

A FUTURE FOR US: THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

Un Futuro para nosotros: El don del perdón

Martín Grassi (Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina – CONICET)

martingrassi@uca.edu.ar

Artículo Recibido: marzo de 2022

Artículo Aprobado: junio de 2022

Abstract

In this paper I intend to show that forgiveness is beyond any transactional or economic logic, and that it belongs to the realm of gifts. What is given in forgiveness is time, the possibility of a different and open future. Hope is, therefore, the soul of forgiveness. In fact, far from rejecting or forgetting a past offense, forgiveness is a different, and deferring memory; a memory that neither records nor replays past actions, but one that re-interprets the past from the promise of future, from the promissory capacity for building a community together.

Key words

Forgiveness, Hope, Memory, Difference, Community

Resumen

En este trabajo intento mostrar que el perdón trasciende cualquier lógica transaccional o económica, y que pertenece al ámbito del don. Lo que se da en el perdón es tiempo, es decir, la posibilidad de un futuro diferente y abierto. La esperanza es, por ello, el alma del perdón. En efecto, lejos de rechazar u olvidar una ofensa pasada, el perdón es una memoria diferente y *difiriente*, una memoria que ni archiva ni reproduce las acciones pasadas, sino una memoria que re-interpreta el pasado desde la promesa de un futuro, desde la promisoria capacidad de las personas de construir una comunidad juntas.

Palabras clave

Perdón, Esperanza, Memoria, Diferencia, Comunidad

1. Introduction: the ambivalence of for-giving

What does forgiving *mean*? What does one *do* when one forgives? What is it what we *give* when we for-give? And what is it *that* we for-give? Do we forgive some-*thing* or some-*one*? In order to answer such questions, one could, first, attend to the etymology of the word ‘forgiveness’¹, which already shows that there is something given, that we are within the realm of the gift. Hence, to understand what forgiveness means, one needs to examine the notion of the gift. The difficulty concerning the semantics of the gift is its ambivalence: it belongs to the sphere of commerce, and, at the same time, it is strange to an economic logic. Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion stressed this irreducible character of the gift to any kind of objectivity (Derrida, 1991; Marion, 1997). If there is a gift, they claim, all phenomenological conditions must be suspended: there can be neither a giver, nor a receiver, nor even something given. The reason of this claim is that if something of the gift appeared as being given, then the very meaning of *givenness* would be lost, and we would fall into the realm of binding contracts, i.e. into the logic of the *do ut des*. Paul Ricoeur (2004), avoiding these radical claims, prefers to explore the meaning of the gift within the institutional and symbolic gestures where it is performed. In this hermeneutical perspective, the gift appears as such only within certain languages and certain symbolic and ritual gestures. Albeit the differences between a radical *phenomenology of the unapparent* (Derrida and Marion) and the *phenomenological hermeneutics* (Ricoeur), the realm of givenness is only meaningful if one distinguishes it from an economic and utilitarian framework. Consequently, if the meaning of forgiveness is to be found in connection with the semantics of the gift, then forgiveness will also show this ambivalence of givenness, for its significance is also captured by both the discourses of economic transaction and unconditional selfless donation. In this paper, I intend to argue that the true meaning of forgiveness entails the suspension of any transactional character or economic exchange. Moreover, the event of forgiveness creates a new bond between the persons involved that transcends the logic of equivalence, and that gives them the possibility of a future.

¹ See: Oxford English Dictionary: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/73337#eid3788258> (last entry: 10-10-2018).

2. *Forgiveness, beyond economy*

To forgive is an action that is performed linguistically and, more precisely, that happens between someone that asks for forgiveness, and someone who is expected to answer back. However, one should distinguish *asking* from *demanding* if one is to better understand forgiveness. In fact, one can *ask* for forgiveness, but never *demand* for it. When one asks for forgiveness, one already knows that refusal is possible and even fair. A demand entails some kind of *fairness*, for we demand what the other ought to give. If forgiveness belongs to the semantics of givenness, it transcends the logic of equality or of justice, and should be interpreted as belonging to that of donation, generosity, or love. Hence, one could say that forgiveness is, in a way, *unfair*. The difference between asking and demanding can also be shown in the expectation of their performance: whereas to *ask* for forgiveness implies certain language and symbolic expressions that aim at *motivating* it, to demand forgiveness entails a linguistic expression that aims at *causing* it. In other words, when there is a demand, the other must answer back positively. This difference also shows that the axis of forgiveness should be placed on the side of the one who forgives. Whereas in a demand, the other comes later, responding to my requirement, in forgiveness it is the other that comes first. In fact, the symbolic expressions used to ask for forgiveness are not actually necessary to be forgiven: one could be forgiven without asking for it. Asking for forgiveness can only prepare the *court* for forgiveness to come (and again, forgiveness can come without this *preparation*). The gratuity of forgiveness not only implies that one cannot demand for it, but also that the one who forgives does not have any *need* to do so, nor that he forgives only when the wrongdoer asked for it. The linguistic dimension of forgiveness, based on asking, shows how the question of fairness is put aside or suspended.

This displacement from the one asking forgiveness to the one that forgives is highlighted by the fact that the one that forgives must be the one that has suffered what is being forgiven. No one else can forgive but the victim. If one could speak of a “right to forgive”, only the one who suffered could claim this right. There is no possible way to make oneself the bearer of the suffering of the victim, and to have the right to forgive in her name. Of course, to speak of “right” here evidences the paradoxical character of

forgiveness, being both strange and familiar to juridical lexicon. But, again, this displacement entails that the linguistic expression of forgiveness transcends the legal formulas that are proper to a *demand*. There is no *formula* for forgiveness: even silence could be an eloquent way of forgiving. And even if we understand forgiveness from the linguistic performance of asking, and not demanding, an answer from the victim can take place without any linguistic expression. Hence, whereas asking for forgiveness demands some symbolic framework, forgiving is frameless. The one who suffered can simply remain in silence and, nevertheless, forgive the offense. This means that asking for forgiveness does not imply that the answer of the victim will be recognizable. Being outside the sphere of legality, even of legal lexicon, and even outside of language, there is no *due answer* to be expected on the side of the victim. Even more, forgiveness transcends language and symbolic expressions because uttering the formulas for forgiveness is not enough to forgive. There is a certain *secret* behind every instance of forgiveness. Although a certain vocabulary and syntax of forgiveness is culturally available, there is a dimension of secrecy that is owned by the victim and that cannot be violated. It is as much inappropriate to look for a “due answer” for our forgiveness, as to presume that, given the “right answer”, one is effectively forgiven. The victim only forgives in his heart. Likewise, this intimate and secret dimension of forgiveness is to be found in the one who ask for forgiveness. In a way, asking for forgiveness is not enough to be prepared to receive forgiveness, for there is also a *secret confession* in the one who asks for forgiveness. A confession, as a *speech act*, is essentially public, and many times in history a confession was *required* to be forgiven. Nevertheless, although one could confess publicly, or even in the intimacy of a private relationship, forgiveness implies to *dis-pose* oneself and abandon oneself to the other, to be available to the other in giving oneself to the other. This availability is, by definition, something that is kept in secret, or at least that cannot be performed by any discourse, although it can be expressed linguistically somehow.²

Forgiveness seems to transcend the juridical field and lexicon, not only concerning the language and the speech acts that are involved, but also concerning the very categories

² The Catholic ritual of confession and forgiveness could be an interesting phenomenon to study, for the silence of the forgiving God makes itself heard by the dogmatic formulas, making of forgiveness something artificial in some way, bounded to *due canonical answers*, and so taking forgiveness to the juridical realm

and concepts of the juridical. One of these categories is the one of “merit”, one that is strange to the event of forgiveness: neither the one who forgives is virtuous, nor the one forgiven deserves it. Even though this concept of merit is at the heart of forgiveness in its economic dimension, this logic of meritocracy must be left behind if we are to understand the irreducible dimension of givenness, proper to forgiveness. In the case of forgiving on the name of merit, that is, as if it were a kind of reward, then one is speaking about *restitution* or *exculpation*, even *atonement*. Within this logic of the merit (of what is ought), both the giver and the receiver claim some kind of right over what is given or over the legitimacy of receiving it. If forgiveness transcends merit, however, neither the one who forgives should do it in the name of virtue, nor the forgiven should receive it as the reward to his repentance or his compensation. In addition, one should say that the act of forgiveness does not have any *content*, for one gives nothing when one forgives. This is why there cannot be any merit in forgiveness, for if there is no content, nor object, nor “ought duty” to be done. Away from an economic logic, when one forgives, one does not give *any-thing* to the one forgiven. There are gestures, words, symbols that perform forgiveness, but there cannot be *any-thing* given. If there is an object involved, then forgiveness turns into restitution, for there is something lost that is given again or regained. Likewise, on the side of the victim, to grant forgiveness does not entail a demand for *reparation* of any kind. If one expects that the offender will repair the damage he has done, then one remains within the realm of commerce, within the realm of juridical techniques by which there is a definition of what is due to the victim and what is not. Nevertheless, this lack of reparation can also be seen as an *absolute expectation* from the victim: since there is no definition of what the offender owes to his suffering, the offender owes her nothing and everything, which would entail a dialectical bondage of the kind of master-slave that is strange to the feeling of release that forgiveness should bring forth.

But then, what is forgiveness? What does it *give*? I would say that what is at stake in forgiving is *time*. Namely, one forgives some-one. But *what* does one for-give, what does one give to the one forgiven? *One gives no-thing, and one gives every-thing*. In forgiveness one gives time, i.e. *possibility* as such; for-giveness opens time to the future, to what is to come, to everything that the forgiven can receive once he has been emancipated from his offense. Forgiveness gives the very possibility of the giving, of the mutual and reciprocal giving of oneself to the other. Hence, forgiveness is defined by an

experience of time that suspends any determination in the way of prevision, predictability and calculation of means and ends (and this is why forgiveness falls out of the idea of *virtue*). This experience of time is signed by an expectation without an object, an expectation beyond desire. And this experience of the projection of the future without caution or conditions is what is called *hope*. Hence, hope should be considered the heart of forgiveness: one hopes forgiveness, and one hopes when forgiving. And what is given in hope, what is expected in hope, is time itself; *time is but the gift of hope, and to forgive is to wait-for*. When one forgives, one gives time, possibility, future; one opens himself to the givenness of time, to the present/gift that is proper to an event. In forgiveness, one awaits *every-thing* because one cares for *no-thing*. As Gabriel Marcel would say, hope is not desire: one does not *hope for* something, but one *hopes in* someone. And *hoping in* someone is to wait for *any-thing* on behalf of the other, in the mysterious assurance that the other will act for the sake of both of them, for the sake of the community that keeps them both open to each other. As Marcel beautifully defined hope with the formula “I hope in you for us” (*j’espère en toi pour nous*) (Marcel, 1944, p. 81). It is noteworthy that Kierkegaard understood this connection between hope and forgiveness in the negative expression of despair: the ultimate and radical despair consist in acknowledging oneself as not being worth receiving forgiveness, even more, that one *should not be* forgiven. The *mortal disease* of *despair* is, in its radical sense, thinking that we are not worthy of being forgiven (by God).³ For someone for whom there cannot be any forgiveness, there cannot be any future: it is not that there is *nothing* to expect, but rather that *there is no-one expecting me*. The irreducibility of forgiveness to an economic logic is to be found in that forgiveness is concerned with communion, and not with objects. The heart and soul of forgiveness is time, for time is what happens *in between us*, in between those who owes themselves one another (*com-munio*).

3. Forgiveness as a “different memory”

For-giving is, thus, the act of giving time to the other. One opens the future of the offender by an *un-bonding*, by a release from the victim-aggressor dialectics. In such a

³ Kierkegaard defines the sin of despairing of the forgiving of sins as “scandal” (*The sickness unto death*, V, 2).

dialectic, the danger of a sadist-masochistic relationship is at stake, where a dialectical exchange of roles will be a never-ending story, a circular narrative of aggressions and vindications, a tragedy of blame and revenge. Only once this logic of retribution and compensation is transcended, a *personal* communion can take place: personal existence is, necessarily, open to difference. In the realm of objects, repetition and calculation is expected; in the realm of communion, time as the dimension of differing, of bringing forward differences, is essential. In this sense, regarding communion, there is no place for *pro-gramming*, nor for *fore-seeing*: every logic of calculation or of investment is strange to communion. The other is only such in his difference, and difference is only real in its be-coming, in the deferring of time. We could take Jacques Derrida's concept of *differance*, which combines the mutual implication of time and difference, to better understand the nature of forgiveness (Derrida, 1971).

If time is what one gives when *for-giving*, then time was somehow lost in the way. This means that the other was somehow *denied*, for the other is another in its being different, and difference can only be real in time. As the offense occurs, both the offender and the victim are somehow objectified and typified: there is no time for none of them, for they cannot differ from their positions as offender or victim. To forgive, thus, is to forgive some-*one*, not some-thing. When forgiveness happens, the objectified position of both the offender and the victim is suspended. And, as the past is the essential dimension of objects, for they are defined once and for all, forgiveness is somehow to open the past to the future. In a way, the time of the offense is somehow freeze in this victim-aggressor dialectics, and there is no way to *restore* that time: the enigma behind forgiveness is that it is, at the same time, stuck in the past offense and that, nevertheless, must release *time* from it, although the past cannot be changed. In effect, the weight of forgiveness is placed into the *past*, and, thus, forgiveness is not in any way a denial of this past, a blindness regarding the offense committed. *To forgive is not to forget*. Nevertheless, forgiveness implies a certain scansion, a certain cut between the past and the future, a cut that is performed not in the objective dimension of time as *chronos*, but in the inner personal time as *kairós*. The chronological time is suspended for the sake of the *opportunity*, that is, for the recovery of the future that was denied in the time of the offense, and that forgiveness aims to restitute. *Re-habilitation* is at the core of forgiving, for in forgiving the offender's possibilities of acting different and being different, that were refused by

anger and resentment, are expected once again. Forgiveness implies, thus, the difference between *chronos* and *kairós*, the scansion between the person that offended and the act of offending. Paul Ricoeur insisted on this dimension of forgiving in the frame of his philosophy of the *capable man*, for being a person implies being different from our actions, albeit being a person also implies taking responsibility over them.⁴ Forgiveness points, therefore, not to the *wrong-done* but to the *wrong-doer*. One does not forgive the offense, but the offender: I would add that one does not forgive the *offender*, but the *person* that offended me. It is a question of *accent*: to for-give is to give time, and only a person has time, only a person can differ from himself. The offender, on the contrary, has no time, for it is already defined as such, *someone* that is *some-thing* (a criminal, a rapist, etc.), who cannot be *other-wise*.

To place the person at the center (and not the characters of victim and offender) entails to understand forgiveness within a narrative experience.⁵ What do we forgive? We forgive someone. But what does it mean to forgive someone? It means to forgive something done by someone. And what does it mean to forgive something done? It means that one acknowledges someone's past actions and decides, all the same, to call him *someone*, and not *some-thing*. In other words, to forgive implies that both the action and the actor are recognized as being such, the action done as the objective dimension of forgiveness, the person who acted as the subjective one.⁶ To forgive is to emancipate not

⁴ "Toute ce joue finalement sur la possibilité de séparer l'agent de son action. Ce déliement marquerait l'inscription, dans le champ de la disparité horizontale entre la puissance et l'acte, de la disparité verticale entre le très haute du pardon et l'abîme de la culpabilité. Le coupable, rendu capable de recommencer, telle serait la figure de déliement qui commande tous les autres" (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 637-638). And later, he claims that "cette dissociation intime signifie que la capacité d'engagement du sujet moral n'est pas épuisée par ses inscriptions diverses dans le cours du monde. Cette dissociation exprime un acte de foi, un crédit adressé aux ressources de régénération de soi" (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 638).

⁵ The importance of the narrative side of forgiveness is stressed by Julia Kristeva (2002), whose approach to forgiveness is pierced by her psychoanalytical practice. She defines forgiveness as "to give meaning beyond nonmeaning". Forgiveness is an act of re-interpretation, by which a traumatic episode is interpreted in a new fashion, allowing a rebirth and renewal both of the offender and of the victim. In a conference on hatred and forgiveness, Kristeva points out that love cannot be the answer to hatred, for they are both sides of the same coin, and only forgiveness as interpretation can overcome unconscious love: "[Freud] set in motion the modern, endless, postmoral variant of forgiveness, which is nothing other than interpretation. Let's call it *pardon* (*par*, through, *don*, a gift) to highlight the giving of sense to the senselessness of unconscious hate. Interpretation is a pardon: a rebirth of the psychical apparatus, with and beyond the hatred that bears desire, which religion is and is not aware of and from which it defends itself" (Kristeva, 2010, p. 193).

⁶ This double articulation between the act and the agent regarding forgiveness, is interesting to examine the connection between understanding and forgiving. In his paper, Pettigrove (2007) claims that understanding the wrongdoer *can* promote forgiveness (although it is not necessarily so), at least in three ways: "It may mitigate our sense of the wrong done. It may alter our sense of the primary message communicated by the

the person from his act, but the future from the past, *to emancipate difference from repetition*. Paradoxically, however, the future can be emancipated from the past only facing the fact that the aggression happened. This does not mean that the offender acknowledges his past actions as something that must be retailed, as in “transactional forgiveness”, nor it means that the forgiver claims the past offense as the right to demand repentance. This idea means, on the one hand, that someone’s future is but the possibility of differing, that is, the very possibility of the existence of time. And, since one only differs from something, if there is no past, then there would be no differing at all, for there would be nothing to differ from. On the other hand, this entails that, although self-identity is bond to action, one-*self* is not *defined* by one’s actions. In a narrative scheme, therefore, one could claim that the person only differs and has future when his past actions are acknowledged as being their own, and when future actions are considered as the possibility of re-interpreting and re-defining his actions. Hence, forgiveness does not imply forgetting; instead, the recalling of the past is *transfigured* by the future given by forgiveness. Paradoxically, *memory* is bound to *promise*; the past is only such in its reference to the future. Forgiving does not mean forgetting; it means to remember differently, not with the *eyes fixed* in the past, but with the *eyes wide open*, facing the future. Therefore, I call forgiveness a “different memory”, meaning both a *different way of recalling*, and a *deferring memory* that *pro-duces difference*, that opens the future in recalling. Whereas there is a kind of memory that entails the fixation of the past, a certain irrevocability and inexorability of the past that we recall, the memory proper to forgiveness is quite the opposite: it transforms a cruel and unbearable past into a past full of opportunities, a “promissory past.” In forgiving, one re-calls (re-evokes) the past in

wrongdoing. And it may trigger empathy in a way that discloses the possibility of being reconciled with the wrongdoer. Along the way, perhaps it will also encourage a better understanding of ourselves as a result of seeing our own wrongdoing in a new light” (p. 175). What Pettigrove shows quite clearly is that understanding is not always something that promotes forgiveness: either because understanding is closer to excuse than to forgive, either because understanding could enforce hatred and resentment rather than mitigate them in order to forgive. In any case, understanding is meaningful to forgiveness in two senses: that it acknowledges the wrong done, and that articulates and separates, at the same time, the act and the agent. This is why Pettigrove can place narratives also as being essential to forgiveness: on the one hand, understanding as promoting forgiveness can be thought of as a way of writing a narrative about the wrongdoer in which “we may refuse to take this single event as definite of the story of the other” (p. 173); on the other hand, an empathic narrative understanding engages self-love, imagining myself acting as she does, and, in this process, “I am motivated to treat her as I would like to be treated” (p. 174).

giving it another meaning, that is, not as if it were a *fact*, but as an *event*, not as something fixed once and for all, but as something that bears possibility and the openness of future.

Hannah Arendt argues that men both forgive and promise because they face the irreversibility and unpredictability of time: whereas forgiving looks into the past, promising faces the future.⁷ Nevertheless, I would argue that forgiveness and promise are bound together and that they signify one another. On the one hand, a promise implies a certain trust between two people, and one can only trust the other if one can untie their past actions from their actual possibilities: in a way, to make a promise, and to believe the one who promises, entails for-giveness, that is, a faith that the future is not merely a repetition of the past. On the other hand, to for-give is a way of promising, as far as forgiveness entails a faith in the other's future, and, therefore, a certain promise that the future will be different (how different is not important, for we are beyond the realm of calculation). In this sense, there is no contradiction in calling the past "promissory", because in forgiveness the past is not a dead-end, but a source of possibilities.

Of course, to see the past in one way or the other implies, already, the act of forgiving and the attitude of availability, that is, of opening time as *différance*. A "countable memory", a way of *recording* in its etymological sense, is an economic recalling of merits and debts that is incapable of suspending the knot of offense and avenge.⁸ Oblivion would be the only *pharmakon* to this kind of oppressive and obsessed memory ("if only I could forget what you did to me!", one could say). Nevertheless, as *pharmakon*, oblivion is, at the same time, something that heals and something that makes us ill:⁹ to forget an offense would entail to live with it, and this would imply that my anger and hatred could come again at any time. The knot between victim and aggressor cannot

⁷ "The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility -of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing- is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose 'sins' hang like Democles' sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men" (Arendt, 1998, p. 237).

⁸ One episode of the English TV-Series, *Black Mirror* (Charlie Brooker, 2011), called "The entire history of you" (Season 1, Episode 3, directed by Brian Welsh), works in this same direction, showing the dark side of understanding memory as recording, and the absolute impossibility of any forgiveness. To forgive, in this case, would entail to "delete".

⁹ One can find a wonderful analysis of the ambivalent nature of *pharmakon* in: Derrida (1968).

be untied; it can only be cut. Consequently, only a “different memory” (that of forgiveness) can cut the *Gordian knot* of revenge. Arendt also considered the act of forgiving as the only act that could re-act to the past, not merely by reacting, but as acting anew. This re-action entails an understanding of forgiveness that is defined by its relationship to promise.¹⁰

In this *different memory*, the past and the future do not only reach the offender, but also the victim. In forgiving, one does not only give time to the other, suspending its identification as an offender, but one also opens time to oneself, suspending one’s typification as a victim. Forgiving entails not only the affirmation of the person in the offender, but also the affirmation of the person in the victim. Offender-victim is but a dialectical coupling: one performs one role, because the other is performing the opposite character. Forgiving gives time because it renders this dialectic meaningless. In this way, to forgive is not to forget, but to re-signify one’s own suffering. *Ressentiment* seems to be the ultimate expression of the victim’s incapacity to forgive, for the past trauma has not yet been healed, has not yet been transformed narratively, and therefore, the victim remains a victim *as such*. *Ressentiment*, however, is not morally condemnable, but an expression of suffering, which cannot be surpassed.¹¹ As a traumatic suffering, *ressentiment* must, somehow, enter in a certain grief-work that could reconcile the present with the past, by enabling a future that is no longer a compulsory repetition of the traumatic past. Nevertheless, to be able to overcome *ressentiment* implies to suspend the victim-offender dialectic, and, thus, it implies forgiveness as the act of giving time to the other who offended me. *Ressentiment*, thus, is but the denial of the future in turning the

¹⁰ “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” (Arendt, 1998, p. 241).

¹¹ Minkinen (2007) argues that one should address the victim’s resentment as suffering in order to understand why, sometimes, the victim cannot forgive the offender. Taking the “commissions of truth” as a case-study to examine the articulation between Law and forgiveness, he claims that the juridical theorist that supports this kind of reconciliatory process must empathize with the victim to the point where resentment is not something that one should condemn, but as a right of the victim. Instead of condemning resentment as an expression of a weakness of the will, one should understand that the victim is in suffering, a suffering that no legal process or juridical scenery could suspend, nor properly accompany. As Minkinen states, “the victim’s unwillingness to forgive is the symptom of his suffering rather than the expression of any innate weakness” (2007, p. 527).

past into something absolute and unchangeable. Forgiveness is not possible but within community, that is, within the realm of persons, and not of things or roles. Moreover, forgiveness is possible within community, because it does not belong neither to one nor the other, but it inhabits the realm of the *We*: I cannot be myself without the other, and there is no I or Thou if one is captured in the dialectics of victim and offender. To forgive is to give time to both or to none.

This understanding of forgiveness by centering it in a *we-perspective*, could be a way of suspending the implicit violence and *ressentiment* that forgiveness entails due to its dependence on the one who forgives. Since forgiveness could be easily understood as the chosen action of a merciful person, who decides to forgive someone, *despite* them, that is, *in spite* of their possible future actions, forgiveness could be a subtle way of sovereignty, of considering oneself superior to the one forgiven, fixing the other as the offender. In a dialectical fashion, the forgiver considers himself a worthy person because of his generous and merciful attitude towards the offender, placing the offender as someone worth of pity and “understanding”. This feature of forgiveness seems to be essential to it. Jacques Derrida leaves the question about the connection between forgiveness and sovereignty open, and claims that this question points towards the difficulty of thinking about unconditional forgiveness. It also seems to be Martha Nussbaum’s concern in her last book, *Anger and forgiveness* (2016). In her work, after considering the Judeo-Christian roots of forgiveness, and its practice in *Teshuva* and in Christian confession, Nussbaum warns us about the essential violence that those practices entail as being expressions of a “transactional forgiveness”.¹² Nevertheless, she also points out that there is, in both religions, a different model of “unconditional forgiveness”: “forgiveness that rains down freely on the penitent, without requiring an antecedent confession and act of contrition” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 75), as clearly seen in the words and actions of Jesus in the Gospels. This unconditionality, however, is troublesome: first, it is rarely free from some type of payback wish; second, it remains backwards looking and says nothing about constructing a productive future, that is, “it may remove an impediment to the future, but it does not point there in and of itself” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 76); third, sometimes the forgiving process itself channels the wish for payback. In sum,

¹² “Forgiveness of the transactional sort, far from being an antidote to anger, looks like a continuation of anger’s payback wish by another name” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 11).

Nussbaum claims, “unconditional forgiveness has some advantages over transactional forgiveness, but it is not free of moral danger” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 77).¹³

Nussbaum considers, still, another “version of unconditional forgiveness that lies very close to unconditional love and generosity, *lacking any nuance of superiority or vindictiveness*” (Nussbaum, 2016: 77, my italics).¹⁴ The real difficulty in thinking on forgiveness for Nussbaum is how to suspend the instance of sovereignty, i.e. how the one that forgives can suspend any claim of superiority. Nussbaum prefers not to understand this “unconditional forgiveness” as a kind of forgiveness, but as a kind of love, as “an ethic of unconditional love” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 78), exemplified in the parable of the *Prodigal Son* and Gustav Mahler’s *Resurrection Symphony*. Both cases show “at least a possibility (...) of a love that is itself radical and unconditional, sweeping away both forgiveness and the anger that is its occasion, a love that embarks upon an uncertain future with a generous spirit, rather than remaining rooted in the past” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 81). In sum, “there is just love, silencing anger” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 85).

Even if Nussbaum’s analysis is quite compelling, this understanding of “pure love”, or “just love” or generosity, is not sufficient to think on the existential and ethical time that forgiveness explores. If love produces future, it cannot be abstracted from the past experienced: one loves some-one, that is, some-one that has a past, a present and a future. Simply to discard forgiveness would entail to love no-one, or to open generously the future for no-one’s sake. Albeit its moral danger, forgiveness turns human relationships into something concrete and historically meaningful, connecting past and future. “Pure love” would entail pure oblivion, acting as if nothing had happened. Of course, Nussbaum would claim that this “as if” is still in a transactional dimension, without being capable of neutralizing anger absolutely. Even if this pure love were real and radical, it would not have any concrete content at all: no-one to whom one could possible love. I suspect that, in a way, Nussbaum’s unconditional generosity or love is but an absolute affirmation of the future, a future without past, and, thus, it implies an absolute and “unconscious”

¹³ “Unconditional forgiveness is still about the past, and it gives us nothing concrete with which to go forward. It just wipes out something, but entails no constructive future-directed attitude. It might be accompanied by love and good projects -or it might not” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 77).

¹⁴ “What is called ‘forgiveness’ is best understood as some type of unconditional generosity” (Nussbaum, 2016, p. 12).

oblivion (if oblivion were conscious, we would arrive at a possible transactional relationship, where I forget your offense as long as you ask for forgiveness, etc.).

The inter-dependence of forgetting and forgiving, thus, must be rearranged. Memory is not only an epistemological question, but also an ethical and religious one. Within modern frames of subjectivity, forgiveness cannot be unbound from a fixing memory. Nevertheless, the attention given to a religious experience could transfigure every aspect of subjectivity, including cognitive operations, such as memory. Forgiveness has nothing to do with knowing; forgiveness is about trust and risk, is about abandoning oneself to the other. One leaves the Citadel of modern subjectivity to be *faced* by the other. No wonder that the idea of *exodus* is at the heart of the idea of for-giving, for the *exodus* is but the ultimate act of hope, of giving oneself to the other in trusting that we will be together, that redemption is all about being together. To forgive is to expect the unexpected; it is the wage for an (im)possible future. This wage, however, this trust, is fed by a certain knowing of our belonging together, of our communitarian nature. In a way, to forgive is to restore, not some-thing, but to “restore us”: to restore a community jeopardized by an aggression. This restoration goes all the way back to a *mythical past*, and also it goes way forward towards an *eschatological future*. It is noteworthy that, in a mystical fashion, Gabriel Marcel defined hope as the “memory of the future” (1944, p. 72),¹⁵ being hope the ultimate essence of forgiveness, since, as Hannah Arendt claims, both faith and hope rely in the miracle of our actions, in their capacity to give birth to a new reality.¹⁶ A future for us: that is the gift of forgiveness.¹⁷

References

Arendt, H. (1998). *The human condition*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

¹⁵ “On pourrait dire encore que si le temps est par essence séparation et comme perpétuelle disjonction de soi par rapport à soi-même, l’espérance vise au contraire à la réunion, à la recollection, à la réconciliation; par là, mais par la seulement, elle est comme une mémoire du futur” (Marcel, 1944, p. 72).

¹⁶ “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the act of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope...” (Arendt, 1998, p. 247).

¹⁷ I am very grateful to Cornelia Richter (University of Bonn) for her comments on this paper.

- Derrida, J. (2006). *El siglo y el perdón*, seguido de *Fe y saber*. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de la Flor.
- Derrida, J. (1968). “La pharmacie de Platon”, *Tel Quel*, nrs. 32-33. Reprinted in: *La Disemination*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.
- Derrida, J. (1971) *Marges de la philosophie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- Derrida, J. (1991). *Donner le temps. 1. La fausse monnaie*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.
- Derrida, J. (1999). “Le siècle et le pardon”, *Le Monde de Débats*, December 1999.
- Kristeva, J. (2002). “Forgiveness: an interview (with Alison Rice)”, *PMLA*, 117/2: 278-295.
- Kristeva, J. (2010). *Hatred and forgiveness*. Translated by Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Marcel, G. (1944). *Homo viator*. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne.
- Marion, J.-L. (1997) *Étant donné. Essai d’une phenomenology de la donation*. Paris: PUF (Epiméthée).
- Minkinen, P. (2007). “Ressentiment as Suffering: On transitional justice and the impossibility of forgiveness”, *Law and Literature*, 19/3: 513-532.
- Nussbaum, M. (2016). *Anger and forgiveness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (2000). *La mémoire, l’histoire, l’oubli*. Paris: Seuil.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004) *Parcours de la reconnaissance*. Paris: Stock.
- Pettigrove, G. (2007). “Understanding, Excusing, Forgiving”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 74/1: 156-175.