self-respect and to experience resentment. In this case, one may also overcome these feelings and consequently remain silent about it. This is precisely what is

²¹⁷ A suitable example of this interpretation of condoning as ‘overlooking’ can be found in the way in which, as recently was revealed, both men and women have been handling the problem of sexual abuse and intimidation in the performing arts world. Although sheer denial was not at hand, it clearly involved brushing aside such incidents as if they were of minor importance. Even more, taking offence would have been considered a sign of ill will. However, this does not necessarily indicate a lack of self-respect as some may not even have experienced it as really wrong. And others, who did disapprove of the wrong, may not have lacked self-respect, but rather the instruments and power to protest the wrong or to bring it to an end.

²¹⁸ Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 112.

²¹⁹ Ibid. Pettigrove referring to Hughes.

²²⁰ See for instance Kolnai, “Forgiveness,” 98. For a discussion of this aspect of condonation, see also Calhoun, “Changing One’s Heart,” 84-85.

meant by related synonyms of condoning such as enduring, swallowing, submitting or even surrendering.

c) It should also be noted that in discussing the problems condonation poses for forgiveness, the notion of self-respect is mainly understood as an emancipatory demand: one is not respecting oneself if one agrees with a subservient role. This is a highly disputable interpretation of the notion of self-respect. One may doubt whether agreeing in a subservient role is always a sign of a lack of self-respect and whether there is even necessary a wrong involved in this subservience, let alone a condonation of that wrong. Some societies or aspects of society are organized in such a way that one is not taking offence in a subservient role. One merely considers this way of living to be one's true existence. To view of such a life as one that condones a wrong being done and one that lacks self-respect, presupposes a very liberal account of self and self-respect. There may be ways of living in which self-respect is not understood in an emancipatory way, but as taking one's responsibility in a shared communal event.

The assumed relation between resentment, which is considered to be a form of moral anger, and self-respect is questionable as well. Martha Nussbaum for instance asserts that anger may point at a lack of self-respect.²²¹ Nussbaum holds that attaching too much value to the demeaning claim an offender makes with his wrongdoing, signals an overt concern with one's relative value and may thus precisely cast doubt on the assumption that resentment signals self-respect. As Nussbaum argues, anger may not only signal a payback-wish, but it may also merely be about one's relative status.²²² Consequently, the victim perceives of the wrongdoing as what Aristotle called a 'down-ranking' of the victim's self. In this case, any lowering of the offender's status will be an efficacious way of payback. Lowering the status of the wrongdoer by forcing pain or humiliation on him may put the victim relatively up. However, Nussbaum argues, this exclusive focus on relative value is normatively problematic.²²³ One may thus argue that making resentment a necessary requirement for

²²¹ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 109. In *Forgiveness and Love*, Glen Pettigrove also points at a potential relation between the refusal to forgive the unapologetic and a deficiency of self-respect. Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 114.

²²² It is important to point out that accounts relying on the condition of self-respect fail to make the crucial distinction between self-respect and self-esteem. Nevertheless, if a person worries a lot about whether another's action is demeaning or not, one may wonder whether this person isn't compensating low self-respect with high self-esteem. For a discussion on the distinction between self-respect and self-esteem, see David Sachs, "How to Distinguish Self-Respect from Self-Esteem," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 10, 4 (1981): 346-360.

²²³ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 5-6.

forgiveness makes the victim focus too much on the perception of one's worth through another's eyes, in this case the wrongdoer. Consequently, the victim makes forgiveness shift from a moral emotion towards an emotion that signals a concern with one's relative status.²²⁴ This concern with one's relative status may even be more explicit if one does not only put forward the precondition of self-respect and the related requirement of resentment, but also the condition of repentance of the offender. This points again to the misleading tendency in the literature on forgiveness to regard wrongdoing as mainly entailing claims about the victim's worth. Although it is certainly part of wrongdoing and part of what makes it hurtful, one should be wary of overemphasizing this aspect of the wrong. A considerable part of the harm that one suffers as a result of wrongdoing is not about being offended and demeaned, but entails concrete physical, mental, social or financial sufferings or disadvantages resulting from another's actions.²²⁵ By putting forward the condition of self-respect as a demarcation tool, it is precisely the concern with one's worth that is overestimated, both in defining forgiveness and condonation.

²²⁴ Glen Pettigrove also questions the connection between 'moral' anger and the capacity for making judgments about the unjust treatment of what we value. Glen Pettigrove, "Meekness and 'Moral' Anger," *Ethics* 122, 2 (2012): 341-370. First, he points out that there has already been philosophical suspicion about how anger affects judgment. Just like Nussbaum, he refers to Seneca's *On Anger*, to point out that anger can easily get out of control and rage at anything it meets on its way. But, Pettigrove proceeds, recent experimental psychological research suggests that even the stance of victims on a later time and that of bystanders are not reliable in judging as long as they are angry. Pettigrove refers to some experiments that found that even a very modest degree of anger, created in a lab setting, has a marked influence on one's judgment of cases, even if these cases are completely unrelated to what provoked one's anger. Pettigrove concludes: "What these studies show is that 'moral' anger can have an adverse effect on an agent's judgment across a wide range of morally relevant domains. Not only is the person who is angry about something at work more likely to come home and kick the cat, but, these studies suggest, he or she is more likely to believe the cat deserves it." *Ibid.*, 364. Consequently, Pettigrove argues, we have reason to doubt the epistemic credentials of 'moral' anger. Firstly, it is a defensive response system that, in responding to threats, is naturally set to generate many more false alarms than justified ones. This may evoke the narcissistic error Nussbaum is detecting. Anger may make one interpret everything as being about oneself and one's worth and may cause an unpleasant form of short-tempereness. Secondly, Pettigrove holds, anger involves a feedback loop in which the more anger one feels, the more one perceives others as responsible for a negative event; and, subsequently, the more one perceives them as responsible for a negative event, the more anger one feels. *Ibid.*, 365. Persons who are angry, Pettigrove argues, are less responsive to counterevidence, are less likely to revise their plans and to reconsider their judgments, even when they are confronted with data they would normally find convincing. *Ibid.*, 365. For Pettigrove's further discussion of the flaws of anger in making moral judgments, see Glen Pettigrove and Koji Tanaka, "Anger and Moral Judgment," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 92, 2 (2014): 269-286.

²²⁵ In South-Africa these concrete sufferings and disadvantages are still a very tangible reality for a considerable part of the black population. As a result, some tend to turn against the reconciliation that is established by Nelson Mandela. In 2015, his statue in Pretoria had to be protected against vandalism by disappointed and angry youngsters. See Henk Haenen, *Ubuntu en Nelson Mandela: Afrikaanse filosofie van verzoening* (Budel: Damon, 2016), 62. Lately, Winnie Mandela has become a symbol for the dissatisfaction that has grown among younger generations. See Bram Vermeulen, "Nelson is dood, lang leve Winnie," *De Standaard*, 1 Juli, 2017, https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20170630_02951903.

However, if the condition of self-respect is used to defend an unconditional account of forgiveness, the problems and implications are even worse. An unconditional account claims that one's self-respect is independent of what a wrongdoer does. The unconditional view thus entails a view on morality in which one's moral self-respect cannot be really affected in the first place. This also implies that in the end the moral person remains unaffected by the wrongdoing whatsoever. If self-respect is taken to be an inviolable precondition, the unconditional view thus gives rise to moral invulnerability. But moral invulnerability does not seem a good description of what it means to forgive. It is rather a way of protecting oneself against a wrongdoer and his acts. This view therefore becomes prey to what Nietzsche calls a slave-morality.²²⁶ It entails the attempt to claim moral superiority by means of forgiveness that is self-respecting and thus grounded in justified resentment.

Moreover, the precondition of self-respect cannot withhold an unconditional view from becoming implicated in condonation when the wrongdoer's inherent moral worth is also taken as a reason for forgiveness. Since the unconditional view assumes that one's moral worth is independent of any moral violation, it also assumes that it is possible to distinguish a wrongdoer's moral essence from his acts. Unconditional views thus rely on the same distinction between sin and sinner on which conditional accounts and the condition of repentance rely. However, since unconditional accounts believe that one's moral worth is independent of what one does, they take it to be a pre-existing and inviolable moral distinction. Due to his inherent moral worth, a wrongdoer cannot really exclude himself from the moral community. Merely because he is a human person he retains moral worth and therefore remains part of the human moral community, however immoral his acts may be. Conditional accounts, in contrast, hold a different view on morality. They believe that certain immoral acts cast doubt on a wrongdoer's moral worth and exclude him from the moral community. Therefore, in order to re-integrate in the moral community, he first has to reaffirm his moral status by repudiating his acts. This way, conditional accounts also rely on the assumption of a pre-existing distinction between the immoral acts and the moral essence of the agent. But this moral essence is not inviolable. They assume that an offender has to testify that he still possesses this moral core.

The assumption, held by unconditional views, that one's moral worth is not only to be distinguished from one's acts but is also inviolable becomes problematic when this also constitutes a reason for forgiveness. When human persons always retain moral worth and

²²⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

when this moral worth constitutes a reason for forgiveness, there is no criterion not to forgive. But when forgiveness is granted indiscriminately of what one does and who one is, it becomes just as blind as the blindness of pure rage and hate. As a result, it becomes prey to the accusation of condonation. Consequently, it must be stressed that it is not necessarily the absence of conditions imputed to the wrongdoer, rendering it 'unjustified' as Kolnai argues, that gives rise to the objection of condonation. Instead, I argue that the condonation objection results from a combination of three other assumptions. First, there is the assumption that one's moral self-respect and thus one's worth as a moral person is inviolable. This also automatically renders the wrongdoer's moral worth inviolable. Second, there is the assumption of a distinction between the wrongdoer as a moral person, retaining inviolable moral worth, and the wrongdoer as someone who acts in an immoral way. Third, there is the assumption that a moral person's inviolable worth constitutes a reason for forgiveness. From the combination of these three assumptions the condonation objection rises. The combination of these three assumptions compels to take an attitude of universal tolerance that has much in common with condoning a wrong in view of a higher moral value. As a result, unconditional forgiveness also tends to become a moral obligation instead of a free act.

1.3.4. Disentangling the Paradox

All this reveals that the notion of self-respect is not even an appropriate means to distinguish between condonation and forgiveness. In the best case, it enables to determine when condonation is an acceptable response to wrongdoing. The precondition of self-respect merely enables to mark when condoning is acceptable from a moral point of view and when it is not, although it may not be the only relevant touchstone. It doesn't reveal anything about the activity of forgiveness. Moreover, clarifying the several meanings of condoning also enables to point again at the inadequacy of the standard definition of forgiveness as the overcoming of justified resentment. Since by condoning someone it is also possible to disapprove of the wrong and to experience resentment without losing self-respect, the definition of overcoming resentment turns out to be problematic. Moreover, if the condition of self-respect is conceived as pointing to one's inherent moral worth, it renders both the forgiver and the wrongdoer morally invulnerable. If the inviolable moral worth of the

wrongdoer is taken as a reason for forgiveness, forgiveness indeed becomes very similar to condoning. The so-called inherent risk of condoning is thus rather a result of an inadequate definition of forgiveness. It should therefore be called into question whether the specificity of forgiveness and its difference with condoning could actually be situated in an inner state, process or condition. As pointed out above, the distinction depends rather on both an external criterion and on communication of the wrong. There may be arguments for believing that silent forgiveness cannot be forgiveness, as it fails to make its activity communicated to and visible for both victim and offender. But even if one believes silent forgiveness is possible and doesn't require an explicit dialogue, there may be other factors that help to determine whether forgiveness took place. Instead of delving into the inner states of either forgivers or wrongdoers, one may put an emphasis on how the forgiver and the wrongdoer act - on what they actually do.

It turns out that the paradox of forgiveness Kolnai describes, rises from problematic assumptions about both forgiveness and wrongdoing. As Calhoun points out, the paradox in fact results from a double vision in the literature on forgiveness. It reveals a desire to have both a concept of forgiveness that captures it as a generous and sublime moral act and a risk free concept of warranted forgiveness. The double vision thus implies that forgiving the repentant is owed and rationally required, while forgiveness is also considered to be elective and generous. Thereby it tries to satisfy two needs at the same time: the desire for justification as a result of the need to escape the charge of being too forgiving on the one hand and the desire to exceed the bounds of justification in matters of the heart on the other.²²⁷ This also points out that the conception of forgiveness as intrinsically morally paradoxical in fact results from the conflation of two conflicting views on morality and moral restoration. The unconditional view aspires to conceive of forgiveness as a free moral gift and value. But its view on morality and moral restoration also entails a perception of one's moral worth as inviolable. It cannot be compromised by what a wrongdoer does. Therefore, forgiveness tends to become subject to a general moral duty of universal love and generosity and precisely ceases to be a real free act. Moreover, the unconditional view brings with it two other problems. First, there is the problem of moral invulnerability that comes with the idea of an independent condition of self-respect. Second, as a result of the unconditional reliance

²²⁷ Calhoun argues that this double vision can be found in the accounts of Norvin Richards, Aurel Kolnai and Jeffrie Murphy. Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," 82.

on a pre-existing moral distinction between a moral agent and his immoral acts, it lacks a criterion that permits not to forgive. As a result, unconditional forgiveness may easily fall victim to condonation. The conditional view, in contrast, holds a view on morality in which a wrongdoer may exclude himself from the moral domain by perpetrating immoral acts. As a result, he must demonstrate to deserve to be re-integrated in the moral community. This, however, also implies that forgiveness is no longer a high-principled and sublime moral act. It is the mere outcome of a rational process of moral transaction. In both cases, forgiveness thus loses its character of a free and unexpected act.

Derrida aims to solve the problems rising from these conflicting and heterogeneous moral views in arguing that we must precisely aim to stand the paradox. We must not only embrace the moral practice of forgiveness as being inherently paradoxical in character, as being precisely a matter of forgiving the unforgivable. We must also realize that unconditional and pure forgiveness may perhaps be unattainable and impossible in real life, but it must nevertheless remain the horizon from which we derive its meaning. Even when concrete matters may compel to forgive in a conditional manner, unconditional forgiveness must always remain present as the ultimate moral ideal.²²⁸

With this view, Derrida takes the problems that rise from both the conditional and unconditional view as insolvable problems that are intrinsic to any concept of forgiveness. However it should be called into question whether there really is no other way than accepting the problems of the concept of forgiveness as resulting from an intrinsic and insolvable paradox. In this chapter I put forward that the problems of redundancy and condonation result from specific assumptions about forgiveness. It results from assumptions about what the wrong is that is forgiven, about how and who we forgive and about what it requires to conceive of forgiveness as a free act. I have asserted that the problem of redundancy, addressed by Kolnai, not only rises from a problematic view on wrongdoing, but also from a specific conception of repentance. I have pointed out that the prevailing conception of repentance presupposes that there is a distinction between act and agent on

²²⁸ "These two poles, the unconditional and the conditional, are absolutely heterogeneous, and must remain irreducible to one another. They are nonetheless indissociable: if one wants, and it is necessary, forgiveness to become effective, concrete, historic; if one wants it to arrive, to happen by changing things, it is necessary that this purity engage itself in a series of conditions of all kinds (psycho-sociological, political, etc.) It is between these two poles, irreconcilable but indissociable, that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken. Yet, despite all the confusions which reduce forgiveness to amnesty or to amnesia, [...] to the work of mourning or some political therapy of reconciliation [...] it must never be forgotten that all of that refers to a certain idea of pure and unconditional forgiveness, without which this discourse would not have the least meaning." Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 44-45.

which an offender can rely in order to repudiate his acts in the name of his 'true' self. Similarly, the reliance of unconditional views on this very same distinction to presuppose an inviolable moral essence in the wrongdoer that does not require any repentance constitutes the problem of condonation. I also revealed that in the literature on forgiveness wrongdoing is almost solely conceived of as entailing a moral claim and threat. As a result, the condition of self-respect is taken as a helpful criterion guaranteeing that in granting forgiveness we are not simply condoning a wrong. But I have argued that the condition of self-respect is not an appropriate means for defining forgiveness. It precisely fails to describe the distinctive activity of forgiveness in its own terms.

Consequently, it is necessary to point out what forgiveness is doing exactly which neither repentance nor self-respect can do. To further examine this, it is necessary to bring in Hannah Arendt's account of forgiveness and her related account of human action. Arendt's view enables to point out that forgiveness is doing what neither repentance nor any reliance on a pre-existing moral essence can do. By forgiving someone for what they did, one is in fact drawing a distinction that is not yet made and that cannot be made in any other way. Forgiveness is releasing someone, not by untying them as a person from their acts, but by untying them from the consequences of their acts.

2. Arendtian Forgiveness: The Turn to the Act

In the previous chapter I discussed the way in which contemporary accounts aim to identify the practice of forgiveness and to determine its conditions. I have demonstrated that the contemporary debate on forgiveness always revolves around the moral principles, considerations and motivations that justify forgiveness and make it possible: forgiveness is assumed to have the task of restoring the integrity of the moral subject and the moral community, and is thus seen as an act of moral restoration. Starting from diverging ideas about the boundaries of morality and the moral task, conditional and unconditional approaches compete about the conditions that should be attached to this act of restoration. First, starting from different concepts of morality and the moral task, these accounts discuss which attitudes are most moral and therefore most conducive to forgiveness. Second, also starting from differing convictions about what morality implies, the debates revolve around the limits of morality and about the way these limits become manifest with regard to forgiveness. As a result, the debate about the conditions for forgiveness threatens to be completely dominated by questions concerning moral satisfaction: in what way do people adequately meet the demands of moral communal life and moral integrity? When does an offender have given sufficiently account of the violation of the moral community as a whole and of the moral individual in particular, and when does the moral community and the moral individual have the task of reintegrating the offender? However, because one tries to bring together different aspects of the moral life and different approaches of morality, one ends up in unsolvable paradoxes. These paradoxes are often seen as an inevitable part of forgiveness. Yet, in fact, they result from the problematic moral assumptions on which the applied definitions of forgiveness are based.

In this chapter I intend to demonstrate that a completely different perspective on these questions is possible when Hannah Arendt's theory of action and her political concept of forgiveness is taken as a starting point. Arendt's approach enables to shift the focus from the moral subject, his integrity and his attitudes, to a completely different aspect of human acting in communal life. It is crucial here that for Arendt in action, and therefore also in the act of forgiveness, it is not man as a rational moral being that is central, but man as an initiator. This implies a radical turn that sheds a completely different light on the conceptual problems, moral dilemmas and paradoxes that seem to be bound up with the practice of

forgiveness. In this chapter I extensively thematise this radical turn. I further discuss the details and implications of this radical turn in the second part of this dissertation.

Arendt's account of action enables to define forgiveness no longer within the context of issues related to the justification of certain moral attitudes, but starting from problems related to the confrontation with the irrefutable and irrevocable character of what has been done. This entails an important shift in perspective: the focus is no longer on the description of the moral-psychological process of the moral subject involved in forgiveness, but on the objective, manifest and inefaceable presence of an act in a community of acting beings. Starting from this radical shift in perspective, a transgression is no longer seen merely as an infringement of a moral principle or as a violation of moral integrity. Instead, it is seen as something that occupies an objective space, visible to everyone, in the world that we all share. In line with this, forgiveness appears first and foremost as a re-action, an act, an initiative that aims to remove what cannot be undone. It is no longer defined as a moral-psychological effort of the moral subject to relate in a moral and paradoxical way to what precisely offends, suspends and violates morality. In this chapter I will therefore present first of all Arendt's concept of action and the related phenomena of the irreversibility and the unpredictability of actions. This will enable me to map the implications and opportunities of this shift in perspective with regard to an alternative conception of forgiveness.

2.1. Hannah Arendt's Account of Human Action

Hannah Arendt's peculiar view on human action entails an elaboration of two crucial aspects of acting: the capacity to start something new, to do something unexpected on the one hand, and the ability to act among and with others on the other. According to Arendt, these two elements are constitutive for human action. Without the capacity to start anew, which she calls the capacity of spontaneity, and the ability to act among and with others, which she calls the condition of plurality, human action simply dissolves. Focusing on these elements provides a completely different view of human action than is generally used in normative ethical theories. As a result, these elements also enable an entirely different view on forgiveness and wrongdoing.

2.1.1. Acting Among Peers

In her phenomenology of the active life, aimed at breaking the dominant philosophical focus on contemplation, Arendt distinguishes three activities: labor, work and action. Characterizing each of these three human activities, Arendt does not aim to describe separated empirical domains in which these activities take place separately. Nor does she aim to state that someone is bound by one type of activity. Instead, she reveals three modes of being active, each of which relate to other conditions, generating different experiences and constituting other modes of appearance.

Arendt claims that in the activity of acting and speaking human beings realize their capacity to start something new and reveal who they are. In words and deeds they appear in a spontaneous manner and reveal their uniqueness. By acting and speaking they make their unique appearance in the human world.²²⁹ Arendt therefore considers this the human activity par excellence. Only in the activity of acting and speaking, humans fully acknowledge and realize their humanity and freedom.

The 'who' that is revealed in action differs from 'what' someone is, namely someone with certain qualities, gifts, talents and shortcomings. These, Arendt argues, are things one can choose to reveal or conceal.²³⁰ Who one is, instead, is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity.²³¹ But its disclosure can almost never be achieved as a willful purpose, as if one possesses it. It is even more than likely, Arendt argues, that who one is, which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself.²³² This demonstrates how the activity of acting and speaking is dependent upon the condition of plurality. Plurality, in Arendt's view, is not sheer otherness, or *alteritas*, which implies the mere fact that we are unable to say what a thing is without distinguishing it from something else. It is also not the mere variety and distinction between specimens of the same species.²³³ It implies a human uniqueness, the fact that every human being is distinguished from any other who is, was or ever will be. It is a unique distinctness that, according to Arendt, can only be revealed in speaking and acting

²²⁹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 179.

²³⁰ As how we, for instance, choose to present ourselves on social media platforms.

²³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

²³² *Ibid.*, 179-180.

²³³ What nowadays often seems to be meant by the politically laden term 'diversity'.

with others.²³⁴ Human plurality, however, does not only imply human uniqueness. It has the twofold character of equality and distinction:

If men were not equal, they could neither understand each other and those who came before them nor plan for the future and foresee the needs of those who will come after them. If men were not distinct, each human being distinguished from any other who is, was, or will ever be, they would need neither speech nor action to make themselves understood. Signs and sounds to communicate immediate, identical needs and wants would be enough.²³⁵

Uniqueness is thus not sheer particularity. Men's distinctness does not imply that one is imprisoned in one's individuality. Equality enables to act not merely among, but also with others. It enables to develop shared concerns and projects.

That equality and uniqueness go hand in hand in the condition of plurality explains why in Arendt's view plurality always requires some distance between people. It is this distance that enables human beings to perceive the world from their unique perspective. If the distance between humans - which according to Arendt is constituted by the world as a shared interest, the 'inter-esse' - ²³⁶ disappears, they are pressed into one mass, one body, lose their unique perspective and thus also the capacity to speak and act.²³⁷ Equality, on the other hand, seems to be understood as what enables to abstract from one's own private self and its direct concerns and needs. One thus does not abstract from one's particular point of view, which is essential for public human action, but from one's concerns as a private self. In *On Revolution* Arendt compares the appearance of an acting and speaking person in the public space with a performer wearing a mask. This way, he covers his face, but his true voice sounds through the mask. The one who wears the mask is not a hypocrite trying to cover his real being. On the contrary, the mask is a symbol of his public appearance and his legal personality, which is given and guaranteed by the body politic.²³⁸ His legal personality enables him to set aside

²³⁴ Ibid. 176, 175. Arendt puts it as follows: "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, become uniqueness, and human plurality is the paradoxical plurality of unique beings." Ibid., 176.

²³⁵ Ibid., 175-176.

²³⁶ Ibid., 182.

²³⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 57-58, 46; Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 60, 94; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York – London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc., 1973), 465-466.

²³⁸ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 106-108. See also Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 12.

his private, 'natural' self, making it irrelevant. This way he is able to simultaneously appear among peers and manifest himself as a unique person in acting and speaking. The loss of the 'natural' self is thus meant to reveal a more unique public mode of being.²³⁹ Arendt holds that setting aside one's private self is only possible in the activity of acting. Precisely for this reason Arendt considers it to be the human activity par excellence, revealing our true humanity. Humanity, in Arendt's view, is not simply shared humanness, referring to similar human capacities and failures. Humanity requires acting and the possibility of abstracting from one's own private needs to acquire a unique, but not a sheer particular point of view on the shared world. One's unique point of view is meant to reveal what we share and how we share it, as public persons. For this reason Arendt compares the condition of plurality and our unique point of view on the world with sitting at a table. The table unites us, but separates us at the same time.²⁴⁰

In Arendt's view, speaking and acting are two sides of the same coin. Acts can only receive their meaning as human acts when they are accompanied by what she calls 'great words'.²⁴¹ In order to act we need to tell others what we are doing. Speechless action, Arendt argues, would no longer be action, since there would no longer be an actor. The action he begins, although it can be perceived in its brute physical appearance, becomes only relevant through the spoken word "in which he identifies himself as an actor, announcing what he does, has done and intends to do".²⁴² On the other hand, she also supposes that words can be acts. They can do what they say. We can promise, forgive, just like we welcome, apologize, thank, etc. - merely by speaking these words.²⁴³

Arendt connects the activity of speaking and acting in the presence of others to the political. For her, it is a political activity. Furthermore, the kind of freedom we acquire by acting and speaking is political freedom. Both political freedom and the political as a public space have a peculiar meaning in Arendt's view. Her conception importantly differs from what we usually take to be political or politics. As I revealed above, for Arendt, acting entails abstracting from one's private self. Therefore, it also requires a public, political domain that is liberated of necessity, which makes the private self merely involved with its direct interests

²³⁹ George Kateb, "Freedom and Worldliness in the Thought of Hannah Arendt," *Political Theory* 5, 2 (1977): 151-152.

²⁴⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52.

²⁴¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics* (New York: Schocken Books, 2005), 125.

²⁴² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179.

²⁴³ In this respect Arendt's view of the activity of speaking is similar to Austin's account of speech acts.

as a living biological being. The experience of being free as an acting person presupposes a preceding liberation of the condition of necessity.²⁴⁴ It entails a liberation of one's attachment to the pressing demands of the human body and enables to acquire freedom in acting and speaking among peers. Acting precisely entails the capacity to do what is not pre-determined. It rises from the capacity to take an unexpected and unprecedented initiative. For this reason, Arendt strictly discerns the political from the social, which constitutes society as a whole. For her, the social is a domain in which one is still involved with the self and its direct concerns and needs. She takes the social domain to be constituted by the activity of labor, entailing both effort and relief. In contrast to the activity of speaking and acting the activity of labor is determined by necessity and privacy. It is bound to the biological life process of the body and its needs. In the activity of labor we are concerned with our survival as biological organisms. Labor produces consumer goods that have a limited durability. We produce in order to consume and to produce again. As an activity it has no beginning and no end in itself. Consequently, the cyclical activity of labor corresponds to the cycle of nature and to the cyclic process of biological life, metabolism and reproduction, endlessly repeating itself.²⁴⁵ It is the labor of our body, entailing pain and the joy of relief.²⁴⁶ In the activity of labor, a human being appears as an *animal laborans*, determined by the necessity and pressure of sustaining life. For *animal laborans*, life is the highest good.²⁴⁷ Since the activity of labor is bounded to life and to sustaining one's body, it is an essentially private activity, originally belonging to the private domain of the household. It lacks the publicity that is a necessary condition for the activity of action.²⁴⁸ Arendt holds that

²⁴⁴ According to Arendt, in Antiquity, this was originally the freedom of movement, the ability to leave the household. See Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 122. See also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28-32, 197; Hannah Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 128-129.

²⁴⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 96, 98-99.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 107. Arendt remarks that, although labor is bound to necessity, it is not merely an unpleasant activity. She argues that "the blessing of labor is that effort and gratification follow each other as closely as producing and consuming the means of subsistence, so that happiness is a concomitant of the process itself". *Ibid.*, 107-108. This is a relevant remark, as it may help explain why the activity of labor has become so dominant and praised in modern times. According to Arendt, one of the problems of modern times is the constitution of a society of laborers and consumers. It is a society in which the activity of labor and consuming - which are only two sides of the same process - occupies the public domain. As such, the activity of labor remains just as private as it was before, but tends to reform all other activities according to its private norms of necessity. Consequently, those other activities tend to lose their meaning for human life. Whatever we do, she argues, "we are supposed to do for the sake of 'making a living'; such is the verdict of society" and "[f]rom the standpoint of 'making a living', every activity unconnected with labor becomes a 'hobby'." *Ibid.*, 127-128.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁴⁸ Arendt holds that in antiquity the slavish nature of all occupations that serve the needs for the maintenance of life gave rise to the felt necessity to possess slaves. Enslavement was inherent in the conditions of human life. Because men were dominated by necessity and because to labor meant to be enslaved by necessity, the antiques could only win their freedom through the domination of those whom

nothing ejects someone more radically from the shared world than exclusive concentration upon the body's life. Nothing is less common and less communicable and thus shielded against the visibility and audibility of the public realm than what goes on within the body, its pleasures and pains.²⁴⁹ Arendt does not deny that it is possible to labor in the presence of others. However, bringing men together in a labor gang entails laboring together as if they were one. It thus implies "the actual loss of all awareness of individuality and identity".²⁵⁰ The sociability rising out of the labor of the body rests "not on equality but on sameness".²⁵¹ It is not the kind of publicity and equality involved in action, requiring a plurality of distinct and unique others.

Acting with others also crucially differs from the activity of work. Work is primarily performed in isolation, in view of a certain model or idea. The process of making is thus also entirely determined by a relationship of means and ends. The production process comes to an end with the created and finished object and is only a means towards this end.²⁵² As an end, the object that results from the fabrication process determines and justifies the means by which it is made.²⁵³ Contrary to the labor of our bodies, the work of our hands is not circular and constructs a diversity of durable objects.²⁵⁴ Their durability is not absolute, as we use them up or they will simply deteriorate.²⁵⁵ A consumable such as bread in contrast, made

they subjected to necessity by force. Ibid., 83-84. Arendt's description on the relation between freedom and slavery may easily be misunderstood as an approval of slavery. But, in fact, she merely wants to point out that being bound to the necessities of lives entails being enslaved by the labor of the body. In antiquity, men saw no other means to liberate oneself from this enslavement than by dominating others. Freedom and liberation was thus held at the price of domination of unfree slaves. When criticizing this view on freedom and the liberation of necessity it entails, we should also ask ourselves what has actually changed nowadays. Who makes our clothes, our iPhones, picks our cherries from the field, delivers our packages? Although the possession of slaves by individuals may have virtually come to an end, slavery is not so much an issue of the past as history books may make us believe. Since life maintenance has become organized on a larger societal scale, there is no longer a need to possess individual slaves, but instead we pay companies to organize slavery for us, out of sight, and to deliver us the consumable products that result from its labor. What actually has changed is that the 'freedom' that is gained by slavery is not used for free political action but entails a specialization in a specific section of the labor process: the labor of consumption. See *ibid.*, 131. The gained 'freedom' is thus merely a financial freedom generating consumers with a sense of freedom of choice in how exactly they hand themselves over to the necessity of consumption.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 112.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 212-213.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Hannah Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding 1953-1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 299.

²⁵³ Ibid., 301.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 297-298.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 298. After they are used, the material of which these objects are made may deteriorate and return to the natural process from which they were extracted. This, however, does not alter the fact that these objects are not made for their destruction.

by the labor of our bodies, is produced to be consumed and destroyed almost immediately. It is the durability of 'use objects' that lends them a relative independency of the people making them.²⁵⁶ In Arendt's view, the sum of the diversity of durable objects, produced by the work of our hands, constitutes the human artifact, namely the world in which we live.²⁵⁷ They constitute an artificial world, which contrasts with the cycle of natural life. The independency and durability of the objects of the world makes them oppose the natural and insatiable needs of their living users. Their durability withstands their life process and thus has the function of stabilizing human life. As those things oppose and resist the biological life process they receive some kind of objectivity. Their objectivity consists of the fact that they stand in relation to human beings, with their ever-changing nature, and as such enables humans to acquire their identities. They stabilize human life.²⁵⁸

The activity of action is only possible in a world of durable things, created by the activity of work. However, Arendt argues, the man-made world of things can only become a real home for mortal men as far as it transcends both the sheer functionality of things produced for consumption and the utility of objects. Arendt holds that human life, in its non-biological sense, as a lifespan between birth and death, manifests itself in acting and speaking. Consequently, the world cannot be a mere sum of durable 'use-objects'. In order to be a home it needs the stories of the historiographers and poets. Those stories are the stories of acting and speaking beings, which would not survive without their help.²⁵⁹ The world of things lies physically between men. Out of this physical in-between arise their specific, objective, worldly interests. Clearly, those worldly interests differ from one's private interests rising from necessity. In the most literal significance of the word, those worldly interests constitute something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together.²⁶⁰ Most acting and speaking is concerned with this in-between, most words and deeds are *about* some worldly objective reality.²⁶¹ But the disclosure of the subject, the 'who', in acting and speaking is an integral part of all intercourse, even the most

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid. Arendt makes a distinction between living on the earth and inhabiting the human world. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7-9. For an in depth discussion of this distinction, see: Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation of Her Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 105-110.

²⁵⁸ "[T]he things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that – in contradiction to the Heraclitean saying that the same man can never enter the same stream – men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table." Arendt, "Labor, Work, Action," 298.

²⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 173.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 182.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

'objective' one. Therefore, the physical worldly in-between is overlaid and, as it were, overgrown with an altogether different in-between. This in-between consists merely of deeds and words. According to Arendt, it owes its origin "exclusively to men's acting and speaking directly to one another".²⁶² In contrast to the durable world of objective things, this second, subjective in-between of human relationships is not tangible. But despite of its intangibility, this 'web' of relationships, as Arendt calls it, is no less real than the world of things we visibly have in common.²⁶³ In acting, the world is at stake and constantly forms the object of conversation. This is why for Arendt acting and speaking is guided by a 'love of the world' instead of by an interest in the self or in mankind.²⁶⁴ It is because of its intangibility that the words and deeds need the stories of poets and historians to survive their volatility in order to become an objective part of our shared world.

However, Arendt points out that this intangible web of human relationships that constitutes our human world, has two disadvantages. The first disadvantage is its unpredictability. Since every actor has the capacity of spontaneity, which implies the possibility to add something unexpected to the world, action is unpredictable. The second disadvantage is that, since it is part of a network of relationships, action is irreversible. We cannot undo what we have done. At this point, action crucially differs from the activity of work. The process of making is not irreversible. What human hands make, they can also destroy. According to Arendt, this means that in the process of making, man is indeed his own lord and master: "He is master of himself and his doings".²⁶⁵ This mastery is a result of the fact that he works in isolation. Only when he stops working and enters the market place he abandons his isolation. According to Arendt, the exchange market on which his products are displayed is the craftsman's own public realm. It is not a political realm, which only comes into being when people start to act and speak, but it is a place where he can show the products of his hands and receive the esteem that is his due.²⁶⁶ Nevertheless, as long as he has not sold his products, he remains their master: "Alone with his image of the future product, *homo faber* is free to produce, and

²⁶² Ibid., 183.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ See for instance Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 150-153.

²⁶⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 144

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 160. According to Arendt, this public domain of the marketplace standing in relation to the activity of *homo faber* came to an end with industrial capitalism and the emancipation of labor. The people meeting each other on the marketplace were no longer the fabricators themselves. They did no longer meet as persons, but as owners of commodities and exchange values. At this point, Arendt holds, Marx's famous self-alienation sets in. Ibid., 162.

facing alone the work of his hands, he is free to destroy."²⁶⁷ He is able to control what he has made. In acting instead, human beings lack the ability to control what they did. This is what Arendt calls the condition of non-sovereignty. The non-sovereignty of human action is a direct result of plurality, the fact that we always act among others. Acting human beings reveal themselves, but lack the capacity to control or produce their own life story. They are not the author of their own story. The experience of irreversibility and the condition of non-sovereignty are crucial for understanding Arendt's conception of forgiveness as a political act.

2.1.2. *The Problem of Irreversibility*

In Arendt's view forgiveness is a response to the irreversibility of human action. It entails the ability to release someone of the consequences of an act he himself cannot make undone:

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; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell.²⁶⁸

Although Arendt does not give an explicit account of the notion of irreversibility and its implications, it is crucial for her specific understanding of the act of forgiveness. It must be stressed that conceiving of forgiveness as a response to the irreversibility of human action is something completely different than conceiving of it as a response to the transgression of a moral commandment. The irreversibility of human action poses a totally different problem. Whereas the insult and violation that is implied in the transgression of a moral rule can somehow be withdrawn, the irreversibility of the act objectifies what is done. The event manifests itself as something that cannot possibly be undone. As such, it may occupy an enduring place in the presence. In order to clarify this distinction and its implications for Arendt's account of forgiveness, Vladimir Jankélévitch' phenomenological elaboration of the notion of irreversibility in *The Bad Conscience* is very helpful.

²⁶⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 144.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 237.

Jankélévitch discusses the problem of irreversibility as one that results from the unilateral direction in which time unfolds. In contrast with the reversibility of spatial existence, the mode of becoming inevitably entails living in one direction:²⁶⁹

[T]he returning train indeed traverses in reverse the same line, but the returning voyager lives in the proper direction, on this reversed course, a new series of experiences that are without precedent and qualitatively irreversible; the voyager of space comes and goes alternatively on the same paths, but the voyager of life, of a living life and not of a lived life, voyages and always becomes in the same direction according to a non-reversible duration that is simultaneously futurity and senescence.²⁷⁰

As a result, action is also a plan that functions in one direction only. Like duration, it is asymmetrical.²⁷¹ This emphasis on the unilateral direction of 'the living order' reminds of Kierkegaard's thought that life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.²⁷² It is a thought that must also have been familiar to Arendt, since it resembles her idea that the true meaning of one's acts can only be revealed by historians after one's death.²⁷³ Jankélévitch holds that the dissymmetry or unidirectionality of time is at the very origin of a specific human tragedy. It entails an interdiction not only on reversing but also on repeating, which makes it impossible to reiterate or confirm an experience. Irreversibility implies that we cannot do what we please with temporality. We cannot manipulate it at will. Irreversibility, Jankélévitch argues, constitutes objectivity, the very objectivity of time:²⁷⁴

The irreversible pathologizes, dramatizes, and impassions duration. In the end the living order no longer obeys us in the same way that the reversible series that are sufficiently softened and well accustomed to all the mechanical manipulations obey us. [...] [L]ived succession completely escapes our mastery. [...] We are not able to undo, revoke, or suspend time according to our whims.[...] Living irreversibility thus

²⁶⁹ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *The Bad Conscience* (Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 48, 51.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 51

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁷² "It is quite true what philosophy says: that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other principle: that it must be lived forwards." Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), 161.

²⁷³ In an interview with Günter Gaus, Arendt tells that, at the age of 14, Kierkegaard and Kant were one of the first philosophers she read. See Hannah Arendt, "What Remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus," in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), loc. 663-681 of 8854.

²⁷⁴ Jankélévitch, *The Bad Conscience*, 48-49.

expresses above all that there are things that are absolutely anterior and things absolutely posterior; that one does not take hold of life indifferently from whatever end [...]. [T]he very order in which [acts and feelings] are lived is something absolute, qualified and objective; and that does not exist without possessing a certain type of organic necessity: that is, the vital order imposes on us certain exigencies of chronology and a sort of obligation of opportunity [...]; here one does not have the right to arrive “too late”, for lost occasions no longer present themselves and no one knows the means of living in reverse.²⁷⁵

In my view, it thus becomes clear that if forgiveness is perceived as a response to the irreversibility of an act, it is not merely dealing with a moral transgression that may be implied in an act. It is dealing with the persistent and objective character of the act, as it has appeared in time and can never be reversed or made undone. Arendt assumes that since the act and its consequences cannot be undone, it may also appear as an enduring obstacle that lies beyond one’s power and guides one’s subsequent actions and re-actions. This way it deprives one of the ability to act in an unprecedented manner.

In view of this, it should be noted that Jankélévitch makes a further distinction between the irreversible and the irrevocable. While the pathos of the irreversible is the pathos of the *panta rhei* and originates in the impossibility of repeating, of reviving, and even, strictly speaking, of redoing, the pathos of the irrevocable originates in the impossibility of undoing. The first stems from a romantic melancholy, entailing the impression that time is fleeing and escapes you, and should therefore be slowed down. One aims to stop the Heraclitean flux. The pathos of the irrevocable, on the contrary, results from a present that is forever all too present and cannot be liquidated.²⁷⁶ The insoluble problem that rises from the irrevocable is “to erase the unerasable [sic], to repair the irreparable, to remedy the irremediable, and by means of this impossible exploit, to unfreeze the slowing-down of becoming”.²⁷⁷ Whereas the irreversible can exist without the irrevocable, the irrevocable always exacerbates a pre-existent irreversible. Jankélévitch claims that the irreversible is the constitutional character of becoming, but the irrevocable is a scandal on top of this irreversibility. Whereas the irreversible is nothing but the indifference and objectivity of the progress of time, the irrevocable results from the capacity to act freely within this unilateral time-order. The scandal of the irrevocable is a sickness that the man who made a bad use of his freedom has

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 49-50.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 54-55.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 55.

given himself.²⁷⁸ Action itself, what one did, causes an acquired sickness. It becomes even more of a sickness once one realizes one could have spared oneself. This “adds an adventitious misfortune, [...] a guilty misfortune to the pre-existing and chronic misfortune of the irreversible”²⁷⁹. In contrast with the irreversible, the irrevocable therefore makes the past all too present and stops the fluidity of time and becoming:

The irrevocable is the sickness of a duration that is abnormally deprived of its fluidity, that is, one that has become lame and unambiguous: starting with the misdeed, the irreversion is frozen.²⁸⁰

Consequently, Jankélévitch asks whether there is a means that can make time fluid again, a miraculous act of grace:

Is there a means of perfecting the work of time by setting futurity back on course? Indeed, no one can, unless by a supernatural miracle, reverse the irreversible and come back to the status quo of the earliest innocence once this latter is alienated from itself: but if one cannot retrace the course of time, it is perhaps possible to lift the obstacle that halts the continuation of the suppression; repaired preterition in turn, repairs futurity, mobilizing again the entire machine of time; dissolved in the general current, stripped of its privileged position and of its exceptionality, sin ceases to stop the flow of becoming. [...] And if a miracle is necessary to reverse the irreversible, perhaps a gesture of interior grace suffices for revoking the irrevocable?²⁸¹

With this suggestion of an act of grace that may miraculously save from the irrevocable, Jankélévitch anticipates the view on forgiveness he will later further develop. In his book *Forgiveness*, he perceives of forgiveness as a gracious jump on the trampoline of memory that accelerates the process of time and thus of forgetting.²⁸² It also resonates important aspects of Arendt’s view of forgiveness. As I will discuss in much detail in the second part of this thesis, Arendt holds that the forgiving response to irreversibility rises from the miraculous capacity of spontaneity.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 57-58.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 57.

²⁸⁰ Ibid.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 57-58.

²⁸² See Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 56.

Jankélévitch's elaboration provides insight into the kind of problem the irreversibility of human action poses. It also makes clear that the problems of irreversibility and irrevocability - as problems resulting from lived free action in the progress of time - are fundamentally different from the problem of a transgression of moral integrity. In the first chapter I have pointed out that there is a tendency in the contemporary literature on forgiveness to consider a wrong as being mainly problematic because of the negative moral claim it makes about the victim. It entails a violation of, or poses a threat to, one's moral integrity and self-respect. It has therefore been generally assumed that forgiveness must be in line with the restoration of this integrity. But if we take an Arendtian perspective on forgiveness, it becomes clear that these conceptions do not give account of the irreversibility that is implied in action in general and in wrongdoing in particular. In conceiving of wrongdoing as a sheer moral violation one fails to see that the suffered moral damage may not be the primary concern with respect to forgiving. Forgiveness primarily comes in play when real irreparable damage has been suffered. The moral offence may be withdrawn by offering excuses or by demonstrating good will, or simply be refuted by the victim's moral community.²⁸³ However, neither the real physical or interpersonal damage nor direct and indirect consequences can impossibly be withdrawn. This lends the act a remaining objectivity that cannot be dissolved. Jankélévitch supposes that even if the circumstances were such that one could abolish all the traces of an event, all the consequences, this would not prevent the event from having taken place. You will not make it the case that the thing itself has not happened:

[P]recisely, one can undo the thing done, *res facta* (or redo the thing undone)! What one cannot undo is the fact-of-having-done. It is the *fecisse* that is indefeasible.²⁸⁴

Consequently, Jankélévitch argues, the problem of erasing the past, as if the crime had never been committed, is "less about annulling [...] the crime itself and its consequences, which are always reparable, than annihilating the fact-of-having-committed-it in general: [...] the quiddity is inexterminable"²⁸⁵.

This way, Jankélévitch alludes to the role of facticity in one's conscience for the experience of remorse. As I will discuss at the end of the second part, conscience and remorse also have a

²⁸³ See for instance Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 552-553.

²⁸⁴ Jankélévitch, *The Bad Conscience*, 60.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 61. See also Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 45.

part in Arendt's conception of forgiveness. But the facticity of human action has also another, much more important role in her account of forgiveness. Jankélévitch assumes that the consequences of human action are - only in principle - always reparable - an assumption that is in itself highly contestable. But Arendt's condition of non-sovereignty adds an important second constraint to the problem of irreversibility. In her account, the condition of non-sovereignty reinforces the problem of irreversibility. It renders the consequences of action boundless and irreparable in its strict sense.

2.1.3. *The Condition of Non-Sovereignty*

In Arendt's view, action's irreversibility and the condition of non-sovereignty, which is a direct consequence of the condition of plurality, are closely connected. Although acting human beings are able to start something new, they are unable to master the consequences of their actions. This, Arendt argues, is a result of the fact that human beings never act alone. We have discussed how acting, as Arendt understands it, always requires the presence of other acting beings. Without the presence of others, an act loses its meaning as an act, as it loses the meaning it has for others.²⁸⁶ Moreover, a person's act always becomes part of a network of actions of others. As a result of this, action never ends.²⁸⁷ Arendt calls this the boundlessness of human action.²⁸⁸ As Arendt puts it, the process it sets in motion "can quite literally endure throughout time until mankind itself has come to an end".²⁸⁹ The fact that an act is always part of a network of actions also entails that one is never exclusively a doer, but also a sufferer. Someone begins a story and becomes its subject in the twofold sense of the word. Since it is a story that is interwoven with other acts and actors, it has no author.²⁹⁰ Consequently, as soon as he starts to act, a person also loses control of his action. This is what Arendt calls the condition of non-sovereignty. Moreover, the process it sets in motion tends to be just as uncontrollable as natural forces. Clearly, in Arendt's account the condition of non-sovereignty reinforces the effect of irreversibility that is part of action as it develops in time. Since the act always directly becomes part of a network of human relations and immediately sets in motion a process of other acts one is unable to undo, the irreversibility of

²⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 181, 187-192.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 190

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

action is put to its extreme. According to Arendt, the irreversibility of action appears as a burden to men, precisely because of its strength, its enormous capacity for endurance.²⁹¹ In Arendt's account, this strength results from both the sheer facticity and enduring objectivity of an event and the condition of non-sovereignty that lends action and its consequences its boundlessness.

The irreversibility of human action and the inability to control one's acts may pose an obstacle to one's freedom. It may precisely preclude the possibility to act freely, since one may be bound by the consequences of what one did before. Consequences one could perhaps not have foreseen. Under these conditions, Arendt argues, one appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and the doer of what one has done. Nowhere, neither in labor, nor in fabrication, does man appear to be less free than in those capacities, namely acting and speaking, the very essence of which is freedom.²⁹² Arendt affirms that this may seem to be a paradoxical situation. She explains how this has brought the great tradition of Western thought to "accuse freedom of luring man into the necessity, to condemn action, the spontaneous beginning of something new, because its results fall into a predetermined net of relationships, invariably dragging the agent with them".²⁹³ This way the agent seems to forfeit his freedom at the very moment he makes use of it.²⁹⁴ The simultaneous presence of freedom and non-sovereignty seems almost to force us to the existential conclusion that human existence is absurd.²⁹⁵ The only salvation out of this paradoxical situation seems to be non-acting. The abstention from the whole realm of human affairs seems to be the only means for safeguarding one's sovereignty and integrity as a person. But according to Arendt, this rests on a basic error, which lies in the identification of freedom with sovereignty. An identification that always has been taken for granted by political as well as philosophical thought.

Arendt offers a totally different view on the problem of irreversibility and non-sovereignty for freedom. Plurality may be part of the problem, but at the same time it also offers the solution in the act of forgiveness. The solution or remedy, as Arendt calls it, comes from free action itself. One has no need of any other kind of activity and salvation certainly not lies in non-acting. It is not the abstention from the whole realm of human affairs that sets one

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 234.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

free.²⁹⁶ One also does not need to affirm freedom as an intrinsic impossibility or inherent contradiction. As in itself an interdependent act, forgiveness has the power to set another person free again, precisely due to the condition of plurality and the capacity of spontaneity. It is due to the miraculous character of acting that human initiatives are constantly able to interrupt the process of history that came into being by earlier initiatives.²⁹⁷

Forgiving [...] is the only reaction which does not merely re-acts but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.²⁹⁸

But how should we conceive of the capacity and freedom to begin? Is it not absurd to rely on a capacity to start anew, precisely in those circumstances in which we are entangled in the determining consequences of previous actions? Does this not somehow pre-supposes what should be brought about? What enables to act spontaneously?

For Arendt, the capacity to start anew originates from the condition of natality, which entails the mere fact of appearing as a distinct speaking and acting person among others. Since natality is a human condition it cannot be lost. Arendt assumes that due to the condition of natality we always retain the possibility to act and re-act in a spontaneous manner. However, this spontaneous impulse to act can only be activated by the presence of others.

2.1.4. *The Capacity to take Initiative: Natality*²⁹⁹

In Arendt's view, the capacity to start anew, to do the unprecedented and to interrupt a given course of events, is present from birth. It rises from the mere fact that, by birth, we arrive in the world as newcomers. Therefore, we are dependent upon the web of human relationships, in which we appear. She calls this the condition of natality.³⁰⁰ For Arendt, every new birth

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 236-237, 232. At this point her position diverges from many philosophical accounts, which are based on the views of Platonism, Stoicism but also of Existentialism. See also *ibid*, 378 endnote 75. This crucial difference will be discussed in much detail in the second part, in which the conception of liberation through forgiveness is the main theme.

²⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 112.

²⁹⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

²⁹⁹ For this section I am greatly indebted to Karin Fry's analysis of the concept of natality in Arendt's account. Karin Fry, "Natality," in *Hannah Arendt: Key Concepts*, ed. Patrick Hayden (London-New York: Routledge, 2014), 23-35.

³⁰⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

always brings with it the unexpected appearance of a 'who' into the network of human relationships, a unique person capable of distinct acting and speaking.³⁰¹ Merely by the fact of his birth, he brings with him the possibility of a whole new distinct way of acting and speaking. The condition of natality is re-affirmed by us in action, in beginning something new on our own initiative or by advancing the initiatives of others. It is the remembrance and recognition of one's original appearance in the world through birth that reminds every newcomer of their inherent capacity to act and start something new. Arendt terms it as a second birth.³⁰² The impulse of this second birth springs from the beginning that was made by our birth and entails a response to this origin by taking initiative.³⁰³

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. [...] It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning, which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.³⁰⁴

Arendt calls the condition of natality the ontological fundament of her theory of human action.³⁰⁵ However, it is important to remind that this re-affirmation is not dependent on any kind of decision. One's 'who' appears in everything one says and does; one can only avoid to appear as an acting 'who' when one remains entirely passive and silent.³⁰⁶ The activity of acting and speaking manifests itself in the entire life span between birth and death, and no human being can completely do without it.³⁰⁷ Our active appearance as a unique being through acting and speaking happens at our own initiative, but this does not entail a decision.³⁰⁸ We neither control nor possess what we reveal when we start to act and speak. As discussed before, how we appear as acting beings might be absolutely clear to others, while it nevertheless remains invisible to ourselves.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Ibid., 176-177.

³⁰³ Ibid., 177. See also Fry, "Natality," 26.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 176-177.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 247.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., 179.

³⁰⁷ Ibid. 173, 176.

³⁰⁸ This aspect is better expressed by Arendt in the German translation of *The Human Condition, Vita Activa oder vom tätigen Leben*. See Annelies Degryse, *Politiek/ Handelen: Een reconstructie van Hannah Arendts politieke filosofie* (Leuven, 2011), 139-140.

Initiative or *Intitium* is a crucial notion for Arendt's concept of natality and for her account of acting. She refers to it for the first time in her dissertation on St. Augustine's concept of love. Here she draws attention to a distinction, made by Augustine, between *principium*, which refers to the beginning of the universe and *initium*, referring to the beginnings of humans, acting in the world.³⁰⁹ The remembrance of one's origin includes both human beginning and the beginning of the universe.³¹⁰ For Augustine, human beginnings seem just as important as the beginning of the universe.³¹¹ Human beings have a crucial temporal role. Their existence means that time and change can be marked and events in the universe can be viewed sequentially and thus have a purpose. Whereas God's time is nothing but eternal simultaneity, human's temporality marks what occurs in the world. Moreover, Arendt argues, humans can contribute to the world through action. She infers that "it was for the sake of *novitas*, in a sense, that man was created".³¹² Arendt holds that Augustine's elaboration of the remembrance of human beginnings in birth touches upon an important aspect of human existence. But as a result of his Christian ideology, which prioritizes eternal afterlife over temporal earthly life, Arendt argues, Augustine is not able to see the importance of birth and its remembrance for understanding the meaningfulness of each individual life.³¹³ Therefore, Arendt's own project aims to address the relevance of birth for men's human earthly existence. She takes Augustine's emphasis on human birth and beginnings as a starting point of what she will later expound in her own account as the ontological concept of natality, in *The Human Condition* as well as in the later revision of her dissertation.³¹⁴ With her concept of natality, Arendt investigates the implications of birth for the meaning of our existence here on earth as acting and speaking beings.

By doing so, she breaks with Heidegger's emphasis on mortality, as constitutive for human's experience of time and for authentic life. According to Heidegger, one can only make authentic decisions about one's present life, if one acknowledges that life is limited and that death is uniquely one's own. Living the authentic life is therefore a solitary and individual task in the mode of being-towards-death. He takes other people to distract us and encourage us to be inauthentic, since they are caught up in everyday concerns that refute the idea that

³⁰⁹ Fry, "Nativity," 26-27.

³¹⁰ Fry, "Nativity," 27.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² *Ibid.*

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

³¹⁴ Fry explains that, in her later revisions of her dissertation in 1964 – 1965, Arendt includes the term natality. According to Fry, this indicates that her examination of Augustine's work may have inspired the formation of this concept. Fry, "Nativity," 23.

death is an ever-present possibility. Heidegger calls these others, in inauthentic engagement with the self, *das Man*.³⁵ Heidegger also points to a possibility of authentically being-with-others, which he calls *Mitsein*. However, he does not further develop this idea in much detail and rather emphasizes the problematic relation with other people.

I have already discussed that Arendt does not perceive of the presence of others as being problematic for one's true existence. On the contrary, she takes their presence to be crucial for appearing as who one really is. The presence of others gives indeed rise to the irreversibility and non-sovereignty of human action. However, Arendt argues that as far as the presence of others may constitute a problem for acting in this way, acting also offers a solution, in the capacity to forgive. By doing so, Arendt holds a unique philosophical position. She does not merely break with Heidegger's emphasis on individuality and mortality as the basis for authentic life, but with a whole philosophical tradition before him, relying on the very same ideas.³⁶ With its emphasis on birth and being with others as constitutive for one's true being in the world, Arendt's phenomenology is characterized by a revolutionary turn.

In examining Augustine's discussion of human birth, Arendt discovers that it is not the awareness of one's death, but the remembrance of one's origin through birth that needs to be linked to the potential for human action. She links the notion of birth in Augustine's thought to gratitude for all that has been given.³⁷ She concludes that it is because humans remember and are grateful for their origin that they are able to begin and act in the story of humanity.³⁸ However, Arendt also recognizes that, since Augustine adheres to a Christian and Platonic worldview, he prioritizes eternal things. Therefore, he does not acknowledge the importance of individual life and actions on this earth. In his view, individual action needs to be perceived from the wholeness of God's universe to which they contribute.³⁹ To be saved, humans must love what is outside the world: *caritas*, instead of *cupiditas*, the latter being a kind of craving which clings to the worldly temporal things.³²⁰ However, for Arendt, choosing the eternal above the actual world, through *caritas*, makes the actual world a desert. It becomes a desert because the saved person can only live in the world because he has

³⁵ Fry, "Nativity," 24.

³⁶ See for instance Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234-235.

³⁷ Karin Fry takes Augustine's idea of gratitude for what has been given as a way to link Arendt's concept of natality to her idea of *amor mundi*, or love of the world. See Fry, "Nativity," 26.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

oriented himself towards God and eternity.³²¹ According to Arendt, this raises questions about neighborly love in Augustine's account. Neighborly love that comes from *caritas*, namely love of the eternal God, is not a love that acknowledges the neighbor's worldly existence. One does not love one's neighbor for his uniqueness, but for his sameness, as being part of God's creation. Moreover, since in *caritas*, humans love their neighbors for the sake of God, they are not loved for their own sake, but used as vehicles to gain salvation.³²² This brings her to a re-evaluation of birth as one's being born as a distinct, acting human being among distinct others, which she fully develops in *The Human Condition*. However, Arendt's description of the capacity to start something new as originating from natality does not imply that one can merely rely on oneself in order to act. Her concept of natality is related to her concept of plurality:

If action as beginning corresponds to the fact of birth, if it is the actualization of the human condition of natality, then speech corresponds to the fact of distinctness and is the actualization of the human condition of plurality, that is, of living as a distinct and unique being among equals.³²³

Arendt reforms Augustine's notion of birth to emphasize precisely the fact that humans are born with a potential for individual distinction. However, while Arendt's interest in natality has its roots in her thesis on Augustine, she is also guided by her own political experiences. Those experiences taught her that ignoring this shared world in favor of some ideology or intellectual concerns allows for untold evils to occur.³²⁴ For this reason, Augustine's notion of thankfulness for what has been given inspires her to stress the role of 'love of the world' in politics. This love of the world is understood as care for the web of interdependent relations held together by common concerns.

In Arendt's view, it is the condition of natality that saves the world and realm of human affairs from its inherent tendency to become just as determining as natural processes:

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid. Karin Fry refers to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl in the third appendix of her biography on Arendt. See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1982), 493.

³²³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

³²⁴ Fry, "Natality," 29. See also Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the world*, 495.

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, 'natural' ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born.³²⁵

Arendt takes the condition of natality to ground all initiative, also the initiatives that are taken in the activity of work.³²⁶ But action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality.³²⁷ For Arendt, to act means to begin something new, which could not be foreseen, and it is because men are 'initium', newcomers and beginners by virtue of birth, that they take initiative, are prompted into action.³²⁸ Arendt calls the possibility of interrupting a certain course of events and the natural cycle of life with something new and surprising the miraculous nature of action. It is the remembrance of the possibility to start something new that continuously saves humanity from its destruction:

The life span of man running toward death would inevitably carry everything human to ruin and destruction if it were not for the faculty of interrupting it and beginning something new, a faculty inherent in action like an ever-present reminder that men, although they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin.³²⁹

In Arendt's view, the fact that we are born as newcomers thus also entails an element of hope for the human world. In a letter to her husband Heinrich Blüchner in 1952, she writes about attending the performance of Händel's *Messiah*. She explains how the performance made her fully aware of the relevance of the statement 'For unto us a child is born'.³³⁰ The condition of natality thus does not merely imply possibilities for the newcomer, but for the entire community in which he arrives. This also points out that Arendt attaches great importance to the possibilities and capacities of new generations. For this reason, she also claims that forgiveness does not merely save the actor here and now, but also saves the possibility to act for future generations.

³²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 247.

³²⁶ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 128.

³²⁷ Fry, "Natality," 30.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177.

³²⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 246.

³³⁰ Dirk De Schutter en Remi Peeters, "Nataliteit," in *Hannah Arendt: Politiek denker* (Zoetermeer: Pelckmans, 2015), 14.

It is crucial to emphasize that novelty, which comes with birth and the capacity to act, is pivotal in Arendt's account. In judging events and acts she always aims to bring to the fore what is new and unprecedented about it.³³¹ In her view, one should resist the tendency to reduce every new act to what we already know and what already exists. The acting of dictators, for instance, - however terrible its consequences may be and whatever impediment it may entail to others' freedom to act - may also entail an element of novelty and originality that one should be able to recognize. Only then, one may be able to respond not merely by disbelief or indignation, but by acting and speaking.³³² This also points out that Arendt's concept of acting and acting anew is not normative. In her view, neither acting nor starting anew coincides with doing good. Taking initiative also does not coincide with acting in favor of a certain cause or goal. It also does not mean being motivated to act or having reasons for acting. Arendt compares the capacity to take initiative and to begin to the ability of doing wonder. She holds that the fact that men are capable of action implies that the unexpected can be expected from them. Merely due to the fact that each man is unique, he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable:³³³

It is clear [...] that whenever something new occurs, it bursts into the context of predictable processes as something unexpected, unpredictable, and ultimately causally inexplicable - just like a miracle³³⁴

This also points out that Arendt's account of human action, as founded in the condition of natality, entails a radical shift in perspective in regard to how we forgive. In Arendt's view, one does not rely on certain sentiments and attitudes in order to forgive. What is necessary is the sheer ability to take initiative, to do something unprecedented.

³³¹ In all her writings she makes above-average use of the adjective 'new' to describe events and their meaning. She regularly writes about the 'new criminals', see for instance Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment* (New York - Toronto: Schocken Books - Random House of Canada, 2003), 48; 'the new moral principle', *ibid.*, 52; 'new commands', *ibid.*, 107; 'a new discovery', *ibid.*, 113; 'a new ideology', Arendt, *Crisis of the Republic* (New York-London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), 39; 'a new faith', *ibid.*, 122; 'new experiences', *ibid.* 203; etc.

³³² Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York - Toronto: Schocken Books - Random House of Canada, 2003), 54-56. See also Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 295.

³³³ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

³³⁴ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 112.

2.2. Freedom and Responsibility: The Primacy of the Act

2.2.1. From Moral Threat to Irreversible Act

As I pointed out in the first chapter, there is a tendency in the contemporary literature on forgiveness to consider the wrong that is done and of which one somehow needs to be released by forgiveness as being mainly a matter of moral judgments. First of all, the wrong is mostly considered to make a negative claim about the victim's moral value and thus to entail a threat to his moral integrity. This negative claim on the victim's worth is often presented as an obstacle for forgiveness, since it requires an explicit rejection or challenge of that claim in order to reclaim one's self-respect.³³⁵ Therefore, it often seems as if this moral claim or judgment on the victim's moral value is all wrongdoing is about. Secondly, the forgiving act is considered to be mainly about revising one's judgments about the offender.³³⁶ The so-called separation between the agent and his act rests upon the idea that in forgiving we retain our negative judgment about the act, but revise our judgment about the offender.

However, if we take an Arendtian perspective on forgiveness, it is revealed that these conceptions overlook what is actually at stake in forgiveness and what kind of release it entails. First, one loses out of sight that the suffered moral damage may not be the primary interest of the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness primarily comes into play when the consequences of one's acts are irreversible and when there has been suffered real irreparable damage. The moral offence may be withdrawn by offering excuses or by demonstrating good will, or simply be refuted by the victim's moral community.³³⁷ However, the real physical or interpersonal damage or direct and indirect consequences cannot be withdrawn. This is

³³⁵ See for instance: Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 25; Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 546.

³³⁶ Glen Pettigrove for instance challenges the idea that wrongdoing is primarily about the claim a wrongdoer is making about his victim. He argues that it is not a claim that is likely to be taken seriously by others. He points out that, on the contrary, the claim that is heard loudest by others is a claim the wrongdoer has made about himself. His actions have disclosed him as having a badly formed character or as having a lack of goodwill, being selfish and so forth. Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 67-68.

³³⁷ Pamela Hieronymi for instance argues that even if a wrongdoer does not repent it is still possible to restore one's self-respect and dignity if the community one is part of publicly repudiates the act and the moral claim it involves. Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 552-553. The reversibility of moral offences of course presupposes that it concerns a single event. If one is offended structurally, as is for instance the case with repeated humiliation, this may cause long-term psychological damage that cannot be reversed so easily. Yet also in this case it would be absurd to pretend that the wrong that is suffered should be merely dealt with as a moral claim or offence.

what Arendt calls the irreversibility of human action. Secondly, in Arendt's view the separation between the agent and his act is not merely a matter of freeing the offender of his victim's judgments. Instead, it refers to a way of releasing him from the consequences of his acts as far as they fall beyond his power while he nevertheless remains their agent. This means that forgiveness does not exclude that one may be expected to offer reparations neither that one may be expected to act differently nor acknowledge the wrong. It doesn't necessarily release the offender of certain responsibilities towards the victim, but it releases him of those consequences of his acts over which he no longer has any control. This also implies that the contemporary debate on conditions such as repentance is in fact misplaced. I have revealed in the first chapter that some accounts suppose that as soon as a wrongdoer repents, forgiveness becomes redundant. The idea is that, since the moral threat is taken away by the offender's repentance, there is no longer a need to revise one's judgment about the offender. The offender has already refuted the idea that he is bad; forgiveness cannot be more than an acknowledgment of this.³³⁸ This is a very influential line of thought in contemporary literature. But again, this conception takes the wrong that is done as merely entailing a moral judgment, threat or claim. The real suffered damage and irreversible consequences of an act, over which the agent may repent as much as he wants, but over which he never has and never will have any control, remains. Despite all his repentance, he will never be able to undo what he has done. Precisely at this point forgiveness comes in.³³⁹

Arendt's account of forgiveness as a spontaneous response to irreversibility and non-sovereignty also enables to see that forgiveness may not be primarily or merely a response to so-called willed evil. In *The Human Condition* Arendt holds that forgiving can only apply to trespassing and not to the extremity of crime and willed evil. The condition of non-sovereignty and the related boundlessness of human action give rise to what Arendt calls an unknowingness regarding one's own acts:³⁴⁰

[T]respassing is an everyday occurrence which is in the very nature of action's constant establishment of new relationships within a web of relations, and it needs

³³⁸ Kolnai, "Forgiveness," 98-99.

³³⁹ See also Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London-Sydney: Rider, 1999), 282. Tutu argues that there is no way in which a wrongdoer could restore what he did, be it either in acts of reparations or with new and better attitudes. There will always be this albatross hanging round his neck. It is a timebomb that could explode anytime, rendering new relationships vulnerable and unstable.

³⁴⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 192.

forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly.³⁴¹

At first sight, the implication of Arendt's distinction between trespassing and willed evil on the one hand and the connection of forgiveness to the idea that men 'do not know what they do' on the other, seems to be that we can only forgive so-called unintentional wrongdoing. Consequently, forgiveness only seems to apply to those cases in which we have no intention to harm or to offend someone. Or it may refer to those situations in which we had nothing but good intentions, but the consequences unfortunately turned out wrong. Those are typically cases in which one tends to excuse someone for what has happened, because one cannot be held responsible for unintended or unforeseen consequences. But is Arendt then in fact equating forgiving with excusing? Is forgiveness, as I argued in the first chapter, not precisely addressing inexcusable wrongs?

Arendt doesn't give a full and detailed moral philosophical account of what she means with trespassing and acts that are done unknowingly, but she gives some hints, which suggest that it is not this kind of irresponsible unintentional wrongdoing she is aiming at. In a footnote she remarks that as a translation of *hamartanein* trespassing means 'to miss', 'fail and go astray', rather than 'to sin'.³⁴² She also refers to trespassing as 'misdeeds', which seems to imply mistakes, which may be made without the explicit intention to harm, but for which one still can be held responsible and even accused.³⁴³ In some cases, such as cheating, one knows that someone probably will be hurt, but one chooses to neglect this information. This, however, does not mean that one acts with the intention to harm. In this case, the mistake consists of the fact that one has chosen to give priority to one's own pleasure above the prospect of another's pain and the disrespectful treatment that is involved in cheating. But, naturally, one is also never entirely sure whether one's act will indeed harm someone. It may be very well the case that when one confesses one's mistake, the other person responds: "Halleluja, now I can finally confess I don't love you anymore and that I have been cheating on you for years!". Now, the cheater may be the one who is hurt. This unpredictability, however, does neither annul his initial neglect of the other's feelings, nor does it remove the fault implied in acting disrespectful by lying and cheating. One remains responsible for what one did, although one did not have the intention to harm and the consequences did not turn

³⁴¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 240 footnote 78.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 240.

out as bad as one thought. In Arendt's view, trespassing thus seems to refer to acts undertaken with a limited degree of ignorance, negligence, self-love, disrespect, etc. Those are faults for which we can be held responsible and in regard of which we can be expected to do better in the future, but they are not straightforward crimes. It is not evil that is undertaken for 'evil's sake'.

However, Arendt's idea that men act unknowingly also refers to the idea that one can never make an entirely sound moral judgment about one's own acts. She holds that we are unable to predict whether the good cause we have in mind will indeed have good consequences.³⁴⁴ This is a direct result of the condition of plurality (the fact that one never acts alone) of non-sovereignty (the fact that one cannot control the consequences of one's own acts) and of action's boundlessness (the fact that the consequences of an act can endure forever). As good as one's reason for acting may be, one can never be sure that the consequences of one's act will not be bad. For Arendt, the cause therefore also doesn't justify the means.³⁴⁵ Arendt's description of acting unknowingly thus also refers to the observation that we will never be able to take an impartial and absolute point of view from which we are able to judge the meaning of our own acts. Elsewhere, Arendt argues that for the disclosure of the full meaning of their acts, actors depend on the judgments of spectators, those who do not participate directly in the action.³⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Arendt holds that non-sovereignty and the unknowingness that results from it should not withhold us from acting. But since we are unknowing regarding the outcome of our own actions and because in acting we reveal ourselves to others in a way that we are never able to grasp, acting requires courage. Courage, Arendt argues, may be considered to be the political virtue par excellence. It must be noted however, that the qualification of courage concerns merely the willingness to act. It is not a qualification of the act nor of the agent who is revealed by it.³⁴⁷ In Arendt's view, the willingness to act does not become less courageous when the agent turns out to be a coward.³⁴⁸ However, according to Arendt, this courage is not necessarily or even primarily related to a willingness to suffer the consequences. Therefore, forgiveness guarantees that we can be released of the consequences of what we courageously did. The possibility of

³⁴⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 233, 244. See also Margaret Canovan, Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation, 188.

³⁴⁵ For an excellent discussion of this crucial aspect of Arendt's thinking, see *ibid.*, 167-168, 187-189.

³⁴⁶ Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, 7. See also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 191-192, 233.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

forgiveness may thus not merely serve as a remedy for action's weakness, namely its irreversibility, but, conversely, it may also support the courage to act.

2.2.2. From Rational Moral Subject to Political Initiator

Arendt's conception of forgiveness as a response to irreversibility and her emphasis on the release of the consequences of non-sovereign and unknowing acts have revealed a specific view on wrongdoing. This view does not address wrongdoing in the way we are used to do, namely as the violation of a moral value. Also, her conception of forgiveness does not merely, and probably not even mainly, defines wrongdoing as we usually do: actions that are undertaken with the intention to harm. Arendt does not take forgiveness to be involved with wrongdoing in this strict moral sense. Her notion of acting unknowingly clearly includes acts we did with good intentions and involuntary wrongdoing. However, the conclusion that we always remain unknowing about our acts and their consequences does not deny personal responsibility for what we do. It only brings to the fore that in responding to evil we should not be primarily involved with the intentions that lie at its root. Arendt does not only assume that we may never fully know and understand our own intentions, motivations and reasons and these of others- which she calls, in line with Kant, 'the darkness of the human heart'. Her view also points to the political uselessness of clearing one's soul by referring to good intentions. For Arendt, what is at stake in forgiveness is one's freedom. Freedom is what is made use of independent of moral prescriptions.

Arendt's theory of action starts from an approach of acting as being not exclusively moral in character. A person may reveal herself in acting in various ways and by very different kinds of acts. These acts do not necessarily have moral significance. They may nevertheless be meaningful for other acts and actors. For Arendt, the person that is revealed in acting (the 'who') is not merely a moral agent who is capable of rational moral considerations. She is not merely an agent that can be held accountable for her acts, but she is someone who is capable of taking initiative. She is capable of starting something new - of whatever moral nature it may be. According to Arendt, acting in the presence of and with others is therefore not an expression of a prior individual moral consideration. Rather, it is the realization of a freedom given to human beings to do something on their own initiative, to bring something new into the world. This freedom and the power to act can be used in any way. It is a freedom that

manifests itself merely in taking initiative. In Arendt's view, this freedom does not precede action, in a consideration of that action, but only manifests itself in the act itself. For her, the moral considerations that are made with regard to one's actions can only be made afterwards. It is thinking and judging about what one does or has done. It implies a reflection, not on what has to happen, but on what has already begun. It judges acts that are committed; it does not prescribe how action is to be taken. In Arendt's view, this reflection also constitutes the person and - in her words - 'gives roots'.³⁴⁹ Moreover, according to Arendt, acting is not merely an arbitrary matter, but it is inspired by what she calls principles of action. However, the plural and unpredictable nature of human action implies that this cannot lead towards established moral prescriptions regarding future initiatives. Arendt assumes that the person who acts is a being who takes unpredictable initiatives. As a result, the outcome of our actions is in principle always unpredictable. In that unpredictability, Arendt recognizes the expression of the freedom to start something new at every single moment on the one hand and situates the amoral character of action on the other. The freedom to start something is not tied to a moral commandment. In principle it may have any outcome. However, since in acting one is dependent on others, one has to convince them in one way or another to proceed and complete the initiative. Arendt therefore sees action as something very powerful. It sets all sorts of things in motion; it enables a new beginning. Yet, at the same time, it also entails a permanent danger, precisely because it is unpredictable and uncontrollable. Arendt's account of action therefore also contests that even if an act is moral in its strict sense, its moral character completely coincides with the purity of intentions and rational considerations about the possible consequences.

The distinction between a conception of acting as moral acting, guided by the individual moral considerations and principles of a moral agent on the one hand, and a conception of acting as driven by a person's ability to take initiative on the other, is crucial. It entails a shift in perspective that not only enables to understand and reconstruct Arendt's concept of forgiveness, but it also enables to see its relevance in a debate that is primarily morally inspired and therefore always conceives of the acting person as a rational moral agent.

This shift demands that one does not merely conceive of oneself as a member of a moral community - giving account of the considerations and intentions that accompany one's actions and relying on generally recognizable moral principles such as love, empathy,

³⁴⁹ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 95-96.

sincerity and justice. It also demands that one becomes aware of the way in which one appears among others as an initiator, shapes the world in acting and speaking, and thus manifests oneself as a member of what Arendt calls the political community. Arendt's account of action points out that, initially, we do not appear in the world as moral beings capable of a dialogue with ourselves. But we appear as political beings, namely, among others. From the very beginning, we have always been involved in that world and we have always been acting in it. In word and deed we constantly express ourselves, and reveal who we are. The possibility to think about what we are doing exists only by virtue of the possibility of temporarily withdrawing from that world, in which we also always remain present in a paradoxical way. It requires, as Arendt puts it, to stop and think.³⁵⁰ For Arendt, our political presence in the world, our being among others, is therefore in fact primary. For her, one's moral conscience is a by-product of the ability to withdraw and to relate to oneself as 'another self', more specifically by entertaining a mental dialogue with oneself.

Therefore, from an Arendtian perspective, forgiveness is not the anointment of sins. It offers no consolation or comfort for the temptations to which one has fallen prey. It is not a remedy for the freedom to make wrong choices. It is a remedy for the freedom to take unexpected initiatives, from which of course wrong choices may follow. In these circumstances only the remedy of forgiveness can safeguard one's existence as a political being, as an initiator. It guarantees that one remains capable of acting spontaneously and unexpectedly, instead of being determined once and for all by what one has done and once started. Forgiveness therefore also provides the courage needed to act unpredictably. In Arendt's view, forgiveness does not take part in the moral healing of either perpetrator or victim. It does not rehabilitate. It makes neither a moral judgment about the perpetrator nor about his actions in view of his reintegration into the moral community. It does not restore moral relationships. For Arendt, forgiveness does not involve a restoration of the moral community in its original harmony. Instead, it involves a restoration of the freedom that constantly makes new political (and possibly conflicting) relationships possible. When the subject of forgiveness is man as an initiator rather than the moral subject, a completely different type of restoration comes to the fore: political restoration.

³⁵⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Thinking," in *The Life of the Mind* (New York-London: Harcourt, Inc., 1981), 78.

With this view on man as an initiator instead of as a pure moral and rational being, it comes to the fore how human beings are always involved in the consequences of their actions. In Arendt's approach, any initiative is constitutive of the world in which we live. As a result, acts do not necessarily have to be morally categorized or do not have to be a result of a rational, moral consideration for their consequences to be examined and for forgiveness to be appropriate. Arendt's view of man as an initiator renders it impossible to clear oneself of the consequences of one's actions by appealing to one's pure moral core, good intentions or motivations. As soon as we start to act, we are always co-responsible for what we have started, regardless of whether we have desired or even anticipated the consequences. As a result, the emphasis is on actions and their consequences on the one hand - not on actions in a moral sense, but on their objective status and meaning in the world we share with others - and on the ability to be aware of these consequences and their meaning on the other hand. Consequently, forgiveness does neither entail a statement about one's moral intentions, neither is it summarized by a process of moral considerations, nor does it claim to be able to absolve someone's guilt. Instead, it focuses precisely on what an act has brought into the world. It is concerned with the meaning an action has received and how one proceeds with it.

But before elaborating the further implications for the conception of forgiveness as a liberating activity, it is important to take notice of a thought that is inevitably evoked by Arendt's conception of acting unknowingly. Her emphasis on trespassing and unknowing acts raises the question whether one is not discussing an entirely different practice. If Arendt excludes all intentional evil from her concept of forgiveness, are we not discussing something fundamentally different and incomparable? Most accounts use a concept of forgiveness aimed at moral restoration, which deals with evil as that which is done voluntarily, with the conscious violation or disregard of a moral principle on the one hand and with moral failure on the other hand. Consequently, does a political concept of forgiveness, conceived as an act of political restoration focusing precisely on what was committed unknowingly, not move the goal posts during the game? In doing so, are we not discussing something completely different as if it were the very same thing? Yes and no. In the second part I will further demonstrate why it makes sense to change the rules and how this sheds an entirely new light on the meaning of forgiveness. Arendt's emphasis on the act precisely makes clear how the exclusive focus on rare, intentional moral evil darkens and neglects the core of what we do in forgiveness. In relation to this, it is helpful to refer to an early note in Arendt's *Denktagebuch*. Here, she still holds a classic view on forgiveness and

initially problematizes it and opposes it to the more political concept of reconciliation. In this note, she makes clear what she believes is essential to a political community in regard to what goes wrong within that community: one should not cleanse another, who has sinned, by presenting oneself as unstained. Instead, one should release another by taking, along with him, the burden of the wrong on one's shoulders.³⁵¹ In line with this remark, in her later writings Arendt takes the acting subject as the subject of forgiveness. From this a conception of personal responsibility comes to the fore that goes beyond matters of guilt, intent and imputability (or what someone can be held accountable for). Arendt's concept of forgiveness enables to reveal that responsibility is precisely taken in response to what has been done, of what has irrevocably appeared in the world, independently of one's intentions. In forgiving, one takes the responsibility for restoring precisely what could not be foreseen and for which one is prepared to risk harm to oneself. This also makes clear that for taking care of the world we share, good intentions are not sufficient. One cannot dismiss the burden of the wrong by merely good intentions. Good intentions and moral principles precisely make it possible to wash one's hands of the consequences of what happened as soon as responsibility has to be taken, choices have to be made, a courageous initiative has to come about.

³⁵¹ Hannah Arendt, *Denktagebuch: 1950 bis 1973*, (München – Zürich: Piper, 2002), 3. For an excellent discussion of this fragment, see Roger Berkowitz, "Bearing Logs on Our Shoulders: Reconciliation, Non-Reconciliation, and the Building of a Common World," *Theory & Event* 14, 1 (2011).

PART II

LIBERATION THROUGH
FORGIVENESS

Introduction to Part II

In the first part I established that Arendt's perspective on human action enables to conceive of forgiveness as an act of political restoration instead of as an act of moral restoration. Its subject is not the violation of the moral order but the objective, irreversible act itself. It is an act that has certain consequences in the world of human actors and potentially remains a permanent obstacle. It is not the violation of one's moral integrity, but the irreversibility of the act and the enduring existence of what has been done that require forgiveness. By taking this perspective it becomes clear that forgiveness does not imply a process of moral salvation but involves an interruptive act of political liberation.

In this part I will further explore the most important implications of the Arendtian shift in perspective by examining this central and crucial aspect of forgiveness, namely the liberation it entails. Liberation is an essential part of any concept of forgiveness. However, in the literature on forgiveness the underlying conceptions of the notion of liberation are never explicitly brought to the fore. The assumptions about the liberation forgiveness entails have not been given notice. Yet, a profound analysis of these implicit conceptions of liberation is an extremely meaningful and appropriate way of critically evaluating the standard account of forgiveness. Therefore, in this part I will bring to the fore which concepts of liberation are operating in many of the contemporary accounts. I will confront them with Arendt's peculiar conception of freedom in order to articulate a completely different view on the liberation forgiveness brings about. Finally, I will examine the implications this alternative conception of liberation has with regard to an accurate understanding of political forgiveness, unforgivable acts and remorse.

In the first chapter, 'Liberation in the Standard Account', I will bring to the fore the implicit conceptions of liberation by discussing two paradigmatic contemporary accounts, namely the accounts of Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton. These accounts and their implied assumptions both still have a significant impact on the contemporary debates on forgiveness. I will argue that the conception of liberation in Murphy's account of forgiveness is one that connects liberation and freedom to a process of self-mastery. As a result, Murphy's account puts a strong emphasis on the overcoming of certain moral sentiments in the forgiver. Hence, forgiveness becomes a matter of one's own moral-psychological household. In Hampton's account, forgiveness is supposed to liberate the offender of a moral stain by seeing him in a

new light. However, I will call into question whether this is an accurate description of the liberation that is involved in forgiving. In Hampton's view, the person who is forgiven merely comes into the picture as someone who is forgiven on account of his inner decent moral core that remains unaffected by the wrongdoing. In both Murphy and Hampton's view, the other as an irreducible acting person, who is bound to the past since he cannot undo what has happened, thus remains completely out of view.

In the second chapter, 'Liberation Through Spontaneous Interruption', I explore Arendt's conception of freedom and its implications for forgiveness as a liberating act in great detail in order to tackle this issue in the accounts of Murphy and Hampton. I will discuss the capacity of spontaneity, understood as the ability to interrupt a series of events. Subsequently, I will discuss Arendt's critique of inner freedom. She explicitly contrasts her conception of freedom as spontaneity with the common philosophical conception of freedom as an inner commandment of the will. Moreover, I will point out that in Arendt's view the capacity of spontaneity is intimately connected with the condition of plurality. It is only in acting that one is able to realize one's freedom. Therefore, freedom is also non-sovereign. This way, Arendt departs from any conception of freedom as self-mastery and sovereignty. It is precisely in joint action, guided by shared principles of action, that freedom becomes a tangible reality.

In the third chapter, 'The Transformative Power of Forgiveness', I will examine some of the most important implications of Arendt's view on freedom and forgiveness by pointing to the transformative character of forgiveness. I will argue that in Arendt's account the classical distinction between sin and sinner is not referring to a pre-existing moral or metaphysical distinction, but precisely points to a distinction that can only be brought about by forgiveness itself. Moreover, I will point out that Arendtian forgiveness is not directed at someone's unaffected and omnipresent inner moral core, but entails the *active* liberation of his capacity to act anew and unexpectedly. As a result, forgiveness will turn out to be neither pointless nor unjustified, but will prove to be an indispensable part of everyday human interaction. Furthermore, I will tie in with Arendt's conceptions of political power as arising from joint action to shed more light on forgiveness as a transformative and liberating event. I will argue that Arendt's notions of freedom and power enable to point out that forgiveness is not a matter of moral restoration, as it is often presupposed in contemporary accounts. This will reveal that, just like promising, forgiveness is an act that opens up new relations and realities and is thus transformative in character. It entails precisely the recognition that it is impossible to return to the past or to any other original moral position or balance. Finally, I

will argue that the liberating activity of forgiveness has some important similarities with the kind of liberation that may be involved in the alternative of fair punishment. This importantly differs from the common conception that the gift of forgiveness is crucially at odds with the logic of punishment and justice.

In the fourth chapter, "Forgiveness as an Act of Political Liberation", I discuss why, for Arendt, forgiveness is a matter of political respect rather than a matter of moral goodness. Starting from this distinction I will discuss the implications for and possibilities of forgiveness as a political concept. I will argue that the persisting moral presupposition that forgiveness is enabled by a reference to our shared humanity precludes conceiving of it as real political act, grounded in the condition of plurality. Moreover, I will discuss several accounts that aim to provide a sheer political concept of forgiveness. This discussion will enable me to highlight the importance of forgiveness as an effort to take shared responsibility for what has irreversibly been done, to share the burden of absorbing the ineradicable damage of the past.

In the fifth and final chapter, 'The Political Conscience', I will discuss that Arendt's notion of the unforgivable establishes that the power of forgiveness is not omnipotent. I will argue that her notion of the unforgivable is not - as it is in other philosophical accounts - a way of indicating the moral indignation following from an extreme moral transgression. I will point out that her notion of the unforgivable refers to the impossibility to remove the obstacle that is posed by specific wrongs. They are wrongs that precisely destroy the capacity of spontaneity and free acting in plurality. I will discuss that, in Arendt's view, these unforgivable wrongs spring from a delusion of omnipotence and a stubborn inability to recognize oneself as a spontaneous actor, who is (co-)responsible for the consequences of what has been done. Subsequently, I will shed light on the role of conscience in Arendt's discussion of evil. Finally, I will assert that the tight connection between the actor and his acts in Arendt's account helps to develop a different conception of remorse than the one that has become widespread in the contemporary literature. As we discussed in the first part, the common conception of repentance gives rise to the problem of redundancy. In contrast to the common conception of repentance as repudiating one's acts, I will consider Arendt's view on remorse as the ability to 'retrace one's steps'. This view entails that one does not dissociates oneself from what one has caused, even when one has not intended or foreseen the consequences. This way, remorse implies acknowledging that one remains tied to one's acts, since one's act are constitutive for who one is, and forgiveness turns out to be no longer redundant.

I. Liberation in the Standard Account

Many leading contemporary philosophical accounts of forgiveness focus on moral emotions in order to define the act of forgiveness. Jeffrie Murphy for instance explicitly assumes that “[f]orgiveness is primarily a matter of how I *feel* about you (not how I treat you)”.³⁵² Forgiveness is taken to be dependent upon the presence or absence of certain moral emotions, sentiments and judgments in the forgiver. Because forgiveness is being conceived as mainly an inner moral experience, forgiveness has been distinguished from related practices such as mercy and reconciliation, which concern how the wrongdoer is treated or how wrongdoer and victim relate to one and another.³⁵³

Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton are among the first scholars to articulate this moral-psychological view on forgiveness in their book *Forgiveness and Mercy*.³⁵⁴ Their essays constitute a vivid dialogue with one and another and discuss the conditions of forgiveness. Their contributions to the philosophical understanding of the act of forgiveness are frequently referred to ever since. Despite new discussions and developments, their accounts has retained its paradigmatic status in at least two respects: the assumption that forgiveness entails an inner transformation process that is justified by moral reasons on the hand, and the presupposition of an inner moral decent core in the wrongdoer on the other.

In this chapter I will discuss the views of Murphy and Hampton and reveal the underlying concepts of freedom their conceptions of forgiveness imply. Subsequently, I will call into question whether they are adequate for capturing the kind of liberation that is at stake in forgiveness.

³⁵² Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 21.

³⁵³ As Murphy puts it: “To be merciful is to treat a person less harshly than, given certain rules, one has a right to treat that person.” Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 20. Paul M. Hughes and Brandon Warmke describe manifestations of mercy as essentially engaging in overt behavior, such as lessening another’s punishment. Forgiveness, they assume, is not necessarily overt. One may forgive privately. For this reason, philosophical discussions of forgiveness have focused predominantly on its private manifestations. Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness,” 7.

³⁵⁴ Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge-New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988). See also Haber, *Forgiveness. A Philosophical Study* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1991).

1.1. Jeffrie Murphy and Liberation Through Self-Mastery

Murphy's definition of forgiveness as the overcoming of justified resentment for moral reasons is often referred to as the classic, standard or paradigmatic view.³⁵⁵ But despite its influence on many philosophical views articulating the role of forgiveness, Murphy's account of forgiveness is not primarily concerned with defending the moral value of forgiveness. His view mainly raises objections and cautions against forgiveness. Murphy's interest in forgiveness arises precisely from a concern with the moral role and value of resentment and other retributive emotions. He shares this concern with Joseph Butler, whose 'resentment-centered' definition of forgiveness he adopts and further develops.³⁵⁶ However, while in Butler's view resentment functions in a rather general defense of the rules of morality and the social fabric those rules define, in Murphy's view resentment rather functions as a personal defense. It is a defense of certain values of the self, rather than of all moral values and norms. Resentment is a response to wrongs that imply either violations of one's rights or the unfair advantage another takes of one's sacrifices - the so-called freeriding on reciprocal cooperation.³⁵⁷ Therefore, Murphy holds that "the primary value defended by the passion of resentment is self-respect"³⁵⁸ in such a way that "a person who does not resent moral injuries done to him (of either of the above sorts) is almost necessarily a person lacking

³⁵⁵ See for instance Kathryn Norlock, ed., *The Moral Psychology of Forgiveness* (London-New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), xi; Leo Zaibert, "The Paradox of Forgiveness" *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6, (2009): 388. Blustein, *Forgiveness and Remembrance*, 9. See also Warmke and Hughes, "Forgiveness," 14.

³⁵⁶ Murphy; "Forgiveness and resentment," 15. Butler is led by the question on how a loving God who commanded that we love our neighbor could implant in us such an unloving passion as resentment. Butler argues that the passion of resentment demands respect for morality and is thus consistent with any reasonable interpretation of a gospel of love. However, being dominated by the passion of resentment or acting unjustly on the basis of that passion, in contrast, is not consistent with a gospel of love. In Butler's view, forgiveness thus needs to check resentment and keep it within proper bounds. *Ibid.*, 22. One should note that Butler's theory of forgiveness thus fits within a framework in which everything, also the propensity to evil, should have a place in the order of the world (created by God). Consequently, also the inner struggle that we experience in overcoming certain passions in view of the gospel of love, is supposed to have a well-defined function in the harmonious world order. However, what is interesting about Butler's reply to the existence of evil in God's world, is that his view deviates from the classical Christian view that anything concerning the body and its incentives has to be denounced. Butler's account of resentment is thus a quite modern Christian view on the passions. Murphy's adoption of Butler's view is often followed by other philosophers working on the topic of forgiveness, but it also met some criticism. Charles Griswold for instance contends that Butler does not hold that resentment needs to be overcome but that it needs to be held within certain acceptable bounds and that it entails the foreswearing of revenge. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 20, 31 See also Warmke and Hughes, "Forgiveness," 20-22.

³⁵⁷ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 15-16.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

self-respect”.³⁵⁹ As a result of this concern with the passion of resentment and the value of self-respect, Murphy is one of the first to argue that forgiveness may not always be a moral virtue. Sometimes it may even be considered to be unjustified and immoral.³⁶⁰ In Murphy’s view, the quest for the meaning of forgiveness becomes primarily a quest for its justification.³⁶¹ He assumes that since forgiveness implies the overcoming of justified and morally valuable emotions such as resentment, it requires good moral reasons.³⁶² In Murphy’s view, these reasons have to be moral in the sense that they must be in line with one’s self-respect, respect for others as moral agents, and respect for the rules of morality and the moral order.³⁶³ Hence, the moral character of these reasons indicates that they are not undermining morality rather than that they result from a certain valuable moral aim. Murphy holds that, with this view, he is “bucking a trendy and almost messianic sentimental movement that sees forgiveness as a nearly universal panacea for all mental, moral, and spiritual ills”.³⁶⁴ By claiming that the emotional transformation process one carries through in forgiveness must be made “on moral grounds”³⁶⁵, Murphy distinguishes a philosophical and moral account of forgiveness from therapeutic approaches of forgiveness. For forgiveness to be a moral act, one should not solely be concerned with one’s own well-being and mental health, which are merely selfish reasons.³⁶⁶

With his defense of the value of resentment, Murphy is doing more than being cautious about the moral value of forgiveness. Since he assumes that “my ceasing to resent will not

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 16.

³⁶⁰ Aurel Kolnai was one of the first to draw attention to this problem, as being the problem of condonation that is discussed in much detail in the first part of this thesis. He takes the risk of condonation to be the first term of a logical dilemma that he famously called the ‘logical paradox of forgiveness’ in 1973. Kolnai, “Forgiveness,” 95-99. Murphy points out in the preface of *Getting Even* that at the time *Forgiveness and Mercy* was written, he was one of the few voices that was to any degree negative on the value of forgiveness. For that reason some people came to see him as an enemy of forgiveness. He claims that this perception is wrong and that he has much to say in favor of forgiveness, although he continues his attempt “to offer objections to forgiveness and to counsel cautions with respect to its hasty adoption as a response to wrongdoing”. Murphy, *Getting Even*, IX. He also describes how a colleague of his asked him whether the subtitle of his book with Hampton was going to be ‘An Outsider’s View’. Murphy, *Getting Even*, VIII. It must thus be noted that it is quite ironic and perhaps also very revealing that precisely someone who aimed to debunk some of the moral pretenses of forgiveness and aimed to make a strong case for the morality of resentful sentiments became such an important reference figure in contemporary accounts of forgiveness. His definition of forgiveness left a significant mark on how the practice of forgiveness has been philosophically discussed in recent decades. If he had taken the suggestion of his colleague seriously, the adoption of his theory and definition of forgiveness would perhaps have proceeded with a bit more caution.

³⁶¹ Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 23.

³⁶² Ibid., 24

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Murphy, *Getting Even*, VIII.

³⁶⁵ Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 24.

³⁶⁶ Ibid., 23.

constitute forgiveness unless it is done for a moral reason”³⁶⁷, he takes the moral justification of forgiveness to be essential for defining its practice. He claims that “[t]he question ‘What is forgiveness’ cannot after all be sharply distinguished from the question ‘How is forgiveness justified’.”³⁶⁸ This assumption has far-reaching consequences for his definition of forgiveness, which has strongly influenced contemporary philosophical research on forgiveness. It has given support to the idea that forgiveness is an inherently problematic practice and therefore somehow needs to be deserved or has to depend on certain conditions. Since many philosophers also hold that precisely the appeal to reasons and conditions contradicts the essence of forgiveness, forgiveness is often believed to suffer from an intrinsic paradox.³⁶⁹ Moreover, Murphy supposes that it is the transformation of one’s emotions that defines the transformation of forgiveness. However, although such a transformation of one’s emotions may take place in the context of forgiveness, it is quite problematic to define this as the essence of what it means to forgive another. For this reason, Murphy’s account is sometimes criticized. For instance, externalist or performative accounts have challenged his internalist or emotion account of forgiveness as fundamentally involving the victim’s overcoming of some relevant negative emotion. According to externalist or performative accounts, forgiveness involves an illocutionary speech act, implying that we perform an act in uttering a sentence, rather than it would be a private phenomenon.³⁷⁰ This opens up other perspectives on the meaning and operation of forgiveness. Peter Digeser, for instance, takes political forgiveness to operate as the releasing of a debt.³⁷¹ Nevertheless, the performative

³⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 23-24

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 23.

³⁶⁹ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32-33; Kolnai, “Forgiveness,” 95-99.

³⁷⁰ Performative accounts rely on John Austin’s account of speech acts. Some scholars, such as Joram Haber and Glenn Pettigrove, understand forgiveness as a habitative illocutionary act. In this case a sentence is held to express or exhibit the speaker’s attitude about the conduct of the intended audience. For instance when one says ‘I applaud you’. The illocutionary speech act of forgiveness is also sometimes taken as a commissive. For instance, Glenn Pettigrove claims that in addition to functioning as a habitative, forgiveness can also function as a commissive. In this case, an utterance is committing the speaker to an action or a course of conduct, for instance, when one says to promise something. Some scholars also argue that forgiveness may be a declarative expression, changing reality in various ways. For instance, Brandon Warmke and Richard Swinburne argue that saying ‘I forgive you’ makes it the case that one has been forgiven. Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Brandon Warmke, “The Normative Significance of Forgiveness,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, 4 (2016). With the utterance the operative norms that govern the interaction between victim and wrongdoer are altered. Such declaration may release the wrongdoer from certain obligations to the victim and may relinquish the right to continue to blame the wrongdoer. Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness,” 25-27. Some authors criticized Murphy’s internalist view, mostly in view of its political role. See for instance Alice MacLachlan, “The Philosophical Controversy over Political Forgiveness,” in *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Context*, eds. Bas Van Stokkom, Neelke Doorn and Paul van Tongeren (Cambridge-Antwerp-Portland: Intersentia, 2012), 39-40; Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*. See also Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness,” 25-29, 32-34.

³⁷¹ Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, 5.

view on forgiveness remains unpopular among contemporary philosophers. It goes against the mainstream of philosophical thought.³⁷² However, as I will discuss later, the performative view is in itself also insufficient for providing a new model of the transformation of forgiveness, as it often entails a mere formal and functional description.

Finally, Murphy seems convinced that a life is moral as far as it is in accordance with Butler's 'gospel of love', involving a love of one's neighbor, and Adam Smith's 'virtue of magnanimity'.³⁷³ But in fact, the role that he ascribes to forgiveness in reaching this general moral aim or good is very minimal. Within his view, the liberating act of forgiveness consists merely of the ability to control one's passions out of caution. Despite his defense of the moral role of resentment and the value of retributive emotions representing the desire to restore a moral balance,³⁷⁴ he finds reasons for caution in Kant's arguments against hatred.³⁷⁵ The first argument is that human beings have cognitive limitations and are "never in a position to know if another (whose essential character is, after all, inner) is evil to the degree that hatred of him would be justified".³⁷⁶ The second argument is that human beings are "so morally flawed as to lack proper standing to hate and despise other human beings and to seek to hurt or destroy them".³⁷⁷ Although Murphy extracts from these arguments a body of reasons for caution, he does not regard the passion of retributive hatred to be immoral or irrational in

³⁷² Kathryn Norlock, *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective* (Lanham-Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2009), 96, 103.

³⁷³ His discussion of Butler's view suggests that he agrees with him that the gospel of love, or love of one's neighbor, is the moral fundament of forgiveness. See Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 22. Elsewhere, he refers to Adam Smith who takes it to be our moral duty to temper our passions out of magnanimity and a concern for impartiality. According to Smith our whole style and deportment should be generous, candid, and full of all proper regards, even for the person who has offended us. See Jeffrie Murphy, "Hatred: A Qualified Defense" in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 108-109.

³⁷⁴ Murphy, "Hatred: A Qualified Defense," 89. Murphy describes feelings that are retributive in nature as "feelings that another person's current level of well-being is undeserved or illgotten (perhaps at one's own expense) and that a reduction in that well-being will simply represent his getting his just deserts". *Ibid.*, 89. For this reason, Murphy argues, people are generally not ashamed either to utter these feelings. They are not a sign of ill will, envy or spite, but have a righteous dimension. *Ibid.*, 90.

³⁷⁵ Murphy doesn't take these arguments to be conclusive but finds a profound caution against hatred expressed in each. *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 98-99. Both arguments, Murphy holds, are ways of raising the question 'who are we to judge and thus to hate'. Murphy does not accept those arguments to be conclusive, but he finds a profound caution against hatred to be expressed in them. *Ibid.*, 99. The question about whether we have enough knowledge of other's motivations doesn't prohibit to form reasonable beliefs about such matters and sometimes we are justified to act on such beliefs. But caution is appropriate when directed toward one who is (or believes to be) a victim of wrongdoing. Such persons, Murphy argues, "have a natural tendency to make hasty judgments of responsibility, magnify the wrong done to them, and thus seek retribution out of all just proportion to what is actually appropriate". *Ibid.*, 100. Murphy also warns for claims concerning one's own moral purity. Therefore, he refers to what John Rawls called 'luck on the natural and social lottery'. *Ibid.*, 101. Finally, Murphy argues that there are also limitations to considering retributive hatred as a strategy. Sometimes, he holds, it is either impossible or too costly to get even. *Ibid.*, 104-105. Moreover, one's inherent moral decency imposes some constraints on what one can do to another, although it may attain perfect retribution. *Ibid.*, 106-107.

itself. However, he takes it to be irrational or immoral to be led by “this dangerous and often blind passion”.³⁷⁸ He agrees with Adam Smith and cites him stating that:

[w]e should resent more from a sense of the propriety of resentment, from a sense that mankind expect and require it of us, than because we feel in ourselves the furies of disagreeable passion. There is no passion, of which the human mind is capable, concerning whose indulgence we ought so carefully to consult our natural sense of propriety, or diligently to consider what will be the sentiments of the cool and impartial spectator. [...] It must appear [...] from our whole manner [...] that passion has not extinguished our humanity; and that if we yield to the dictates of revenge, it is with reluctance, from necessity, and in consequence of great and repeated provocations. When resentment is guarded and qualified in this manner, it may be admitted to be even generous and noble.³⁷⁹

However, the conception of forgiveness as a demand to control one’s passions for moral reasons tends to fall victim to the therapeutic concerns Murphy precisely aims to avoid. The purpose seems to be to cure oneself from excessive passions that compromise one’s moral goals and relationships and thus one’s self-respect and wellbeing as a rational moral agent. Murphy points out that resentment has not only a very unattractive - even dangerous and unhealthy - dimension, but it can also stand as a fatal obstacle to the restoration of equal moral relations among persons:³⁸⁰ “Forgiveness heals and restores, and, without it, resentment would remain as an obstacle to many human relationships we value”.³⁸¹ However, it is questionable whether it is the purpose of forgiveness to restore moral relationships and moral equality. This view I will challenge in the following chapters.

It has become clear that, in Murphy’s view, forgiveness is supposed to liberate from uncontrollable feelings that tend to overrule one’s commitment to moral decency. For this reason Murphy also defines forgiveness in a very minimal and negative way: as the transformation of certain emotions, namely the overcoming of resentment, if and only if such transformation is morally justified.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 108.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 109.

³⁸⁰ Murphy, “Forgiveness and resentment,” 16-17.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 17.

But I call into question that it is sufficient to describe the liberation that is implied in the act of forgiveness as a liberation of the victim's uncontrolled and dangerous passions and its undesirable side effects. Moreover, I will dispute that this kind of liberation is ever really successful.³⁸²

Murphy's definition implies that genuine or legitimate forgiveness is a result of adequate feelings of resentment, which at the same time also need to be kept in balance or even have to be extinguished all together.³⁸³ This means that, in this view, forgiveness is almost by definition part of an inner struggle that may or may not be sustained. Forgiveness is supposed to be the victor of a struggle between conflicting moral reasons all of which we are supposed to agree on wholeheartedly. However, Murphy does not account for what exactly should be the decisive factor with respect to outweighing one moral reason against the other. Consequently, we have no ultimate reason to rank the concern for forgiveness above the concern for resentment and retribution. He does refer to the so-called distinction between sin and sinner and holds that it is only possible to give reasons for forgiveness when it is possible to draw this distinction.³⁸⁴ However, the way in which he uses the distinction to provide reasons for forgiveness is highly contestable. He refers for instance to cases in which the offender had good motives or he claims that we are able to forgive for "old time's sake", for who a wrongdoer once was in distinction of who he is now.³⁸⁵ These are clearly cases where the attention is drawn away from the wrong and the wrongdoer's accountability for it. Consequently, as Calhoun rightly argues, Murphy uses the distinction between act and agent in a way all excuses do. It is a way of stating that what was done is morally wrong, but because of certain factors about the wrongdoer we cease to blame him for it.³⁸⁶ Murphy also refers to apology and begging for forgiveness as rituals of humiliation.³⁸⁷ In this case the victim thus triumphs over the wrongdoer as a result of the self-abasement and by taking a moral superior position in forgiving the wrongdoer. This surely may provide a reason -

³⁸² There are many victims testifying that they experience forgiveness as an ongoing struggle. See for instance Howard Zehr, *Transcending: Reflections of Crime Victims* (New York: Good Books, 2001), 70.

³⁸³ Murphy's view is dubious on this point. His definition of forgiveness seems to imply that resentment needs to be overcome or foresworn and thus eliminated altogether. Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 15, 23-24. But elsewhere, when he argues that one should not be led by one's passions, he merely seems to suppose that certain retributive feelings need to be kept in balance and should not turn over into hate. Murphy, "Hatred: A Qualified Defense," 108-109.

³⁸⁴ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 24.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26, 29.

³⁸⁶ According to Calhoun "[a]ll excuses work by driving a larger or smaller wedge between act and agent". Calhoun, *Changing One's Heart*, 83.

³⁸⁷ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 28.

perhaps even a good reason for restoring social harmony -, but it is contestable whether it is a moral one.³⁸⁸

Consequently, it is not clear how good moral reasons for forgiveness, reasons that do not amount to excusing or humiliation, overrule the reasons one may have for resenting or even hating someone. How do the reasons for forgiveness overrule the passions that result from perceiving someone as the indisputable agent of the act you condemn, threatening your self-respect and respect for morality? Murphy also explicitly admits that he conceives of forgiveness as an inner struggle between competing values that cannot be dissolved:

We are often torn, when considering revenge versus forgiveness, by a deep tension between competing values – for example, the expected satisfaction of getting even versus the belief that the virtuous person should be loving and forgiving, not vindictive. This tension may leave a person unfulfilled whatever course of action is taken – perhaps feeling guilty if revenge is indeed taken, perhaps feeling weak and servile if it is not.³⁸⁹

He admits that his original interest in the topic of forgiveness grew out of the experience of this tension in his own personality: “[A] tension between (alas) my rather angry and even vindictive personality and my Christian upbringing, in which I had been taught the gospel of love and forgiveness.”³⁹⁰ He explains that all his writings about forgiveness have been attempts to examine and clarify this tension. He argues that when one is confronted with such a conflict of values we have several options: one can decide to simply live with it or one can seek to remove it. The latter can be done by rethinking the concepts of forgiveness or self-respect in such a way that they are rendered consistent, or one can decide to rank one’s values so that some are allowed to defeat others. In this case one can decide, for instance, to only forgive if one’s self-respect is not sacrificed, for example when an offender truly repents. At some point, Murphy seems to have chosen the second option: that one is only allowed to forgive if one’s self-respect is not compromised. But as stated above, if forgiveness is defined as being essentially about a transformation in one’s emotions, there is no way in which one can resolve the tension that exists between them and the correlated values. Murphy seems to

³⁸⁸ According to Martha Nussbaum, all kinds of conditional or transactional forgiveness imply humiliation or self-abasement of the offender. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 72-73.

³⁸⁹ Murphy, *Getting Even*, 4.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

realize this when he claims not to give a formula or decision procedure for when to forgive.³⁹¹ Murphy's account thus in the end turns out to provide nothing more than a description and explanation of this inner struggle in moral-psychological terms. He takes this to be the limitation of philosophy. He claims that his philosophical account cannot settle the various conflicts that lie exposed: "It cannot develop a formal decision procedure for forgiveness – some method of proving, for example, that you ought or ought not [sic] rank self-respect higher than forgiveness if there is indeed a conflict between the two."³⁹²

Murphy's view on forgiveness is strongly influenced by the platonic and stoic ideal of moral life as one that entails the ability of self-domination and self-mastery. This ideal is inspired by a specific concept of freedom, namely the possibility to be one's own lord and master. It is a concept of freedom that identifies freedom with sovereignty, the possibility to rule over oneself and one's passions. As I already have pointed out above, Murphy's view is not only very influential in contemporary debates but also paradigmatic for prevailing conceptions of forgiveness and the liberation it implies. In both liberal and religious views it is very common to perceive of forgiveness as something an individual must somehow be capable of in order to restore a moral relationship. One must find a way of overcoming certain emotions, either with the help of certain conditions or with the help of positively stimulating sentiments, beliefs and attitudes. An individual must thus somehow find the strength to forgive. Sometimes the wrongdoer helps him with this difficult achievement, so that the effort becomes less impossible and less strength is required. But the focus remains on the individual *tour de force* a victim needs to make in forgiving an offender.

The main question is whether this concept of freedom, entailing a kind of self-management and inner struggle, is appropriate for capturing the kind of freedom and liberation that is at stake in forgiveness. As a result of the involved conception of freedom as self-mastery, there appears to be hardly any difference with a therapeutic outlook on forgiveness from which Murphy claims to distance himself. As soon as one attaches the liberation that is implied in forgiveness to the existence or absence of certain emotional states and attitudes, forgiveness becomes primarily a matter of one's own psychological household. As a result of this, the

³⁹¹ Others, who are inspired by his view, aim to give such a formula. Griswold, for instance, brings six well-defined conditions to the fore that need to be fulfilled in order to forgive appropriately. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 38-59.

³⁹² Murphy, *Getting Even*, 7.

therapeutic assumption that forgiveness is something one does for oneself and not for the other is just one step away.

In the next chapter I will discuss Hannah Arendt's view on freedom to demonstrate that the concept of freedom as self-mastery, which standard accounts of forgiveness employ, is self-defeating and insufficient to grasp the liberation forgiveness enables. In reference to what Arendt calls a conflict of the will I will point out that Murphy's finding that philosophy cannot solve the inner tension of competing moral values is correct. According to Arendt, such an insolvable inner conflict can only come to an end by acting. Precisely for this reason, she considers freedom to be a matter of action rather than a matter of moral reasons or of the will and the feelings it generates. Subsequently, I will discuss how her notion of spontaneity and her identification of freedom with non-sovereign action point in a different direction than Murphy's account does. This way, the notion of spontaneity enables to reveal the specific interpersonal character of forgiveness. The act of forgiveness is a matter of interrupting a series of events by relying on one's capacity for spontaneity rather than a matter of evaluating competing values and their corresponding moral sentiments and judgments.

However, before discussing Arendt's view on freedom and its implications for the meaning of the act of forgiveness, I will discuss Jean Hampton's account. Hampton's account exemplifies another paradigmatic view on forgiveness and the liberation it implies.

1.2. Jean Hampton and One's Pure Moral Core

In *Forgiveness and Mercy* Jean Hampton develops a view that is at least as influential as Murphy's view, but differs from it in some crucial aspects. The elaboration of these aspects enables me to reveal another prevailing conception of the liberation that is implied in forgiving another.

Hampton shares the critique on Murphy's account that forgiveness cannot merely be understood as an emotional transformation in the victim.³⁹³ In Murphy's view, the liberation of forgiveness can be described as the controlling or extinguishing of undesirable passions, which arise from a model of freedom as self-mastery. In contrast, Hampton argues for a more positive description, in which forgiveness involves the liberation of a moral stain on the person of the wrongdoer by actively changing one's judgment about the offender and seeing him in a new light.³⁹⁴ By doing so, Hampton adopts a classical Christian view, expressing a fundamental trust in the inner decent moral core of every human being, and gives a moral-psychological description of the 'change of heart' it requires.³⁹⁵

Against Murphy's view, Hampton argues that forgiveness is an act that is 'directed' at the wrongdoer rather than merely some kind of internal emotional changes inside the victim.³⁹⁶ Although forgiveness may presuppose such changes, she assumes that it is a response that is concerned first and foremost with the forgiver's relationship to the wrongdoer.³⁹⁷ It is 'bestowed upon' or 'offered to' the wrongdoer in order to reestablish some kind of relationship. It restores "at the very least, the 'civil' relationship that prevails between strangers in a human community".³⁹⁸ Therefore, Hampton believes that the change of heart that takes place in forgiveness involves the overcoming of a point of view, "namely, the point of view of the other as 'the one who wronged me'".³⁹⁹ She argues that this point of view is "the product of a judgement of the other as one's transgressor, so it [...] is really *this* judgement which a victim must 'let go of' if he's going to be able to welcome that person back into his life."⁴⁰⁰

Consequently, she believes that in forgiving someone, one is not overcoming one's resentment, but indignation and moral hatred. In her view, indignation and moral hatred differ from resentment and simple hatred.⁴⁰¹ According to her, resentment reflects two concerns of the victim. First, it reflects the fear that the demeaning and harmful action has effected or revealed a low value and rank. Second, it entails the judgment that it should not

³⁹³ Jean Hampton, "Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred," in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 36-37.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-85.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰¹ She explains that the distinctions she makes are her own. Therefore, she also chooses to use her own terminology because there is no existing terminology on which she can rely. *Ibid.*, 43.

have been intentionally inflicted on him given his value and rank as a moral person.⁴⁰² Furthermore, Hampton holds that resentment is not hatred. The object of hatred is a person who committed a wrong, the object of resentment is an action. One can resent what someone did, but one cannot resent someone, she claims. Nevertheless, she takes resentment to be a kind of anger resulting from a personal defense, since it is a protest against one's diminishment.⁴⁰³ Indignation instead, applies when the defense of the moral value as such has been violated by the wrongdoing:

[I]ndignation is the emotional protest against immoral treatment whose object is the defense of the value which this action violated, whereas resentment is an emotion whose object is the defiant reaffirmation of one's rank and value in the face of treatment calling them into question in one's own mind.⁴⁰⁴

Furthermore, moral hatred relates to indignation the way simple hatred relates to resentment. While the object of indignation is an action, the object of moral hatred is the person who committed the immoral action:⁴⁰⁵

[Moral hatred] is an aversion to someone who has identified himself with an immoral cause or practice, prompted by moral indignation and accompanied by the wish to triumph over him and his cause or practice in the name of some fundamental moral principle or objective, mostly notably justice. [...] [I]t is the opposite of what one might call *moral love*, that is, the attraction one feels towards someone whom one believes has identified himself with a moral cause or objective, combined with the desire to see him and his moral cause prevail.⁴⁰⁶

She also describes moral hatred as involving the belief that, in view of the transgressor's association with the evil cause, he has 'rotted' or 'gone bad' so that he now lacks some measure of goodness or moral health.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰² Ibid., 54. Hampton doesn't distinguish between self-respect and self-esteem. See: Ibid., 50, footnote 12.

⁴⁰³ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 59-60.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 61. Hampton refers to Martin Luther King or Gandhi as people towards which this kind of emotion of moral love is felt.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 80.

Hampton argues that the change of heart that takes place in forgiveness involves overcoming the emotions of indignation and moral hatred, rather than resentment and simple hatred. Overcoming one's spite or hate and resentment is only part of what she calls "the psychological preparation for this change of heart".⁴⁰⁸ By overcoming spite or hatred and resentment one regains confidence in one's own worth despite the immoral action that challenged it.⁴⁰⁹ But the change of heart - which Hampton takes to be the very essence of forgiveness - is something else. It involves the overcoming of the indignation and moral hatred that appeared as a result of the defense of a moral cause, rather than merely this personal protest. A change of heart implies a change in one's judgment about the moral nature of the wrongdoer. It is a change in which one comes to reapprove of the wrongdoer. One has a new understanding of her as "a person one can be 'for' rather than 'against'":⁴¹⁰

The forgiver [...] has a change of heart when she 'washes away' or disregards the wrongdoer's immoral actions or character traits in this ultimate moral judgement of her and comes to see her as still decent, not rotten as a person, and someone with whom he may be able to renew a relationship.⁴¹¹

This, however, does not imply that the forgiver forsakes her opposition to the wrongdoer's action. She is not condoning her actions. Hampton holds that she does not even have to give up her opposition to the wrongdoer's bad character traits. But she revises her judgment of the person herself. She comes to realize that this person does not deserve moral hatred as, despite her action, she is still decent.⁴¹² A change of heart involves the decision to see a wrongdoer in a new, more favorable light.⁴¹³ By doing so, Hampton believes, the forgiver 'sends away' the moral stain:⁴¹⁴

If she 'lets go' of her sense of herself as the victim of an immoral person, she thereby drops the perspective from which she looks like a morally rotten individual. The one who receives forgiveness may thus feel cleansed of the stain, cured of the rot,

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid., 85.

⁴¹³ Ibid., 84.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 85

because the forgiver's perspective enables him to see himself as decent rather than (...) corroded or morally damaged.⁴¹⁵

Consequently:

To forgive someone for an action or a trait is a way of removing it as evidence of the state of his soul.⁴¹⁶

Hampton believes that forgiveness liberates the wrongdoer of both the moral stain on his person and his moral debt towards the victim: "He is no longer in the position of the sinner, stained by sin and indebted to his victim".⁴¹⁷ The forgiver on the other hand, is no longer in the position of defending herself.⁴¹⁸ By removing or 'sending away' the moral stain that is left by the immoral act, "the forgiver is able to respond to the wrongdoer as someone other than 'the one who wronged me'".⁴¹⁹ She argues that this liberation of the burden of moral debt "puts the two parties on an equal footing once more, and makes possible renewed relationships".⁴²⁰

According to Hampton, this change of heart and the possibility to see an offender as still having "a core of decency"⁴²¹ within him results from an effort to understand the wrongdoer. She claims that "[o]nce we understand why they have come to wrong other people, their anger or abuse is often shown to have little to do with the people they in fact hurt, and a lot to do with their own frustrations or feelings of malice towards people they are unable to hurt back".⁴²² It is the evidence of their vulnerability and pathetic circumstances, Hampton believes, that make their reactions more understandable and their characters much more like our own:

Our familiarity with the desires and emotions at the base of their immoral actions enable us to see them not as mindless, evil monsters but as human beings like

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Ibid.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 38.

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Jean Hampton, "The Retributive Idea," in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 152.

⁴²² Ibid., 150.

ourselves, with serious problems that ignite feelings of compassion and benevolence.⁴²³

While moral hate blinds us and makes us insensitive to aspects of the wrongdoer's character which are not bad,⁴²⁴ understanding enables us to feel compassion and even come to like the person, although we may retain our hatred of her deeds and of her character traits that led to hurting another.⁴²⁵ According to Hampton it are these warmer feelings that "open up the way to forgiveness and reconciliation".⁴²⁶

On account of describing the change of heart that forgiveness implies as an alternation of judgment that takes place in view of a wrongdoer's inner decent moral core, Hampton's view is illustrative of many accounts of forgiveness. Her influential account mixes the heritage of two traditions, the moral-psychological tradition and the tradition of fundamental love of mankind. Her view is paradigmatic for the conception of the liberation of forgiveness in both these traditions. More specifically, Hampton's view does not only hold the idea of a moral-psychological transformation process of self-mastery - in this case a process of altering one's emotions by altering one's judgments. It also holds the idea - prevailing in the bulk of contemporary literature on forgiveness - that a distinction has to be made between the sin and the sinner in reference to the wrongdoer's inner decent moral core. Within this view, an agent's pure moral core is assumed to be his true essence, his authentic self.

However, just like Murphy's view, Hampton's view on forgiveness and the liberation it implies poses some significant problems. First of all, her account, which grounds the capacity to forgive in the capacity to understand the motives and circumstances of the offender evokes the same objections as Charles Griswold's view, which I discussed in the first part of this dissertation. All efforts to find reasons for forgiveness by referring to certain familiar motives or circumstances always fall victim to a tendency to either excuse the wrongdoer or to minimize the wrong that has been done. Forgiving someone for what she is despite the wrongdoing is in fact a way of looking away from the wrong and the wrongdoing. One is forgiving another not for what she has done wrong, but for what she didn't do wrong. I argue that by concentrating on positive character traits and familiar shared human motives one

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 151.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

aims to override the unpleasant feelings caused by the wrong and its harm by warmer feelings of recognition and empathy.

Furthermore, the central idea of an inner, decent moral core poses problems for her conception of the liberation implied in forgiveness. While in Murphy's account, which focuses on balancing one's passions, the self stands in the center of his conception of liberation, Hampton's account aims to conceive of forgiveness as an act that addresses another person. However, by focusing on the wrongdoer's pure moral core she is blind for what constitutes the other as discriminate other: his acts. If one addresses some inner decency, one is precisely overlooking the other as a distinct person who is burdened by an act he cannot take back.

Secondly, the reference to a moral core takes forgiveness as liberating the wrongdoer from a moral stigma. The distinction between sin and sinner entails a salvation of sin from the wrongdoer. Although the sin in itself may still be strongly condemned and the wrongdoer's responsibility for it is not denied, he is liberated from the victim's association or identification of him with the sin. Within this view, forgiveness thus has the task to clear the moral reputation of the wrongdoer, to set him free in a way that no longer testifies of his sins or sinfulness. But even if this were possible, when we forgive in view of one's inner decent core, a core we all share, there remains no reason not to forgive. Forgiveness is thus a rational response that does not even require any consideration. Consequently, one might call into question whether it is appropriate to conceive of it as a moral-psychological transformation process. Since there is no reason not to forgive it might be more adequate to take Jankélévitch's position and assume that forgiveness should be given immediately, without any consideration. The moment one starts to justify forgiveness and aims to point out why a wrongdoer deserves it one is already forfeiting it as a response to one's inner goodness.

Finally, the distinction of the sinner - as a pure, morally decent person - from his sin implies an idea of moral improvement. A wrongdoer is not simply different from what he did, but he is *better* than what he did. By forgiving him, we allow him to act in accordance with that inner and pure moral goodness and to do better in the future. By forgiving him, we thus raise a moral expectation he should meet. In fact, we thus still exhibit some kind of moral power over him. It is precisely for this reason that Nietzsche believes that forgiveness can only result from a slave morality, in which the wronged aims to exert moral power and superiority

over the wrongdoer.⁴²⁷ It is also for this reason that Derrida argues that the actual challenge of forgiveness stands in paradoxical opposition to the idea of a transformed sinner, and requires precisely that forgiveness is granted to the guilty as guilty.⁴²⁸ Similarly, Calhoun holds that forgiveness begins when one stops demanding that a person were different from what she is: “It is the choice to place respecting another’s way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards”.⁴²⁹

All of the above shows that the main problem with forgiving someone in view of his inner, unaffected and decent moral core is its essentialistic view on human persons. It starts from the assumption that as rational moral agents all human beings are the same. They all share the same moral capacities for moral reasoning and the same moral sentiments and motives. For this reason, as this view goes, we are all considered to be members of the same human family. However, I contend that this view entails only a limited and minimal conception of what it means to be a human person. If we forgive in view of this aspect of being a person, the act of forgiveness is being reduced to the general recognition of our essential sameness. We limit its operation to the mere acknowledgment of our shared humanity. As a result of this, forgiveness does not just manifests itself as overly moralistic, it becomes very minimal as well. It is reduced to either moral modesty (which always implies the risk of excusing since it focuses on our inherent fallibility) or to an unshakeable trust in our inherent moral goodness (which always implies the risk of condoning). I argue that this, however, obscures that most of our conflicts and tensions arise precisely because we are not the same. Although we may share some common characteristics and concerns, we are all also irreducibly different. We all do different things and get involved in all kinds of varying consequences. Our differing and unique life stories create experiences that, although they may be familiar to some extent, are also singular and irreducible. In my view, to suppose that forgiveness should be granted in view of a decent core we all share, at least if it is not immoral to do so, is in fact to assume that all the difficulties and conflicts we get involved in are in the end not worth discussing. In

⁴²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁴²⁸ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 34.

⁴²⁹ Calhoun, “Changing One’s Heart,” 95. Calhoun believes that instead of making forgiveness a story of desert, that separates the misdeeds from the agent’s true self, we should take it as an aspirational story. An aspirational story begins precisely by connecting a wrongdoer’s misdeeds to his true self. It entails understanding the wrongdoer’s misdeeds as a way of making biographical sense of his life, though he is unable to make moral sense of them. Calhoun holds that being a person does not necessarily involve that one identifies the most sensible or rational thing to do with the morally justified thing to do. Although one may still put the person on moral trial, aspirational forgiveness is the choice not to demand that she improves. The object of an aspirational story is to get us to accept the wrongdoer’s uncleanness and unworthiness and go on without resentment. Calhoun, “Changing One’s Heart,” 86-96.

view of a universal love, either for man in particular or for God and his creation in general, concrete worldly matters in fact lose their complexity, relevance and problematic character. The reference to a pure moral core that can be distinguished from one's acts abstracts from what it means to be a person. Being a person does not entail sharing certain rational and moral capacities. It implies taking decisions, making mistakes, asking others for help. Those actions create meaningful experiences we could not do without. It is precisely in doing those things that we experience what it means to be a human person. Being a human person and acting are intimately connected. Any attempt to distinguish both in view of some metaphysical true self in fact liberates one not only of a moral stain but also of the meaningfulness of what it means to be a human acting person.

Hence, I contend that the richness and meaningfulness of the liberation of forgiveness is not captured in reference to the idea of human persons as similar moral agents. Is forgiveness merely concerned with altering moral judgments and cleansing the moral stain from a wrongdoer or is something else and perhaps something more important and interesting at stake? How can we provide for an account of forgiveness that is less moralistic on the one hand and less on the edge of condoning and excusing on the other?

I believe that this challenge requires setting out a new course. In discussing Arendt's view on freedom and forgiveness I point out that it is possible to reframe the debate. Therefore, in the next section I will examine the implications of the new and refreshing perspective she invites to.

2. Freedom and Liberation in Arendt's Account

In this chapter I will discuss how Arendt's account of freedom enables a completely different view on the liberation of forgiveness.

First of all, I will argue that the definition of forgiveness as a morally justifiable transformation precludes conceiving it as a free and liberating act. It confines it to a very narrow conception of liberation, namely the liberation of negative moral sentiments. In contrast, Arendt's conception of freedom as spontaneous acting enables us to perceive of forgiveness as an unprecedented and unexpected new beginning. In Arendt's view, a free act precisely entails an interruption and thus cannot be grasped in referring to causes and motives.

Second, I will reveal how her critique of inner freedom enables us to see that if the liberation of forgiveness is conceived as an inner commandment of the will, it will always remain entangled in its own inner struggle. Therefore, its liberation will be unsuccessful. In Arendt's view, freedom can only be realized in acting, for which one depends on others. Her concept of non-sovereign freedom thus enables to conceive of the liberation of forgiveness as resulting from an interdependent, though spontaneous, act, rather than as a sheer inner experience or process of transformation. In this chapter I will articulate the radical shift that this implies in order to demonstrate how it brings about a very unusual but compelling account of forgiveness as a liberating act.

2.1. From Justified Inner Transformation to Spontaneous Beginning

In discussing Murphy's and Hampton's accounts, it has become clear that their conceptions of forgiveness are essentially tied up with a quest for moral justification. Their accounts are paradigmatic for two philosophical traditions in the literature on forgiveness.

The first tradition relies on moral psychology and the ability to alter or evoke emotions and moral sentiments. According to this view, forgiveness is defined as a moral-psychological process of transformation, in which one moral sentiment (legitimate resentment) is replaced

by another, more positive moral sentiment (sympathy/empathy). For the desired moral-psychological transformation to take place, the victim is in need of moral reasons. These moral reasons do not only make the moral transformation morally acceptable. They also make the transformation of one's sentiments possible.

The second tradition is older and assumes that making a new beginning, taking a nonviolent initiative that breaks out of the spiral of violence and hate, becomes possible by appealing to the principle of universal love of mankind. This principle of universal love may take the form of Christian or religiously inspired love for one's neighbor or it may appear in its rather humanistic version of *agape*.

However, I argue that these traditions provide a very limited view of the liberation forgiveness implies. First, the liberation depends on the individual *tour de force* of the victim and thus becomes a sheer inner experience. Second, since they ground the liberating act of forgiveness in moral reasons and universally binding principles, they precisely deny its freedom to constitute a radical new beginning that breaks with the past.

In elaborating Arendt's view on freedom, it becomes possible to set out a new course and to reveal a different conception of the liberation forgiveness entails. In Arendt's view, freedom and liberation cannot be conceived in terms of causation and motivation. Her conception of freedom brings to the fore two constitutive elements of freedom: its spontaneity and its non-sovereignty. First, Arendt claims that we can only conceive of action as grounded in freedom if we understand it in its radical spontaneity and contingency. This means that action's freedom cannot be explained by relying on what has caused or motivated it. Second, Arendt claims that the impulse to act is given from without. It is our appearance among others that invites to act spontaneously. Therefore, Arendt also assumes that freedom can only become a tangible reality in acting with others. We are unable to master our own freedom since it is only realized in acting with others. Freedom, in Arendt's view, is therefore fundamentally non-sovereign. I will first discuss the notion of spontaneity in Arendt's account of freedom.

With the notion of spontaneity Arendt aims to emphasize that action can only be free as far as it is able to make a radical new beginning. She assumes that we are losing sense of freedom as soon as we start to question how an act came about or what it intended for. As soon as we rely on motivations and intentions that explain what we do, we lose sight of the very essence of freedom, namely its ability to interrupt precisely this time-continuum:

Action, to be free, must be free from motive on one side, from its intended goal as a predictable effect on the other. This is not to say that motives and aims are not important factors in every single act, but they are its determining factors, and action is free to the extent that it is able to transcend them.⁴³⁰

Arendt thus does not deny that free actions may be guided by motives, intentions, desires and aims. But if we aim to understand in what respect they are free, we should not focus on inner intentions and motives but on what exceeds these direct motivations and aims. She claims that the freedom to start something new is utterly incompatible with the principle of causality. Free action resembles a miracle:

The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle.⁴³¹

A miracle is mostly understood as a religious phenomenon, in which something superhuman or supernatural breaks into the natural course of human affairs or natural events. But with the use of the word miracle Arendt does not intend to refer to supernatural forces, but precisely aims to draw attention to the miraculous capacity of spontaneity. It entails the ability of human beings to take initiative, to do what could not be expected. Arendt claims that we are so familiar with the spontaneity of human action that we tend to overlook its improbable character, its freedom and contingency.

By way of example, Arendt refers to the existence of the earth. Compared to the universal occurrences and the statistic calculable probabilities controlling them, even the existence of the earth just as well as the existence of men, rests upon a kind of wonder.⁴³² That which we call real came into existence through the addition of infinite improbabilities. Similarly, Arendt argues, are historical processes, which do not proceed according to predictable natural developments but are sequences of unpredictable events. Those sequences of events, which are the result of previous initiatives, are themselves constantly interrupted by new human initiatives. However, according to Arendt, the structure of historical sequences of

⁴³⁰ Hannah Arendt, "What is Freedom?" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 333-334.

⁴³¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.

⁴³² Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 111.

events is so frequently interspersed with the infinite improbabilities of wonder that precisely any talk of miracles seems odd to us.⁴³³

By calling taking initiative in acting and speaking miraculous, Arendt does not aim to point to some supra-natural source of human action. Instead, she aims to draw attention to the improbable character of an everyday and particularly human occurrence. An occurrence which takes place so often that we are no longer able to recognize its improbability.⁴³⁴ It is man himself who is capable of doing miracles, she claims, in a highly wonderful and mysterious way.⁴³⁵ According to Arendt, there is a crucial difference between the infinite improbability on which the wonder of earthly human existence rests and the wonderful interruptions in the course of human affairs and relationships, the latter which is the miracle of action. In the latter there truly is a miracle worker evoking these improbabilities. The common and – as Arendt calls it – ‘hackneyed’ word our language provides for this talent for doing miracles is ‘action’.⁴³⁶ By using the religious language of miracles, Arendt thus aims to point to the improbability that is tied up with the novelty in taking initiative in acting and speaking, while simultaneously arguing that these improbabilities happen so often that they tend to remain unnoticed. In referring to action as a miracle, she aims to point to the powerfulness of the omnipresent capacity of spontaneity:

[W]e do indeed have the right to expect miracles. Not because we superstitiously believe in miracles, but because human beings, whether or not they know it, as long as they can act, are capable of achieving, and constantly do achieve, this improbable and unpredictable.⁴³⁷

In line with Kant, Arendt calls the ‘miraculous’ capacity to start something new and unprecedented the capacity of spontaneity. It entails the possibility to start freely and spontaneously, i.e., in an unmediated, independent and unprescribed way, a new series of events.⁴³⁸ But Arendt also points out that the idea of a new free beginning, which interrupts

⁴³³ Ibid., 112.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 113.

⁴³⁷ Ibid., 114.

⁴³⁸ Hannah Arendt, “Willing,” in *The Life of the Mind* (New York-London: Harcourt, Inc., 1981), 29. Arendt refers to the revealing German translation of spontaneously as ‘von selbst’.

what came before, brings with it at least two difficulties. She calls these difficulties 'the problem of the new'.⁴³⁹

First, spontaneity implies that what one does could also remain undone. This means that the freedom of spontaneity is always tied up with contingency.⁴⁴⁰ But this also makes it hard to explain why things are as they are. The contingency of action interrupts the order of necessity. For this reason, Arendt argues, philosophers have never been pleased with freedom and its ineluctable randomness. Because they are committed with interpreting and knowing the world, they have been "unwilling to pay the price of contingency for the questionable gift of spontaneity".⁴⁴¹ For classical philosophy, Arendt claims, the contingency of reality is equal to ultimate meaninglessness and this original bias against contingency survived deep into the modern age.⁴⁴² She concludes that the philosophical conceptions of freedom should therefore not be trusted. They precisely aim to get rid of contingency and thus of freedom's liberty.⁴⁴³

Second, since spontaneity implies starting something new, it cannot be perceived as a continuation of what came before. However, Arendt argues, the conception of an absolute beginning is very troublesome, as Kant already experienced. Since, insofar as it is part of a time-continuum, an event is always only the continuation of a preceding series. A series occurring in the world can only have a relatively first beginning, since it is always preceded by some other state of things in time.⁴⁴⁴ But action as a new free beginning is precisely conceived as an interruption of the time-continuum and as the start of a new series of events. Arendt therefore calls the troublesome notion of a new beginning - interrupting the continuity of time - the problem of the new.⁴⁴⁵ She assumes that the idea of an absolute beginning correlates to the experience of forming projects. If one has something in mind one wishes to do, this event starts a new series.⁴⁴⁶ Seen from the perspective of the person who (wishes to) act(s), the continuity of time is interrupted by the new series of events he starts. However, Arendt argues that there are two ways in which this possibility of new beginnings is traditionally neglected. First, there is the historically traditional solution for the new in Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality that could save the unity of time. It

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 28, 32.

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 31-32, 195-198.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 198.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 32.

⁴⁴³ Ibid. 32; 198.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 30.

entails the assumption that the new series was potentially contained in the preceding series of events.⁴⁴⁷ Second, in reference to Henri Bergson, Arendt points to the related phenomenological problem of the perspective of memory and the impact of reality as sheer factuality:⁴⁴⁸

[L]ooked at retrospectively, a freely performed act loses its air of contingency under the impact of now being an accomplished fact, of having become part and parcel of the reality in which we live. The impact of reality is overwhelming to the point that we are unable to 'think it away'; the act appears to us now in the guise of necessity.⁴⁴⁹

Arendt argues that this impact of factuality is experienced most obviously in the case of action, since no deed can be safely undone. She thus explains the tendency to deny the freedom to begin in a phenomenological way. It implies the sheer impossibility to ignore reality as it is, even though we are able to imagine many other possible outcomes, and therefore it appears as a necessity.⁴⁵⁰ It must be noted that this tendency to necessity may especially be observed in how one is dealing with wrongdoing and crime. It is often hard to believe that an offender could have acted differently than he did without this implying that he also explicitly embraces the evil that he did. As a result, conceptions of forgiveness always tend to respond to the unavoidability of crime and evil instead of to its irreversibility, which is a quite different notion.

The contingency of what is also implies that the free will, whether it is being understood as the freedom of choice or as the freedom to start something unpredictably, can be assumed, relying on inner experience, but it cannot be proved.⁴⁵¹ The capacity of spontaneity thus implies the uncomfortable idea that no other source can be indicated than the fact of

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 30-31. Arendt explains that, according to Bergson, reality, by virtue of its sheer factuality, throws its shadow behind into an infinitely distant past. As such, it appears to have existed in the mode of potentiality in advance of its own actualization. Ibid., 31.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid. Arendt argues that the impossibility to 'think away' reality is neither a result of a mere delusion of consciousness nor a limited ability to imagine possible alternatives, but merely results from the overwhelming facticity of reality.

⁴⁵¹ The seeming implausibility of the postulate of freedom, she claims, results from the fact that due to our outward experiences, we seldom start a new series. Ibid., 32. In contrast to what she claims when she discusses the miraculous nature of action in *The Promise of Politics*, holding that its miracle happens so often that we tend to overlook it, in "Willing" Arendt agrees with Bergson, that (real) free acts are exceptional. Most of our acts, she holds, are taken care of by habits. Ibid., 33. Later in her life, Arendt thus seems to have become more pessimistic about how often we are actually making use of our capacity to act and to do the unexpected.

freedom itself. Arendt therefore links this freedom of spontaneity to the condition of natality, the fact that we are born in the world as newcomers:

The miracle of freedom is inherent in this ability to make a beginning, which itself is inherent in the fact that every human being, simply by being born into a world that was there before him and will be there after him, is himself a new beginning.⁴⁵²

Arendt admits that as a fundament of the freedom of spontaneity, the condition of natality remains quite impenetrable and incomprehensible. She claims that it only reveals that we are doomed to freedom because we are born among others, irrespective of whether we love our freedom or detest its arbitrariness.⁴⁵³ Therefore, she does not only describe the possibility to start something new as miraculous, but also calls it mysterious.⁴⁵⁴

At the end of *Willing*, the second part of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt describes how not only philosophers - who are traditionally on bad terms with freedom's contingency - but also the founding fathers - who she admires most for their capacity to act in concert and to consolidate the freedom to begin in a constitution - seemed to recoil for the abyss of the experienced freedom to begin. When they became aware that the change they wanted for the world might imply a new order, the start of something unprecedented, they started to look to history for guidance in understanding what they were doing. Confronted with the element of complete arbitrariness in every new beginning, knowing that whatever would be done could just as well have been left undone and believing that once it is done it cannot be undone, they started rethinking the foundation legends of the *Pentateuch* and *Aeneid*.⁴⁵⁵ In founding a new order they experienced the *hiatus* between a no-more and a not-yet, between liberation from the old order and the new freedom. The *hiatus*, Arendt explains, indicates that freedom does not automatically results from liberation.⁴⁵⁶ It marks the interruption of an

⁴⁵² Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 113.

⁴⁵³ Arendt, "Willing," 217.

⁴⁵⁴ Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 113. In *Willing*, she writes about the ability to start a new political community: "The only trait that all these various forms and shapes of human plurality have in common is the simple fact that of their genesis, that is, that at some moment in time and for some reason a group of people must have come to think of themselves as a 'We'. No matter how this 'We' is first experienced and articulated, it seems that it always needs a beginning, and nothing seems so shrouded in darkness and mystery as that 'In the beginning', not only of the human species as distinguished from other living organisms, but also of the enormous variety of indubitable human societies." Arendt, "Willing," 202.

⁴⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 204.

absolute beginning in the flow of temporal sequences.⁴⁵⁷ The *hiatus* thus also demonstrates that the beginner has nothing to hold on to.⁴⁵⁸ Arendt explains that when the founding fathers ransacked the archives of Roman antiquity they were not only in need of an acquaintance with a new form of government, but also aimed to overcome the perplexities inherent in every beginning. They were quite aware of the bewildering spontaneity of a free act. They knew that an act could only be called free if it is not affected or caused by anything preceding it. Yet, insofar as the free act turns into a cause of whatever follows, it demands a justification.⁴⁵⁹ However, according to Arendt, the foundation legends only indicate the problem without solving it.⁴⁶⁰ They merely “point to the abyss of nothingness that opens up before any deed that cannot be accounted for by a reliable chain of cause and effect and is inexplicable in Aristotelian categories of potentiality and actuality.”⁴⁶¹ Moreover, in looking for an answer in Virgil’s poems, they found out that the hope of founding a ‘new Rome’ was an illusion:

Confronted with the riddle of foundation – how to re-start time within an inexorable time continuum – they naturally turned to the story of the foundation of Rome and learned from Virgil that this starting-point of Occidental history had already been a re-vival, the resurgence of Troy.⁴⁶²

They found out that there was nothing else they could do than hoping that their own foundational act could be understood as a renaissance or rebirth of Rome.⁴⁶³ Consequently, the abyss of pure spontaneity was covered up by a device, typical of the Occidental tradition, of “understanding the new as an improved re-statement of the old.”⁴⁶⁴ This, again, points out how hard it is to conceive of a new free beginning, despite the fact that it is so clearly experienced by the one who takes initiative, as Arendt claims.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 205, 208.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 210.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 214.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 215. Arendt points out that the notion of foundation is at the very center of Roman historiography. But it goes along “with the no less profoundly Roman notion that all such foundations – taking place exclusively in the realm of human affairs, where men enact a tale to tell, to remember and preserve – are re-establishments and reconstitutions, not absolute beginnings.” Ibid., 213.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 216.

It thus turns out that, although Arendt takes the capacity of spontaneity to be an omnipresent capacity, it is also easily denied and neglected. Since this freedom of spontaneity is clearly experienced but hard to conceive of, the spontaneous moment of interruption in the act of forgiveness is also easily neglected or mistaken. However, Arendt's phenomenological description of forgiveness precisely aims to dig up this moment of spontaneous interruption. Although forgiveness is a reaction Arendt also takes it to entail the characteristics of a free act. It interrupts a course of events and thus exemplifies the capacity to start something new, to act spontaneously:

In contrast to revenge, which is the natural, automatic reaction to transgression and which because of the irreversibility of the action process can be expected and even calculated, the act of forgiving can never be predicted; it is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven. The freedom contained in Jesus' teachings of forgiveness is the freedom from vengeance, which encloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end.⁴⁶⁵

In Arendt's view, the liberation of forgiveness is thus not a liberation of certain moral sentiments but the liberation of revenge. Forgiveness interrupts the determined reactions to an act. From this angle, it also becomes possible to see that the presence or absence of certain sentiments is irrelevant for forgiveness. In Arendt's view, forgiveness is not defined as a transformation of mental states, but as an interruption of a series of successive acts. This also enables to point out that the requirement of good moral reasons that either justify or enable forgiveness, is in fact at odds with forgiveness. It is also precisely for this reason that we usually not conceive of a negotiated cease-fire or armistice as an act of forgiveness. In demanding good reasons for forgiveness one precisely remains caught within a 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours' logic. This is clearly at odds with the interruption of necessity forgiveness aims at. By requiring good moral reasons in exchange for forgiveness, forgiveness tends to become a sublimated act of revenge and payback. Even when these

⁴⁶⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

moral reasons are for instance grounded in practicing the general virtue of magnanimity, this causes one to see oneself as morally superior and thus as the victor of a moral battle.

The omnipresent capacity to make a radical new beginning is left out of view as soon as forgiveness is discussed in terms of what either justifies or enables it. Arendt's account enables to elucidate precisely the miraculous moment of interruption, which entails a liberation of both the wrongdoer and the victim. It conceives the act of forgiveness in a way that is independent of any moral reason, virtue or value. It is a way of conceiving the liberation of forgiveness in its purest form, disposed of any form of necessity or causation. By doing so, Arendt in fact also explicitly invites not to recoil for this omnipresent freedom of spontaneity or, in other words, the capacity to interrupt.

However, in discussing the capacity to begin something new as a capacity of spontaneity, one may have the impression that an individual is left to one's own devices in order to forgive. It may seem as if it is something we must somehow conjure up from ourselves. But is this not precisely what is implied in the concept of freedom as self-mastery? Is the idea that one must 'remember' one's capacity of spontaneity not similar to the idea that one must somehow find the strength to cease resenting, which we found in Murphy's and Hampton's view?

Moreover, is the conception of forgiveness as the freedom to start something new not very minimal and limited? Doesn't forgiveness then also risks becoming very random and also a bit too easy and free of engagement? Is it even possible to conceive of it as a solid practice or is it at the mercy of whoever wants to make use of it?

I have mentioned that in Arendt's view the capacity of spontaneity results from the condition of natality. Natality refers to the fact that one is born among others as a unique acting and speaking being. In Arendt's view, natality, one's uniqueness, and plurality, one's distinct appearance among others, are closely connected. I will further discuss the importance of this connection for her concept of freedom and the implications for the act of forgiveness in the following section. Subsequently, it becomes possible to point out that although spontaneous action is contingent and unprecedented it is not simply afloat. It is guided by common principles that require joint action.

2.2. Arendt's Critique of Inner Freedom

Just as Arendt takes freedom to be fundamentally at odds with necessity, she also takes it to be at odds with sovereignty and self-mastery. Freedom, she claims, can never be a solitary experience. It can only be experienced and realized in acting. Since one always acts among others, acting is never sovereign.⁴⁶⁶ It is not only impossible to control one's own acts, but what we do also only receives its meaning as an action when it is undertaken with and among others. As a result, the freedom one experiences in acting, even though it rises from one's capacity of spontaneity, is always and fundamentally a non-sovereign freedom.

With this concept of non-sovereign freedom, Arendt goes directly against a whole, dominant philosophical tradition that shaped a concept of inner freedom that appears very self-evident to us nowadays. Within that common view, freedom is assumed to be precisely what we experience when we are released from the other, as the one who limits us and hinders us to do whatever we want. However, Arendt argues, such a kind of freedom is an illusion. Since plurality, and the frustration of one's desires and wishes, is a reality of everyday human life, such sovereign power is impossible. We always depend on the help and initiatives of others. As a result of this interdependency, freedom is commonly understood as the ability to withdraw in an inner realm. It refers to the sheer inner experience of feeling unaffected by whatever happens, to feel free. Due to this conception of freedom as an inner feeling and experience, it is also commonly related to the ability of self-control, the ability to control one's own passions, desires and judgments.

This standard concept of freedom deeply influences the common conception of the liberation that is at stake in forgiveness. We easily assume that in forgiving another, we are concerned with the way in which the past weighs upon our heart. Due to the burden of the past we are no longer able to feel free. Consequently, if we no longer want to be the prisoners of the past, we have to liberate ourselves of this burden and have to forgive. Therefore, it is assumed that in forgiveness we have to liberate ourselves from undesirable passions and sentiments. To do this, we have to rely on our inner strength. In enacting control over our passions and judgments we are no longer burdened by the sentiments of the past and feel free again. One just has to surf the internet to find all kinds of statements about forgiveness that refer to this concept of freedom. Only two examples: "Forgiveness is not about letting

⁴⁶⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234.

the 'bad guy' of the hook; it's about taking the hook out of your own heart"⁴⁶⁷; "Forgive others, not because they deserve forgiveness, but because you deserve peace".⁴⁶⁸ In the moral literature on forgiveness it is explicitly stressed that, for it to be a moral act, forgiveness should not be granted on account of this kind of selfish motives. Instead, moral accounts assert, one has to rely on moral reasons.⁴⁶⁹ However, the conception of liberation and freedom that these moral accounts rely on is exactly the same as in therapeutic self-help approaches. As I discussed with regard to Murphy's and Hampton's accounts, these moral accounts rely on the idea that one can only gain liberation and freedom if one finds the inner strength to release oneself of the burden of negative and hostile attitudes and sentiments. However, Arendt takes this concept of inner freedom to be very problematic. Sovereignty and self-control, she argues, are only possible in imagination, paid for by the price of reality.⁴⁷⁰ In reality, no man can be sovereign, because not one man, but men, in plurality, inhabit the earth.⁴⁷¹ This, however, does not imply that freedom is impossible or self-defeating:

Actually it is as unrealistic to deny freedom because of the fact of human non-sovereignty as it is dangerous to believe that one can be free – as an individual or as a group – only if he is sovereign. (...) Under human conditions, which are determined by the fact that not man but men live on the earth, freedom and sovereignty are so little identical that they cannot even exist simultaneously. Where men wish to be sovereign, as individuals or as organized groups, they must submit to the oppression of the will (...). If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.⁴⁷²

Arendt thus explicitly refutes the common idea that interdependency would preclude freedom. Although the condition of plurality and non-sovereignty indeed exclude sovereign control over one's own acts, the situation of interdependency simultaneously creates the freedom to take a new initiative and to appear as a distinct speaking and acting being. For Arendt, this is real, political freedom. Arendt does not deny that non-sovereignty may also

⁴⁶⁷ Jessica Lanyadoo, "Forgiveness is an act of self-healing that will set you free," *Lanyadoo*, <http://www.lovelanyadoo.com/forgiveness>.

⁴⁶⁸ Raney Simmon, "Forgiveness (poem)," *Rainy Day's Books, Video Games and Other Writings*, April 25, 2017, <https://rainyday.blog/2017/04/25/forgiveness-poem/>.

⁴⁶⁹ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 24.

⁴⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 235.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

⁴⁷² Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 359-360.

cause serious problems for a person's freedom to act. But she holds that withdrawing in one's inner realm of sovereignty and self-control is not the solution. In her view, the practice of forgiveness precisely shows that it is possible to gain freedom in non-sovereign acting. The act of forgiveness is exemplary for the ability to experience freedom in interdependency and non-sovereignty and to solve the obstacles that are posed by non-sovereignty. It entails a liberation that stems from the shared power to act rather than the inner strength of the will. In the following two sections I will discuss the crucial distinction between these two concepts of freedom.

2.2.1 *The Inner Commandment of the Will*

According to Arendt, the greatest misunderstanding concerning freedom arose since it came to be understood in philosophical tradition as an inner freedom of the will. This conception is very influential. Today, our conceptions of freedom are still determined by this conception of what Arendt calls philosophical freedom. However, Arendt argues that the faculty of the will only came to be discovered by philosophers due to certain experiences. In *Willing*, she discusses these experiences that led to a philosophy of the will and discusses how it became associated with a problematic concept of freedom.⁴⁷³

According to Arendt, the notion of the will has not always played such a dominant role in philosophy. Although Aristotle's analyses of the soul exerted a decisive influence on almost all philosophies of the will, the notion of a free will was unknown in Greek philosophy. Nevertheless, Aristotle knew that acting requires deliberate, in advance planning. He referred to this with the term *proairêsis*, the choice between alternatives, which was translated in Latin as *liberum arbitrium*.⁴⁷⁴ However, Aristotle's freedom of choice concerns merely the means for an end that is taken for granted and not an object of choice.⁴⁷⁵

⁴⁷³ In the essay "What is Freedom?" Arendt already develops the argument she will further investigate in "Willing". We will therefore also refer to this earlier text. It is important to note that Arendt explicitly holds that tracing the history of a faculty should not be mistaken for an effort to follow the history of an idea. If we mistake the will for a mere idea, it could indeed turn out to be an artificial concept, as Gilbert Ryle assumes. According to Arendt, a faculty is not a thought-thing, mental artifacts that presuppose an artificer. But the mind of man is nevertheless "affected both by changes in the world, whose meaningfulness it examines, and, perhaps even more decisively, by its own activities". Arendt, "Willing," 56. All the activities of the human mind, and none more so than the activities of the willing ego, are of a reflective nature. *Ibid.*, 55-56.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 60, 62.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.* Arendt explains that nobody takes health or happiness deliberately as one's end. Those ends are conceived to be part of human nature and equal for all. *Ibid.*

According to Arendt, the notion of a will, a faculty that not merely deliberates about the means, but freely sets oneself goals, appears only later, in a theological context, namely in the writings of the Apostle Paul. The Apostle Paul describes his discovery of the will in his *Letter to the Romans*.⁴⁷⁶ Arendt explains how its discovery results from an experience one has not only with oneself, but also inside oneself.⁴⁷⁷ It is the experience of being two-in-one, where these two are in constant struggle with each other.⁴⁷⁸ Paul describes how the will to fulfill the law, which he acknowledges to be good, simultaneously activates another will, the will to sin, to do what he hates.⁴⁷⁹ Paul describes it in terms of just two laws, the law of the mind and the law of the body.⁴⁸⁰ The experience of two contrasting and struggling wills, 'a will and a nill', is described by Augustine, but its basis is to be found in the descriptions of Paul.⁴⁸¹ Evidently, the idea of a struggle between mind and body and the philosophical prejudices against the body were not new.⁴⁸² Arendt argues that what was new in Paul's aggressive hostility to the body is that it arises out of the very essence of the will. The flesh, in Paul's reasoning, becomes the metaphor for an internal resistance and the will grows aware of itself - as being split and automatically producing its own counter-will - by its effort to overcome resistance.⁴⁸³

In my view, Arendt's analysis aims to bring two decisive elements in Paul's discovery of the will to the fore. These elements help to explain why the will, as an inner faculty, became such an important faculty in philosophy and why, despite its imperative character, it was associated with freedom. First, Arendt discusses the influence of the Gospel, preached by Paul, which gave rise to a concern with eternal life. The 'good news' of Christianity came in an age where the common experience was one of a declining, perhaps dying world. Whereas Cicero held that "although men must die, communities are meant to be eternal and perish only as a consequence of their sins",⁴⁸⁴ Christian eschatology clearly preached the opposite: you have always believed that men die whereas the world is everlasting. Now, you only need to turn to a faith that proclaims that the world comes to an end but that you yourself will have everlasting life.⁴⁸⁵ Consequently, Arendt argues, "the question of 'righteousness',

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid. 64, 68

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Ibid., 87, 89.

⁴⁸² Ibid., 70-71.

⁴⁸³ Ibid., 70, 71.

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid.

namely, of being worthy of this eternal life, takes on an altogether new, personal importance.”⁴⁸⁶ She points out how in Paul’s preaching of the ‘good news’ the emphasis shifts entirely from doing to believing, from the outward man living in a world of appearances to an inwardness “which by definition never unequivocally manifests itself and can be scrutinized only by a God who also never appears unequivocally.”⁴⁸⁷ Due to its emphasis on inner belief, the new law of righteousness no longer commands ‘thou shalt do’, but ‘thou shalt will’. The Thou-shalt of the new law demands and expects a voluntary act of submission. According to Arendt, it was the experience of an imperative demanding voluntary submission that led to the discovery of the Will. Precisely its command to will gave rise to its contrary, I will not, and puts one before the choice between an I-will and an I-will-not, or what Arendt calls with Augustine I-nill.⁴⁸⁸ Consequently, inherent to the experience of a will that always also evokes its contrary, was the wondrous fact of a freedom that none of the ancient peoples had been aware of.⁴⁸⁹

[...] that there is a faculty in man by virtue of which, regardless of necessity and compulsion, he can say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, agree or disagree with what is factually given, including his own self and his existence, and that this faculty may determine what he is going to do.⁴⁹⁰

Paul’s descriptions thus gave rise to a conception of freedom as being an inner faculty of the will.

Second, Arendt points out how Paul’s experience of the will rose out of an experience of impotence: I-will-but-cannot.⁴⁹¹ Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* deals with the fact that the law of righteousness cannot be fulfilled. The phenomenon that Paul describes, that “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do”, Arendt argues, is naturally not new.⁴⁹² What is new is that the phenomenon is no longer ascribed to the weakness of reason when confronted with the passionate drive of the desires, but ascribed to a free choice of the will.⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 68. To nill is Arendt’s translation of the latin term *nolle*, which Augustine used as the contrary of *velle* (willing). Ibid., 89.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 67.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 69. Arendt cites Paul in *Letter to the Romans*.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 70.

Consequently, Arendt argues, the impotence of the will stems from its internal struggle.⁴⁹⁴ In Paul's view, the will to fulfill the law automatically activates another will, the will to sin, and is thus inevitable countered by a counter-will, an I-nill. This also implies that even if the law is obeyed and fulfilled, there remains this inner resistance. The fight between the I-will and the I-nill therefore tends to be endless.⁴⁹⁵ The endless struggle results from the reflexivity of the will. In its natural inclination toward freedom - that is "the natural revulsion of free men toward being at someone's bidding" - the will always addresses itself to itself.⁴⁹⁶

[W]hen the command says, Thou Shalt, the will replies, Thou shalt *will* as the command says - and not mindlessly execute orders. That is the moment when the internal contest begins, for the aroused counter-will has a like power of command.⁴⁹⁷

Arendt therefore concludes that the will is impotent, not because it is hindered by something outside, but because the will hinders itself.⁴⁹⁸ The will's freedom thus in fact turns out to be paradoxical and self-contradictory. Freedom requires power, the power to do what one has resolved to do, but in Paul's conception it is precisely its restless struggle for power that makes the will impotent. The will that is split and always automatically produces its own counter-will is therefore in need of healing - of becoming whole again.⁴⁹⁹

I have discussed that such an inner struggle is also present in Murphy's account of forgiveness. He explicitly refers to it as an insolvable tension and claims that philosophy is unable to solve or release this tension. In Christian and philosophical literature forgiveness is also often referred to as an enduring process, something of which one can never be sure to have truly attained it.

According to Arendt, the struggle can only come to an end in action. Without action, the will is helpless:⁵⁰⁰

The will's worrying disquiet can be stilled only by the I-can-and-I-do, that is, by a cessation of its own activity and release of the mind from its dominance.⁵⁰¹

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 69.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 69.

Arendt explains that, despite its reflexivity, the will always relates to the world of appearances in which its project is to be realized. As a mental activity, every volition looks forward to its own end, when willing-something will have changed into doing-it. The will always wills to do something. No willing is ever done for its own sake, Arendt claims, or finds its fulfillment in the act itself. The impatience, disquiet, and worry of the will results from the fact that the will's project presupposes an I-can that is by no means guaranteed.⁵⁰²

[...] [T]he willing ego [...] deals with things which are in our power but whose accomplishment is by no means certain. The resulting tension [...] causes a kind of disquiet in the soul [...], a mixture of fear and hope that becomes unbearable when it is discovered that, in Augustine's formula, to will and to be able to perform, *velle* and *posse*, are not the same. The tension can be overcome only by doing, that is by giving up the mental activity altogether [...].⁵⁰³

However, Arendt argues that precisely this - the fact that the free will is oriented at a future that is uncertain and indeterminate - has always bothered philosophers. To them, the uncertainty and contingency of the future seems to be an obstacle to their freedom. But in fact, it is the serenity of the thinking ego - "the enjoyment of an activity that never has to overcome the resistance of matter"⁵⁰⁴ - that is disturbed. The will's tenseness ruins the mind's tranquility, which is precisely what philosophers insist on.⁵⁰⁵ Uncomfortable as philosophers are with the will's restlessness, caused by the uncertainty of the future at which the will is oriented they have often tried, highly contradictory as it is, to reconcile the will's freedom with the necessity of what is.⁵⁰⁶ Therefore Arendt asks whether perhaps "professional thinkers, basing their speculations on the experience of the thinking ego, were less 'pleased' with freedom than with necessity?"⁵⁰⁷ Her historical analysis points out that Duns Scotus was

⁵⁰¹ Ibid., 37.

⁵⁰² Ibid., 36-37.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 37-38.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid. The claim that 'all serious philosophers' insist on a tranquility of mind is made by Leibniz and referred to by Arendt. Arendt's own conception of thinking differs. She takes it to be an activity, consisting of an inner dialogue. See Arendt, "Thinking," 185.

⁵⁰⁶ Arendt, "Willing," 24-27, 45, 42.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 33.

the only philosopher of the will that was ready to pay the price of contingency for the gift of freedom.⁵⁰⁸ Therefore Arendt concludes:

No doubt the philosophers have been more 'pleased' with necessity than with freedom because for their business they needed [...] a peace of mind, which [...] could be effectively guaranteed only by an acquiescence in the arrangement of the world.⁵⁰⁹

The peace of mind of the philosopher is thus better served with necessity than with the contingency of the future, at which the will is oriented. A contingency, that results, as I have discussed, from the fundamental requirement of freedom, namely that everything that has been done could also have remained undone.⁵¹⁰ The future and its contingency depends on human beings who have the capacity to begin something new, in an unpredictable and unexpected manner, without being able to master the consequences of what one does. Contingency and non-sovereignty are thus interrelated characteristics of freedom.

However, one may question whether Arendt is not too hasty in condemning the peace of mind of the philosopher? Is one's inner realm of free thinking not a 'good' to be cherished in order to be able to act and judge in a world that is unpredictable and contingent? Is this inner domain not a stable basis to rely on to make authentic choices and deliberate decisions, not merely about our own lives, but also about these of others? Arendt affirms that we need the possibility to withdraw in solitude in order to think, to involve in what she calls a dialogue with oneself and to constitute a conscience, but she takes it to be a misunderstanding to conceive of this inner activity as constitutive for one's freedom. In her view, freedom can only be experienced when one stops thinking and starts to act.

Unfortunately, Arendt claims, philosophers didn't seem to be prepared to accept the consequences of the will's struggle and impotence. They didn't seek freedom and power where it could be found, namely in action. On the contrary, they have often tried to take refuge with the promises of an omnipotence of an inner freedom of the will. Arendt explains how in Roman Antiquity the will came to be perceived as something that could be practiced. This way, the will does not only practice its own strength, but it also learned to be indifferent

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid., 26

for the disturbing influence of the world and one's own body. Arendt takes Epictetus to be paradigmatic for this conception of freedom as an inner, sovereign power of the will. According to Arendt, exercising the will goes hand in hand with a cultivation of an inward space, in which men may escape from external coercion and feel free. In Roman antiquity the idea that freedom required an inward space resulted from an actual retreat from a world where real tangible freedom was denied.⁵¹¹ The estrangement from the world led to a withdrawal into an inward space to which no other has access and where the self is sheltered against the world. In this inward space worldly experiences of freedom were transformed into experiences with one's own self.⁵¹² Arendt takes the Stoa and more specifically Epictetus' discussion of freedom to be representative for this conception of ultimate freedom as inner freedom. She points out that, in Epictetus' view, freedom means living as one wishes. Therefore, man needs to limit himself to what is in his power - he should not reach into a realm where he can be hindered. Epictetus describes the "science of living"⁵¹³ as founded on making the right distinction between the alien world over which man has no power and the self of which he may dispose as he sees fit.⁵¹⁴ Arendt holds that whereas Paul believes that the will is impotent and needs the grace of God to do what one wills to do, Epictetus declares that the will is almighty.⁵¹⁵ This omnipotence it reaches with the help of reason, rather than God.⁵¹⁶ According to Epictetus, reason discovers that it is the fear of pain rather than pain that makes you miserable, the fear of death rather than death. And while men cannot escape pain or death, Epictetus believes they can argue themselves out of the fear within themselves by eliminating the impressions fearful things have imprinted on their minds.⁵¹⁷ What is crucial is that it is believed that those impressions rely on one's consent. Reality itself is believed to depend on one's consent to recognize it as such. Consequently, all you need to feel free is *ataraxia* or invulnerability.⁵¹⁸ Arendt claims that it is in the ability of consent that Epictetus discovers the freedom and omnipotence of the will:⁵¹⁹

Epictetus' discovery was that the mind, because it could retain outward 'impressions' [...], was able to deal with all 'outside things as mere 'data of consciousness' [...]. [...]

⁵¹¹ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 323.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 323-324.

⁵¹³ Arendt refers to Epictetus' "On Freedom" in *Dissertations, book IV, I, § 118*.

⁵¹⁴ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 325.

⁵¹⁵ Arendt, "Willing," 74.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 77, 78.

Once the mind has withdrawn from outside things into the inwardness of its own impressions, it discovers that in one respect it is entirely independent of all outside influences: 'Can anyone prevent you from agreeing to what is true? No one. Can anyone compel you to accept the false? No one. Do you see that in this sphere your faculty is free from let and hindrance and constraint and compulsion?'⁵²⁰

In Epictetus' view, consent solves the problem of the impotence of Paul's struggling will. To exert the will's power, one does not just need to be indifferent to everything that is not within one's power, but it demands that man actively wills what happens anyhow.⁵²¹ In order to live well, it is not enough just to refrain from asking that events happen as you will. You must let it be your will that they happen as they do:⁵²²

It is only when will power has reached this climactic point, where it can will what is and thus never be 'at odds with outward things', that it can be said to be omnipotent. Underlying all the arguments for such omnipotence is the matter-of-course assumption that reality *for me* gets its realness from my consent; and underlying that assumption, guaranteeing its practical effectiveness, is the simple fact that I can commit suicide when I truly find life unbearable.⁵²³

The reliance on the idea that the door of suicide is always open and the belief that this demonstrates the ultimate freedom of the will, could not contrast more with Arendt's emphasis on love of the world and spontaneous acting as a re-affirmation of the condition of natality. In Epictetus' arguments in favor of inner freedom, we also observe the roots of what Arendt calls the merging of freedom with sovereignty:

The power of the will rests on its sovereign decision to concern itself only with things within man's power, and these reside exclusively in human inwardness. Hence, the will's first decision is not-to-will what it cannot get and to cease nilling what it cannot avoid – in short, not to concern itself with anything over which it has no power. [...] [S]ince man, [...] is entirely powerless in the real world, he has been given the miraculous faculties of reason and will that permit him to reproduce the outside – complete but deprived of its reality – inside his mind, where he is undisputed lord

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 76-77.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 81.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid., 81-82.

and master. There he rules over himself and over the objects of his concern, for the will can be hindered only by itself. Everything that seems to be real, the world of appearances, actually needs my consent in order to be real *for me*. And this consent cannot be forced on me: if I withhold it, then the reality of the world disappears as though it were a mere apparition.⁵²⁴

I discussed that in Hampton's account the liberation of forgiveness results from the ability to alter one's judgments about the offender by focusing on an inviolable moral core. In the literature on forgiveness, this focus on the moral core is often supposed to be only successful when accompanied by an effort to sincerely will the best for the wrongdoer.⁵²⁵ This emphasis on changing one's judgments about the offender and to align one's will with it is very similar to Arendt's description of the Stoic concept of freedom. In conceiving of the wrongdoer in such a way that there is nothing else one can do but agreeing with what he 'really' is, one also transforms reality in order to lessen the effect of being hurt on oneself. One makes oneself invulnerable for the factual wrongdoer and the threat he poses. One thus relies on a conception of freedom in which one aims to master one's passions by mastering one's perception of reality.

Arendt strongly opposes to this conception of freedom, which became very dominant after the nineteenth century. This concept of individual and inner freedom gave rise to the idea that freedom begins where politics and acting with others ends and thus to the liberal credo "the less politics the more freedom".⁵²⁶ But Arendt argues that overcoming this condition of plurality in sovereignty would not just entail the sovereign domination of one's self but rather the arbitrary domination of all others. Or, as in Stoicism, it would imply the exchange of the real world for an imaginary one where these others would simply not exist.⁵²⁷ It also brings along mistrust in the ability to act, to actually change the world and to take responsibility for it. But freedom in its political sense, Arendt holds, stems from neither ruling oneself nor others. Freedom does not result from governing but from acting and requires the presence of others. The non-sovereign condition of plurality and freedom are thus precisely mutually constitutive.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 78-79.

⁵²⁵ See for instance Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 15; 101. Marietta Jaeger, "The Power and Reality of Forgiveness: Forgiving the Murderer of One's Child," in *Exploring Forgiveness*, eds. Robert D. Enright and Joanna North (Madison-Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998): 12. Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 51, 196, 202-203, 483. Garrard and Naughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness," 44.

⁵²⁶ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 329.

⁵²⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 234.

The prevailing conception of freedom as inner freedom of the will also distorts the conception of liberation in forgiveness. As an act, forgiveness responds to another act, as having irreversible destroying or painful consequences. It responds to what has taken place in the world rather than to a wrongdoer's true nature. It is an occurrence that, however we would like it, and, although it could have been different from what it is, we cannot alter. Forgiveness thus not merely responds to the irreversibility of what happened, but also responds to its contingency. Nonetheless, we have to find a way to continue with – rather than in spite of - what happened and find a way to remove it as an obstacle for future acting and relations.

2.2.2. Non-Sovereign Freedom and The Political Power of Joint Acting

Arendt does not only points out that inner freedom is based on an illusion of sovereignty, she also argues that it would be impossible to have these conceptions of inner freedom if we had not been acquainted already with freedom in a totally different sense. One would not be able to conceive of an inner freedom of the will, if one had not primarily experienced freedom as the possibility to be among peers, which implies the possibility to move freely. Arendt argues that any belief in inner freedom, which she takes to be a misconception, is derived from the worldly experience of freedom in interacting with others:

[M]an would know nothing of inner freedom if he had not first experienced a condition of being free as a worldly tangible reality. We first become aware of freedom or its opposite in our intercourse with others, not in the intercourse with ourselves.⁵²⁸

According to her, originally, man's freedom was first experienced in the mere possibility of free movement:

Before it became an attribute of thought or a quality of the will, freedom was understood to be the free man's status, which enabled him to move, to get away from home, to go out in the world and meet other people in deed and word.⁵²⁹

⁵²⁸ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 327.

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

Or else:

Freedom of movement, the power of moving about unchecked by disease or master, was originally the most elementary of all liberties, their very prerequisite.⁵³⁰

This freedom clearly requires liberation. One needs to be liberated from the necessities of life. But the status of freedom does not follow from mere liberation. According to Arendt, in addition to mere liberation, freedom needs the company of other men in a public realm.⁵³¹ She therefore argues that the political realm is the field where freedom has always been known, not as a problem, but as a fact of everyday life.⁵³² The power that is implied is the power of the I-can. Arendt reveals that the power of the will is merely a matter of strength and not of freedom:

The power to command, to dictate action, is not a matter of freedom but a question of strength or weakness.⁵³³

Freedom depends on the power to do rather than to will something. Arendt agrees with Montesquieu that an agent can no longer be called free when he lacks the capacity to *do* what he wants to do, regardless of whether this was due to exterior or interior circumstances.⁵³⁴ But the freedom that is experienced in the I-can is always a limited freedom. Since men can only achieve something in the world if they act with others, the power of the I-can can only arise where men live together in a (political) community. These communities are produced and preserved by laws, all of which in one way or another constrain the free will of its members. It is within this limitation that some space of freedom opens up for action and that the constituted body of members is set in motion.⁵³⁵ The community, in which a 'We' is always engaged in changing our common world, and not in interpreting it through action, relies on some kind of consent⁵³⁶. But this consent clearly differs from the kind of consent Epictetus insists on:

⁵³⁰ Arendt, "Willing," 200.

⁵³¹ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 327-328.

⁵³² Ibid., 322. She holds that "[t]he *raison d'être* of politics is freedom, and its field of experience is action". Ibid.

⁵³³ Ibid., 334.

⁵³⁴ Arendt, "Willing," 199.

⁵³⁵ Ibid.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., 200-201

[In a community,] [c]onsent entails the recognition that no man can act alone, that men if they wish to achieve something in the world must act in concert, which would be a platitude if there were not always some members of the community determined to disregard it and who in arrogance or in despair try to act alone. [...] [W]hat they have in common and what sets them apart from the rest of the community is that they put their trust in the use of the instruments of violence as a substitute for power.”⁵³⁷

Violence is only a means to exercise force. But force and strength crucially differ from power. For Arendt, power can only stem from the ability to act in concert. In the sphere of human plurality, power and freedom are synonymous.⁵³⁸ It is the possibility to act among and with others, rather than the strength of one’s will that is exercised in isolation, that brings into being real tangible political power and freedom.

Arendt clearly distinguishes this view on power from the prevailing account of political power as resulting from ruling. The hallmark of a concept of rule is the belief that men can only lawfully and politically live together when some are entitled to command and the others forced to obey.⁵³⁹ The concept of rule originates from the household and family realm, but has played its most decisive part in the organization of public matters. Therefore, for us it is invariably connected to politics.⁵⁴⁰ Arendt situates the origins of the political concept of power as ruling in Plato’s account of the state. Plato first derived the principle of domination from the master-slave relationship in a well-ordered household and then introduced it into the intercourse of man with himself. Furthermore, he assumed that the supreme criterion for ruling others is the capacity to rule oneself. He believes that the philosopher-king needs to command the city just like the soul commands the body and reason commands the passions.⁵⁴¹ Arendt argues that the popularity of the concept of ruling arises out of the frustrations about action and its character of unpredictability, irreversibility and anonymity of its beginner. She claims that those characteristics always have given rise to a temptation to find a substitute for action in the hope to escape “the haphazardness and moral

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 201.

⁵³⁸ Ibid., 201.

⁵³⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 222.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 224.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents”.⁵⁴² The most obvious attempt to do away with plurality she finds in the one-man-rule in its many varieties, from “outright tyranny of one against all to benevolent despotism and to those forms of democracy in which the many form a collective body so that the people ‘is many in one’ and constitute themselves as a ‘monarch’”.⁵⁴³ These varieties all have in common that citizens are banished from the public realm and should mind their private business while only the ruler attends to public affairs.⁵⁴⁴ Plato’s model of ruling was aimed at making sure that someone who begins, who takes initiative, remains the complete master of what he had begun and is no longer in need of the help of others.⁵⁴⁵

[T]his isolated mastership can be achieved only if the others are no longer needed to join the enterprise of their own accord, with their own motives and aims, but are used to execute orders, and if, on the other hand, the beginner who took the initiative does not permit himself to get involved in the action itself. [...] [T]he beginner has become a ruler [...] who ‘does not have to act at all [...], but rules [...] over those who are capable of execution’. Under these circumstances, the essence of politics is ‘to know how to begin and to rule [...]’; action as such is entirely eliminated and has become the mere ‘execution of orders’.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴² Ibid., 220.

⁵⁴³ Ibid., 221.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 222.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 222-223. Arendt cites Plato’s *Statesman*. With this description of rulership as a distinction between rulers and obeying citizens it may seem as if this model is no longer applicable to our contemporary western democratic situation. But one should only think of the way in which Belgian politicians reacted on the persistent protest and political actions of citizens - who organized themselves in action groups which finally even succeeded in proposing thoroughly investigated alternatives- against the Antwerp building project ‘Oosterweel’, to see that the idea of ruling politicians and obeying citizens still exist, at least in the head of some politicians in leading governmental positions. After a long time of ignoring all resistance and clinging to what was called “resolved policy”, one could no longer resist the political power that had grown out of the citizen movements. The politicians claimed that this led them to the conclusion that they didn’t make sufficient efforts to “create public support” for their decision. Finally, they needed an intendant, to make sure that they could make use of the creative and thoroughly investigated ideas of the citizen movement without losing their credibility as rulers. Since it had been confronted with the political power potential of its citizens, the city of Antwerp has been organizing so-called ‘participation moments’ for several small building projects. However, some people have the impression that it is meant to keep the attention away from the decisions about the big building projects. Moreover, it appears that in the best case ideas and suggestions of citizens are collected ... and mostly (apart from a flower box here and there) ignored. There are also moments of purported deliberation which are actually merely informing citizens about certain plans and to give citizens ‘the opportunity to ask questions’. It appears that the ‘participation moments’ are simply a bullet point on a to do list of executing what already has been decided, in order to be able to anticipate resistance and to decline it with the argument that there has been citizen participation in the creation of the plans.

Arendt explains that the concept of rulership implies a completely different interpretation of power. The original interdependence of action - the dependence of the beginner upon others for help and the dependence of his followers upon his initiative - disappears. It is split into two, altogether different functions: the function of giving commands on the one hand and the function of executing them on the other. The ruler is alone, isolated from and protected against others by his force. He claims for himself what is actually the achievement of many. He monopolizes the strength of those without whose help he would never be able to achieve anything.⁵⁴⁷ As a result, “the delusion of extraordinary strength arises and with it the fallacy of the strong man who is powerful because he is alone.”⁵⁴⁸

With this division between rulers and obeyers Plato introduced the division between “those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know”.⁵⁴⁹ It also gave rise to the idea that only the beginner is entitled to rule. The identity of beginning and ruling resulted in the understanding of all beginning as legitimation for rulership until finally the element of beginning disappeared altogether from the concept of rulership. This way, Arendt claims, the most elementary and authentic understanding of human freedom - the freedom of spontaneity that rises from natality - disappeared from political philosophy.⁵⁵⁰

In contrast to the concept of rulership, Arendt points out that political power depends on spontaneous joint action. Since power arises out of acting with others, it does not only exist as long as acting people stay together but also as long as action lasts. Its power cannot be stored and kept up in reserve like the instruments of violence can be. Unlike the mind’s will power, which merely entails a relation between me and myself, the political freedom and power that stem from plurality and spontaneity are always limited.⁵⁵¹

Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength. While strength is the natural quality of an individual seen in isolation, power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes the moment they disperse.⁵⁵²

⁵⁴⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189-190.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 224-225.

⁵⁵¹ Arendt, “Willing,” 201.

⁵⁵² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 200.

The power of joint action exists only in its actualization. Where power is not actualized through action, which sets up relationships, it passes away.⁵⁵³

Power is actualized only where word and deed have not parted company, where words are not empty and deeds not brutal, where words are not used to veil intentions but to disclose realities, and deeds are not used to violate and destroy but to establish relations and create new realities.⁵⁵⁴

Because the freedom of acting (which Arendt calls political freedom) clearly is a quality of the I-can rather than the I-will, it clearly differs from philosophical freedom. It can only manifest itself in communities, where “the many who live together have their intercourse both in word and in deed regulated by a great number of *rapports*”.⁵⁵⁵ Rapports or laws are man-made and regulate men’s relations. Political freedom, Arendt concludes, is thus only possible in the sphere of human plurality.⁵⁵⁶ Human plurality, the faceless ‘They’, is divided into many units. And according to Arendt, it is only as a member of such a unit, that is, of a community, that men are able to act and that action receives its power and its freedom.⁵⁵⁷ For Arendt, action does not only imply taking initiative, but also carrying out and completing with the help of others.⁵⁵⁸

Arendt’s conception of power as the ability of action to establish new relationships and realities is crucial for understanding forgiveness as an ultimate human power. Arendt takes the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth to be ‘the discoverer’ of the role of forgiveness regarding human affairs.⁵⁵⁹ To point this out, she focuses on those aspects of his teachings that “are not primarily related to the Christian religious message but sprang from

⁵⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁵ Arendt, “Willing,” 200

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁵⁸ “Granted, action likewise can never occur in isolation, insofar as the person who begins something can embark upon it only after he has won over others to help him. In this sense all action is action ‘in concert’, as Burke liked to say; ‘it is impossible to act without friends and reliable comrades’ (Plato, *Seventh Letter*, 325d); impossible, that is, in the sense of the Greek verb *prattein*, to carry out and complete. But this in fact is only one stage of action, although, as the one that ultimately determines how human affairs turn out and how they appear, it is the most politically important stage. It is preceded by the beginning, the *archein*; but such initiative [...] really depends on an individual and his courage to embark on an enterprise.” Arendt, *The Promise of Politics*, 127.

⁵⁵⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 238. According to Arendt, the only other rudimentary signs of an awareness that forgiveness may be a necessary corrective for the damage resulting from action may be seen in the Roman principle to spare the vanquished or the right to commute the death sentence, probably also of Roman origin. Ibid., 239.

experiences in the small and closely knit community of his followers”.⁵⁶⁰ She takes it to be decisive that Jesus maintains against the scribes and Pharisees that it is not true that only God has the power to forgive. According to him the human power to forgive also does not derive from God. Jesus holds that the power to forgive must be mobilized by men toward each other before they can hope to be forgiven by God as well.⁵⁶¹ For Arendt, Jesus was the first to recognize the power of forgiveness as an ultimate human power. Nevertheless, Arendt also emphasizes that political power only arises in a political community that is regulated by laws. Therefore, it also becomes clear that forgiveness, as an act of interdependent power, can only exist in a community that is held together by the law. In order to be able to forgive there must be an agreement on what is everyone’s due. Nevertheless, Arendt stresses that laws and rapports are man-made and thus also rely on the capacity of spontaneous and joint acting. This also implies that law and justice should not lose its connection with human action, which is where they result from. They should be enacted and executed in view of the human relationships they are supposed to regulate and uphold. Forgiveness may thus also be a constitutive part of the way in which laws and rapports regulate relations. To understand how a joint commitment to the law and the spontaneity exemplified in forgiveness may co-exist, it is important to discuss Arendt’s account of principles of action.

2.2.3. *Inspiring Principles*

Thus far, I have discussed Arendt’s view on forgiveness as stemming from spontaneity. I have also revealed that, according to Arendt, real political freedom only arises from the acknowledgement of non-sovereignty. It can only be realized in joint acting. Nevertheless, as I pointed out earlier, the conception of forgiveness as a spontaneous act seems to imply that in order to forgive one has to rely on oneself and one’s own capacities. How can this view on spontaneity be reconciled with Arendt’s rejection of the will as a source of freedom and the liberation of forgiveness? To clarify this, it is important to note that, although Arendt to some extent identifies the capacity of spontaneity with the operation of a free will as well, her conception and conclusions regarding that capacity importantly differ from the common philosophical conceptions and conclusions about the will. In contrast to the faculty of the

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 239.

will, the capacity of spontaneity is not self-reflexive. While the philosophers of the will put emphasis on how the will activates another counter-will and is related to itself, Arendt holds that the omnipresent capacity of spontaneity somehow needs to be activated by acting and speaking with others. It is thus activated from the outside by acting and speaking others rather than an inner self-reflexive activity.

I also referred to Arendt's claim that, in order to understand its freedom and originality, we should resist the tendency to perceive of an action as merely being part of a time-continuum and as necessarily caused by what came before. We should also not reduce it to its motives and goals. Although motives and goals are never absent in an act, in understanding the capacity to begin as a free capacity, it is precisely necessary to focus on what transcends them. But in what respect can an action transcend mere motivation and goal? How is that possible? Moreover, how is it to be reconciled with the notion of freedom as resulting from joint action? Does joint action not necessarily requires a shared motivation and goal? Above, I asked whether the reliance on action's capacity to start anew, to make a new beginning, as arising from spontaneity does not turn forgiveness into an arbitrary activity, afloat, without any direction. Does this not precisely preclude the possibility of joint and powerful action?

To address these issues it is necessary to discuss Arendt's notion of principles of action. This notion illuminates that, although free actions are not merely determined by its motive and goal, they are not unguided or arbitrary. It also helps to further unpack Arendt's view on spontaneity. Although she perceives of the capacity of spontaneity as a capacity to make a free beginning, it does not imply that one is merely left on one's own devices. The capacity to act is activated from the outside, by acting and speaking with others. I will now discuss this in more detail.

In a community, actions are inspired by principles, Arendt claims. This insight she gains from Montesquieu, but develops it in her own manner. According to Montesquieu, principles vary in accordance with the different forms of community, such as virtue in republics, honor and glory in monarchies, moderation in aristocracies, fear and suspicion in tyrannies.⁵⁶² A community does not merely move and act according to its inspiring principle, it also serves as a standard for judging the community's deeds and misdeeds.⁵⁶³ But Arendt holds that Montesquieu's traditional distinction between types of government is inadequate

⁵⁶² Arendt, "Willing," 199, 201.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

for the rich diversity of human beings living together on the earth.⁵⁶⁴ There exist many more ways of community than his classification of governmental types suggest. Moreover, for Arendt, a community isn't necessarily guided by one uniting principle, but can be inspired by several principles at the same time.⁵⁶⁵

It is crucial to clarify how, in Arendt's view, the notion of a principle differs from a motivation or incentive to act. They inspire, Arendt holds, 'from without'.⁵⁶⁶ Principles enable people to orient their actions and to act together, although opinions may differ about what actions best correspond to a certain principle. Neither do they originate from an individual's personal and concrete needs and concerns. Rather they arise from the community's most central ideas. They originate from and revive in a community of actors. This also means that they are always somehow preserved and sustained by a community's institutions and can be revived by a new initiative at any time.⁵⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Arendt holds that they only come into being through action. Principles depend on a community's possibility to realize them in word and deed. Only in the performing act itself principles become fully manifest, Arendt claims. They come about and are manifest as long as the action lasts, but no longer.⁵⁶⁸

A principle also crucially differs from an aim or a goal. Principles do not prescribe particular goals, since they are much too general.⁵⁶⁹ They are, what Arendt calls with Jefferson, "energetic principles".⁵⁷⁰ They are neither fixed rules nor laws. They may evolve and reform over time and inspire and orient instead of prescribe. Nevertheless, once the act has started every particular aim can be judged in the light of its principle.⁵⁷¹

The notion of a principle helps to explain how free actions can be oriented at something that transcends a mere concrete aim and motivation, without being surrendered to mere arbitrariness:

What saves the act of beginning from its own arbitrariness is that it carries its own principle within itself, or, to be more precise, that beginning and principle, *principium*

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., 201-202.

⁵⁶⁵ James Muldoon, "Arendtian Principles," *Political Studies* 64, (2016): 131.

⁵⁶⁶ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 335.

⁵⁶⁷ Muldoon, "Arendtian Principles," 122.

⁵⁶⁸ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 335-336. For an illuminating discussion of how to reconcile Arendt's claim that principles only come into being *in* action with the idea that they inspire from without, and thus also somehow exist *before* action, see Lucy Cane, "Hannah Arendt on the principles of political action," in *European Journal of Political Theory* 14, 1 (2015).

⁵⁶⁹ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 335.

⁵⁷⁰ Arendt, "Willing," 199.

⁵⁷¹ Arendt, "What is Freedom?" 335.

and principle, are not related to each other, but are coeval. The absolute from which the beginning is to derive its own validity and which must save it, as it were, from its inherent arbitrariness, is the principle which, together with it, makes its appearance in the world.⁵⁷²

But for Arendt, beginning and principle are thus also coeval. The free act of beginning itself founds its own principle, which furthermore inspires the deeds that are to follow.⁵⁷³ The description of beginnings being coeval with their principles is somewhat mysterious. How does that work? How can a beginning act found its own principle? With this, Arendt claims to have found a solution for the “otherwise unsolvable problem of an absolute beginning in the realm of human affairs which is relative by definition”,⁵⁷⁴ which we discussed in the previous section on action’s spontaneity. But how does this solution work? Arendt’s line of reasoning seems to be the following: as soon as one starts to act, one inevitably and involuntarily reveals the spirit in which one acts. Those who observe the deed can recognize its spirit and be inspired by it. By doing so, they may continue and carry through the deed in their own acting. Consequently, in making a free beginning, one finds a principle by revealing the spirit in which the act is undertaken. The spirit of an act is evidently dependent on the uniqueness of a human being that came in the world with a distinct way of acting and speaking and thus depends on his spontaneity. But with his appearance in the world through acting and speaking he may give shape to a principle that had already been latently present in the community and whose distinct revival is recognized by others.

Principles are thus able to guide and judge action without depriving it of its freedom. They merely inspire or reflect its initial inspiration. They do not prescribe action but grasp the spirit in which an act is (to be) undertaken. Consequently, it is possible to act in accordance with a principle, but in a very distinct and original way. A principle activates and animates to act and speak, to take initiative in an unexpected way, rather than laying down what is required. Principles activate one’s omnipresent capacity of spontaneity.

Within this view, it is also possible to see how the rule of law and forgiveness may coincide. Although laws have to be executed correctly, judges should not forget that they are always acting beings as well. In making decisions on particular situations they also bring to life

⁵⁷² Arendt, *On Revolution*, 212.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 213.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

certain shared principles. Some of these principles may require acts that are rather forgiving than retributive in character.

2.3. Forgiveness as an Inner Paradox: Arendt's Way Out

In the previous chapter I have highlighted that the accounts of Murphy and Hampton are paradigmatic for the prevailing contemporary view on the liberation forgiveness implies. Within this view, the liberation of forgiveness is supposed to stem from a psychological process of transformation in which justified retributive emotions are replaced by more positive emotions or judgments. However, in discussing Arendt's account in more detail, it has become clear that her view shifts the focus from this individual psychological process of reassessment and self-control to the power of forgiveness as a releasing interpersonal, free act. Spontaneous and non-sovereign, joint acting itself has the power to interrupt a course of events and has no need for special psychological and moral motivations. Moreover, the notion of a principle enables us to see how one can understand the direction of a free act without tying it to the logic of motivations and incentives as well as to the logic of justification.

In Arendt's view, the capacity for free acting in response to what happens to us in an unpredictable and peculiarly undetermined and revealing way is what makes an action virtuous. Rather than in its moral sense of being in accordance with moral prescriptions or in its sense of moral excellence of one's character, the virtuosity of action is to be understood in line with the Machiavellian concept of *virtù*. For Arendt, this implies the virtuosity with which men accept the chances that are offered to them by fortune.⁵⁷⁵ It should be understood as the response of men to the way in which the world presents itself to them through the constellation of fortune. It implies a harmony between world and men in which they interact with each other.⁵⁷⁶ Acting in the world could thus be compared to the virtuosity with which one plays a violin. Even though a violinist is still in possession of his musical capacity or talent when he is not playing, his virtuosity can only become manifest in the playing itself.

⁵⁷⁵ Arendt, "What is freedom?" 336

⁵⁷⁶ Arendt, "What is Authority?" in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 308.

Similarly, the freedom of spontaneity only appears in acting with others.⁵⁷⁷ Only in actively acting and speaking within a community, inspired by and inspiring its principles, human freedom and power comes into being. It is only thanks to joint acting that they are able to uphold human relationships and a human world in which they are able to live 'as they wish'. The importance of the condition of plurality in Arendt's account of forgiveness becomes even more prominent in view of her assumption of the 'darkness of the human heart', an assumption about the human condition in which she follows Kant.⁵⁷⁸ Arendt believes that, however much as we try, we are never able to really know what the motives and intentions of others are. Even more, she believes it is impossible to fully come to know our own intentions, motives and goals. However, for Arendt the darkness of the human heart is not a reason for being cautious about hating or resenting someone, as in Murphy's view. Rather, it entails for Arendt the stronger claim that if we aim to find reasons for forgiving another by understanding his intentions and motivations, our quest becomes endless. We will never become fully familiar with the intentions of the person who wronged us. We will also never know whether his testimony of them is true - even when the effort is sincere. Furthermore, we will never know whether our own intentions for forgiveness are entirely pure and whether we really have overcome the emotions that are aroused by the wrongdoing. Scrutinizing one's own motives and attitudes thus tends to be just as endless. In Arendt's view, rather than being discovered by scrutinizing familiar motives, who one truly is can only be revealed and experienced in action. Since it is only as acting persons that we reveal our distinctness. It is a distinctness and uniqueness that only fully appears for others. Only others perceive who we are through our words and deeds.

As a result of the common but unjustified intuition that forgiveness is something you have to feel and therefore have to agree on wholeheartedly, rather than something you do, contemporary accounts that aim to provide a way out of Murphy's internalistic conception of forgiveness have not been taken as seriously as they should have been. Moreover, it is precisely because of this internalistic view that any conception of forgiveness always remains entangled in a paradox of justification on the one hand and liberation on the other. Here, I aim to offer a way out of this paradox based on Arendt's account. I do this without completely denying the reality of the paradox; I do not aim to deny that there is not such a

⁵⁷⁷ For this analysis of the concept of virtuosity in Arendt's account I am indebted to the dissertation of Annelies Degryse on Arendt's account of acting and politics. See Annelies Degryse, *Politiek/Handelen: Een reconstructie van Hannah Arendt's politieke filosofie* (Leuven, 2011).

⁵⁷⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237, 244.

thing as a tension between what is morally justified and morally required or valuable. However, rather than solving the moral paradox as an inner conflict of reasons, Arendt's account provides a fruitful new framework to conceive of the liberation of forgiveness. Because, in conceiving of forgiveness as an acting response detached from certain motives and reasons, it no longer turns out to be as contradictory or impossible as is often assumed. To act and re-act in a spontaneous and non-vengeful way is in no way at odds with the judgment or uttered claim that the act was wrong.

This way, Arendt's account is more substantial than performative accounts of forgiveness, which focus on the illocutionary act of forgiveness. She does not reduce the act of forgiveness to a mere speech-act, whose illocutionary operation one describes in a rather formal manner. Her notion of the liberation of forgiveness as resulting from spontaneity and non-sovereignty provides a concrete, alternative and substantial view on the intersubjective role of forgiveness and its connection to human existence.

3. The Transformative Power of Forgiveness

In this chapter I will point out that Arendt's alternative conception of the liberation that is implied in forgiveness enables to bring to the fore the transformative power of forgiveness. It makes clear that, rather than depending on a transformation of emotions, judgments and attitudes, forgiveness precisely brings about a transformation. Forgiveness, as arising from both the capacity to start anew and the possibility to engage in non-sovereign action, does not require a transformation or a moral-psychological process; it *is* the transformation.

To develop this position, I will firstly argue that forgiving, in its Arendtian sense, instead of relying on a pre-existing moral distinction between an agent's pure moral nature and his acts, it enacts a distinction that liberates the other's capacity to act anew. In discussing forgiveness as the capacity to distinguish an agent from his acts in a 'man-made' or artificial way, I will bring to the fore the distinctive liberating and transformative power of the act of forgiveness. Secondly, I will discuss how, in Arendt's view, the interdependent human act of forgiveness establishes new realities and relations. In doing so, I argue that forgiveness, rather than aiming at restoration, is a transformative practice. Finally, I articulate why Arendt holds that forgiveness is the alternative of punishment rather than its opposite. I will argue that punishment, just as forgiveness, has the ability to interrupt a course of events and to set an agent free again. This, however, is not sufficiently recognized in our contemporary system of detention.

3.1. The Distinction between Act and Agent

In the first chapter I have discussed Hampton's view on forgiveness and the liberation it implies. I have asserted that she takes forgiveness to be addressed to one's pure moral core. In order to include the offender in one's moral universe one has to entertain a more positive view on him. He has to be seen in a more favorable light. Hampton therefore also assumes that the task of forgiveness is to cleanse a wrongdoer from a moral stain.

Hampton's view is paradigmatic for both the moral-psychological tradition and the tradition that relies on a fundamental love of one's neighbor. Both assume that forgiveness, and the moral restoration it is supposed to imply, is not only brought about but also justified by referring to a pure moral essence in the wrongdoer that remains unaffected by the wrongdoing. These traditions assume that the moral agent and his inextricable moral dignity is independent of the moral character of his deeds and thus remains unblemished. Dependent on whether it concerns a conditional or unconditional account of forgiveness – with their differing views on moral self-respect and moral dignity – the wrongdoer is also expected or not expected to testify of his inner, decent moral core, for instance by an act of repentance. The shared presupposition that there is an essential distinction between one's inner essence as a moral agent and one's acts, is often referred to as a distinction between sin and sinner.⁵⁷⁹

However, when one forgives in view of an inviolable goodness of which a wrongdoer testifies despite the evil he committed, the damage that has been done risks to be no longer the subject of forgiveness. One is forgiven for what one is despite the wrongdoing rather than because of what one caused. Or to put it in Derrida's words, one refrains from forgiving the guilty as guilty.⁵⁸⁰

However, if one conceives of the distinction between act and agent from an Arendtian perspective, a completely different interpretation of the distinction comes to the fore. In Arendt's view, who one truly is can only be revealed in action. It is only as acting persons that we reveal our distinctness. It is a distinctness and uniqueness that also only appears for others. Only others perceive who we are through our words and deeds. Therefore, it is also only in view of this close interconnection between who one is and what one did that we may come to understand how, in Arendt's account, a person is released from the consequences of his act. Arendt holds that we need to forgive what a person did, for the sake of the person.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁹ In reference to what is known as Augustine's 'hate the sin, love the sinner'. However, a more adequate translation of the citation "Cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum" is "with love for mankind and hatred of sin". Augustine, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2 (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2011), letter 211.

⁵⁸⁰ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 39.

⁵⁸¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243. Arendt is not very consequent in determining the precise object of forgiveness. Sometimes she claims that it is the act which is forgiven. See for instance: Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241, 243. Here she claims that what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it. In other passages she holds that it is the person that is forgiven. In an unpublished letter to Wystan Auden, she writes: "I was wrong when I said that we forgive what was done for the sake of who did it. I may forgive somebody who betrayed me but I am not going to condone betrayal ueberhaupt. I can forgive somebody without forgiving anything; If I forgive a 'thing' then only that I was wronged." Hannah Arendt to Wystan Auden, February 14, 1960, Series: Correspondence File, 1938-1976, n. d, *The Hannah Arendt Papers at the Library of Congress*, American Memory, <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi->

By doing so, she seems to refer to the same distinction between the act and the agent I have highlighted in both Hampton's and Murphy's accounts. It relies on St Augustine's statement that one should hate the sin, while loving the sinner.⁵⁸² As in Hampton's account, in most literature on forgiveness this distinction is taken to imply that while one's actions may be bad, the real person is not. This assumption represents a typical Christian perspective, which holds that men's sins have dispelled them from the earthly paradise, whereas their souls always remain God's children and are deeply loved by Him. The perspective implies that essentially everyone is good, but they constantly fail to act according to that goodness. Arendt's conception of forgiving a sin for the sake of the sinner, or the person who committed the (wrongful) act, diverges from this standard view in some important respects. The interpretation of a pre-existing separation between a person's good nature and his acts contradicts Arendt's basic assumption about the close connection between who one is and one's acts, namely that only action—what someone says and does—can reveal someone as a human person. In my view, her formulation of forgiveness for the sake of the person thus means the opposite of what is implied in Hampton's account. It is precisely because it is impossible to separate a person from his actions and due to the fact that every act always relates to other acts of other agents that both sufferer and doer risk to remain bound by the wrongful act forever. Therefore, one needs to forgive the act and all its consequences, and release both doer and sufferer of them. The act of forgiveness thus makes an artificial distinction between act and agent that did not exist before. It is precisely the powerful human capacity of forgiveness that distinguishes someone from their acts and its consequences, even though one can never really be dissociated from what one did and suffered. This is what makes forgiveness such a powerful releasing act. In many accounts someone is forgiven in view of the fact that all humans are fallible and that they have shortcomings just like everyone else. Therefore, in these accounts, rather than being forgiven for the sake of 'who' he is, i.e., a free acting and speaking person, he is forgiven, for 'what' he is, i.e., a human being with certain character traits, failures and qualities. Hence, in these accounts, one's freedom as an acting being remains out of view. Here, forgiveness turns out to be merely about clearing one's soul and finding personal moral relief, healing and satisfaction. In contrast, Arendt's view opens up an entirely different perspective on the

bin/ampage?collId=mharendt_pub&fileName=02/020030/020030page.db&recNum=0&itemLink=/ammem/arendthtml/mharendtFolderPo2.html&linkText=7. See also Thomas Dürr, *Hannah Arendts Begriff des Verzeihens* (München: Alber Thesen, 2009), 145, 165.

⁵⁸² Augustine, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 2 (Charleston: Nabu Press, 2011), letter 211.

meaning of forgiveness and its relief. In her view, setting an agent free is, rather than salvation from sin or from a moral stain by reference to a pure moral rational core, aimed at the liberation of one's contingent spontaneity. For Arendt, forgiveness entails the important assumption that someone acted as a free agent, that, as Nicholas de Warren puts it, "a wrongdoer could have done otherwise, and might have thought otherwise".⁵⁸³ This contingency, namely the possibility that one could have acted otherwise than one did, is the very essence of freedom. It constitutes a difference in oneself. One's contingent spontaneity entails the possibility to differ from oneself and to relate to oneself. This kind of freedom refers to one's responsibility as an actor instead of to one's inviolable inner goodness. This view will be of great importance for elaborating an alternative conception of remorse in the last chapter. It is also crucial to stress - as I have done in the first part of this thesis - that this freedom and the responsibility that comes with it goes beyond the classic distinction between intentional and unintentional acts and the related concept of accountability. It is not because a certain outcome is unintended that one ceases to be a free agent that could have done otherwise than one did. The juridical classification of an act as unintentional wrongdoing does not destroy the contingency of free action. Rather than to his accountability forgiveness responds to a wrongdoer's capacity of free acting as such. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl puts it: "[I]t is very important to distinguish between a court process, which can [...] pronounce a perpetrator guilty and punish him [...] and a forgiveness process".⁵⁸⁴ Moreover, it is not because one is discharged from what happened that one is unable to take responsibility for what is done. It is this freedom, the freedom to act, which always implies contingency, and the corresponding plurality or difference in oneself that are both assumed and 'saved' by forgiveness. This way, forgiveness sets the agent free again and liberates him from necessity. It "reopens a space", the space of freedom and contingency, "for the other to no longer appear as who she appears to have been".⁵⁸⁵ This liberation of the condition of natality and the capacity to act anew in the other is the transformation that is implied in forgiveness.

In the first chapter, I called attention to the fact that, in Murphy's view, the liberation of forgiveness primarily implies ruling over those personal sentiments that tend to compromise one's moral goals. Murphy's conception is thus centred on the self and one's moral-

⁵⁸³ Nicolas De Warren, "For the Love of the World: Redemption and Forgiveness in Arendt," in *Phenomenology and Forgiveness*, ed. Marguerite La Caze (London-New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018): 36.

⁵⁸⁴ Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters* (New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 2006), 120.

⁵⁸⁵ De Warren, "For the Love of the World: Redemption and Forgiveness in Arendt," 36.

psychological household. I also discussed Hampton's account, which entertains the idea that the liberation of forgiveness should somehow be addressed to the other person. But in dealing with the other as possessing a decent moral core that is worth of forgiveness, the other is deprived of his existence as a concrete distinct and acting person. In contrast, Arendt's conception of forgiveness entails a liberation of the other's capacity for spontaneous action and for taking responsibility. Crucially, in her account, the orientation towards the other and the interdependent relation of forgiveness thus gets a real and substantial meaning. In the next section I therefore bring to the fore that, in her view, forgiveness has the power to establish interdependent human relationships.

3.2. Promising and Forgiving: The Power of Establishing Relations

In the previous chapter I discussed that human political power has its limits. It cannot be stored and kept in reserve. And it depends on its actualization. But Arendt argues that this is not a reason for replacing acting by ruling, which is according to Arendt a way of replacing acting by a form of making. Action has its own ways of making sure that power does not vanish too quickly - for instance in the act of promising and making contracts and treaties. In the same vein, forgiveness is a way of exercising joint power and establishing new realities. The acts of forgiving and promising in Arendt's account are exemplary for action's power. Precisely because forgiving and promising constitute new relations and realities, they are inherently powerful remedies for the irreversibility and unpredictability of action. Arendt holds that it is only because of the power that rises from the actualization of the remedies of promising and forgiving that "men can be trusted with such a great power as that to begin something new".⁵⁸⁶

Arendt holds that the act of mutual promising enables us to build islands of security in the ocean of uncertainty - which the future is by definition. Without the ability to make promises there would be no continuity, let alone durability of any kind, in the relationships between men.⁵⁸⁷ As I have underscored in the first part of this thesis, action is not only irreversible, but

⁵⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 237.

also unpredictable. This is a direct consequence of action's spontaneity and the condition of plurality. Action always takes place in the company of acting others, who have the same capacity for spontaneous unpredictable action. But Arendt argues that action's unpredictability does not merely stem from the boundlessness of the web of relations in which the action takes place. It also results from the fundamental unreliability of people, which is related to what she calls 'the darkness of the human heart'.⁵⁸⁸ Arendt holds with Kant that we are fundamentally unable to fully grasp the motives and incentives of people, both those of others as well as our own. Consequently, we are not only unable to rely on others but also on ourselves, we cannot have complete faith in ourselves.⁵⁸⁹ Arendt calls it the basic unreliability of men "who never can guarantee who they will be tomorrow".⁵⁹⁰ The act of making promises provides a remedy for this unpredictability and unreliability.⁵⁹¹ I have highlighted that, in Arendt's view, the ability of people to gather together and to act in concert generates power. But this power only lasts as long as they stay together. It disappears the moment they depart. Therefore, the force of mutual promise and contract keep them together. It is the mutual agreement on a purpose that bounds them and keeps them together, so that "they can dispose of the future as though it were the present".⁵⁹² By making promises and contracts they can "miraculously" enlarge the dimension in which power can be effective.⁵⁹³ Although Arendt calls the promise that arises from the power of acting together a binding force, it clearly differs from the sovereignty implied in the political model of ruling. Body politics that rely on contracts and treaties leave the unpredictability of human affairs and the unreliability of men as they are. They use them merely as a medium "into which certain islands of predictability are thrown and in which certain guideposts of reliability are erected".⁵⁹⁴ Arendt holds that as soon as promises lose their character of isolated islands of certainty and are misused "to cover the whole ground of the future and to map out a path secured in all directions, they lose their binding power and the whole enterprise becomes self-defeating".⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁸⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid. See also Arendt, *On Revolution*, 96-97.

⁵⁹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 244.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 245.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid., 244.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid.

In the same vein, forgiveness is, in Arendt's view, also an act that establishes new relations and realities. Its power reaches from the present to both the past and the future. But, she claims, its political power is far less recognized. While promising has long been recognized as indispensable in politics, the appropriateness of forgiveness in public and political life is less obvious. Forgiveness, Arendt claims, has "always been deemed unrealistic and inadmissible in the public realm".⁵⁹⁶ Although Arendt stresses its important political role in *The Human Condition* and reveals an original and refreshing view on its operation, she refrains from an extensive elaboration of the meaning of forgiveness in politics and does not examine the implications of her view in much detail. Nevertheless, in discussing forgiveness as grounded in Arendt's conception of political freedom its inherently political and transformative power comes to the fore. It allows forgiveness to be removed from the moral presuppositions by which all considerations of the role of forgiveness are deeply influenced.

Similar to her conception of promising, which she takes to be a result of the darkness of the human heart, Arendt claims that the internal process is not constitutive for the act of forgiveness. She takes the Roman principle to spare the vanquished to be a rudimentary sign of "an awareness that forgiveness may be the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action".⁵⁹⁷ This, she holds, is a wisdom that was entirely unknown to the Greeks. She also refers to the right to commute the death sentence as a prerogative of nearly all Western heads of state.⁵⁹⁸ This suggests that her concept of forgiveness is quite close to a concept of mercy. But I hold that mercy entails an elevation of suffering, while forgiveness, in Arendt's view, is the restoration of one's freedom. This stands in apparent contrast to Murphy's distinction between forgiveness and mercy. Murphy contrasts mercy to forgiveness by holding that while the latter is a matter of how I feel about you, the first is a matter of how I treat you. But, in my view, this entails a misconception of both practices. The practice of mercy is not conceptualized correctly if one merely conceives of it as a way of treating someone. Rather, it is a response to suffering and therefore calls for two assumptions. Firstly, it involves the assumption that one has somehow the power to interrupt another's suffering. Secondly, it entails the assumption that without one's intervention this suffering would endure. Murphy takes mercy to be a regulation of law or state and a release of deserved punishment, but, for instance, the mother who kills her severely handicapped child may also consider this an act of mercy. While forgiveness may in some cases be related

⁵⁹⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243.

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 239.

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

to mercy - since it may not only liberate another as an acting person but it may also release his mental suffering -, both are not the same. It would for instance be absurd to call the mother's killing an act of forgiveness, while it is understandable that she takes it to be an act of mercy.

Arendt perceives of forgiveness as a political activity. Rather than on internal states, it depends on the way in which humans enclose new realities, possibilities and relations in the world they inevitably share, by forgiving one and another. The emphasis is not on what the self needs in order to forgive, but rather on what the act of forgiveness enables and forecloses between peoples and in the world. Its focus is not on the inner psychological strength it requires to overcome the internal struggle, one that comes down to a struggle between the will and its counter-will as the Apostle Paul found himself in (in this case in light of the commandment to forgive), and to will wholehearted the best for a wrongdoer. The emphasis is rather on the power it generates to act with him. The difference between both is immense. In order to act with a wrongdoer no special psychological states are required, no special motives or incentives, beliefs or attitudes. One doesn't have to forswear negative emotions or thoughts. One only needs to resist the impulse of revenge in one's acting (which imply both words and deeds). One only needs to interrupt the automatic cycle of revenge and violence by beginning something new, whatever that may be and however small it may be.

Arendt also does not prescribe how forgiveness has to occur. One only needs to be prepared to engage in a relation with a wrongdoer. In no respect this relation needs to rely on or give rise to any other relationship than the relationship between forgiver and forgiven that is established by the act of forgiveness itself. Arendtian forgiveness also isn't merely aimed at restoring existing personal relationships. Arendt's concept of forgiveness requires the framework of a community of related human beings, who are inspired by the same principles. Rather than restoring previous relations, the act of forgiveness enables to renew relations. Forgiveness is thus not an act of restoration but rather an act of transformation.⁵⁹⁹

As I called attention to in the first part of this thesis, this transformative character of forgiveness is an essential part of Vladimir Jankélévitch's account of forgiveness. Precisely because he believes that no preceding internal process is required, he perceives of forgiveness as an immediate act, that must be granted without any consideration or passing

⁵⁹⁹ Andrew Schaap also tackles the problems of an emphasis on restoration in his agonistic account of political reconciliation. His view will be discussed in the chapter on forgiveness as an act of political liberation. See Andrew Schaap, *Political Reconciliation* (London-New York: Routledge, 2005).

of time. In Arendt's view, forgiveness restores only the possibility of acting and relating to others, but to do this it is precisely required to acknowledge that it is impossible to return to the past. The stipulation that forgiveness does not require restoration but rather recognizes the impossibility to return to the past, may be especially important in political conflicts that are often conceived as insolvable, such as the Israël-Palestine conflict. Therefore, it is evidently necessary that the wrongdoing is acknowledged and neither condoned nor forgotten. Arendt explicitly claims that forgiveness does not call for condoning a wrong.⁶⁰⁰ But forgiveness enables to relate to the other in a manner that avoids the reflex of revenge, without implying that relations or situations should be restored to how they were before the misdeed took place. Insisting on the restoration of a previous relationship may precisely worsen the conflict and fuel the mutual hostility. Such an insistence may occur in diverse ways. It may involve the attempt to refer to good memories or acts preceding the misdeed. Jeffrie Murphy for instance takes old times' sake to be a good reason for forgiving, since it is one way of separating the agent from his act. He argues that when one forgives the repentant, one forgives for what the other *now* is. Similarly, when one forgives for old times' sake, one forgives for what the other *once was*. He asserts that much of our forgiveness of old friends and parents are of this sort.⁶⁰¹ However, as I have pointed out in reference to Hampton's account, instead of having a biographical source, the original relationship one believes to be able to restore might also be of a metaphysical kind. It may involve the reference to mankind in general and to a solidarity with other human beings, as imperfect as ourselves. It may also refer to the religious idea that we are all God's children and thus brothers and sisters. Or it may refer to a political relationship, in which we identify with the other as part of the same community, nation or group of interest.

In contrast to this idea of forgiveness as aiming at a restoration of pre-existing relationships stands Arendt's emphasis on the irreversibility of human action. For Arendt, there is no 'original position' to which one could return by acting. Forgiveness is no 'reset' or 'delete' button. Forgiveness precisely acknowledges that one cannot undo what has been done and provides a remedy for this problem. As Pamela Hieronymi argues: "[A]ny wrongdoing leaves in its wake some amount of damage or cost, be it physical, financial, emotional, relational, or

⁶⁰⁰ Arendt writes to Wystan Auden: "I may forgive somebody who betrayed me but I am not going to condone betrayal ueberhaupt. I can forgive somebody without forgiving anything: If I forgive a 'thing' then only that I was wronged." Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

⁶⁰¹ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 29.

social. This is damage which the offender usually cannot repair ('you can't take it back', as children learn).⁶⁰² Forgiveness is thus also not an attempt to restore moral damage. Rather, it is aimed at a renewal of that which cannot be undone. Arendtian forgiveness does not prescribe how precisely that new relationship should take shape. Insofar as it is a spontaneous act, it depends on the involved actors how this new relationship is constituted. Nevertheless, she does discuss what is at stake in forgiveness. And as I will discuss in the next chapter, she even provides a guiding principle for it. A principle that does not prescribe but that orients and inspires the spontaneous act of forgiveness. Arendt also explicitly emphasizes what forgiveness is not, namely that it is not an act of charity. For Arendt, forgiveness is not the gracious gift it is often believed to be in both religious and non-religious contexts.

Hence, despite being a powerful remedy for the weaknesses of human action, forgiveness also remains a vulnerable act. As a result of one's dependency on others, in some cases, it may turn out not to be possible to forgive or to be forgiven. But rather than replacing forgiveness by a solitary self-delusive practice, it may be possible to find other ways of spontaneous acting that enables a break with the past.⁶⁰³ In the next section I therefore discuss the alternative of punishment. In Arendt's view, punishment is not the opposite of forgiveness. Rather, it is an alternative achievement of human power, which is also capable of releasing someone from his past actions. By discussing this alternative, I will highlight some crucial features punishment has in common with forgiveness.

3.3. The Alternative of Punishment

In the first section of this chapter I pointed to the distinction between a juridical process and a forgiveness process. This, however, does not imply that they are opposites. According to Arendt, punishment also has the capacity to interrupt a course of events. This it has in common with forgiveness. Both attempt "to put an end to something that without

⁶⁰² Pamela Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 550.

⁶⁰³ One may think of raising an online platform for other victims and offenders of similar misdeeds to safely testify about the events and find help or of engaging in an organization that makes new policy proposals for preventing such events in the future etc.

interference could go on endlessly”.⁶⁰⁴ Therefore, Arendt does not conceive of punishment as the opposite of forgiveness. Rather, she takes it to be an alternative.⁶⁰⁵ Within this view, forgiveness is thus also not the release of punishment. The releasing or decreasing of deserved punishment may be conceived as an act of mercy. Mercy may be granted for instance in view of the fact that an offender has suffered enough or has made sufficient efforts to contribute to society and to make amends. Arendt’s conception of punishment as an alternative for forgiveness thus crucially differs from how it is conceived in most contemporary discussions on forgiveness. Although it is often assumed that forgiveness is not fully incompatible with punishment, it is mostly accepted that their logic are crucially at odds.⁶⁰⁶ The restorative justice movement, for instance, claims that punishment is mostly tantamount to retributive justice, entailing an institutionalized form of revenge or payback.⁶⁰⁷ But in Arendt’s view, punishment does seem not to be merely about retribution. As I will discuss in the last chapter, she rather takes retribution to be the only response that is left when we are neither able to punish nor forgive.⁶⁰⁸ Although punishment is only conceivable as some kind of penance for a committed offence aimed at restoring a moral balance and social equality, Arendt’s conception suggests that the conviction of punishment also somehow seems to be able to set the offender, as an acting person, free. Despite the fact that the offender has to bear the punishment that is imposed on him, and thus, in contrast to forgiveness, remains bound to the consequences of his act, he is no longer automatically in the grasp of the series of events of which the offence was part. Strictly speaking, his conviction entails an interruption and a new beginning. An Arendtian perspective on punishment thus reveals that punishment implies both an element of restoration and of transformation. On the one hand punishment is aimed at restoring the moral and social community, to re-affirm its fundamental values, harmony and order. But, on the other hand, this is precisely enabled by an act of interruption. It is the interruption that establishes a new beginning and liberates the offender as a free agent. The interruption of punishment re-affirms not only the existing community and its prescribed rules. It also re-affirms the

⁶⁰⁴ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ See for instance: Bill Wringe, “Punishment, Forgiveness and Reconciliation” *Philosophia* 44, (2016): 1099-1124; Luke Russell, “Forgiving While Punishing,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, 4 (2016): 704-718; Leo Zaibert, “The Paradox of Forgiveness,” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 6 (2009): 365-393; Brandon Warmke, “Is Forgiveness the Deliberate Refusal to Punish?” *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 8, (2011): 613-620.

⁶⁰⁷ See for instance: Howard Zehr, *Changing Lenses* (Virginia-Ontario: Herald Press, 2015), 67-85; Howard Zehr (et al.), *The Big Book of Restorative Justice* (New York: Good Books, 2015), 95-96.

⁶⁰⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240-241.

offender as an initiator, as someone who is capable of free and spontaneous acting. As an initiator, he is capable of doing the unexpected and unprecedented and to take responsibility as a free agent. Punishment thus addresses him as someone who is capable of establishing new realities and new relationships. This is the transformative element of punishment.

Unfortunately, precisely this aspect of punishment is neglected in our contemporary system of incarceration. Although not all punishment involves incarceration, nowadays there are at least three problems in the detention system, which hinder the new beginning that might result from a conviction. One problem is the long-lasting uncertainty about the prison term prisoners find themselves in. Although it may be interpreted as an act of mercy, the system of early release contributes to this uncertainty. In fact it further postpones the precise determination of the punishment, which further enslaves the prisoners.⁶⁰⁹

Secondly, there is the tenacious idea that punishment is not in itself enacting an interruption and transformation but that it rather is a means for moral reform. During the time one spends in prison, one is not merely addressed as a free agent. One needs to become a better person. One has to go through a process of moral conversion. But this has already been demonstrated not to be very realistic. Moreover, punishment has been found not to be the best method for moral improvement in the first place.⁶¹⁰ Furthermore, the requirement of reform is in itself also questionable. The demand to reform implies that one remains in the grip of whatever may be regarded as a sufficient sign of reform. One needs to foreswear everything one was and did before, without ever knowing whether and when it will be sufficient. One has to repent and to repudiate one's acts. One has to dissociate oneself from

⁶⁰⁹ Recently an experimental philosophy course was held in the prison of Leuven by The Center of Philosophy of Life and Detention (Het Centrum voor Levensbeschouwing en Detentie), in collaboration with the University of Leuven. It centered around the question "What is fair punishment?" and had a mix of university students and prisoners among its students. During the course sessions, one of the main problems of fair punishment which was raised by the prisoners was the unbearable uncertainty about the prison term. It precludes them to be involved with the future and to make a new beginning. Therefore, they indicated to prefer a well-defined penalty. See Arne De Jaegere, "Wat is een goede en rechtvaardige straf? Studenten en gedetineerden zoeken het samen uit," *vrtNWS*, 6 maart 2018, <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2018/03/06/-wat-is-een-goede-en-rechtvaardige-straf---studenten-en-gedetine/>.

⁶¹⁰ This is demonstrated by the high degree of recidivism after prison release. For instance in the US, the figures of 2018 of the Bureau of Justice Statistics show that, among the 401,288 state prisoners released in 2005, 1,994,000 arrests occurred during the 9-year period that followed upon their release. This is an average of 5 arrests per released prisoner. 44% of released prisoners were arrested during the first year following release. An estimated 68% of released prisoners were arrested within 3 years, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years. See: Mariel Alper and Matthew R. Durose, "2018 Update On Prisoner Recidivism: A 9-Year Follow-Up Period (2005-2014)," *Bureau of Justice Statistics*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.bjs.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbdetail&iid=6266>. The prisoners that participated in the philosophy course on fair punishment also indicate that imprisonment makes them worse instead of better persons. See De Jaegere, "Wat is een goede en rechtvaardige straf?"

what one did. As I will discuss in the last chapter, this kind of repentance, understood as an act of repudiation, precisely precludes re-affirming oneself as a free and responsible person. It is only when one realizes that it is impossible to dissociate oneself from one's acts that one can be 'saved' by an act of interruption, involving either punishment or forgiveness. Conceived from an Arendtian perspective, punishment has the ability to set free the person as an acting person, whatever they may be doing with that freedom and notwithstanding an eventual limited time of incarnation. But this is only possible when punishment does not involve any further requirements than the fulfillment of the punishment itself. If further requirements are attached, punishment does not set someone free, but rather enslaves them to the endless effort to prove themselves, to hand themselves over to the unsatisfied demands of others. In this case, a conviction is no longer the beginning of an atonement someone can fulfill in order to regain freedom, but an infinite mark someone can never get rid of. Freedom, so to say, is only free when someone is free not to make use of it. Nowadays, there is a paternalistic tendency regarding how prisoners should make use of the 'chances' of a new beginning that are given to them by imprisonment. One should question whether for an important part of the prison population, this does not have a rather reverse effect. Moreover, it deprives punishment of the power to interrupt a course of events, since the quest for satisfaction and compensation does not stop with the conviction and punishment that follows. It only further justifies sentiments of revenge and aversion towards former prisoners.

A third problem, which is related to the second, is the inherent threat of humiliation in imprisonment. According to Avishai Margalit humiliation entails both a rejection from the human commonwealth and a loss of freedom and control.⁶¹¹ In Margalit's view, it is the freedom to shape one's life that makes human beings humans rather than mere things. When one's capacity to be free is rejected, one is rejected as a human being.⁶¹² In reference to Sartre, Margalit explains that not being regarded in the light of this human aspect, i.e. not being seen as free to make decisions bearing on one's life, boils down to being treated subhuman.⁶¹³ Margalit thus considers the experience of loss of control and of being treated subhuman through humiliation to be intertwined. One experiences a loss of self-control when one is no longer able to act on the basis of reasons, but merely on the basis of causes and motives:

⁶¹¹ Avishai Margalit, *The Decent Society* (Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 90.

⁶¹² *Ibid.*, 118.

⁶¹³ *Ibid.*, 117.

A considerable proportion of the most humiliating gestures are those which show the victims that they lack even the most minuscule degree of control over their fate – that they are helpless and subject to good will (or rather, the bad will) of their tormentors.⁶¹⁴

What is thus ignored in humiliation is the ability to make the kind of free decisions that constitute us as human beings.

It must be noted that Margalit's concept of freedom resembles Murphy's and the ideal of freedom as self-mastery and sovereignty. As I already discussed in detail, this conception of freedom is not only problematic, but also very limited. His concept of freedom also relates freedom to autonomy, which is fundamentally at odds with Arendt's concept of non-sovereign freedom. However, this does not need to contest that humiliation indeed also implies a denial of one's freedom and capacity to act spontaneously in a much broader Arendtian sense.

Although prisoners are mostly treated with a minimum of respect, it cannot be denied that the act of punishment and imprisonment entails the permanent risk of humiliation. Even when the punishment and imprisonment are completely justified and thus lack the humiliating arbitrariness of severe crimes, they are nevertheless clearly designed to make people humble. Their neediness as a human creature is used against them in view of restoring the moral balance that has been disturbed. It also precisely frustrates the freedom of movement, which Arendt takes to be constitutive for the freedom to act with others. In Margalit's view, a civilized society is a society whose members do not humiliate one another, while a decent society is a society in which the institutions do not humiliate people.⁶¹⁵ Although Margalit aims to avoid the conclusion that punishment is inherently humiliating, he admits that, in practice, prisoners are regularly humiliated.⁶¹⁶ This means that although punishment does not principally involve humiliation, prisoners nevertheless constantly live in a vulnerable position in which humiliation is an ever-present possibility and threat. In addition, Margalit holds that treating human beings as subhuman includes the treatment of adults as children.⁶¹⁷ But it cannot be denied that even children are granted more occasions to move freely - and thus to act among others and to take decisions influencing their lives - than

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

prisoners. Prisoners are granted basic respect in the sense that they are not maltreated: apart from food, drinks and a bed, they are granted a certain degree of predictability concerning their fate and they are often able to choose some kind of activity. In most cases, their physical integrity is safeguarded as well: they are not tortured or beaten. Nevertheless, because prisoners are put in a situation in which they are made vulnerable and humble, they are precisely ignored with respect to what makes them human: the ability to appear as who they are in acting. Evidently, the goal of imprisonment is precisely punishing someone by depriving him of his freedom. It is a clear sign of society that freedom comes with responsibilities. It is thus also clear that nobody wants offenders not to be blamed or to go clear. Punishment and imprisonment are a way of restoring a balance that is destroyed or threatened by the wrongdoer. It is a balance of reciprocity we care about. Nevertheless, it must also become clear that a punitive treatment precisely tends to miss the point of encouraging offenders to take their responsibility. Denying them their freedom also entails the denial of their ability to take responsibility for what they have done as well as the denial of their ability to make decisions and efforts that amount to a restoration and healing of the damage that is inflicted by them.

All of this may only add to a sense of victimization offenders often experience. Ezzat Fattah, for instance, points out that offenders have regularly been victims themselves, or at least perceive of themselves as victims.⁶¹⁸ Violence is often an expression of their grievance, a reaction to victimization. This points out that a sense of victimization may be a crucial factor in repeatedly displaying unacceptable behavior. Because of this sense of victimization the threat of punishment also risks to preclude constructive communication. Lode Walgrave, for instance, points out that even only the prospect of punishment forecloses all communication with offenders in court. The offender mainly experiences the threat and hence the moral request is simply not heard. The normative message that is attached to the conviction and the punishment doesn't reach its addressee.⁶¹⁹ However, studies about recidivism among

⁶¹⁸ Howard Zehr, "Justice as Restoration. Justice as Respect," *The Justice Professional* 11, (1998): 74.

⁶¹⁹ Lode Walgrave, "Herstelrecht en de wet," in *Straf en Herstel: Ethische Reflecties over Sanctiedoeleinden*, red. Bas Van Stokkom (Den Haag: Boom Juridische Uitgevers, 2004), 75. In child education, it has been recognized that punishment may only have a limited effect and, if not properly used, may even reinforce negative behavior. This is no less shown by organizations that adopt a conditional method of positive reinforcement than by the movement of unconditional parenting. While the former still advocate punishment in the form of time-outs, the latter promotes alternative ways of defining limits. Unconditional parenting mainly focuses on maintaining communication with children and young adults. Some of its supporters therefore promote a 'time-in' precisely on these moments of bad behavior in which a time-out at first sight seems to be the most appropriate response. A 'time-in' entails that parents listen to their children's needs and try to understand what causes their behavior rather than rejecting the child. Subsequently, they confirm the emotions and

juveniles, for instance, show that communication and positive involvement of parents are crucial for avoiding problematic behavior.⁶²⁰ Consequently, it may very well be the case that a society that mainly punishes problematic social behavior also reinforces alienation of its offenders. Putting people who are already in the margins of society even further on the verge of life may thus not only be ineffective, but even dangerous. It is for instance known that some terrorists are radicalized and recruited in prison.⁶²¹ In some criminal subcultures being imprisoned counts as an initiation rite, as they feed on a general shared sense of victimization and hostility towards ordinary society.⁶²² In a Belgian film by Robin Pront, *D'Ardennen*, there is an interesting scene that accurately reflects how the deterrent of punishment brings about precisely the opposite of what it aims at.⁶²³ In this scene, the main character Dave, aims to liberate himself from the crimes in which his brother, Kenneth, is involving him after Kenneth's release from prison. He walks in at a police office in order to report the crimes of his brother. Unfortunately, he is also accessory in the crime for which only Kenneth has been imprisoned. When he was caught and convicted, Kenneth refrained from betraying his brother, Dave. As Dave is waiting to be seen by a police officer, his brother Kenneth walks up to him and takes a seat next to him. Kenneth reminds Dave of all the years in prison that are in front of him if he reports to the police what has happened. He reminds him that it will not be possible to pursue a peaceful life with his girlfriend, as he would like to. Consequently, Kenneth makes a proposal: if Dave continues helping him out with his troubles right now, he will leave him and their shared love, Sylvie, alone and in peace forever. After this conversation, he walks out, leaving it up to Dave to make up his mind and decide. Obviously, Dave is put up against the wall. Unsurprisingly, after some

experiences of the child, while rejecting the behavior. Punishment may serve as a last resort, but turns out to be unnecessary in most cases in which a form of constructive communication is set up. In Belgium, the method of positive reinforcement is advocated by *Kind en Gezin* (Child and Family), a governmental organization for the assistance of families and the supervision of Child Care. Alfie Kohn is a proponent of the Unconditional Parenting Method: Alfie Kohn, *Unconditional Parenting. Moving from Rewards and Punishments to Love and Reason*, (New York-London: Atria Books, 2006).

⁶²⁰ Some studies that examine the relation between parenting styles and recidivism among juveniles pointed out that there is a correlation between a low level of parental involvement and positive parenting and the likelihood of recidivism. See for instance Ruthie G. Williams and Elsie W. Smalls, "Exploring a Relationship between Parental Supervision and Recidivism among Juvenile Offenders at a Juvenile Detention Facility," *International Social Science Review* 90, 2 (2015).

⁶²¹ As is known, for instance, of one of the shooters at Charlie Hebdo in January 2014. See: Angelique Chrisafis, "Charlie Hebdo attackers: born, raised and radicalized in Paris," *The Guardian*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/12/-sp-charlie-hebdo-attackers-kids-france-radicalised-paris>. See also "Paris attacks: Suspects' profiles," *BBC News*, January 12, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-30722038>.

⁶²² Zehr, "Justice as Restoration," 86.

⁶²³ Robin Pront, *D'Ardennen* (Dutch Filmworks, 2015), DVD.

doubts he decides to leave the police office without having seen an officer. What follows is nothing but tragic.

This scene magnificently points out that the threat of punishment keeps offenders tied down to their crimes. In their view, it seems best to continue wrongdoing in order to improve their lives and to find peace. The false belief that, at some point, it will be possible to break with the past and that it will become unnecessary to do wrong, is what makes many of them getting deeper and deeper into troubles. In those cases, the threat of punishment does not prevent from wrongdoing. Instead, it rather is what makes offenders hide previous crimes by committing new ones. The deterrence of punishment thus misses its point and has the perverse effect of encouraging lying, betraying and doing wrong, instead of motivating being honest, open and responsible.

In contrast, a sentence that enables to reveal who one is and facilitates one's capacity to act anew, discourages to wallow in victimization and to hold a deterministic view on one's fate. It enables to reveal oneself as a person in acting and speaking, instead of as a mere offender. The research literature on the outcome of restorative justice practices (such as victim-offender mediation and group conferencing) finds promising effects on recidivism and increasing remorse of offenders for their victims.⁶²⁴ In my view, this is a result of one of the main conditions that need to be fulfilled in order for a practice to be both restorative and transformative: voluntary participation of both victims and offenders and an encouragement of their capacity to act with others. It is the mutual willingness of offenders and victims to meet each other that invites offenders to take their responsibility and encourages them to face the damage they have done. Restorative justice's voluntariness contrasts sharply with the way in which ordinary criminal law exerts coercion and obligation. Therefore, it is also problematic to insert restorative practices within criminal law. As soon as collaboration in a restorative program involves the potential prospect of reduction of sentence, its voluntariness risks to be compromised. However, in order to explore the full potential of restorative justice it should no longer be treated in a stepmotherly way. Contact between victim and offender and a real confrontation with the devastated lives are crucial. For this reason, community service remains only an alternative way of punishing. The effort that is delivered to society remains abstract and is exercised as a result of an obligation. It doesn't make offenders more sensible to the damage they inflicted. It only reminds them of the

⁶²⁴ See for instance John Braithwaite, *Restorative justice and responsive regulation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

humiliation of being on the bottom of society. Nevertheless, in California there is an interesting example of voluntary community service. Prisoners working as fireman in special camps are free to participate and quit and are sometimes even in a position which allows them to escape. This, however, turns out to be very unusual.⁶²⁵ The firemen's attitudes would probably be entirely different if they were intensively controlled, forced and threatened. The example also points out that the prisoners are out to take their responsibility as acting agents. In taking free initiatives, one is capable to reveal oneself as an agent and a person, rather than an offender who is caught up in the circumstances that tend to control his life. Restorative justice's voluntariness is thus crucial as it expresses both the free exchange that is at stake and the fundamental belief in each participant's ineradicable freedom of spontaneity. It encourages to take responsibility and to deal with the consequences of what happened. Respecting one's freedom is a sign of trust, which is of vital importance for joint action and reconciliation. Therefore, in my view, a mere interaction between offenders and victims is far from sufficient for true long-lasting reconciliation. Offenders also need to be involved in negotiations about how they will compensate their victims and how they should be punished. They should be able to express safely what they consider reasonable. Not only does it make them sensitive to what the victim has suffered as a result of the crime, it also encourages them to take an impartial point of view towards their own behavior. Instead of becoming hostile, they are challenged to take a reasonable and responsible attitude towards the wrong they have committed. The capacity for taking free initiatives, even in a context of punishment and compensation, is crucial for making offenders aware of the fact that they are free actors, who are able to break with past events and take responsibility for the shared future.

⁶²⁵ See: Vanessa Barford, "The Prisoners fighting wildfires in California," *BBC News*, September 24, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-34285658>.

3.4. For the sake of 'who': From Moral Essence to Natality

In discussing the transformative power of forgiveness, it has become clear that Arendt's conception of spontaneity and freedom does not only enable to perceive of forgiveness as an act of interruption, without reference to any motives and causes that justify, explain or enable it. It has also become clear that forgiveness, as a free and interruptive act, addresses the other as a free acting person. This clearly differs from Hampton's view. Hampton's account is paradigmatic for the common moral assumption that by forgiving one expresses a fundamental trust in the other person's moral essence or pure and decent moral core. It involves the belief that who a person truly is depends on his inner moral capacities and his responsiveness to moral reform. Within this view, it is therefore assumed that forgiveness depends on this presupposed distinction between one's moral pure essence and one's immoral acts. Insofar as we are able to rely on that distinction we are also able to forgive.

However, in discussing Hampton's view in the first chapter I have asserted that any reference to a pure moral essence precisely fails to give account of the other as a concrete, distinct, acting and responsible person. By focusing on a pure moral essence, one merely decides to be blind to what reveals who one is, namely one's acts. By addressing another in their pure moral core, one is precisely overlooking the other. Moreover, one ignores the actual problem for which forgiveness provides a remedy, namely that another cannot just be discerned from what he did. What one does is constitutive for one's existence as a free acting person. Precisely this makes the irreversibility of acting such an unbearable problem for a person. What one did always tends to adhere to someone and therefore hinders free acting in the future. It is also for this reason that an act of repentance, understood as the repudiation of one's acts, is not sufficient for liberating oneself from what one did. Who one is as a distinct, free person, is only visible to others through one's acts. Therefore, one also depends on others to regain the freedom to act and to re-appear as who one is. Seen from an Arendtian point of view, re-integration in the community is thus only possible if it entails a reaffirmation of one's freedom as an acting person. In order to be liberated from what one irreversibly did one must be liberated as a distinct acting person and be restored in the ability to act again.

The act of forgiveness restores the condition of natality. It enables to appear again and to appear as one never did before. It involves the possibility to differ from oneself, to surprise oneself and others and to act in an unprecedented and spontaneous way. This kind of

renewal constitutes hope for the future and for the world we share. It enables to take responsibility, not merely by repudiating previous acts, but by acting again and to reveal who one is in how one appears. This emphasis on one's intrinsic capacity to appear again crucially differs from the moral notion of reform, which requires an inner and moral conversion. Such a conversion entails the idea that one can exercise control over oneself and is able to identify who one is and aims to be. Arendt's condition of natality instead suggests that one never completely coincides with oneself. The assumption that one never knows how one appears to others implies that one's acting and speaking does not refer to an inner essence or a true self that is 'expressed' in acting. It rather reveals that some difference or plurality always remains present. Who one appears to be is not only never entirely within one's power, but it is also never determined in advance. This highlights that Arendt's condition of natality is closely related to her concept of freedom as both entailing spontaneity and non-sovereignty.

It is only in view of the close interconnection between who one is and what one did that we may come to understand how, in Arendt's account, a person is released from the consequences of his act in an act of forgiveness. It is precisely because the distinction between act and agent - on which Murphy's and Hampton's accounts rely - cannot be presupposed that we have to carry out the artificial act of forgiveness. When Arendt refers to the need to forgive what a person did, for the sake of that person,⁶²⁶ she refers to one's natality rather than to an inviolable moral core we would all share. Natality implies a contingent freedom and plurality. As an act, forgiveness enacts a distinction and a transformation that cannot be presupposed. 'Seeing the other in a new light' is thus not dependent on the ability to change one's judgments about who the other truly is. It rather entails the capacity to affirm the other as an acting person and to restore his freedom, despite of what he did with that freedom before or what he might be doing with it later. Rather than merely dissociating the true person from his bad acts, forgiveness is re-affirming the possibility of acting and of revealing who one is in acting. By doing so, forgiveness is, rather than restoring an original moral essence or goodness, enacting a transformation that enables new unexpected acts, new unprecedented realities and new relationships.

Within this view, punishment is also no longer conceived as standing in opposition to forgiveness. Rather, it implies a similar interruption that also addresses the person as a free and responsible agent. Someone is punished in view of what he did. This entails the

⁶²⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243.

assumption that he is a free agent who is capable of acting differently than he did. Punishment thus precisely re-affirms the contingency and freedom of acting. At first sight, it seems as if punishing someone for what he did precisely ties the person to his acts. It appears an act of mere revenge and retribution, which is precisely the opposite of the interruption forgiveness aims at. However, Arendt's view on punishment as an alternative for forgiveness enables to point out that fair punishment may also be a way of liberating someone from what he did. Within this view, the most important distinction between punishment and forgiveness turns out to be that punishment calls for a process of atonement. Someone has to atone for what he did before he can be expected to be liberated from his acts. Forgiveness instead entails the immediate liberation of the consequences of one's acts. However, this also suggests that as soon as someone has atoned, he should also be 'forgiven' and thus be liberated from the further consequences of his acts. Atonement is precisely what deprives the consequences of their infinite boundlessness. Just like forgiveness, the atonement of punishment enacts a well-defined and definite interruption of these consequences and therefore involves a transformation.

4. Forgiveness as an Act of Political Liberation

By conceptualizing forgiveness as a free spontaneous act it has become clear that it departs from any motive or cause that may justify or enable it. Nevertheless, there is a strong tendency in the philosophical literature on forgiveness towards conceiving of forgiveness as an act of love, compassion or unconditional moral grace and goodness. It is assumed that in forgiving we take a positive attitude towards the wrongdoer and concern for his well-being. However, I argue that since this positive attitude is grounded in sentiments such as love, compassion or sympathy, these conceptions fail to see the agent as a distinct acting person. I point out that, in Arendt's view, these sentiments in fact remove the space between persons that is necessary for action to take place. Therefore, these conceptions also fail to conceive of forgiveness as a political liberating act. In this chapter I will therefore scrutinize Arendt's arguments against the prevailing conception of forgiveness as involving goodness or love. By doing so it will become clear that these sentiments are particularly dangerous when they have free play in the public domain of action. Consequently, I will point out that, in Arendt's view, the liberation of the capacity to act requires respect for the other and the distance that is necessary for acting in plurality. Finally, I will draw the conclusion that the distinction between shared humanness and plurality is crucial to developing a sheer political concept of forgiveness.

4.1. The Distance in Plurality and the Principle of Respect

In the literature on forgiveness it is often assumed that forgiveness requires a moral-psychological process of transformation and an effort to put the offender in a more favourable light. It is also regularly held that this moral-psychological process of transformation has to be brought about by an act of empathy, understanding, love or benevolence.

Charles Griswold, for instance, assumes that forgiveness necessary involves an act of sympathetic understanding. According to Griswold, forgiveness is not only the end of a

process of transformation, but also the process itself. Forgiveness, he claims, calls for moderating one's resentment and making "a further commitment to work toward a frame of mind in which even that resentment is let go".⁶²⁷ He believes, in line with Murphy's and Hampton's accounts, that one must have reasons for this transformation to take place.⁶²⁸ In his conditional account, those reasons are supposed to be provided both by the offender and the victim. Griswold holds that for forgiveness to take place well-defined conditions on both sides have to be fulfilled. Both the offender and the victim have to go through a process of transformation that is mutually dependent and requires reciprocity.⁶²⁹ Forgiveness, Griswold claims, is a dyadic process.⁶³⁰ He assumes that, for this process to take place, the possibility to enter sympathetically into the situation and person of the other is crucial. According to him, forgiveness requires the recognition of the other as a human being like oneself. This is enabled by the capacity to take the other's point of view in an act of sympathy. Therefore, he relies on Adam Smith's account of sympathy.⁶³¹ In Smith's view, sympathy means putting myself in your shoes, by taking on your persona and look at the situation from your point of view, through an act of projective imagination.⁶³²

Other scholars, such as Glen Pettigrove, hold that there is an essential relationship between forgiveness and love. He takes forgiveness to be promoting an offender's well-being. However, Pettigrove argues that forgiveness does not depend on conditions that guarantee that the wrongdoer deserves forgiveness or positive regard. He takes forgiveness to be an act of grace, an intentional act of unmerited favour.⁶³³ He argues that the notion of grace provides moral reasons that differ from reasons that are grounded in desert.⁶³⁴ He also assumes that the concern with another's well-being points to a relation between forgiveness and love. Although he believes that not every case of forgiveness needs to be rooted in love, he does assume that love yields forgiveness.⁶³⁵ Consequently, he holds that a comparison of the

⁶²⁷ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 42.

⁶²⁸ Murphy, "Forgiveness and resentment," 24

⁶²⁹ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 47, xiv.

⁶³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶³¹ For an extensive discussion of the various meanings of the notion of sympathy in Hume, Kant's and Smith's account, see Michael L. Frazer, *The Enlightenment of Sympathy. Justice and the Moral Sentiments in the Eighteenth Century and Today* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶³² Charles Griswold, "Sympathy and Selfishness," in Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 87.

⁶³³ Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 133.

⁶³⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-131, 138-142.

⁶³⁵ *Ibid.*, 98, 103.

features of love and forgiveness helps explaining what kind of act forgiveness is. He argues that our encounters with love are our most obvious experiences of grace.⁶³⁶

Some accounts claim an even more intimate relationship between love and forgiveness. As I discussed in the previous chapters, some accounts rely on a universal principle of love for man and mankind. This love may either be conceived of either as Christian neighbourly love or as the more humanistic or secular moral value of *agape* or as a general attitude of goodwill.⁶³⁷ It is believed that the principle of love of mankind enables to address the wrongdoer's inviolable moral goodness and his moral capacities for improvement.

In Martha Nussbaum's account forgiveness is even completely pushed aside by the sentiment of love. She rejects forgiveness as a way of dealing with past wrongs and replaces it by an ethic of unconditional love and generosity. An ethic of unconditional love and generosity departs from judgment, confession and contrition but also from the waiving of anger. Love is understood as a first and immediate response, rather than a substitute of a payback wish.⁶³⁸ To illustrate this, Nussbaum refers to the parable of the Prodigal Son, which is, according to her, often mistakenly understood as an example of forgiveness.⁶³⁹ She argues that the father's reaction cannot be described as forgiveness, either conditional or unconditional.⁶⁴⁰ Nussbaum notes that the father does neither make any reference to forgiveness, nor to the son's repentance, nor to anger.⁶⁴¹ There is only a type of intense, unconditional parental love, involving a strong bodily feeling, expressed in the words "I'm so happy that he is still alive".⁶⁴² It is a love that, rather than remaining rooted in the past, focuses on an uncertain future.⁶⁴³ It refers to a loss and to the joy of a rediscovery, Nussbaum argues.⁶⁴⁴

⁶³⁶ "Love [...] involves the 'inclination and spontaneous readiness' to promote the beloved's interests and to bring her joy. And this readiness is not determined by the merits of the beloved." Ibid., 136-137.

⁶³⁷ See for instance Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 97; Garrard and Naughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness," 44; Hampton, "Forgiveness, Resentment and Hatred," 84-85; Trudy Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, 1 (1999): 65-66; Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, 100-103.

⁶³⁸ Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 78.

⁶³⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid., 80.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 81.

⁶⁴² Ibid.

⁶⁴³ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 79. However, it should be questioned whether Nussbaum's frequent usage of the term 'transition' is not a way of avoiding the term forgiveness. It seems to be a disguised way of pointing at the transformative forgiving act that is required to move away from the past. For my discussion of Nussbaum's account and her alternative of unconditional love and generosity, see Els Van Peborgh, Review of *Anger and Forgiveness. Resentment, Generosity, Justice*, by Martha C. Nussbaum, *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77, (2016): 342-347.

In Arendt's view, forgiveness is neither an act of love, nor sympathetic identification with the other. It is also not an act of charity or goodness. She claims that sincerely doing good is rather at odds with the publicity of plural political action. Goodness must be hidden from being seen or heard.⁶⁴⁵ It must "go into absolute hiding and flee all appearance if it is not to be destroyed".⁶⁴⁶ The moment good work becomes public and known it loses its specific character of goodness, of "being done for nothing but goodness' sake".⁶⁴⁷ I have argued in the first part that unconditional accounts of forgiveness are at risk of claiming moral superiority. The openly generous granting of forgiveness may be displayed in such a manner that it actually becomes suspect. For this reason, Arendt also associates goodness with self-forgetfulness.⁶⁴⁸

Goodness can exist only when it is not perceived, not even by its author; whoever sees himself performing a good work is no longer good, but at best a useful member of society or a dutiful member of a church. Therefore: 'Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth'.⁶⁴⁹

Arendt argues that although goodness is no longer pure when it appears openly, it may still be useful as organized charity or an act of solidarity.⁶⁵⁰ Pure goodness is an extreme and exceptional phenomenon. Moreover, in *On Revolution* she warns "that absolute goodness is hardly any less dangerous than absolute evil" when it becomes part of the course of human affairs.⁶⁵¹ She holds that "[t]he absolute [...] spells doom to everyone when it is introduced into the political realm".⁶⁵² Goodness also does not simply consist of the criterion of selflessness "for surely the Grand Inquisitor is selfless enough".⁶⁵³ Arendt thus warns against the dangers of both selflessness and goodness in the public domain of acting.⁶⁵⁴

⁶⁴⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 74.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 74-76.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 74. Arendt cites Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁵¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 82.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁶⁵⁴ It must be noted that, at first sight, this characterization of moral goodness as self-forgetfulness contradicts Arendt's assumption that morality is an activity in which the self stands in the middle of one's considerations. Arguably, it is because she assumes that absolute, sincere goodness is rare that she takes selflessness mostly not to result from goodness and may thus be a vice. In order to be a moral and responsible person it is precisely necessary to relate to oneself. As we will discuss in the third chapter, anonymity or being a 'nobody' leads in Arendt's view to thoughtless evil, since it enables to refrain from taking responsibility. Margaret Canovan points out that the superhumanly high standard of selflessness in the performance of pure

For Arendt, forgiveness is not a selfless act of goodness. She also does not take it to be an act of (public) charity. In a letter to Wystan Auden she writes: “The trouble with charity as with the law is that it levels out distinction”.⁶⁵⁵ The acts of charity are addressed to the needy in general. Therefore, it also reduces people to their neediness. The criterion of fairness towards the needy requires that who they are remains out of view. They ‘deserve’ charity, merely because they are human and merely because they are in need. This also reflects Arendt’s view on *caritas* or neighborly love in her dissertation on Augustine. Here she writes that in neighborly love the Christian only loves the being, namely God, who lives in the other person as his source:

[...] every beloved is only an occasion to love God. The same source is loved in each individual being. No individual means anything in comparison with this identical source. The Christian can thus love all people because each one is only an occasion, and that occasion can be everyone. Love proves its strength precisely in considering even the enemy and even the sinner [...] as mere occasions for love. It is not really the neighbor who is loved in this love of neighbor – it is love itself.⁶⁵⁶

Arendt argues that forgiveness instead, is addressed to a distinctive person, a unique and irreducible ‘who’. As I revealed before, she holds that forgiveness is granted for the sake of the person who did wrong:

Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it.⁶⁵⁷

goodness, may also clarify why Christianity appears in Arendt’s writings in two opposite forms. Sometimes it appears as the epitome of selflessness, sometimes she characterizes it as an introverted religion concerned primarily with the believer’s own personal salvation. According to Canovan, Arendt sometimes suggests that Jesus’ high standard of selfless goodness was counterproductive, making his followers intensely aware of their shortcomings. Consequently, they transformed his teaching into a doctrine of salvation from sin, and became preoccupied with the state of their souls rather than with goodness or the love of God. See Margaret Canovan, *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation*, 180. This awareness of one’s shortcomings and the transformation towards a preoccupation with the salvation of one’s soul can also be observed in the struggle and solution of the Apostle Paul I discussed earlier.

⁶⁵⁵ Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

⁶⁵⁶ Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, loc. 2007 of 5966.

⁶⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

In Arendt's view, this person, or *who* someone is, differs from what he is, a person with certain qualities and achievements. As a person, one only appears to others, not to oneself. Therefore, Arendt argues, nobody is able to forgive oneself.⁶⁵⁸

For Arendt, forgiveness also neither involves the sentiment or passion of love, as is often believed.⁶⁵⁹ The confusion, she holds, results from the fact that passionate love is also capable of revealing the distinct person, the *who*, of the other:

[L]ove, although it is one of the rarest occurrences in human lives, indeed possesses an unequaled power of self-revelation and an unequaled clarity of vision for the disclosure of *who*, precisely because it is unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness with *what* the loved person may be, with his qualities and shortcomings no less than with his achievements, failings, and transgressions.⁶⁶⁰

But love, Arendt argues, is not only rare, but also unworldly.⁶⁶¹ By reason of its passion, it destroys the in-between that simultaneously relates us to and separates us from others.⁶⁶² Arendt's concept of plurality entails being connected and equal to others while retaining individual distinction. She explicitly distinguishes being with others in plurality - which requires a certain distance that is necessary for revealing one's distinctness -, from the togetherness of people, being pressed into one mass, acting as if they were one body with one 'general' will.⁶⁶³

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt argues that the space between people is necessary for the freedom of movement and for free acting in plurality:

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 243.

⁶⁵⁹ Arendt refers to the "current conviction that only love has the power to forgive", which still prevails today. Ibid., 242.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁶¹ Arendt distinguishes love, which is exceptional, from romance, which is much more common. See: Ibid., 242 footnote 81.

⁶⁶² Ibid., 242.

⁶⁶³ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 60, 94. For Arendt's discussion of Rousseau's general will, see *ibid.*, 75-79. According to Arendt, Rousseau's uniting general and indivisible will replaced the word 'consent', or the will of all, with its overtones of deliberate choice and considered opinion. Ibid., 76. Its attractiveness for the men of the French Revolution was that it puts "a multitude into the place of a single person; for the general will was nothing more or less than what bound the many into one". Ibid., 77.

[Total terror] substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.⁶⁶⁴

Arendt claims that tyranny abolishes the fences of law between men. Total terror also uses this instrument of tyranny but even goes one step further. It also destroys the lawless, fenceless wilderness of fear and suspicion tyranny leaves behind. Although in Tyranny the public space is a desert, it is still some kind of space. Instead, total terror presses men against each other, completely destroying the space between them.⁶⁶⁵ Even fear, although under totalitarian conditions probably more widespread than ever before, can no longer serve as a principle for action. The arbitrariness by which the victims of totalitarianism are chosen, completely “in accordance with the objective necessity of natural and historical processes”,⁶⁶⁶ causes fear to lose its practical usefulness. Actions guided by the principle of fear can no longer help to avoid the dangers man fears.⁶⁶⁷ Consequently, since it eliminates the capacity to act according to a principle, total terror destroys “the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space”.⁶⁶⁸ Although the disappearance of the space between people united in love is evidently not comparable to the “iron band” of the terror of totalitarianism, it illustrates love’s anti-political character.⁶⁶⁹

Love, by its very nature, is unworldly, and it is for this reason rather than its rarity that it is not only apolitical but antipolitical, perhaps the most powerful of all antipolitical human forces.⁶⁷⁰

This anti-political character of love is not as innocent as it may seem. The distinction Arendt here makes between apolitical and anti-political is crucial. Although at first glance love may

⁶⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York – London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc., 1973), 465-466.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 466.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 467.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 466.

⁶⁶⁹ Arendt notes that the only in-between that can insert itself between two lovers is the child as love’s own product. The lovers are now related to the child, that is between them, and which they hold in common. As such, the child is representative of the world in that it also separates them. It indicates the new world, implied in each birth, they introduce into the existing world. The lovers return to the world through the child, but this new worldliness is in a sense the end of love, which must either overcome the partners anew or transform into another mode of belonging. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242.

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

seem a quite innocent uniting power, its anti-political character makes it not merely useless for worldly human affairs, but even threatening for the plurality implied in free action. If it is expanded from the narrowly circumscribed sphere of intimacy to the larger domain of human affairs, passion's boundlessness destroys the space that is necessary for free action. This space can only be upheld by limits and proper distance.

Illustrative for the effects of love and passion in the domain of human affairs is its influence in the French Revolution, discussed by Arendt in *On Revolution*. Here, Arendt analyses the role compassion played in the French Revolution and how it drowned the foundations of freedom and compassion finally ended in violence and terror:⁶⁷¹

Compassion, in this respect not unlike love, abolishes the distance, the in-between which always exists in human intercourse (...). Because compassion abolishes the distance, the worldly space between men where political matter, the whole realm of human affairs, are located, it remains, politically speaking, irrelevant and without consequence. (...) [I]t is incapable of establishing 'lasting institutions'. (...) As a rule, it is not compassion which sets out to change the worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering, but if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence.⁶⁷²

Arendt explains that compassion, just like pure goodness, is characterized by a curious muteness:⁶⁷³ "Passion and compassion are not speechless, but their language consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words."⁶⁷⁴ It is characterized by an incapacity or unwillingness for "all kinds of predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks *to* somebody *about* something that is of interest to both because it *inter-est*, it is between them".⁶⁷⁵ A talkative and argumentative interest in the world is alien to compassion. Its passionate intensity is directed solely towards the suffering man himself.

However, Arendt maintains that Rousseau transformed and perverted compassion into the sentiment of pity. It was no longer addressed to a singular person but rather involved in the

⁶⁷¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 94.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, 86-87.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

moods and caprices of one's own heart. In contrast to the emotion of compassion, the sentiment of pity can be addressed to the multitude:

Pity, because it is not stricken in the flesh and keeps its sentimental distance, can succeed where compassion always will fail; it can reach out to the multitude and therefore (...) enter the market-place. But (...) without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak. Moreover, by virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others.⁶⁷⁶

In contrast to the particularity and muteness of compassion, the sentiment of pity also becomes boundless and talkative, as its inner enjoyment comes to serve as a stimulus for a new range of emotions.⁶⁷⁷ It is precisely the intense involvement with one's own boundless sentiments that makes one insensitive for reality in general and for persons in particular.⁶⁷⁸ What at first may have been a genuine compassion towards specific suffering and particular persons "turned into the boundlessness of an emotion that seemed to respond only too well to the boundlessness of suffering of the multitude in their sheer overwhelming numbers".⁶⁷⁹ According to Arendt, it was the ocean of suffering around him and the turbulent sea of emotion within him, caused by the sentiment of pity, that made Robespierre lose the capacity to establish and hold fast to rapports with persons in their singularity. It drowned all specific considerations - "the considerations of friendship no less than considerations of statecraft and principle".⁶⁸⁰ Consequently, the revolutionaries felt no compunctions in sacrificing individual persons to their 'principles', to the cause of the revolution or to the course of history.⁶⁸¹ Pity, Arendt holds, has proven to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself, because it is believed to be the spring of virtue.⁶⁸²

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 84.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 89. It must be noted that in the war of Syria many of the fighters that were recruited in the West by the extremely cruel terrorist organization IS were first frequently and deliberately exposed, by way of pictures and films, to the suffering of the Syrian population under the regime of Bashar al-Assad. See Edwin Bakker and Roel de Bont, "Belgian and Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters (2012–2015): Characteristics, Motivations, and Roles in the War in Syria and Iraq," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, 5 (2016): 846. Some 'de-

But Arendt's critique of the sentiment of pity does not entail that we should neglect the suffering and poor life conditions of others. Her account of politics and political engagement is not as anti-social as is sometimes believed.⁶⁸³ She contrasts the sentiment of pity with the alternative principle of solidarity. As a principle it can guide and inspire action:

[S]olidarity, though it may be aroused by suffering, is not guided by it, and it comprehends the strong and the rich no less than the weak and the poor.⁶⁸⁴

Cold and abstract as solidarity may appear, it remains committed to ideas (greatness, honor, dignity) rather than to any love of men. Therefore it is able to look at fortune and misfortune, the strong and the weak with an equal eye.⁶⁸⁵

Similarly, because love is a valuable but anti-political emotion, Arendt takes it to be inappropriate for forgiveness. She argues that it is often believed, under the influence of Christianity that only love can forgive. It is assumed that only love is fully receptive to who someone is, irrespective of one's talents and traits.⁶⁸⁶ In the contemporary literature on forgiveness there is much discussion on whether it is possible to extrapolate such an intimate emotion to the larger human relationships we have with strangers. However, as I will discuss in the next section, the idea that forgiveness is necessarily related to sentiments such as love or compassion completely distorts the debate on the potential of a political concept of forgiveness. It implies the assumption that only the cultivated sentiments of sympathy, compassion or empathy are able to make us forgive strangers who wronged us. Yet, Arendt's view departs crucially from this prevailing assumption. Arendt takes, instead of sympathy, empathy or compassion, respect to be what prompts to forgive those with whom we are only 'politically', thus not intimately, related. She takes respect to be in the larger domain of human affairs what love is in the intimate sphere. The relations in the domain of human

radicalized' fighters declared that they were sincerely touched by the misery in the Middle-East, which was believed to be either caused or ignored by the West.

⁶⁸³ Arendt has given rise to this belief due to her emphasis on the need to make a distinction between the political and the social in for instance *The Human Condition* and her essay *Reflection on Little Rock*. See Hannah Arendt, "Reflections on Little Rock," in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. Peter Baehr (New York-London: Penguin Books, 2000), 231-246.

⁶⁸⁴ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 88-89.

⁶⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁶⁸⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 242-243.

affairs are characterized by plurality. In this regard the attitude of respect is not only more appropriate than love, but Arendt also takes it to be quite sufficient to prompt forgiveness.⁶⁸⁷

[Respect] is a regard for the person from the distance which the space of the world puts between us, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we may highly esteem.⁶⁸⁸

Respect is thus also able to address the person in his uniqueness and distinctness, apart from his qualities and achievements. Arendt explicitly departs from the common conviction that respect is due only where we admire or esteem. In her view, respect is rather an attitude that abstracts from what we may esteem in others. Respect, she argues, concerns only the person, *who* someone is in distinction of *what* he is. The latter refers merely to his specific talents, character traits, achievements and shortcomings. She compares respect to the Aristotelian *philia politike*, a kind of political friendship, without intimacy and without closeness.⁶⁸⁹ In Arendt's view, political friendship is not concerned with the other as a fellow human being. It is also not an intimate relation. Rather, it consists of a dialogue in which both friends share a world. It is in the 'dialogue between friends' that one is able to understand the truth in the opinion of the other, who is a distinct and dissimilar person. It is in this sharing of opinions on worldly matters and the possibility to see the world from the viewpoint of the other, that these friends share a world.⁶⁹⁰

The possibility of sharing opinions among friends depends on a proper distance between both partners, so that they appear for each other in their distinction and are able to relate to one and other by sharing the world that is between them. Similarly, the attitude of respect enables the distinction necessary for making forgiveness a plural interdependent action in which the wrongdoing remains in place and can be its subject. Arendt points to an important and revealing distinction between forgiving out of love on the one hand and out of respect on the other when she claims that love is always willing to forgive the beloved whatever he may have done.⁶⁹¹ In her letter to Auden, Arendt claims that both love and charity 'forgive' indiscriminately. She takes forgiveness in this sense to be a form of condoning. Love, she holds, will forgive everything because of its utter commitment to the beloved person.

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid., 243.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid., 243.

⁶⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, 1 (1990): 82-84.

⁶⁹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 243.

Similarly, charity forgives the misdeed because of its solidarity with human's sinful nature. In contrast, forgiving out of respect is neither an indiscriminate act of charity nor of love. In reference to her statement in *The Human Condition* that we forgive what has been done for the sake of the person she clarifies:

I was wrong when I said that we forgive what was done for the sake of who did it. I may forgive somebody who betrayed me but I am not going to condone betrayal ueberhaupt [sic.]. I can [...] forgive somebody without forgiving anything; If I forgive a 'thing' then only that I was wronged. But charity indeed forgives ueberhaupt [sic.], it forgives betrayal in the person who betrayed – on the ground, to be sure, of human sinfulness and solidarity with the sinner. I would admit that there is a great temptation to forgive in the spirit of Who am I to judge?, but I'd rather resist it.⁶⁹²

Arendt's account of forgiveness is thus also not unconditional. She does not believe that everything can be forgiven, merely out of respect for the person who did the deed. Rather, she believes that there are unforgivable deeds. Moreover, she assumes that someone is only forgivable to the extent to which he is able to go back and realize what he did. However, her account of the role of remorse crucially differs from the condition of repentance I discussed in the first part of this thesis. This will be discussed in the last chapter, 'The Political Conscience'.

Arendt's analysis of the anti-political implications of emotions such as love and compassion and her critique of the sentiment of pity enables to shed a new light on some of the common misunderstandings about the political role of forgiveness. In contemporary literature on forgiveness there is not only a stubborn tendency to invoke goodness, virtue and generosity as a fundament for forgiveness. But, as we discussed above, the sentiments of sympathy, empathy, love and compassion are also often considered to be necessary to see the person of the offender in a new light.⁶⁹³ Arendt's critique of the reliance on moral sentiments in the larger domain of human affairs enables us to see that, although emotions, such as love and compassion, may reveal the *who* of a person in the very limited atmosphere of intimacy, it is useless and even dangerous to extrapolate those emotions to the broader domain of human

⁶⁹² Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

⁶⁹³ Sometimes it is even believed that sentiments such as sympathy may replace the 'problematic' concept of forgiveness. See for instance Nir Eisikovits, *Sympathizing with the Enemy: Reconciliation, Transitional Justice, Negotiation*, (Dordrecht-Leiden-Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2010), 25-35.

affairs, in which de facto most misdeeds that require forgiveness take place. Arendt's analysis of forgiveness as an activity that requires plurality in order to be meaningful puts things in a radically different light. It enables to turn things upside down. In Arendt's view, forgiveness enables to rebuild relations and possibilities with those people we are not intimately connected with. It is rather because we have no existing relationship and commitment to rely on that we need the artificial act of forgiveness to interrupt the cycle of revenge and violence. It is rather because we have no self-evident fundament that guarantees that our relationship with the other survives every misdeed that we have to rely on forgiveness. In the relationships that are bound by the emotion of love, we are not in need of forgiveness in its strict sense, because we are already able to forget, condone or overcome what was done in light of our love and loving relationship with the other.

However, before clarifying this issue further in the next section on political forgiveness, it is important to point out that, according to Arendt, even love violates the integrity of the wrongdoer if it forgives without having been asked to: "Is not forgiving without being asked to really impertinent, or at least conceited – as though one said: Much as you tried, you could not wrong me; charity has made me invulnerable?"⁶⁹⁴

For this reason, I also take it to be appropriate to assume that respect in an Arendtian account of forgiveness operates as a guiding principle -even though Arendt herself does not refer to it in that way. As a principle it enables us to orient the act of forgiveness, independently of what one's personal attitudes, beliefs and motivations in relation to the offender may be. As a principle it guides instead of prescribes the act of forgiveness. In order to forgive one needs to rely on one's own capacity to judge and one has to remain sensitive to the particularities of both the situation and the person one is confronted with. The principle of respect thus orients but also leaves the spontaneity of human action intact. Forgiveness is not a direct and automatic, but rather a spontaneous and sensitive - though unsentimental -, unpredictable re-action.

⁶⁹⁴ Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

4.2. The Political Meaning of Forgiveness Revisited.

I have underscored the crucial role of the condition of plurality in Arendt's account of forgiveness. In doing so, I have discussed how her understanding of forgiveness as a political activity has to be discerned from all conceptions that relate forgiveness to sympathy, unconditional moral goodness, love and generosity. This way, her unconventional view on the act of forgiveness comes sharply to the fore. It breaks with all traditional conceptions of forgiveness and their presumptions about its operation and scope. Her view makes room for examining forgiveness not merely as a moral enterprise and a challenge but as a political practice. This, however, raises the question how this political practice is to be understood.

After the terror and horror of World War II and the holocaust, many of Arendt's contemporaries felt a strong need to find a new way to deal with the legacy of the past. It had become clear that conventional methods were somehow not apt to deal with the impact and consequences of those occurrences. This has given rise to an examination of new transitional justice methods.⁶⁹⁵ It has also become clear that in dealing with large-scale atrocities the traditional concepts of wrongdoing has become totally insufficient. It no longer makes sense to conceive of wrongdoing as constituting a certain moral relation of guilt and debt between an individual offender and an individual victim. Those "world-shattering wrongs"⁶⁹⁶ affect an entire community very deeply and require an effort of post-conflict reconciliation that goes beyond mere juridical practices. Within this context, a quest for the political role of forgiveness has gained much attention. In recent decades, the potential of political forgiveness has been stressed in many post-conflict situations that had to deal with grave wrongs, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South African, the Gacaca Community Courts in Rwanda, the politics of reconciliation in Somalia, El Salvador and Chile. In the next section, I will discuss the relevance of an Arendtian perspective to these issues.

⁶⁹⁵ Ruti G. Teitel, "Transitional Justice Genealogy," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 16, (2003): 69-93.

⁶⁹⁶ Alisa L. Carse and Lynne Tirrell, "Forgiving Grave Wrongs," in *Forgiveness in Perspective*, eds. Christopher R. Allers and Marieke Smit (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi, 2010), 48.

4.2.1. *Forgiveness in Political Context: Persisting Moral Presuppositions*

Arendt's view on the political character of forgiveness has a central role in the manifold theoretical accounts of the political role of forgiveness. These accounts aim to examine the role of forgiveness to restore communities in the aftermath of grave wrongs. However, it is unfortunate that prominent religious leaders, such as Pope John Paul Two and Desmond Tutu, have taken the increasing interest in forgiveness and Arendt's reference to Jesus of Nazareth as an occasion to plea for the Christian message of forgiveness in the public space.⁶⁹⁷ Although Arendt explicitly aims to undo the historical figure of Jesus of its religious connotations in order to reveal an experience that is neither moral nor religious in character, the quest for the role of forgiveness in the public space is thus initially guided by a religious politics. Within this religious politics the interpersonal character of forgiveness between humans is emphasized (in contrast to the conception of forgiveness in The Old Testament where it is a matter between men and God). However, the traditional moral assumptions about forgiveness remain unaltered. As a result, discussions about the political meaning of forgiveness primarily revolve around the possibilities and problems of a moral concept in a political or public context.

While in public discourse many see new hope for politics, other philosophers, such as Jeffrie Murphy, fear an uncritical promotion of forgiveness.⁶⁹⁸ On the one hand questions arise regarding its compatibility with public and political institutions that defend the values of liberalism and justice. On the other hand it is believed that as a moral ideal forgiveness risks distortion and cheapening as soon as it enters the public space. Many scholars argue that, as a rationally defensible ideal, forgiveness depends on the rich nature of our private interpersonal relationships, and the space for trust, empathy, and emotional expression afforded by them.⁶⁹⁹

However, in my view, these objections against the role of forgiveness in the public and political realm are informed by the presupposition that forgiveness is essentially a moral and private practice that is transferred to the public domain. The possibilities and problems of forgiveness are thus considered in view of its applicability to a political *context*, rather than

⁶⁹⁷ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

⁶⁹⁸ Alice MacLachlan, "The Philosophical Controversy over Political Forgiveness," 37-38.

⁶⁹⁹ *Ibid.*,

considered being intrinsically political in character. The description of its practice remains merely moral.

This reliance on moral assumptions and descriptions can also be found in the views of many defenders of forgiveness in a political context. Most of them seem aware of the specificity of political relationships. Nevertheless, in stressing the importance of forgiveness, they often refer to the acknowledgment of 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 that is known to everyone and needs no further clarification. It is assumed that in forgiving, offenders are reconciled with this human community. This reflects the main presupposition of all morality: the idea that, as a mere consequence of the fact that they belong 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. Consequently, we are belonging in one way or another to the same natural human moral community. This also reflects the main presupposition about forgiveness, namely that it is an activity of moral restoration.

Christel Fricke for instance, refers in *The Ethics of Forgiveness* to forgiveness as a path for setting up a new social relationship and for redefining its normative foundations.⁷⁰⁰ She thus seems aware of the transformative task of forgiveness. However, she adds that forgiveness involves a 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."⁷⁰¹ This means 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 implies 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. However, if that were true, it raises the question as to why there would be any need to look for a more complex social or even political solution. If we can simply 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?

⁷⁰⁰ Christel Fricke, *The Ethics of Forgiveness: A Collection of Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 1.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid.

In Arendt's view, there is one crucial reason for human beings to engage in politics: their plurality. This plurality is not conceived of as something that disturbs or obscures moral human relationships, rather it is the very condition of humanity itself. Arendt therefore 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.⁷⁰² With this distinction in the presuppositions of morality and politics she aims to point out that morality and its reliance on a shared humanness can never be a foundation for politics. In order to clarify this in more detail, I will consider another example.

In *An Ethic for Enemies, Forgiveness in Politics* Donald W. Shriver Jr. refers to a 'fractured human community'.⁷⁰³ 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 to overcome mutual alienation of human beings, caused by conflict and social habit, and therefore enables to settle some form of co-existence or to form a new community. 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.⁷⁰⁴

It is significant that Shriver acknowledges that in many cases of political conflict relationships cannot simply be restored. He 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 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 as offering a necessary solution to inevitably being chased 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, as Arendt's discussions of Totalitarianism and The French Revolution point out, ignoring that this plurality is an essential condition for

⁷⁰² David W. Shriver Jr., *Forgiveness in Politics: An Ethic for Enemies* (New York: University Press, 1995), 35.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁰⁴ As such it is a classic example of social contract theory.

politics may exactly be 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 should be rather aware of the difference between a political and a moral relationship and the conditions on which they rely. 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 people. 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. Arendt's view makes clear that 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 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.⁷⁰⁵

Moreover, as Hannah Arendt magnificently points out, morality cannot provide a sufficient guard against political evil. Totalitarianism has demonstrated that morality turns out to be nothing but customs. Moral customs have no more power of resistance than other customs, when they are no longer grounded in lawfulness and shared citizenship.⁷⁰⁶ Therefore, we need a political answer to political evil, an answer that is able to resist the moral perversions that may come along with it.

The greatest challenge regarding 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 response to political evil and injustice and that have to enable reconciliation, should in one way or another reflect real political plurality. Similarly, political conflict is an excellent challenge and invitation to resist any reference to shared moral sentiments and to reveal the inherent political character and meaning of forgiveness.

⁷⁰⁵ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 94.

⁷⁰⁶ Margaret Canovan, "Morals and Politics in a Post-Totalitarian Age," in *Hannah Arendt. A Reinterpretation*, 159-161.

4.2.2. *Towards a Sheer Political Concept of Forgiveness*

Some scholars recognize that the political role of forgiveness can only be addressed and understood if the traditional conceptions of what constitutes forgiveness are revised. They explicitly aim to develop a sheer political concept of forgiveness, rather than to search for a way to transfer a moral concept to a political context.

Some scholars argue that the objections against and problems with a political practice of forgiveness arise from the predominant Emotional Model or standard account of forgiveness that I discussed in the first chapter. They assert that the character of the political relation and its related liberal institutions bring the need for a performative account to the fore.⁷⁰⁷ A performative account takes the act of forgiveness to be a speech act rather than an emotional transformation process. This is not only believed to be more appropriate but also sufficient for describing what forgiveness is about.

Most illustrative for this view is Peter Digeser's account. She is dissatisfied with the ordinary understandings of forgiveness and their employment in politics.⁷⁰⁸ Many commonsensical understandings of forgiveness are so burdened with psychological and religious assumptions that their connection to politics is occluded, she claims.⁷⁰⁹ Moreover, in line with Arendt, Digeser holds that the dream of universal reconciliation is not only illiberal but leads to violence and terror.⁷¹⁰ Therefore, she aims for a more rigorous, political conceptualization that incorporates forgiveness into our theories about politics. In reference to Arendt's

⁷⁰⁷ Some scholars, such as Alice McLachlan, argue for a multidimensional account of forgiveness. The multidimensional view aims to account for the variety of social practices of forgiveness. According to MacLachlan a philosophical theory of forgiveness needs to apply to a wide variety of interpersonal relationships that differ in importance, closeness, affection, knowledge of the other and power. Acts of forgiveness may thus manifest themselves as primarily affective, cognitive and/or socially performative. Consequently, MacLachlan argues, understanding what constitutes an act of forgiveness entails examining its function or meaning to those involved rather than looking for a singular phenomenology of emotion, gesture, or performance. MacLachlan, "The Philosophical Controversy over Political Forgiveness," 39-42. But the problem with such a multidimensional account may be that in affirming that "there are multiple, competing, and sometimes conflicting intuitions about the character of forgiveness" (ibid., 43), it also affirms the conceptual lack of clarity instead of clearing it up. The claim that a multidimensional account can avoid the objections against a political concept of forgiveness thus risks to imply merely that one is able to shift the meaning and function of the concept as soon as a problem rises.

⁷⁰⁸ Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, 2.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., 14. She refers to Albert Camus' objections against the dream of a republic of forgiveness that helped fuel the terror in the French Revolutions.

assumption of the darkness of the human heart,⁷¹¹ she takes it to be crucial for the political relation that action and behavior take precedence over motivation. Moreover, she holds that politics must enable people to receive their due.⁷¹² Within this view, she conceives of political forgiveness as an illocutionary act, the central effect of which is to release debtors or transgressors from what they owe.⁷¹³ For Digeser, political forgiveness should be conceived as the releasing of a debt or giving up what is due. But since receiving our due is extremely important to us, forgiveness can easily be squeezed out of consideration, as it stands in conflict with justice. Nevertheless, Digeser argues, even when receiving one's due remains an important good, it is not necessarily the most important good. To open a space for a conception of political forgiveness thus also requires challenging the assumptions of the normal model of justice as 'the constant and perpetual will to render everyone his due'.⁷¹⁴ Ultimately, it calls for a settlement with the past such that it should no longer serve as a basis for legitimate claims into the future: "This state of reconciliation is not a grand vision of harmony or unity but a settling of past debts so that they do not haunt the future".⁷¹⁵ Digeser argues that the success of this enterprise does not require an examination into the sentiments of the forgiver. It also does not require the removal or the presence of any particular motive. It requires not even a particular attitude, but it only requires a form of civil behavior.⁷¹⁶ Rather than an inner effort of self-enactment, it is a public act of self-disclosure. Its success does not depend on the sentiments that may motivate it but rather on whether one lives up to the public rules that govern its practice.⁷¹⁷

Although Digeser's view offers a valuable alternative for conceiving forgiveness in a moral-psychological manner, there are also some problems. Her liberal view sharply discerns one's existence as a political being from one's existence as a private person. Her account is in line

⁷¹¹ Ibid., 16-17.

⁷¹² Ibid., 2.

⁷¹³ Ibid., 29-30.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 12. Digeser cites David Miller on Justice in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Political Thought*.

⁷¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

⁷¹⁶ Digeser mistakenly assumes that Arendt's valuable alternative of respect is seen by herself as impossible, since we are confronted with 'the modern loss of respect'. Again mistakenly she concludes that Arendt therefore holds that we are 'thrown back to forgiveness being tied to love, rendering it unpolitical'. This is a complete distortion and incomprehensible misinterpretation of Arendt's view. Ibid., 16-17.

⁷¹⁷ Digeser refers to Michael Oakeshott who used the term self-enactment to define the demands an agent makes upon himself to act on particular sentiments and not others. It does not involve establishing what particular action to perform but rather the sentiment to adopt when performing it. This does not imply the assumption that human beings can generate whatever sentiment they want, but it does assume that one can actively cultivate certain sets of feelings. Moreover, it implies the idea that, if one is able to simultaneously feel resentful and generous, one can be motivated by one sentiment and not the other. Oakeshott contrasts self-enactment with self-disclosure, which entails the pursuing of a valuable end by acknowledging and subscribing to the conditions intimated or declared in a practice of moral intercourse. Ibid., 24 footnote 11.

with a view that associates the political with political institutions and communities of interest. Unfortunately however, this distinction between moral interpersonal relations and political institutional relations is often used as an argument against the possibility of a political concept of forgiveness. Griswold, for instance, rejects the possibility of a political concept of forgiveness for this reason. He takes forgiveness to be an interpersonal act that may sometimes have a political context. But he claims that there is no coherent concept of political forgiveness that clearly distinguishes it from pardon, clemency, mercy, the dismissal of debt, and interpersonal forgiveness.⁷¹⁸ He argues that “the political sphere possesses structural characteristics, tensions, dynamics that in relevant and significant ways differ from those present in the interpersonal context”.⁷¹⁹ Moreover, he assumes that “forgiveness is necessarily connected to the sentiments”.⁷²⁰ He therefore takes it to be “very doubtful that the close connection between the moderation and the forswearing of resentment and interpersonal forgiveness is reproducible at the political level”.⁷²¹ Griswold holds that the claim that political forgiveness may be specified by its lack of relation to sentiment is misleading. He agrees that phrases such as ‘we regret’ or ‘we apologize’ are indeed speech acts, but they are aimed at a different purpose. In these cases, he argues, we should not speak of political forgiveness but rather of political apology.⁷²² He claims that political apology and interpersonal forgiveness share some common characteristics and basic assumptions. But they are also distinct, due to the different areas of human life to which they respond.⁷²³ Clearly, his rejection of a political concept of forgiveness relies upon certain assumptions about forgiveness that are far from self-evident. In arguing against a political concept of forgiveness, Griswold is constantly taking his own paradigm of forgiveness as a criterion and starting point.⁷²⁴ Consequently, he is actually assuming what has to be demonstrated, namely that his model is the most accurate model for describing what exactly is taking place when one forgives.

Furthermore, it turns out that both Griswold and Digeser are unable to give account of the political moment in many of our interpersonal relations. A political moment is a moment in which we appear to others as the distinct and spontaneous acting and speaking persons we are. This does not necessarily imply a political relation defined by institutions and laws

⁷¹⁸ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 136.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁷²¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷²² *Ibid.*, 141-142.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, 143-146, 213.

⁷²⁴ See for instance *ibid.*, 140, 142.

about what is our due. As a result of the liberal distinction between oneself as a private person and oneself as a political person forgiveness is often discussed in relation to questions regarding whether groups are able to have attitudes or whether heads of a state have the right to forgive on behalf of their people.⁷²⁵ In line with this, it is sometimes argued that warm feelings of deep affection cannot be expected in a political relation. Yet, certain moral attitudes and sentiments do not require deep affection. Therefore it is argued that these attitudes are apt to a political context and should be fostered.⁷²⁶

This abstract, formal and minimal conception of the political relation is unable to account for the kind of political liberation forgiveness entails. This conception of the political relation remains caught within moral assumptions about the liberation that forgiveness brings about. Digeser's concept of political forgiveness as the releasing of a debt entails the presupposition that wrongdoing primarily constitutes a moral or financial debt and disturbs moral and social equality. The aim of political forgiveness is thus to restore civic or moral equality or to renew the debtor's financial position. In line with this, she assumes that the task of forgiveness is to invite for a restoration of a valued political relationship.⁷²⁷ However, the conception of political forgiveness as not receiving what is due, assumes that all wrongdoing and all actions with undesirable consequences can somehow be redeemed. Consequently, the interdependency of forgiveness remains caught within a model of economic or moral transaction and leaves the irreversibility of past actions out of view. However, it is precisely this irreversibility that enables another conception of interdependency. Irreversibility requires taking shared responsibility that goes beyond releasing a debt or restoring moral equality. It requires accepting the burden of the past as a shared burden. Pamela Hieronymi rightly highlights this aspect of forgiveness and puts it as follows:

[A]ny wrongdoing leaves in its wake some amount of damage or cost, be it physical, financial, emotional, relational, or social. This is damage which the offender usually cannot repair ("you can't take it back", as children learn), and which the offended will, in any case, incur. The persistence of the damage threatens any attempt to leave the past in the past, insofar as the damage testifies to the deed. The persisting damage cannot be addressed in the same way as the persisting meaning of guilt. So

⁷²⁵ See for instance Robert Schreier, "Public Forgiveness at the Boundary of the Secular and the Religious. How do we read the terrain?" in *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Context*, 258-259; Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, 82-167.

⁷²⁶ See for instance: Trudy Govier, "Public Forgiveness: A Modest Defence," in *Public Forgiveness in Post-Conflict Context*, 25.

⁷²⁷ Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*, 4-6.

here's a further thing left for forgiveness to do: With forgiveness, the offended agrees to bear in her own person the cost of the wrongdoing and to incorporate the injury into her own life without further protest and without demand for retribution.⁷²⁸

Moreover, Hieronymi adds that this "very important aspect of forgiveness has been largely overlooked in most accounts"⁷²⁹ and deserves "much better explication".⁷³⁰ In a footnote she examines the idea a bit further and refers to Jesus who provides his own blood as the blood of sacrifice. She suggests that:

[O]ne might see this idea not as expressing the need for retribution (forgiveness is typically an *alternative* to retribution) but rather as expressing the fairly commonsensical view that when a wrong has been done *someone* will bear the cost of that wrong.⁷³¹

Consequently, she claims:

In forgiveness, the one *wronged* absorbs the cost, without retribution. Forgiveness never comes cheaply. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. (...) Forgiveness is not *simply* a revision in judgment or a change in view or a wiping clean or a washing away or a making new. Someone will bear the cost in his or her own person. The wrong is less 'let go of' or washed away than it is digested or absorbed.⁷³²

Hieronymi's view is quite relevant with respect to the establishment of a political concept of forgiveness, since it brings to the fore that forgiveness does not amount to a salvation of sin or a washing away of a moral stain. Forgiveness also does not restore a relation of moral equality. Rather, it entails a liberation in which offender and victim agree in sharing the burden of the past in such a way that it no longer precludes their future acting.

It thus becomes clear that in order to grasp forgiveness as an act of political liberation the political relation should be conceived in a much more substantial manner. It must give account of the fact that in a political relation one is not merely making transactions in order

⁷²⁸ Hieronymi "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 550-551.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid.*, 551.

⁷³⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷³¹ *Ibid.*

⁷³² *Ibid.*

to regain either one's self-respect or civic status. Rather, in a political relation one is acting with each other, sharing not merely the same but also common concerns. This initiates an interdependency that is not merely captured in terms of necessity and justification. Arendt's concepts of natality, spontaneity, plurality, irreversibility and love of the world turn out to be very helpful in this respect.

This is clearly recognized by Andrew Schaap. He develops an agonistic account of political reconciliation and political forgiveness in which Arendt's view has a prominent role. Schaap holds that both the realistic model of politics and the liberal model of politics trap political forgiveness in Kolnai's paradox. Since political necessity overlooks the wrongdoing for the sake of social harmony, it gets implicated in the condonation of wrongdoing. When subordinated to the dictates of moral reason in the liberal model, in contrast, it tends to become redundant. In contrast to this Schaap proposes "an ethic of worldliness"⁷³³ in which forgiveness is accorded a central role. Within this framework he takes Arendt's fragility of the web of human relationships and the freedom to begin anew as grounds for forgiveness.⁷³⁴

The starting point of Schaap's view is that in political reconciliation and political forgiveness the existence of a moral community preceding the political conflict cannot be presupposed.⁷³⁵

In many cases of political conflict one cannot rely upon such a pre-existing harmonious moral relation. In reference to Antjie Krog, he claims that in societies divided by grave wrongs, there might be 'nothing to go back to'.⁷³⁶ For this reason, he takes the use of concepts such as 'restoration' to describe reconciliation and forgiveness as problematic.

Within this view, Schaap acknowledges the peculiar "worldly" character of the political relation. Following Arendt, he recognizes the condition of plurality and the attitude of respect it requires. He also emphasizes that the political relationship and the ability of forgiveness therein arise as a result of the possibility to hold a world in common:

Respect for the other as co-builder of a common world, which is the basis for political forgiveness, differs from that Kantian form of respect that applies to individuals as autonomous beings who share the universal capacity for reason. Instead, it applies to individuals as political beings who share a particular world as their common end. Although our sense of morality depends upon recognizing a universal quality in the other such as dignity or sacredness on the basis of which we

⁷³³ Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 109.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

⁷³⁵ Ibid., 5.

⁷³⁶ Ibid., 14. Schaap cites Krog in *Country of My Skull*.

accord rights to all, in order to be politically relevant this quality cannot be attributed to human nature but must be articulated and actualized through our belonging within particular associations. As Arendt writes, 'philosophy may conceive of the earth as the homeland of mankind and of one unwritten law, eternal and valid for all. Politics deals with men, nationals of many countries and heirs to many pasts'. To forgive the other for the sake of the fragile world one holds in common with her is, therefore, to forgive her in her neighbourly relation to us rather than on the basis of our shared moral status as rational beings or creatures of God.⁷³⁷

Schaap also recognizes that the act of forgiveness is not only a reaction that arises from the capacity of spontaneity, but also releases this capacity in the other. As such, he claims, it is a response to the natality of the other:

[F]orgiveness undoes the meaning of the wrong by ceasing to recognize the other only in terms of his past actions or those of his fellow group members. We undo the meaning of the deed as evidence of the identity of the other. As Arendt puts it, to forgive in this sense is to insist on seeing the individual as 'more than whatever he did or achieved'. Forgiveness, in this context, [...] [invites] the other to disclose that difference that exceeds his identity. [...] We forgive the other 'what' he is (our transgressor) for the sake of 'who' he might reveal himself to be through action.⁷³⁸

Schaap captures quite well what I discussed in the previous chapter in regard to the distinction between act and agent forgiveness is making. However, his view on political forgiveness also involves some problematic claims, which preclude a substantial understanding of the political relation and the political interdependent liberation that is enabled by it. He understands the condition of plurality as a constant agonistic striving and contestation of ideological hegemony and power. This view is based on the political theories of Chantal Mouffe and Carl Schmitt.⁷³⁹ Within this view, Arendt's conception of the frailty of human relationships and the condition of natality receive an agonistic turn. Schaap argues that forgiveness entails both a world-delimiting and a world-rupturing moment. As a response to the frailty of the world (or the intangible web of human relationships),

⁷³⁷ Ibid., III.

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy. Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, (New York-London: Verso Books, 2013); Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

forgiveness appears in its world-delimiting moment. It brings a determining process of interaction to an end. As a response to the natality of the other, Schaap claims, it appears in its world-rupturing moment. It affirms and re-affirms the possibility of a new beginning.⁷⁴⁰

The interpretation of the possibility of beginning as a world-rupturing moment illustrates Schaap's agonistic view of politics. This view is shaped by a fear of ideological narratives that suppress conflicting narratives of minorities. For Schaap, the meaning of the acts and wrongs of the world are claims that always are to be contested. On the one hand, he takes forgiveness to be a political undertaking and a struggle to settle the meaning of past claims.⁷⁴¹ On the other hand, however, he holds that a narrative about the past should always remain contestable. The meaning of reconciliation should therefore never be determined in advance and reconciliation should not aim at definite closure and harmony.⁷⁴² Similarly, in Schaap's view, the frailty of human relationships is not merely a result of the unpredictability of human action. For him, the political relation is and needs to be a constant struggle at risk of enmity as well. Forgiveness limits the consequences of an act, which lends the world its stability without being ideological.

It thus turns out that in Schaap's view the liberation of forgiveness consists of the freedom to have a conflicting narrative of the past. With the right to have conflicting views, one aims at social and political equality. But this agonistic conception of plurality as a constant struggle rather fails to conceive of the interdependent world-building activity of forgiveness. By conceiving of the political relation as an agonistic striving for recognition of one's narrative and interpretation about the past, Schaap fails to see that Arendt's concept of worldliness rather transcends the opposition between a consensus- and dissensus-centred view of politics. She perceives of common sense, understood as the possibility to solidly orient and understand oneself in the world, as something that can only come into being in plurality.

By conceiving of the political relation as one that is essentially one of conflict, disagreement, struggle and agonistic striving, Schaap in fact adopts a very classical philosophical view of the other as one's adversary. Within this view, friendship arises as a necessary solution in countering foreign power.⁷⁴³ It should be noted that Schmitt's concept of politics, on which

⁷⁴⁰ Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 109.

⁷⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁷⁴² Andrew Schaap, "Reconciliation as Ideology and Politics," *Constellations Volume 15*, 2 (2008): 251-252.

⁷⁴³ See for instance: "Following from this, if reconciliation is to be political, it depends on citizens discovering good grounds to want to share a polity at all with their historical enemy or oppressor. This requires not that we transcend our relation to our neighbour as enemy but that we transform it into one of civic friendship." Andrew Schaap, "The Time of Reconciliation and the Space of Politics," in *Law and the Politics of Reconciliation*, ed. Scott Veitch (Hampshire-Burlington: Ashgate, 2007), 15.

Schaap's view relies, takes politics as what should safeguard against domination by others. It is a concept of politics that relies on a concept of freedom as self-mastery. It is in the absence of domination and interference of others that we are able to experience freedom. However, in Arendt's view, the interpersonal act of forgiveness rather results from non-sovereign freedom. Here, the other is not portrayed as an adversary who aims to force upon me his narrative of the past, but as one who, in his distinct uniqueness helps my distinct uniqueness and my narrative to come to the fore.

In order to conceive of the liberation of forgiveness as relying upon a relation of shared responsibility, I take it to be helpful to draw, in conclusion, attention to the notion of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is held to have had an important role in the relative success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁷⁴⁴ It is a religious worldview holding that everything that exists and ever has existed – not only plants, animals, humans and their ancestors but also the universe as a whole – is alive and intimately connected and interdependent for its health and well-being. However, it is possible to refer to its ethics of interdependency without necessarily subscribing the related spiritual worldview. The notion of *Ubuntu* or 'Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness', as Antjie Krog translates it, captures quite well how an entire society is affected by wrongdoing.⁷⁴⁵ As a result, the burden has to be shared and needs to be relieved not only publicly but also in interaction with and in view of the community as a whole.⁷⁴⁶

In the worldview of *Ubuntu* it is believed that our humanity depends on our interconnectedness with others. We realize ourselves as persons through our interconnectedness not only with those within the community, but also with strangers or outsiders.⁷⁴⁷ Moreover, humanity is not characterized by what we share by the mere fact that

⁷⁴⁴ See for instance Henk Haenen, *Ubuntu en Nelson Mandela: Afrikaanse filosofie van verzoening* (Budel: Damon, 2016); Antjie Krog, "This thing called reconciliation... 'forgiveness as part of an interconnectedness-towards-wholeness,'" *South African Journal of Philosophy* 27, 4 (2008): 353.

⁷⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 355.

⁷⁴⁶ It is probably for this reason that wrongs committed within a certain state are perceived of as a crime against the state and thus also needs to be dealt with by the state. Unfortunately, in this criminal procedure most of the direct interaction between participants of the society and between offender and victim is lost. This point is central to the restorative justice movement. See for instance Howard Zehr, "Justice as Restoration," 80-82. In Arendt's view, direct interaction is crucial for realizing and revealing who we are. It can thus not be overtaken or represented by a procedural and impersonal institution.

⁷⁴⁷ Krog refers to A.C. Jordan's theory that, in the worldview of *Ubuntu*, hospitality and reconciliation are synonyms. It is held that the stranger or outsider is constitutive for the community and the humanity of its members: "[Hospitality/reconciliation]... was a way of becoming, in a limited sense, the one who was not one's own, the one through whom one owned oneself and become who one was. One was a person through others

we are all humans - as biological creatures sharing the same human nature. Instead, humanity needs to be attained and taken care off:

[...] personhood is not bestowed on somebody simply through birth, but is something to be acquired; personhood is something at which an individual could fail.⁷⁴⁸

Krog points out that the Christian commissioners of the TRC interpreted interconnectedness as something we can rely on in the reconciliation process in order to experience a shared pain and to feel compassion with each other. However, she claims, it had an altogether different meaning for the South African people. For the South African people wrongdoing causes a break in interconnectedness. The Christians referred to Ubuntu as an omnipresent collective source of healing. But the South African people underlined the break-down in interconnectedness. They expressed their concerns about how this break could be healed. Victims sometimes made suggestions about education and financial help for the offender. They express the hope that this would help restoring the break in interconnectedness.⁷⁴⁹ In Ubuntu or 'Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness', Krog argues, reconciliation and forgiveness cannot be separated. They are mutually dependent. One cannot forgive without reconciling and one cannot reconcile without forgiveness. Forgiveness is thus not merely a moral-psychological individual process, but it also is in need of reconciliatory acts with others that help to restore interconnectedness itself. Only then an act of forgiveness can recover the other, ourselves and all others in the community. To underline the importance of reconciliation for the restoration of 'Interconnectedness-towards-wholeness', Krog refers to a statement of a witness in the TRC:

This thing called reconciliation...if I am understanding it correctly ... if it means this perpatrator, this man who has killed Christopher Piet, if it means he becomes human again, this man, so that I, so that all of us, get our humanity back ... then I agree, then I support it all.⁷⁵⁰

and became a person through the stranger." See Krog referring to Mark Sanders: Krog, "This thing called reconciliation," 363.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid., 360. Krog referring to Gyekye, citing Ifeanyi Menki

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid., 359.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid., 356.

In my view, the notion of Ubuntu or ‘interconnectedness-towards-wholeness’ entails a conception of the liberation involved in forgiveness that diverges from any direct, individual moral-psychological liberation. It also refrains from addressing an omnipresent condition of humanness on which we may rely. It is held that humanity has to be evoked in someone. The notion of Ubuntu thus illustrates that in taking care of the interdependent conditions through which we operate as human persons, we give rise to a broad shared liberation that exceeds the individual moral-psychological level. By doing so, we do not aim to escape our dependence of others by mastering their influence on us, but rather we admit, embrace and take care of our non-sovereignty in order to take our responsibility as interdependent human persons.

4.3. From Shared Humanness to Interdependent Responsibility

In this chapter I have argued that it is only possible to conceive of the political role of forgiveness if one gives account of the specificity of political relations. In Arendt’s view, one’s existence as a moral being crucially differs from one’s existence as a political being. Whereas morality assumes that all human beings ultimately are the same as they possess the same capacities for moral judgment, politics is grounded in human’s plurality or distinct uniqueness. Therefore, one’s membership of the political community cannot be derived from one’s membership of the moral community and vice versa. This distinction is well summarized by Schaap:

As Arendt observes, morality may require us to imagine the ‘earth as the homeland of all mankind’ and to presuppose ‘one unwritten law, eternal and valid for all’. Politics, however, does not deal with ‘Man’ in the abstract (as autonomous, rational being, subject to the laws he gives to himself) but with men in their plurality (as earthbound creatures who belong to different communities and are ‘heirs to many pasts’).⁷⁵¹

⁷⁵¹ Andrew Schaap, “The Time of Reconciliation,” 15. Schaap cites Arendt in *Men in Dark Times*. See Arendt Hannah, *Men in Dark Times*, (New York and London: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1968), loc. 1250 of 5167.

Schaap therefore argues that, with respect to political reconciliation and forgiveness, the moral community cannot be hypostatized as an ultimate end in terms of which our present relations should be regulated.⁷⁵² Moreover, in societies that are divided by past wrongs, the existence of harmonious moral relations that precede the conflict cannot be presupposed and relied upon.⁷⁵³ The irreversibility of concrete past wrongs and the distinct existence of a plurality of actors and their narratives preclude relying upon a common moral source to solve political conflict. Forgiveness therefore calls for an act of transformation rather than restoration. Schaap holds that political reconciliation “depends on citizens discovering good grounds to want to share a polity at all with their historical enemy or oppressor”.⁷⁵⁴ Hence, an adequate articulation of the specificity of the political relation, grounded in plurality, and shaped by the contingency of human spontaneous and irreversible human action is crucial to make sense of the political role of forgiveness.

However, in Arendt’s view, the specificity of political relations and the distinction between the political and the moral community is not grasped by making a distinction between the institutional, political and public domain on the one hand and the moral and interpersonal domain on the other. Arendt’s assumption of a distinction between moral and political communities is not a distinction that refers to distinguished areas of human life, with different structural characteristics, tensions and dynamics.⁷⁵⁵ In Arendt’s view, the distinction between the moral and the political rather consists of the way in which we relate to others. In morality one primarily relates to oneself, to one’s moral values and capacities and to one’s conscience. The relationships with others are derived from these attitudes towards oneself. In politics, in contrast, the appearance of a plurality of others and the possibility to take initiative and speak and act with them is primary. The political relationship, Arendt argues, is grounded in experiences which nobody could ever have with himself and which are entirely based on the presence of others.⁷⁵⁶

For Arendt, the political relation is thus also an interpersonal relation. In contrast to Digeser and Griswold, she does not identify political relations with institutional relations and their representatives. In Arendt’s view, laws and institutions do not constitute political relations

⁷⁵² Schaap “The Time of Reconciliation,” 15.

⁷⁵³ Schaap, *Political Reconciliation*, 5, 14.

⁷⁵⁴ Schaap, “The Time of Reconciliation,” 15.

⁷⁵⁵ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 138.

⁷⁵⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237-238; Hannah Arendt, “Civil Disobedience,” in *Crisis of the Republic* (New York-London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1972), 59-63.

that are distinct from interpersonal relations, but rather they delimit and moderate interpersonal political relations and interactions. In Arendt's view, political relations arise from the capacity to act with others. Everywhere and anytime when human beings act, political relations and political communities arise. The capacity to take initiative is present from birth. Therefore, we are not dependent upon institutions and laws to engage in political relations. Nevertheless, institutions and laws guarantee that the power of joint acting in a community is not vanishing. They hold the community of acting peoples together and guarantee the distance that is required for acting.⁷⁵⁷ It is only because Arendt takes the political relation to be an omnipresent, interpersonal relation that she is able to conceive of forgiveness as an intrinsically political capacity. For her, forgiveness is not a moral virtue that is transferred to the public domain, but it rather is an inherent political and interdependent practice. As an interpersonal political practice it constantly helps to safeguard and restore the freedom and distance among human beings that is required for joint acting. This view on the political relation thus avoids and dismantles much of the doubts and problems that arise in regard to the applicability of a moral concept in a political context. It enables us to perceive of forgiveness as an indispensable political practice and thus as an intrinsically political concept.

In Arendt's view, it is this distance between people that is constitutive for the interpersonal political relation. Therefore, the articulation of forgiveness as a constitutive part of political plural and interdependent relations precludes referring to sentiments and passions such as love, sympathy and compassion. These sentiments rely on our shared human nature. This does not imply that they necessarily abolish all distinctions between human beings. Griswold for instance explicitly holds that Adam Smith's notion of sympathy, on which he relies, differs from any form of contagion. It is not simple affectivity without little or no cognition at work, as for instance when an infant catches the mood or feeling conveyed by another's weeping. It is also not a form of more complex cognitive contagion, in which we look for something that is pleasing to us in order to experience you being pleased.⁷⁵⁸ Griswold rather contends that sympathy, in a Smithean sense, enables the capacity of "understanding the other's purposes as generating reasons for feeling and action, reasons as independent of

⁷⁵⁷ Arendt, "Willing," 199; Arendt, *On Revolution*, 151-153, 175-176, 166.

⁷⁵⁸ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 84-85.

one's own".⁷⁵⁹ He argues that this also provides a space that is needed for evaluation. The capacity to enter sympathetically into what it would be like for another to lose his son involves that one may disapprove of another's reaction to losing his son.⁷⁶⁰ However, it is clear that this capacity of sympathy depends on what is similar to human beings. Griswold relies upon Smith's account of sympathy in order to point out that the recognition of our shared humanity is crucial for forgiveness. He takes Smithean sympathy to articulate "our fundamental understanding of others as 'being like us'".⁷⁶¹ The capacity of sympathy refers to our natural similarities and inclinations as human beings rather than what makes us all irreducibly different and unique - our acts. Consequently, in Arendt's view, these sentiments destroy the distance that is required for responsible human action.

It is important to point out that for Arendt these sentiments are not merely moral sentiments. Since they are grounded in our shared human nature, they also manifest themselves as social capacities. For Arendt the social is closely related to the activity of labor, which is bound to natural and biological processes. Therefore, in Arendt's view, sentiments such as compassion, pity and charity also tend to reduce humans to their neediness as natural beings. These sentiments bring the laws of necessity and neediness into the domain of freedom and action. For Arendt, freedom and plurality are crucially at odds with necessity and determined natural processes. As a result, these sentiments, which are bound to the necessity of our shared human nature, rather destroy both the space for free human action and the spontaneity of the act of forgiveness. Sentiments, such as compassion and sympathy, are compelling natural sentiments. Therefore, they are incompatible with the free act of forgiveness that, in its spontaneity, rather addresses the other as another distinct and free actor. Forgiveness does not address the other as a human being that is subject to all kinds of inclinations, weaknesses and temptations. In Arendt's view, forgiveness is not a response to our shared human fallibility but rather a response to the irreversibility of free action. In her account, human's vulnerability does not appear as a natural weakness or propensity to sin but rather as the absence of omnipotence.

⁷⁵⁹ Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 88.

⁷⁶⁰ Griswold notes that it is unclear whether in Smith's account this implies either that one cannot 'enter into' the sentiments of the other because one disapproves, or, that one enters into them but find them out of proportion with the situation and therefore then finds them improper. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 88. See also Griswold, "Sympathy and Selfishness, Imagination and Self," in *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 87-88.

⁷⁶¹ Griswold, "Sympathy and Selfishness," 85.

Arendt's account of forgiveness as a political act therefore reveals our interdependent responsibility instead of our shared humanness. She holds that the irreversibility of wrongdoing is like a burden on one's shoulders. She opposes this burden to the Christian idea of sin according to which the wrong arises out of the person. In elaborating the meaning of reconciliation in an early note in her *Denktagebuch*, she conceptualizes reconciliation as a political solidarity that is free from the universal sinfulness of Christian and moral political theology. One does not reconcile with the existence of an evil soul or with a sinful humanity but rather with a world containing the "actually existing wrong".⁷⁶² As Roger Berkowitz puts it:

The wrong is not something internal to the person and thus it does not poison the inner and moral quality of the person. Instead, the burden on one's shoulders is one's fate, what has been given.⁷⁶³

Arendt holds that "the reconciling man resolves himself (...) to be responsible-with (...), but in no circumstances guilty-with (...) the wrongdoer and his wrong".⁷⁶⁴ Roger Berkowitz holds that reconciliation therefore allows for the development of a common world.⁷⁶⁵

Similarly, forgiveness rises out of a concern for human relationships, freedom and a love of the world. It invites to take responsibility for the world we share instead of resigning oneself either to one's shared weaknesses or an eternal higher destiny. Arendt points out how this love of the world stands in opposition to the Christian love of one's neighbor or St. Augustine's *caritas*. The ideal of loving one's neighbour as one's self is an expression of one's love of God and his creation. But this love of one's neighbour does not acknowledge the neighbour's singularity and worldly existence.⁷⁶⁶ It is a universal love that renders all distinctions between persons irrelevant. One's neighbour is not loved for his uniqueness, but for his sameness. He is loved because he is part of God's creation. But, as Schaap points out, only the concrete situation of worldly interdependence makes the appearance of the other as a friend or enemy relevant to us. The love of one's neighbor is thus a love of the source of one's being (God) instead of a love of the particular person that appears before me.⁷⁶⁷ In

⁷⁶² Roger Berkowitz "Bearing Logs On our Shoulders," par. 10. Berkowitz cites Arendt in *Denktagebuch*

⁷⁶³ *Ibid.*, par. 8.

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, par. 10.

⁷⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), loc. 1946-2002. See also Fry, "Nativity," 28.

⁷⁶⁷ Schaap, "The Time of Reconciliation," 11.

caritas, humans love their neighbors for the sake of God. Consequently, they are not loved for their own sake, but rather used as vehicles to gain salvation and to become part of God's eternal love.⁷⁶⁸ Moreover, Schaap claims, this universal love establishes a community with the other that is too abstract to realize any meaningful 'we' in the world. Arendt also holds that, as a result, this world becomes like what the desert was for the people of Israel: a place where they lived not in houses but in tents. Therefore, she wonders whether it would not be better to love the world and be at home in the world.⁷⁶⁹ Her account of politics and the elaboration of plurality, respect and spontaneity regarding forgiveness are an examination of this love of the world and worldly relations. The love of the world enables to appear as responsible interdependent actors. Arendt's principle of respect addresses the other person as a particular, free and responsible agent. In an act of forgiveness one invites to share the burden of the wrong that took its place in the common world in order to try to be at home in that world again. However, this love of the world also enables to judge what is absolutely beyond our human power to repair and thus remains unforgivable.

⁷⁶⁸ Fry, "Nativity," 28. Karin Fry refers to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl in the third appendix of her biography on Arendt. See Young-Bruehl, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World*, 493.

⁷⁶⁹ Schaap, "The Time of Reconciliation," 14.

5. The Political Conscience

In this chapter, I will explain that Arendt's conception of unforgivable acts and the limits of human power enable a more profound understanding of the role of conscience, remorse and responsibility in forgiveness. First, I will demonstrate that Arendt's conception of unforgivable acts crucially differs from the common conception that it is an extreme and unacceptable moral transgression. Instead, Arendt's notion of the unforgivable refers to what deprives us of the capacity of spontaneous action and shared power. I will argue that in Arendt's view, the unforgivable rises from the delusion of omnipotence, which entails a denial of the condition of plurality. Moreover, it results from the dominance of ideology, which entails a denial of one's capacity to act spontaneously. Consequently, I will argue that what renders these acts unforgivable is not their extremity, but rather the way in which they no longer reveal a human acting person as their agent. As a result, it becomes impossible to forgive, since there is no agent left for the sake of who one may forgive. I point out how this also enables a completely different view on the condition of remorse than is relied upon in most contemporary accounts. Instead of repudiating one's acts, remorse implies 'tracing back one's steps'. It entails accepting one's deeds as inseparable from whom one has appeared to be. I argue that only when one is able to trace back one's steps and to assume responsibility for what one did - even when the consequences differ from what one has intended -, one may be liberated by the interdependent power of forgiveness.

5.1. From Ultimate Moral Challenge to the Limits of Human Power

5.1.1. *The Unforgivable as Moral Impossibility*

Arendt takes forgiveness to be a very powerful human capacity, which is ultimately grounded in the omnipresent fundamental human capacity for making new beginnings. However, she does not take the power of forgiveness to be unlimited. According to her, it is not possible to forgive every possible deed. She assumes that there are evil deeds that categorically fall beyond human power and thus are unforgivable by definition. In *The Human Condition* she claims that we are unable to forgive what we cannot punish and to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable.⁷⁷⁰ Vladimir Jankélévich also describes unforgivable crimes as somehow irreparable, inexpiable. He also stresses the similarity with the inability to punish them and sketches the sense of powerlessness they cause.⁷⁷¹ However, this part of Arendt's account on forgiveness has received much criticism. Yet, in my view, the notion of the unforgivable is no less criticized than misunderstood and undervalued. Therefore, in this chapter I will clarify Arendt's understanding of the unforgivable. In doing so, I emphasize its relevance for her alternative conception of forgiveness.

A classical argument against the notion of the unforgivable can be found in Trudy Govier's account. Addressing the idea of the unforgivable in general rather than specifically Arendt's account, Govier claims that unforgivable deeds do not automatically render their agents unforgivable. She refers to Hampton, who holds that if we come to understand their desires and emotions, we may come to regard even the perpetrators of atrocities as human beings like ourselves rather than moral monsters.⁷⁷² She also cites Desmond Tutu's claim that we should discern between monstrous deeds and their agents:

[T]here are people in South Africa who have committed the most unbelievable atrocities and I am willing for their deeds to be labelled [sic.] with the harshest of epithets: monstrous, diabolical, even devilish. However, monstrous deeds do not turn

⁷⁷⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

⁷⁷¹ Vladimir Jankélévitch and Ann Hobart, "Should We Pardon Them?" *Critical Inquiry* 22, 3 (1996): 558.

⁷⁷² Trudy Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36, 1 (1999): 63-64.

the perpetrators into monsters. A human person does not ultimately lose his or her humanity, which is characterised by the divine image in which every individual is created.⁷⁷³

In both Govier's and Tutu's view the idea reappears that I have discussed in the context of Hampton's account. It is the idea that a human being always retains a divine and pure moral core that remains unaffected by what they do to others and to the world. Govier agrees with Tutu that a wrongdoer "may have clothed himself in evil, but he should not be regarded as immoral to the core".⁷⁷⁴ With this, she supports the Christian outlook, which purports a distinction must be made between evil deeds and those who committed them.⁷⁷⁵ She argues we must "have faith in the inner decency of all human beings, even of those who would seem to be among the worst among us."⁷⁷⁶ In contrast to Hampton's view, however, Govier's view is completely unconditional. Hampton holds a more cautious position. Hampton claims that when a perpetrator shows no sign of acknowledgement it may be self-deception to believe that 'deep down' he is still morally decent. Sometimes the only conclusion is that someone will never repent and thus will turn out to be unforgivable. Although Hampton argues that one must principally believe in an inner moral core in every human being, she has a conditional account of forgiveness. Forgiveness turns out to be conditional on the offender's acknowledgment and his or her lack of repentance. It is the condition of repentance that discerns the agent from his deeds and this makes a perpetrator forgivable. In contrast to Hampton, Govier rejects the idea that we may conceive of a wrongdoer as rotten to the core if he shows no sign of repentance.⁷⁷⁷ She takes Hampton's conditional position to be morally justifiable and holds it as a valuable reason for not forgiving. Nevertheless, she assumes that we have to see a wrongdoer as a human being who always retains the potential for moral change and reform - even if they have committed heinous deeds - and thus always as principally forgivable.⁷⁷⁸

The insistence that some persons cannot reform, and the *a priori* distrust required to preserve that belief strike me as objectionable. We go too far if we insist that some people have become so indelibly evil that there is no possibility of their moral

⁷⁷³ Ibid., 64. Desmond Tutu cited by Govier.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁷⁵ She argues it is not merely Christian, since it can also be found in Gandhi's views. Ibid., 74 endnote 18.

⁷⁷⁶ Ibid., 64.

⁷⁷⁷ Ibid., 74 endnote 19.

⁷⁷⁸ Ibid., 64, 70.

change. [...] The point is, persons can change. Many persons do change, and even some persons who have been guilty of appalling evil do change.⁷⁷⁹

Govier argues that there is a significant anomaly in the philosophical literature on forgiveness. She claims that forgiveness is something we extend or do not extend towards persons and fundamentally affects relationships between persons. Yet, in the literature it is deeds that are said to be unforgivable.⁷⁸⁰ She holds that we can, and do, say that deeds are 'unforgivable' as a way of uttering our strong moral disapprobation. They entail an insult to humanity and to moral principles that may be profound. However, she maintains, this should not make us forget that it is persons who are the object of our forgiveness or lack of forgiveness.⁷⁸¹ Govier takes it to be a big mistake to infer a permanent evil in their person from the atrociousness of their deeds:

It is to omit considering the possibility of moral change in such persons, regarding them as deeply and permanently evil. To do so is to ignore their human capacity for moral choice and change, which is the very foundation of human worth and dignity. [...] The moral challenge is not to hold out a gauntlet against those who have committed evil but to encourage them to acknowledge wrongdoing and undertake a commitment to fundamental moral change.⁷⁸²

Govier therefore holds that the existence of unforgivable deeds offers a moral challenge to re-invite offenders in the moral community.

Derrida's well-known argument against both Jankélévitch and Arendt - that it are precisely the crimes that seem unforgivable that require forgiveness - is in line with this. Derrida opposes both Arendt's assumption that we are unable to forgive what we cannot punish and vice versa. He also rejects Jankélévitch' assumption that forgiveness no longer has a meaning when the crime has become "inexpiable', 'irreparable', out of proportion to all human measure".⁷⁸³ Derrida explores an alternative route, namely the option that forgiveness only becomes possible from the moment that it appears impossible: "Its history would begin, on the contrary, with the unforgivable."⁷⁸⁴ This way, Derrida conceptualizes the unforgivable as

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid., 65.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid., 69.

⁷⁸² Ibid., 71.

⁷⁸³ Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 37.

⁷⁸⁴ Ibid.

an inevitable part of a moral paradox. The paradox results from the effort of responding morally to what precisely violates morality. He claims that one should not try to solve the moral paradox of forgiveness. On the contrary, for Derrida, forgiveness implies that one should push this paradox to the extreme and try to stand it.⁷⁸⁵ By doing so, Derrida's position is in fact a postmodern version of the mainly religiously inspired classical unconditional position in Govier's account. That unconditional position starts from the idea that, whatever an offender does, it is principally impossible for him to exclude himself from the moral community. Merely because he is a human being, he always remains part of the human moral community. Within this view, it is precisely the task of morality to overcome what insults and violates morality and its principles. Evil is conceived as an outstanding invitation to take a moral attitude and to fulfill oneself as a moral person.⁷⁸⁶ Consequently, this position also implies a kind of moral inaccessibility and inviolability or immunity. In Derrida's postmodern version, the fulfillment of oneself as a moral person entails the ability to stand, at least in theoretical respect, the moral tension between a strong moral disapprobation of the wrong and the inclusive attitude of forgiveness.⁷⁸⁷

The notion of the unforgivable also gained approval in the public discourse on forgiveness. But the terminology used to describe what renders a deed unforgivable is also mainly moral. It similarly suggests that the boundary that is crossed by these particular crimes is a mere moral one. Simultaneously, it is also regularly stressed that those crimes are of a special kind, which render all common moral terms useless. This, however, is only considered to be a sign of the extreme immorality of the acts. In line with this, the term atrocity has been introduced to indicate such profound immoral acts.⁷⁸⁸ Most illustrative for this understanding concerning the nature of the crimes and what renders them unforgivable are some of the commentaries following Simon Wiesenthal's autobiographical story, described in *The*

⁷⁸⁵ Ibid., 39, 44-45.

⁷⁸⁶ See also Arendt's view on the Christian love of neighbor and Jankélévitch's view on integration as similitude. Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, loc. 2007 of 5966; Jankélévitch, *Forgiveness*, 31-32.

⁷⁸⁷ In reality, Derrida argues, we will often have to take the option of conditional forgiveness, but unconditional forgiveness should remain the ideal. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 44-45.

⁷⁸⁸ Trudy Govier for instance describes atrocities as "worse than other moral wrongs because of the gross departure from moral and legal principles, the gross disrespect for human beings displayed, and (for many cases) the cruel or degrading nature of the deeds". Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," 73 endnote 30. She also defines it as "an act which is (a) wrong and either (b) shows gross disrespect for human beings, human life, and fundamental moral principles or (c) is exceptionally cruel or degrading to human beings". According to her, "gross" thus refers to the degree of departure from the moral law, "which is great either due to numbers (killing hundreds of people, for instance, or thousands or millions) or to the manner in which the act is done (for instance, killing people by burning them to death, disemboweling them, or burying them alive)". Ibid.

Sunflower.⁷⁸⁹ In this book, Wiesenthal describes how he, while he was imprisoned in a Nazi concentration camp, was invited to the bedside of a dying SS member, who wanted to ask forgiveness from a Jew. The soldier confesses to Wiesenthal how he participated in the shooting of Jews who tried to escape a church that has been set to fire after they were forced to collect there. After listening to the story of the SS member, Wiesenthal left without saying anything. But for the rest of his life, he wondered whether he did the right thing. Therefore, he asked many others specialists to comment on this issue and he received responses from theologians, political leaders, jurists, Holocaust survivors and victims of attempted genocide in Bosnia, Cambodia, China and Tibet. Some explicitly stress that the SS soldier has forfeited the opportunity to be forgiven once and for all.⁷⁹⁰ Sidney Shachow, a holocaust survivor who served most of his adult life in the military, claims to “know something about combat training and about what war can do to a person”.⁷⁹¹ But he holds that this man defies any extenuating circumstance. He managed “to overcome the voice within him that said a person cannot murder innocent men, woman and children and still call himself a human being”.⁷⁹² In allowing himself to be changed into a foul beast and in doing the unforgivable, he gave up his moral life and soul to his leader and his state.⁷⁹³ Lawrence Langer, writer of several books on the holocaust, also refers to the fact that the SS-member has forfeited his moral integrity the moment he agreed in shooting innocent peoples. At that point, Langer argues, when the SS soldier agreed in shooting instead of deferring to a higher authority and disobeying the order, he failed the test of integrity and he permanently cut himself off from the possibility of forgiveness.⁷⁹⁴ But, remarkably, Langer not merely refers to the unforgivable as indicating a moral deficit. He also emphasizes the uncommon nature of the crimes and the impossibility to grasp them in moral terms:

Words like ‘wrong’ and ‘misdeed’ grew up in a universe of discourse oblivious to places like Auschwitz and Majdanek, where gas chambers and crematoria flourished. The long list of exonerating terms that appear in *The Sunflower* –

⁷⁸⁹ Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower. On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).

⁷⁹⁰ The responses, that are published following the story, vary significantly. Some commentators argue that forgiveness may not have been possible in this specific case but is nevertheless an achievement one should always strive for in dealing with the past. Others argue that by becoming a murderer of the Nazi-Regime the dying SS soldier did the unforgivable.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

atonement and expiation, repentance and absolution, guilt and forgiveness – to me reflects a valiant but misguided and ultimately doomed effort to reclaim for a familiar vocabulary an event that has burst the frame of conventional judgmental language.⁷⁹⁵

According to him, there are atrocities that are beyond guilt and atonement.⁷⁹⁶ They are “so outrageous that they condemn the soul of the sinner to eternal damnation before his death”.⁷⁹⁷ Mark Goulden, a British journalist and worker for humanitarian causes claims that the human mind is simply incapable of comprehending the magnitude and mathematics of such slaughter.⁷⁹⁸ Its sheer enormity deprives us from any tool to grasp what has happened. He also refers to the murderers as monsters. By doing so, he aims to indicate how they cross the border of what is morally conceivable in uttering simultaneously a strong moral condemnation.⁷⁹⁹

It thus becomes clear that the arguments that these commentators provide in explaining what renders this murderer unforgivable rely on a straightforward conditional account of morality.⁸⁰⁰ Its proponents don't believe in an inviolable inner moral core that can be distinguished from one's acts. The moral outrageousness of a crime indicates a profound moral failure of the offender, which forfeits his moral integrity and his humanity. As a result of the failure in his moral capacities, he can no longer be conceived as a moral human being and therefore he is excluded from the moral domain. The moral destructive character of the crimes he has committed excludes him from the moral community as a whole. As a result of this excessiveness and inhumanness, our common moral language and juridical categories fall short in addressing such crimes. In line with this, the language of forgiveness is also supposed to fall short as a moral way of dealing with them, since forgiveness can in no way be morally justified.

In view of both the recounted critique and approval of the notion of the unforgivable, it should be stressed that Arendt's account of the unforgivable has to be distinguished from these views. Her account of the unforgivable is very specific. For Arendt the unforgivable does not result from an inability to comprehend how human beings are able to commit such

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid., 189.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., 189-190.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid., 189

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid., 155.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid., 157.

enormous atrocities. The notion does not refer to what exceeds our imagination and lies beyond our human capacity for empathy. It also does not refer to the factual endless injustice of millions of victims who are no longer able to speak for themselves, as some users of the notion take into account.⁸⁰¹ In her view, it is also neither related to the large scale on which the atrocities took place, nor to the enormous amount of dead. In an interview with Günther Gaus Arendt claims “this should never have happened”.⁸⁰² But she continues that it is not because of the great amount of dead, but rather because we will never be able to come to terms with what happened.⁸⁰³ It is neither meant as an utterance of absolute moral disapprobation, nor does it deny that humans always remain capable of reform, but rather it is concerned with what is within our power to repair.

For Arendt, the finding that there are crimes that defy our moral categories precisely points out that the unforgivable cannot be described in moral terms. With the notion of the unforgivable she does not refer to how an offender forfeits his moral integrity in committing an atrocity that breaks all moral rules and values. The existence of unforgivable deeds is what makes her believe that not moral rules or standards hold someone back of being involved in such atrocities. Instead, the capacity of thinking constitutes one’s moral integrity and provides the only moral barrier. Arendt assumes that without ‘the wind of thought’ which dissolves what is fixed,⁸⁰⁴ moral rules tend to be nothing but table manners, which may change overnight.⁸⁰⁵ It is thus precisely in sticking thoughtless to pre-scribed moral rules, standards, and the logic of an idea that it becomes possible to do the unforgivable. For her, the notion of ‘the unforgivable’ also does not refer to fixed inner moral capacities or deficits. Instead, it refers to the way in which an act, of whatever moral category, constitutes a major obstacle for future human relations and engagements. It does not merely exceed our moral categories, but also our shared power to act. She assumes that Eichmann, for instance, should be hanged and thus not forgiven. She argues that he should be hanged, not because he failed to think about what he was doing, but rather because he – as a result of this – was not prepared to share the world with others:⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰¹ See for instance Govier’s discussion of Berel Lang’s view on the unforgivable: Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 65.

⁸⁰² Arendt, “What Remains? The Language Remains’: Interview with Günther Gaus,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1994), loc. 787 of 8854.

⁸⁰³ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁴ Arendt, “Thinking,” 174.

⁸⁰⁵ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 50.

⁸⁰⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 300.

We are concerned here only with what you did, and not with the possible noncriminal nature of your inner life and of your motives or with the criminal potentialities of those around you. [...] Let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that it was nothing more than misfortune that made you a willing instrument in the organization of mass murder; there still remains the fact that you have carried out, and therefore actively supported, a policy of mass murder. For politics is not like the nursery; in politics obedience and support are the same. And just as you supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people and the people of a number of other nations – as though you and your superiors had any right to determine who should and who should not inhabit the world – we find that no one, that is, no member of the human race, can be expected to want to share the earth with you. This is the reason, and the only reason, you must hang.⁸⁰⁷

For Arendt, precisely the acts that are performed without any special intention to do evil are most capable of posing an enormous obstacle for human acting and destroying the shared power to act. This is what she calls – in a somewhat unfortunate way – the banality of evil.

5.1.2. *The 'Skandalon': What Human Power Cannot Remove*

In *The Human Condition* Arendt refers to the unforgivable as an offense that neither can be punished nor forgiven. As I explained before, for Arendt punishment and forgiveness are not opposites, but rather alternative ways of interrupting a course of events. She holds that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable.⁸⁰⁸ This analogy of the ability to punish and to forgive clearly points out that for Arendt the unforgivable does not result from an inability to justify forgiveness. The unforgivable in Arendt's view has nothing to do with what is inexcusable and thus puts an impossible demand on us to overcome in a paradoxical way on moral grounds what in fact, from a moral point of view, should not be overcome.⁸⁰⁹ For her, the unforgivable does not rise from a tension between law and love, or between the need for condemnation and the need for reconciliation and rehabilitation. It does also not refer to a demonic understanding of evil. For Arendt, the unforgivable is rather defined by what lies beyond human power, but

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

⁸⁰⁹ Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32-33.

not in a diabolic sense. In her view, both punishment and forgiveness are achievements of human power. They enable to come to terms with what we can impossibly make undone. But the form of crime and willed evil she calls, in line with Kant, 'radical evil' and which she takes to be very rare, destroys all human power and the human realm in which power may arise.⁸¹⁰ She takes the Nazi-crimes to be of this sort. She thus takes her own generation to be exceptional witnesses of the rare outbursts of such crimes on the public scene. Nevertheless, she holds that still very little is known about their nature:

All we know is that we can neither punish nor forgive such offenses and that they therefore transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance. Here, where the deed itself dispossesses us of all power, we can indeed only repeat with Jesus: 'It were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he cast into the sea'⁸¹¹

For Arendt, just retribution is the only possible way to deal with such crimes.⁸¹² In regard to this type of crimes, the remedy of forgiveness is powerless. The only solution that seems to be left is one derived from the activity of work: to destroy what has been made. In her later essay *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy* (in which she does not only contends that the problem of willed evil is explained away by moral philosophy but in which she also explores the problem of the 'banality' of evil) she repeats her statement that there are unforgivable crimes. Jesus defines these crimes as a 'stumbling stone', a *skandalon*, which human powers cannot remove. Therefore it can only be destroyed:

The *skandalon* is what is not in our power to repair – by forgiving or by punishment – and what therefore remains an obstacle for all further performances and doings. And the agent is not somebody who, in the Platonic understanding, can be reformed through punishment or, if he is beyond improvement, will offer through his sufferings a deterrent example for others; the agent is an offender to the world order

⁸¹⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240-241. Since the Eichmann trial, she dropped the idea of radical evil and started to explore the notion of the 'banality of evil', which is thoughtless and rootless. But her view about its unforgivability remained unaltered. See Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

⁸¹¹ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 241.

⁸¹² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240. As already remarked above, this points out that for Arendt punishment and just retribution do not coincide.

as such. He is, to take another of Jesus' metaphors, like the weed, 'the tares in the field', with which one can't do anything except destroy them, burn them in the fire.⁸¹³

According to Arendt, there are crimes that are unforgivable, simply because they destroy all human relations and therefore also the possibility of gaining power by acting with others. Therefore, they also destroy the possibility of the powerful remedy of forgiveness. Because some acts are such a substantial threat to human plurality and action, Arendt holds that a community has no other option than removing the agent of such acts.

The *skandalon* she refers to in defining the unforgivable is not merely a perverse moral violation, crossing a moral boundary, but it is a stumbling stone. It is an object, an evil that irremovably takes its place and to which the members of a community willy-nilly have to relate. It thus not only concerns a fundamental and unacceptable infringement of the moral integrity, but also indicates its manifest reality in the world we share. Arendt thus conceives of the unforgivable as an object, something to which we have to relate, something we bump into. If not, we *should* bump into it in order to try to make sense of it. Such a stumbling stone is not a mere infringement of moral integrity. Clearly, the limited power of limited and shared human action is inadequate to remove the stumbling stone that is left by certain events or crimes.

The notion of the unforgivable therefore marks the boundaries of human action and the possibilities of the spontaneity implied in forgiveness. As Michael Janover puts it:

[Some] crimes are strictly unforgivable and in that status they throw light on boundaries intrinsic to human action, and hence to political and moral life. Not only do such crimes not call forth forgiveness but, for Arendt, they point to a space (or a chaos) that seems to lie outside of human action and response, defying judgment and thought itself.⁸¹⁴

However, for Arendt, the existence of unforgivable deeds is not a reason for despair. It confronts us with the limitations of moral philosophy in defining evil. Therefore, it should actually invite us to understand the moral problems this kind of political evil poses in a new and unprecedented political manner.

⁸¹³ Arendt, "Some Question of Moral Philosophy," 124.

⁸¹⁴ Michael Janover, "The Limits of Forgiveness and the Ends of Politics," *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 26, 3 (2005): 221.

5.2. The Obstacle of Unforgivable Political Evil

5.2.1. *The Problem of Evil and The Speechless Horror*

In the previous section I explained that in Arendt's account the incapability to come to terms with what happened does not refer to one's moral indignation about a moral boundary that has been crossed. Instead, it refers to the impotence of our common political capacities when we are confronted with the obstacle that is posed by a particular kind of evil. However, Arendt assumes that in order to understand this impotence, we have to shed light on the moral problem that this kind of evil poses. She argues that the rise of unforgivable crimes has shown us a type of evil we are not familiar with. It falls beyond what we have learned about the propensity to evil thus far and thus renders us speechless. It makes us stare into a deep abyss, unable to understand these types of criminals in terms of normal understandable, sinful human motives.⁸¹⁵ This moral problem and the speechlessness that comes with it is what Arendt calls "the speechless horror".⁸¹⁶

According to Arendt, the speechlessness that overtakes one when one is confronted with this type of evil results from two important moral issues.

The first issue concerns the fact that moral philosophers have always assumed that every human being unquestionably possesses a moral compass. It is assumed that this moral compass enables one to know intuitively what is good and to tell right from wrong.⁸¹⁷ But Arendt argues that unforgivable evil has shown that this moral assumption is wrong.

Secondly, Arendt claims that moral philosophers have never succeeded in giving account of wickedness or willed evil. No moral philosopher could actually believe that man could will evil for its own sake. They were all tempted to explain pure wickedness away. Kant for

⁸¹⁵ Illustrative for the speechlessness that rises in the face of the horror of this type of evil is David Grossman's *See Under: Love*. In this story a little boy, Momik, a child of two Holocaust survivors, aims to get to know the 'Nazi-beast' that is said to have his grandfather within its powers. No-one in his Israelian village will explain him what this Nazi-beast is. Therefore, he sets up a place in the basement where he delivers food to the beast, hoping that since he believes the beast is waiting to feed on Jews, this will make him appear. Moreover, Momik hopes that in being fed by him, the beast will leave his grandfather in peace. David Grossman, *See Under: Love* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1989).

⁸¹⁶ Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," 55, 57.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

instance explained all transgressions “as exceptions that a man is tempted to make from a law which he otherwise recognizes as being valid”.⁸¹⁸

Arendt explains that as a result of the confrontation with a type of evil that we are unable to grasp in normal moral and judicial categories, one is tempted to let the moral issues that arise from this type of evil lay dormant. The civilized courtroom procedure, for instance, was unable to come to terms with it in juridical form. Consequently, it insisted on “pretending that these new-fangled murderers are in no way different from ordinary ones and acted out of the same motives”.⁸¹⁹ This has prevented a much-needed reappraisal of legal categories and it made one forget the more manageable moral lessons.⁸²⁰ Or, even worse, people find it difficult to live with something that takes their breath away and renders them speechless. Therefore, at some point they are tempted to translate their speechlessness into whatever expressions that are close at hand. But Arendt considers all of them inadequate.⁸²¹ She holds that nowadays the “whole story is usually told in terms of sentiments which need not even be cheap in themselves to sentimentalize and cheapen the story”.⁸²² She claims that “the whole atmosphere in which things are discussed today is overcharged with emotions”.⁸²³

Arendt calls this speechless horror the refusal to think the unthinkable.⁸²⁴ By doing so, she seems to insist that despite the horror and the understandable reaction of speechlessness, we must not merely remain perplexed by the moral issues we are confronted with. Rather we should find new words and concepts by ‘scandalizing’ it, taking serious the obstacle or *skandalon* it poses. During her entire lifetime, Arendt aimed to give words to the unforgivable new type of evil that her generation was confronted with. Her struggle with those moral issues did not bring forth an entirely coherent theory of evil. But it rather aimed to discuss at least two different aspects of this type of evil: its wickedness or radical nature on the one hand and its banality or superficiality on the other.

On the one hand Arendt discusses evil as arising out of the delusion of omnipotence, the belief that ‘everything is possible’.⁸²⁵ She believes that this leads straight to the elimination of

⁸¹⁸ Ibid., 61-62.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid., 56.

⁸²⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁸²¹ Ibid., 55-56.

⁸²² Ibid.

⁸²³ Ibid., 56.

⁸²⁴ Ibid., 55

⁸²⁵ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 441. See also Richard J. Bernstein, “Arendt: Radical Evil and the Banality of Evil,” in *Radical Evil* (Cambridge-Maldon: Polity Press, 2002), 212.

plurality and spontaneity. In a letter to Jaspers, written in 1951, Arendt summarizes some of her thoughts on this aspect of unforgivable evil:

In objective terms modern crimes are not provided for in the Ten Commandments. Or: the Western tradition is suffering from the preconception that the most evil things human beings can do arise from the vice of selfishness. Yet we know that the greatest evils or radical evil has nothing to do anymore with such humanly understandable, sinful motives. What radically evil really is I don't know, but it seems to me that it somehow has to do with the following phenomenon: making human beings as human beings superfluous (not using them as means to an end, which leaves their essence as humans untouched and impinges only on their human dignity (...)). This happens as soon as all unpredictability – which, in human beings, is the equivalent of spontaneity – is eliminated. And all this in turn arises from – or better, goes along with – the delusion of the omnipotence (not simply the lust for power) of an individual man. If a man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all (...). [T]he omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous.⁸²⁶

On the other hand, Arendt was also well aware of the dangers of demonizing this kind of evil. She didn't want to grant the evildoers a mythical status, as if they were subhuman. She was very much aware of the fact that she needed to describe evil in human terms, while at the same time resisting the tendency to reduce it to the human sinful motives we already know. These sinful motives are elaborately described by moral philosophers. Her struggle with these two different aspects of evil (both of which she takes to point to what precisely renders them unforgivable) is very well illustrated by a very early correspondence she had with Jaspers on his notion of German guilt. In 1946, shortly after the war ended, she wrote to him:

Your definition of Nazi policy as a crime ('criminal guilt') strikes me as questionable. The Nazi crimes, it seems to me, explode the limits of the law; and that is precisely what constitutes their monstrousness. For these crimes, no punishment is severe enough. It may be essential to hang Göring, but it is totally inadequate. That is, this guilt, in contrast to all criminal guilt, oversteps and shatters any and all legal systems.

⁸²⁶ Ibid., 207. Arendt cited by Bernstein.

(...) We are simply not equipped to deal, on a human, political level, with a guilt that is beyond crime and an innocence that is beyond goodness or virtue.⁸²⁷

Jaspers replied to her, making a suggestion that would probably lead her to her later notion of the banality of evil:

You say that what the Nazis did cannot be comprehended as 'crime' – I'm not altogether comfortable with your view, because a guilt that goes beyond all criminal guilt inevitably takes on a streak of 'greatness' – of satanic greatness - which is, for me, as inappropriate for the Nazis as all the talk about the 'demonic' element in Hitler and so forth. It seems to me that we have to see these things in their total banality (...), in their prosaic triviality, because that's what truly characterizes them. Bacteria can cause epidemics that wipe out nations, but they remain merely bacteria. I regard any hint of myth and legend with horror (...). The way you express it, you've almost taken the path of poetry. And a Shakespeare would never be able to give adequate form to this material – his instinctive aesthetic sense would lead to falsification of it (...)⁸²⁸

Arendt admitted to be half convinced by his response. She holds that she too totally rejects any suggestion of mythical or satanic greatness. Nevertheless, she realizes that she came "dangerously close" to it in the way she expressed it.⁸²⁹ To the extent that she can't avoid such formulations she admits not to have understood what actually went on. Nevertheless, she believes that behind it all lies "that individual human beings did not kill individual other human beings for human reasons, but that an organized attempt was made to eradicate the concept of the human being."⁸³⁰

During the Eichmann trial she came to take Jasper's suggestion on the banality of what happened even more serious. It also made her realize that the inability to come to terms with this type of evil, rendering it unforgivable, did not merely rise out of the inability to describe the nature of this kind of evil. It also resulted from the fact that no persons were left one could forgive or punish. The majority of the criminals that were involved in the Nazi-crimes was not only swept away unthinkingly. They also denied that they were acting. Therefore,

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 214. Arendt cited by Bernstein.

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 214-215. Jaspers cited by Bernstein.

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 215.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 215. Arendt cited by Bernstein.

Arendt believes, they precisely failed to give themselves roots and to understand themselves as persons.

Those two aspects, the delusion of omnipotence on the one hand and the denial of one's spontaneity, are constitutive elements of the unforgivable and will be discussed in what follows.

5.2.2. *Ideology and The Delusion of Omnipotence*

Despite Arendt's strong conviction that the Nazi-crimes are principally unforgivable, she only gives a description of what precisely renders them unforgivable in a rather disparate way throughout her body of work. But recollecting some of her 'thought trains' (as both Margaret Canovan and Richard J. Bernstein call her interrelated lines of thinking)⁸³¹ on what she initially called 'radical evil', enables to examine in more detail what she believes to deprive us of the human power to forgive. However, it must be emphasized that her conception of the unforgivable reaches beyond any deliberate effort to do evil. Clearly, this does not deny that deliberate evil may be part of it, but Arendt's conception of what constitutes the unforgivable is broader than mere evil intentions. As pointed out above, Arendt perceives of the Nazi-crimes as unforgivable because they entail an organized attempt to "eradicate the concept of a human being".⁸³² In her view, these crimes enable the elimination of both human plurality and the capacity to take initiative. But the destruction of plurality and spontaneity is not primarily resulting from some kind of satanic evil nature. Rather, it entails the application of a specific logic in a domain in which it is not only inappropriate but also fundamentally disruptive. Arendt's conception of the unforgivable thus aims to hold together two different aspects of a certain type of political evil. On the one hand, there is the responsibility of specific offenders creating certain circumstances eliminating the ability to act as plural and spontaneous beings. On the other hand, there is the rise of certain phenomena that are creating the conditions for making those specific circumstances possible. Sometimes Arendt describes radical evil as a deliberate experiment on its victims, similar to the scientific experiments on twins Josef Mengele carried out. In some descriptions it therefore seems as if the unforgivable relates to what has been done to

⁸³¹ Ibid., 206-207; Canovan, *Hannah Arendt: A Reinterpretation*, 201.

⁸³² Ibid., 215. Arendt cited by Bernstein.

the victims. In other passages Arendt refers to the unforgivable as the releasing of an overpowering and irrepressible force that deprives both victims and offenders from the capacity to act. She regularly insists on how the denial of the human condition of plurality and the capacity of spontaneity primarily affects and sweeps away the offenders themselves. This, however, in no way absolves the offenders from their responsibility.

Arendt repeatedly refers to the unforgivable as rising from a delusion of omnipotence.⁸³³ The delusion of omnipotence is the systematic disregard of the fundamental human condition of plurality as the source of human power. She believes that the first marks of this delusion can be found in Western philosophy. Philosophers have always taken the singular man as their subject of reflection instead of a plurality of men.⁸³⁴ Her political theory and her description of the human condition are an attempt to turn this history. Arendt discriminates the delusion of omnipotence from the lust for power. The lust for power, she notes, in fact still entails an awareness of the fact that power is always shared and should therefore be conquered by surrendering others to one's will.⁸³⁵ In contrast, the delusion of omnipotence is far more extreme, since it entails the belief that others can simply be made superfluous:

If a man qua man were omnipotent, then there is in fact no reason why men in the plural should exist at all (...). [T]he omnipotence of an individual man would make men superfluous.⁸³⁶

Arendt takes the delusion of omnipotence to be put to its extreme in the totalitarian regimes of both Nazism and Stalinism. The totalitarian domination of these regimes not merely results from the old nihilistic principle that 'everything is permitted'. It rather transcends this principle that is "still tied to the utilitarian motives and self-interest of their rulers"⁸³⁷ in order to establish a realm where 'everything is possible'. This, Arendt claims, is a realm that has been completely unknown until then.⁸³⁸ She takes the concentration and extermination camps of totalitarian regimes to "serve as the laboratories in which the fundamental belief of

⁸³³ Ibid., 207.

⁸³⁴ Ibid., 212.

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 207. Arendt cited by Bernstein.

⁸³⁶ Ibid. Arendt cited by Bernstein.

⁸³⁷ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 440.

⁸³⁸ Ibid., 440-441.

totalitarianism that everything is possible is being verified”⁸³⁹ She believes the totalitarian experiment to be aimed at the destruction of plurality:

Total domination, which strives to organize the infinite plurality and differentiation of human beings as if all of humanity were just one individual, is possible only if each and every person can be reduced to a never-changing identity of reactions, so that each of these bundles of reactions can be exchanged at random for any other.⁸⁴⁰

This way, not only the condition of plurality is denied, the capacity for spontaneity itself is annihilated:

The camps are meant not only to exterminate people and degrade human beings, but also serve the ghastly experiment of eliminating, under scientifically controlled conditions, spontaneity itself as an expression of human behavior and of transforming the human personality into a mere thing, into something that even animals are not; for Pavlov’s dog, which, as we know, was trained to eat not when it was hungry but when a bell rang, was a perverted animal. Under normal circumstances this can never be accomplished, because spontaneity can never be entirely eliminated insofar as it is connected not only with human freedom but with life itself, in the sense of simply keeping alive.⁸⁴¹

In Arendt’s view, this destruction of plurality and spontaneity, which results from the delusion of omnipotence, is enabled by means of ideology. According to Arendt, the actions of totalitarian regimes are no longer guided by principles of action, but by the compelling logic of ideology.⁸⁴²

No guiding principle of behavior, taken itself from the realm of human action (...) is necessary or can be useful to set into motion a body politic which no longer uses terror as a means of intimidation, but whose essence *is* terror. In its stead, it has introduced an entirely new principle into public affairs that dispenses with human will to action altogether and appeals to the craving need for some insight into the law

⁸³⁹ Ibid., 437.

⁸⁴⁰ Ibid., 438.

⁸⁴¹ Ibid.

⁸⁴² Ibid., 468-471.

of movement according to which the terror functions and upon which, therefore, all private destinies depend.⁸⁴³

This new principle is the logic of the laws and forces of history and nature as they are explained by ideology, in which human beings and their actions become mere vehicles:

The inhabitants of a totalitarian country are thrown into and caught in the process of nature or history for the sake of accelerating its movement; as such, they can only be executioners or victims of its inherent law. The process may decide that those who today eliminate races and individuals (...) are tomorrow those who must be sacrificed. What totalitarian rule needs to guide the behavior of its subjects is a preparation to fit each of them equally well for the role of executioner and the role of victim. This two-sided preparation, the substitute for a principle of action, is the ideology.⁸⁴⁴

Arendt's analysis of the role of ideology demonstrates that the destruction of plurality and spontaneity does not merely affect the victims. Totalitarianism entails a movement in which certain forces are given free rein. Ideology is what makes offenders prepared to believe that the posited laws of history and nature should not only flow unrestrained, but also need to be accelerated. This creates a willingness in the offenders to sacrifice not only others, but also themselves and their own spontaneity. Ideology creates a dangerous condition of absolute selflessness, in which not only victims but also offenders become superfluous:⁸⁴⁵

[W]e may say that radical evil has emerged in connection with a system in which all men have become equally superfluous. The manipulators of this system believe in their own superfluosity as much as in that of all others, and the totalitarian murderers are all the more dangerous because they do not care if they themselves are alive or dead, if they ever lived or never were born.⁸⁴⁶

Arendt assumes that the destruction of plurality and the capacity for taking initiative by "a form of government whose essence is terror and whose principle of action is the logicity of

⁸⁴³ Ibid., 468.

⁸⁴⁴ Ibid., 468.

⁸⁴⁵ The condition of selflessness is also given evidence of in the popularity of suicide attacks in contemporary terror organizations.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid., 459.

ideological thinking⁸⁴⁷ starts with the basic experience of isolation and finally brings with it a condition of loneliness.⁸⁴⁸ Isolation, Arendt claims, has always been characteristic of tyrannies and as such it is pre-totalitarian. Its hallmark is impotence insofar as power for Arendt always comes from men acting together. In tyrannical government political contacts between men are severed, and the human capacities for action and power are frustrated. But in contrast to totalitarian terror, Arendt argues, under Tyranny not all contacts between men are broken and not all capacities destroyed:⁸⁴⁹

The whole sphere of private life with the capacities for experience, fabrication and thought are left intact. We know that the iron band of total terror leaves no space for such private life and that the self-coercion of totalitarian logic destroys man's capacity for experience and thought just as certainly as his capacity for action.⁸⁵⁰

In totalitarianism the political experience of isolation becomes absolute loneliness in every social intercourse. In isolation, Arendt argues, men remain in contact with the world, which is a human artifice. Loneliness instead, is not merely that impasse into which men are driven when the political sphere of their lives is destroyed, but arises when they are deserted by the world of things and others as well.⁸⁵¹

While isolation concerns only the political realm of life, loneliness concerns human life as a whole. Totalitarian government, like all tyrannies, certainly could not exist without destroying, by isolating men, their political capacities. But totalitarian domination as a form of government is new in that it is not content with this isolation and destroys private life as well. It bases itself on loneliness, on the experience of not belonging to the world at all, which is among the most radical and desperate experiences of man.⁸⁵²

For Arendt, loneliness also needs to be distinguished from solitude. Solitude requires being alone but also entails being together with oneself in a thinking dialogue. In this dialogue I do "not lose contact with the world of my fellow-men because they are represented in the self

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid., 474.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid., 474-475.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid., 474.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁵¹ Ibid., 475.

⁸⁵² Ibid.

with whom I lead the dialogue of thought”.⁸⁵³ But loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others. One finds oneself with whom one cannot establish contact. In loneliness I am therefore actually alone, deserted by all others. Yet, Arendt claims that for the confirmation of one’s identity, one depends entirely upon other people. Companionship ‘saves’ thinking persons - who are in their solitude always at risk of loneliness when they do no longer find the grace of companionship - from duality and makes them ‘whole’ again. It restores their identity, which makes them speak with “the single voice of one unexchangeable person”.⁸⁵⁴ The experience of loneliness therefore causes losing a sense of reality and of oneself:

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.⁸⁵⁵

Loneliness makes one lose one’s common sense, which depends on the contact with other men. If we were never able to have contact with others, even our experience of the materially and sensually given world would be untrustworthy. We would be enclosed in the particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous.⁸⁵⁶

Arendt holds that with this loneliness the most elementary form of creativity, which is the capacity to add something of one’s own to the common world, is destroyed. She claims that this happens not only in totalitarianism but also in a world where all human activities have been transformed into laboring: “Under such conditions, only the sheer effort of labor which is the effort to keep alive is left and the relationship with the world as a human artifice is broken.”⁸⁵⁷ When *homo faber*, who works in isolation, is treated as an *animal laborans*, “whose necessary ‘metabolism with nature’ is of concern to no one”,⁸⁵⁸ the isolated man who has lost

⁸⁵³ Ibid., 476.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid., 477.

⁸⁵⁶ Ibid., 475-476.

⁸⁵⁷ Ibid., 475.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid.

his place in the political realm of action is deserted by the world of things as well. According to Arendt, under these conditions isolation becomes loneliness.⁸⁵⁹

Arendt takes the condition of loneliness to be the common ground for terror - the essence of totalitarian government - and for ideology or logicity. Moreover, she argues that in this government loneliness is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluousness, which she takes to be the curses of the rise of the modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution. Uprootedness means to have no place in the world, which is recognized and guaranteed by others. Consequently, it can be a condition for superfluousness, just as isolation can be (but must not be) a condition for loneliness. To be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. Uprootedness and superfluousness, Arendt argues, have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the nineteenth century and with the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our own time.⁸⁶⁰ It must thus be explicitly stressed that the conditions that give rise to the unforgivable not merely rose in the limited time period of the Nazi-regime. Rather, they may rise under several circumstances and Arendt explicitly warns for the use of totalitarian means in a post-totalitarian era.⁸⁶¹ But the Nazi-crimes somehow put these conditions to their extreme.

In what Arendt calls “organized oblivion” the conditions of loneliness and superfluousness become so radical that they become very hard to recover from. In the concentration camps, the radical and disturbing experience of no longer belonging to the world was not only generated by a sense of loneliness, but also by an effort to preclude all memory of a person and thus to erase his entire existence. For Arendt, this destruction of the possibility of remembrance marks the distinction between murder and the unforgivable annihilation carried through in the death camps:

The murderer leaves a corpse behind and does not pretend that his victim has never existed; if he wipes out any traces, they are those of his own identity, and not the

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., 459. She warns for the use of totalitarian means in times marked by a tendency to render human beings superfluous: “The danger of the corpse factories and holes of oblivion is that today, with populations and homelessness everywhere on the increase, masses of people are continuously rendered superfluous if we continue to think our world in utilitarian terms. [...] Totalitarian solution may well survive the fall of totalitarian regimes in the form of strong temptations which will come up whenever it seems impossible to alleviate political, social, or economic misery in a manner worthy of man”. Ibid., 459. One may think for instance of the contemporary refugee crisis.

memory and grief of the persons who loved his victim; he destroys a life, but he does not destroy the fact of existence itself.⁸⁶²

Moreover, while the murder still takes place within plural reality, the annihilation in the death camps takes place within an unreal phantom world, a place standing outside life and death, “a life removed from earthly purposes”.⁸⁶³ Arendt assumes that the camps and the murder of political adversaries are part of a more general organized forgetfulness, which makes grief and remembrance forbidden. According to Arendt, this is radically new in Western history. Hitherto, the Western world has, even in its darkest periods, granted slain enemies the right to be remembered. According to her, this indicated the self-evident acknowledgement of the fact that we are all men, “and *only* men”,⁸⁶⁴ she adds as a reference to the condition of plurality. The concentration camps made death itself anonymous.⁸⁶⁵ In taking away the individual’s own death, which has its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life, they showed that nothing belonged to him and he belonged to no one: “His death merely set a seal on the fact that he had never really existed.”⁸⁶⁶ Consequently, Arendt argues, for the first time in history, martyrdom becomes impossible.⁸⁶⁷ Arendt takes this skepticism to be “the real masterpiece of the SS”, “their great accomplishment”:⁸⁶⁸

Here the night has fallen on the future. When no witnesses are left, there can be no testimony. To demonstrate when death can no longer be postponed is an attempt to give death a meaning, to act beyond one’s own death. In order to be successful, a gesture must have social meaning.⁸⁶⁹

⁸⁶² Ibid., 442.

⁸⁶³ Ibid., 445.

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid., 452.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ There may be exceptions. One exception is a priest, Maximiliaan Kolbe, who voluntarily took the place of a prisoner who had young children he did not want to leave behind. This father was one of ten prisoners who were picked out randomly to be punished by being locked up and starved to death for an attempt of three other prisoners to escape. In contrast to the fabrication of bodies the execution was a punishment because other prisoners tried to escape. As a punishment their death was not completely arbitrary and thus the possibility of martyrdom as a sign of spontaneity may have arisen. See “Maximilian Kolbe,” *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maximilian_Kolbe.

⁸⁶⁸ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 451.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

Arendt's remark that with this organized oblivion and skepticism the "night has fallen on the future"⁸⁷⁰ suggests that the preclusion of remembrance makes it impossible ever to recover from the elimination of plurality and spontaneity. It seems that for Arendt the attempt to eradicate all memory, making it impossible to give one's spontaneous acting a meaning beyond death, entails such a profound destruction of spontaneity that these crimes are rendered forever unforgivable. This reminds of the importance of memory for the possibility of forgiveness, as I have discussed in the first chapter of the first part of this dissertation. It also stresses that the power of forgiveness relies on the capacity of spontaneity. As we revealed before, human action and initiative may be very powerful but are also always limited. Human action, and thus also forgiveness, is not omnipotent. It can only flourish under certain conditions, most importantly the condition of plurality and natality. Arendt strongly believes that if those conditions are denied or destroyed the remedy of forgiveness is equally destroyed. As Michael Janover puts it: "[I]f the capacity of beginning, the ground of any action and hence any forgiving, is destroyed, then the possibility of forgiveness would itself be annihilated."⁸⁷¹ He emphasizes that for Arendt certain crimes are unforgivable, because they are crimes against persons qua persons - which means in Arendt's view crimes against persons as acting persons and not as moral persons - and thus crimes against humanity.⁸⁷²

However, Arendt's belief that spontaneity can somehow be fundamentally destructed received important critique among fervent defenders of her account of politics. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl for instance believes that in assuming that there are acts that are principally unforgivable Arendt is underestimating the potentialities of human power. Young-Bruehl argues that Arendt, who had "the most profound understanding of the nature of human power and its distinction from violence"⁸⁷³, failed to see that "a person *always* has the power to forgive, acting in relationship with the one forgiven".⁸⁷⁴ One should indeed call into question whether, even if these crimes render human forgiveness powerless, it would never be possible to recover from this condition. Why would these crimes, that created a situation in which forgiveness could simply not be at stake, remain unforgivable whatsoever, even after the condition of plurality and the capacity of spontaneity are recovered? Why wouldn't

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁸⁷¹ Janover, "The Limits of Forgiveness," 230.

⁸⁷² Ibid., 221. Nowadays the term 'crimes against humanity' has become a common term to indicate all forms of genocide and Janover therefore also equates both, but I doubt that Arendt would agree with this generalization.

⁸⁷³ Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 122.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid.

one be able to come to terms with what happened when the political regime has changed, the condition of loneliness is removed and one regains the capacity to act freely? Isn't it possible to regain power and to make forgiveness possible afterwards? It is clear that, despite the attempt to destroy the memory of the victims, in recent decades we have somehow learned to remember the holocaust. As a human community, we have somehow succeeded in remembering what was almost made impossible to remember. Despite the great efforts of the Nazi's to annihilate all memories of life and death of the victims, there are also many testimonies of liberated survivors of the concentration camps. Thanks to the liberation of Germany and of the camps, those survivors are somehow able to tell the stories of those who didn't survive. So many films and books narrate the life stories of individuals that in one way or another became victims of the Nazi-system, to the extent that we even might get 'bored' by them. Intellectuals, such as Arendt herself, tried to grasp what happened and even retold western history in view of these crimes. There is a huge Holocaust memorial in Berlin that aims to give a tangible place to the sense of unreality and disorientation that came with the prosecution and extermination of the Jews. Yearly, large groups of schoolchildren visit the concentration camps of Auschwitz and Birkenau. And in most European countries there is even a law that prohibits minimalizing or denying the holocaust. In light of these developments the question might be posed whether the time for forgiveness could have arrived by now. Why would these crimes remain unforgivable by definition, as Arendt supposes? Why wouldn't we, at some point, be able to remember and forgive? Is forgiveness not precisely a process of establishing new relationships and of regaining the power and freedom to act? Moreover, didn't we discuss before that for Arendt, the capacity of spontaneity is an omnipresent capacity, grounded in the condition of natality, one's appearance in the world as an acting and speaking being? If one finds a way to belong to the world again in acting and speaking, to be 'reborn' so to say, would it still not be possible to forgive those who created this horrible situation? Consequently, is Elisabeth Young-Bruehl not right in arguing that Arendt in fact underestimates the potential of human power in assuming that there are crimes that exceed this power, that there are '*skandalons*' which we cannot remove? Young-Bruehl holds that "we should never rule out the possibility of forgiveness for any *person*, no matter how heinous the crime or how great an assault it makes against the condition of plurality, against humanity."⁸⁷⁵ According to her, "such a potentiality

⁸⁷⁵ Ibid., 121-122.

cannot be radically destroyed unless - through violence – every last person is destroyed.”⁸⁷⁶ This way, she stresses the role of plurality for the capacity of spontaneity. It is due to the presence of others that someone can re-appear in acting and speaking.

It must be noted that the anomaly Govier points to - namely that, while we forgive persons, we call certain deeds unforgivable and suppose that this also renders the actors unforgivable - also appears in Arendt’s account. Although Arendt strongly emphasizes that it is for the sake of the person we forgive, she also assumes that it are certain deeds that are principally unforgivable. As Eichmann’s case demonstrates, this also renders the persons committing those deeds unforgivable. But as I already discussed in the first chapter, this precisely reveals that, for Arendt, a person cannot simply be untied from his acts by relying on his decent moral core. In an Arendtian view, the distinction between persons and their acts is not an essential metaphysical condition, the so-called separation between the sin and the sinner, preceding the act of forgiveness. It is not an absolute pre-existing distinction, but rather a practice. It is precisely by forgiving someone that we untie the irreversible act from the person who committed it. By doing so, we actively prevent that one remains attached to the determining consequences of one’s acts forever. But, since we forgive for the sake of a person, there must be a person for the sake of whom we may forgive. Forgiveness not merely depends on the spontaneity of the forgiver, but also on the recognition of spontaneity by the offender. If one ignores one’s capacity of acting or denies that one did anything out of one’s own initiative, forgiveness indeed becomes impossible. In such a case we precisely lack the interdependent power to forgive and to untie a person from his acts. This points out why, for Arendt, the possibility of forgiveness is also always dependent on the condition of remorse. But unlike the condition of repentance, as it appears for instance in Hampton’s account, her account of remorse does not rely on the Christian distinction between the act and the agent. The notion of repentance as it appears in conditional accounts implies that an offender distances himself from his evil acts. This gives evidence of his ‘inner decent core’ and his moral transformation. Arendt’s account of remorse rather entails the ability of an agent to accept his deeds as undeniably and irreversibly *his* deeds. It does not imply repudiating one’s acts in order to clear one’s soul, but rather taking responsibility for them in recognizing that one cannot just get rid of them. Sometimes this implies the recognition and acceptance that one cannot be forgiven for what one did. I will discuss this important distinction in detail in the section on remorse.

⁸⁷⁶ Ibid., 122.

Moreover, it may very well be true that a remembrance of the holocaust victims has become possible, but it must be stressed that the memory of the offenders and collaborators is still much more problematic in European Society. The same goes for its colonial history. This points out that the kind of speechless horror to which Arendt refers has not yet dissolved. It is this difficulty of thinking and speaking about the offenders that Arendt takes to be “a deep-rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened”.⁸⁷⁷

Elisabeth Young-Bruehl argues that the Truth and Reconciliation commission in South Africa has shown that forgiveness, as a structural element of human affairs, is a necessity in political life:

[F]orums like the TRC should be as much part of political life to deal with past conflicts as forums for treaty negotiation – promise making – are to secure against future conflict. Forgiveness is not just an action that can take place, it is an action that must be encouraged.⁸⁷⁸

Young-Bruehl may be right in arguing that establishing institution and forums in which truth is acknowledged may encourage perpetrators, such as Eugène de Kock, who committed horrible atrocities and was therefore known as ‘Prime Evil’, to acknowledge what they did and to make commemoration possible. Such an institutionalized forum may foster acknowledgement, truth, memory, publicity, plurality, a sense of reality, action and spontaneity - all of which are conditions for forgiveness. But I don’t think it should promote forgiveness directly and as such. This ‘encouragement’ only increases the chance that forgiveness is misunderstood and misused. Moreover, it is highly paternalistic. Since forgiveness is an ultimate human capacity, every human being is able to come to know its powers, and does not need to be advised, reminded, encouraged or enlightened. One only needs to take care of the conditions that enable a renewed future and if those are sufficiently fulfilled, forgiveness will eventually find its way among acting beings. As ‘beginners’, they always remain capable of starting anew, even if forgiveness does not take place. Forgiveness is an expression of the capacity to start anew. But the capacity itself is not dependent upon

⁸⁷⁷ Hannah Arendt, “The Aftermath of Nazi Rule: Report from Germany,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, Totalitarianism*, loc. 5100 of 8854.

⁸⁷⁸ Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 121.

forgiveness. Tutu may thus be wrong in claiming that there is “no future without forgiveness”.⁸⁷⁹

At the end of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt also hopefully acknowledges the possibility of making a new beginning, as a result of the condition of natality, which implies the birth of new distinctive individuals:

But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning; this beginning is the promise, the only ‘message’ which the end can ever produce. Beginning, before it becomes a historical event, is the supreme capacity of man; politically, it is identical with man’s freedom. *Initium ut esset homo creatus est* – ‘that a beginning be made man was created’ said Augustine. This beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man.⁸⁸⁰

But for Arendt, this new beginning does not consist of insisting on forgiving what remains unforgivable. When forgiveness is not possible, a new beginning may imply the judgment that forgiving what has happened is impossible and that in order to rise out of the ruins of the past, the world may be in need of something absolutely new and unpredictable. Arendt for instance defends the establishment of an international criminal court and an international penal code under which these ‘new crimes’ could be prosecuted.⁸⁸¹

By discussing some of the most important characteristics of what Arendt describes as radical evil, such as the delusion of omnipotence, ideology, loneliness and oblivion, I have illuminated what she takes to be the radical elimination of the condition of plurality and the capacity of spontaneity. It should be stressed that part of what renders certain acts unforgivable in Arendt’s view is not merely the way in which it destructs certain capacities in the victims. It also refers to the way in which offenders and the so-called bystanders neglect the capacity of acting in themselves. In *The Human Condition* Arendt explicitly warns for a world in which we somehow tend to forget that we are acting beings, precisely at those moments in which our acts leave their irreversible traces in the world.⁸⁸² If we mistake our own actions for the activity of working, surrendering them to the logic of utility and mastery,

⁸⁷⁹ Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*.

⁸⁸⁰ Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478-479.

⁸⁸¹ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 295. See also Douglas Klusmeyer, “Hannah Arendt’s Critical Realism: Power, Justice and Responsibility,” in *Hannah Arendt and International Relations. Reading Across the Lines*, eds. Anthony F. Lang, Jr. and John Williams (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 150-151.

⁸⁸² Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 3

we may render the remedy of forgiveness powerless.⁸⁸³ Forgiveness can only be a remedy in a world in which spontaneity and unpredictability are recognized for what they are. Arendt assumes that if one aims to replace the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action by the predictability of scientific models and programs, one may precisely be confronted with a type of irreversibility for which there is no remedy left. In respect to the notion of unforgivable deeds we always tend to think of a massive shedding of blood. But for Arendt, the horror of the unforgivable rather refers to what arises from the dominance of a compelling, self-evident and ice-cold logic of technocracy and bureaucracy. This way, as Richard J. Bernstein rightly remarks, she also aims to warn for the *hubris* that is implied in certain acts. This hubris characterized the Nazi-leaders but may just as well survive them as totalitarian means may survive a totalitarian age.⁸⁸⁴ The unforgivable may thus just as much rise out of very familiar contemporary circumstances. As soon as the Marc Zuckerbergs of this world forget that they are acting, the irreversible consequences of created algorithms, data brokerage, fake news, scientific fraud and cheating software may turn out to be unforgivable. This is not to say that all technic and scientific means in the search for social and political solutions are to be condemned and avoided whatsoever. But according to Arendt, we should never refrain from thinking about what we are doing.⁸⁸⁵ This implies recognizing our acts as what they are, unpredictable and irreversible interventions in a fragile web of relations. Therefore we must be prepared to take responsibility for them as spontaneous actors. If one is not continuously prepared to perceive oneself as a spontaneous acting person, it may be already too late to interrupt when one starts to realize what one is doing – just like Marc Zuckerberg only slowly seems to do.

It thus has also become clear that, in Arendt's view, the judgment that some acts remain unforgivable does not express a deep moral disapproval but rather arises out of a concern and love of the common world. In the first chapter of this part I explained that the universal love of man and mankind in fact precludes excluding anyone or anything from forgiveness.

⁸⁸³ Ibid., 238.

⁸⁸⁴ As Bernstein puts it: "What is it about superfluosity that makes this evil so distinctive and so radical? It is not exclusively the humiliation, torture, and systematic murder of millions (Jews and non-Jews). It is also the *hubris* of those totalitarian leaders who think they are omnipotent, that they can *rival* a God who created a plurality of human beings." Bernstein, "Arendt: Radical Evil and the Banality of Evil," 213. Bernstein holds that Arendt was not committed to Judaism as a religion, although she was also not hesitant to affirm her identity as a Jew. Nevertheless, he believes that in regard to the hubris of the unforgivable there is a theological aura in her thinking. Ibid., 213.

⁸⁸⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 3.

In view of his inviolable moral value every human person deserves to be forgiven. However, this blind love for one's inner goodness also amounts to overlooking and condoning a wrong. It even fails to take the existence of conflict and enmity seriously. But if one takes the principle of love of the world as a criterion for forgiveness, it becomes possible to judge that some acts pose such a huge obstacle for interdependent acting relationships that they remain unforgivable. Some acts, Arendt claims, are of such a kind that one is never able to fully recover from them.

Moreover, the criterion of love of the world points out that forgiveness is always an interdependent act in which one takes responsibility for the common world and for the other as an acting person in that world. But when the other person is no longer able to appear as an acting person, because he has destroyed all plurality and spontaneity in himself, the interdependent act of forgiveness becomes powerless. Consequently, Arendt argues, all we can do is making sure that such a person never comes near to us.

5.3. The Meaning of Remorse

5.3.1. Choosing One's Company

The preceding analysis demonstrates that, on the basis of the notion of the unforgivable, Arendt aims to give account of two different aspects of evil, its radicality on the one hand and its banality on the other. During her lifetime her attention shifted from the first aspect to the second. As a result, she at some point even rejected the notion of radical evil:

I changed my mind and do no longer speak of "radical evil" [...] It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never "radical", that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension.⁸⁸⁶

⁸⁸⁶ Bernstein, "Arendt: Radical Evil and the Banality of Evil," 218.

This, however, does not imply that she rejects the existence of wickedness altogether. She only assumes it to be rare and not sufficient as an explanation for the rise of unforgivable crimes.

In the first part of this dissertation I discussed Arendt's assumption that it is the everyday occurrence of trespassing that requires forgiveness. This, however, does not imply that for her only light offences or small faults qualify for forgiveness. The crucial criterion for forgiveness is the way in which an offender reveals himself as an acting person. Forgiveness addresses a person. It is for the sake of who someone is as an acting person that we forgive. For Arendt, the remedy of forgiveness therefore also depends on the way in which one reveals oneself as a person, as someone who is capable of unexpected spontaneity. The wicked person appears precisely as someone who has handed himself over to the predictable logic of repeated evil acts. It is therefore impossible to distinguish him as a spontaneous actor from his acts by means of forgiving, because the consistency of his evildoing precisely leaves no space for spontaneity. This is for instance illustrated by Arendt's reference the story of Bluebeard. Bluebeard is a French folk tale, first published at the end of the 17th century. It tells the story of a wealthy nobleman who has been married several times, but all of his wives have mysteriously vanished. After he has married the frightened youngest daughter of his neighbor, he tells her he must leave the country for a couple of days and gives her a golden key. With this key, she is able to open all the doors of his castle, but she is not allowed to open the door of an underground chamber. If she neglects what he has strictly forbidden, she will suffer his wrath, he warns. After he has left, she cannot resist the temptation and opens the door of the forbidden room. Here she finds the floor flooded with blood and she discovers the murdered corpses of her husband's former wives. When he comes back earlier than expected, she succeeds in murdering him with the help of her brothers and sister before he is able to murder her.⁸⁸⁷

Arendt takes Bluebeard to be the kind of murderer who is unforgivable, because his murders are constitutive for who he is. He is not an ordinary criminal, but does evil for evil's sake. He wills evil wholeheartedly. In her letter to Auden, she writes that just like forgiveness, judicial pardon "will hardly pardon Bluebeard who is a murderer, but it may pardon a crime passionel because murder was committed by somebody who was not a murderer".⁸⁸⁸ In his dissertation on Arendt's concept of forgiveness Thomas Dürr explains that we are unable to

⁸⁸⁷ "Bluebeard," *Wikipedia*, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bluebeard>.

⁸⁸⁸ Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

know whether Bluebeard would have never been able to change substantially by future acts. But since Bluebeard has shown himself as a murderer several times, we cannot see him differently from whom he has proved to be, a murderer:

[W]ir enthalten den Blaubärte dieser Welt unsere Verzeihung vor, weil sie sich wieder und wieder als Blaubärte erwiesen haben. Blaubart als der, als der er sich mordend gezeigt hat, kann uns schlechterdings nicht mehr davon überzeugen, dass er mehr ist als seine Taten und noch ein anderer werden kann als der, der er mordend geworden ist. Ein Mörder hingegen, der vor dem Mord noch nicht gemordet hat, bleibt zwar für immer jemand, der einen anderen Menschen ermordet hat und die mörderische Schuld nicht abtragen kann. Aber weil er vorher ein anderer war, hat er grundsätzlich die Möglichkeit, uns begründete Hoffnung zu vermitteln, dass er in Zukunft mehr sein wird als der Mörder, der er nun auch, aber nicht nur ist. Wer einem solchen Mörder die Verzeihung verweigert, beschließt, in ihm fortan allein den Mörder zu sehen.⁸⁸⁹

This way, Dürr stresses that the unforgivable in Arendt's account arises from the way in which someone's deeds reveal who they are. It is thus not a judgment on one's inner moral state, but it results from the impression one gains from the other as an acting person. Arendt's reference to the story of bluebeard shows that her distinction between forgivable and unforgivable deeds is not determined by a categorical judgment on the gravity of the misdeed nor by the seriousness of its consequences, but rather by what the deeds reveal about its actor. This again points out that it is strictly speaking impossible to 'separate the sin from the sinner'. Instead, it is the case that, rather than revealing who one is by just one act to which one can be reduced, one reveals who one is by one's entire life story as an acting person. Unlike the Christian view of 'who am I to judge' as a motivation for forgiveness, this view precisely implies a capacity to judge particular situations and events.⁸⁹⁰

Moreover, Arendt assumes that what one does is not primarily a matter of intentions, but rather a matter of conscience, understood as the ability to live with oneself. In the essay "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy" she argues that making decisions on right and wrong depends on who we will choose to be in company with as soon as we 'come home' with ourselves and start thinking about what we are doing:

⁸⁸⁹ Dürr, *Hannah Arendts Begriff des Verzeihens*, 173-174.

⁸⁹⁰ See also Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

[T]his company is chosen by thinking in examples, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents, past or present. In the unlikely case that someone should come and tell us that he would prefer Bluebeard for company, and hence take him as an example, the only thing we could do is to make sure that he never comes near to us.⁸⁹¹

Arendt thus suggests that willed evil is not only unforgivable but also very rare. In contrast to her emphasis on radical evil and her effort to distinguish it from ‘regular’ trespassing, in *The Human Condition* Arendt gradually comes to realize that it is precisely the refusal to judge and the refusal or inability to think about what one does that gives rise to the most dangerous and unforgivable acts. In contrast to the kind of evil that is exemplified in Bluebeard, this ‘banal evil’ is not rare and gives rise to the real *skandala*, or stumbling stones. She takes the chance that someone willfully chooses Bluebeard’s company to be much smaller than the chance that one remains indifferent in regard to whom one wants to live with:

[T]he likelihood that someone would come and tell us that he does not mind and that any company will be good enough for him is, I fear, by far greater. Morally and even politically speaking, this indifference, though common enough, is the greatest danger. Out of the unwillingness or inability to choose one’s examples and one’s company, and out of the unwillingness or inability to relate to others through judgment arise the real *skandala*, the real stumbling blocks which human powers can’t remove because they were not caused by human and humanly understandable motives. Therein lies the horror and, at the same time, the banality of evil.⁸⁹²

This also reveals that the ignorance or negligence that may be involved in ‘normal’ trespassing may become even more dangerous as soon as one is no longer able to realize what one does. For this reason, Arendt emphasizes the importance of regret and repentance for forgiveness. But for her, repentance does not imply dissociating oneself from one’s acts in an act of mere repudiation and rejection. On the contrary, it implies the possibility to trace back one’s steps, to come to recognize what one did and to take responsibility for it. For this reason, I take Jankélévitch’s terminology of remorse to be more appropriate to indicate what she aims at. Moreover, it enables to draw a distinction with the common use of the word

⁸⁹¹ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 144.

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*, 144-145.

repentance.⁸⁹³ A lack of remorse and conscience is what ‘radical’ or willed evil and the thoughtlessness of ‘banal’ evil have in common. For this reason, the distinction between trespassing and willed evil turns out to be far less important in determining what can be forgiven than the difference between misdeeds for which a person takes responsibility and misdeeds for which one refuses to do.

5.3.2. *Tracing Back One’s Steps*

The obstacle that is posed by the unforgivable points out that forgiveness is an intrinsically interdependent practice. One can only liberate another from what he did if he is prepared to acknowledge that he is a spontaneous actor. He must be able to realize that acting is always contingent and that he may act differently than he did. In contemporary literature on forgiveness much attention has been paid to the difficult or even impossible task to forgive, which only amounts to its greatness.⁸⁹⁴ But in a letter to Wystan Auden, in which she discusses forgiveness after she read his piece on Falstaff, Arendt demands attention for the position of the one who asks for forgiveness:

I do not know what is more difficult: to demand a coat or to give the cloak also, but I am quite sure that it is more difficult to ask than to give forgiveness. This side of the matter, that is, the mutuality of the whole business, remains outside all considerations in ‘doing good’, but it is essential for the act of forgiving.⁸⁹⁵

Arendt’s attention for the wrongdoer’s role in the forgiveness process - not as someone who needs to make it morally and psychologically possible to forgive or shows to deserve it, but rather as an independent spontaneous actor who forecloses a new relation and new reality - is unique in the literature on forgiveness.⁸⁹⁶ Once again, it demonstrates the importance of the condition of plurality and the role of interdependency for forgiveness in Arendt’s view.

⁸⁹³ Jankélévitch, *The Bad Conscience*.

⁸⁹⁴ In this respect, Derrida’s account is very influential in the contemporary literature. See for instance Paul van Tongeren, “Impossible Forgiveness,” *Ethical Perspectives* 15, 3 (2008): 369-379; Steven Gormley, “The Impossible Demand of Forgiveness,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 22, 1 (2014): 27-48.

⁸⁹⁵ Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

⁸⁹⁶ Some other authors, such as Charles Griswold, also emphasize the dialogue between forgiver and wrongdoer as a requirement for forgiveness. But this dialogue is merely perceived in the light of the conditional relation between both, giving rise to forgiveness in its conditional form. Arendt’s interpretation of the mutual relation between actors (not merely offender vs victim) clearly differs.

One cannot achieve forgiveness alone, neither in its unconditional form of forgiving an unrepentant or absent wrongdoer, nor as forgiveness of oneself.

For Arendt, the condition of plurality and mutuality is so fundamental that she takes self-forgiveness to be a mere role one plays for oneself.⁸⁹⁷ The act of forgiveness, for Arendt, is addressed to who someone is as an acting person. But this 'who' is not only to be distinguished from their character traits, it can also only appear for others, not for themselves. For this reason, she believes that nobody is able to forgive themselves:

[T]he fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody forgive himself; here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in a distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive.⁸⁹⁸

Arendt's view of forgiveness as a dialogical act, grounded in the condition of plurality, thus also precludes to perceive of it as an act of moral excellence, which always involves the risk of claiming moral superiority. Her attention for the act of asking forgiveness also relies on a completely different conception of remorse than is discussed so far.

In her letter to Auden, Arendt explicitly claims that, if we are to trust what the Gospels assure us, forgiveness is not unconditional. She refers to Jesus stating: "If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him."⁸⁹⁹ In *The Human Condition* she refers to the Gospel of Luke, stating that trespasses should be forgiven when one repents: "And if he trespasses against thee seven times a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him."⁹⁰⁰ In a footnote to this quote she explains that the notion of repentance is in fact not an adequate translation of what is at stake. She holds that the original notion of *metanoein* in fact means 'change of mind'⁹⁰¹ and also serves the Hebrew *shuv*, which means "'return', 'trace back one's steps' rather than 'repentance' with its

⁸⁹⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 237.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁸⁹⁹ Arendt to Auden, February 14, 1960.

⁹⁰⁰ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 240. Arendt cites the Gospel of Luke in the New Testament.

⁹⁰¹ It is important to note that in the contemporary literature *metanoein* is mostly translated as 'change of heart'. Arendt translation as a 'change of mind' thus indicates a revision of the notion.

psychological overtones”.⁹⁰² Arendt holds that “what is required is: change of mind and ‘sin no more’, which is almost the opposite of doing penance”.⁹⁰³ In “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy”, she also refers to repentance or *teshuvah* as going back and remember what one did. She takes this possibility of thinking in retrospect about what one did to be a requirement for being a person and being able to forgive a person:⁹⁰⁴

The trouble with the Nazi criminals was precisely that they renounced voluntarily all personal qualities, as if nobody were left to be either punished or forgiven. They protested time and again that they had never done anything out of their own initiative, that they had no intentions whatsoever, good or bad, and that they only obeyed orders. To put it another way: the greatest evil perpetrated is the evil committed by nobodies, that is, by human beings who refuse to be persons. Within the conceptual framework of these considerations we could say that wrongdoers who refuse to think by themselves what they are doing and who also refuse in retrospect to think about it, that is, go back and remember what they did (which is *teshuvah* or repentance), have actually failed to constitute themselves into somebodies. By stubbornly remaining nobodies they prove themselves unfit for intercourse with others who, good, bad, or indifferent, are at the very least persons.⁹⁰⁵

For Arendt, being a person requires taking personal responsibility for what one does. It entails the acknowledgement of one’s acts as undeniably being one’s own, whatever the mitigating circumstances may be. It requires not evading responsibility on the basis of the argument that ‘everyone would have done the same’ or that ‘as a cog in the system’ one ‘just obeyed orders’. It requires tracing back one’s steps and thinking about what one did. It entails being expected to answer for what one has done.⁹⁰⁶ After the controversy about her report on the Eichmann trial, Arendt examines in the essay “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship” the tendency to evade personal responsibility and the related widespread fear of judging. She aims at the widespread conviction that, in times of political evil, being tempted and being forced are almost the same and that one is not able to judge past events at which we were not present. Consequently, judging those events in terms of personal

⁹⁰² Ibid., 240 footnote 78.

⁹⁰³ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁴ Arendt, “Some Questions of Moral Philosophy,” 110-112.

⁹⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁰⁶ Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, 19.

responsibility is generally considered to be wrong.⁹⁰⁷ Arendt reveals that behind the unwillingness to judge lurks the suspicion that no one is a free agent:⁹⁰⁸

Who am I to judge? actually means We 're all alike, equally bad, and those who try, or pretend that they try, to remain halfway decent are either saints or hypocrites, and in either case should leave us alone.⁹⁰⁹

Incidentally, Arendt argues, the idea that who was not there cannot pass a judgment, was precisely Eichmann's own argument against the courtroom's judgment.⁹¹⁰ Likewise, the reverse tendency to attribute collective guilt to the German people in general turns into "a highly effective whitewash of all those who had actually done something, for where all are guilty, no one is".⁹¹¹ Arendt asks how deep-seated the fear of judgment, of naming names, and of fixing blame, must be if one would rather throw all mankind out of the window, as it were, in order to save one man in a high position from the accusation, not even of having committed a crime, but merely of an admittedly grave sin of omission.⁹¹² But, fortunately, she argues, "there exists still one institution in society in which it is well-nigh impossible to evade issues of personal responsibility"⁹¹³ and where "not systems or trends or original sin are judged, but men of flesh and blood like you and me, whose deeds are of course still human deeds but who appear before a tribunal because they have broken some law whose maintenance we regard as essential for the integrity of our common humanity".⁹¹⁴ This institution is the courtroom. Arendt concludes that legal and moral issues are by no means the same, but they both presuppose the power of judgment and they both address a person rather than a system.⁹¹⁵ In reference to her experiences with the Eichmann trial and the defense's plea that he was but a small cog in the system, she argues:

[It] was the great advantage of courtroom procedure that this whole cog-business makes no sense in its setting, and therefore forces us to look at all these questions

⁹⁰⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁰⁸ Ibid., 19

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁹¹⁰ "When told that there had been alternatives and that he could have escaped his murderous duties, he insisted that these were postwar legends born of hindsight and supported by people who did not know or had forgotten how things actually have been." Ibid., 18

⁹¹¹ Ibid., 20.

⁹¹² Ibid.

⁹¹³ Ibid.

⁹¹⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁹¹⁵ Ibid., 20, 29.

from a different point of view. [...] For, as the judges took great pains to point out explicitly, in a courtroom there is no system on trial, no History or historical trend, no ism, anti-Semitism for instance, but a person, and if the defendant happens to be a functionary, he stands accused precisely because even a functionary is still a human being, and it is in this capacity that he stands trial. [...] In every bureaucratic system the shifting of responsibilities is a matter of daily routine, and if one wishes to define bureaucracy [...] as a form of government [...] bureaucracy unhappily is the rule of nobody and for this very reason perhaps the least human and most cruel form of rulership. But in the courtroom, these definitions are of no avail. For to the answer: 'Not I but the system did it in which I was a cog,' the court immediately raises the next question: 'And why, if you please, did you become a cog or continue to be a cog under such circumstances?' If the accused wishes to shift responsibilities, he must again implicate persons, he must name names, and these persons appear then as possible codefendants, they do not appear as the embodiment of bureaucratic of any other necessity. The Eichmann trial, like all such trials, would have been devoid of all interest if it had not transformed the cog or 'referent' of Section IV B4 in the Reich Security Head Office into a man.⁹¹⁶

In the third chapter I explained that in Arendt's account forgiveness is an alternative to punishment rather than its opposite. They share a common feature which enables Arendt to hold that we are unable to forgive what we cannot punish and vice versa. This common feature is the attribution of personal responsibility, which relies on the assumption that men – despite the system in which they operate – always remain responsible persons, free agents, capable of acting and thinking. Evidently, Arendt argues, the system cannot be left out of account altogether. It appears in the form of circumstances, in the same sense as mitigating circumstances in the case of crimes committed in the milieu of poverty appear, rather than as excuses.⁹¹⁷

⁹¹⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

⁹¹⁷ Ibid., 32. But just like she considers those crimes to exceed human power and therefore to be unforgivable, she also holds that all our previous notions about punishment and its justifications fail in confrontation with these war crimes. Ibid., 26. Punishment, she argues, is usually justified on one of the following grounds: the need of society to be protected against crime, the improvement of the criminal, the deterring force and retributive justice. Arendt argues that these grounds are not valid for the punishment of war criminals. Hardly anyone of them can reasonably be expected to commit further crimes, society is thus in no need of being protected from them. Ibid., 24. That they can be improved through prison sentences is even less likely than in the case of ordinary criminals and since the crimes were committed in extraordinary circumstances the chances that they serve as deterrence to future criminals is equally small. Even the non-utilitarian notion of retribution is hardly applicable in view of the magnitude of the crime. But the fact that we are not able to hold on to preconceived standards, norms and general rules does not allow us to let those who murdered hundreds of thousands or millions go scot-free. The confrontation with the magnitude of the crimes should

For Arendt, being a person and claiming responsibility as a person refer to the omnipresent ability to do something on one's own initiative, but also to the omnipresent ability to think and judge about what one does. In her view, the ability to go back and remember what one did is closely related to what she takes to be what a conscience is. She holds that thinking entails a two-in-one. In thinking one engages in a mental dialogue with oneself.⁹¹⁸ It is by relating to oneself that one is able to experience difference in oneself. This difference in oneself, the two-in-one, reflects the difference and otherness as it is present in the world of appearances, where things are not merely for oneself but also for others.⁹¹⁹ In thinking about what one does, one thus in fact appears to oneself. Arendt refers to Socrates who regards the other self as a fellow who awaits him at home and cross-examines him. It is a close relative and lives in the same house.⁹²⁰ Therefore, Arendt argues, in order to be able to think we must be able to live with ourselves. The other self must be a friend.⁹²¹ The only criterion for the mental dialogue with oneself is thus agreement. One must be consistent with oneself. If the opposite is the case, when one is in contradiction with oneself, one actually becomes one's own adversary.⁹²² Conscience, she argues, is a side effect of the fact that in order to think "the self that we all are must take care not to do anything that would make it impossible for the two-in-one to be friends and live in harmony":⁹²³

Its criterion for action will not be the usual rules, recognized by multitudes and agreed upon by society, but whether I shall be able to live with myself in peace when the time has come to think about my deeds and words. Conscience is the anticipation of the fellow who awaits you if and when you come home."⁹²⁴

not preclude us to judge them, Arendt argues. *Ibid.*, 26. For her, these war crimes fall beyond any category and therefore precisely require a human faculty "which enables us to judge rationally without being carried away by either emotion or self-interest, and which at the same time functions spontaneously, that is to say, is not bound by standards and rules under which particular cases are simply subsumed, but on the contrary, produces its own principles by virtue of the judging activity itself". *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁹¹⁸ Arendt, "Thinking," 185.

⁹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹²¹ "To Socrates, the duality of the two-in-one meant no more than that if you want to think, you must see to it that the two who carry on the dialogue be in good shape, that the partners be friends. The partner who comes to life when you are alert and alone is the only one from whom you can never get away – except by ceasing to think." *Ibid.*, 187-188.

⁹²² *Ibid.*, 186. In relation to this Arendt also refers to Kant's categorical imperative as being essentially about not contradicting oneself. *Ibid.*, 188.

⁹²³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁹²⁴ *Ibid.*

For Arendt, conscience is thus not an inner moral law telling us what to do. Rather, it refers to choosing one's company in reference to exemplars: who do I want to live with? The exemplar functions in a similar way as a principle. It does not prescribe but it orients one's acts and guides one's considerations.

Through this analysis of Arendt's notion of repentance, personhood and conscience, it should become clear that her account on repentance or remorse as a condition for forgiveness crucially differs from how it appears in many contemporary accounts. It does not rely on a distinction between the sinner and his sins, or on the mere moral condemnation and repudiation of one's acts. In fact, Arendt's account of repentance as the ability to 'trace back one's steps' is at the same time more and less demanding. On the one hand, it does not require a complete transformation of who one is, to such an extent as to give rise to absurd philosophical questions concerning whether the person we forgive is still the same as the one who came to commit the crime.⁹²⁵ On the other hand, it is also more demanding, since it does not merely require that one morally condemns and repudiates the wrongs one committed, but also that one explicitly takes personal responsibility for it. This implies that one acknowledges one cannot just get rid of one's acts, one must accept them as undeniably one's own. This also implies that one is not able to rely on the moral 'trick' of reform, repudiation and transformation in order to separate oneself from it.

It is possible to illustrate this with an example that is often referred to in the contemporary literature on forgiveness and which is even supposed to be an outstanding piece of evidence against Arendt's notion of the unforgivable as applicable to war criminals: the remorse expressed by 'Prime Evil' Eugène de Kock.⁹²⁶

From the 1980s to the early 1990s the South African police colonel de Kock kidnapped, tortured and brutally murdered numerous anti-apartheid's activists and members of the ANC and thus became nicknamed 'Prime Evil' by the press. After apartheid, he testified in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and revealed information about the deaths and disclosed the full scope of C10, a counter-insurgency unit of the South African Police. In 1996 he was sentenced to two life sentences plus 212 years in prison for crimes against humanity. Since the beginning of his sentencing he has been accusing several members of the apartheid

⁹²⁵ See for instance Gormley, "The Impossible Demand of Forgiveness," 33.

⁹²⁶ See for instance Young-Bruehl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 199.

government of permitting the CIO activities. In response to former state president F.W. de Klerk's statements that he had a clear consciousness regarding his time in office, de Kock claimed that de Klerk's hands were soaked in blood. In 2015 de Kock has been granted parole.⁹²⁷

In her book *A Human Being Died That Night* Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela describes her experiences with de Kock as a member of the Truth and Reconciliation commission and during her encounters with him afterwards in prison. De Kock is not irrefutably repentant on all murders he committed as a state murderer. Some of the relatives of his victims declared not to be able to reply to his request for forgiveness since he expressed so little remorse on the TRC hearings. Nevertheless, it is obvious that he at least acknowledges he was responsible for these horrible killings and many of them he clearly regrets.⁹²⁸ Not only does he declare that the many deaths are haunting him, he also explains that at several times he was struggling with his conscience. He also declared that he kept a memory of his victims.⁹²⁹ Gobodo-Madikizela claims that de Kock knew that what he had done as a commander of covert police activity was simply beyond what most human beings could understand. It was also beyond what he himself could understand, once removed from the day-to-day demands of the destructive life he had led. According to Gobodo-Madikizela, this was clearly his burden, his struggle. She holds that this presence of a stirring within him is what fundamentally distinguishes him from his former colleagues who appeared at the TRC as well as from Eichmann.⁹³⁰ At the first day of his appearance at the TRC de Kock testified about his role in the killing of three black policemen by means of a bomb in their car while they had been sent on a false mission. In concluding his testimony he made an appeal to meet the widows of the victims of the car bombing. He wanted to apologize to them and wanted to do this in private. The widows agreed to meet him on his terms. Afterwards, when Gobodo-Madikizela met the widows, they turned out to be profoundly touched by de Kock. She claims that both woman he met felt that de Kock had communicated something that he

⁹²⁷ "Eugene de Kock," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_de_Kock.

⁹²⁸ In her book Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela cites de Kock who says in defense of his operations as a state murderer: "We had to keep those operations going, inside and outside the country, to keep voters happy, to show them that the government can protect them from the onslaught of the liberation forces. I had no problem with this. If there was an explosion at the Wimpy Bar that killed woman and children we had to hit back. If these people were setting up bombs to kill innocent civilians, woman and children, then I had no problems with the operations', he said defensively." Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South-African Woman Confronts the Legacy of Apartheid* (Boston-New York: Mariner Books, 2004), 31. For the claim of some relatives of his lack of remorse, see also "Eugene de Kock", *Wikipedia*.

⁹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁹³⁰ Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, 23.

felt deeply and that he acknowledged their pain. One of them explained that she couldn't hold her tears and was just nodding, as a way of saying: yes, I forgive you. She said to Gobodo-Madikizela that she hoped that when de Kock sees their tears that he knows that it are not only tears for their husbands, but tears for him as well. She concluded that she would want to hold his hand, showing him that there is still a future for him, that he still can change.⁹³¹ Gobodo-Madikizela explains that it was this response of the widows that had led her to meet de Kock in prison afterwards. It also gave rise to the fundamental questions concerning remorse and forgiveness that she raises in her book.⁹³² In her book, she describes an experience during her meetings that confused her deeply. When she asks de Kock about the widows whose forgiveness he asked, he immediately seems deeply moved and distressed in telling her with tears in his eyes and with a broken voice how much he regrets the dead of their husbands:

'I wish I could do much more than [say] I am sorry. I wish there was a way of bringing their bodies back alive. I wish I could say 'here are your husbands'', he said, stretching out his arms as if bearing an invisible body, his hands trembling, his mouth quivering, 'but unfortunately ... I have to live with it.'⁹³³

As Gobodo-Madikizela feels she can relate to him in such human circumstances, she describes how she touches his shaking hand, surprising herself. But as the hand feels cold and rigid, as if holding back, she recoils and recasts her spontaneous act as incompatible with the circumstances in which she meets a person who not too long ago has used these hands to initiate unspeakable acts of malice against people like her. In her description of how she struggles with this act of empathy and the horror of his killings, she also refers to the next meeting she had with him. He thanked her for the 'other day', a reference to the meeting in the prison room and then, with an expression of amazement, he said: "You know Pumla, that was my trigger hand you touched."⁹³⁴ She describes how this statement confused her, as it held confusing and contradicting messages. She claims that it has not lost its grip on her until that moment, nor has softened its visceral impact.⁹³⁵ When she deals with the incident in the book, Gobodo-Madikizela is swung back and forth between considerations about de

⁹³¹ Ibid., 13-14

⁹³² Ibid., 15.

⁹³³ Ibid., 32.

⁹³⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁹³⁵ Ibid.

Kock clinging to his evil identity on the one hand and psycho-analytic theories about a strategy of ‘splitting off’ his hand from the rest of him, as if the trigger hand is to capture all that is evil about him on the other. In my view, however, the statement in fact points at de Kock’s acknowledgement that he is unable to remove his past acts. The ‘trigger hand’ is an omnipresent recollection to his memory. He wants to make sure Gobodo-Madikizela is aware of that fact. Her gesture did not touch him in his true and pure humanity, but rather touched upon the evil he cannot liberate himself from. As Gobodo-Madikizela also remarks, his statement was also a plea. He wanted her to reassure him that despite his murderous past, she would still reach out for him. In fact, he wants her to acknowledge the evil as what it is, just like he does. As Gobodo-Madikizela rightly puts it: “*He was not able to disown his past*”.⁹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, we should ask ourselves whether the remorse that is expressed by De Kock would be sufficient to forgive him. Although the offender’s effort to go back and remember may be a necessary condition, it is questionable whether it is also a sufficient condition. It may very well be the case that in tracing back one’s steps one finds that one has chosen - be it willfully or indifferently - to be in the company of a murderer. In going back and remembering, it may thus be the case that one cannot liberate oneself from the murderer one has chosen to be in company with. One may indeed, as De Kock puts it, “have to live with it”.⁹⁹⁷ This may also imply that one has to live with the fact that forgiveness is impossible for the murderer one has chosen to live with. Acknowledgment and remorse lose their meaning if they are merely a way of escaping the disagreement one has caused in oneself. True acknowledgment and true remembrance require the courage to admit that one might have done the unforgivable.⁹⁹⁸ This might also further illuminate Arendt’s reference to Jesus I pointed at in the beginning of this chapter. Arendt does not only points out that it were better if the one who did the unforgivable was hanged a millstone around his neck and cast in the sea, but also emphasizes that it were better *for him*. She holds that “these phrase makes

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid., 32.

⁹⁹⁸ In Vladimir Jankélévitch’s view, remorse implies the realization that one is completely lost, that there is no hope for redemption. This pure remorse is not selfish or egoistic because it is not looking at itself and wallowing in, or making a show of its sorrow. It entails a type of gratuitousness as it overcomes one, nonrationally and unjustly. It should not be consoled or hidden. The suffering of remorse entails a process of moral healing and opens the remorseful person up for and to ‘gracious’ acts of forgiveness. Jankélévitch thus assumes that only pure remorse that has lost any hope for redemption opens up the possibility of a renewed future. Jankélévitch, *The Bad Conscience*, xviii-xix.

Jesus' remark read as though the agent of this offense, the nature of which is only indicated as an unsurmountable obstacle, had extinguished himself".⁹⁹

In conclusion, Arendt's notion of the unforgivable makes clear that her account avoids some of the pitfalls that are present in the contemporary literature on forgiveness. Her description of the unforgivable as what falls beyond our human power diverges from a notion of the unforgivable as posing an ultimate challenge to the moral person. The unforgivable does not refer to the extra-ordinary paradoxical effort of the virtuous person to do the impossible. Instead, it refers to the fact that acting human beings are never omnipotent. Forgiveness is an interdependent activity, which depends on a shared effort to care for the common world.

Arendt's notion of the unforgivable also points out that, although she conceives of forgiveness as a spontaneous act that is not determined by moral motivations, reasons and attitudes, it is not a gratuitous and blind moral gift. Her emphasis on the limitations of joint action and human power and her notion of love of the world establish a criterion for forgiveness. But, in her view, forgiveness is also not reduced to a mere moral transaction. As an interdependent act it is not aimed at restoring moral equality, but rather it aims to address the other as a unique and distinct acting person.

Finally, Arendt's account of the unforgivable enables us to see that in her view on forgiveness one's responsibility as an agent is acknowledged. If one ceases to perceive of oneself as an acting person and refrains from thinking about what one is doing or has done, one may not only do the unforgivable, but one also cannot be liberated as an acting person. If one denies the contingency of one's actions and one's natality and plurality, forgiveness becomes powerless. The power of forgiveness only comes into being when one is prepared to take initiative in the world and to share this world with others.

⁹⁹ Arendt, "Some Question of Moral Philosophy," 109.

Conclusion

In this dissertation I argued that Hannah Arendt's account of forgiveness, politics and freedom enables a fundamental revision of the most important topics of discussion in the contemporary literature on forgiveness. I aimed to demonstrate that Arendt does not only offer a valuable alternative for the common conceptions of forgiveness. Above all, in discussing the underlying assumptions of these conceptions, I aimed to reveal that Arendt's uncommon view also offers some critical solutions to the problems and paradoxes these conceptions give rise to.

In the first part of this thesis I discussed two prevailing perplexities that arise in the contemporary debate on forgiveness. The first perplexity concerns the relation between forgiveness and responsible wrongdoing. One of the main assumptions in the literature is that forgiveness is a response to responsible wrongdoing and is therefore to be distinguished from excusing. Furthermore, forgiveness is also often conceived as an act that is aimed at understanding the wrongdoer and at coming to terms with him in view of a shared vulnerability for doing wrong. However, these conceptions in fact undermine the assumption that forgiveness is a response to responsible wrongdoing. Consequently, this raises the question as to how forgiveness may liberate someone from a wrong without either nullifying the wrong or denying their responsibility for it.

The second perplexity results from two paradoxes of forgiveness. The first paradox is a moral paradox: forgiveness turns out to be a moral 'impossibility' since, on the one hand, it entails an attitude of moral re-acceptance, while, on the other hand, the wrongdoing also demands to be morally condemned. Therefore, it has often been argued that forgiveness can only be granted when there are good moral reasons to do so. However, when forgiveness depends on good moral reasons it gets entrapped in a second paradox, the so-called logical paradox of forgiveness, described by Kolnai. This paradox implies that forgiveness is either unjustified or pointless. In the absence of moral reasons it is unjustified because it fails to appropriately condemn the wrong and thus amounts to condoning it. In the presence of moral reasons it is pointless because these reasons make forgiveness redundant as a moral act of re-integration. These paradoxes thus call into question whether forgiveness is even a

meaningful practice. Does it really achieve anything? Is it even possible to make sense of forgiveness without being involved in a meek acceptance of the wrong? Or is it only reserved for those extra-ordinary morally virtuous persons that somehow succeed in doing the 'impossible'?

In the second chapter of the first part I discussed Arendt's account of human action and freedom and argued that Arendt's view on forgiveness offers a way out of these perplexities. I claimed that the perplexities and paradoxes in the contemporary literature result from the dominant idea that forgiveness is essentially a moral practice, enabled by an individual's moral reasons, principles, attitudes and incentives. Arendt's account of human action, however, enables a completely different view on both wrongdoing and the act of forgiveness. Her account involves a radical turn to the act, in which man as an initiator is central rather than man as a rational moral subject. In addition, Arendt takes action to be only possible in a community of others, a plurality of men. Other acting human beings are constitutive for both the meaning of an act and the possibility of dealing with its consequences. This shift in perspective enables to conceive of the wrong that is done as an irreversible object rather than merely an infringement of one's moral integrity. The wrongful act involves irreparable damage and poses a remaining and tangible obstacle. It is thus not a mere moral offence, which can be withdrawn by repentance, apologies or excuses. In Arendt's view, actions always take place in a web of relationships and therefore its consequences are irreversible and boundless. As an act, the wrong also takes place among other acting beings and leaves its irreversible consequences among them. Forgiveness therefore appeals to the common responsible effort to absorb the damage of what has been done, rather than to an individual's moral capacities and values. From this perspective, forgiveness no longer appears as an act of moral restoration, aimed at restoring the moral integrity of the individual and the moral community. It is also not involved with the salvation of sin or the cleansing of a moral stain. Instead, it is a transformative act of political restoration. Moreover, Arendt's view on action, freedom, plurality and natality enables to perceive of forgiveness as a spontaneous act, which is not in need of any good reasons and moral incentives in order to interrupt a series of events. As initiators, we always appear among others in a distinct and unique way through acting and speaking. This unique and irreducible appearance enables us to do the unexpected and unprecedented.

In the second part, I further developed these insights on forgiveness and explored a different view on the liberation and power of forgiveness. I argued that Arendt's shift in perspective enables to demonstrate that the liberation and power of forgiveness do not consist of the individual psychological strength to transform negative emotions of either blind hate or morally legitimized resentment to positive sentiments such as love, generosity and empathy as standard accounts argue. Rather, the power of forgiveness arises from the freedom that is obtained as soon as one appears as an initiator rather than as someone that is in need of the right transforming moral sentiments, motivations, considerations and principles. It is this capacity to take initiative that enables to break the spell of the past. In forgiveness one appeals to the omnipresent capacity to 'start anew', whatever the sentiments and incentives may be. It is this capacity to 'interrupt' a series of events that puts a stop to the past and liberates one from its consequences. It is the power of acting in a community with others that brings either to a standstill or changes the path of an object that is irreversibly put into motion. Without this interruption, the object keeps on rumbling ruthlessly and continues to cause damage. The capacity to start anew succeeds in interrupting what from a psychological and moral point of view is constantly in need of good reasons. As a result of this requirement for good reasons, forgiveness appears as either insuperable and impossible or pointless and thus becomes entangled in itself. Precisely when it is in search for conditions, supportive attitudes and justifications, forgiveness fails to get rid of the past. In contrast, the sheer capacity to take initiative puts an abrupt end to all kind of reasons, incentives and requirements and, simultaneously, makes a new and unknown beginning.

To the question where this freedom to act spontaneously may come from, Arendt responds in a quite radical way. She holds that, as soon as we start to explain the freedom of action in terms of what causes it or motivates it, we already lose sense of its freedom and contingency. It is also for this reason that she assumes that freedom ought not to be defined as an inner freedom of the will. For Arendt, the concept of a free will is in fact a *contradictio in terminis*. The will is what makes a compelling appeal to us. It has an imperative character. It commands. Therefore, it rather tends to defeat its freedom. For this reason, Arendt holds that real freedom can only be experienced in acting. The spontaneity of acting is not a sheer inner capacity. As human beings who are capable of taking initiative, we are invited and inspired by others to act. It is the possibility to act with and among each other that constitutes our freedom. Consequently, in her view, forgiveness is not an inner moral struggle for justification but an interdependent liberating act.

In the third chapter of the second part I argued that Arendt's specific view on human action also enables to see that forgiveness is not about changing one's judgments about who the wrongdoer truly is. It does not involve the ability to discern the wrongdoer's moral essence from his immoral acts. Rather, Arendt's account of action precludes thinking of who someone truly is in terms of similar moral qualities or an inviolable moral value. She assumes that who someone is can only be revealed in how he acts, in what he does. This precludes appealing to one's moral essence in order to liberate either oneself or another from what is done. Therefore, I pointed out that it is precisely because a person cannot be discerned from his actions that it is required to rely on the interdependent and artificial act of forgiveness to disengage him. Rather than depending on a transformation of judgements, forgiveness enacts a transformation that is not possible in any other way. In addition, in the last chapter I explained how Arendt's view on the close interconnection between who someone is and what they do also brings about a completely different view on repentance. In Arendt's view, repentance or remorse entails the capacity to take responsibility for what one did. It involves 'tracing back one's steps', remembering what one did and realizing its consequences. One cannot just repudiate one's acts and dissociate oneself from what one did in reference to an inner truer or better self. Moreover, only others are capable to liberate one from the consequences of one's acts. They have the power to interrupt the further consequences of the act. They absorb the damage that is done and restore the possibility of the other to act anew. This way one is granted the ability to act again and to appear in a different and unexpected manner among others.

Consequently, it is brought to the fore that, rather than a pointless affirmation of a transformation that already has taken place, as Kolnai portrays it, forgiveness is a meaningful and indispensable transformative practice. As an act, it constitutes new realities and relationships. It brings something new and unexpected into the world. It also becomes clear that, within this view, forgiveness is not an act that merely condones a wrong in view of one's inner capacities or one's good intentions. It is also not denying one's responsibility for the wrong. On the contrary, Arendt's account of human action even enables to see that one is not merely responsible for what one has intended or aimed to do. She holds that we are always able to take responsibility for what we did, irrespective of what our intentions and aims for acting have been.

Arendt's account of human action, forgiveness and freedom also fundamentally revises the meaning of forgiveness as a political concept. In the fourth chapter of the second part I

revealed that the problems and doubts that rise in regard to the appropriateness and possibilities of forgiveness in politics, are the consequence of the strongly morally laden interpretation most accounts on forgiveness remain entangled in. I argued that it is only possible to adequately understand the political meaning of forgiveness if one properly gives account of the specificity of the political relation. In Arendt's view, the political relation cannot be grasped in terms of what makes us similar to each other, namely our shared moral capacities, sentiments and shortcomings. Rather, in order to understand the meaning of forgiveness as a political practice it is necessary to give account of the condition of plurality, the irreducible distinctness and uniqueness of every acting human being. Sentiments such as sympathy and compassion or the universal love of one's neighbour overlook the other as a distinct being. They destroy the distance between people that is necessary for free acting. It is revealed that only free and spontaneous acting is capable of liberating another and oneself of the consequences of the past. Therefore, Arendt assumes that forgiving requires an attitude of distance and respect, rather than special sentiments. It is this distance that enables us to address the other as a distinct, acting person, rather than as an entity belonging to the general category of human beings with qualities, talents and shortcomings like every one else.

I also clarified that, in Arendt's account, the political relation ought not to be distinguished from interpersonal relationships. The political relation is not reduced to institutional relations. For Arendt, the political relation itself is a throughout interpersonal relation. The distinction between moral and political relations does not involve a distinction between an interpersonal domain of interaction and an institutional domain of interaction. Rather, she takes moral relations to primarily entail an attitude towards one's self, which then, secondarily, determines one's relationships to others. The political relation, in contrast, is brought about by one's existence among others. It arises from the fact that these others are always present and bring about relations and experiences one can never have with oneself. This implies that, in her view, forgiveness is not a practice that has to be transferred from a moral, interpersonal domain to a political, public domain, as it is conceived in Tutu's and Griswold's views. Rather, Arendt's account enables to reveal forgiveness as an inherently political practice. I argued that it therefore dismantles much of the problems and doubts that arise in relation to the applicability of a moral concept in a political context.

Arendt's description of forgiveness as an intrinsic political practice also enabled to point out that it is not concerned with the salvation of man or mankind, as it is conceived in religiously inspired accounts. It is not an effort to liberate man from his earthly sins in view of his

eternal existence with God. Instead, it is an interdependent practice that takes responsibility for our interpersonal political relations out of love for the world we hold in common. It is part of the common effort to be at home in the world we share, rather than take the world as a mere temporary intermediate stage towards eternal salvation. This way, it becomes clear that forgiveness has its meaning as a real tangible concern for our everyday interpersonal relations with others, rather than it were an act of extra-ordinary virtuosity.

Furthermore, I argued that the principle of universal love of man, on which both some contemporary moral and traditional religious accounts rely, precludes conceiving of forgiveness as a concrete, unexpected, distinct and limited act. It tends to overlook concrete and distinct persons and fails to take interpersonal conflicts seriously. Consequently, it amounts to ignoring and hence to condoning wrongdoing in view of the universal moral value of every human person. In contrast, the principle of love of the world in Arendt's account does provide a criterion for forgiveness. It is a criterion that is able to avoid the pitfalls of conditions that are tied to moral satisfaction and that tend to reduce forgiveness to a mere moral transaction. In view of the love of the world, one may judge that some acts are unforgivable. However, they are not unforgivable because they are crossing every possible moral boundary in a very extreme way and therefore insult all moral values, as some respondents in Wiesenthal's *Sunflower* hold. Rather, for Arendt, they are unforgivable because they put a block on the future in such a way that it becomes impossible to remove the obstacle they pose. They are acts that release forces in the world that render human action - which is so indispensable for holding a world in common - powerless. By doing so, their actors are not only denying the spontaneity and plurality of their victims, but also their own spontaneity and plurality. They therefore cease to perceive of themselves as acting persons. Arendt therefore holds that these acts should not be forgiven and their actors should be removed from our common world. They pose a threat, not to our moral value, but to our capacity to act with others. For this reason, Arendt takes the condition of remorse - understood as the possibility to realize what one did -, to be crucial for forgiveness. Yet, truly realizing what one did may also lead to the conclusion that what one did remains unforgivable and there is no way in which one can be liberated from what is done. Consequently, I clarified that, in Arendt's view, unforgivable acts do not establish an ultimate moral challenge to overcome the 'impossible'. Forgiveness is not a paradoxical act of moral self-fulfilment on the one hand and an ultimate sacrifice of the self and its reasons on the other, as it is portrayed by Derrida. Instead, it is a real everyday interdependent practice that takes responsibility for the world in which we live among others.

In summary, in this dissertation I argued that Arendt's specific view on the acting subject, wrongdoing and freedom enables a radical new perspective on practices of forgiveness, political reconciliation, re-integration and punishment. I aimed to demonstrate that Arendt's view does not have to be a mere source of inspiration to contemporary theories about these practices. Rather, she provides some crucial means and arguments for a thorough re-investigation of the meaning, operation and aims of these practices. This also underscores the critical relevance of her fundamental revision of the traditional philosophical and moral assumptions about the acting subject, his freedom and his relation to others.

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Summary

In this dissertation I argue that Hannah Arendt's concept of forgiveness enables a fundamental revision of the most important discussions in the contemporary literature on forgiveness. I demonstrate that the moral assumptions about forgiveness in these discussions give rise to all kinds of problems and paradoxes. Hannah Arendt's account of acting and her concept of freedom enable to tackle these assumptions. Moreover, from the alternatives her account offers it becomes possible to rethink forgiveness as a practice thoroughly and to offer solutions for the problems that seem unavoidable in the contemporary approaches.

In the first part I analyse how forgiveness is disentangled from forgetting, excusing and condoning in the contemporary literature. This brings to the fore some crucial features of forgiveness and enables me to call into question the most important assumptions about forgiveness. I reveal how Arendt's theory of action involves a shift in perspective, which sheds a whole new light on what is at stake in the act of forgiveness. Her account implies a 'turn to the act' which on the one hand sketches another picture of the wrong forgiveness is dealing with and on the other hand shows how in the act of forgiveness one is precisely disentangling oneself from moral motivations and attitudes.

In the second part I mobilize some of Arendt's key concepts in order to clarify what kind of liberation is at stake in forgiveness. Her concept of freedom gives short shrift to conceptions that are based on self-mastery and a moral transformation of sentiments. I also demonstrate that her concept of forgiveness does not address someone's pure inner moral core but precisely presumes that who someone truly is, is only revealed through her actions. Forgiveness does not offer a mere salvation of one's sins, but it restores the possibility to act again and to appear in a different way. Arendt's concept of forgiveness starts from how humans appear in their uniqueness and not from a moral subject with similar moral qualities. This enables to understand forgiveness as intrinsic political practice, in which one takes responsibility for oneself, the other and the world one holds in common. However, this political practice is not omnipotent and the unforgivable does not set up an ultimate moral challenge but a boundary. Subsequently, repentance also appears as the ability to 'trace back one's steps' instead of merely repudiating what one did.

Samenvatting

In deze dissertatie argumenteer ik dat Hannah Arendts concept van vergeving een fundamentele revisie mogelijk maakt van de belangrijkste discussies die in de hedendaagse literatuur over vergeving worden gevoerd. Ik toon aan dat er in die discussies allerlei problemen en paradoxen opduiken die het gevolg zijn van bepaalde morele assumpties over vergeving. Hannah Arendts opvatting van het handelen en haar concept van vrijheid maken het mogelijk deze assumpties aan te pakken. Bovendien wordt het mogelijk om vanuit de alternatieven die zij biedt vergeving als praktijk grondig te herdenken en een oplossing te bieden voor de problemen die in de hedendaagse benaderingen onvermijdelijk lijken.

In het eerste deel analyseer ik hoe vergeving in de hedendaagse literatuur wordt losgemaakt van vergeten, excuseren en vergoelijken. Dit brengt een aantal cruciale kenmerken van vergeving naar voor en maakt het mogelijk de belangrijkste assumpties over vergeving te bespreken en bevragen. Vervolgens laat ik zien hoe Arendts theorie van het handelen een perspectiefwissel inhoudt die een heel nieuw licht werpt op wat er in de praktijk van vergeving op het spel staat. Haar benadering impliceert een 'ommekeer naar de act' die enerzijds een ander beeld schetst van het kwaad waarmee vergeving omgaat en anderzijds laat zien hoe men zich in de act van vergeving precies losmaakt van morele motivaties en attitudes.

In het tweede deel zet ik een aantal van Arendts kernconcepten in om uit te klaren welke bevrijding in vergeving op het spel staat. Haar concept van vrijheid maakt komaf met concepties die uitgaan van zelfbeheersing en een morele transformatie van sentimenten. Ik toon ook aan dat haar concept van vergeving zich niet richt op iemands zuivere innerlijke morele kern maar precies veronderstelt dat wie iemand echt is pas tot uitdrukking komt in zijn handelen. Vergeving biedt geen loutere verlossing voor de zonden, maar herstelt de mogelijkheid opnieuw te handelen en op een andere manier te verschijnen. Arendts vergevingsconcept gaat uit van hoe mensen in hun uniekheid verschijnen en niet van een moreel subject met dezelfde morele kwaliteiten. Dit maakt het mogelijk vergeving als een intrinsiek politieke praktijk te begrijpen, waarin men verantwoordelijkheid opneemt voor zichzelf en de ander en voor de wereld waarin je met die ander samenleeft. Deze politieke praktijk is echter niet almachtig en het onvergeeflijke vormt geen ultieme morele uitdaging maar een grens. Berouw verschijnt vervolgens ook als het vermogen om 'op de stappen terug te keren' in plaats van slechts afstand te nemen van wat men heeft gedaan.