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The American University in Cairo

School of Humanities and Social Sciences

## **On Forgiveness: Phenomenon and Norms**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of Philosophy  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

By  
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Under the supervision of **Professor Alessandro Topa**

**January 2018**

The American University in Cairo

## Table of Contents

1. Prologue .....	4
2. Introduction .....	4
3. The Phenomenon of Forgiveness .....	5
3.1 Different Views on Forgiveness .....	5
3.1.1 Ancient Greece .....	6
3.1.2 The New Testament .....	8
3.1.3 Nietzsche and Nussbaum .....	11
3.1.4 Kant, Arendt and Derrida .....	14
3.2 A Description and Definition of Forgiveness .....	19
3.2.1 What is Forgiveness? .....	20
3.2.1.1 The Bond Model (What Forgiveness is) .....	21
3.2.1.2 The Economic Model (What Forgiveness does) .....	23
3.2.1.3 Further Definitions and Clarifications .....	26
3.2.1.3.1 What is Guilt? .....	26
3.2.1.3.2 What is Resentment? .....	27
4. The Norms of Forgiveness .....	30
4.1 Conditions of the Moral Permissibility of Forgiveness .....	30
4.1.1 Forgiveness in a Moral Framework .....	31
4.1.2 What About Repentance? .....	35
4.2 Performative Conditions of the Actualization of Forgiveness .....	37
4.2.1 Truth and Narrative .....	37
4.2.2 Language .....	39
4.2.3 Are there Unforgivable People? .....	41
5. Conclusion .....	44
Bibliography .....	46

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## 1. Prologue

In the summer of 1996, Tom Stranger met Thordis Elva. Tom, 18 years old, was an Australian exchange student in Iceland, homeland of 16 year old Thordis. Tom and Thordis fell in love and as boyfriend and girlfriend went together to the school's Christmas dance. That night Thordis had too much to drink. She started feeling sick, vomiting and drifting in and out of consciousness. Instead of letting the security at the dance call an ambulance for Thordis, Tom decided to take her home. When they got to Thordis' home, Tom laid Thordis on her bed, started undressing her and for the following two hours he raped her. A few days later they broke up and a little while later Tom flew back to Australia. Both Tom and Thordis struggled with defining and understanding what happened on the night of the Christmas dance. They both knew very well that something very wrong had taken place. It took Thordis nine years to finally reach a point where she believed that what happened to her was not her fault and that much of the suffering she had been enduring was a result of what Tom had done to her. She finally wrote Tom a letter confronting him with what had happened. Tom replied with a regret filled confession. That letter started an eight year correspondence until they decided that they needed to meet to talk about what had happened. They decided to meet in South Africa for a week. Thordis wanted to find forgiveness and peace... and Tom needed to be forgiven.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Introduction

The term 'forgiveness' denotes a social practice that is as common as it is complex. Even though it is such a common social practice, people will often disagree about what it involves, what its norms are, what it aims at and what value it holds. This disagreement is, at least in part, due to the complexity of the practice. It is a practice that usually involves multiple agents who are attempting to deal with a state of affairs that is characterized by strong personal evaluations and which has effects that can be very far reaching.

In one sense, forgiveness is a practice that most agents at some point realize their need for. This could be as a result of being hurt and feeling a need, a duty or a desire to forgive. It could also be a result of someone committing a deed for which they feel the need or desire to be forgiven. Many have experienced some form of forgiveness in their lives. Many might be limited to the experience of struggling with forgiveness while failing, or even refusing to give it. In a world where one is confronted with the realities of war and genocide, sexual assault and rape, even with disputes

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Elva and Stranger (2017). Throughout this paper there will be quotations from Thordis' and Tom's book at the beginning of some of the chapters reflecting some of the concepts and ideas being discussed.

and arguments between family members or friends, the issue of forgiveness is likely to become thematic in our lives.

This paper takes a close look at forgiveness. As the title suggests, this paper is divided in two sections. The first section provides a description and an understanding of the phenomenon of forgiveness. This is done first by considering how various philosophical accounts have done so. This is then followed by a phenomenological description of what forgiveness is and what forgiveness does. For this purpose the paper also considers other concepts that are related to forgiveness, namely those of guilt and resentment. In the second section of the paper the norms of forgiveness are investigated. Two elementary normative conditions of forgiveness are discussed: the conditions of moral permissibility and the conditions of performative actualization of forgiveness.

### **3. The Phenomenon of Forgiveness**

#### **3.1 Different Views on Forgiveness**

The aim of this section is to provide a sample of some of the different views on forgiveness. This is not an exhaustive survey of all opinions philosophers and other theorists have had about the issue, but it is intended to indicate the range of opinions that have been proposed. The first and second sections will show some of the diversity that existed in ancient times by showing how the ancient Greeks and the authors of the New Testament thought about forgiveness. The third and fourth sections will deal with some modern and contemporary philosophers who also have entertained a variety of opinions on the topic.

As the different opinions are surveyed it will become clear that a person's understanding of forgiveness will differ depending on their general understanding of the moral world and their conception of human nature. For some authors, forgiveness would not be considered a virtue, because their ideas of perfection or goodness are such that the perfect or good person does not have a need to forgive. This is not to say that authors who do not think of forgiveness as a virtue agree in their understanding of the world, their conception of the human condition or in their understanding of forgiveness. However, these authors do hold ideas about the world and about human nature that lead them to conceive of forgiveness as either unnecessary or non-virtuous. Other writers, espousing different understandings of the world we live in and of human nature, consider forgiveness a very highly regarded virtue.

### 3.1.1 Ancient Greece

“It is surprising and illuminating that forgiveness is not seen as a virtue by the ancient Greek philosophers,”<sup>2</sup> writes Charles Griswold. The reason this is so, is not because they think revenge or resentment is better than forgiveness (as Griswold understands it), but because the idea of moral perfection in the thinking and writing of the ancient Greeks does not allow for forgiveness to be considered among the virtues.

To illustrate his point, one might look at the way Aristotle dealt with the topic. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes what he calls the great-souled (*megalópsychos*) person.<sup>3</sup> This is an individual who Aristotle believes to have perfect virtue. A person who is perfectly virtuous is one who clearly has nothing for which he needs to be forgiven. It seems that he is also a person who has no need to forgive others. This person distances himself from those who are non-virtuous. He does not “incline towards admiration, because in his eyes nothing is great, nor towards remembering evils, because it is not characteristic of a great-souled person to harbour memories, especially of evils, but rather to overlook them.”<sup>4</sup> This also means that when the non-virtuous do injure or wrong him, their injuries or wrongs are ineffective against him. He is not vulnerable. He is “unable to live in dependence on another, unless he is a friend.”<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, his description of ‘the perfect being’ or ‘the cause of all things’ is that it is independent, unmovable and unchanging.<sup>6</sup> Granted, he was not talking about a human being, but it nevertheless does reflect his ideas about perfection.

The Greek word, *syngnóme*, which Aristotle uses and can be translated as ‘forgiveness’, is a word that has a wide range of usage.<sup>7</sup> Aristotle usually uses it in a context where it can mean excuse or pardon.<sup>8</sup> He uses it, for example, when he describes how some people’s actions are not voluntary but rather (in various ways) imposed on them. If that is the case, these people are to be excused or pardoned.<sup>9</sup> It is debatable whether or not this should be considered forgiveness. According to Griswold, “[t]o forgive someone... assumes their responsibility for the wrong-doing

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<sup>2</sup> Griswold (2007): 2.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle, NE, Book IV, Ch. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1125a2-4.

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1124a1.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, MET, 1073a5-14.

<sup>7</sup> Griswold (2007): 3.

<sup>8</sup> Griswold (2007): 4-6.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, NE, Book III, Ch. 1.

indeed, what distinguishes forgiveness is in part that it represents a change in the moral relation between wrong-doer and wronged that accepts the fact that wrong was indeed done, and done (in some sense) voluntarily.”<sup>10</sup> If that is how one understands forgiveness it would seem that Aristotle has little to say about it.

Griswold believes this to be the case in general with the ancient Greeks. After citing Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the Epicureans he concludes

“that forgiveness (as distinct from pardon, mercy, lenience, compassion, and excuse) is not a virtue within these perfectionist ethical schemes ... The character type on whom such theories are focused, and which they hold up as the moral exemplar, is perfect or like-the-perfect, and thereby rises quite distinctly above the merely human. Forgiveness is more appropriate to an outlook that emphasizes the notion of a common and irremediably finite and fallible human nature, and thus highlights the virtues that improve as well as reconcile but do not aim to «perfect» in the sense we have been examining.”<sup>11</sup>

Gregory Sadler, however, takes issue with Griswold’s interpretation of Aristotle. He argues that it is not necessary to restrict what counts as forgiveness to situations where the wrongdoer is not pardonable or excusable. If this is so, then Aristotle has indeed much to say about forgiveness and it would be right to translate *syngnóme* with the term ‘forgiveness.’ Sadler sees forgiveness as a “choice not to engage in available responses of revenge and retribution... and giving up of negative affective responses and affective dynamics such as anger, hatred, indignation, distrust, or *ressentiment*.”<sup>12</sup> This, of course, is a possible reaction if a person has been wronged, regardless of whether the person who has committed the wrong has done so voluntarily or involuntarily.

In this sense, Sadler sees Aristotle’s great-souled person as a forgiving person. He believes that ignorance or involuntary action of the wrongdoer are among the reasons why a wronged person should not take revenge and should give up her negative emotions towards the person who wronged her. Sadler goes on to argue that forgiveness is part of the virtue of mildness or even-temperedness, which is “the virtue bearing on, directing and tempering anger.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, if one accepts Sadler’s definition of forgiveness and then reads Aristotle, one could see how Aristotle’s discussion of the anger of a mild or an even tempered person makes space for forgiveness. In fact, Aristotle writes:

“The even-tempered person professes to be calm and not carried away by his feelings, but to be cross only in the way, at the things, and for the length of time that reason directs. And he

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<sup>10</sup> Griswold (2007): 7.

<sup>11</sup> Griswold (2007): 14.

<sup>12</sup> Sadler (2008): 232-233.

<sup>13</sup> Sadler (2008): 241.

is thought to miss the mark more in the direction of the deficiency, because the even-tempered person is inclined not to revenge so much as to forgiveness.”<sup>14</sup>

It becomes clear that how one defines forgiveness will play a role in whether or not one will find it in the writings of the ancient greeks. It seems that, linguistically at least, the greek noun sometimes translated as forgiveness was closely tied with many other related concepts. Therefore, it can be said that the greeks had a concept of *syngnóme* which one can understand to be in significant ways related to what some thinkers today would consider forgiveness to be.

### **3.1.2 The New Testament**

In *Before Forgiveness*, David Konstan argues that in the New Testament “there is nothing like a systematic philosophical interrogation of the concept [of forgiveness] and seeking one is likely to be a frustrating exercise.”<sup>15</sup> It is understandable that one does not find in the New Testament a “system philosophical interrogation of the concept” of forgiveness because the New Testament is not a systematic philosophical text. One will not find a systematic interrogation neither of forgiveness, nor of any other concept for that matter. The nature of the text, which consists partly of narrative and partly of letters written by various individuals to various groups of people, invites the reader to search for the concept in a different manner.

Konstan also disagrees with Arendt, who believes that the “discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth.”<sup>16</sup> He believes that even though we have in the New Testament “at least the germ of the modern conception of forgiveness,”<sup>17</sup> nonetheless “a fully developed conception of forgiveness as an interpersonal, human process is not yet present.”<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that Konstan considers a specific conception of forgiveness to be the modern conception of forgiveness, which is very similar to that espoused by Charles

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<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, NE, 1125a31-1126a3.

<sup>15</sup> Konstan (2012): 122-123.

<sup>16</sup> Arendt (1998): 238.

<sup>17</sup> Konstan (2012): 122.

<sup>18</sup> Konstan (2012): 124.

Griswold.<sup>19</sup> It is this conception that he compares to what he takes to be the conception of forgiveness found in the New Testament.

Even though there are only a few passages which directly address the issue of forgiveness in the New Testament, it can be argued that the whole New Testament revolves around the topic. It is generally agreed upon that the event upon which the New Testament is centered is the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The four gospels tell the story of this life, the letters are intended to be teaching the various christian communities how to live in light of that story. It is also generally agreed upon that, according to the authors of the New Testament, one of the main things accomplished through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God. The Apostle Paul describes his whole mission as a “ministry of reconciliation” and clarifies further that “this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself ... that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.”<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere he describes what he believes God has done for the world as “redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>21</sup>

Even though this is clearly referring to God’s forgiveness, the Apostle Paul does seem to believe that there is a strong parallel between God’s forgiveness for us humans and our forgiveness for one another. He writes: “bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”<sup>22</sup> In this sense, it is possible to read out of the New Testament a lot of ideas concerning what forgiveness is and how one ought to forgive, not only from passages that directly talk about it, but also from the general narrative of the whole collection of writings that comprise it. The specific passages that do mention forgiveness should be understood within the context of the rest of the New Testament. There is no space here to deal with this issue in detail. Rather this section will only consider one of the key

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<sup>19</sup> A good summary of the conception of forgiveness espoused by Griswold in *Forgiveness: A Philosophical exploration* is found in Nussbaum’s *Anger and Forgiveness*: “Forgiveness... is a two-person process involving a moderation of anger and a cessation of projects of revenge, in response to the fulfillment of six conditions. A candidate of forgiveness must 1. Acknowledge that she was the responsible agent 2. Repudiate her deeds... and herself as the author 3. Express regret to the injured at having caused this particular injury to her 4. Commit to becoming the sort of person who does not inflict injury and show this commitment through deeds as well as words 5. Show that she understands, from the injured person’s perspective, the damage done by the injury 6. Offer a narrative accounting for how she came to do the wrong, how that wrongdoing does not express the totality of her person, and how she is becoming worthy of approbation.” Nussbaum (2016): 57.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Colossians 1:14.

<sup>22</sup> Colossians 3:13.

ideas concerning the conception of forgiveness which seems to be found both in specific texts and also in the greater narrative of the New Testament.<sup>23</sup>

In the New Testament it seems to be the case that God is deeply involved in every act of forgiveness. This is true whether one is considering God's forgiveness or interpersonal forgiveness. This is expressed for example when Jesus teaches his disciples to pray: "forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors."<sup>24</sup> In this instance, as in the previously mentioned quotation by the Apostle Paul, God's forgiveness for us and our forgiveness for others are strongly connected. The involvement of God in every act of forgiveness is also clear in passages which suggest that any action or attitude any one has towards another is related to a person's relation to God. The Apostle John writes that "if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?... If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen."<sup>25</sup>

It is therefore possible to see that the authors of the New Testament believed the love of God and the forgiveness of God to be the paradigm for the love and forgiveness humans ought to have for one another. The New Testament describes God's love and his forgiveness as a gift given to humans "while [they] were yet sinners."<sup>26</sup> The New Testament authors believed forgiveness to be something one ought to do for others, not because they deserved it, but because they believe that God, first of all, has forgiven them (the wronged forgivers) while they were undeserving. And this forgiveness is a result of a love for the person who has committed the wrong. It is an action one takes in order to make reconciliation possible.

Taking it a step further, it seems that at the core of New Testament's command to forgive is an awareness that God is a forgiving God and that we are people who need forgiveness, but who have also been wronged. Behind the connection between the individual's asking God for forgiveness and the individual's forgiving of others is the assumption that each individual finds herself as both the wrongdoer and the wronged before God. The Christian narrative then goes on to say that God becomes man and unites himself with humans in their condition. He becomes an innocent man who dies the death of a criminal. In his death as an innocent man he unites himself with every wronged, and in his death as a criminal he unites himself with every wrongdoer. In

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<sup>23</sup> It is interesting to note that the New Testament does not use *syngnóme* for 'forgiveness', but the word that is in most cases translated as forgive/forgiveness is *aphiēmi/aphesis*.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 6:12.

<sup>25</sup> 1 John 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> Romans 5:8.

his death, all those united with him, somehow die as well. The Apostle Paul expressed it this way: “For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.”<sup>27</sup>

The Christian idea is that God unites himself with humans so that in his death they die as well. Volf writes, “The Christ who died is the Christ who rose again. The [person] who died as a sinner with Christ was raised with Christ to new life... The person is a new self, because she lives in Christ and Christ lives in her.”<sup>28</sup> This is the experience that is usually referred to as conversion. This new self is a self that is no longer guilty. It is a self that has experienced the costly love and forgiveness of God. It is also a self that sees Christ as taking on her wounds and sufferings. As one who suffers with her and is able to forgive, Christ gives her the power to forgive. As God unites himself with every wronged person, being himself wronged along side every wronged person, and being a God who is capable of forgiving, those who are united with him find themselves able to forgive as they imitate his forgiveness. Only God is big enough and powerful enough to forgive evil with the magnitude that is seen in this world, and it is therefore God who forgives and makes humans forgivers.

It does seem that there are things that would be too difficult and too costly for the wronged to forgive. The Christian narrative suggests, however, that human forgiveness is a reflection and an extension of the forgiveness of God. If this is true, then it might be possible to forgive even the kinds of evil that would have left people severely hurt and without hope. The Apostle Paul sums this up as:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”<sup>29</sup>

### **3.1.3 Nietzsche and Nussbaum**

Friedrich Nietzsche and Martha Nussbaum are two philosophers who seem to have more of a negative view of forgiveness. Even though they would probably disagree on many issues, they do share a common rejection of the idea of forgiveness being virtuous. In order to understand their

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<sup>27</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14-15.

<sup>28</sup> Volf (2005): 149.

<sup>29</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-19.

positions it is important to investigate some of the other concepts that are closely related to their conception of forgiveness, such as anger, resentment and elements of their notions of justice and retribution.

Starting with Nietzsche, one can clearly see that forgiveness does not fit comfortably within his ideas about morality. He writes:

“... impotence which doesn’t retaliate is being turned into «goodness»; timid baseness is being turned into «humility»; submission to people one hates is being turned into «obedience» (actually towards someone who, they say, orders this submission – they call him God). The inoffensiveness of the weakling, the very cowardice with which he is richly endowed, his standing-by-the-door, his inevitable position of having to wait, are all given good names such as «patience», also known as the virtue; not-being-able-to-take-revenge is called not-wanting-to-take-revenge, it might even be forgiveness («for they know not what they do – but we know what they are doing!»). They are also talking about «loving your enemies» – and sweating while they do it.»<sup>30</sup>

Nietzsche’s intellectual attitude towards forgiveness seems to stem from a similar root as that of the ancient Greeks. His ideas about how one ought to live if one were to fulfill their potential do not leave any place for forgiveness. For Nietzsche, the strong man is not easily affected by what others do. In fact, “[t]o be unable to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his misdeeds seriously for long – that is the sign of strong, rounded natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget.”<sup>31</sup> When he describes forgiveness as “not-being-able-to-take-revenge,” he is not saying that one ought to take revenge. But he thinks that the weak are those who want to take revenge, but are not able to and so; in order to hide their inability they pretend it to be a lack of desire to retaliate and consider this a virtue.

Nussbaum rejects what she thinks is the contemporary common idea of forgiveness for different reasons. In *Anger and Forgiveness*, she begins by analyzing anger. She builds on Aristotle’s definition of anger, which states that it is “a desire accompanied by pain for an imagined retribution on account of an imagined slighting inflicted by people who have no legitimate reason to slight oneself or one’s own.”<sup>32</sup> She agrees with most of this definition, but then goes on to suggest that the idea of retribution is one that, even though common, is irrational. She believes there are two reasons why people want retribution. The first is a result of a “magical idea” that when the person who wrongs me suffers, I will be better off.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively one can think of retribution as a way to deal

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<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche (2006): 27-28.

<sup>31</sup> Nietzsche (2006): 22.

<sup>32</sup> Aristotle, RH, 1378a31-33.

<sup>33</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 21-22.

with what she calls a “status-injury”; the idea being that when someone wrongs me, my relative status is decreased and therefore I am motivated to retaliate. Retaliation is then the means through which I will restore my relative status. Nussbaum describes this way of thinking as being “at the heart of infantile narcissism”.<sup>34</sup>

Nussbaum then argues that there is a better way to be angry. Instead of anger having to focus on the suffering of the wrongdoer or on restoring relative status, anger should focus on social welfare “Saying, «something should be done about this,» [Transition-Anger] commits itself to a search for strategies.”<sup>35</sup> She calls this kind of anger “Transition-Anger” and thinks that this is the road any rational person ought to take eventually. Other kinds of anger are human and are experienced by most people, however the rational person will quickly dismiss them and replace them with Transition-Anger.<sup>36</sup>

Having described anger in this way, she begins to explain how this is related to the most common ideas of forgiveness. Summing up her view, she writes:

“The «road» of forgiveness begins, standardly, in terrible anger over a wrong one has suffered at the hands of another. Through a typically dyadic procedure involving confrontation, confession, apology, and «working through,» the wronged person emerges triumphant, unburdened from angry emotion, her claims fully acknowledged, ready to bestow the grace of non-anger. That is what I call «transactional forgiveness,» and it is both enormously influential historically and very common today. It is plausible to think of it as the canonical form of forgiveness in today’s world ... In short, forgiveness of the transactional sort, far from being an antidote to anger, looks like a continuation of anger’s payback wish by another name.”<sup>37</sup>

Nussbaum strongly rejects this idea of transactional forgiveness. She then suggests that there is a better form of forgiveness that is found in the New Testament. She calls it “unconditional forgiveness.” This is forgiveness that does not expect anything from the wrongdoer. They are forgiven whether or not they repent. Even though Nussbaum considers this a much better alternative, she still finds it lacking. To speak of unconditional forgiveness is to say that one is angry with the person, but decides to put aside her anger without conditions. For Nussbaum the problem remains that anger is not the appropriate or rational reaction to being wronged. Anger keeps the individual focused on the past wrong. She thinks there is still a better way to deal with wrongdoing.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 29.

<sup>35</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 36.

<sup>36</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 30-31.

<sup>37</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 10-11.

<sup>38</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 75-78.

The way that Nussbaum recommends is the way of “unconditional love.” In this scenario the wronged individual is not angry, is not focused on the past wrongdoing, but is mainly focused on what can be done for a better future. She thinks this strand is also found in the New Testament writings. She refers to the father in the parable of the prodigal son<sup>39</sup> as an example of this kind of love. The father runs and embraces the son without any repentance or any calculation where we can see the father putting his anger aside. In such a story she sees no forgiveness, only unconditional love.<sup>40</sup>

It is interesting that Nussbaum will not call what the father does in the parable of the prodigal son forgiveness. Once again, we see that depending on how one defines forgiveness, one will or will not find it in certain stories or texts. Nussbaum’s analysis of anger and her ideas about retribution are also not without problems. She does think there could be a place for something to be done about the wrong, but only within a forward looking approach that is not rooted in the traditional Aristotelean understanding of anger.<sup>41</sup> This is however not the only way to think of retribution. Neither is her way of thinking about repentance without problems. Thinking that repentance is merely about the wronged party finding restored status or the central condition for what she considers to be forgiveness is a very limited way of considering the phenomenon we are interested in.

### **3.1.4 Kant, Arendt and Derrida**

After having considered the ideas of Nussbaum and Nietzsche (two philosophers who do not see forgiveness in a very positive light), this chapter will consider samples of modern and postmodern authors who hold a more positive view of forgiveness.

Even though Immanuel Kant has written very little specifically about forgiveness, Konstan argues that it is with Kant that the modern concept of forgiveness (as Konstan understands it) begins. Konstan claims that Kant’s ideas “of moral autonomy and the consequent possibility of a radical change of character; and some of the paradoxical implications of this new image of the self”<sup>42</sup> have inspired and made space for the modern concept of interpersonal forgiveness.

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes:

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. The Gospel of Luke, Chapter 15.

<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 78-81.

<sup>41</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 36.

<sup>42</sup> Konstan (2012): xi.

“It is therefore a duty of men to be forgiving (*placabilitas*). But this must not be confused with meek toleration of wrongs (*mitis iniuriarum patientia*), renunciation of rigorous means (*rigorosa*) for preventing the recurrence of wrongs by other men; for then a man would be throwing away his rights and letting others trample on them, and so would violate his duty to himself.”<sup>43</sup>

The context of this statement is that of punishment. Kant begins this paragraph talking about the importance of punishment, but also about the problem of revenge. He argues that an individual has no authority to avenge crimes committed against himself, but that avenging the crime is the role of the court, which is a reflection of the ultimate moral law giver, who therefore has the authority to avenge crimes. He then reminds the reader that she ought not even ask God to take vengeance, “partly because a man has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of pardon and partly, and indeed especially, because no punishment... may be inflicted out of hatred.”<sup>44</sup> It is interesting to note here the relationship which Kant established between forgiving and being in need of forgiveness oneself.

Even though Kant has written little that directly bears on forgiveness, David Sussman has attempted to reconstruct Kant’s views on forgiveness through locating a place for it within the rest of his moral philosophy and his religious writings. Sussman explains that Kant, in his religious works, writes of God’s forgiveness to us. Sussman argues that, for Kant, “God serves as a kind of moral archetype... If so, then perhaps the grace of God similarly serves as the kind of moral archetype for the kinds of morally transformative and restorative relations that might, in various imperfect ways, be within the realm of human possibility.”<sup>45</sup> Sussman believes that the view of God’s forgiveness found in Kant’s religious writings can also show us something true of human forgiveness as well.

Sussman argues that Kant’s view of forgiveness can be thought of as considering the person who has done wrong, not merely as he is at the time of doing the wrong, but as he can potentially be in the future. When someone asks us for forgiveness “the supplicant asks us to trust in him enough to reestablish a relationship through which he may become worthy of that very trust, although nothing about him as he actually is now morally necessitates such an attitude.”<sup>46</sup> In this sense, forgiveness for Kant has a redemptive aspect. Sussman argues that for Kant, to forgive is to believe that the person one is forgiving will become a person worthy of receiving that forgiveness. This

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<sup>43</sup> Kant (1991): 253.

<sup>44</sup> Kant (1991): 253.

<sup>45</sup> Sussman (2005): 86.

<sup>46</sup> Sussman (2005): 104.

shared belief between the forgiver and the forgiven and the relationship it enables might actually be the cause of the person becoming worthy of the forgiveness.

Hannah Arendt offers a different perspective when dealing with the topic of forgiveness; she deals with the issue of forgiveness in the context of writing about political theory. Arendt writes about forgiveness in *The Human Condition*. In order to properly understand what she is saying about forgiveness it is important to understand her general framework in the book and how forgiveness relates to it.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt begins by introducing a distinction within human activity between “labor”, “work” and “action.” “Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body,”<sup>47</sup> she writes. In other words, labor is all activity that an individual does in order to provide for the necessities of her life. “Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence... Work provides an «artificial» world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings.”<sup>48</sup> Arendt calls “work” the kind of activity where we build and construct unnatural structures within which we continue to exist and that may outlive us. Arendt then introduces the term “action” as “the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, [it] corresponds to the human condition of plurality and to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.”<sup>49</sup> “Action” for Arendt is the human capacity to create new human relationships. She thinks of “action” as a political activity; an activity that contributes to humans insofar as they live in relations to one another.

Arendt writes on forgiveness as an “action” that is the remedy for what she calls “the predicament of irreversibility.” Because “action” is creating something new, it is many times the case that the result is unpredictable and possibly problematic. What ever “action” we take will be in our past and the past is irreversible. It is a problem when we realize that the action we have taken is a problematic one, but we have no way of changing the fact that we have taken such an “action.” The solution for this predicament is in the fact that further “action” can be taken. One such further “action” is forgiveness. Arendt writes:

“[Forgiveness] 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,

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<sup>47</sup> Arendt (1998): 7.

<sup>48</sup> Arendt (1998): 7.

<sup>49</sup> Arendt (1998): 7.

unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.”<sup>50</sup>

Even though Arendt does not give a clear definition of forgiveness, she does state that to be forgiven means to be “released from the consequences of what we have done.”<sup>51</sup> For Arendt this is significant because in “action” we do not know exactly what the consequences will be. This inability to know what the consequences will be is the main reason why Arendt thinks that an action is forgivable. In fact, she contrasts actions that are forgivable, because the actors “know not what they do,”<sup>52</sup> with willed evil, which she believes is very rare. In another passage she describes such unforgivable actions as “radical evil,” and comments that “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.”<sup>53</sup>

Arendt goes on to explain that forgiveness is an action that stems out of love in a specific limited sphere and out of respect in the “larger domain of human affairs.”<sup>54</sup> This is because forgiveness is always releasing an individual, for her sake, for *who* she is, from the consequences of an action she has committed. The action is forgiven *for* the sake of the individual who committed it.<sup>55</sup> This is why forgiveness, as well as trespassing, is a political action. It is an action that can only exist among a plurality of individuals sharing one space of action and existing in a “web of relations”.<sup>56</sup>

Jaques Derrida offers a more complex and somewhat confusing view on forgiveness. In “On Forgiveness”, he begins by attempting to distinguish between a practice that is commonly called forgiveness, but that he considers to be impure. This is a practice that he does not consider wrong,

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<sup>50</sup> Arendt (1998): 241.

<sup>51</sup> Arendt (1998): 237.

<sup>52</sup> Arendt (1998): 239.

<sup>53</sup> Arendt (1998): 241.

<sup>54</sup> Arendt (1998): 243.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Arendt (1998): 243: “But the fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody can 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.”

<sup>56</sup> Arendt (1998): 240.

but that he does not want to confuse with pure forgiveness. The examples he gives of this practice are mainly political examples, where a process that is called forgiveness is undergone with the aim of reconciliation and moving forward. Derrida believes that pure forgiveness must be done with no other purpose in mind. He writes:

“... each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the ‘forgiveness’ is not pure – nor is its concept.”<sup>57</sup>

The way Derrida conceives of this kind of conditional forgiveness is similar to the kind of forgiveness Nussbaum writes about. In fact, he calls this kind of forgiveness which is only granted when the right conditions are met, an economic forgiveness. This is forgiveness that is granted “in the course of a scene of repentance attesting at once to the consciousness of the fault, the transformation of the guilty, and the at least implicit obligation to do everything to avoid the return of evil.”<sup>58</sup>

Picking up the idea of ‘the unforgivable’ from Vladimir Jankélévitch<sup>59</sup> and Arendt, Derrida begins to argue that “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable.”<sup>60</sup> Derrida believes that this is the only kind of forgiveness that is pure. The problem however, is that it seems that this pure forgiveness is not practically possible. He goes on to describe a tension that exists between the pure unconditional forgiveness and conditional forgiveness. “These two poles... are absolutely heterogenous, and must remain irreducible to one another. They are nonetheless indissociable.”<sup>61</sup> Even though he considers conditional and unconditional forgiveness to be totally different from one another, he seems to think that they are both involved when it comes to actually making the decision to forgive:

“... 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.”<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Derrida (2001): 31-32.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida (2001): 34.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida (2001): 33-34. Derrida begins his exploration of the idea of 'the unforgivable' mainly through a text titled “L’Imprescriptible” by Vladimir Jankélévitch. Jankélévitch (1903-1985) is a Jewish French philosopher.

<sup>60</sup> Derrida (2001): 32.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida (2001): 44.

<sup>62</sup> Derrida (2001): 44-45.

It is difficult to think of what this looks like in practice. Derrida seems to want to save forgiveness from being an economic practice that has clear rules. It is important for him that forgiveness maintains its status as something that is in a sense impossible, and yet it is something that we must do. For him “forgiveness is not, it should not be, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality.”<sup>63</sup> Commenting on Derrida’s views on forgiveness Richard J. Bernstein writes:

“Derrida in all his writings has been obsessed with decision and responsibility. The obsessive motif is that there are no algorithms, no rules, no decision procedures, nothing that we can rely on in making decisions – including decisions about when, whom, and what to forgive... When Derrida tells us that forgiveness is an impossible possible, he is not playing frivolous games with us. He seeks to intensify the experience of decision and responsibility involved in forgiveness.”<sup>64</sup>

Derrida’s view of forgiveness builds on and combines the views of some of the other authors mentioned in this paper. He brings together the ideas of transactional forgiveness and of the unforgivable and uses them to present a more complex view of how forgiveness works. As is typical of Derrida’s work, he deconstructs the binary framework that exists (conditional vs. unconditional forgiveness) and attempts to show that these contradictions must be held together in tension.

### **3.2 A Description and Definition of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is a complex social practice. One can think of a myriad of cases where it is appropriate to speak of forgiveness. Forgiveness can be seen to occur between two individuals, it can occur between one individual and a group of two or more, it can be seen to become enacted between two (or more) groups of individuals. An individual could forgive someone who is alive or someone who is deceased. An individual may wish for forgiveness from someone who is alive or from someone who is deceased. In some cases, one may experience the need or urge to forgive someone for a wrong that was not committed against herself. There is also the issue of the forgiveness of God for individuals, or in some cases some have even spoken of individuals forgiving God.<sup>65</sup> This list of options is definitely not comprehensive, it does however show that there are multiple possible scenarios where one can appropriately speak of forgiveness and yet where it is possible to think of

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<sup>63</sup> Derrida (2001): 32.

<sup>64</sup> Bernstein (2006): 398.

<sup>65</sup> Wiesel (1997).

forgiveness as having a slightly different meaning and perhaps also as being played out in accordance with different sets of norms.

In order to properly investigate the phenomenon this paper focuses on what has been called the ‘paradigmatic case’ of forgiveness. This is the case where forgiveness is “understood as a moral relation between two individuals, one of whom has wronged the other, and who (at least in the ideal) are capable of communicating with each other.”<sup>66</sup> This is the most elementary case of forgiveness and so it is methodologically advisable to begin with it. The paper thus will investigate what happens when an individual is wronged by another, and what the wronged party is doing when she forgives. The paper will also investigate what the effects of this forgiveness are on both involved parties. It is possible to then extract the conclusions of this investigation; on their basis one might attempt their application to other cases in order to discern in what ways these other scenarios are different and in what ways they are similar to the ‘paradigmatic case.’ This final step, however, lies beyond the scope of the present work.

### **3.2.1 What is Forgiveness?**

In what follows, I shall argue that some of the confusion regarding the phenomenon of forgiveness has its origins in a certain ambiguity in the usage of the term ‘forgiveness’. ‘Forgiveness’ is a term used in two senses: one is a usage referring to something that happens only within the wronged. This can be seen when people talk of someone forgiving for herself, not for the wrongdoer. It can also be the only option in situations where the wrongdoer is no longer available in the life of the wronged. In such a situation, the wronged might attempt to forgive without any interaction and may be without any effect on the wrongdoer. The other usage is a broader one that is usually considered to be conditional and that includes reconciliation. This is the case when people talk of forgiving a loved one for example. This is forgiveness that is enacted for the sake of restoring a damaged relationship. A clearer case might be when the wrongdoer initiates the process of forgiveness. In such a case the wrongdoer might apologize and ask for forgiveness, hoping that, being forgiven, there might be hope for the relationship to return to the way it was before the wrongdoing.

Some use the term as though forgiveness only refers to the first sense mentioned here, while others think that real forgiveness is only the second sense. In the following chapters an explanation of what forgiveness is and what forgiveness does is provided, which will attempt to reconcile these two positions by showing that forgiveness begins with the wronged and can even end there, but that it will always create the potential for the second sense.

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<sup>66</sup> Griswold (2007): xvi.

Brandon Warmke has argued that forgiveness alters the norms of a relationship.<sup>67</sup> There are different norms that govern different kinds of relationships. These norms will be altered when someone commits an evil action. The norms, and perhaps even the nature of the relationship, will be different after such an action has been committed. These altered norms can be altered further by the action of forgiveness. The alterations of the norms may be accompanied by emotional alterations, but that is not necessary. The alterations referred to here are alterations in obligations, rights and prohibitions within the relationship in question. It is important to note that the alterations of the norms is not what forgiveness is, but it is the result of forgiveness taking place. When forgiveness takes place the nature of the relationship and the individuals within the relationship change as well. Forgiveness involves a change within the individuals that would make the alteration of the norms understandable and possible. Any understanding of what forgiveness is must account for the alteration of the norms that results as a consequence of its taking place.

In the following chapters, two different models are presented that attempt to guide us in our understanding of what forgiveness is. The first model, which I will call the ‘bond model’, will give an explanation of what is happening in the act and the process of forgiveness. The second model, the ‘economic model’, provides a way of understanding what forgiveness accomplishes within and for a relationship. Both models are compatible and will work together to give a fuller and clearer understanding of what forgiveness is.

### **3.2.1.1 The Bond Model (What Forgiveness is)**

*“For a moment, we sit in silence, and it strikes me that in a way, we’ve got each other’s initials forever carved into our skin.”<sup>68</sup>*

An evil action creates a bond between the wrongdoer and the wronged. By ‘bond’ I mean something that is holding both individuals together in a certain kind of relation. This bond (gradually) destroys other bonds that may have existed before the wrongdoing took place. It also destroys the potential bonds of a potentially healthy relationship between people who have never known one another. The bond has an impact on the person and thereby can also negatively influence other relationships a person lives in. This evil bond keeps people close to one another; this closeness, of course, is not geographical, but rather relational. The wronged and the wrongdoer can neither be separated from one another, nor can they create or sustain other healthy bonds with each other, unless this bond caused by the evil act is resolved. The bond can be observed in the wronged as resentment against

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<sup>67</sup> Warmke (2016): 8.

<sup>68</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 101.

the wrongdoer and can be seen in the wrongdoer as guilt. It is possible that one or both parties be not fully aware of the bond at all times. This does not mean that the bond does not exist.

Forgiveness is the act and the process of dissolving this bond created by the evil action. This act will alter the norms of the relationship in such a way that restoration of the relationship becomes possible. This could be through the reviving of previously existing bonds or restoring the potential of creating new bonds between the wronged and wrongdoer.

The term 'forgiveness' refers to and expresses the idea of an act which a wronged party takes to properly remove a bond between the wronged and wrongdoer that was created by the wrongdoer through an action that can be properly described as an 'evil' action or a 'wrongdoing'. The action of forgiveness aims at releasing both the wronged and the wrongdoer from the bond created by the evil action. However, it does seem possible for the wronged party to release her self from the bond through forgiveness without the wrongdoer being released. The wrongdoer can only be released from the bond when the wronged party has released herself. The release of the wronged party from the bond, however, is only a necessary, but not sufficient condition for the release of the wrongdoer. This suggests that the wronged is the one that holds the power to bring about the necessary action for the release of both parties from the bond created by the evil action of the wrongdoer. But there are other necessary conditions that the wrongdoer must fulfill in order for her to be released from the bond. These conditions, however, are not necessary for the wronged to be able to release herself. The bond is asymmetrical. Therefore, the action taken by the wronged party to release herself from the bond created by the evil action, with the intention of also releasing the wrongdoer, is called forgiveness, even if the wrongdoer does not fulfill the conditions necessary for her release. In this case, the wronged would have forgiven, but the wrongdoer would remain unforgiven. If the action of forgiveness is taken by the wronged and properly received by the wrongdoer, the natural progression is that of reconciliation. This explains why forgiveness is sometimes described in a way that includes reconciliation, while other times it refers only to the release of the wronged party from the bond created by the evil action. The confusion thus is a consequence of the fact that although forgiveness always aims at reconciliation, it does not always attain it.

The bond created between the wronged and wrongdoer by the evil action of the wrongdoer contains two strands of different directionality. One that moves from the wronged to the wrongdoer and another that moves from the wrongdoer towards the wronged. The strand that moves from the wronged to the wrongdoer can be described as being dominated by resentment and anger towards the wrongdoer. It is a desire that the wrongdoer, as the one responsible for the injury, not live as if she has not caused it. This is sometimes manifested as a desire for revenge. This is a desire to inflict pain on the wrongdoer with the hope that the inflicting of that pain would restore some kind of

balance and would somehow relieve the wronged from some of her pain. It is important to note that the pain of the injury is not itself part of the bond. The bond can remain even in the absence of the pain and the bond might be resolved even with the persistence of the pain. The second strand moving from the wrongdoer to the wronged is a strand of guilt. Having committed an evil action towards the wronged, the wrongdoer is now guilty. This guilt places the wrongdoer in a specific relation towards the wronged, similar to that of being in debt. *Within* the bond we can thus distinguish a strand of resentment and a strand of guilt.

Once the wronged decides to forgive, she is letting go of the strand that is moving from her towards the wrongdoer. This allows the wrongdoer to begin letting go of the strand moving from herself to the wronged. However, the conditions for the wrongdoer to let go are (i.) the wronged has decided to forgive and (ii.) that the wrongdoer has repented. If the wrongdoer has not repented, the guilt towards the wronged remains, even if the wronged has released her resentment and her demands of the wrongdoer. In that case, it is the guilt of the wrongdoer that demands of her the payment. It might be the case that the wrongdoer is unaware of her guilt, or is unwilling to accept that she is guilty. This does not change the fact that she is guilty and that this guilt binds her to the wronged, even when the wronged is no longer bound to the wrongdoer. This explains how it is possible for the wronged to forgive, without the wrongdoer being forgiven. It is also possible that the wrongdoer repents before the wronged decides to forgive. The wrongdoer will however remain unforgiven, even though she has contributed her part in the process, until the wronged decides to forgive.

The ‘bond model’ is helpful because it provides a way of thinking about and describing the situation that makes forgiveness possible. It also provides a way of thinking about and describing the action and the process of forgiveness. Next, the ‘economic model’ will be introduced. The ‘economic model’ provides a way to make intelligible what forgiveness accomplishes. It explains the alteration of the norms which is an observable result of forgiveness taking place.

### **3.2.1.2 The Economic Model (What Forgiveness does)**

*“As a result, I’m going to South Africa to seek final payment for the costliest night of my life”<sup>69</sup>*

Richard Swinburne writes, “[b]y hurting you, I put my self in a moral situation somewhat like the legal situation of a debtor who owes money. The wrong needs righting. There is an obligation to do

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<sup>69</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 15.

something like repaying.”<sup>70</sup> This analogy between moral debt and economic debt is at the core of the economic model of forgiveness. It is very common to find the language of this model of forgiveness being used when reading or talking about the topic. In the New Testament we find the language and imagery of debt to talk about sins.<sup>71</sup> Nietzsche makes a point of the fact that in German, *Schuld* is the word for both guilt and debt.<sup>72</sup> Even though this is a common way of speaking, Griswold, among others, has argued that it is not a helpful way of speaking of forgiveness.<sup>73</sup> More recently, Warmke has developed and defended this model against some of the objections that have been raised against it.<sup>74</sup>

Undergirding this model is the idea that individuals have certain obligations towards one another. These obligations vary depending on the nature of relationship, however, there is, according to Swinburne, a minimum obligation to have the “attitude of seeking no harm” for anyone regardless of who they are.<sup>75</sup> When one wrongs another person, one is then in position similar to that of being in debt. One is in the position of owing the person something; what exactly is owed is hard to define. One can think that one owes the person an apology, reparations, or maybe to compensate for what has been lost or damaged. One of the reasons it is hard to define what exactly is owed goes back to the complexity and variety in the nature of the evil actions that might be committed. Some evil actions include material damage, while others do not. However, in all cases we talk about the wrongdoer being in debt. It is the immaterial aspect of the wrongdoing that is very difficult to quantify. It is even conceivable that sometimes the kind of debt acquired is one which is impossible to repay.

The strength of the model certainly does not lie in the fact that it can quantify the debt, but in the description of forgiveness as a cancelation of the debt. There are parallels between the kind of relationship involved between parties in an economic debt situation and the kind of relationship between parties in a moral debt situation. More importantly, the kinds of changes that occur once an economic debt is canceled are similar to those that occur when moral debt is forgiven. It is precisely the latter similarity that makes the economic model of forgiveness helpful. Warmke acknowledges that there are disanalogies between the economic and moral debt, but he explains that “the issue is

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<sup>70</sup> Swinburne (1989): 74.

<sup>71</sup> Matthew 6:12, Luke 7:36-50.

<sup>72</sup> Nietzsche (2006): 39.

<sup>73</sup> Griswold: 60-62.

<sup>74</sup> Warmke (2016).

<sup>75</sup> Swinburne (1989): 75.

not whether there are disanalogies, but whether such disanalogies prevent the [economic model of forgiveness] from being illuminating and helpful when thinking about the nature and norms of moral forgiveness.”<sup>76</sup>

Warmke suggests that the most helpful way to think about this is in terms of the norms of the relationship before and after forgiveness takes place. Once a person has wronged another, the wronged is justified in treating the wrongdoer in certain ways. She might be even justified in making certain demands of the wrongdoer. These demands would stem out of the wronged’s right to blame the wrongdoer. However, once the wronged forgives the wrongdoer, she seems to be giving up her rights to treat the wrongdoer in these same ways. Otherwise we would not be able to make sense of what it means that the wronged has forgiven the wrongdoer. These alterations in the norms of the relationship are the effect of forgiveness taking place.<sup>77</sup>

“Any plausible theory of forgiveness should be able to explain why the norms of interaction between wrongdoer and victim are altered in paradigmatic cases of forgiveness,” writes Warmke. He suggests that the way to explain these alterations is to think of forgiveness as having a similar nature as economic debt cancellation. When a person cancels a debt, she cannot go on treating the person who was indebted to her the same way (e.g. she cannot go on demanding payment from the person). The economic model of forgiveness therefore is a helpful model in understanding what forgiveness does. Forgiveness is an action of such a kind that it changes the norms of the relationship in a specific way once it has been taken. The norms are altered in such a way as to remove rights and obligations that would have made the possibility of the parties healing their relationship close to impossible (depending on the severity of the wrong). This does not necessarily mean that once forgiveness has taken place that the relationship is automatically restored. This only suggests that forgiveness effectuates a certain change that makes the restoration possible.

In combining both models one can now get a clearer picture of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the resolution of a bond that holds both parties in a specific kind of relationship. The resolving of the bond means that the nature of the relationship between both parties has changed in a way that is similar to the way the cancelation of an economic debt would change the relationship between the parties involved.

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<sup>76</sup> Warmke (2016): 4.

<sup>77</sup> Warmke (2016): 6.

### 3.2.1.3 Further Definitions and Clarifications

#### 3.2.1.3.1 What is Guilt?

*“I am one of the ‘they’... the ones who have inflicted such hurt. The ones to be feared. A bad man. A man who has committed sexual violence.”<sup>78</sup>*

To call someone *guilty* is to say they have acted in a way they ought not have acted and that they are responsible for their action. This is based on the premise that under certain conditions, individuals are responsible for their actions. To talk about a person being *responsible* for an action is to say that it is right to require a response from said person in regards to the action she has taken. The person is the author of the act and she is thus expected to give an answer for it. When the action to be answered for is good we speak of merit or adequacy, and we speak of guilt when the action is evil or wrong. Therefore, we can say that guilt is a mode of being responsible. It is a description of someone who is responsible for doing something they ought not have done.

The person, being the author of her act, could be responsible towards (at least) three different parties. (1) The person is responsible towards the individual that is affected by their action. The affected individual has a right to call the person who affected her to account. (2) The person is also responsible towards the entity that is in charge of maintaining the laws within which communities are sustained and flourish. This entity’s right to call a person to account is a derivative right. It represents the affected in holding the effector to account. (3) Finally, the person is also responsible towards the entity that has given her the power and authority by which she has acted. Such an entity has a right to question the person about how she has acted using their power and authority.

The account of forgiveness given in this paper assumes the reality of guilt. It assumes that the wronged has a right to call the wrongdoer to account for their action. The wrongdoer’s guilt means that she cannot distance herself from the action she has done. The wronged has the right to treat the wrongdoer in certain ways because of the wrongdoer’s guilt. This is the situation that can be described using the ‘bond model’ and has been likened to economic debt in the ‘economic model.’

It is important to note that there is a difference between the reality of guilt, the consciousness of guilt and the sting of guilt. There are times when all three are present in one person. But there are times where one or more of them can be missing. A person may have a consciousness of guilt and feel the sting of guilt while not being actually guilty. It is also possible for a person to be really guilty while not having a consciousness of guilt. It has been argued by

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<sup>78</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 267.

twentieth century German philosopher Nicolai Hartman that forgiveness can release someone from the sting of guilt, but is not capable of releasing the person from the guilt itself.<sup>79</sup> This means that whether one is conscious of their guilt or not, is not a measure of whether they are really guilty or not.

### 3.2.1.3.2 What is Resentment?

*“My reflection in the window takes on the face of revenge: the cruel creature who wanted to bring my tormentor to his knees. Growling softly, she stretches lazily before meeting my eye. I licked your wounds, she purrs while flashing her claws. You think you have the right to judge me now? I turn away from the apparition, seeking solace in how far I’ve come through understanding and patience. Revenge grabs hold of my chin with bony fingers and forces me to face her. Admit it, she hisses. You enjoyed making him squirm. You’re wrong, I hiss back. It healed nothing. Snarling, she retreats into the shadows. Her presence lingers, its remnants pulsating through my body until sleep finally pushes me off the edge and into the subconscious of the African night.”<sup>80</sup>*

Much depends on properly thinking about resentment when dealing with the phenomenon and norms of forgiveness. One reason for that is that it seems to be a promising way to describe what the wronged experiences when considering or attempting to forgive. Another reason is that forgiveness has been repeatedly defined as the forswearing of resentment.<sup>81</sup> It is therefore important to properly understand resentment and to consider whether the forswearing of resentment really provides us with an adequate definition of forgiveness.

Pamela Hieronymi has defended a version of the so called ‘Resentment Theory of Forgiveness’ in “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness.”<sup>82</sup> Hieronymi helpfully explains that emotions, such as resentment, are “judgment-sensitive attitudes.”<sup>83</sup> By that, she means they are not mere forces, but that they are undergirded by specific judgments. If one were to overcome such

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<sup>79</sup> Hartman (1932): 271-272.

<sup>80</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 198.

<sup>81</sup> Warmke (2014): 107 - In his Doctoral Theses on “Forgiveness and Responsibility”, Branden Warmke argues that the ‘Resentment Theory of Forgiveness’ has “dominated the recent discussions on forgiveness.” He quotes Philosophers such as Stephen Darwall (2006, p. 72) and references John Kekes (2010, p. 490), Linda Radzik (2008, p. 117), and Leo Zaibert (2009, p. 38) as considering this the standard view on forgiveness.

<sup>82</sup> Hieronymi (2001).

<sup>83</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 542.

an emotion, one would go about that by revising the judgments which undergird the emotion in question. She argues that an account of forgiveness as the overcoming of resentment...

“... must articulate the revision in judgment or change in view in a way that allows the forgiver to hold fixed the following three (interrelated) judgments: (1) The act in question was wrong; it was a serious offense, worthy of moral attention. (2) The wrongdoer is a legitimate member of the moral community who can be expected not to do such things. As such, she is someone to be held responsible and she is worth being upset by. (3) You, as the one wronged, ought not to be wronged. This sort of treatment stands as an offense to your person.”<sup>84</sup>

The three judgements mentioned are necessary for justifying resentment. Hieronymi goes on to explain that to deny any of these three judgments might in fact remove resentment, but it should not be considered forgiveness. This is because to deny any of these three judgments “absolves the wrongdoer of culpability, and to absolve of culpability is to excuse, not to forgive.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, she argues, we need to articulate an account of forgiveness that is uncompromising; one that includes a “revision in judgment or a change of view” without denying any of the three emotions that undergird resentment.

The solution proposed by Hieronymi is to realize that these three judgments, when true, lead to a fourth judgment; “that the event in question makes a threatening claim.”<sup>86</sup> It is a threatening claim in the sense that it makes a statement about the wronged and the wrongdoer. About the wronged it states that it is right to treat her this way, and about the wrongdoer it states that she thinks it is right to act this way. This claim, according to Hieronymi, reveals something about the nature of resentment. Resentment protests these claims. Hieronymi argues that it is this fourth judgment that actually “grounds resentment.”<sup>87</sup> This fourth judgment can be undermined through an apology by the wrongdoer. In an apology, the wrongdoer acknowledges that the action was wrong and that she should not have done it. An apology is an admission that it was wrong to treat the wronged this way. This would mean that the past action is no longer threatening. When this fourth judgment is undermined, “resentment loses its footing.”<sup>88</sup> Once the fourth judgment has been undermined through the apology, resentment fades away. According to Hieronymi, forgiveness has

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<sup>84</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 530.

<sup>85</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 530.

<sup>86</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 548.

<sup>87</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 548.

<sup>88</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 549.

taken place. It is important to note that Hieronymi does not claim that this is the only form of forgiveness that exists.<sup>89</sup>

This account is helpful insofar as it provides a developed understanding of resentment. There are, however, problems with this account. The first problem, raised by Warmke, consists in the consequence that forgiveness is thus posited outside of the wronged's sphere of control. The overcoming of resentment is a result of the review in judgment, which is a result of the apology. Neither the apology, the review in judgment, nor the overcoming of resentment are actions that the wronged willfully takes. This would result in all norms underlying forgiveness becoming meaningless.<sup>90</sup>

The second problem with Hieronymi's account of resentment is that it seems to be incomplete. There is more to resentment than the issue of a threatening claim. If resentment is so central to forgiveness, such that overcoming it is what forgiveness is, one would expect there to be more to it than what is mentioned in this account. I would suggest that an important component of what we mean by 'resentment' ought to be expressed in an additional fifth judgment: the act in question has cost you something, and you deserve to be repaid by the person who has wronged you. This judgment is in line with the economic model of forgiveness. It is also easy to observe this judgment in the desire for revenge. The resentment the wronged feels seems to be demanding that the wrongdoer pay. Moreover, it is often the case that the wronged not only desires that the wrongdoer pays, but she desires that she herself make the wrongdoer pay.<sup>91</sup> In other words, it is common for the wronged to desire a payment to be made to herself, not just that a payment be made in general.

This fifth judgment is not necessarily undermined by an apology. It is common to see people who refuse to forgive even when an apology is given precisely because they believe that the wrongdoer must pay. In the mind of the wronged, forgiving might mean that the wrongdoer will not pay. In such a case, even when there is no threat, the wronged will hold on to her resentment. This fifth judgment can only be undermined by an action. The wronged can decide to release the wrongdoer from the cost she owes her (the wronged) and accept to pay it herself.<sup>92</sup> It seems that this action of release is a much better explanation of forgiveness than that of merely defusing the threatening claim. It might be fruitful then to either maintain Hieronymi's account of resentment

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<sup>89</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 545.

<sup>90</sup> Warmke (2014): 112-117.

<sup>91</sup> Lewis (2002): 20-22.

<sup>92</sup> It is interesting to note that Hieronymi (2001, p. 550-551) develops a similar idea that she considers to be a component of forgiveness, yet she does not include it in her account of overcoming resentment.

while abandoning the idea that forgiveness is merely overcoming resentment, or updating Hieronymi's account of resentment to include the fifth judgment and maintain her definition of forgiveness. In the former case, one could think of overcoming resentment as a part of the process of forgiveness, but that forgiveness includes more than that.

It is also worth considering whether resentment can have distinctions similar to those drawn in reference to guilt; can there be a distinction between the emotion of resentment and the objective state that justifies the existence of the emotion? In such a case one could explain how sometimes resentment is unjustified. One could also describe someone who is actually wronged while not being conscious of her state and not experiencing the justified emotion. The word resentment does not seem to be used except to designate an emotion, while the justificatory state is usually referred to as 'being wronged', 'being injured', 'being offended' and the like.

## **4. The Norms of Forgiveness**

The following chapter is divided into two parts, each dealing with one of the two different types of conditions that come into play when thinking about forgiveness. The first type of conditions, I will call *conditions of moral permissibility*. The question to be answered here is: are there conditions that make forgiveness morally permissible or impermissible? In order to answer this question, forgiveness must be placed within a larger moral framework. This is because it is only within moral frameworks that any moral judgments can be made. The second type of conditions, I will call *performative conditions of the actualization of forgiveness*. The question this section will attempt to answer is: what conditions are necessary for the possibility of forgiveness in the first place? This is a question about what capacities or elements need to be in place for forgiveness to be an act possible for human beings. It will also discuss whether or not these conditions actually exist.

### **4.1 Conditions of the Moral Permissibility of Forgiveness**

In the previous chapter the word 'ought' has been used multiple times. For Example, 'guilt' was defined as being responsible for doing something one *ought* not have done. The word 'ought' in this context assumes a moral framework. It is obvious that forgiveness is an action that makes sense only within a moral framework, even if only because it is a (possible) response to a state of guilt, which only makes sense in a moral framework. Forgiveness is, however, also an action that has moral value in itself. When thinking of the norms of forgiveness, disagreement can arise about whether one ought or ought not forgive. Settling such disagreements requires at least a sketch of the framework within which this moral judgment is made.

It is clear that people disagree, not only about moral judgments, but also about the moral frameworks within which these judgments are made. Many of the disagreements about judgments can be traced back to disagreements about moral frameworks. In attempting to sketch a moral framework I am not attempting to convince the reader that this is in some way the ‘right’ moral framework to adopt. Rather, I am attempting to provide a coherent moral framework within which the description of forgiveness I have provided can be tested and shown to work, and on the backdrop of which more general norms of forgiveness can be derived by considering a specific form of its enactment within the introduced moral framework.

#### 4.1.1 Forgiveness in a Moral Framework

*“To show the world that people who’ve been both ends of this scale, whether they’re receivers or perpetrators of sexual violence, aren’t soulless monsters or damaged goods. They’re people; imperfect, fallible, unmistakably human beings like you and me with all kinds of thoughts, jobs, backgrounds, life-styles, and beliefs. People who pay their taxes and love their families and make mistakes and live right next door.”<sup>93</sup>*

According to Charles Taylor, thinking about moral issues is thinking that involves what he calls ‘strong evaluation’; “that is, [the issues] involve discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.”<sup>94</sup> Taylor argues that moral thinking is done around three axes which overlap and are intertwined but are still distinct. These are “our sense of respect for and obligations to others, and our understandings of what makes a full life... [and] the range of notions concerned with dignity.”<sup>95</sup> In order for a person to be able to make any evaluations or judgments regarding any of these axes one has to have a background picture, or a framework, out of which one is able to think about these axes and begin to make judgments that would be considered moral, or ‘strong evaluations’. Indeed, as Taylor points out, “frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgments, intuitions, or reactions in any of the three dimensions.”<sup>96</sup>

Taylor believes that frameworks are inescapable, even though some people might not be aware that they are acting and understanding their actions and those of others’ in their horizon. A

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<sup>93</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 188.

<sup>94</sup> Taylor (1989): 4.

<sup>95</sup> Taylor (1989): 15.

<sup>96</sup> Taylor (1989): 26.

person usually begins to realize that she acts and conceives of her actions in a framework when she is in need of defending her moral position or an action she has committed. Because many people are never challenged to explain why they believe their action or position is right, they don't realize that they act within a determinate conceptual horizon of practical intelligibility, i.e. of concepts, which, on the most fundamental level, are constituting the intelligibility of action for them. Taylor explains that "[t]he average person needs to do very little thinking about the bases of universal respect, for instance, because just about everyone accepts this as an axiom today."<sup>97</sup>

Along these lines, I will develop a moral framework in this paper beginning with the following assumption: The greatest good, the *summum bonum*, for human beings is to be active in what I will call 'good relationships.' The framework developed in this paper is one that sees human beings as agents of such a kind who are capable of being in good relationships. This capacity is the outworking of being human, which is what makes them worthy of respect and gives them dignity. In other words, to be human is to potentially be capable of being in certain kinds of relationships. What makes a human life worth living is the kinds of relationships that a person is actually in, or can potentially be in.

This does not mean that in order to be worthy of respect and dignity one has to be in good relationships, but that what it means to be human is to have certain characteristics that make it possible to be in such relationships. The fact that these characteristics can be deformed or lost does not make an individual less human, and so less worthy of respect and dignity, but it means that this is a human who is challenged in some way or other, and so finds it difficult to reach her potential and fulfill her humanity. Value and dignity are rooted ontologically not functionally. The person's humanity is what gives her value and dignity and it means having such potential.

Out of this framework one can begin to see what kind of judgments and what kind of actions are good actions and which are bad. Actions that are compatible with and that build towards 'good relationships' are good actions. Actions that destroy the potential or capacity for 'good relationships' are evil actions.

Human Existence, – not only for sheer biological, but also for a number of other reasons – is a social mode of existence, necessarily requiring coordination, cooperation and communication. A social existence, in which we are constantly in need of, longing for and working towards good relationships. This does not exclude other goods that we long for and work towards, but it seems that all other goods are compatible with and actually enhanced by us being active in good relationships. To be successful, rich, powerful without being in good relationships is not a state one normally desires. It may be a state one settles for, but it cannot be described as the greatest good in

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<sup>97</sup> Taylor (1989): 9.

human life.<sup>98</sup> To be in good relationships when missing other goods is many times a more desirable option than the reverse. This is intensified by the realization that to not be in good relationships will often mean that one is in bad relationships, as it is difficult to imagine human life without relationships all together. To live a human life without relationships altogether is a nightmare for most people. It is often the case that it is more desirable to be in a bad relationship than to not have any relationships at all. An individual who is active in good relationships will very likely also find herself in many shallow relationships. These relationships can be good, however they cannot replace ‘good relationships.’ Their presence adds to an individual’s life, but their absence is usually not strongly problematic.

A relationship exists when one person who is conscious of herself is also conscious of another who is not herself. The person is not only conscious of herself and the other, but has the capacity to act in such a way that would influence the other and can be influenced by the actions of the other. This requires that both persons exist within a mutual environment that makes the distinction between the persons possible, while allowing the persons to utilize said environment to act in ways that would influence the other. By influence I mean the capacity to act in a way that alters the ideas, emotions and even physical state of another individual.<sup>99</sup>

There are many kinds of good relationships, because there are many kinds of relationships. A person’s relationships to her parents is different from her relationships to her siblings, which is different from her relationships to her friends and different from her relationships to her lover. A person has the potential to exist within a matrix of different kinds of relationships, where each kind of relationship has different norms. All relationships might be important to the person and the person may love all the people with which she has a relationship, however the way she expresses such love and the rules and expectations in each of these relationships is different. A good parental relationship is defined by a set of norms markedly different from those underlying a good marital relationship. In other words, there are appropriate and inappropriate ways of influencing and being influenced by the other which vary according to the kind of relationship in question.

Being in a ‘good relationship’ is not the same as simply acting with goodness towards others. Acting with goodness towards others is a necessary component of being in a ‘good relationship’,

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<sup>98</sup> It is conceivable that someone chooses to be in a state where one is deprived from good relationships. A person might decide for the good of one person, or for the good of a number of people, to live in such a way where she is not active in good relationships. This decision would however be compatible with the belief that the greatest good for human beings is to be in good relationships. It is in the nature of good relationships that the good of the other is more important than the good of the self. In a world where there is evil of such a kind as to prevent people from being able to be in good relationships, the kinds of people who are in such relationships would choose to act sacrificially for the sake of the other. Thus the person would sacrifice her own good for the sake of increasing other people’s capacity to be in good relationships.

<sup>99</sup> Lewis (2001): 20-22.

but it is not sufficient. A person can act with goodness towards others even in the absence of a good relationship. A good relationship is marked by depth (intimacy). The depth in question describes how much access and thereby influence the persons have in each other's lives. Different kinds of relationships have different depths that are appropriate to the nature of that relationship. In order for good relationships to develop, a person must be willing to have access and influence in another person's life, and be willing to grant access and be influenced by the other. This can be described as how much a person is 'in' the other. This is a beginning of a description of what communion looks like.<sup>100</sup>

In order for us to have the capacity to be in such relationships, we need to grow into certain kinds of persons; persons who tend to act with goodness, or in other words virtuous persons. To act with goodness towards another person is to act in such a way where the good of the other is the main concern. This requires not just an intention to benefit the other, but an understanding of what the good of the other person is. Not only do we need to have the good intentions and good understanding, but we also need to have the courage to act according to our good intentions and understanding, even though such an action might be costly. In other words, the kinds of persons who are able to be active in good relations are those who have love, wisdom and courage. To love is to want the good of the other, to be wise is to know what the good of the other is and to be courageous is to be willing to act for the goodness of the other, regardless of the consequences.

An evil action, one that makes a person guilty, is an action that is done with a selfish or careless intention. It is an action where an individual thinks of what she considers her good as more important than the good of those around her. This is what causes an individual to act in a way that violates or injures others. However, not any action that results in some kind of injury is an evil action. One can think of actions that cause some pain but are nonetheless still considered good. A person might accept being injured or hurt when it is clear that the pain is not done out of selfish intention. A person will allow a physician to injure them in order to heal them of a disease or ailment.

It is also possible for someone with a good intention to act in a way that is considered morally wrong because of ignorance. Such an action could cause pain, but it is an action that is in many cases excusable. It could however be inexcusable if the wronged person believes the ignorance that caused the wrongdoer to commit the wrong to be inexcusable. In this case the wrongdoer is guilty for their ignorance more than for the action itself, but they are guilty nevertheless. It is also important to note that it is not only the injury or hurt that mean an evil action has been committed. It is not always clear what impact an evil action has on others. The impact of

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<sup>100</sup> Volf (1996): 129.

some actions only appears after long periods of time. This is why sometimes some actions may be truly evil, even if we cannot immediately see their consequences.

Because of the kind of persons that we are (lacking in love, wisdom and courage), we are the kind of people who will inevitably wrong and injure one another. Unless an action such as forgiveness is possible, we have no hope for reconciliation. The paradox we find ourselves in is that we are creatures who find their ultimate good through being in certain kinds of relationships, but who at the same time find themselves acting in ways that are destructive to such relationships. Forgiveness and reconciliation describe the journey to restoration. Their existence is what makes community not only possible, but also sustainable.

Forgiveness does not seem to fit within a moral framework where the right thing to do is what is demanded by a list of moral laws. Even if one believes that there is such a thing as a list of moral laws, forgiveness seems to be an action that cannot be demanded of a person because of a specific law. In that sense it is not a moral duty. No one is considered immoral if they do not forgive. However, it is an action that shows that there is something beyond any moral law that is more significant than the law. That thing is to be in a certain kind of relationship with an other. To be in a 'good relationship' with an other is something that cannot be achieved merely through adherence to a law, but it is achieved through choosing to make space for the other within oneself and loving the other beyond the demands of any list of moral laws.

#### 4.1.2 What About Repentance?

*“Tom begins to cry. «I wish I could tell you why I did it, Thordis.» «Did what?» «Raped you» he says, quietly. I blink in disbelief that I heard him correctly. «What did you say?» «I raped you.» His words hang in the air, sharp as a razorblade. I want to reach my hand out and touch them. Having read his confession on paper does nothing to lessen the impact of hearing it spoken out loud like this, to my face. Suddenly, the dam within me bursts and I double over on the bed. «I’m sorry» he whispers. «Are you sure that’s how you want to put it?» I whisper back. «No, I meant forgive me. Forgive me for raping you, Thordis»”<sup>101</sup>*

It is common to think of repentance as a condition for forgiveness. Eve Garrard and David McNaughton explain that “many people think that forgiveness should only be offered to wrongdoers who repent of their actions.”<sup>102</sup> It is thought of as the role the wrongdoer is required to do in order to be forgiven. In Nussbaum’s account of transactional forgiveness she mentions confession and apology as typical aspects of the process of forgiveness. In her account this is seen

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<sup>101</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 119-120.

<sup>102</sup> Garrard and McNaughton (2014): 97.

as part of restoring the status of the wronged. It is a “continuation of anger’s payback wish by another name.”<sup>103</sup> Nussbaum’s analysis of this process is influenced by her view of anger and forgiveness in general. Since, for her, most anger is concerned with status, this form of forgiveness requires repentance because it is a way to fix the status injury.

Another way to think about this is that repentance is not a condition for the wronged to forgive, but it is a condition for the wrongdoer to receive forgiveness. It is a condition for reconciliation. It is closely related to forgiveness because reconciliation is the aim of forgiveness. However, as argued above, forgiveness does not necessarily have to achieve its aim and it is possible for a wrongdoer to be forgiven by the wronged, yet remain unforgiven because she has not repented. In this framework repentance is understood as an action that changes the wrongdoer in such a way as to make it possible and safe for the relationship between the wrongdoer and the wronged to be restored.

The essence of repentance is a change of heart (intention) and mind (ideas). To say that the wrongdoer has repented is to say that the intentions and ideas that were instrumental in her committing the wrong have been replaced by intentions and ideas that are compatible with and support the (re)building of a good relationship between the involved parties. Through the act of repentance the wrongdoer shows the wronged that the required change in intentions and ideas has taken place. This is normally done through a confession, an apology and a promise. The confession is the act of affirming the narrative about the wrong committed and shows that the wrongdoer is aware of the problematic intentions and ideas that were involved. In the apology the wrongdoer accepts responsibility for the action, but also acknowledges the wrongness of the action. The promise should reveal that the wrongdoer has replaced the problematic intentions and ideas with benevolent ones.

In repenting, the wrongdoer is in a place where she can receive forgiveness. Forgiveness implicitly means that the wronged sees the wrongdoer as guilty. There can be no forgiveness without this recognition of guilt. In the same way, a wrongdoer who has not acknowledged her wrong can never receive forgiveness for it. To be forgiven is not only meaningless, but also insulting, for a person who does not believe she is guilty. Repentance is the step the wrongdoer takes in order to begin releasing herself from the bond created by the wrong action she committed. As argued before, the completion of this release is conditioned by the wronged party releasing herself through forgiving. In other words, repentance is necessary for receiving forgiveness, but not for giving it. It is understandable that the wrongdoer’s repentance would make it easier for the wronged party to forgive, however, it is not necessary. This process emphasizes the fact that

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<sup>103</sup> Nussbaum (2016): 10-11.

forgiveness does not mean ignoring or condoning the wrong that has been done. In fact, forgiveness is only possible when the wrong is acknowledged as truly wrong. In the words of theologian Miroslav Volf: “To forgive means to accuse the offenders in the larger act of not counting their offenses against them. What does it mean to receive forgiveness, then? It means to receive *both* the accusation and the release from the debt.”<sup>104</sup>

## 4.2 Performative Conditions of the Actualization of Forgiveness

### 4.2.1 Truth and Narrative

*“As a result, I prepared myself for all kinds of outcomes: being told that I was misremembering things; being accused of lies; a downright denial of the whole ordeal. However nerve-racking and unappealing, all of these possibilities seemed more desirable to me than the alternative, which was to silence my newfound voice after it had made such a daring appearance. Given that I had nobody else’s footsteps to follow in, I decided to follow my heart. Despite all my careful predictions, the only outcome I didn’t prepare for was the one that I then got: a reply with a typed confession full of hot regret that disarmed me with its candor.”<sup>105</sup>*

Forgiveness is an action (and a process) that takes place in relation to the narrative created by the parties involved about a certain action. It is not the action itself that created the need for forgiveness, but it is the narrative that surrounds the action to explain and/or justify it. It is easy to imagine how changing the narrative will change a person’s evaluation of an action. Some aspects of the narrative are easier to see and agree upon than others. For example, an important part of any narrative of a wrong committed has to do with the intentions of the wrongdoer. Another element has to do with the background story and information the wrongdoer had which lead her to commit such an action. It is always possible that there are elements to the story that the wronged is not aware of. It is also possible that the wrongdoer has faulty or missing information about the wronged, which play a role in her deciding to act the way she did. Therefore, it is possible that the action itself might be interpreted very differently by both parties.

One possible situation in which the relevance of narrative becomes very clear is if both parties see themselves as wronged while being innocent. Each of them believes a narrative surrounding the action that results in their seeing themselves as innocent and the other as guilty. While it is easy to imagine how two people would both feel wronged by the other, it is more

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<sup>104</sup> Volf (2005): 153.

<sup>105</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 14.

challenging to imagine the same two people being innocent of wronging one another with regards to the same situation. If that is the case, it is very likely that these two individuals believe very different things about what happened and that they are probably missing or are wrong about some of the details in the narrative they hold about the situation.

The process of forgiveness is then strongly influenced by the narrative each party creates in order to make sense of the incident in question. So far, it has been assumed that the wrongdoer really did commit an evil action against the wronged, that the wronged has correctly identified the wrongdoer and correctly condemned the action and that both parties agree on the narrative surrounding the action. There are however multiple ways the case could be different. It is possible that the wronged be mistaken in her belief about what actually took place. This could be a mistake about the degree of the evil committed or a mistake about the fact that the evil has been committed. The mistaken belief about the degree of the evil should be corrected in order for the process of forgiveness to be appropriate. If it is the case that there was no evil action, the correction of the belief will totally remove any need for forgiveness (and any guilt on the side of the supposed wrongdoer).

It is possible that the wronged be mistaken in her belief about who committed the action. In this case the action has been truly committed, however the blame is placed on a wrong person. This case would result in reconciliation being very difficult, as the supposed wrongdoer would be unlikely to repent. However, it still may be possible that the wronged would forgive and thereby release herself from the bond. She will however have false beliefs about the supposed wrongdoer which will be destructive for the relationship. This problem would be solved by the truth of the innocence of the supposed wrongdoer being revealed. The real wrongdoer would be guilty and would remain unforgiven so long as they did not repent.

It is also possible for the wronged to be totally unaware of the evil that has been committed against her. She might be aware of the pain caused by the injury without being aware of the evil action that caused the injury. In which case, she will not be able to forgive, but she will in some sense not be aware of (and may be even unaffected) by the bond created by the evil action. This would mean that the wrongdoer is bound to the wronged by his guilt. It is in such a case that we see the significance of confession very clearly. It is only when the wrongdoer confesses that the wronged is aware of the bond that needs to be resolved. The bond exists even when the wronged is not aware of it, and thereby the relation between the wronged and wrongdoer is affected by the bond. This explains why the guilt of the wrongdoer will sometimes push her to confess to the person who she wronged, even when the wronged was not aware of the evil committed.

This makes clear the value of confession and confrontation. In confession, the wrongdoer reveals the narrative she holds about the action in question. In confrontation the wronged reveals to

the wrongdoer her narrative about what happened. Confrontation not only reveals the narrative to the wrongdoer, but it also requires a reaction from her. Confession and confrontation are elementary practices to establish and unify the narrative in order for forgiveness to be possible. The aim of establishing narrative is not merely to agree on any narrative, but it is to agree on what is actually a true description of what has taken place. It is meaningless to confess and confront when truth is not the aim. A confession that reveals a narrative that the wrongdoer does not believe to be true is no real confession. A confrontation that reveals a narrative that the wronged does not believe to be true is absurd. What might happen in confrontation and confession is that both or either parties come out with a more accurate narrative, a narrative closer to the truth.

Without either confrontation or confession it is possible for both parties to have different narratives about what happened because of which they are not aware of the existence of a bond, or believe that a bond exists where there is actually none. Either confession or confrontation is sufficient if the narrative is accepted by the other party. The content of confession, when accepted by the wronged, is sufficient to establish the narrative and so make the process of forgiveness possible. The content of confrontation, if accepted by the wrongdoer, is also sufficient to establish the necessary narrative. If the content of the confrontation is not accepted, then no reconciliation will be possible, the wronged can however still forgive (release herself from the bond, while the wrongdoer remains bound). When the content of confession is accepted and if the wrongdoer also apologizes and promises to act differently, the wronged is now in a position to continue further with the process leading to reconciliation.

#### 4.2.2 Language

*“In an attempt to give voice to my feelings, I wrote a disgustingly violent poem... It doesn't reflect how I feel today, not by a long shot, but it expresses some of the things I wanted to say to you when I was at my lowest.”<sup>106</sup>*

Taking this issue of narrative a step deeper, it is clear that there can be no narrative without language. In fact, there can be no narrative of the kind that makes forgiveness possible if we were not the kinds of beings whom Taylor describes as ‘self-interpreting animals.’ For Taylor, we are the kinds of beings we are because of our capacity for language. We are the kinds of beings who experience specific emotions that we could have never experienced had we no language. Any narrative we live within does not only tell of events, but it is a narrative that involves certain emotions about these events. Taylor writes:

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<sup>106</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 121-122.

“But then we must speak of man as a self-interpreting being, because this kind of interpretation is not an optional extra, but is an essential part of our existence. For our feelings always incorporate certain articulations; while just because they do so they open us on to a domain of imports which call for further articulation. The attempt to articulate further is potentially a life-time process. At each stage, what we feel is a function of what we have already articulated and evokes the puzzlement and perplexities which further understanding may unravel. But whether we want to take the challenge or not, whether we seek the truth or take refuge in illusion, our self-(mis)understandings shape what we feel. This is the sense in which man is a self-interpreting animal.”<sup>107</sup>

Taylor distinguishes between different kinds of emotions we experience. There are what he calls immediate emotions which are language independent, such as “what we experience in the dentist's chair, or when the fingernail is rubbed along the blackboard.”<sup>108</sup> These are emotions that we share with non-language animals. Two other types of emotions are ones that have what he calls ‘non-subject referring imports’ and those that have ‘subject-referring imports.’ Taylor defines ‘import’ as “a way in which something can be relevant or of importance to the desires or purposes or aspirations or feelings of a subject; or otherwise put, a property of something whereby it is a matter of non-indifference to a subject.”<sup>109</sup> He uses the term ‘subject-referring’ to describe “properties which can only exist in a world in which there are subjects of experience.”<sup>110</sup> The idea is that there are emotions that can only be made sense of when thinking of humans as subjects constituting their social reality and not merely as objects. These emotions cannot be described or explained in purely objectivistic terms.

To understand the difference between the latter two kinds of emotions, Taylor invites the reader to imagine attempting to explain the emotion of fear and of shame to Alpha Centaurans, “who as everybody knows are large gaseous clouds, somehow endowed with sapience, but unrecognizable by us as living beings, lacking what we think of as sense organs, lacking our notion of individuality (they agglomerate and redivide in all sorts of ways).”<sup>111</sup> We would be able to find ways to describe fear in objective terms; terms we have in common with the Alpha Centaurans. We could attempt to reduce fear to a recognition of some kind of danger, which a machine could be designed to imitate. This would be much more challenging with the emotion of shame. This is because “the term 'shameful' has no sense outside of a world in which there is a subject for whom things have certain (emotional) meanings. For the (linguistic) meaning of 'shameful' can only be

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<sup>107</sup> Taylor (1985): 65.

<sup>108</sup> Taylor (1985): 72.

<sup>109</sup> Taylor (1985): 48.

<sup>110</sup> Taylor (1985): 54.

<sup>111</sup> Taylor (1985): 46.

explicated with reference to a subject for whom these (emotional) meanings have weight, and if there were no such subjects, the term itself would lack sense.”<sup>112</sup>

Taylor sees emotions that are subject-referring and import-attributing as emotions that we are only capable of as language animals. This is because our articulation of emotions shapes and reshapes our emotions. “Language is constitutive of emotion” which means that for Taylor “experiencing an emotion essentially involves seeing that certain descriptions apply.”<sup>113</sup> Such descriptions, which are essential for something to have import, are not possible without language. Furthermore, these emotions involve what Taylor calls strong evaluation; that is evaluation that involves “discriminations of right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower.”<sup>114</sup> Taylor argues that language is necessary for any strong evaluation.<sup>115</sup>

These emotions seem to be the kind of emotions that are fundamental to any narrative that calls for forgiveness. Forgiveness is only an issue when there is a situation that involves emotions which result from things that are relevant and important to us, i.e. things that have import. We can only experience such emotions as people who use language. These emotions are also all emotions that involve strong evaluation. We experience resentment if we believe we have been treated *wrongly*. We experience guilt when we believe we have acted in a way that we *ought* not have acted in. We sense an obligation to treat people in certain ways and not in others. We find it *good* to be in certain kinds of relationships with others and we find it *bad* when relationships are of other kinds. Forgiveness is therefore only possible for beings like us, who have the capacity for language.

### 4.2.3 Are there Unforgivable People?

*“Unforgivable. The word rings in my ears. I’m going to [visit] a prison where innocent people’s rights were violated in the most gruesome ways. I’m going there with a man who raped me. And on my way, I cross paths with a man who thinks it’s unforgivable that another motorist nudged his scooter.”<sup>116</sup>*

The first common answer to the question of whether there are unforgivable people is that unrepentant wrongdoers are unforgivable. The understanding of forgiveness put forward in this paper however suggests that the wronged can forgive without the repentance of the wrongdoer.

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<sup>112</sup> Taylor (1985): 53.

<sup>113</sup> Taylor (1985): 71.

<sup>114</sup> Taylor (1989): 4.

<sup>115</sup> Taylor (1985): 71.

<sup>116</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 171.

Regarding the question of whether there are wrongs that are of such kind, that forgiving them would be morally wrong, I would like to suggest that there are no wrongs that make forgiveness morally wrong, but that there are wrongs that would make forgiveness, in the absence of any divine assistance, impossible. Forgiveness is an action and a process that not only has a strong moral dimension, but it is one that is almost always very costly. It is because of its cost that it can be at times humanly impossible.

So far this paper has been exploring the structure of forgiveness. This structure is constant to a great degree throughout the different possible cases of paradigmatic forgiveness. Forgiveness (of this kind) only exists when a person commits an evil action, thus becoming the wrongdoer, against another person, who becomes the wronged. The wronged is also the person who has the right to forgive. Forgiveness cannot be demanded of her, but she can also never be blamed for forgiving, that is, as long as the understanding of forgiveness is one that says that forgiveness makes reconciliation possible, aims at reconciliation, but is not sufficient for reconciliation to take place. It is conceivable that a wronged person who rushes into reconciliation without repentance is doing something that is morally questionable, or at least foolish. What remains to be answered are not questions regarding the structure or categories of the action and the process of forgiveness, but whether the degree and kind of the evil act can make it impossible for someone to forgive.

The idea of forgiveness being costly is based primarily on two observations. First, it is commonly believed that forgiveness is very difficult. Its difficulty is proportional to the non-numerical 'magnitude' of the evil act. This suggests that the effort and pain of forgiving stand in a relation of direct proportionality to the non-numerical 'magnitude' of the evil committed. Because there is such a relationship between the 'magnitude' of the wrong and the difficulty of forgiveness, it makes sense to think of forgiveness as having a variable cost. Obviously the question of the magnitude of evil has a very subjective element to it. It could vary depending on the depth of the relationship between the parties involved, the moral framework the wronged holds and what she believes is truly important in her life.

Secondly, forgiveness is often described as releasing someone from a debt and as a gift. The reason these descriptions have been used for so long in different languages and cultures, is probably because they help us represent to ourselves what it means to forgive. The language of debt suggests that by forgiving, the wronged is choosing to forgo receiving that which she rightfully demands. As argued earlier, to overcome resentment is to decide to bear the weight of the wrong committed against oneself and to not demand it from the wrongdoer. To forgive a debt, is to bear the weight of that debt oneself. The language of forgiveness being a gift also implicitly says that it is costly. And depending on the size of the gift, it will cost more or less. The difference between the analogies and the reality of forgiveness is that it is easy to understand and to determine the cost of forgiving a debt

or of giving a gift, while with forgiveness the cost is very difficult to quantify. The cost could be living without things or people that were very important in a person's life. It could be that the wronged is accepting that her life will never be the same. It also could be her accepting that, for perhaps an indefinite period of time, she will live with various kinds of suffering. Depending on the cost, forgiveness could be the greatest gift a person has given in her life. Heironymi expresses this idea beautifully:

“any 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 or guilt. So 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. (In some cases forgiveness can be uncomfortably intimate: You must allow me to creatively incorporate the scars that bear your fingerprints into the permanent fabric of my life, and trust that I can do so.)”<sup>117</sup>

This also shows why forgiveness is an act of love. It is choosing to bear a price in order to release someone else of it. In fact, it is in order to release the one who has committed the wrong. It is an act of sacrifice done for someone who is very easily seen as an enemy. This is why we are more willing to forgive someone who we deeply love, as long as we love them enough to bear the cost of forgiveness. A parent is many times willing to forgive their child for very costly mistakes. They are willing to endure and bear a lot of pain in order to release their child from any debt they may owe them. In fact, many times they don't even consider it as a debt, because the default position is to forgive no matter how costly. It may be so because the relationship between parents and children is inherently asymmetrical. Parents are expecting to pay high costs for the sake of their children while expecting very little back. The readiness of most parents to forgive thus reveals something of the nature of forgiveness. Many people find that they do not have the power to love the other in such a way. They find it practically impossible to forgive and to release the wrongdoer from their debt.

When the wronged doesn't forgive, she continues on demanding the price of the wrong committed against her from the wrongdoer. She does not accept that she is paying a price for an action she did not decide to take and one that she does not deserve to be the recipient of. It makes sense to think that the wrongdoer should be the one paying. The reality, however, is that sometimes the wrongdoer will never be able to pay in a way that would restore the wronged. The effect of the evil action could be of such a kind that is irreversible. In that case, the debt is permanent. This may

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<sup>117</sup> Hieronymi (2001): 550-551.

result in the wronged wanting the wrongdoer to suffer, even if it will not lead to any restoration. At least it is an acknowledgment that what the wronged is forced to pay for is not her fault and that the other person is also paying a price.

Furthermore, to not forgive could mean that the wronged is holding on to the belief that one day the wrongdoer will be made to pay, and that the wrongdoer's payment will somehow restore the wronged. Even though this belief is many times clearly irrational and unrealistic, it is still frequently very deeply held on to despite its irrationality. There are, however, other beliefs that make such a belief more plausible. For example, the belief in the existence of an omnipotent and good God can lead a person to expect that one day this God will hold the wrongdoer to account and will restore the wronged. It could be a belief that leads people to hold on to their resentment. The paradox that exists is that for many people this omnipotent and good God is one who expects them to forgive others, even their enemies.

## **5. Conclusion**

This paper has provided a description of what forgiveness is through the 'bond model,' and what forgiveness does through the 'economic model.' It has argued that it is the nature of forgiveness to aim at reconciliation, even though it does not always achieve it. It has also argued that it is possible for a wrongdoer to be forgiven by the wronged, while remaining unable to receive this forgiveness because she has not repented. In such a case the wrongdoer remains guilty, while the wronged is in the process of releasing herself from the bond that binds her to the wrongdoer by choosing to release the wrongdoer from the debt she owes her.

The paper has argued that forgiveness is understood as a good action within a framework that considers being in good relationships as the *sommum bonum* of an agent. This reveals the importance of forgiveness as the action and the process that can restore such relationships once they have been damaged through evil actions. This paper has also argued that for forgiveness to be at all possible, agents have to be of such a kind as to have the capacity for language. This is also clear as the process of forgiveness is strongly affected by narrative and truth. Finally, this paper argued that forgiveness is always costly for the wronged and that there are wrongs that seem to be unforgivable because of the 'magnitude' of the wrong. This, However, may not be the case if, as the Christian narrative suggests, it is true that divine assistance is available and accessible.

Much remains to be said about forgiveness. Only one simple case of forgiveness has been discussed here. It is also important to note that understanding forgiveness may be helpful, but it by no means makes it easier to forgive. The difficulty of the action and of the process is not due to the confusion surrounding them, but in the most part due to the nature of the agents involved, the nature

of wrongdoing and the nature of the relationships in question. Nevertheless, clearing up the confusion removes an extra layer of difficulty and enables better articulation and so better communication about forgiveness. This is by no means an insignificant achievement.

*“His eyes open wide. «Oh my God, did you just say that?» he gasps. Before I know it, his arms wrap around me and sweep me tight up against him like a ragdoll. I hug him back, surprised by his strong reaction when the sobs tear through his throat. His crying shakes my body, and I hear myself whisper into his ear: «It’s over. I forgive you. It’s over.» We embrace for a long while before he lets go of me, wipes a tear from his cheek, and says: «I accept your forgiveness.»”<sup>118</sup>*

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<sup>118</sup> Elva and Stranger (2017): 261-262.

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All Biblical quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) translation