FORGIVENESS AND ITS REASON

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Abstract

Forgiveness might be said to involve a certain kind of intellectual suffering: we forgive, and are forgiven, whilst a great many questions remain undecided, and while it is far from obvious that they are unimportant. This thesis explores the way in which the difficulties in submitting forgiveness to thought may be significant. Contemporary accounts of forgiveness are put into creative dialogue with the work of Simone Weil, Rene Girard and Jacques Derrida in an attempt to assess different forms of approach to the resistance forgiveness offers to thought. Utilising the work of Simone Weil in particular, and through a creative interpretation of some of the gospel sayings from which the modern notion of forgiveness originates, the argument is made that forgiveness can be seen to involve a process of transformation of understanding that is akin to spirituality of death and resurrection. On this account, forgiveness is paradoxical and resistant to thought not because it involves a simple suspension of, or opposition to reasoned forms of judgment, but because it involves a way of holding together attitudes, concerns and insights that do not easily cohere. As such it calls for a 'posture' that cultivates and waits with this tension, rather than a theory that allows the meaning and goodness of forgiveness to appear unambiguously. In this sense forgiveness is an expression of a love that both hopes all things and bears all things; a way of accepting the worst whilst desiring the best.

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Introduction

Forgiveness and its reason

I

The teachings attributed to Jesus of Nazareth concerning forgiveness do not at first glance form a harmonious whole.

Firstly, it seems that divine forgiveness hovers between being the ground of human giving and forgiving and a response to it. The command to forgive is associated with the sun that rises on the evil and the good, and the love of enemies through which one becomes a child of the Father, perfect with his perfection.[1] This perfection appears indifferent to human assessments of worth, or worthiness in general; it is a giving that needs no prior condition. Nevertheless, this unreserved giving does in turn give rise to response, such that the measure with which one gives is an indication of how one has received: '[t]herefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.'[2] Slightly different again is the sense that forgiveness is given in response to faith. The son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins, but nevertheless it is faith in this authority that enables forgiveness to be given with the same ease that a lame man is made to walk.[3] But the relationship between divine and human forgiveness is also, somehow, a conditional one: 'if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'[4] God forgives us as we forgive those who sin against us; we forgive those who sin against us so that God will forgive us.

Secondly, and perhaps more problematically, is the relation of forgiveness to human judgement. Forgiveness is commanded alongside a withdrawal from judgement and fault finding, and is part of the reciprocal scheme in which one receives according to the measure one has given: 'do not judge, and you will not be judged'. As a result, it is recommended that one concentrate on the speck in one's own eye, not the plank in

[1]Matthew 5: 43 - 48.

[2]Luke 7: 47 - 49.

[3]Mark 2: 5 - 10; Matthew 9: 2 - 6; Luke 5: 17 - 26.

[4]Matt 6: 12, 15.

another's.[5] Yet it is also placed alongside the description of a careful process for addressing the wrongdoings of others, and if necessary expelling those who do not respond with repentance[6] The giving or withholding of forgiveness is itself treated as a way of enacting judgement, such that the act of human forgiveness binds and releases not just on earth, but in heaven.[7] More than this, forgiveness may also become a new *criterion* for judgement, and as such necessarily comes with an element of threat. Those who do not pass on to others the forgiveness they have received are punished all the more severely; it is a gift that heightens the logic of retribution when it is abused.[8]

The features listed above may each contain seeds of insight to be developed, but they do not at first glance sit harmoniously together. Forgiveness, then, is not just difficult to practice, it is difficult to think: it offers resistance to thought. How can forgiveness be pronounced as a sign of authority, freedom and gratuity, and yet also remain subject to certain conditions or requirements, which mean that it is received from God almost automatically when given to others? How are we to respond to the gift of divine forgiveness, when such forgiveness is itself conditional upon our own response to it - how can forgiveness be genuinely offered when it is accompanied by a threat?[9] How can forgiveness be understood as a forgoing of judgement, a loosening of categories of judgement, and at the same time as itself a basis for judgement? How can forgiveness involve a willingness to act outside of reciprocal expectations as a sign of the indiscriminate love of the Father, and itself be the basis for a rule of forgiveness? There are various ways of bringing order to this picture. Perhaps the key is to consider the qualitative difference between the forgiveness given by God and the forgiveness given to each other, and to describe the relationship between the two; or perhaps greater sense can be made if one distinguishes between forgiveness between two individuals and the sterner, but still forgiving, response of a community to the wrongdoing of one of its members. More critically, the task may be to distinguish between material that authentically reflects words spoken by Jesus and material that reflects the needs of the early church, which may itself have struggled to outwork the more radical, original

[5]Matthew 7:1 - 5; Luke 6: 37 - 38, 41 - 42.

[6]Matthew 18: 15 – 20; Luke 17: 3 - 4

[7]Matthew 18: 18.

[8]Matthew 18: 23 – 35.

[9]The parable of the unmerciful servant as recorded by Matthew most forcefully demonstrates this difficulty. Matt 18: 21 - 35.

command, or been perplexed by its openness to abuse.

It might be thought that this 'resistance to thought' is simply due to the fact that Jesus is not a philosopher and the gospels are not ethics manuals; it is hardly surprising, then, that there is no 'theory of forgiveness' to be found in them. In the gospels, forgiveness is a command to be obeyed, rather than a principle to be understood. But even in its simplest and perhaps earliest forms there is already the hint of reason: 'forgive, and you will be forgiven';[10] 'forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses';[11] 'forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors'; 'if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.'[12] Forgive *and*..., forgive *so that*..., forgive *as*..., forgive *or*... ; each of these words open up lines of reflection which are difficult *not* to follow, but equally difficult to tie together.

Perhaps, then, the easiest place to begin is with this difficulty. Forgiveness is most fascinating and most problematic when it is most difficult. It is the prospect of the survivor of genocide forgiving those that pursued her with machetes every day for a month that perplexes or outrages the intellect, rather than the 'forgiveness' given and received daily for a host of mundane mistakes or misunderstandings. It is in the extreme cases that we wonder whether this word can have any meaning, and if it does, whether it points to something that can be embraced alongside justice, and if it can, whether it will actually prove possible for humans in practice. In the extreme cases, it is not obvious that 'forgiveness' is meaningful, just, or possible, let alone desirable. And it appears that the gospel material deliberately brings the difficulty of forgiveness to the fore:

> Then Peter came and said to him, "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."[13]
>
> Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and

[10]Luke 6: 37b

[11]Mark 11: 25b

[12]Matt 6: 12, 15.

[13]Matthew 18: 21 - 22 (NRSV). All subsequent biblical quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.

> says, “I repent”, you must forgive. The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith!’ [14]

More generally, the message preached by Jesus seems to have been self-consciously difficult. Perhaps the most notable saying that forces a confrontation with this difficulty is the following:

> For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.[15]

These sayings concern losing and saving: an attempt to save life that leads to, or produces, loss; a losing of life that leads to, or produces, its ultimate saving. The invitation to follow Christ and be part of the kingdom of God is an invitation to lose oneself and save oneself, and since forgiveness is a key component of life in the kingdom, we might well ask: what is the loss that one embraces when one forgives, and what is the life that this loss somehow leads to, or becomes? Or, to put a slightly different spin on things: what is it that cannot be kept if one wants the life that forgiveness promises? And how does the loss become gain? Moreover, since this saying is closely linked with the summons to 'take up one's cross', and so cannot be read without the narrative of death and resurrection in the background; how is forgiveness akin to dying, and how is it akin to coming alive - how is it death, and how is it birth?

Despite the appearance of simplicity, the saying above is also notable for the difficulty one finds in pinning down its meaning. It articulates a reversal, and the symmetry involved seems to suggest some kind of principle; if those who want to save their lives lose them, then perhaps one would expect that those who lose their lives will save them. But if there is a hint of intelligibility here it is very difficult to say exactly what it is. Perhaps there is some kind of exchange: one exchanges rights to one's own life in return for the fuller life of the kingdom, just as Paul considered whatever had appeared to be gain to be a loss compared to surpassing greatness of knowing Christ. Or perhaps the saying suggests that most attempts to save one's life are really a form of destroying life, so that when one gives up this attempt and allows one's life to be lost, one finds oneself more alive than ever. Perhaps it expresses a new understanding of

[14]Luke 17: 3 – 5b.

[15]Luke 9: 24. This saying is notable for appearing in slightly different forms five times in the synoptic gospels. See Mattt 10:39, 16:25, Mark 8:36, Luke 17:33, plus the related saying in John 12:25.

what it is to really live, so that what one thought of as 'life' now appears to be a form of dying, and what one thought of as loss now appears to be a kind of gain. But however much one may see hints of a profound and confrontational wisdom here, the element of promise cannot be suppressed, and this element interferes with the attempt to discern a new principle. These sayings present a challenge and invite a risk - the 'for my sake' highlights the sense that these sayings concern a response to Jesus' announcement of the coming kingdom which interrupts history, rather than simply a hidden wisdom. Put differently, it appears that whatever new understanding of life is given in these words is not given apart from a specific call and challenge, it does not 'detach' very easily from the narrative. If what is expressed is primarily warning and promise, rather than a new wisdom or principle, then trust becomes the key response, as opposed to an upheaval of understanding. It is not that one needs to re-think what 'life' is, what it means to save or lose it, but rather that one is called to entrust one's life to another, on the basis of promise.

These two interpretations - principle and promise - each have something to recommend them. The discernment of a principle in the save-lose/lose-save formula seems to goes along with the sense that the kingdom involves a profound and socially subversive re-evaluation. The invitation to follow is an invitation to see differently, so that one's ordinary ways of perceiving wealth, power and wisdom are transformed; tax-collectors and sinners are entering ahead of the righteous because the righteous cannot bear this re-evaluation, having invested too heavily in their own. But equally, there is a danger here, most notably perceived by Nietzsche. This saying is susceptible of a reading that initiates a life-denying process of reversal and nourishes a resentment towards all that really *lives*: loss is gain, weakness is strength and death is life; this might be a revenge against life of the highest order. Perhaps the temptation to discern an upside-down ethic should be refused, then, in favour of promise. To interpret this formula more in terms of trust - and also warning - means not that one possess a new form of wisdom, through which one may plot one's own way to fulfilment and life, but rather that one trusts another, and remains in a posture able to receive. The link between the losing of life, and a deeper, or delayed, saving of life is not itself given, only hinted at. More importantly, on this reading, one is not being asked to deny one's desire for life, which in any case would be self-refuting (one cannot be commanded to abandon concern for one's life on the grounds that such abandonment is ultimately in one's best interests...). But then, one might ask whether this produces a deferral of

judgement, and a shifting of responsibility, so that as long as one is promised that certain actions lead, ultimately, to a pay-off, one will be willing to obey, however counter-intuitive it sounds? The risk here is of a 'magical positivity',[16] which cannot be taken on alongside another command: 'judge for yourselves what is right.'[17]

Correspondingly, we can say that a similar ambiguity surrounds the invitation or command to forgive. There are a number of ways of understanding forgiveness as a loss, or a willingness to lose. Perhaps one gives up one's rights to take revenge or receive compensation, that is, to some kind payment exacted from a wrongdoer. In this case one would think of forgiveness as intimately related to the possibility of withholding punishment, whether retributive or reparative. But forgiveness may also be construed as a change of one's emotional state, so that when one forgives, one gives up (or commits to giving up) resentment felt towards another. And giving up resentment might be experienced as a difficult loss, because resentment can seem necessary as a protective reassertion of one's dignity in the face of being humiliated. Or resentment might be difficult to give up because it feels good; the rather ambiguous pleasure that accompanies the recall of a familiar grievance after a while. Forgiveness could also be understood as a giving up of one's hold on a particular memory, or the attempt to bring some kind of sense to past suffering. The anger I may feel towards someone who has deeply wronged me can be understood not only as the reassertion of dignity in the face of humiliation, but also as the pain of senselessness – to have suffered for no reason leaves me searching for significance. Insofar as one's identity is gained through the continual recollection of one's past, and the self is only whole through a narrative synthesis of time, this search can be thought of as an attempt to 'save' one's life. To forgive, then, might be to give up this search; to let the past remain stubbornly unexplained, and to accept its past-ness is in some sense to lose a part of oneself - to allow its significance to remain a mystery.

It is not difficult, either, to see how the act of forgiveness could be understood as gain of some kind. Perhaps acceptance brings with it increased psychological wholeness and peace, and frees the victim from their fascinated hatred of their violator. People may become tied to one particular event, so that through endless rehearsal of their victim-hood they are defined and shaped by this particular wrong; either through a

[16]This phrase appears in one of John Milbank's essays, however I have been unable to track it down.

[17]See Luke 12: 14, 57.

continued sense of diminishment that the act communicated, or through the never-completed task of revenge. Forgiveness may give the possibility of a future no longer determined by this episode; one gains a life one would otherwise have been unable to live. To forgive involves a particular kind of initiative or power, and to be forgiven involves a particular kind of humility; roles are reversed. This may bring with it a sense of restored dignity for the victim, because in any scene of forgiveness, the power lies with them: in order to be forgiven, I must entrust a particular episode of my life to my victim, so that there is an uncomfortable intimacy between us, as Pamela Hieronymi memorably describes: '[y]ou 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.'[18] From the other side, the humility of apology is also an instance of a kind of losing of one's life: 'we stand unarmed and exposed, relying, in a manner of speaking on our moral nakedness to set things right'.[19] Although this nakedness may be immensely difficult, it may also be a tremendous relief, so that once the attempt to live the life of the innocent is given up, one can much more happily live the life of the forgiven. Finally, it may be that through forgiveness damaged relationships are opened to restoration, and insofar as one's life is always a matter of one's connection with others, if one is prepared to lose a life of protected isolation, one is open to gain a richer life of vulnerable connectedness.

In each of these cases, the form of life that is given up, or lost, in forgiveness would have a slightly different relation to the life that is saved, or gained. If in forgiving one gives up resentment that one has nourished for years, and which has, without one knowing, involved a kind of toxic repetition of an increasingly biased and self-centred narrative, then it is not difficult to see how this loss is really a gain. It may be felt as a loss of something essential at the time, but can be very quickly understood to have been a release; one may even feel that one has been saved from the hell of a particularly bitter and paralysing resentment. In fact, some would want to say that one is morally bound to give up this kind of bitterness, so that it might be hard to see such forgiveness as a loss in any meaningful sense, since one only gives up something one never had any business keeping. In other words, the difficulty that may be faced by someone who

[18]Pamela Hieronymi, 'Articulating an uncompromising forgiveness', in *Philosophy and phenomenological research*, Vol. 62, No. 3, pp. 529 - 555.

[19]Nicolas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: A sociology of apology and reconciliation*, p. 18.

forgives will be very easy to justify - everyone is clearly better off – and so it will not be very difficult to recommend forgiveness (not at all like recommending that someone give up their life, or take up their cross). Forgiveness could simply be recommended as a form of human flourishing; once one understands that it is good, and how, it no longer appears as a sacrifice.

However, if forgiveness is understood simply as the giving up of unwarranted or excessive resentment, and therefore as only *apparently* a loss, this forgiveness may not really have much of a grip on the extreme cases. Resentment may well be poisonous, but it could still be a far better poison than the despairing numbness that threatens the survivor in their inner world. Where there have been considered, deliberate attempts to eliminate life, resentment might be understood as the feeling of life painfully reasserting itself, a surge of defiant moral protest against the torturers and all that they stood for, as Jean Amery, 'self-confessed man of resentment' suggests.[20] Perhaps, as for Amery, to give up resentment may be to succumb retrospectively to the wishes of the executioners, or to those of a society rather too hasty to forget and move on. And in this case, perhaps it is better to remain warped by resentment than to be non-resentfully 'straight'.[21] In this case, to preach forgiveness might very well seem like an invitation to lose one's *life* - one's energy, dignity and strength - not simply to lose a diminished form of life dominated by petty and self-obsessed grievances. But this is the ambiguity of the sayings noted above: the life that is promised remains precisely that - promised. When understood more in these terms - emphasising the 'for my sake' - the experience of loss may remain an experience of loss without obvious recuperation (a loss that apparently some felt the need to remind Jesus of: 'Lord, we have left everything to follow you!'). Since it is not obvious that resentment is simply a mistake, or a diminishing poison to be rid of, it is not obvious that the saving is a *result* of the losing.

All of the above is to say that as the gospels present it, there is an intelligibility associated with forgiveness, but it is suggested rather than fully given. Forgiveness necessarily involves thought, in that it involves considerations of justice, agency, responsibility, prudence, and safety. One cannot forgive thoughtlessly. And so

[20]See Jean Amery, 'Resentments' in *At the minds limits: contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities*, tr. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp.63 – 78. Chapter one deals with the question of resentment in more depth.

[21]See Amery, 'Resentments', p. 68.

forgiveness might be said to involve a certain kind of intellectual suffering; we forgive, and are forgiven, whilst a great many questions remain in the air, and while it is far from obvious that they are unimportant. To push this further, it might be said that the burden of this unresolved logic is a part of the difficulty that accompanies those who wish to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The parable of the unforgiving servant provides a greater puzzle:

> For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything." And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow-slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, "Pay what you owe." Then his fellow-slave fell down and pleaded with him, "Have patience with me, and I will pay you." But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he should pay the debt. When his fellow-slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, "You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not have had mercy on your fellow-slave, as I had mercy on you?" And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.[22]

The parable draws out the hearers' sense of justice; the failure to pass on the mercy that one has received is felt to be more contemptible than any initial state of debt, no matter how severe.[23] The heavenly Father is resolutely unmerciful in response to such a lack of mercy. This exemplifies the tension within the Matthean material on forgiveness. On the one hand, the perfection that bears the closest resemblance to the perfection of the Father is an indiscriminate love of friend and enemy, an uncalculated giving. Debts are simply cancelled with no regard to the consequences of such suspensions of propriety. On the other hand, it is forgiveness itself which is, finally, most subject to judgement; to refuse to forgive when one has been forgiven is to invite the most severe judgement. The obvious question that this provokes is of whether the king ever really

[22] Matthew 18: 21 – 35.

[23] My discussion of this passage draws on Ulrich Luz's excellent commentary on Matthew 18. See Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 8 – 20: a commentary*, tr. James E. Crouch, ed. Helmut Koester (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

released his servant from debt in the first place, since the story ends with the servant being tortured until he pays. Does God ever actually forgive, when previously forgiven sins can still be punished if forgiveness does not issue in the appropriate response? And how can the exhortation to forgive take the form of a threat, when the forgiveness it exhorts is to be 'from your heart'? The suspicion here is that this holds in place a scheme it purports to overcome. Perhaps the king forgives the debt so that he can see what the slave *really* deserves, and then punishes him accordingly, or perhaps the original reckoning is confirmed as just by means of a detour through mercy - we are shown that it was always right that the slave be sold, since he was such an ungrateful, unforgiving wretch. But equally, there may be something more profound here. Since one will always be concerned with justice (with equality, appropriate measure and fair treatment in comparison to others), if there is to be forgiveness, it is these concerns that must be transformed. To make forgiveness the criteria for judgement may then be a way of ensuring that one's sense of justice actually comes into contact with the subversive nature of grace; otherwise one may be left with adult rationality and child-like innocence in separate compartments, never interacting or challenging each other.[24] In other words, it may be a way of ensuring that one contemplate justice and forgiveness together, in the same way that through Christ one might contemplate humanity and divinity in the same place at the same time, and hope that one's notions of each are transformed in the process.

Something similar seems to be true, also, of the save-lose/lose-save sayings discussed above. One of the interesting features of these sayings is the way in which the key terms – save, lose, life – do not have a fixed sense. In fact, part of the effect of the saying seems to be the way in one's sense of what is meant by each is altered by the way they are related. The saying attracts interest because of the intense concern one has for one's life - to find it, keep it, or save it. It is because one cares so much for one's life, because it would profit one nothing if one were to gain the whole world but lose one's life, that one is prepared to consider the paradoxical suggestion put forward, which suggests that one leave hold of one's life. The saying produces a reconsideration of what is meant by 'life'.

One of the central problems that arises in discussion of forgiveness is of how to

[24]The link between the sayings on 'little ones' and the imperative to forgive repeatedly is extremely suggestive. Perhaps the innocence that one must protect from stumbling is the trust that takes each subsequent 'I repent' seriously, rather than becoming unforgiving simply through weary cynicism.

avoid describing forgiveness in such a way that it either undoes the logic through which is meaningful at all, or in a such a way that it fixes in place, or even intensifies that logic (so that forgiveness is strictly governed by a prior notion of justice, or else conceptually dependent upon a notion of justice which it then disowns). Either way, one does not progress very far from where one already was. If forgiveness so undoes the concepts of judgement, condemnation, punishment, etc., that these ideas are no longer solid enough for forgiveness to appear in reference to them, or, on the contrary if forgiveness is really just a temporary detour leading back to or an unchanged moral landscape, then it is hard to see how or the idea is necessary, or why it is powerful.

In this thesis I show how forgiveness can be thought through more richly and deeply as being in a certain sense an ascent or transformation; it is not simply that certain ideas are exchanged for others, or that the same ideas are returned to, but that everything is changed. And that this ascent is best thought in terms of descent: death and resurrection. Put theologically, the point might be that forgiveness is theosis-as-cruciformity. To forgive, and to think forgivingly, involves a certain 'dying'; of one's judgement, one's expectations, one's sense of prudence and sufficient reason: 'those who wish to keep their justice will lose it, and those who lose their justice for my sake will save it.' But forgiveness is also in some sense resurrection; one who has forgiven, and been forgiven, sees differently. In other words, the concept of forgiveness can be thought of as part of a spirituality of death and resurrection.

I show that part of what this means is a certain ambiguity, a necessary impurity, in the language of forgiveness - it is perpetually unresolved both as to what it is, and why it is what it is. If forgiveness is, in a sense, an invitation to 'die' to certain ways of being – the desire to judge, label or confer a simple, final description another of person, the desire to definitively prevent one's own exploitation - then it is also an invitation to learn how to judge, how to construe the significance of the past, how to respond to the question 'what now?' that all suffering or injustice asks. What this also means is that someone trying to follow the teaching on forgiveness can expect to be subject to criticism coming from two directions. Firstly, forgiveness can be accused of being irresponsible, unjust, hollow, and so on; in other words, too forgiving. Secondly, forgiveness can be accused of being not forgiving enough: one only forgives those who seem to deserve it, when it poses little risk. Part of what I want to claim is that attempts to safeguard forgiveness from these or similar criticisms tend to lose the force and significance of the idea, so that in a certain sense, *forgiveness must remain defenceless*,

open to accusation, just as the LORD looks kindly only upon Job, his accuser. And so the question of how to recommend forgiveness becomes crucial, and at this point my Christian bias is most obvious: however illuminating intellectual reflection may be, I think that forgiveness can only really be held up as a good when held up by those who have undergone the suffering of forgiveness, whether through the pain of impotent remorse or the pain of the love of one's enemies.

II

This thesis is situated in relation to a number of different currents of thinking that together make up the contemporary interest in forgiveness. Firstly, over the past three decades a collection of articles and books treating forgiveness as an explicit topic has been slowly accumulating within Anglophone moral philosophy. This includes analytic examinations of the logical coherence of the concept,[25] descriptions of forgiveness as a speech act,[26] as well as treatments influenced by the resurgence of interest in 'virtue ethics'.[27] Closely related to this is a recent surge of interest in the role of forgiveness in public life, prompted to some extent by the prominence of the language of forgiveness in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. The work of Jeffrey Murphy, a philosopher of law, both independently and alongside Jean Hampton, a political philosopher, drew attention to the way in which our understanding of forgiveness and the retributive emotions is a vital part of the understanding of social and political life, and a number of articles and books express a growing interest in forgiveness, not just as an intriguing topic at the margins of moral philosophy, but as a crucial point at which moral, political, social and religious concerns intersect, and so as a subject of concern for 'public intellectuals'.[28] In addition to these trends is the

[25]Notable examples include Aurel Kolnai, ''Forgiveness' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 1973-4* vol. 74, P. Twambly, 'Mercy and forgiveness' in *Analysis*, vol. 36, 1976, and Pamela Hieronymi, 'Articulating an uncompromising forgiveness' in *Philosophy and phenomenological research*, vol. 62, no. 3, 2001.

[26]See Joram Haber, *Forgiveness* (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1991).

[27]Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: a philosophical exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Tara Smith, 'Tolerance and forgiveness: virtues or vices?' in *Journal of applied philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1997.

[28]Examples of treatments of forgiveness as a point of intersection, all of which intend to be fairly accessible, include Jeffrey Murphy's *Getting even: forgiveness and its limits* (Oxford: Oxford

attention given to the subject by Jacques Derrida in two essays published towards the end of his life, as part of his exploration of themes such as gift, justice and responsibility. Because of Derrida's prominence, and the controversial nature of his work, these two relatively short essays have proved to be an essential part of the surge of interest in forgiveness, both as a source of new ways of approaching the subject, and as a perspective to be countered. These essays have also been an important part of attempts to articulate an 'ethics of deconstruction', and have provided further stimulus for theological engagement with deconstruction. Alongside each of these currents runs an increased theological focus upon forgiveness, as a number of theologians have taken the increased interest in forgiveness and related issues as an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and coherence of theology. Whether it is through interaction - with economics,[29] psychology,[30] reconciliation and conflict resolution,[31] - or as a theological topic in its own right,[32] the subject of forgiveness has become one way in which theology might play an active part in public discourse. As such, it is one part of a 'religious turn' in which active theological engagement with issues of public concern has become more widespread. More than this, new publications are emerging all the time. This year saw the publication of Jill Scott's *The poetics of forgiveness: cultural responses to loss and wrongdoing*, which engages with contemporary questions of forgiveness within literary studies, and as I write, David Konstan's account *Before forgiveness: the origins of a moral idea*, which focuses on classical antiquity, is being published.

This thesis attempts to explore some of the central philosophical and theological problems that lie at the heart of this resurgence indirectly. The intent is to contribute to

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University Press, 2003), Trudy Govier's, *Forgiveness and revenge* (London: Routledge, 2002), Richard Holloway's *On forgiveness* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002) and Avishai Margalit's *The ethics of memory* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002).

[29]Dan Bell, 'Forgiveness exceeding economy' in *Studies in Christian ethics* 20.3, 2007.

[30]*Forgiveness in context*, ed. Fraser Watts and Liz Gulliford (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004).

[31] *Forgiveness and reconciliation: religion, public policy and conflict transformation*, ed. Raymond Helmick and Rodney L. Petersen (Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 2001).

[32]Gregory Jones, *Embodying forgiveness: a theological analysis* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995); Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and embrace: a theological exploration of identity, otherness and reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), and Anthony Bash, *Forgiveness and Christian ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

the discussion not through defending one particular approach, or modifying an existing formulation, but by exploring a new connection: between the conceptual difficulty involved in these kinds of discussions, and the sense that forgiveness might involve a deep change in one's perspective. In theological terms, this can be understood as an exploration of the nature of Christian learning, and as already indicated, this can be understood as a meditation on the logic of the death and resurrection implied in the saying discussed above. Nevertheless, I am also making a particular claim that pertains to any attempt to talk about the subject. I argue that forgiveness cannot be affirmed straightforwardly, or put differently, that the goodness of forgiveness cannot appear without ambiguity. Since this argument is formed through theological reflection, this aspect of the thesis could be understood as a theological critique of secular attempts to make forgiveness intelligible, but since I do not try and show that theological accounts can avoid this same difficulty (although I do think the difficulty can take on a different significance), I would rather frame what follows as an extended comment on what seems to happen when one talks about forgiveness, from a theological perspective.

Most discussions of forgiveness acknowledge that there is something difficult about defining it or evaluating it, and broadly speaking, three approaches to this difficulty can be seen. First, a fairly common sense approach which assumes that careful distinctions, measured assessment and good examples will either remove or greatly reduce these difficulties. Second, an approach emerging from Vladimir Jankelevitch and Jacques Derrida suggests that an embrace, or indeed, heightening, of these tensions, gives access to the heart of the subject. Finally, theological approaches that suggest, one way or another, that forgiveness belongs with Christianity, so that the conceptual tensions find a place alongside the paradoxes that are embedded in Christian belief, or the practices that make up Christian life. The thesis attempts to stage an encounter between these currents of thought and the concerns they express. In this sense the method is closely connected to the argument, since what I am claiming is that forgiveness has something to do with dwelling in tension, with holding together competing insights, and with a willingness to be judged. If forgiveness has something to do with the experience of conflict between valid claims to attention, and between different concerns, as I argue it does, then it is appropriate that the method should involve an attempt to experience something similar. The sense that the argument has as much to do with competing concerns as it does with competing claims relates to another characteristic of the thesis: on the whole I have avoided giving surveys of a wide range of arguments, and instead

focused on the texture of individual accounts, so as to focus upon the way that different imperatives are felt within the formation of an argument or position, or put differently, the way that the definition is shaped by the defence of forgiveness.

I have also chosen to focus on thinkers who are particularly concerned with paradox or *aporia*; hence the space given to Simone Weil and Jacques Derrida, who in very different ways are concerned with what we might call the suffering of thought. Both contribute to an understanding of forgiveness specifically, but at the same time, my examination of them is to do with how thought, and in particular what I have called the suffering of thought, is related to ethical, or spiritual life. In this sense I am not simply examining their notions of forgiveness, but also their understanding of the nature of ethical thought.

The purpose of the first chapter is to lay out the problems that will be considered throughout. If forgiveness, as I will argue, involves a mingling of perspectives, and the presence of conflicting imperatives, this can be brought out most clearly through a comparison between two very different accounts. In the first part of chapter one, I explore the difficulties found in the attempt to examine forgiveness directly, through interaction with one primary example of this approach, namely Charles Griswold's *Forgiveness: a philosophical exploration*. Griswold's book is the most recent, and the most thorough attempt to outline and defend a secular notion of forgiveness. Some theological accounts have argued that the notion of forgiveness examined by secular thinkers are often fairly 'thin', revolving around the abstraction 'agent-wrongdoing-victim', and assessing the meaning and worth of forgiveness in relation to isolated events.[33] This is not the case with Griswold, who presents forgiveness as an exercise of a number of virtues in a balanced way, comprehensible only as a commitment to certain values over time. The point of this chapter is to explore the way in which describing forgiveness is always a struggle to show its goodness, and so in the second part, I employ the model outlined by Charles Taylor in the recent *A secular age* to shed some light on the broader tensions that the discussion of forgiveness embodies. My claim is that the struggle to defend and justify forgiveness influences the shape of the arguments in ways that are not always obvious, and that in a sense, these kinds of discussions of forgiveness can be considered the secular equivalent of theodicy. Taylor's account

[33]See in particular L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying forgiveness*, pp. 210-219 and Dan Bell, *Liberation theology after the end of history* (London: Routledge 2001), pp. 86-88, 144.

provides important clues concerning how this works out in practice. In the final part of the first chapter, I consider the embrace of paradox that Vladimir Jankelevitch expresses. Here the issues at stake become clearer: are we to prefer the intoxication of grace or the sober necessities of justice? Jankelevitch provides a powerful articulation of one intuition which seems to be fundamental to getting to the heart of the issue. Jankelevitch powerfully expresses the intuition that forgiveness has something to do with the unaccountable energy of love, an intuition which is perhaps a legacy of the Hebrew scriptures, particularly the prophetic portrait of a God whose wrath is overcome by compassion: 'How can I give you up Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? ... My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.'[34] Although there is some detailed engagement with the arguments here, the first chapter is intended to outline the conflict between intuitions, as much as arguments. It is the difference between the tone of the two arguments that is, in a sense, the most interesting.

Chapter two details the use I have made of the work of Simone Weil in considering this subject. Weil's work has proved a way of exploring the significance of conflict within thought, and in this chapter I try to draw out some of the most important resonances between her work and the discussion of forgiveness. Some of the problems with Weil's thinking are quite obvious: a tendency to express things in as extreme a way as possible, the sheer ambition which at times becomes arrogant or ridiculous, and of course, the sense that there may have been self-destructive tendencies in her life which can be felt in her writing. However, the sometimes astonishing sense of clarity and conviction that emerges in her works is sufficient impetus to make use of her legacy in this area. If forgiveness is concerned, one way or another, with paradox and conflict, then Weil is an indispensable resource for considering the significance of this difficulty. More particularly, part of what the thesis is concerned with is the claim (made by Jankelevitch and Derrida) that the force of forgiveness is located in a momentary crisis of thought. Weil's work is instructive because it provides a rather different way of considering the importance of the 'trembling' of thought that Levinasian deconstruction is concerned with, one that gives a sense of duration, rather than instantaneousness. In other words, I hope to use Weil to show that some of the intuitions that the 'impossible' forgiveness of Derrida, Jankelevitch and others attempt to make sense of may be interpreted and given voice rather differently.

[34]Hosea 11:8.

Chapter three turns to the cross, and in particular the attempt to incorporate René Girard's work into atonement theology. Here I focus on the question of necessity, since if the cross is to have something to do with the meaning of forgiveness, then this will concern the connection between the necessity of the death of Christ, and the necessities that on some accounts make up the conditions of forgiveness. The suspicion that atonement theology is not very 'forgiving' in its affirmation of the dependence of redemption upon brutal execution is a powerful one, and the work of Girard has given impetus to the search for a more peaceful approach to atonement. However, Girard's work is chosen not simply because of its relevance to this question, but equally because Girard may be said to have pursued a purification of Christianity. The brief comments above about the parable of the unforgiving servant suggest that this is an important aspect of the understanding of forgiveness: is there a logic of forgiveness, and if so, can we purge it of all vengeful, retributive or economic elements?

Since the question of forgiveness and exchange is unavoidable here, chapter four focuses on Derrida's work, whose assertion that forgiveness is both ideally aneconomic, and necessarily compromised through inevitable exchange represents another intuition concerning forgiveness: that we never really forgive, that forgiving is ahead of us. However, my focus here is again to examine the sense that the difficulty of thinking forgiveness is part of its essential force. As a result, I focus to begin with on the background of Derrida's thought: the aporetic structure that runs through his work. I attempt to read Derrida in terms of the 'posture' that is supposed by his work, the way that one has to suffer in the right way in order to think ethically. The question of the gift has been crucial in the way that Derrida's work has been taken up by those outside of the philosophical or literary circles in which it began, and this theme is also crucial for the debate over the nature of forgiveness, and in particular the way in which forgiveness might exceed thought. In the final part of the chapter I employ John Milbank's affirmation of reciprocity to, again, explore the sense in which forgiveness may be situated on a fault line between different ways of thinking, motivated by different concerns.

Throughout these chapters my concern is not to establish a particular solution to the difficulties encountered in this subject, but rather to suggest that these difficulties might hold a particular significance. I have, throughout, been guided by an intuitive sense that the subject brings up questions that are destined to be ongoing, and that the task may well be simply of knowing how to continue to ask them. In a sense, then, these

chapters, and my conclusions, are reflexive; they are attempts to probe into my own reluctance to settle into a definitive position, they articulate my own sense of perplexity, and try to fathom its meaning.

Chapter one

Forgiveness within and without reason

This chapter explores two very different approaches to the subject of forgiveness. The first proceeds through a careful process of definition and elucidation, with the aim of presenting the coherence and justice of forgiveness as clearly as possible; the second, through a more intentionally paradoxical and poetic form of articulation, aims to capture something elusive but essential about the heart of forgiveness. These approaches correspond to two basic assumptions about forgiveness. Firstly, that if it is a good, an expression of virtue, it must be basically comprehensible; that it has fairly clear reasons, and so is within reason. Secondly, that forgiveness is an excessive and mysterious phenomenon, one that stretches and challenges our capacity to reflect upon experience; that it may be without reasons, and so beyond reason. Through a close analysis of the contours and inner tensions of two particular treatments of forgiveness, this chapter explores two issues. Firstly, whether forgiveness can be presented so as to satisfy certain criteria of rationality or justice, and if so, how this process of justification affects the shape the concept takes. Secondly, whether forgiveness has its own particular rationality, and if it does, how might this be related to more ordinary patterns of thinking. Although there are many attempts to provide a comprehensive or direct treatment of the subject, this chapter's restrictive focus on two particular thinkers is deliberate, because the intention is to observe what happens in the attempt to reason with forgiveness. Rather than survey the issue through a wider range of material, the point here is to witness the dynamics of the engagement, in the hope that this will shed some light on the particular challenge that forgiveness presents.

I

Justifying forgiveness

The attempt to justify forgiveness could easily result in a circularity such as the following. Being a good Christian, one assumes that it is good to forgive. However, it seems that there is some difficulty or resistance to forgiveness in practice, or doubt expressed when it is recommended or praised. Perhaps one is then led to seek greater

understanding or to make the goodness of forgiveness more apparent so as to persuade those who doubt it:

'It is good to forgive *because*...' Now the virtue of forgiveness becomes more substantial and persuasive by an appeal to its characteristics, its benefits, or the moral norms which it fulfils. We know that forgiveness is good because it manifests certain characteristics, which are also good (for example, the tendency to be generous, to show mercy, or to trust; openness to the future rather than a fixation with the past; the ability to accept reality as it is, compassion for human weakness) or because it produces conditions which themselves are beneficial (restored relationships, psychological well-being, social harmony). However, the increased specificity of the characteristics that make forgiveness good can then become criteria for its approval:

'It is good to forgive *if*...' Since the features that the goodness of forgiveness consists in - the character traits it is a manifestation of, the objective benefits it may lead to - do not infallibly accompany the practice, one is led to conclude that forgiveness is more ambiguous than previously thought, its goodness dependant on certain conditions. Here it is not that there is anything good about forgiveness as such, more that it is an outworking of other virtues or duties, or else a necessary route to certain states of affairs. But there is *nothing* good about the forgiveness that the victim of domestic abuse offers repeatedly to their violent partner; nor in the forgiveness offered to a priest found to have abused children in his care by a bishop eager to avoid scandal. But this position has a correlate:

'Forgiveness is bad *if*...' Since the appeal to forgive can be made for bad reasons, by people displaying dishonesty, self-interest or disinterest, one admits that 'forgiveness' itself may on occasions actually be a bad thing, something to be avoided. Forgiveness, in other words, is a practice that needs to be regulated or guided by a more substantial ethic; it does not on its own tell us what to strive or hope for, and it is not enough simply to say 'forgive'. One could only forgive well if one had learned, or was learning, to live well, which may include the development of other habits like discernment, judgement, moral protest, etc. However, there is something slightly counter-intuitive about this conclusion, and one might be led to conclude that the 'bad' forgiveness wrongly recommended to the victim of domestic violence or offered to the abusive priest is not really forgiveness at all. In this case, one might prefer to say:

'Forgiveness *is only forgiveness* if...' The concept is now more tightly regulated so that there are a set of criteria with which to judge between authentic and inauthentic

forms of forgiveness. For example: one does not really forgive if there has not first been a clear recognition that an offence has been committed, or if there are injustices still awaiting intervention. However, this formulation could equally be expressed differently:

'Forgiveness is only forgiveness if it is good.' But this begs the question with which the whole process began: *how* is forgiveness good?

To claim that investigation into forgiveness will be inescapably circular is hardly original. There will be an element of reflexive circularity involved in any ethical reflection, since we are only able to critically interrogate our understanding of certain concepts through reliance on assumptions which are not at that moment themselves subject to interrogation (for example, in order to concern ourselves with whether forgiveness is psychologically beneficial we assume certain things about psychological well-being). However, forgiveness does seem to occupy this position in a particularly distinctive way, because forgiveness *necessarily* concerns imperfection, moral failure, the difference between ideals and life. It seems necessarily to involve some kind of change in our orientation to judgement. As a result the question of how forgiveness itself submits to judgement is far from straightforward. As already suggested, my argument will be that forgiveness is best understood as a certain kind of giving up of judgement, or in Pauline language, that it is to 'die to' judgement. But at the same time, this giving up is not itself a judgement - forgiveness is not a condemnation of the judgement it responds to - and this lack of resolution is part of what constitutes the suffering of forgiveness. To forgive is not to exchange a moral scheme that condemns for another that shows mercy, rather it is a change in one's relationship to moral schemes. This is what the ambiguity of the gospel sayings, and the ambiguity brought out and intensified by philosophical discussion, suggests. This structure in a sense implies what might be called a sacrificial logic, one that is very difficult to describe. What I hope to do in what follows is to provide a number of hints that gesture towards describing this logic through an examination of the inner tension in a number of treatments of forgiveness.

The immorality of forgiveness

Like God, forgiveness is never without its doubters, or even accusers. Just as the task

of theodicy arises because the reality of evil makes it difficult to believe in the goodness, power and existence of God at the same time, and even more difficult to rationally justify such belief, so we might say that the task of exploring forgiveness arises and proceeds in a similar way. It is not obvious that forgiveness is meaningful, and if it is, that it is good. Is not forgiveness simply a retrospective capitulation to evil, or a weary indifference, the absence of vigorous moral judgement? Or might it be the case that forgiveness is an incoherent notion, a cloud of insubstantial mystification created by a trick of language, its meaning not much more than the residue of bad linguistic habits, much like the word 'God'? If one asks 'what do I do when I forgive?' the answers tend to be rather long, tortuous, and evasive, like those given by nervous theologians, and in any case, few of the respondents agree with each other. Just as theodicy has the rather difficult task of describing and justifying its object at the same time, so it seems that intellectual reflection upon forgiveness always contains an element of defence, or justification, so that whenever one asks 'what is forgiveness?' one is also asking 'what would forgiveness have to be, in order to be good?' or 'what would forgiveness have to be, in order to be meaningful?'

Although not explicitly intended as a discussion of forgiveness, Jean Amery's essay on resentment provides one of the most thought-provoking means of approach to the subject, because it articulates so forcefully a perspective from which forgiveness appears vacuous and immoral, and because in the process it makes some profound suggestions about the meaning of resentment, which will become more important as the discussion unfolds. A member of the Belgian resistance during the second world war, Amery was arrested in 1943 and tortured by the Gestapo before being sent to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and finally Bergen-Belson, from which he was liberated in 1945. Writing two decades later, he addresses the German nation, exploring and defending his continued (and growing) resentment towards a nation too eager to move on. He notes that in the years following liberation, survivors like himself did not necessarily feel resentful, due to the sense of relief and 'resurrection' that accompanied the liberation, as well as the sense of being united with the rest of Europe in condemnation of the Nazis:

> For quite some time there lasted what was for me a totally unprecedented social and moral status, and it elated me to the extreme: being what I was - a surviving Resistance fighter, Jew, victim of persecution by a universally hated regime - there was mutual understanding between me and the rest of the world. ... There was much talk of the collective guilt

> of the Germans. It would be an outright distortion of the truth if I did not confess that this was fine with me. ... For the first time in my life I was in tune with the public opinion that surrounded me.[1]

However, in the years that followed, this sense of being in tune began to dissolve, as talk of remorse became less and less common, and as Amery began to sense a certain wariness of survivors like himself, and their preoccupation with the past.[2] Amery describes his sense of gradually becoming a minority again, at odds with public opinion, which demanded of him a peace of mind that was unthinkable:

> The Germans no longer had any hard feelings toward the resistance fighters and the Jews. How could these still demand atonement? Jewish born men of the same stamp as Gabriel Marcel showed themselves most eager to reassure their German contemporaries and fellow human beings. Only totally obstinate, morally condemnable hate, already censured by history, they said, clings to a past that was clearly nothing other than an operational mishap of German history and in which the broad masses of the German people had no part.
>
> But to my own distress, I belonged to that disapproving minority with its hard feelings. Stubbornly, I held against Germany its twelve years under Hitler. I bore this grudge into the industrial paradise of the new Europe and into the majestic halls of the West.[3]

The account of resentment that follows is as startling as it is clear. Amery notes that the 'moral truth' of the crimes can only come from the victim. Evil is not felt in the heart of the criminal, as Simone Weil also notes, it is felt in the suffering of the innocent.[4] A starving inmate does not work very fast, and when they do not work very fast, they are beaten; the objective events are obvious, but the moral truth of the blows only 'roar in the skull' of the one beaten. Neither can the social body adequately register the damage done to the survivors, since it is concerned with them only insofar as it is concerned to ensure that such things do not happen again. In a chorus of peace it proposes to look forward, together, but neglects this ongoing division, the fact that the

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[1]Jean Amery, 'Resentments' in *At the mind's limits: contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), pp. 64-5.

[2]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 66.

[3]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 67.

[4]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 70. See also Simone Weil, *Waiting on God*, tr. Emma Crawford (London: Harper Collins, 1977), p. 65. Amery is also close to Weil in his description of the reduction of the inmate to a tool, which echoes Weil's description of the slave as an extension of the body of the slave-master.

survivor still lives in isolation, with a consciousness of the world that is permanently altered.[5] Testimonies from survivors of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 resonate with Amery's description of this moral isolation. In the first volume of Jean Hatzfeld's extraordinary collection of interviews with both survivors and perpetrators of the genocide, *Into the quick of life*, one of the recurrent themes is mystification, and a related isolation.[6] This sense of separation means that, for Amery, the demand of resentment is deeper than its moral critics (for whom resentment is a primitive lust for revenge) or the pragmatic critics (for whom it is a paralysing preoccupation with the past) suppose. The dissatisfaction of the 'man of resentment' demands not simply that history be written properly, so that all the victims become visible and all the criminals named, nor does it simply cry a resolute 'never again!'. It is not a matter of a desire for a punishment that would return the evil given back to the criminal, or an atonement that would attempt to 'make up' for what was lost. Rather, it is a demand that the truth that 'roars in the skulls' of the survivors be shared:

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[5]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 69. See also his essay on the experience of torture in the same volume, pp. 21-40.

[6]Jean Hatzfeld, *Into the quick of life: the Rwandan genocide: the survivors speak*, tr. Gerry Feehily (London: Serpant's Tail, 2008). Many of the interviewees express sentiments along these lines, but the following serve as good examples. Janvier Munyaneza:

'If I try to come up with an answer for these massacres, when I try to know why we had to be hacked, my mind comes in for a rough ride; and I am no longer sure of anything around me. I will never be able to grasp our Hutu neighbour's way of thinking.' (p. 38)

Jean-Baptiste Manyankore:

'What happened in Nyamata, in the churches, in the marshes in the hills, are the supernatural doings of ordinary people. ... These learned people were calm, and they rolled up their sleeves to get a firm grip on a machete. So for people like me who have taught the Humanities their life long, criminals such as these are a terrible mystery.' (p. 50)

Innocent Rwililiza notes that there is even an embarrassment attached to speaking of the genocide, and a fear of the resentment of the survivors towards continued protest and the search for explanation:

'I see today that there is still embarrassment in talking of the survivors, even amongst Rwandans, even amongst Tutsis. I think that everyone wishes, in certain ways, that the survivors would move aside from genocide. As if they wished to leave to other people, who had not directly run the risk of being cut by machete chops, the task of taking care of it. As if we were now in the way. ... Foreigners and returned exiles say that the survivors are becoming bitter, withdrawn, almost aggressive. But this is not true, we are simply a little dispirited because little by little we allowed ourselves to be isolated. We survivors have become more foreign, in this our own land we never left, than all the foreigners and expatriates who look on us with worried eyes.' (pp. 79-83)

> But if I have searched my mind properly, it is not a matter of revenge, nor one of atonement. The experience of persecution was, at the very bottom, that of an extreme loneliness. At stake for me is the release from the abandonment that has persisted from that time until today. When SS-man Wajs stood before the firing squad, he experienced the moral truth of his crimes. At that moment, he was with *me* – and I was no longer alone with the shovel handle. I would like to believe that at the instant of his execution he wanted exactly as much as I to turn back time, to undo what had been done.[7]

Resentment, on Amery's account, is a demand that victim, perpetrator and society be united in a hatred of evil, and join in an impossible desire to undo what should not have been done. Amery implies his own account of the logic of punishment here: punishment somehow unifies criminal and victim, it heals the fracture between them - the incommensurability of their experiences - by allowing the criminal insight into the truth he produced in another but remained outside of himself.[8] From this perspective, it is as though only the criminal can free the victim from their crippling attachment to the past, through being united with them in remorse (although Amery displays what Thomas Brudholm calls a 'cautious hope' here: he 'would like to believe' that at the moment of execution the SS officer is thinking of victims suffering, rather than his own, but one might easily object that this is unlikely).[9] Resentment, then, acquires a further moral dimension: as well as being an expression of protest, in a strange way it is also other-focused, as a desire for communion with one's oppressor, to be together with them in the truth. However, the kind of solidarity that punishment produces is subtly but crucially different from most commonly accepted expressions of the link between resentment and retribution. For example, for Adam Smith the punishment that resentment envisages differs from the desire for private revenge in that the imposition of pain is not an end in itself:

> the object, on the contrary, which resentment is chiefly intent upon, is not so much to make our enemy feel pain in his turn, as to make him conscious that he feels it upon account of his past conduct, to make him repent of that conduct, and to make him sensible, that the person whom

[7]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 70.

[8]Once again, Amery is very close to Weil here, see *First and last notebooks*, tr. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 116 and 152.

[9]See Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment's virtue: Jean Amery and the refusal to forgive* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2008), pp. 65 - 80 for a discussion of this essay and its context.

he injured did not deserve to be treated in that manner.[10]

The resentful person desires that the wrongdoer be brought back into line with justice, so that the claims of justice are reaffirmed, and the pain involved is a way for the otherwise mute violation of justice to 'speak'. Amery also wants the imposition of punishment to forge a link between suffering (in this case, the prospect of death) and the past, but not so that the wrongdoer re-enter the moral sphere, so that moral order is restored, but so that the wrongdoer step *out* of a complacent sense of order so as to enter into the desolate experience of the survivor, who has been, and remains, abandoned by justice. In other words, although Amery writes in the name of morality, the educative punishment he envisages is more a symbolic making-wrong than it is a symbolic making-right, it is to awaken to a reality that is not just, which is the reality the survivor already lives in.

As a result, talk of forgiveness - in this context, at least - remains immoral, a failure to oppose reality in the way that morality demands, and in a sense, a failure to fully envisage what reconciliation really means:

> In two decades of contemplating what happened to me, I believe to have recognised that a forgiving and forgetting induced by social pressure is immoral. Whoever cheaply and lazily forgives, subjugates himself to the social and biological time-sense, which is also called the "natural" one. ... Man has the right to declare himself to be in disagreement with every natural occurrence, including the biological healing that time brings about. What happened, happened. This sentence is just as true as it is hostile to morals and intellect. The moral power to resist contains the protest, the revolt against reality, which is rational only as long as it is moral. The moral person demands annulment of time – in the particular case under question, by nailing the criminal to his deed. Thereby, and through a moral turning back of the clock, the latter can join his victim as a fellow human being.[11]

Amery is well aware that what he is proposing is impossible, that time keeps going, and that the necessities of communal life demand that attention be directed to tomorrow and the next day, not past injustices and humiliations however unresolved or unspoken they might remain. What resolution is possible, then? Amery suggests that resentment should be stubbornly maintained on one side, and put up with on the other, until such a time as the overpowered and those that overpowered them are unified in the desire that

[10]Adam Smith, *The theory of moral sentiments,* II. iii. I. 5

[11]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 72.

time be turned back, that the past not have happened. If the perpetrator and survivor were ever unified in this impossible longing, and in an expression of this demand, then somehow, it would be as if it were already fulfilled in the asking.[12] Presumably, at this point, forgiveness would be acceptable (or perhaps irrelevant? or already accomplished?). Forgiveness, if it is meaningful at all, would be a secondary response, or a further unfolding of the moment of unity in condemnation – possible as a result of the lack of tension that results. But the scenario Amery presents as the aim of resentment is deliberately eschatological, so that resentment is an inner disposition that holds out for something that cannot appear in time. Which also means that it is an ongoing, never-completed task, and that those whose task it is should not be resented. This perspective does not so much pronounce a verdict upon forgiveness, as express some fairly severe objections to the possibility of forgiveness being publicly affirmed, and the prospect of resentment being subject to social pressure as a result.[13] To resent those carrying the kind of moral (and quasi-eschatological) resentment that Amery defends for their lack of forgiveness is to move even further away from the possibility of forming a shared understanding concerning the past, and to confirm them in their existential loneliness.

Of course, Amery's essay addressed an extreme situation, which may make it difficult to apply these insights to other contexts. Indeed, there are advocates of forgiveness who would question whether forgiveness is the kind of thing that can meaningfully apply to crimes committed by regimes. Who would forgive? who would be forgiven? who can be held responsible? - each of these questions is so complex that perhaps one is better avoiding the term altogether for the sake of clarity.[14] There is undoubtedly much that is ambiguous and provocative in Amery's perspective, and some of the issues raised will be returned to indirectly. However, the point for now is to note

[12]Amery, 'Resentments', p. 78.

[13]See Thomas Brudholm, "Revisiting resentments: Jean Amery and the dark side of forgiveness and reconciliation', *Journal of human rights*, vol. 5: 1, pp. 18, 22 – 23.

[14]Although as Amery notes, his suffering felt as though it was imposed by 'Germany', rather than any individual. One can certainly resent a corporate entity, on Amery's account, and if forgiveness is defined as the giving up, or letting go of, resentment, then presumably one could also 'forgive' a corporate entity. On this question, see Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: a philosophical exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 134-168 and Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and revenge* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 78-99.

that his argument is not simply that resentment is understandable or defensible given the severity of the past, but that in this context resentment is an expression of a moral vigour that is lacking in those who call for forgiveness. And the *moral* opposition to forgiveness produces an interesting dynamic, which in part is the focus of this discussion. On what basis would forgiveness be justified against the accusation of moral weakness? Put differently: what, or who, does forgiveness answer to? Presumably, if one is to defend forgiveness, then one will have to do this on the basis of the same norms, rules or ideals that cause us to judge some actions as intolerable, and therefore in need of forgiveness. Can the same perspective impel us to judge *and* allow us to forgive or be forgiven? Or put differently, can we contemplate the justice of resentment and the good of forgiveness at the same time?

Charles Griswold: resentment and the conditions of forgiveness

Charles Griswold's recent book, *Forgiveness: a philosophical exploration,* is perhaps the most thorough direct philosophical treatment of the topic to date. In what follows I would like to highlight some of the main contours of Griswold's account in reference to the question of how forgiveness is described and justified at the same time, and the way in which these tasks impact upon each other. In Griswold's account, the justice of resentment does not conflict with the goodness of forgiveness, so that if one gets resentment right, one will find oneself able to forgive (when it is appropriate to do so), and if one gets forgiveness right one will not be subject to judgements such as Amery's. In other words, the justice of resentment and the goodness of forgiveness can appear together and be mutually illuminating. My argument will be that despite the many merits of Griswold's account, something important is lost in the attempt to take the tension out of forgiveness. This is apparent in one of the outcomes of Griswold's account: forgiveness is described as a finely balanced exercise of virtue, a response to wrongdoing that requires that one know both how to condemn where condemnation is warranted and judge leniently when lenient judgement is appropriate, as well as how to allows one's emotions to be subject to rational guidance. But this means that one has to be fairly virtuous in order to practice forgiveness in a way that is authentically forgiving: as a practice, forgiveness is for the righteous, not for sinners.

Before exploring in more detail why this is, it is interesting to note that Griswold

specifically states that the process of forming his notion of forgiveness was shaped by consideration of what would be responsible to recommend. In discussing Bishop Butler's analysis of forgiveness as 'the forswearing of resentment', Griswold examines the question of whether we should think of forgiveness as an instantaneous giving up of resentment, or as a commitment to give up resentment that may take time to fully outwork.[15] Griswold argues for the latter: when someone says 'I forgive you', they should not be understood to be claiming the ability to make their resentment disappear in an instant, but rather expressing an intention to allow and encourage their resentment to diminish, and ultimately to disappear altogether. 'Forgiveness' therefore, refers both to a process and to an end-state; it is an act with a teleology, defined by its progress towards a goal, not simply by a persons' cognitive or emotional state at one moment in time. The merit of this description is that it remains true to some of our intuitive suppositions concerning forgiveness, which is important in preserving the credibility of a rational account of forgiveness. It preserves the intuition that 'fully achieved' forgiveness would let go of resentment altogether, whilst acknowledging these kinds of emotions do not respond immediately to the will - an insight that may only be brought out fully through the process of intellectual reflection.[16] However, it is not only more faithful to reality to define forgiveness in this way, it is also the more prudent thing to

[15] See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p38 – 47.

[16] See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, pp. 42 - 3. For further comments about the relationship between intuitions concerning forgiveness and the consistency sought by rational reflection see also 'Forgiveness, secular and religious: a reply to my critics' in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 82, 2009, especially pp. 307 – 308. Here Griswold notes the difficulty of responding to criticisms that are based on supposedly 'intuitive' ideas concerning forgiveness. Responding to the objection that his account leaves behind the intuitive idea that forgiveness 'should' be unconditional, Griswold points out that any intellectual consideration of one's instinctive convictions changes them: 'considered convictions do not, and cannot, leave all convictions in place.' If the objection is simply that his account revises certain supposedly instinctive beliefs, the objection would have to be applied to the religious conception espoused by those criticising him. However, elsewhere, Griswold assumes that 'the tie between forgiveness and the moral anger one feels at being unjustly treated is unbreakable' (*Forgiveness*, p. 39); i.e. certain unconsidered convictions cannot be lost without completely losing track of the subject in hand. This is why some conceptions of forgiveness are ruled out. For example, this would rule out the use of the word 'forgive' in the suggestion made by Simone Weil: 'men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt.' This 'forgiveness' is a kind of elimination of resentment ahead of time, rather than any actual engagement with resentment.

teach:

> Still further, this approach recognizes that forgiveness may be a difficult achievement for a whole host of reasons having to do both with the wronged and the wrongdoer, while encouraging us to undertake the project with the assurance that it is not an all-or-nothing affair. Forgiveness will require other virtues, such as self-command, understanding, and trust, exercised over time.[17]

It is not only important for the theory to be right, it must also be sensitive, and responsible; it must be a good teacher, encouraging and assuring us. The theoretical account needs to acknowledge the existential difficulty faced by someone who actually has something to forgive, and present the task in a way that encourages them to embark on it. This means acknowledging that it may not be easy (so that that the shock of it being difficult does not cause one to give up) without making it appear *too* difficult (so that one would never begin). This concern for an account that can be justified - both theoretically in relation to retributive emotions, and practically in relation to the impact of the social pressure to forgive - continues through the rest of the book, and exerts a significant pressure on the shaping of the account, as will become clear.

For Griswold, since the responses that go under the name 'forgiveness' differ so widely in substance and significance, the task is to define which characteristics make a particular response to wrong-doing authentically forgiving, rather than something else altogether. As a result, it is meaningless to speak of an entirely unconditional forgiveness, since every account implicitly affirms that there are some responses that are not forgiveness, but may be called forgiveness. The simplest way of describing forgiveness is as 'the letting go of resentment for moral reasons'.[18] This description qualifies forgiveness in two ways. Firstly, since resentment itself is explored very thoroughly, and defined clearly, it qualifies what kinds of emotion forgiveness can be thought to supersede or let go. Forgiveness is not concerned simply with the giving up of hostility or anger in general, since these may be felt regardless of whether the person they are felt towards has actually done any wrong. Rather, forgiveness is the letting go

[17] *Ibid*., p 43.

[18] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 40. Compare with Jeffrey Murphy's nearly identical definition: 'A person who has forgiven has overcome these vindictive attitudes and has overcome them for a morally credible motive.' *Getting even: forgiveness and its limits (*Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 13. The contrast between 'overcoming' and 'letting go' is suggestive; for Griswold the active moment in 'letting go' is due to the lag between a change in rational judgement and one's affective state.

of an emotion that it is specifically concerned with judgement, and which, in its time and place, is both beneficial and justified. Secondly, and more importantly, to forgive is to let go of resentment for particular reasons, and under particular circumstances - 'for moral reasons'. One does not forgive if resentment is diminished or disappears for reasons that have little to do with one's judgement of a particular action; for example, if one simply ceases to regard someone as worthy of one's attention, resentful or otherwise, or if - out of concern for one's own well-being - one is able to alter one's emotional state through some kind of therapy, or simply through distraction. This second condition ties in with one of the main emphases of Griswold's book: that forgiveness is primarily concerned with a relation between two people, and it is this moral interdependence that exemplifies the scene of forgiveness: 'each party holds the other in its power, in this sense: the offender depends on the victim in order to be forgiven, and the victim depends on the offender in order to forgive.'[19] These two conditions together mean that authentic forgiveness is the embodiment of a nuanced moral sensitivity which includes resentment *and* the letting-go of resentment: if one is resentful in the wrong way, one does not forgive; if one lets go of resentment in the wrong way, one does not forgive.

Griswold explores resentment in great detail and with considerable insight, and his discussion is too in depth to be fully engaged with here. However, the main contours are as follows. Resentment is a cognitive, or quasi-cognitive state; that is '[i]t is . . . not just a "raw feel" but embodies a judgement about the fairness of an action or of an intention to do that action.'[20] However, nor is it simply a result of cognitive judgement. It is also 'an affective, bodily state', and as a result, there can be considerable 'lag' between abandoning the judgements that give rise to resentment, and a change in one's affective state, and this, in turn is linked with the way in which effort may be involved in the 'letting go' of resentment (indeed, effort may be required even when it is not a question of forgiveness, as for example, if a long grievance is discovered to have been based upon faulty information).[21] In other words, the affective state of resentment is closely related to rational judgement, without being straightforwardly subject to it. Griswold engages critically with Bishop Butler's sermons on resentment (which have

[19]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 49; see also *xvi.*

[20]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 26.

[21]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 37.

become central to these kinds of discussions), taking the idea that resentment is an 'inward witness to virtue' as the basic point.[22] While anger may flare up and pass very quickly in response to being hurt in some way, and not include any particular desire for retribution, resentment is a longer term, settled and deliberate anger, and includes desire for punishment of some kind.[23] In this respect, resentment is also a witness to the way in which the individual is dependent upon the community, in that it can be understood to include a desire for public vindication. Wrongdoing of various kinds can be understood not simply in terms of the harm one suffers, but as the communication of a message about one's worth, and since one's worth is linked to one's sense of social presence, resentment and forgiveness are not simply concerned with a two-way relation.[24] Although for Griswold forgiveness has a basically dyadic form, it nevertheless involves a 'morally tinged exchange with the community'.[25] Resentment is not a perfectly clear concept, and a variety of emotional and cognitive states can be given this name. However, Griswold assumes that it is possible to discern an authentic core: it is a reaction aroused by the perception of unwarranted harm, one that includes a judgement concerning fairness, that is aimed at the author of an action, that instinctively protests and looks for some kind of due punishment or revenge.[26] Resentment is how a virtuous person feels and thinks when injured: to feel the right kind of anger for the right kinds of reason. In other words, there is a 'proper' response to wrongdoing, even evil, and this response includes something called 'resentment'; a proper response to the improper.

If resentment, when properly understood, and not subject to excess, is a moral response, why would there be a case for the letting go of it? Griswold's answer is simple: '[f]orgiveness does not attempt to get rid of warranted resentment. Rather, it follows from the recognition that the resentment is no longer warranted. And what

[22]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, pp. 19 - 37, especially p. 26.

[23]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 24.

[24]The idea that the actions most strongly felt as wrong are those that communicated a 'message' about one's worth has proved quite useful for authors discussing these issues. See Jean Hampton and Jeffrey Murphy (eds.), *Forgiveness and mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 24 - 25 and 44 - 45.

[25]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 29.

[26]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 39.

would provide the warrant can be nothing other than the right reasons.'[27] One would be letting go of resentment for the right reasons only if the following conditions had been fulfilled by the wrongdoer: condemnation of their own behaviour, acceptance of responsibility for it, the experience and expression of regret, commitment – demonstrated through action if necessary – to becoming a different sort of person, demonstration that they understand the damage they have done, and provision of an account of how it was they came to do whatever it was that they did.[28] To learn how to forgive, then, one would have to learn how to discern the presence of these criteria, and of course, this is not easy, since contrition can be faked for the sake of convenience.[29] More than this, one would have to have the kind of disposition that is willing to give forgiveness where these are present, and withhold it where they are not. Similarly, there are conditions that must be met if the victim can be understood to have forgiven. The first three are concerned with how one engages with one's sense of hostility towards the wrongdoer: one must 'forswear' revenge, moderate resentment, and commit to giving up resentment altogether. Fourthly, the injured party must be willing to revise their judgements concerning the wrongdoer, such that they are no longer defined simply by a particular act, nor assumed to be incapable of future change. In this sense, to forgive implies a trust in the future, and a willingness to understand the whole person in a narrative framework.[30] Fifthly, the injured one must modify their understanding of themselves in relation to the wrongdoer, so that they no longer presume a definitive moral superiority, and instead recognise their shared humanity. Finally, just as remorse and repentance should be expressed in apology, so forgiveness should, ideally, be expressed or pronounced, not simply assumed, so that there is a 'symmetry in address'.[31]

These conditions together make up 'paradigmatic forgiveness'; a case of fully realised forgiveness. However, Griswold acknowledges that this description leaves him with the old metaphysical problem of how imperfect instances relate to the ideal form: since very often forgiveness does not conform to these conditions, how can these cases be said to be forgiveness at all? For example, someone may be remorseful and repentant but still not show that they have understood the perspective of the one they

[27]Griswold, Forgiveness, p. 43.

[28]Griswold, *Forgiveness.*, pp. 49-50.

[29]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 59.

[30]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, pp. 98-110.

[31]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 53-9.

have wronged, so that their remorse is focused more upon their own regret and discomfort, rather than the suffering they have imposed. Or the injury was such that the victim still feels strong resentment when the memory of the event in question arises particularly strongly, despite a desire and commitment to let go of such feelings. Do these limitations mean that we cannot apply the term, and if so, does this not mean that - ironically - the discourse on forgiveness has turned out to be rigidly perfectionistic in a way that seems absurd when dealing with a virtue necessarily concerned with imperfection? This objection is dealt with as follows. The quite detailed conditions laid out should be understood as 'forgiveness at its best'. This ideal does not exclude instances that do not fully conform, but it does give a sense of what one is aiming for when one embarks upon forgiveness - what one should want forgiveness to be, or what it would be when fully achieved, a goal that animates and shapes the actual task.[32] Paradigmatic forgiveness is the *telos* of non-paradigmatic forgiveness.[33] In addition to the conditions above, then, Griswold, gives conditions for each party that serve as a threshold for forgiveness - the level below which one is no longer talking about forgiveness at all. These are the willingness on the part of the victim to lower their resentment and not seek revenge, and the willingness on the part of the offender to take minimal steps to qualify themselves for forgiveness, i.e. to show their opposition to their action in some way.[34] Since the first of these is somewhat obvious, it is the second that is important; without some kind of movement towards repentance on the part of the wrongdoer, one is not forgiving if one puts aside resentment arising from the act in question. Forgiveness *cannot* be 'unconditional' in this sense; without a change of heart - however incomplete - as a prior condition, forgiveness cannot be distinguished from morally suspect responses - resignation, condonation, excuse, justification, etc.; it is simply some kind of combination of these. In fact, to 'forgive' without any reference to a change of heart on the part of the wrongdoer is to neglect their potential, to fail 'to hold him or her to his or her best self.'[35] Forgiveness has to pass through judgement, and since it is a fundamentally interpersonal affair, *both* parties must pass through.

[32]See the further clarification in 'Reply to my critics', p. 305 on this point.

[33]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, pp. 113-7.

[34]Griswold also adds a third condition: that the injury be 'humanly forgivable', but I will not discuss this here, since the issues it raises take us too far from the argument. See p. 110 and pp. 114-5.

[35]'A reply to my critics', p. 306.

Forgiveness as virtue

To examine some of the specific claims Griswold's approach makes I would like to consider in more depth the way in which forgiveness may be an expression of virtue. For Griswold, forgiveness is not simply a discrete component of moral life, but is rather the expression in particular circumstances of different but related values. Forgiveness at its best is a virtue that 'both expresses and promotes the ethical excellence of its possessor';[36] and it is underpinned by the ideals of 'responsibility, respect, self-governance, truth, mutual accountability, friendship, and growth'.[37] Insofar as forgiveness involves an engagement with both cognitive and affective aspects of resentment, it involves learning how to judge, how to feel the importance of certain values, so that one's defence of oneself is not just an end in itself but also a way of continuing to affirm the value and dignity of all. To forgive is to come to understand that resentment has an important, but limited, role to play, and to let it go in due course. However, Griswold also notes that the virtue of forgiveness is linked in some way with acceptance; it is 'a model virtue for the project of reconciliation with imperfection'.[38] Forgiveness, then, combines both active and passive modes of being in the world; it is part of a life that defends, strives, and shapes; and part of a life that bends, accommodates and accepts.

However, the question remains of whether the internal tension that this results in means that the virtue of forgiveness is impossible to simply specify in the way that Griswold would like. In order to assess the value of forgiveness one already has to know where to 'draw the line' between those imperfections with which one might justly reconcile oneself, and the violations and shortcomings which should only be protested and changed. In other words, one has to already know what to accept and what to reject. Griswold proposes in Aristotelian fashion that the virtue of forgiveness lies on a narrow band of a spectrum, which ranges from an excess of servility to an excess of

[36]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 70. Early on in the book, Griswold defines virtue in terms of responsiveness: '[v]irtues express praiseworthy or excellent ways of being responsive to the world, given the sorts of creatures we are.' (p. 19)

[37]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 213.

[38]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 110.

anger or resentment. 'The forgiving person, then, will experience anger in the right way, at the right time, and toward the right object.'[39] However one is harmed, one is not in a position to forgive if one's anger is always excessive, concerned with the wrong things, for the wrong reasons, and of disproportionate duration. He goes on to argue that something similar is true of the characteristics required to request and receive forgiveness:

> A person who incessantly and compulsively expressed contrition, at times with cause and at times not, would very probably not be a credible candidate for forgiveness. She would exhibit the excess of the requisite virtue. And one who regularly failed to show appropriate contrition would express a defect of the requisite virtue.[40]

To forgive, and to be forgiven, one needs to already possess the right amounts of the requisite virtues; that is, forgiveness is a secondary moral exercise, only really appropriate for the well practised. As a result, one learns to forgive by first learning how to judge, which in turn means that judgement must - if there is to be any forgiveness - already include this possibility. And this is in fact what Griswold assumes: judgement in its ideal form contains the possibility of forgiveness for certain situations. Alongside this assumption is another: that there is no basic conflict between the seemingly different dispositions - moral rigour versus acceptance; vigilance versus trust - that are necessary to forgive. That is, that cultivation of the virtues that make up 'forgivingness' may not be easy, but if it is difficult, it is difficult in a fairly straightforward way. Although, as Gregory Jones notes, an important difference between secular philosophical and theological accounts of forgiveness is found in the way that theologically forgiveness is meaningful as part of a much broader narrative of transformation, involving concrete communal practices through which to 'unlearn' sin, as well as a Trinitarian conception of God,[41] here the most important difference seems

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[39]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 18.

[40]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 18.

[41]See L. Gregory Jones, *Embodying Forgiveness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), especially pp. 207 - 225. In some respects, Griswold's account is less susceptible to the kind of critique that Jones offers of secular, philosophical treatments of forgiveness, in that Griswold is quite wary of treating the topic in terms of isolated moral scenarios, and instead keen to address the question of the relation between forgiveness and ongoing patterns of judgement, cultivation of moral sense, etc. Jones argues that attention given to forgiveness in modernity makes three mistakes: firstly, the assumption that a philosophical account can be offered without reference to theological assumptions;

to centre on the way that in the gospels, the command to forgive goes along with the sense that the gospel message is not for the righteous, but for sinners. Forgiveness is one of the commands that most centrally characterises life in the kingdom of God, and the command is a gift for those who are needy, and hungry for justice rather than full of it already. Forgiveness is the kind of command that sinful people can obey, rather than an exercise of morally confident judgement. In fact, this is one of the paradoxes of the Christian understanding of forgiveness: forgiveness is not just for sinners to receive, but for sinners to give, whilst at the same time it is claimed that to forgive the unworthy is to become perfect as the Father is perfect. For Griswold, in contrast, forgiveness is defined so that it is only accessible to those who are already able to judge well; both as received and as given. This, I suggest, is a more significant divergence than the question of religious metaphysic, context, or narrative, however important these are.

The difficulties of the approach that Griswold takes in this regard can be seen more clearly in Tara Smith's article 'Tolerance and forgiveness: virtues or vices', which presses some of the same assumptions further and gives a significantly less appealing description of forgiveness as a result. Smith explores the relationship between judgement, tolerance and forgiveness, asking if the latter two can really be considered to be complementary with the former. The tension is heightened because of the way that justice is understood: justice is most basically a form of observation, one that 'requires scrupulously objective evaluation and treatment of others'.[42] Justice involves observation, evaluation and appropriate response, whereas tolerance appears to involve a tension between one's opinions concerning another person's conduct and one's

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secondly, that where such accounts have referred to the theological roots of the concept, they assume a theistic, rather than Trinitarian perspective; thirdly, the Kantian or Utilitarian roots of post-Enlightenment moral philosophy tends to mean that the act of forgiveness is focused upon, rather than the character traits, outlook or disposition that such acts express. With regard to the first point, rather than simply assume its coherence apart from theological assumptions, Griswold explicitly argues that the concept makes sense in secular terms, being fundamentally dyadic in structure, and acknowledges that this gives rise to a less transformational notion than theology presumes. With regard to the third point, Griswold agrees, and himself takes an Aristotelian approach (as opposed to Jones' Thomist-Aristotelianism), acknowledging that the concept is only meaningful in relation to more fundamental assumptions concerning human flourishing and the habits necessary to cultivate justice. See Jones pp. 210-19 for a summary and critique of a number of important contributions to the discussion.

[42]Tara Smith, 'Tolerance and forgiveness: virtues or vices?' in *Journal of applied philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1997, p. 33.

response to them. As a result, tolerance can only be held as valuable when its teleological necessity can be demonstrated; i.e. if there are situations in which refraining from active censure actually promotes justice in the long run (for example, in the way a parent may tolerate behaviour they know to be damaging in their teenage son or daughter, in the hope that this will allow to discover for themselves what is beneficial, and ensure they learn the lesson more deeply as a result). Tolerance does not have any particular value in itself, but when properly understood, 'is to be judiciously employed on occasion for the purpose of best serving morality's *telos*.'[43] Noting - quite rightly - the way in which the vague notion that there is something good about 'being tolerant' is often simply a way of avoiding 'the strain of moral confrontation', Smith goes on to say that the dangerously seductive thing about the notion of tolerance is the way in which it appears to offer a cost-free morality: the 'self-satisfaction from having moral positions' and 'the tolerance-blessed convenience of not having to live by them'.[44] Although tolerance might sometimes be commended as a corrective to the fact that people often come to hasty judgements about others based on instinctive suspicion of differences, for Smith this simply indicates that judgement necessarily involves evaluating carefully and dispassionately: the solution is better judgement, not more tolerance.

In the light of this interrogation, forgiveness is given a very restricted meaning: 'forgiveness is a kind of moral estimate. It is the conclusion that one should understand and respond to another person's breach less harshly than would normally be appropriate.' To forgive is to dispassionately decide to make a justified exception, this decision 'rests on one's interpretation of what the breach reveals about the agent'; the judgement that in this particular case genuinely immoral conduct does not reveal 'a grave moral defect or an irremediably bad character.'[45] When one forgives, one remains in the position of judge that morality, on this reading, demands that one adopt. The 'aura of flexibility' that surrounds forgiveness is a result of the fact that the complications of particular cases require insightful interpretation rather than straightforward application of a rule. Forgiveness involves a sophisticated capacity to evaluate motive, character, context, etc., so that in a sense, forgiveness represents a

[43]Smith, 'Tolerance and forgiveness', p. 35.

[44]Smith, 'Tolerance and forgiveness', p. 36.

[45]Smith, 'Tolerance and forgiveness', p. 37.

more advanced form of judgement than that found in 'more routine occasions of evaluating others'.[46] It is this sophistication that gives the concept the unfortunate appearance of 'flexibility'; to the untrained eye, it appears that one is bending the rules, when really one is applying the rules with increased insight into this particular situation. Perhaps the least appealing aspect of this description of forgiveness is the contradiction at the heart of the conception of justice: on the one hand, justice involves an eye for detail, complexity, particularity, rather than a mechanical application of certain rules; on the other hand, the upshot of all this nuanced evaluation is a straightforward, either/or verdict. The wrongs we do are either evidence of a bad character, in which case, we cannot be forgiven; or they are out of character, in which case, we *should* be forgiven. In other words, forgiveness is defined entirely in reference to a single moment of verdict-pronouncement: saying yes or no. The cultivation of a sophisticated ability to evaluate complex situations involving complex actors is necessary so that one can come to perfectly simple verdicts.

It is obvious that Smith's interpretation of forgiveness is a long way from the Christian origins of the concept: there is no sense that forgiveness involves any kind of compassion for sinners (an idea expressed most forcefully in the parable of the prodigal son, or through the prophet Hosea), that human judgement might be in dire need of deep challenge or correction, or of the idea that forgiveness has the form of gift, as a manifestation of love. Given that these aspects are intentionally eradicated from the account, the more interesting contrast is with Griswold's similarly secular account, and what it is that stops Griswold's account exhibiting the same degree of sterile moralism. Perhaps most significant is Smith's assertion that there is no reason for forgiveness to be prescribed or affirmed in its own right. Since judgement, if done carefully and well, will, under certain conditions direct a person to forgive, there is no place for an affirmation of forgiveness itself as something to aspire to; if anything, such an affirmation is only likely to nourish the tendencies towards the unvirtuous forms of tolerance already mentioned. For Griswold, however, there *is* a sense in which forgiveness should be actively affirmed, and a sense that it occupies its own unique place in our conceptual landscape. Given the dangers associated with forgiveness, especially the risk of forgiveness being 'hijacked' by tolerance, moral weakness, injustice, etc., why should it be affirmed? What do we gain by speaking of forgiveness

[46]Smith, Tolerance and forgiveness', p. 39.

that we could not gain simply through speaking of justice, accuracy and appropriate response? Although not clearly spelt out, the sense is that forgiveness expresses a level of compassion towards the frailty of 'embodied, affective, and vulnerable creatures', a compassion that goes along with our reconciliation with imperfection.[47] The emphasis throughout the book on the dangers of perfectionistic modes of ethics, which tend to give rise to an aspiration to leave the realm of human interaction and openness (the 'circle of sympathy'), suggests that for Griswold, forgiveness is a part of our acceptance of our condition - an acceptance not always manifest in the formation and communication of ideals. Whereas Smith seems to envisage a world in which the most significant and serious aspect of human existence is moral evaluation (primarily of others, rather than oneself) and basically instrumental efforts to make what progress we can towards the ideals we are committed to, Griswold is more aware of the role of forgiveness in supporting aspects of human existence that exceed the moral horizon: friendships and intimate family relationships; the actual living of life, rather than any particular goal or duty.

Although forgiveness is defended and justified through very careful definition, it is actively commended for reasons that have little to do with this definition: the continuing presence of resentment may damage one's capacity for love, compassion and sympathy for others, and to forgive is to exhibit the belief that a future of renewal and growth is possible.[48] In fact, the link between forgiveness and the possibility for transformation is an aspect that Griswold states he wishes was brought out more strongly in the book.[49] But the tone of the book, on the whole, is much more focused on the care with which the concept must be handled, the way that abuses must be foreseen and headed off, the sense that forgiveness needs to be very well hemmed in, if it is to be of any use. So, the concern that shapes the account offered is for security: how can we understand forgiveness so that the practice does not become corrupt, misleading or inhuman? But the appeal of forgiveness, the thing that means we need forgiveness, not simply fairness, or understanding, is something to do with the way that it embodies trust and vulnerability. What Griswold does not explore in any depth, though, is the way there may be conflict between the two, and whether there may be a

[47]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 19.

[48]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 70.

[49]See Griswold, 'Forgiveness, secular and religious: a reply to my critics' in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, vol. 82, p. 306.

more basic difficulty in reconciling - in life - the capacity for love, compassion and sympathy with an unyielding vigilance towards the ways that selfishness and stupidity, cruelty and compromise damage our lives. Further to this, the question is whether the difficulties involved in making sense of forgiveness may have something to do with these kinds of conflict; that is, what kinds of concerns motivate our understanding of the subject, and how do these concerns shape our understanding?

If part of the human goodness of forgiveness is something to do with trust, if it means to step towards a future that is not certain - hoped for rather than guaranteed - how does this willingness affect our understanding and pursuit of justice? Does our willingness to trust affect our concern for justice? In a sense Griswold's account is designed to demonstrate more fully that forgiveness does not have to involve an exposure to exploitation, or an ambiguous leaving hold of the concern for justice. The conditions specify the way in which forgiveness can be prudent, and suggest that where forgiveness is not prudent, it is something else. Forgiveness is the giving up of resentment that is no longer warranted; the 'no longer' implies that the job that resentment is 'designed' to do has been done; one forgives only when it is safe to do so. The detailed nature of these conditions prevent forgiveness from ever appearing as risk, and if it does not appear as risk, in what way could it be said to be a cultivation, or manifestation, of trust?

II

Forgiveness, aspiration and affirmation

If forgiveness cannot be fully justified according to rational or moral criteria without losing significance, then an alternative approach may be necessary. Before turning to this question, I would like to engage with Charles Taylor's recent book, *A secular age*, which attempts a sweeping diagnosis of the inner struggles of contemporary ethical reflection. Taylor's diagnosis seems particularly relevant to the questions above, and will help to frame the discussion that follows.

A secular age attempts to provide a different – and more comprehensive – account of the development of secular forms of thinking in the West in terms of the ambiguous nature of the drive to reform, the impulse to 'raise the level' of human life. Taylor's book, and in particular the description of the contours of contemporary ethical

reflection, could be said to be an examination of the complex and problematic relationship between aspiration and affirmation. At the heart of Taylor's discussion is a description of an ineradicable tension within the Christian account of human life, a tension which exerts a greater and greater pressure as secularity advances and develops. On the one hand, there is the emphasis on ordinary human flourishing; to put it crudely, that God is in favour of everyday life and the rhythms, expectations and desires that uphold it. This is in continuity with the Axial insight that true religion does not depend simply upon ritual observance, but rather requires justice and acts of kindness directed to other humans: "I desire mercy not sacrifice". On Taylor's account, these religious insights bequeath a restless impulse that strives for completion: to fully convert religiosity into benevolence, to draw out *all* the implications of the affirmation of ordinary human life and flourishing.[50] On the other hand, although the Christian God is revealed to will ordinary human flourishing, there is nevertheless an equally strong sense that the fullest human desire aims at something beyond this, at love of or union with God, at something not straightforwardly identical to a decent life occupied by ordinary human concerns. For a Christian, to pray 'your will be done' is, somehow, not quite the same as simply saying "let humans flourish"; in fact, 'your will be done' is often linked with renunciation or sacrifice of the finite and earthly. In other words, there is something necessarily unstable in the Christian world-view: on the one hand, affirmation of ordinary human life and concerns; on the other, aspiration for the transcendent, which involves aiming beyond ordinary human life. As Taylor sees it, this tension is essential to understanding the Christian sense of sacrifice or renunciation, which is the giving up of the genuinely good for the sake of something beyond, something higher, rather than leaving behind that which was largely insignificant anyway (Jesus' distress in Gethsemane contrasted with Socrates' indifference).[51]

Of course even the simplest articulation of this tension involves making assumptions about what we mean by ordinary human life, what counts as a 'transcendent' goal, and so on. Nevertheless, it is, Taylor says, a useful distinction to make, especially in examining the history of Western Christianity, within which this distinction has become so important. Another way of articulating this tension is in terms of attention: does the

[50]Charles Taylor, *A secular age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 772-4.

[51] Taylor, *A secular age*, p16-18.

highest and best life involve seeking and acknowledging a good which is some sense beyond, or independent of ordinary human flourishing? The Axial movement seems to be towards directing attention onto the concerns of human life, and the question therefore becomes one of competing claims for attention; can one be fully attendant towards the needs of other humans whilst understanding flourishing through reference to that which lies beyond or outside of the ordinary human sphere?

The central thrust of Taylor's account is his emphasis on what he calls the 'drive to reform'. In late mediaeval Latin Christendom, this manifests in an increasing desire to 'raise the level' of the laity, attempts to make ordinary Christians more Christian, and it intensifies during and after the Reformation, in both Protestant and Catholic churches. With the Reformation arrives an increased suspicion towards monastic spirituality, which appears to confine full bodied religious devotion to a specialised group, as well as a changed relation of the individual to communal religious practice. Salvation no longer depends on properly regulated participation in church life but on individual response to God, and the location for whole-hearted Christian life is now emphatically ordinary life. The important point here is that the suspicion of the elitism of clerical and monastic spirituality assumes an antagonism between the 'higher' and the 'lower'; there is a feeling that affirmation of the ordinary goes hand in hand, or even *requires*, the repudiating of these higher callings. The sense is that the reforming tendency begins to construe this difference in more competitive, antagonistic terms, such that pushing down on one side is felt to raise the other side, and vice-versa. Taylor does not make this point explicitly, but the implication is that along with the drive to reform and the affirmation of ordinary life comes an increasingly one-dimensional sense of progress and competitive sense of attention. For Taylor, the drive to reform is malleable; it could be to re-emphasise the importance of the transcendent, to re-assert the priority of the love of God over lesser goals, or it could be to re-focus the energy of religious devotion onto mundane, every day concerns, to insist upon the priority of benevolence, to emphasise the necessary 'detour' of love of neighbour, etc. Or, of course, it could be to insist on complete secularization, the sacrifice of religious impulses for the sake of an enlightened and fully-immanent conception of human life. In other words, the higher aspiration could be for the removal of reference to transcendence, and the affirmation of 'ordinary life' could involve a re-assertion of 'religious' impulses.

This narrative, in which one has a latent tension between immanent and transcendent notions of flourishing, and a desire to reform that can end up sharpening

the distinction and competition between the two, leads Taylor to a particular characterisation of contemporary ethical reflection. It is this picture which is of importance here. On Taylor's analysis, this tension that characterises Christianity is not removed in the move towards a 'self-sufficing humanism' rather, he wants to claim that it remains in various mutated but frequently unrecognised forms.[52] In his description of a 'three-cornered debate' Taylor notes that alliances between differing perspectives can be made for the sake of convenience:

> There are secular humanists, there are neo-Nietzscheans, and there are those who acknowledge some good beyond life. Any pair can gang up against the third on some important issue. Neo-Nietzscheans and secular humanists together condemn religion and reject any good beyond life. But neo-Nietzscheans and acknowledgers of transcendence are together in their absence of surprise at the continued disappointments of secular humanism, together also in the sense that its vision of life lacks a dimension. In a third line-up, secular humanists and believers come together in defending an idea of the human good, against the anti-humanism of Nietzsche's heirs.[53]

The crucial point here is that there is a common dilemma to each of these perspectives: how to affirm the goodness of ordinary human life without draining humanity of any real depth and vital energy; how to articulate higher aspirations without degrading or mutilating the 'lower' level. This dilemma will appear very differently depending on where one draws the line between forms of behaviour that are fairly ordinary, and can be expected, and those which are only possible through some kind of higher, more energetic aspiration. For example, the question of how to see the human propensity towards violence appears very differently depending on where one draws this line. One might see peaceableness as a higher goal, achieved perhaps only with some difficulty by those pursuing a certain kind of life, something in some sense ahead of us; or one might see it as a given, part of what ordinary life becomes when left to its own devices and allowed simply to flourish. If peaceableness is a good, and yet violence natural, then some kind of disciplining of nature is appropriate; violent tendencies must be controlled, suppressed, or transformed. But if the difference between natural tendencies and the goal of peaceful co-operation becomes too great, then the practices through which we progress may themselves seem to exert a kind of violence on natural instincts. The question then becomes of how these impositions can be framed; what justifies

[52] Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 618-675.

[53] Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 637.

them, how do we measure the cost that they may require us to pay? Taylor's point here is that where the affirmation of ordinary life has itself become a kind of moral imperative, there is a great difficulty in admitting the ordinariness of violence; violence is seen as pathology, or the remnants of a more barbaric age, and of course, this in turn may legitimate all kinds of dehumanising, controlling measures against the violent.[54] In other words, certain conceptions of the human good produce certain conceptions of the kinds of effort that are acceptable (so that the difficulty involved in the progress does not count as regression) and these in turn determine our perspective of human life, insofar as they influence what we are willing to perceive. The third corner of the debate that Taylor tries to describe - the neo-Nietzschean - highlights that this kind of restriction of vision and stress that nature, and human nature, may be more disturbing and violent than the humanist vision is prepared to admit. More than this, there is also the possibility that the aspiration to peace is itself a kind of imposition, a failure to fully recognise the force and struggle inherent in existence. In this case, the affirmation of violent struggle as an ineradicable part of existence is assumed to possess a kind of power; when liberated from the reactive, slavish goals that restrict and mutilate its energy, violence is revealed as, or can become, will to power, self-affirmation and joyous overcoming.[55]

What Taylor tries to highlight, then, is the great difficulty of meeting what he calls the 'maximal demand': **'**how to define our spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?' Ethical discussion is frequently conducted in bad faith, simply because the difficulty of achieving this demand from *any* particular perspective is suppressed, and this produces an inability to recognise the effects of the tension when they do appear. Indeed, in this sense, Taylor seems to want to introduce a note of tragic wisdom into ethics:

> We have to face the possibility that [satisfying the maximal demand] may not be realizable, that squaring our highest aspirations with an integral respect for the full range of human fulfilments may be a mission impossible. That, in other words, we have to scale down our moral

[54] See the discussion of violence on pp. 656 – 675. On this point, see also Oliver O'Donovan, *The ways of judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 86-8.

[55]However, as Taylor notes, Nietzsche is crucially different in that there is no sense that there are universal human aspirations or means of progress; there is no progress that includes all, nor should this be desired. The tension is resolved somewhat through the removal of the demand for inclusion.

> aspirations in order to allow our ordinary human life to flourish; or we have to agree to sacrifice some of this ordinary flourishing to secure our higher goals. If we think of this as a dilemma, then perhaps we have to impale ourselves on one horn or the other.[56]

Negatively, the point is that aspiration is dangerous but essential, and that no single ethical insight, or conceptual scheme, gets us out of this predicament. We have no guaranteed way of purifying our ideals, so that they no longer contain the risk of being pursued in ways that mutilate the ordinary patterns of life. More positively, his contribution is to suggest that this predicament *is* the realm of ethics, and therefore that simply pointing it out, again, cannot honestly serve as a substantive criticism of any particular perspective. The challenge is not to escape these kinds of dilemmas; '[r]ather it appears as a matter of who can respond most profoundly and convincingly to what are ultimately commonly felt dilemmas.'[57] Ethics is not simply the business of deciding what are the characteristics of human flourishing, which aspirations are most in harmony with life's inherent potential, and then hoping that these two tasks will turn out to not to interfere with each other; it is also the 'how' of combining them, and of negotiating the risk that there may be significant losses (on either side) in the process. The underlying sense here is that there is a moment of difficult acceptance involved in any genuine ethical reflection, a moment of 'counting the cost', and the implication is that many forms of contemporary ethical reflection fail to do this. It is here that Taylor sees that the 'acknowledgers of transcendence' have the advantage, potentially at least. The Christian sense that that our notion of progress or ascent is formed through memories of particular itineraries towards God - the saints - holds the potential for acknowledging how fragile, fallible, and at times ambiguous all our progress is. This allows us to recover a sense of the way in which progress is not fully manifest as such except eschatologically, i.e. it is not, for us, unambiguous, personally or corporately.

> My itinerary crucially includes my existence embedded in a historic order, with its good and bad, in and out of which I must move towards God's order. The eschaton must bring together all these itineraries, with their very different landscapes and perils.[58]
>
> The indispensable step forward can in its concrete form impose unacceptable sacrifices. This is a reason to be wary of these mainline narratives of simple, cost-free supersession, whether narrated by

[56] Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 640.

[57] Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 675

[58] Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 754.

Christians, or by protagonists of the Enlightenment.[59]

The difficulty that a Christian ethics of transcendence has is of how to remain articulate without resorting to forms of defence that collapse the tension which is at the heart of Christianity. Any attempt to definitively avoid criticism coming from one direction is likely to take us into the path of another, and either way, we lose sight of the actual predicament we are in.[60] But ethics concerns the predicament we are in; we cannot fully engage with this predicament whilst our reflection is shaped by the desire to evade it.

Cross-pressures: forgiveness, cost and trust

This diagnosis of a 'cross-pressured' intellectual landscape has a particular relevance to the discourse on forgiveness, especially insofar as the latter involves the evaluation of cost. As we have seen, one of the key questions in these kinds of discussions is the way that as an ideal forgiveness asks us to interfere in some way with impulses and emotions, or the cognitive judgements that they are intimately entwined with. If one wants to affirm forgiveness as an unambiguous human good, one would first have to show how the aspiration to forgive in response to wrongdoing does not damage us by interfering with other responses which, although they may be less attractive, do seem to be fairly natural, and by implication, to have something to do with human flourishing. Here one defends against the sense that perhaps we contort ourselves in the effort to forgive. But then, if one is aiming to fulfil the 'maximal demand' one would also have to show that it aims high enough, that it does not fail to aspire, and is not a form of accommodation based on a too-rosy conception of human life. Here one defends against the suspicion that forgiveness is simply too easy, too convenient, and that the harsh realities of human behaviour require a sterner attitude towards life, for the sake of individuals and the social body. In other words, understanding forgiveness seems to involve the evaluation of very different - almost opposing - kinds of cost, that are nevertheless intimately related. Forgiveness could be an ethical aspiration that fails to accept ordinary human limitations by demanding too much; or else a weakened

[59]Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 772.

[60]See Taylor, *A secular age*, pp. 624-5.

tolerance through which we *accept* too much and aim for too little; at once too difficult and too easy. It appears that in the gospel material, both of these possibilities appear to be confronted and accepted in advance, as part of the challenge that forgiveness presents. Forgiveness is part of an ethic that exceeds ordinary reciprocity and seems to ask us to draw on far deeper reservoirs of generosity than we usually have access to ('give, expecting nothing in return', etc.); but is also linked to a willingness to remain exposed to violence, rather than defend oneself or retaliate (even if such exposure should be understood as a form of active resistance, a refusal of the imposition of victim status, as Walter Wink suggests)[61] and awkwardly related to the need to hold others accountable for the sake of community, and the demand for repentance (as is apparent in the internal tensions of the material in Matthew chapter 18).

Charles Griswold's account (as one of the best examples of the secular interest in forgiveness) for all its subtlety, insight and scope, might be said to suffer from what in Taylor's terms is an unwillingness to be 'impaled'; a desire for unambiguous, cost-free progress, or a perfectly affirming aspiration, particularly in its attempt to describe what it is to forgive in relation to the meaning of resentment. The understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and resentment is shaped by both sides of the cross-pressured affirmation/aspiration complex described above. An obvious response here would be that this is simply to describe the process of consideration that lies behind a detailed presentation such as Griswold's. That is, this kind of negotiation of different concerns is simply what is involved in thinking something through to the best of one's ability. We consider possible responses to any particular way of expressing an idea, as

[61]See Walter Wink, *Engaging the powers: discernment and resistance in a world of domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 175-194. On Wink's understanding, the injunctions in the Sermon on the Mount (to turn the other cheek) should be read not as injunctions to refuse to refuse violence at all costs, so as to remain outside of violence, but as ways of non-violently responding to violence, so as to act creatively within violence. The key point is that those who follow the way of active non-violent engagement learn to see the futility of violent exertion of power - its essential powerlessness. This involves what Wink describes as the 'rehearsal' of non-violence; that is, the employment of one's capacity to imagine one's own exposure to violence to learn, with great difficulty, to perceive the possibility of a 'third way'; a response to violence that refuses the either/or that violence presents: either be a victim or mirror the violator. We are always, compulsively, asking 'what if...?', and on Wink's reading, the gospel material should encourage a redeeming of this usually reactive tendency, so that the power and possibility of non-violence is learned and gradually trusted in advance. See pp. 231-240.

well as its inner coherence, and both of these may include combining different kinds of concerns: how likely is a particular idea to be motivational, how plausible does it seem from a variety of perspectives, how acceptable are the main lines of interpretation it allows, etc. Griswold perceives, quite rightly, that forgiveness is tremendously ambiguous and open to both abuse and vacuousness, and more than this, assumes that at present the balance has swung in one particular direction, so that there is a tendency towards an over-enthusiastic embrace of its virtues without consideration of its risks. As a result, he presents an account that substantially qualifies the concept, and aims to redress the balance to a certain extent. An awareness of the potentially 'mutilating' nature of ethical aspirations - especially those that have religious overtones - is simply part of this process, and goes alongside a desire to present ideals and corresponding practices that combine rigour and hope as convincingly as possible. However, the suggestion that runs through Taylor's analysis is that these 'cross-pressures' may adversely affect our capacity for ethical reflection (particularly when it comes to reacting to religious ideas), because it may mean that in the course of defending against certain accusations our assumptions shift, and if this is not owned or admitted to, it allows us to evade the possibility of confronting the real limitations and costs of ethical life. What seems to be missing from Griswold's account, then, is the sense that we evaluate forgiveness, and especially the costs of forgiveness, with a somewhat conflicted gaze. We interrogate the subject with concerns that do not easily cohere, and consideration of forgiveness is one of the ways in which this conflict, or lack of resolve, becomes obvious.

The 'cross-pressures' outlined above necessarily concern openness to the future, to our anticipation and negotiation with possibilities. Although Griswold, in his definition of forgiveness, focuses primarily on the moral implications of a discrete *act* of forgiveness, the note of caution has more to do with the implications of an ongoing commitment to forgiveness: what does a forgiving life produce, encourage, or permit; in oneself or in community life? There is an affirmation that forgiveness is virtuous because it expresses a hopeful commitment to certain values, that it fosters trust:

> Forgiveness rests in part, I argued above, on trust that the projected narratives about the offender, as well as oneself, will become true. Forgiveness is, so to speak, a vote for the victory of such values as respect, growth and renewal, harmony of self and reconciliation, affection and love. ... Acting on the basis of these ideals may also have a constitutive character, such that treating oneself and the other as capable

of ethical growth may in itself help to promote that growth.[62]

However, what this highlights is the way in which forgiveness necessarily eludes the kind of justification that Griswold attempts to provide through his careful definition. The actual moment of forgiving is very carefully defined and framed, but the conditions that are outlined involve some level of judgement concerning the future. The crucial distinction between warranted and unwarranted resentment, is only visible after a judgement concerning the future, because assessing the authenticity of another's remorse, resolve, understanding, commitment, etc., all rely on anticipation. Resentment will only seem to be 'no longer warranted' if another's repentance seems to be genuine; but it will only seem to be genuine if I no longer imagine them repeating their hostility towards me. But this is not, surely, simply a matter of assessment, because at this point, our evaluation of another is intimately bound up, one way or another, with a much more basic sense of our own vulnerability - our ongoing response to our exposure to others. In other words, the judgement we use to discern whether it would be good to forgive is already intimately bound up with trust, but trust cannot be subject to the same kind of definitive assessment and safeguarding that this definition of forgiveness aims to provide. We cannot know whether treating oneself and the other as capable of growth will help promote that growth, or whether our 'vote' for respect and renewal will lead to victory or not. Our exposure to the possibility of being hurt by another, and our response to this possibility, already conditions our thinking; we ask whether it is wise, acceptable or profitable to forgive in part because of the need to respond to this exposure. The assumption in Griswold's treatment of resentment is that since it can be shown that resentment is not simply an unpleasant reaction, but has an important cognitive aspect, and is in many respects a central part of our capacity to stand for certain values, and since forgiveness must also be a 'vote' for these values, that there should be a basic harmony between them. So that on Griswold's account, the (properly) resentful person wants the same thing that the (properly) forgiving person wants. But this is precisely what is at issue in the question trust: whether it involves a different way of desiring - and therefore of hoping - for the best. If there is something virtuous about trust, then it is surely something to do with *how* we desire what we desire; trust involves a more peaceful desire, a kind of hopeful openness. The relationship between trust and

[62]Griswold, *Forgiveness*, p. 71.

the character of resentment, then, appears to be important. What Griswold does not bring out in his discussion is the way in which resentment may include a demand for security; that is, a demand for it to be no longer possible to be hurt in the way in which one has been hurt: one resents not simply the actuality (which is focused upon a particular person, their actions and intentions), but the possibility of the hurt one has suffered. This is perhaps why there is a strong tendency for resentment to become excessive; one cannot exclude, except through violence to oneself or another (physically or emotionally), the possibility of further violation, and so the demand is necessarily insatiable. In this case, forgiveness would not simply be a norm-governed shift out of resentment at the right moment, or, as Griswold wants to rule out, an other-focused giving up resentment (which might imply a judgement of one's resentment), but rather would be allied to a realisation of the futility of resentment. In other words, whatever it is that we - consciously or unconsciously - desire when we resent is now desired differently.

As already suggested in the introduction to this thesis, trust - whether it is in another's sincerity; in one's own capacity to develop a different attitude towards them; or in the giving and forgiving of God that lies behind and ahead of our own forgiveness - appears to be central to the gospel sayings. More than this, the call to trust seems to be a central aspect of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, and to be part of its particular challenge. Jean Hampton, in the influential book co-authored with Jeffrey Murphy, develops these ideas, arguing that forgiveness necessarily involves having faith in another's decency, and is coherent even where the behavioural evidence weighs (or seems to weigh) against such faith.[63] Interestingly, this suggestion is specifically countered in Tara Smith's account of the virtue of forgiveness. Smith argues that this would be to counsel blindness to known facts on the basis of a sunny optimism, and conflicts with the teleological aspect ethics she espouses. There is no reason to think that forgiveness offered to the malevolent in the absence of any signs of them having recognised their wrongdoing will do anything other than confirm their sense of freedom to act as they please. Forgiveness in these circumstances does not get us any closer to our ideals.[64] For Smith, if forgiveness is to appear as fully just, it must be purged of any

[63]Jean Hampton, 'The retributive idea' in *Forgiveness and Mercy*, ed. Jean Hampton and Jeffrey Murphy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 155.

[64]Smith, 'Tolerance and forgiveness', p. 39.

uncertain risk-taking or trust. However, Hampton's view is far more subtle that Smith allows. She observes that where the movement towards reconciliation is based in an *attempt* to believe in the decency of another, it is more than likely to fail at the first hurdle. How, then, is the command to have faith in the possibility of forgiveness not simply an injunction to make oneself believe something (which is surely self-defeating)? Or put differently, what is the difference between real hope and naive optimism? Hampton suggests that hope concerning the possibility of real repentance (even when pronounced for the seventy seventh time) is linked to reflections on our own character: '[t]o the extent that we reflect on how the evidence of our own actions indicates a poor state of character, then if we would wish for a more generous reading of our character in spite of those actions, we should respect others' wish that we be generous with them.' Thus far, one might say that the command to trust in another's repentance (or their capacity for forgiveness) and so continue to offer forgiveness is a case of 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you'; and if this means letting someone else off the hook in the same way that I hope to be let off the hook, it seems a morally dubious form of hope or trust. However, there is a further point, which is perhaps more important. Our faith in the decency of another is intimately linked to the kind of hope we have regarding our own state of being. Our trust that the fragile and flawed repentance expressed by another may become the grounds for real change is less likely to be self-deception if we know the presence of something similar within ourselves. And here, Hampton argues, is another reason for actively resisting moral hatred: our judgements and evaluations of others tend to fall back on ourselves, so that if we refuse to trust in the way that forgiveness requires us to trust, we are liable to end up unable to forgive ourselves. For Hampton, this is a more helpful reading of the parable of the unforgiving servant: the one who refuses to act mercifully cannot show themselves mercy, and as the gospel saying suggests, one is judged with the form of judgement one uses ('the measure you give will be the measure you get', etc.).[65] The one who says 'Raca' is in danger of 'the hell of fire', because the contempt they heap on another immerses them in self-contempt, and nothing can rescue one from this burning, since there is no-one well respected enough to put it out with an encouraging word.[66]

[65]Hampton, 'The retributive idea', p. 155-6.

[66]See also Hampton, 'Forgiveness, resentment and hatred', in *Forgiveness and mercy*, pp. 64-5 on this point.

For Hampton, then, the decision to extend forgiveness involves a deeper trust than that with which we take a calculated risk that something might work out well (which is the way that Smith seems to envisage evaluation of the propriety of forgiveness). It is a trust that emerges from a sense that *there is forgiveness*; that is, that we can be forgiven, as we forgive.

In a memorable passage at the end of her 'Articulating an uncompromising forgiveness' Pamela Hieronymi suggests that allowing oneself to be forgiven also involves an act of trust: '[y]ou 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.' When seen in this light, the importance of supplication, apology, expressions of remorse, and other aspects of the offender's role in the scene of forgiveness can be seen as tests of our ability to trust in this way. To approach one's victim with pleas of ignorance, or excuses, or pointing out one's own victim status may not simply be signs of a dislike of rebuke or the burden of responsibility - a lack of moral fibre - but more deeply, may be the result of doubt that our wrongdoings can be 'borne' in this way, without mitigation. In fact, to develop this suggestion further, one might say that if this is what forgiveness is, then to undergo punishment, or vindictive reprisal may in one sense be easier than being forgiven, in that such responses are attempts to do something about the wrong suffered, whether through reparation, retribution or revenge. But to ask forgiveness may be to acknowledge a deeper powerlessness, and so to contemplate the sheer unchangeable givenness of what one has done, and along with this, the sense of one's own exposure to such acts. So long as one remains unforgiven, and subject to another's hatred, resentment or revenge, there is the sense that one's action naturally issues in some kind of response, whether proportional or excessive. In other words, there is a pre-existing answer to the question 'what now?', even if it is a harsh and unpleasant answer. But to simply be forgiven - even if this is a task that has two sides, and is not without some level of give-and-take - may be to contemplate the plain reality of one's actions.

These are brief suggestions, and require further exploration, some of which is attempted in chapters three and four. However, the point I hope to have made above is that the qualities and costs of forgiveness appear to be necessarily beyond moral justification, insofar as we can never fully justify what we are prepared to trust in and hope for, however much we may be held accountable for the results of our trust and hope. The meaning and justice of forgiveness do not appear harmoniously together,

such that to definitively defend the reality of the one seems to remove the other from sight. As a result, forgiveness is never simply the subject of our ethical reflection, but always at the same time a trial and test of it.

III
Forgiveness without reason

The first part of this chapter expressed dissatisfaction towards the attempt to make forgiveness fully intelligible, to express its various aspects and meanings as a harmonious whole free of tension. Whilst there are important insights to be gained through such attempts, and clarification is to be found through them, there nonetheless remains a sense of something missing, as if, despite the ground gained, one had still managed to miss the heart of the matter. Taylor's analysis further emphasises the way in which reflection on forgiveness is shaped by concerns which do not easily cohere with each other. The question this leaves is of what alternatives there may be, and whether such alternatives are any more satisfying. The conclusion above is that the attempt to make forgiveness fully coherent and just - to defend forgiveness - has the effect of making it subject to assumptions that are pre-rational and that we cannot, in any case, demonstrate. In particular, the process of justification involves our sense of whether, and how, trust is warranted, our sense of how benignly the current of time flows.

This chapter approaches similar issues from a slightly different direction. If instead of trying to explain or justify forgiveness through reference to moral and rational criteria, Vladimir Jankelevitch argues that forgiveness has its own reasons, so that the discourse which articulates forgiveness is involves pursuit more than careful scrutiny. The question that begins to emerge in consideration of this approach is of how the 'moment' of forgiveness is related to the rest of life, and the forms of thinking which sustain it. This question has already been touched upon in the discussion of how a forgiving life might be said to combine different virtues, but here the issue is of how different forms of thinking cohere, or not, as the case may be.

A number of different conceptual tensions or difficulties can be discerned within our understanding of forgiveness. Different streams of thinking respond to these difficulties in different ways. One can present them as paradoxes, and through conceptual clarification try to show that the paradox arises through a fault of reasoning, and so does

not hold. Alternatively, one might take the difficulty as an opportunity for thought, or an articulation of a real existential difficulty, so that the suffering of the dilemmas of life finds a corollary in a form of intellectual suffering. Finally, one might relate the particular paradoxes, tensions or aporias of the particular topic of forgiveness to a metaphysics of paradox, such that the intellectual difficulties have a home in a framework which resolves to keep certain issues unresolved, and takes this as a positive and constitutive element of thinking. Very roughly, this is one way of characterising the analytic, continental and theological approaches to the subject. Although Charles Griswold does not look for a simple, logically resolved formula, he is interested in showing the basic coherence of forgiveness in reference to certain intellectual norms and generally accepted ethical ideals. In contrast, this chapter will begin with an exposition of Jankelevitch's attempt to articulate a fundamentally paradoxical - and so confrontational - account of forgiveness and then move to a discussion of the limits of this approach.

Paradox and the moment of forgiveness

A particularly succinct expression of the conceptual difficulty of forgiveness is found in Aurel Kolnai's essay on the 'logical paradoxy' of forgiveness, which has become a key point of reference for philosophical discussions of the subject. Kolnai puts it very simply: '[b]riefly, forgiveness is either unjustified or pointless.'[67] If I am unrepentant, unremorseful and malevolent, then to forgive is simply to condone my behaviour, and is unjustified; if I am humble, weighed down with remorse and eager to make amends in any way I can, then to forgive is simply to give me what I, in my sorry state, warrant, and is no more than the application of justice. Kolnai presents this difficulty as the difficulty of defining forgiveness in such a way that its necessary components do not render it incoherent. For Kolnai, the nuance which rescues forgiveness from this unforgiving either/or is found in the mystery of personal identity. If I sin, and then sincerely repent, then I both am and am not the same person: I am the person who did

[67] Aurel Kolnai, 'Forgiveness' in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian society* 75, p. 99. In Taylor's terms, we might say that the telling part of Kolnai's formulation is the word 'pointless'; the concern is that we sanitise or diminish the force of forgiveness so that there is no real energy left in it.

such and such, and will always have been this person; and yet insofar as my repentance is genuine, I am *not* the same person I was.[68] As Nicolas Tavuchis notes, this tension is reflected in the complexities of apology: to apologise convincingly, I have to show that I accept the unalterable fact of responsibility, whilst showing that the act in question does not reveal a previously hidden and ongoing malevolence, i.e. I have to somehow communicate that 'it was me, but it wasn't *me*'.[69] The 'either unjustified or pointless' paradox is loosened by showing how the object of forgiveness is not the past-sinner, but the now-repentant sinner. This means that there is still enough of the sinner left to forgive, but not so much that forgiveness would condone the hostility expressed through his or her action.[70] As we have seen, Griswold negotiates this paradox through his very careful definition of what is let go of in forgiveness; that is, through a focus on what is done by the one forgiving rather than the identity of the one forgiven.[71] Although initially expressed as 'the letting go of resentment for moral reasons', more fully, it can be expressed as 'the letting go of *no-longer-warranted* resentment for moral reasons', which as we have seen, leaves forgiveness for the morally cultivated, who know why and when and for how long to be resentful. The nuance here, therefore, is that there is a moment - the kairos moment of forgiveness -[72] when resentment is no longer needed,

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[68]Kolnai, 'Forgiveness', p. 101.

[69]Nicolas Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa: a sociology of apology and reconciliation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 26.

[70]See P. Twambly, 'Mercy and forgiveness' in *Analysis* 36, 1976, pp. 84-90 for a short response to Kolnai published not long after Kolnai's. Twambly criticises Kolnai for the attempt to make forgiveness something earned, and for the way in which his discussion conflates blame and resentment. Twambly (very briefly) suggests that it is the failure to understand the role of gift in human interaction that weakens Kolnai's approach: '[m]any highly regarded moral actions are not demanded of one; they are not earned by their recipients, nor are they acts to which one is bound. Rather they are gifts, actions freely performed, sacrifices freely made. Eminent among these are the gifts of mercy and forgiveness.' (p. 90) See Marilyn MacCord Adams, 'Forgiveness: a Christian model' in *Christian theism and moral philosophy*, ed. Michael Beaty and Mark Nelson (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), for a discussion of both.

[71]Griswold does explore the question of identity - primarily in the section on narrative - but this is not the primary location of his defence/description of forgiveness.

[72]See Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa*, pp. 86 - 88 for a description of a 'kairos' moment in the timing of apology. As Tavuchis describes it, the purpose of apology is 'to retrace the offence and convert it into an occasion for sorrow, expiation and forgiveness'; if offered too soon, it may indicate indifference, and self-interest - it becomes an unconsidered reflex; if offered too late it becomes more and more difficult

and yet not yet a morally objectionable residue.

Griswold assumes that the emergence of this moment is governed by moral norms, and so is largely dependent on the wrongdoer. There is a passage, which takes time, between a situation in which there is no place for forgiveness, only defensive resentment and moral indignation, and a situation to which the best response (although not necessarily the only one) is forgiveness. The person forgiving must possess the discernment necessary to judge that this passage has taken place, and it is their willingness to see this that makes forgiveness possible, but forgiving is primarily a response to what is already given. Vladimir Jankelevitch's book *Le Pardon*, translated as *Forgiveness,* is given almost entirely to consideration of this moment, and in stark contrast to Griswold, concludes that this moment is one of madness, when the force of love pierces through the surface of our understanding: 'a fleeting shock', or an 'imperceptible flickering of charity'.[73] Jankelevitch concludes that forgiveness is necessarily creative, and this creativity consists in a form of response that is not governed by the reality of the offender or what has been. In other words, to forgive is to *create* the moment of forgiveness, in an act of 'drastic positing'.[74] Without this momentary interruption one does not have forgiveness at all.

As a result Jankelevitch treats much of the detail that is found in our descriptions or justifications of forgiveness to be evidence of the rarity of the real thing, which means that his account quite deliberately challenges some of the intuitions that Griswold attempts to account for, or revise as gently as possible.[75] The tradition in which Jankelevitch is situated is quite distinct, and takes a very particular approach to the

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to call up the past convincingly, and apology becomes more and more complicated. Tavuchis' point is that effective apology relies on a very subtle judgement concerning these things, but the point could equally be made for offering forgiveness. The necessity for a delay in apology should seen in relation to the delay in gift-exchange, whereby to offer a return gift too soon indicates an insulting failure to receive, and to leave the return too long indicates a refusal of the invitation the initial gift represents.

[73]Vladimir Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, tr. Andrew Kelly (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 4.

[74]See John Llewelyn, 'In the name of philosophy', in *Research in phenomenology* 28, p. 41. Jankelevitch was Emmanuel Levinas' doctoral examiner, and on Llewelyn's account, the sense of rupture that runs throughout Levinas's work owes much to Jankelevitch, although for the former, the rupture originates in ethical responsibility, and the face of the other, rather than an act of creation prior to predicative judgement.

[75]On this point, see Griswold, 'A reply to my critics', pp. 307-8.

philosophical task in general. However, the perspective on forgiveness that Jankelevitch expresses has resonance regardless of the set of philosophical commitments it belongs to. In particular Jankelevitch's account gives rigorous yet poetic expression to the intuition that forgiveness has something to do with the miraculous or mysterious, as we will see. This intuition is itself an important part of the discussion, and disagreement as to its significance has an effect on the discussion (as is reflected by the encounter between Herbert Morris and Jeffrey Murphy, for example).[76]

For Jankelevitch, the only valid discourse on forgiveness is one which proceeds primarily negatively: one can speak easily and at length about an 'impure, opaque forgiveness', but pure forgiveness is so simple that its 'limpid transparency' resists description.[77] However, this sense of force, of almost violent interruption should not be taken to indicate that forgiveness is an exercise of sheer will; on the contrary, forgiveness is a moment of 'tender agape' and a whole world away from the indifference of the Stoic sage, who is never concerned enough about the other to be insulted by them, or the cost-free generosity of a mad billionaire, who throws her money out of the window to random passers-by.[78] Nevertheless, forgiveness is an act, not an emotion; whereas pity has a 'because' in the condition of the afflicted one, forgiveness is not prompted or explained by any such 'because'. In fact, forgiveness forgives 'even though'.[79] Just as for Jankelevitch forgiveness is difficult to describe, so is his book, because although in one sense it is utterly simple, the simplicity of the central point is returned to again and again, and each time the exposition grows deeper. The broad outline is that real forgiveness is distinguished by its lack of reliance on the temporal decay which means that everything is always being forgotten, becoming gradually less significant, and by its indifference to the task of assessing the complexity of events so as to understand them better. In both senses, then, forgiveness goes against the grain in some way.

Firstly then, forgiveness must not be dependent upon the passing of time. The

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[76]See Herbert Morris 'Murphy on forgiveness' in *Criminal justice ethics*, vol. 7, issue 2, Summer 1988, especially pp. 16 and 19. Morris argues that Murphy neglects the sense that forgiveness carries a sense of transcendence and grace, and then suggests that one of the characteristics of forgiveness is the way in which it seems beyond the simple operation of the will, and yet happens through us nonetheless.

[77]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, pp. 5-6.

[78]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 7.

[79]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, pp. 129-130.

constant becoming of time appears to lend a certain natural impetus to forgiveness. In time, regardless of the force of one's resentment, everything will be forgotten, and is therefore irrelevant. Just as time gradually erases the actual effects of a misdeed, so it erases the clarity of the memories in which it is preserved, and even someone who nurtures their resentment lovingly will eventually succumb like everyone else to fatigue, and all will be forgotten.[80] But if forgiving is something that can be made easier by the increasing distance of the offence from the offended, it becomes an act with no ethical significance, for the nature of the ethical is to be unnatural.[81] There is a certain immortality in wrongdoing related to 'the fact of having-done'.[82] For Jankelevitch, there is no relationship between 'axiology' and chronology, that is, value is atemporal.[83] Although the event of any offence is part of the continual becoming of time, and this flux exercises a corrosive force upon the reality of sin - successive moments drive each other back into forgetting, memories become more vague, repercussions abate - at the same time, the reality of offence is imperishable. If there is to be forgiveness, it must somehow access, or confront, or change, the atemporal - the fact of having done, the very thing that time leaves intact. Where forgiveness is conceived of as being in some way harmonious with the passage of time, so that a backward looking resentment is overcome by a forward looking forgiveness, one simply fails to recognise the kind of thing we are talking about when we talk about wrongdoing, because ethics 'wants to be scandalously, paradoxical antireal.'[84] The heart of forgiveness has nothing to do with progression or erosion; where there is really something to be forgiven, time is of no use.

Secondly, there is something about the notion of forgiveness that opposes the careful and complex task of understanding. Forgiveness cannot look for reasons to forgive in the circumstances of the original misdeed, nor in the current disposition of the offender, nor in any possible future outcome. In the first case, this might involve looking for mitigating circumstances that render the intention and act less serious; in the second, the presence of remorse which asks for forgiveness, or the loveability of the offender; and in the third, the possibility that forgiveness may aid moral transformation, or that the

[80]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 54.

[81]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 51.

[82]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 42.

[83]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, pp. 44 and 47.

[84]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 51.

sinner may 'continue to express himself and to renew himself beyond the misdeed.'[85] Jankelevitch's analysis of the relationship between excuse, understanding, sympathy and forgiveness is extremely subtle, but the basic point is fairly simple: forgiveness can have nothing to do with the perspective that increased understanding offers. Understanding may exonerate the innocent (meaning there is nothing to forgive), or encourage increased leniency where appropriate (so as to make justice kinder), but either way, the logic is of giving what is due, responding to a condition that is already present, and it is here that Jankelevitch opposes forgiveness to even the most perfect combination of rigour and empathy in judgement. Forgiveness pays no attention to justifying itself or giving reasons.[86]

This means that even where judgement is construed as a process that necessarily involves compassion, so that mercy or leniency is an expression not of a dismissive or amoral attitude towards wrongdoing, but of a genuinely moral wisdom, it is *still* not to be thought of forgiveness. In a particularly insightful passage, Jankelevitch notes the way in which comprehension and love are mutually conditioning:

> Love, by dint of loving, finishes by understanding, and by dint of understanding, finishes by loving. By virtue of a veritable circular causality, sympathy is at the same time the consequence and condition of intellection. One sympathises by dint of understanding, but in order to understand, it is already necessary to sympathize, the two at the same time; intellection, effect and cause of love, is wholly penetrated by love.[87]

One only understands if one wants to understand, and to want to understand already implies love. Therefore judgement, strictly speaking, is impossible without love, and the compassionate gaze. Forgiveness is a giving which is unmotivated, and involves something like a 'facing-down' of the truth, rather than a response to it. Forgiveness is its own ground and cause, and in a sense produces the innocence it pronounces:

> Above all, forgiveness obeys neither the causality of the loveable, nor the causality of the detestable; it is unleashed neither by a pre-existent value, nor by a counter-value; it trails behind nothing… Not only is it not

[85]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 81. This is almost exactly how Trudy Govier presents forgiveness: as response to the intrinsic worth of the person. To conclude that someone is a 'moral monster' and therefore unforgivable is to assume the worst, and assume that someone is swallowed up by the significance of one act and no longer open to moral transformation. See Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and revenge*, (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 70, 110, 112, 124.

[86]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*., pp. 92-5.

[87]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 88.

> because the accused is innocent that forgiveness receives him (innocence, on the contrary, rendering forgiveness superfluous), rather it is much more because forgiveness forgives that the guilty person becomes innocent.[88]

As we have seen above, the desire to present the goodness of forgiveness as unambiguously as possible seems to go along with a rather cold and uninspiring definition of forgiveness, that seems somewhat at odds with the virtues it is thought to express. Here, the risk that that approach tries to neutralise (that the forgiving person has to set aside what they should not set aside) is embraced as the whole truth of forgiveness. Or in Taylor's terms, forgiveness is thought to be a good by virtue of its transcendent madness or danger. In a sense, Jankelevitch does not even attempt to argue this basic conviction, it is simply presumed that it will appear as self-evident as each distinction between pure forgiveness and everything else is described. It is very much like an apaphatic theology (as he himself realises)[89] with the focus on the distinction between the transcendent deity and everything else, rather than the question of whether there is any reality to fill the place that the negative gestures mark out. Here I am concerned not simply with the arguments presented but with this assumption; the sense that somehow, forgiveness is, and should be, *drastic*. Jankelevitch's book could be explored endlessly, and a full critique would be needed to engage with his whole philosophy, which I cannot do, but two very closely related issues can be drawn out in the concluding discussion: the relationship between forgiveness and the temporal processes of understanding involved in judgement, and the relationship between forgiveness, anticipation and hope.

Love and understanding: the future of forgiveness

The comment above about the 'veritable circular causality' of sympathy and 'intellection' is echoed in Martha Nussbaum's essay 'Equity and mercy'. Through interaction with Aristotle and Seneca, as well as Andrea Dworkin's novel *Mercy*, Nussbaum explores the question of whether appropriate situational judgement can include mercy. Aristotle proposes that the equitable person is characterised by a

[88]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 145.

[89]See, for example Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, pp. 5, 119.

forgiving attitude towards human things, so that one can perceive motives and intentions, and says that this means the ability to see 'with' the other.[90] However, this does not lead to an affirmation of mercy, because for Aristotle, the point is still to separate out the truly guilty from those who superficially resemble them, rather than be lenient towards those who are found truly guilty. Compassionate judgement leads one to classify offences with more discernment, but not necessarily to alter the appropriate response once a final verdict has been reached. However, Nussbaum notes that mercy seems to refer to something more than this; 'a gentleness going beyond due proportion, even to the deliberate offender.'[91] In *On anger*, Seneca initially notes that a closer look at the complexity of human situations may provoke increased leniency *or* harsher condemnation, but then goes on to suggest that human errors and crimes are more the result of 'yielding to pressures that lie very deep in the fabric of human life.'[92] Circumstances are at the origin of vice, not innate propensities. Furthermore, the retributive tendency to become preoccupied with assigning just punishments hardens the spirit, and turns it against humanity, so that one begins to mirror the callousness of those one judges. The cultivation of humanity that Seneca proposes involves an imaginative exercise of putting oneself in the narrative of another's life, so as to feel how the particular pressures of circumstances they faced contributed to their actions, responses, and even the formation of their intentions. 'Seneca's bet is that once one performs this imaginative exercise one will cease to have the strict retributive attitude to the punishment of the offender. ... And the punishments that one does assign will be chosen, on the whole, not for their retributive function but for their power to improve the life of the defendant.'[93] Nussbaum goes on to argue that this implies that narrative sensibility is an intimate part of merciful judgement, and that the novel in particular is a construction based upon the capacity and need for mercy: [t]he novel's structure is a structure of *suggnome* - of the penetration of the life of another into one's own

[90]Martha Nussbaum, 'Equity and mercy' in *Judging and understanding: essays on free will, narrative, meaning and the ethical limits of condemnation*, ed. Pedro Tabensky (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), p. 13.

[91]Nussbaum, 'Equity and mercy', p. 15.

[92]Nussbaum, 'Equity and mercy', p. 17.

[93]Nussbaum, 'Equity and mercy', p. 20. This capacity is, in turn, cultivated by a daily practice of self-examination, in which one honestly notes one's errors and, fearing nothing from them, says to oneself 'see that you don't do that again, this time I pardon you.'

imagination and heart.'[94] The practice of entering into the complex sequence of events that act as pressures upon action necessarily involves and in turn produces what might be called a merciful gaze.

Despite the very similar sense that love, understanding and judgement are intimately linked in this way, this is not, for Jankelevitch, an indication that the cultivation of forgiveness goes along with the cultivation of the humility of judgement just described. Forgiveness is an event of love in a way that has nothing to do with this tendency to judge mercifully, even though this understanding is dependent upon love. This in turns means that 'forgivingness' is not the kind of thing one cultivates through the kind of self-examination Seneca recommends, or through compassionate imaginative efforts to see from the other's perspective. Forgiveness does not emerge from, or sustain an underlying or ongoing attitude. The understanding just outlined may well involve a costly sacrifice or painful renunciation (of the self-centred perspective), but this renunciation is not the event of forgiveness.[95] The reason for this is that forgiveness is dependent upon a notion of offence which could not appear through the processes of understanding described by both Nussbaum (via Seneca) and Jankelevitch himself. The 'fact of having done' refers to the way in which malicious intention flashes in an instant which never has any duration, but nevertheless is then immortal; this is what one first has to see, or rather, this is *how* one must first see, in order to forgive. The object of forgiveness is not the damage done in time, which can sometimes be amended, sometimes forgotten, sometimes excused, but the meaning, which exists atemporally even though it arises in time. It is this that forgiveness responds to, with a similarly 'tangential' moment. But this also means that in a sense, the moral wrongness that forgiveness is concerned with is only recognised as such in a similarly pure instant of condemnation. If forgiveness has no duration, and can only be 'brushed against', then

[94]Nussbaum, 'Equity and mercy', p. 24. The conclusion about the ethical significance of the novel can be compared with Gillian Rose's rather enigmatic comments about the 'sympathy of the ultimate predator' which seems to be referring to film watching in particular. One can sympathise with the spider, or with the fly, given the right presentation. 'Since she is the ultimate predator, she can be sentimental about the victimhood of other predators while overlooking that victim's own violent predation; and she may embellish her arbitrary selectivity of compassion in rhapsodies and melodramas.' See Gillian Rose, *Mourning becomes the law: philosophy and representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 48.

[95]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 82.

the condemnation which it confronts should, equally, be only negatively described, by its utter difference from our usual ways of understanding, judging or condemning, which always involve some level of process, and take time. However, Jankelevitch does not draw this conclusion. Despite the extremely elegant description of understanding as a labour of love rather than a search for objective accuracy, Jankelevitch does not explore the obvious problem that his conception of the truly ethical perspective produces: the recognition of wrongdoing remains just as beyond us as true forgiveness. And more than this, in order to forgive one must in fact cultivate a way of seeing the utter simplicity of evil that is in some sense opposed to the judgement of love.

The conception of pure forgiveness offered tends to assume that the perception of complexity is likely to be complicit in a deferral of judgement. If forgiveness emerges from this kind of perception (that things are always more complicated that condemnation allows) then forgiveness is not pure, because it may be motivated by one's desire to avoid conflict or receive similar judgement oneself. But what is not sufficiently noted is the way that simplicity in judgement is equally open to abuse, so that the abstraction of sinner/sin/sinned against can be a resource for manipulation, coercion, deception, etc. And as a result 'I forgive you' can be impure in its purity, so to speak, insofar as it presumes a completed verdict that it then suspends or abandons in some way. 'I forgive you' is always a judgement of one kind or another, and in the worst cases it may be 'a particularly clever form of vengeance,' a way of judging without judging (all of the benefits but none of the risk or difficulty).[96] But because the ideal of forgiveness is *only* creative, and not at all responsive or responsible, the moment of judgement is disowned, so that it is either presumed that someone, or some aspect of the person, will be able to produce a solid recognition and naming of evil. In fact we can 'brush against' the purity of forgiveness *only* within the sphere of simple judgements[97]

However, there is an asymmetry in the two moments of simplicity. Jankelevitch argues that we cannot take up residence in the moment of forgiveness, since its purity makes its point 'infinitely fine'. However, the whole structure of the book indicates that he assumes that we can take up residence within the condemnation of evil; *its* simplicity

[96]See James Alison on this point in *On being liked* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd), pp. 32-46.

[97]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, pp. 115-6.

is much more habitable.[98] In the case of forgiveness, Jankelevitch assumes that although there is no process of translating the instant of forgiveness into habitual forms of understanding or ways of living, the effects of these moments may, nevertheless, be observed, and felt: '[t]he miracle is that the instantaneous advent is capable of inaugurating a future, of founding a new life, of instituting new relations among men; the miracle is that an era of peace could outlive the joyous instant.'[99] Perhaps, then, we might also conclude that the instantaneous moment of condemnation (the 'jolt' of moral hatred)[100] has no real duration, but nevertheless gives certain possibilities that are manifest in temporal forms of understanding. But here Jankelevitch's presentation gets stuck, because *both* the sacrificial *process* of compassionate-yet-moral judgement and the pure instant of forgiveness are said to be agapeic. The truly understanding judgement, which proceeds in humility, patience, compassion, etc., *necessarily* has duration. To judge in this way is a particular way of taking and giving time: one gives up time in order to consider the complexity of another person. If this kind of understanding is an expression of love, it means that love takes time, love is given in the spending of time. There may be no single moment where judgement is fully agapeic - free from fearful concern for oneself, personalised resentment towards the other, unseen individual bias, etc. - but love is *in* the duration of the effort itself, the openness that this supposes.

Why, then, is Jankelevitch so committed to the instant, to an uninhabitable point that gives no habits? A full engagement with this question would require interaction with Jankelevitch's work as a whole, which I cannot offer. John Milbank offers a brief but extremely dense critique of this position, in terms of the immanent conception of time that lies in the background. For Milbank, it is because the past only *is* through memory

[98]This is particularly evident in his essay 'Should we pardon them?', where he rages against the presumption that the guilt incurred in the Shoah is subject to any erosion. Here Jankelevitch argues that forgiveness is meaningless without the request for forgiveness, and that some evils are so beyond human comprehension that they become unforgivable. In a sense, Jankelevitch actually confirms his own point here: the fine point of forgiveness is uninhabitable, even for someone who is able to affirm this. See 'Should we pardon them?' tr. Ann Hobart in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 22, no. 3, 1996. Derrida's discussion of the relationship between the two works is crucial, but discussion of Derrida's position is reserved for the final chapter of this thesis.

[99]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 117.

[100]On this point, see John Milbank's particularly dense discussion of the aporia of forgiveness and time in *Being reconciled: ontology and pardon* (London, Routledge, 2004), pp. 51-6.

that it can be forgiven, in that if even the worst evil can be re-narrated by grace, then what should have been the time of gift can become the time of mercy.[101] For Jankelevitch, the past is real and yet inaccessible; this means that the past *as such* is unforgivable. The only forgiveness, then, can be of the unforgivable, in opposition (unjustified and inexplicable opposition) to temporality. Milbank offers Augustine's conception of time as a way of showing how temporality and forgiveness are not so starkly opposed: '[t]he past, on this understanding, only *is* through memory, and while this does not abolish the ontological inviolability and irreversibility of pastness, it does mean that the event in its very originality is open to alteration and mutation.' Just as a note in a piece of music is situated by its place in the flow, such that it may be changed by what follows (in particular the conclusion of the piece), so any event, whilst always remaining the same, may also come to have a very different significance, given future developments or interpretation.

However, it appears that there is a reason for Jankelevitch's insistence on the instant that is rather more to do with a conviction about the nature of our orientation to the future than it is to do with the philosophical conception of the past which lies in the background. This concerns the way in which forgiveness is risky, and never certain of the future. In his discussion of various kinds of impure forgiveness, Jankelevitch notes that not only might forgiveness be seen as an optimistic anticipation of innocence (one forgives in the hope the apparently guilty will be shown to be innocent) it may also be a way of exerting influence upon someone. To forgive, then, would be a way of developing the 'infinitesimal good will' that, we hope, lies behind the bad will. We pardon in the hope that gratitude will produce reform, and trust in the existence of a tiny seed of goodness. But Jankelevitch notes that this could also be expressed in a more extreme way, so that 'speculation no longer speculates about an independent chance; speculation itself creates a destiny by speculating.' Here forgiveness would imply the power of a transforming will, and 'to have an influence on the guilty person by the power of its radiance alone.'[102] Obviously, there is a similarity here with what is conveyed in the parable of the unmerciful servant, because the parable relies on the expectation that the shock or relief of mercy should produce mercy in turn, and the sense of indignation that is provoked then serves as a caution to those listening: 'so my

[101]See John Milbank, *Being reconciled*, pp. 53-4.

[102]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 110.

Father will do to you if you do not forgive each other from the heart.' Here the suggestion is that it is by being radically different that forgiveness produces radical difference.

Jankelevitch's objection to this is 'the lack of innocence of this tactical forgiveness'. If it is focused upon the future at all, this focus means that forgiveness is not a gift to the other, attention is divided between what could be and what is.[103] The importance of the instant for Jankelevitch appears - in part, at least - to be connected with the idea of an undivided attention to the other.[104] His objection is not entirely consistent, however; it wavers between this sense of giving full attention to what is present, which is in turn linked to the sense that love involves a loss of self in the other, and a sense of the purity of disinterest being tarnished by motivated action.[105] The conflict here is between love as 'tender agape' and love as disinterestedness, and this conflict is part of the reason why there is both an affirmation of the likeness between forgiving and compassionately judging, and a disavowal of this continuity.

What Jankelevitch does not consider, however, is that the difficulty of forgiveness - the reason that forgiveness 'flickers' in a perplexing instant - is not so much that it involves a straightforward giving up of concern towards the future (and with it, concern for the future well-being of this particular other), but because it involves both concern for the future and a total acceptance of what is. But this is exactly what seems to be effected in the 'he who wishes to save his life...' saying considered above. It would perhaps be easier to give up one's life if one no longer desired it, or if it were shown to not be worth desiring. Similarly, it would perhaps be easier to forgive if this meant to abandon - for a miraculous instant - one's concern for the future (one's own future security, recognition, the future of the other, as well as of one's relationship with them). The embrace of the instant would then mean a well-bounded suspension of normality. But if the difficulty of forgiveness - the reason it may be encountered in a drastic moment - is due to the encounter between one's essential and continual concern for the future (for justice, for intimacy, for security, etc.) and an unconditional acceptance of what is.

Interestingly, a few pages after this discussion, Jankelevitch invokes the Jesus-

[103]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness,* pp. 112-3.

[104]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness,* p. 125.

[105]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness* pp. 113 and 120.

saying above to describe the acceptance of forgiveness, after an admission that the radical grace of forgiveness may well convert the sinner. In doing so he comes very close to the approach just outlined, which appears to render the straightforward negativity of his approach suspect:

> And nothing prevents, either, the grace of forgiveness from converting the sinner, provided that this grace did not aim expressly at this conversion like a recompense that was due on account of its generosity, provided that forgiveness did not have the express intention of saving the immortal soul of the guilty person! ... There is then a relation between forgiveness and the transfiguration of the guilty person ... but transfiguration does not need to be devised; and this relation is entirely undeliberated and indirect. ... In these matters, the pretension to efficaciousness is, then, the most common cause of failure, whereas the innocent acceptance of the failure alone renders forgiveness and remorse efficacious. For whoever wants to find salvation will miss it.[106]

What is striking here is the affirmation that forgiveness contains some kind of uniquely efficacious power precisely through its 'innocent' lack of concern for beneficial outcomes (although little is said about why this might be). Here, in contrast to much of the book, there is a relation between the embrace of the paradoxical instant and future possibilities, but it is a relation the one forgiving is not permitted to know of, or anticipate.[107] But this insight could be much more fully developed if it was acknowledged that the lines between forgiveness and judgement are blurred, so that the command to forgive is not simply to exhort one to adopt an 'innocent' attitude towards the present, but equally to provoke a re-thinking of our processes of judgement. In other words, to forgive is sometimes to renounce judgement, sometimes to submit our judgements to judgement, and since we do not know ourselves fully, we may not always know which.[108] This is also to say that forgiveness is a way of being concerned with the future, a way of hoping and desiring. This is exactly what the quotation above suggests; because the relation between forgiveness and its effects are never determinate,

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[106]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 121.

[107]As we will see, a very similar notion appears in Simone Weil's work, so further discussion of this point will be reserved for chapter two.

[108]See Oliver O'Donovan for a description of forgiveness as a 'judgement of judgement', in *The ways of judgement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), p. 94. O'Donovan insists that forgiveness should be understand in terms of its forward looking objectives, as well as a particular form of recollection, meaning that forgiveness always has some relation to public norms of judgement. See pp. 85-100.

in order to forgive one must in 'innocence' renounce control over the future of one's forgiveness. It is not to cease to desire, but to desire differently, to desire without the element of certainty or control.

What I have attempted to do is to reinterpret Jankelevitch's emphasis on the instant of forgiveness, based on certain openings within his own presentation. Rather than being simply in the gratuity of the instant, and in its competition with temporal processes of understanding, the heart of forgiveness is in the way in which these are held together. On my reading, this holding-together is, as Jankelevitch suggests, not a moment which easily submits to evaluation or explication, since to forgive is to accept the worst whilst desiring the best. It is in this sense that forgiveness involves the suffering that characterises the love that 'bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things'.[109]

Conclusion

What I hope to have shown, through the exploration of Charles Griswold's work in particular, is that forgiveness does not submit to reasoned judgement, because in an important sense, forgiveness involves the question of how we relate to our ideals, and the thinking that upholds them. The difficulty encountered in articulating the meaning of forgiveness demonstrates that the concerns that are operative in any evaluation of the good of forgiveness do not necessarily cohere, or pull in the same direction. In this sense, discussion of forgiveness exposes what Charles Taylor has called the 'cross-pressures' of our thinking. Central to this dynamic is the way in which trust is evaluated: if trust is valuable in some way, how can its goodness appear unambiguously, without requiring a sacrifice of other ideals? Perhaps because of this, the idea of forgiveness seems to be intuitively connected to a sense of excessive, or even irrational gratuity, so that forgiveness does not submit to reason but is found through the abandonment of the need for reasons. However, the attempt to fully articulate this sense, through a more poetic and enigmatic discourse, produces in turn a very different restriction: forgiveness may be excessive, gratuitous and even a little mad, but it is, at the same time, unable to exert any challenging or destabilising effect on ordinary

[109] 1 Corinthians 13: 7.

patterns of thinking, and this in turn produces the suspicion of a form of complicity between the two. Utilising some of the inconsistencies in Jankelevitch's very rich presentation, I have attempted to articulate the intuition that forgiveness is not straightforwardly within reason in a rather different way. This may be described in a number of ways: to forgive is to accept what is, and has been, without diminishing one's desire for a better future; to forgive it is to somehow incorporate the worst whilst hoping for the best.

This formulation suggests that forgiveness concerns a way of dwelling within certain tensions - the adoption of a particular posture - and furthermore that the meaning of forgiveness will not be accessible from any single perspective, since it necessarily concerns a process of re-learning. In the next chapter, these insights will be extended through interaction with the thought of Simone Weil, who reflects on these issues in ways that are both illuminating and problematic.

Chapter two

Simone Weil: acceptance, protest and desire

Herbert Morris, who wrote a response to one of Jeffrey Murphy's early articles on forgiveness used the following passage from one of Simone Weil's notebooks to hint towards the sense that forgiveness has a mysterious and transcendent dimension.[1]

> A beloved being who disappoints me. I have written to him. It is impossible that he should not reply by saying what I have said to myself in his name. Men owe us what we imagine they will give us. We must forgive them this debt.
> To accept the fact that they are other than the creatures of our imagination is to imitate the renunciation of God.
> I also am other than what I imagine myself to be. To know this is forgiveness.[2]

These lines are typical of Weil's writing in their simplicity and force. Here forgiveness is linked with transformation of perspective, in that 'we must forgive them this debt' does not simply mean a tempering of unrealistic expectations of others, but aims at a perspective completely purified of 'imagination'.

In what follows I wish to explore in greater depth the kind of tensions that are produced in the attempt to articulate forgiveness as an aspect of transformed perspective through an examination of Simone Weil's notebooks and late essays. As we have begun to explore, forgiveness involves both acceptance and desire, and to forgive is to live through the conflict between the two. Simone Weil is, in Gillian Rose's words, a 'phenomenologist of conflict',[3] and so proves a provocative example here, because of

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[1]Herbert Morris, 'Murphy on forgiveness' in *Criminal justice ethics* 3, p. 16.

[2]Simone Weil, *Gravity and grace*, tr. Emma Crawford and Marion von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 9. Quotations are from *Gravity and grace* where the relevant entry could not be found in the *Notebooks*. *Gravity and grace* is a small selection from the notebooks, edited by Gustav Thibon, with whom Weil lived for a short period of time before she left France.

[3]Gillian Rose, 'Angry angels: Simone Weil and Emmanuel Levinas' in *Judaism and modernity: philosophical essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 220. Rose compares Weil to Levinas in the sense that both use philosophical means to highlight the essentially ethical nature of the religious impulse (p. 212).

her willingness to think in extremes, and for the way in which the conflict within her thinking is so obvious, indeed, consciously reflected upon. If, as suggested, the height of forgiveness would be an unrelenting hope for the best alongside an incorporation of the worst, then in many respects Weil's notebooks and essays are examples of the tension that this involves and produces. In particular, I will focus upon the attempts she makes to reflect upon suffering, and the (sometimes contradictory) insights she forms in the process. Through an exploration of how she believes that a compassionate and attentive recognition of suffering is expressed in the texture of one's thinking itself, I will suggest that Weil is faced with a difficulty in knowing how to articulate the truth that compassion sees. Any positive statement of what suffering means may collude with one's desire to evade attending to it, just as, for Jankelevitch, when one gives reasons for one's graciousness, one betrays. However, I hope to demonstrate that Weil's thinking moves beyond the limitations that are found in an exclusive emphasis on the momentary nature of grace, because the posture of 'waiting' that she describes is a way of dwelling in time. In the second half of the chapter I turn to Weil's understanding of the cross as the perfect instance of 'waiting', and so as the basis for an account of redemptive suffering. Here I compare the virtue that Weil saw in acceptance with Miroslav Volf's discussion of 'strict justice'. This comparison highlights the importance of Weil's thought for our understanding of forgiveness. I will begin, however, with further consideration of some of the synoptic material that relates to forgiveness. The issues raised will frame the discussions that follow.

Introduction: promise, principle and reversal

What follows is a rather schematic presentation of some of the theological issues that hover in the background, given so as to situate Weil's sometimes idiosyncratic work in relation to more familiar ethical and theological concerns.

We can begin with further consideration of the text already noted: '[t]hose who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.'[4]

[4] Mk 8:36 (NRSV). See also variants in Mt 10:39, 16:25, Lk 9:24 and 17:33, plus Jn 12:25.

Although it is immediately and powerfully suggestive, the precise meaning of this saying remains elusive. As already suggested, this saying conveys both the difficulty of entering the kingdom of heaven and the nature of the life within it, just as forgiveness may be taken both as a condition of entry ('if you do not forgive...') and a characteristic of the lives of those who receive it ('forgive, and you will be forgiven'). Two obvious ways of understanding this text present themselves: firstly, eschatologically, as an expression of a promise; secondly, ethically, as an articulation of a principle. If it expresses something like a promise, and an invitation to trust, then the important thing is that there *is* a relationship between the saving and the losing, the losing and the saving. What is important is that the one follows the other, not the nature of this connection or development. But if it articulates something like a principle, then the nature of the connection is vital: why is it that the attempt to save one's life can lead to its loss? And why should loss, under particular circumstances, lead to gain? It is the place of the *desire* to save one's life in this saying that proves most difficult to interpret. One assumes that concern for one's life is not really in question, as the verse that immediately follows in Mark's version suggests: 'For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?' Life's importance is such that it cannot be measured by any comparison, or be the subject of any exchange. Indeed, it is the concern for one's life that makes one listen: if one did not care about losing or saving one's life, the warning and the promise would be of no interest. And yet the desire or pursuit that the immeasurable value of one's life inspires is ambiguous, and subject to warning and scrutiny. The question, then, is not of whether or not to desire one's life, but of how.

The question of the relation between promise and principle relates closely to the shaping and directing of this desire; each gives rise to a different kind of pursuit, a different relation between means and end. If there is a way of wanting to save one's life that endangers it, a principle that made fully intelligible the connection between loss and gain may only feed and encourage this form of desire, through providing a guaranteed progression from means to ends. Such a principle may have the power to transform one's understanding of *where* to look for one's life, but not to transform *how* one looks. Perhaps instead of looking for riches and power, one may look for ways to incur loss through acts of giving; that is, for sacrificial opportunities. Either way, one's way of searching may remain unchanged. Furthermore, a fully intelligible principle

that showed how loss produces gain would simply prevent real loss from ever appearing or being felt. If loss is instantly transformed, through the comprehension of some principle, into gain, one would never have the time in which it would be necessary to accept it *as* loss. However, if we are wrong to look for a fully present principle behind these words, accepting them as pure promise is just as problematic. If one really saw that the value of one's life is such that it cannot be measured against anything else, what could possibly act as a sufficient impetus to simply accept the promise that its loss could somehow lead to gain? Perhaps a complete trust in the one who makes the promise, and a dim apprehension that this is, in some sense, *how things work*. But both of these ultimately appeal to some kind of intelligibility; that is, to the beginnings of a principle.

A similar problem emerges in any reading of the beatitudes. Although the repetitive structure of these sayings gives the impression of a common pattern, the nature of the pattern is not obvious. Some of the initial characteristics relate to actions or attitudes commanded elsewhere (to show mercy, to hunger for righteousness), whereas others are more or less passively borne as a result of circumstance (to mourn, to be persecuted, to be poor in spirit). Similarly, the relationship between the present condition and 'blessedness' could be construed in a number of ways. Perhaps most obviously, some of these sayings seem to affirm that *despite* their condition the poor in spirit, the meek, the grieving, the persecuted are, or will be, blessed. The blessing that is the coming of the kingdom does not respect the distinctions that usually distinguish the fortunate from the unfortunate, just as the sun shines on the just and the unjust. And so blessedness may be hidden at present beneath the veil of good or bad fortune, but it is nevertheless still obvious – it consists in receiving the kingdom of heaven, in inheriting the earth, in being comforted. One does not have to be told why one is blessed in inheriting the earth, or in being comforted; such things *are* a blessing. However, another logic also suggests itself through some of the sayings. The merciful will receive mercy, surely, because of the mercy they have showed; the pure in heart will see God because that was what they desired above all else; those that hunger for justice or righteousness are rewarded according to their hunger. These sayings, then, may announce a completion in which the full significance of present actions or attitudes is fully developed and recognised; the peacemakers are finally named as the children of God they always were.

Finally, and perhaps most problematically, the first and last of the beatitudes end

with 'for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven', suggesting, perhaps that the kingdom of heaven is already present *in* poverty of spirit and persecution, and that the values of the kingdom are plainly and simply opposed to earthly values. But if poverty of spirit and persecution can be manifestations of the kingdom (persecution in particular, is described as being a sign of one's inheritance of the kingdom, the mark of an authentic prophet), what is it that makes inheritance of this kingdom a blessing, rather than a curse? If the persecuted are receiving the kingdom of heaven in and through their persecutions, why should one desire this kingdom? The Lucan version of the beatitudes renders this problem more acutely: it is not simply the poor in spirit to whom the kingdom *already* belongs, but simply the poor; wealth, satiety and laughter are signs that one has nothing good left to receive, that one has already received one's reward. But proclaiming an inversion of human values, affirming that wealth is poverty, weakness is strength, and suffering, joy, is far from straightforward. If this is to be the case, if poverty can manifest a kind of wealth, what is it that makes this poverty wealth, if not wealth? Speech rebels against the attempt to simply invert values, because articulating such an inversion requires an affirmation: if all values are reversed, on what basis does one affirm anything - what is it that one is doing when one affirms? If the blessings of the kingdom appear as paradoxically opposed to all usual notions of blessing, why should one count them as blessings at all? This latter reading is far too extreme to be of much use on its own, and fails to take into account much of the nuance of these sayings. Nevertheless, the problem it poses is a real one, one that arises as soon as images of inversion are used at all, and in particular, one that appears to haunt *any* attempt to talk about redemptive suffering or self-denial.

These tensions have a bearing both on the discussions of forgiveness already outlined and on the interpretation of the thought of Simone Weil. We have already seen how the question of the intelligibility of forgiveness becomes ethically significant: does forgiveness ask us to operate according to given principles that guarantee its goodness, legitimacy and potency, or are we asked to step more nervously and dangerously beyond what we can know? Secondly, there is the sense that both a fully intelligible and justified forgiveness that exhibits prudent judgement, and an entirely momentary, mad forgiveness that exhibits creative grace seem to lose an important aspect of the difficulty of forgiveness. Both completed principle and sheer promise seem to lose the responsibility involved in forgiving in different ways, and yet if we are to affirm that

forgiveness has the beginnings - and only the beginnings - of an intelligibility, we have the problem of responding to promise whilst searching for principle. Put differently, this is the problem of how to combine the virtues of responsibility and trust, prudence and generosity. Thirdly, there is the question of the extent to which an ethic of forgiveness might radically transform our evaluations, and if so, what mode of affirmation would be fitting. If forgiveness is good in a way that we do not (yet) know how to comprehend, how might it be held up, or affirmed? Each of these tensions are concerned, one way or another, with the problem of a gap, a space in which the frustration of incoherence is heightened by the suggestions of intelligibility, in which principle has as yet only been promised, and in which true treasure has not yet shown how it is valuable.

With these considerations in mind, the following discussion will begin with an exposition of Weil's approach to the problem of suffering, proceed to an exploration of her attempts to bring compassion into thought so that rationality is itself compassionate, and then finally interrogate her conceptions of redemptive suffering with her own warnings and concerns in mind.

I

Suffering, compassion and thought

Simone Weil's preoccupation with suffering - philosophically, spiritually and practically - is the chief cause of both the admiration and the consternation she inspires. Her exploration of suffering and compassion demonstrates not only her central concerns, but also the sometimes tense relationship between the different levels of her thought.[5]

[5]The centre of Weil's *metaphysics* is not her notion of compassion, but the idea of separation of the necessary from the good, as Miklos Veto notes: '[a]t bottom it is a vision of reality containing in its totality only two true perfections, necessity and love, which will thereby become the two faces of God. The act of creation itself will reveal this duality.' (Miklos Veto, *The religious metaphysics of Simone Weil*, tr. Joan Dargon, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 11-2). Weil was certainly unashamed of metaphysics, and her affirmation of the importance of the contemplation of contradiction

Weil's phenomenology of suffering alone is a significant contribution to reflection on these issues. Significantly, even the most complex forms of distress linked to the intellect or emotional life are still described as analogous to physical pain, in the way that it constrains and determines thought. When suffering, one no longer has the freedom to choose a particular object to consider, one's attention is restricted, whether to one's own body and the present moment, a traumatic memory, or some fearfully anticipated event.[6] However, as Weil notes, a couple of hours of toothache leave no permanent mark on the soul. 'Affliction', however, names something deeper than momentary distress: it is the combination of suffering, social degradation and subjection to blind necessity. The *Iliad*, the figure of Job, the experience of slaves and Jesus' prayers in Gethsemane and on the cross are the central co-ordinates in Weil's understanding of this experience. Weil describes affliction in a number of ways: as the complete uprooting of the person that prolonged exposure to the fear of death produces, as the state of being stripped of the clothing of character and turned into a mere thing,[7] or as a heightened yet powerless experience of time, and one's complete submission to it: '[e]ach second which passes brings some being in the world nearer to something he cannot bear'.[8] Most importantly, affliction is an experience of an absence of meaning, it cannot be fitted into any coherent structure of understanding. In this way, the suffering involved in martyrdom may be qualitatively different from affliction because it may be recognised as containing some nobility or purpose, even if only by the martyr

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is not meant to indicate the futility of rational activity, since it is only through careful analysis that contradiction appears *as* contradiction. See Andre Devaux, 'On the right use of contadiction according to Simone Weil' tr. J. P. Little in *Simone Weil's philosophy of culture: readings towards a divine humanity*, ed. Richard H Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 153 on this point. However, in many respects the abstract aspects of Weil's thought can be seen as experimental attempts to translate a more basic experience into philosophical language. The central spiritual condition or movement in her conception of human life - 'compassion for creatures' - seems, as we will see, to function as a test for rational activity, and so I will presume this order of priority here. Treating Weil's work in this way produces a different set of problems: rather than examine the consistency of her philosophical system, the task is to explore her attempts to be true to the experiences she found to be at the centre of graced human life, the contours of the struggle, and the way in which she continually reflects upon this process.

[6] Weil, *Waiting on God*. tr. Emma Crawford (London: Harper Collins, 1977), p. 62, and *Notebooks, tr*. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 158.

[7] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 252.

[8] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 27.

himself, whereas no such consolation naturally appears in the experience of affliction. Hence Christ's suffering is not dignified: '[c]hrist was afflicted. He did not die like a martyr. He died like a common criminal, confused with thieves, only a little more ridiculous. For affliction is ridiculous.'[9] For Weil, the lack of conscious, cruel intention on the part of those perpetrating horrific acts simply increases the senselessness of it: one can be reduced to misery by someone who does not understand what they are doing, or why (hence the expression 'for they know not what they do' only increases as the isolation of the one suffering, as Amery also noted). The significance of the suffering that crime produces is not experienced or even conceived by the criminal, only by the victim, and this one-sidedness is itself part of the ordeal.[10] Related to this is the idea that affliction is ugly. One of the central needs of the human soul is for beauty, to feel that one inhabits a beautiful world, but affliction appears to drain the world of all beauty, and the complete absence of beauty is a horror humans do anything to avoid.[11] Essentially, affliction destroys any sense of the reality of God: '[a]ffliction makes God appear absent for a time, more absent than a dead man. . . A kind of horror submerges the whole soul. During this absence there is nothing to love.'[12]

As a result, we seldom, if ever, contemplate suffering honestly or willingly. Drawing on the book of Job, Weil stresses the tendency to despise the afflicted, to 'attach all the scorn, all the revulsion, all the hatred which our reason attaches to crime, to affliction.'[13] The sight of affliction repels, because it makes us aware of our 'almost infinite fragility.'[14] The body can be left in permanent pain by the simplest of physical changes, and the soul and the social personality are equally subject to unpredictable forces and dependent upon all sorts of external objects, themselves temporary and unpredictable.[15] On the whole, we live with the illusion of having chosen our well-

[9] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 68.

[10] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 68. See also *First and last notebooks*, p. 69: 'Evil is something external to itself; and in the place where it is, it is not felt. It is felt where it is not. The feeling of evil is not an evil.'

[11] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 99.

[12] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 65.

[13] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 65.

[14] Simone Weil, *Science, necessity and the love of God*, tr. and ed. Richard Rees (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 185.

[15] Weil, *Science, necessity and the love of God*, p. 184.

being, and of deserving our comfort, but considering the afflicted raises the horrible suspicion that we too are entirely at the mercy of circumstance; no deep principle or existential right separates our well being from their poverty, sickness or misfortune.[16] More than this, thought is repulsed by affliction because it involves contemplating a void in meaning, the idea of an experience lived through with no purpose or goal other than that which is imposed upon one: like a slave being told to take an object from A to B, and then back again, and made to repeat this all day, every day, their only goal being to stay alive. It is duration with no *telos*, and as such, regret manifests something similar. She gives the fictional example of a selfish young man who agrees to prostitute his wife to a rich but repulsive old man in exchange for a fortune. Afterwards the young man learns that there was never any chance of receiving this fortune, and is left contemplating the reality of his act without the sense that his motive seemed to give it:

> Wishing incessantly that his wife was still intact (would he not make a good hero for a tragedy?) his thought reverts to the recent past, when she was. To return to the present, his thought must pass through that happening. But that happening has now lost the motive which alone made it possible. His thought keeps continually falling into the past and can only get back to the present by passing through the impossible.
>
> It is the same with an action whose accomplishment puts an end to the motive which alone made it possible. For example, a murder due to rage which subsides as soon as the murder has been committed.
>
> Thought, having fled back to the innocent past, must go through the murder again without feeling rage. But that is an impossible journey.[17]

Finally, then, affliction is destructive because it tends to produce dishonesty in those who suffer and inflict it; the journey from past to present cannot be avoided in fact, but it can be looked away from in thought. In affliction, one is subject to contradictory forces: the suffering consumes one's attention and brings it back repeatedly to the present, but the same suffering produces the desire for a future in which there is no trace of it. Two thoughts about the duration of suffering may appear to ease this tension

[16] Here Weil articulates something that Jean Amery expressed in more detail, after having been tortured: '[t]he first blow brings home to the prisoner that he is helpless, and thus it already contains everything that is to come. ... They are permitted to punch me in the face, the victim feels in numb surprise and concludes in just as numb certainty: they will do with me what they want.' Jean Amery, *At the mind's limits*, p. 27.

[17] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 148.

a little: that it will stop immediately, that it will continue forever. 'We can think of it as impossible or necessary, but we can never think that it simply *is*. That is unendurable.'[18] The hope that suffering is going to stop in the very next instant is linked to the thought 'I cannot bear it, *therefore* it is going to cease'.[19] However, to gloomily suppose that this suffering is destined to last forever is to seek comfort in despair, which is at least fixed and final, but is also yet another kind of illusion. If suffering, however horrific, can be relied upon, or predicted, the element of chance and senselessness is diminished, so that one does not have to contemplate the fact that one could just as easily be that person over there, the one who is not suffering. The disproportion between the felt significance of suffering, and the external meaninglessness of its distribution and purpose produces a sense of disharmony, and imbalance. Even the attempt to characterise those who inflict destructive suffering as evil - to identify those who are moral monsters - could, on this understanding, become a way of trying to restore the balance, insofar as one looks for a conscious intention to match the depth of the suffering.[20]

To show compassion to someone in affliction is, for Weil, a supernatural act, because it involves contemplating this senselessness with those who suffer, without ceasing to love. The contemplation of suffering is a secondary level of suffering, an expenditure of energy with no reward: one suffers not only through acknowledging another individual's affliction, but simply through acknowledging the possibility of such affliction. The text in the background of Weil's account here is the parable of good Samaritan, of which she says:

> Those who pass by this thing scarcely notice it, and a few minutes afterwards do not even know that they saw it. Only one stops and turns his attention towards it. The actions that follow are just the automatic effect of this moment of attention. The attention is creative. But at the

[18] Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, p82.

[19] Weil, *Notebooks*, p157.

[20] This is what Cyril O'Regan, developing Weil's insights, refers to as the 'fallacy of inference', and this tends to be followed by the 'fallacy of representation', whereby those who cause immense suffering tend to be represented, in fiction especially, as particularly interesting or glamourous, as if the power to cause immense suffering must be connected to an individual potency, rather than simply being a possibility inherent in the universe. See O'Regan, 'Countermimesis and Simone Weil's Christian Platonism' in *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* ed. E. Jane Doering and Eric O. Springsted (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), p. 190.

> moment when it is engaged it is renunciation. This is true, at least, if it is pure. The man accepts being diminished by concentrating on an expenditure of energy, which will not extend his own power but will only give existence to a being other than himself, who will exist independently of him.[21]

The idea that attention is creative is one which seems underdeveloped in Weil's notebooks, but the fact that it appears here in a more carefully considered essay is significant. The attention paid to the afflicted is an echo of God's creative attention. It does not simply respond to what is there, but creates the object of its contemplation: '[c]reative attention means really giving our attention to what does not exist. Humanity does not exist in the anonymous flesh lying by the road-side.'[22] The movement of compassion is not, therefore, accounted for by a quality displayed in the suffering of the afflicted. The worst suffering destroys and reduces humanity, it does not reveal it. And because contemplating the suffering of the afflicted involves facing one's own limited nature and powers (not only could it be me lying there in the road, I do not have the power to change the fact that such and such happened, and may happen again), it also involves consenting to a reduction in one's sense of life, beauty and power, with no guarantee of this being 'made up for'. Acts of compassion are not simply reflections or imitations of the love of God, they *are* the love of God, whether recognised as such or not. It is only God who can pay attention to an afflicted man,[23] and it is through human attention that God listens to and gazes upon the creation.[24]

For Weil, supernatural compassion differs from most acts of pity, which are frequently a kind of necessary guard against the impact of affliction when one can no longer avoid encountering it. One usually offers help to someone so as to discharge the obligation to think about another's suffering, or (which is worse) to enjoy the feeling of power that comes through observing the effect one's efforts can have upon those less fortunate than oneself, whereas supernatural compassion involves identifying one's own frailty with the affliction of another. This painful identification is not naturally made any easier by either experience or innocence: those who have not suffered dread it, and so are unwilling to think of the possibility; those who have suffered hate it and wish

[21] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 84.

[22] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 85.

[23] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 86, *First and last notebooks*, p. 92, and *Notebooks*, p. 333

[24] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 378-9 and p. 383.

only to forget it. It is, equally, opposed to any kind of fascination or love of suffering. Despite the fact that, because of what one knows about her life and manner of death, one may read in many of her more extreme comments an unhealthy preoccupation with suffering, Weil is perfectly clear that the seeking out of suffering is mistaken, and wrong.[25] To seek suffering because of what it may, somehow, give or produce is to fail to recognise the destructive nature of affliction, and to fail to value the life it destroys.

For Weil, the reluctance to attend to misery and suffering is not just the result of a lack of warmth, or a preoccupation with one's own affairs, it arises from a kind of denial of the most troubling aspect of reality. For Weil, the most incomprehensible aspect of existence is not the malign human will but the destructive experience of suffering, whether brought about by the intentional actions of another person, the impersonal forces of nature, or a mixture of both.[26] The knowledge that such useless and undeserved suffering can and has occurred should be enough to reconfigure all thought; the scandal is that it is not. This is expressed with particular force and clarity in the following remark:

> Let us suppose a man whose entire family has perished amidst tortures, and who himself was long exposed to torture in a concentration camp; or an American Indian of the sixteenth century who was the sole survivor of his people. Such men as these, if they ever believed in God's mercy, either believe in it no longer, or else conceive it in an entirely different fashion from that in which they did before. I myself have not gone through such things. But I know that they exist; hence what difference is there? It comes, or must come, or should come to the same thing.[27]

Just as the friends in the book of Job present forms of human wisdom that fail to acknowledge the reality of undeserved suffering, and are judged lacking as a result, so

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[25] Weil, *Science, necessity and the love of God*, p. 184, and *First and last notebooks*, in which Weil writes almost as if she was writing her own creed: 'I believe in the value of suffering so long as one makes every [legitimate] attempt to escape it.' (p. 3.)

[26] There is no sense, in Weil's writing, of horrified fascination at the possibility that a human could will evil for its own sake – an idea which is plainly excluded by her account of the human will and the good - instead there is an acute sensitivity to the experience of those who suffer evil. It is in this sense that evil is a mystery: the will of the evil doer does not demand attention, the experience of those who suffer as a result does. Evil dwells in the heart of the evildoer without being felt there - this is to be expected given the predominance of illusion – but it is felt in the heart of the victim.

[27] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 432.

Weil suggests here that there is something wrong with any conception of God that could not be shared by someone who had been through the most extreme affliction, or communicated to them without insult. This would be to exclude them from one's moral or spiritual universe, to deny their existence. For Weil, most conceptions of God and of the shape and texture of moral life fail to include the reality of undeserved suffering, because the voice of affliction is so difficult to listen to and its truth so difficult to express. Wherever it is recognised, wherever there are acts of compassion unaccompanied by the assurance of an explanation or the confidence of having the power to end affliction, there is the love of God, whether it is consciously invoked or not (and for this reason Weil states rather boldly that she knows that the author of the *Iliad* knew the love of God while the author of the book of Joshua did not).

The ability to show compassion is intimately linked, then, not just with a recognition of the troubling reality of another's suffering, but with a recognition of the possibility of this suffering within the universe, as an ineliminable part of one's being. So although Weil describes compassion in terms of an instinctive (although in some way *supernaturally* instinctive) response towards an individual, she suggests that this response is only possible as part of an acceptance of something that is more like a philosophical truth about the world in general, and in doing so links the ability to perceive affliction in another with one's openness to truth generally. The sight of affliction is the sight of human finitude, frailty, insubstantiality; it is also the fact of necessity – that God has given everything over to mechanical processes that can wreck and ruin everything that is most beautiful in humans (and for Weil, human evil is itself made up of almost mechanical processes, as discussed below). To show real compassion is, at some level, to recognise all this, and to love nevertheless, and this movement, or posture, has resonances at every level of the human person, and every level of thought.

Compassionate thought

Weil's comments on the implicit love of God make it clear that she thought that compassion is quite possible without an explicit recognition of the significance she

believed to be present in every such act, but it is also clear that she believed that this quality *could* be displayed at the level of one's conceptual understanding, and that conceptual understanding itself can be compassionate, or lacking in compassion. She is extremely sensitive to the ways in which the affirmation of a particular truth can operate so as to obscure the very same truth, and the way in which dogmas that begin as a response to affliction frequently end by clouding the reality of affliction. But the question Weil's account raises is of how one can say anything at all about human suffering without throwing a comforting veil over it (and therefore of whether there are forms of comfort which are *not* simply veils), of how one can speak about an absence of significance, or of how to provide a representation of the world in which there is some void.[28] Put differently, the problem is of how to think so as to produce compassion and of how to make thought itself compassionate.

A good example of Weil's treatment of this tension, and of the pressure it exerts on her work, is found in a cluster of remarks from her New York notebook:

> If one is hungry one eats, not for the love of God but because one is hungry.
>
> If an unknown man lying hungry in the road is hungry one must give him food, even if one has not enough for oneself, not for the love of God, but because he is hungry.[29]

If one demands an explanation or understanding of the suffering of the afflicted before one is prepared to give them one's attention - a principle which guarantees that the attention will not be wasted - one will never get as far as compassion. Hence the attention of compassion involves, and is dependent upon, an exposure to waste and insignificance. Or in other words, compassion involves seeing *only* the current reality of suffering, not some future resolution or significance, something one's action would be for. However, on the next page, Weil appears to affirm the exact opposite:

> Every thinking being is worthy of love solely in so far as he has received existence by God's creative act, and possesses the right to renounce that existence for the love of God. It is solely on this account that I have the right to love myself or another. Only God is the good, therefore only he is a worthy object of care, solicitude, anxiety, longing, and efforts of thought.

[28] Weil, *Notebooks*, pp. 483-4 and 148.

[29] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, pp. 123-4.

In this case, the attempt to describe more fully the religious aspect of compassion, or the deeper metaphysical structure within which it has its place, seems to compromise the immediacy, and the concern for the particular as particular that characterises it.[30] We have already seen a similar tension within Jankelevitch's understanding of forgiveness; the sense that something essential is compromised in the movement towards intelligibility, or accountability. Weil is not unaware of this tension, and so attempts to incorporate it into her thinking, as a comment on the previous page indicates: '[t]here are some truths which one must not know, or not too much. E.g. that the final outcome of obedience to God is undoubtedly beatitude.'[31] One should love only God, but one should attend to the suffering of the other for its own sake, not for the sake of any divine contact or illumination that one might gain as a result. This conflict is perhaps why she goes on to say that the value of some representations is dependent on their use. The example given is the notion of hell, which should only be considered in relation to oneself,[32] and for Weil the ambiguous value of certain ideas implies the need for a subtle structuring of thought:

> In the domain of the transcendent there is an architecture of representation and ideas. Some are to be put in the foreground and others in the silent, secret part of the soul, unknown to consciousness. Some should be in the imagination, others in the completely abstract intelligence, others in both places, etc.
>
> This complex and refined architecture, which is operative even in those who are called simple, if they are close to sanctity, is what builds a soul ready for

[30] On this point see Rowan Williams, 'Simone Weil and the necessary non-existence of God' in *Wrestling with angels*, ed. Mike Higton (London: SCM Press 2007). Williams argues that a Kantian conviction that the limited subject is necessarily a source of error motivates this to-and-fro moment in her work between affirmation of the finite and particular, and the desire to purge conditional desires by a wrenching away from attachment: 'Hence, too, we cannot and must not love ourslves except 'because God loves us' – and thus, presumably, as God loves, that is, unconditionally and impersonally, as part of the fabric of the necessary. God loves that particular perspective of creation which can only be had from the spot where I am; but only when I am absent from it – i.e. not really as a subject's perspective.' (p. 220). In other words, in some respects, Weil maintains a competitive notion of the relationship between God and creation, despite many indications of trajectories which move beyond this perspective, e.g. her insistence on 'the beauty of the world' as 'proof of incarnation'.

[31] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 122.

[32] Weil says that the notion of hell should be accepted when it is a case of accepting the will of God for oneself when one feels on the verge of damnation, but not when one feels close to salvation, because in that case one is accepting it for other people.

salvation.[33]

Weil does not explicitly connect this point with her comments on compassion, self-love and the love of God, but there does seem to be a link. On Weil's account, in compassion, there is in the foreground the simple need of another person, which exerts a pressure without further reference, just as one's hunger is itself the reason for satisfying it. However, there is - at another level - an understanding of the nature of the good of created beings, which is of a more abstract nature. An architecture is required, which will harmonise this conceptual insight with one's sense of duty to others, so that one can form in the intelligence the idea that it is the goodness of God which grounds the love of self and neighbour-as-self, whilst keeping this insight sufficiently secret, so that it may exert its influence without being noticed, in such a way that compassion arises *as if* it were instinctive. A similar kind of 'architecture' can be found in a number of her most important ideas. Elsewhere, Weil makes a similar point in terms of different levels or planes of reality, and here the difficulty in articulating and affirming certain ideas is linked to the possibility of something being true at one level but not at another:

> To enumerate the truths which are of such a nature that by affirming them one destroys them (e.g. the grace included in sin), because they are not true on the same plane on which the opinions one is affirming are found (on that plane, the reverse is true), but on a higher plane. They are only able to be perceived as true by such minds as are capable of conceiving on several vertical, superposed planes simultaneously; to other minds they remain completely incommunicable.[34]

As we shall see below the this applies particularly to the idea that suffering can be redemptive. In itself, suffering is simply destructive, and to attribute redemptive qualities to it is to refuse to contemplate it, whether in oneself or another. However at a higher level the honest contemplation of suffering produces spiritual fruit; grace fills the void that is left by unconsoled suffering. The rupture between these levels arises because to articulate the truth of the higher plane may be to destroy the (opposite) truth of the lower plane; suffering is never accepted in its destructive reality, and never

[33] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 122.

[34] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 163. See also *Notebooks*, p. 62-63, and *First and Last Notebooks*, p. 179.

becomes redemptive. This implies a rupture between conceptual truth and experience, in that the attempt to make an experience more intelligible may be to block access to the experience, or falsely avoid it: one must not speak too much or too soon, because experience is changed as it is spoken of.[35] However, in other ways, Weil supposes a more peaceful continuity between levels of reality, and between thought and action, concept and experience. It is not possible here to provide an exhaustive analysis of how Weil construed these 'planes', or how well she constructs such an architecture herself, but two observations can be made that relate to the remaining discussion.

Firstly, when discussing compassion or related ideas, Weil tends to stress the continuity between abstract thought and responsive behaviour. This is one of the main concerns expressed in her 'Letter to a priest', in which she writes: '[o]ne may lay down as a postulate: All conceptions of God which are incompatible with a movement of pure charity are false. All other conceptions of him, in varying degrees, are true.'[36] In an important sense the recognition of suffering as intolerable, unexplained and unjustified becomes a criteria for judging beliefs; any belief which allows or encourages one to throw a veil over suffering is itself a lack of compassion, an 'expression of submission to the Great Beast.'[37] As the capacity to genuinely pay attention is both intellectual and ethical (see in particular the essay 'Reflections on the right use of school studies' in *Waiting on God*), there is continuity between concept and behaviour. Those who acknowledge undeserved suffering in theory will be more likely to recognise and respond to it in practice, and only those who recognise it in practice will be *able* to recognise it in theory. Any conception of God which emerges from a failure to recognise suffering, or which (re)produces this failure, is incompatible with a movement of pure charity, and so false. In this sense, thought and behaviour are condemned or affirmed with the same judgement. Beliefs reproduce the blindness or cruelty in which they were conceived: those who believe that the order of the world clearly communicates the existence of a merciful God must become increasingly blind, deaf and pitiless in order to remain committed to this correspondence.[38] Kindness

[35]On this point, see also *First and last notebooks*, pp. 231-3, where Weil explores the question of vainity in spiritual progress: 'There are some goods that are destroyed by being evaluated. This really shows that only God can save by his grace.'

[36] Weil, *Gateway to God*, p. 135.

[37] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 351.

[38] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 438. For a related discussion of this process, in which practice produces a

produces truth by nourishing one's capacity for attention, just as cruelty reaffirms one's incapacity to recognise suffering and the real existence of the other.[39] As a simultaneously intellectual and ethical capacity, attention is the capacity and willingness to contemplate the world without lying to oneself or deliberately looking away from unwelcome facts, and this stance is part of what Weil means by 'waiting': '[a]bove all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.'[40]

Secondly, when discussing any kind of reward, spiritual fruit or progress, Weil tends to stress the *dis*continuity between thought or belief and attitude or behaviour, and the need for a more wary, delicate form of affirmation. Conscious thought directs attention, and as previously noted, attention should not be consciously directed towards God or the prospect of spiritual benefit when responding to the needs of another, or rather, if it is, one is not really responding to the needs of another, but acting with another purpose in mind (the service of God, the sanctity of one's own soul). The attention demanded by the affliction of others is such that there is no room for any other object, so that even though one may believe, as Weil did, that the love of neighbour is somehow one with the love of God, this knowledge must be hidden away at the highest level, beyond comprehension.[41] One must love one's neighbour as one's neighbour, and nothing more, before this love can be found to be secretly the love of God. It is not too difficult

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principle, which then demands practice that defends and affirms the principle, see Philip Goodchild's 'The logic of sacrifice in the book of Job' in *Cultural Values* vol. 4, no. 2. Responding to Rene Girard's reading of Job, Goodchild emphasises the economic stakes in the background of the dialogues, the way in which 'the principle of temporal retribution emerges from economic conduct' (p. 178) and the systematic blindness towards the exception necessary to affirm this principle and the economic aspirations that found it: 'The principle of reward and retribution becomes contagious through a similar pattern (i.e. Girardian mimetic contagion): one moves from envy of Job's rewards, through imitation of his righteousness, to the imitative principle of reward for righteousness, symbolic reunification. Finally, in the face of Job's misfortunes, the credibility of Job's piety is sacrificed in favour of the abstract principle of temporal retribution which substitutes for it.' (p170) Job learns to speak rightly of God through occupying a 'chaotic interval' in which premature judgements concerning wickedness and innocence are suspended. In many respects Goodchild's account of the 'chaotic interval' experienced by Job relates to the reading of Weil's notions of waiting and void being explored here.

[39] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 357.

[40] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 58.

[41] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 179.

to love God, but too easy; as a thought detached from human interaction, 'God' is almost infinitely malleable, and can be shaped to fit our desires exactly; the 'country here below', offers resistance which is essential in our learning of love.[42] One only thinks about God, and loves God, through thinking of the world in a particular way.[43] In this sense, spiritual treasure and reward are found at a qualitatively different level from their earthly counterparts, and any conceptual framework that allows such notions to be treated as straightforward goals that could be attained by particular means, or that can be used as an excuse to direct attention away from the present, should not be known 'too much' and only believed secretly (and here Weil makes frequent reference to the synoptic saying on giving in secret, the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing). A clumsy, over hasty identification of the love of neighbour *as* the love of God means that one construes God as an object desirable and obtainable like any other, and the neighbour as a mere means to an end; this reduces heaven to the level of earth, and earth to the level of a tool necessary for attaining heaven. It is true, in a certain sense, that the love of the world *is* the love of God, but 'knowing' this as a truth in the wrong way prevents one from enacting it, and so there is a rupture between conscious affirmation and implicit acceptance.

This discontinuity between 'levels' is partly a result of the sense of scarcity in her notion of attention: attention, as a way of giving or spending time, is limited, and there is an antagonistic competition between possible objects of attention. The resistance to giving undivided attention to anything is at the heart of Weil's understanding of the condition of humanity, and so religious beliefs become problematic insofar as they seem to separate an act from its significance (if I give bread to the hungry because this pleases God), or virtue from reward (if the thought of heaven is compensation or counter-balance for the effort of obedience), discouraging the already very difficult business of giving undivided attention. In a sense, Weil's intention seems to have been to compress ethical and religious thought so that all the concepts occupy a space small enough to contemplate all at the same time, so that attention can be undivided (hence the value of paradox – two indispensable but contradictory truths in the same place). This is, perhaps, one of the reasons for her seeming reluctance to discuss the

[42] See 'Some thoughts on the love of God' and 'Some reflections on the love of God' in *Science, necessity and the love of God*.

[43] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 25.

resurrection; it seems to simply distract attention from that which is already nearly impossible to contemplate (it introduces an aspect of choice, which is always the beginning of error for Weil: do I contemplate the crucified Jewish teacher, or the risen and vindicated Saviour?).

Interestingly, though, it is the fact that there *is* continuity between levels - between the love of God and the love of neighbour, and between conceptual formulations and attitude or behaviour – that means that not only are conceptual formulations subject to judgement (in the same way that the Job's friends' words are subject to judgement), but also that the Christian conception of God has to be understood as being supernatural in content and origin. The love that motivates compassion cannot be simply observed in the nature of physical or social patterns. It does not arise from a straightforward 'reading' of suffering, for in fact there can be no such thing, as suffering always produces some kind of reaction. Real love, in thought or action, can only be the result of inspiration: 'it is for this reason that mysticism is the only source of the human virtues. For whether we believe that there is no infinite mercy lying behind the curtain of the world, or whether we believe that this mercy lies in front of the curtain, in either case we are rendered cruel.'[44] Belief in divine mercy and the capacity for compassion mutually condition each other: compassion only arises in those who glimpse an infinite mercy 'behind the curtain', but the chief demonstration of this divine mercy 'here below' is the radiance that comes from the compassionate, who have contemplated divine mercy in the midst of suffering.[45] For Weil, the existence of genuine compassion is experimental proof of divine inspiration: the real conviction, in those who do not look away from suffering, that there is divine mercy 'behind the curtain' *must* be supernatural in origin, as there are no other explanations for such conviction.[46]

In this sense, the experience of evil and suffering in a world of beauty and order

[44]Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 438.

[45]Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 450.

[46]This conviction elsewhere takes the shape of an ontological argument for the existence of perfection: 'Essential point of Christianity -(and of Platonism)-: It is only the thought of perfection that produces any good - and this good is imperfect. If one aims at imperfect good, one does evil. One cannot really aim at perfection unless it is really possible; so this is the proof that the possibility of perfection exists in this world.' (*First and last notebooks*, p. 342.) However, as Weil recognised herself, when considered as a phenomenon that occurs within the world, inspiration compromises her notion of a world given over by God to be governed entirely by necessity (*Notebooks*, p. 361).

constitutes a void that can only be contemplated without (false) consolation if one receives 'supernatural bread'.[47] The difficulty is of the form such 'supernatural bread' might take, how it might be described, and when it might be received. If it takes the form of beliefs that can be passed on separate to any experience – for example, belief in the final perfection of creation, the promise of reward for the good and punishment for the wicked - such beliefs may become occasions for the imagination to fly from the reality of unresolved, unredeemed suffering. The suffering of the innocent no longer attracts attention if the contradiction it presents is resolved through anticipation, and removed in theory; one might then be able to pass by without stopping. On the whole, Weil thinks of the vision of the love and mercy of God as something which is received through, and after, one has waited; that is, accepted the reality of some experience of void (unsatisfied desire, undeserved suffering, etc), and continued to love from within this void. Equally, however, she conceived the void as that which cannot be contemplated *as* void without this vision.[48] This makes the relationship between belief and experience very ambiguous in her work. Doctrines concerning life after death, the fruit of obedience or virtue, or in fact any notions that express expectation or fulfilment, are often described as superfluous at best, if not actually harmful.[49] But equally, she recognises that in a sense it is belief that makes certain experiences possible as much as it is experience that produces belief, as is shown in the following, from her discussion of the value of the apparently fruitless expenditure of energy in school studies:

> Without our knowing or feeling it, this apparently barren effort has brought more light into the soul. The result will one day be discovered in prayer... Certainties of this kind are experimental. But if we do not believe in them before experiencing them, if at least we do not behave as though we believed in them, we shall never have the experience which leads to such certainties.[50]

Here she hints that on occasions inherited beliefs may act as boundaries that mark out a space that can only be filled through existential trial; lifeless themselves, but necessary to catch the moment when it comes. Although here she is speaking about attention in study, the same applies to her understanding of suffering, and what it is that

[47] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 157.

[48] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 157.

[49] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 198, *Gateway to God*, p. 129.

[50] Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 54.

is necessary for suffering to be undergone in such a way that it becomes redemptive. Ultimately, belief cannot be entirely redundant, derivative or secondary because it affects how one responds to suffering - whether one's own or another's - and more than this, affects the tonality of the experience itself. However, Weil has such a heightened sense of the danger of belief being evasion of the void, imaginative consolation, etc, that she only occasional makes any positive statements like the one above, even though in a sense all her religious writing is an attempt to articulate the 'experimental certainties' gained through contemplating void in language that can be grasped outside, or prior to, such an experience. Her work is a promise that there is plenitude within, or (and it is not clear which) out the other side of the void; and if all that she has said about the danger of evading suffering, or seeking some meaning or purpose within it is true, then to make this promise is always to risk it becoming another veil or evasion. If there is a principle through which to contemplate the meaning and use of suffering, there is no void; if there is a promise of something more than destruction within suffering, one attends not to suffering, but to what is promised.

We can briefly note here that this relates very closely to the problems already explored concerning motivations for forgiveness, in two ways in particular. Firstly there is a concern in Vladimir Jankelevitch's work, and, as we shall see, in Derrida's and Caputo's development of these ideas, to preserve a sense that to forgive is to be unmotivated, or to be motivated in a qualitatively different way. This, in turn, relates to a concern to preserve the sense in which forgiveness is concerned not with moral norms, or pragmatic concerns with halting violent cycles or unhealthy psychological states, but with the other. It expresses a different kind of vision. In other words, the implication is that we cannot be concerned simply with the other whilst also being concerned with justifications for action, goals which include ourselves, or the deeper religious dimensions of the act. There is a sense that if one is to say too much (positively, at least) about forgiveness - its conditions, benefits, and goals - one may actually prevent the moment of forgiveness from unfolding. To attend to suffering, on Weil's account, is also to be unmotivated. This does not primarily mean that someone who shows compassion would have no way of explaining their response, but more that no answer can be given to the question 'why be compassionate?' because the question itself is not compassionate. Compassion is a way of living or response that is beyond the giving of justification and reasons, or else it is its own justification and reason. In

some discussions of forgiveness, a similar approach is evident; forgiveness, like compassion, may be seen as a stopping point for justification or explanation. Secondly, just as for Weil compassion involves a difficult acceptance of reality, so forgiveness seems to involve acceptance of some kind, and it is this aspect that provokes both the suspicion of its moral character, and the sense that it is a transformative moment that lies ahead of us, not within our ordinary personal or ethical capacities. This sense of acceptance is, of course, profoundly linked with the words of Jesus in Gethsemane, which also characterise Christian prayer: 'yet not my will, but yours'. Weil's attempts to show the virtue of acceptance whilst affirming an uncompromising desire for the good led her towards an understanding of the posture of spiritual life as a fundamentally conflicted one, in which contradictions are borne within oneself, and it is this aspect that will be explored below.

II

Redemptive suffering and the cross

Given the way in which Weil describes the destructive uselessness of human affliction, her account of redemptive suffering – which finds a use for suffering and a meaning in evil – is inevitably paradoxical. However, despite the structures outlined above, she does attempt to explore in detail the 'how' of redemptive suffering - often to the point where it gives the impression of an unhealthy fascination or obsession. The result is that there is a great deal of material that is in a sense an extended meditation on what might be called the logic of atonement. Critically assessing Weil's thought on this subject, especially the material in her notebooks, is difficult, because many of these remarks have the appearance of being experiments in paradox, attempts at getting as close as possible in language to the contradiction experienced in life, or contemplated through religious imagery. As far as Weil is concerned, that extreme suffering brings, through an almost impenetrable mystery, both destruction and divine grace is never in question. This is the truth of the cross; the question is of how to say anything about this, of how to make this truth available without distorting it. Weil's understanding of the cross incorporates both a sense of divine activity, and of human imitation: the cross

is the perfect instance of waiting in the void, and this act of waiting reproduces this experience in those who do so.

Any number of examples could be chosen to highlight the paradoxical nature of Weil's reflections, but the following remark makes it particularly clear:

> We must never seek an external compensation for evil in some form of good which balances it, whether or not the evil and the good be linked together by a bond of necessity. For in this way we deprive ourselves of the most precious use to be made of evil, which is to love God through and beyond evil as such.
>
> We must love God through and beyond evil as such; love him through and beyond the evil that we hate, while hating the evil; love him as the author of the evil that we are in the process of hating.[51]

Evil exists; it is real and because it is real it should be loved .[52] But since evil is evil, it can only be hated. Therefore to approach evil *as* evil, one must hate it: one loves evil by hating it. Although in many places these kinds of expressions are presented simply as objects of contemplation, like Zen koan, Weil gives a great deal of attention to the task of providing explanations of the redemptive value of suffering, or describing what it happens when, miraculously, suffering becomes redemptive. It is not always clear how best to understand what Weil is trying to do - describe or explain - but it is clear that the former is never completely separate from the latter. Moreover, a trajectory can be traced from the description of what happens when suffering becomes useful, through an explanation of this process in terms of a kind of spiritual mechanics or cosmic necessity, ending in an elevation of redemptive suffering as the paradigmatic form of the love of God, thought in terms of the Cross. Very roughly, three aspects of Weil's account of spiritual growth correspond to the stages of this transition: the experience of suffering as a means of awakening from imagination to reality; suffering as the necessary consequence of the refusal of passing on evil; suffering as a means of destroying the 'I' (which Weil sometimes refers to as 'decreation'). Only the first two of these will be dealt with here, since a full analysis of the third takes us into more metaphysical territory.

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[51] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 340-1. For other examples see also p. 343, p. 431 and *First and last notebooks*, p110.

[52] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 343.

Acceptance

Firstly, then, Weil believes that to love reality as it is involves suffering, and that the cross is the perfect model of this love. As we have seen, the character of suffering is described particularly in terms of time: duration lived through with no purpose, being carried against one's will towards that which one cannot bear, the attention constrained to the present moment in which there is nothing to desire. However, for Weil the desire to escape from time is also central to her understanding of sin: 'All sins are an attempt to escape from time. Virtue is to submit to time, to press it to the heart until the heart breaks.'[53] Essentially, Weil argues that most ways of giving meaning to life express a futile desire to overcome time, to love life only insofar as its course can be directed and contained, and so reject that which is most essential to being human: temporal finitude and passivity. The future can always be imagined as containing a situation in which present difficulties or pains have been overcome, and in which one has been restored to one's rightful position as a self-determining being. We learn, therefore, to construe the future as that which counter-balances the present, and fills up the void. One loves things not because they are real but because the thought of them appears to render the present more tolerable, and in this way, imagination breeds a conditional love of the world. These reflections on time are closely linked to others concerning death. Death is the source of all deceit for humanity: it cannot be contemplated without dishonesty because the thought of it calls incessantly for a counterweight.[54] The thought of death

[53] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p.102. See also *Notebooks* pp. 23, 38-39, 551 and *First and last notebooks* pp. 141, 177 and 183 for a selection of remarks concerning time. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar's characterisation of the mission and person of Jesus in *A theology of history* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), which echoes that of Weil in certain respects, for example: 'he does not do that precise thing which we try to do when we sin, which is to break out of time, within which are contained God's dispositions for us, in order to arrogate to ourselves a sort of eternity. . . Time, in fact, is either real time, in which man encounters God and accepts his will, or it is unreal time, lost and corrupted: time as the finite in self-contradiction, an unredeemed promise, a space full of nothing, duration leading nowhere.' (pp. 36 and 41).

[54] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 166.

produces a panicked reaction, in which one seeks an opposite to cancel it out, but this reaction in fact prevents life being loved as what it is, because all valuations based on the threat of death simply turn life into death's opposite.[55] In this way, it is only the acceptance of death that reveals life as an excessive abundance of reality, rather than a mere counterweight to death. To contemplate another person without wishing them either immortal or dead is, for Weil, to begin to love truly, through death and time, and this love is as opposed to the selfish love which wishes to preserve someone forever as it is to the hatred which wishes them dead.[56]

However, for Weil, when time is accepted and loved as time, it opens out onto eternity, just as death accepted as death leads to life: 'If one behaves as though dead, the Lord comes and brings life from on high. ... Total obedience to time obliges God to bestow eternity.'[57] There is a strange dynamic here: abundance is glimpsed, or given, only once scarcity is accepted. But it is not clear whether Weil has in mind something like an unveiling or dramatic shift in perspective, in which time is found to be eternity, suffering to be joy and death to be life; or whether something more like a transformation, in which eternity overcomes the finitude of time, joy fills and overflows the void left by suffering, and death is destroyed by life. Neither approach, alone, would seem to meet Weil's criteria for a real love of reality, and forms of understanding based on either could be accused of 'sweetening what is bitter' or providing false consolation: if one believes that one can, somehow, become reconciled with death through a shift in perspective, one sweetens the bitterness; if one believes that suffering is temporary and death insignificant, one never tastes the bitterness in the first place. These two possibilities correspond to the 'two thoughts' concerning the duration of time noted earlier: the first attempts to deny the reality of the present, the second denies its bitterness by attempting to make the present suffering (which, however terrible, is transitory) a permanent home.

A notable section on beauty from 'Forms of the implicit love of God' in *Waiting on God* displays a similar tension between dramatic change in perspective and real

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[55] This point is consonant with James Alison's description of resentment as a warding off of death, the attempt to re-affirm the value of one's life over and against the threat of death. See 'Theology among the stones and dust' in *Theology and sexuality* no. 11, 1999, pp. 91 - 114.

[56] Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 40.

[57] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 110.

transformation:

> It is because it can be loved by us, it is because it is beautiful, that the universe is a country. It is our only country here below... We have a heavenly country, but in a sense it is too difficult to love, because we do not know it; above all, though, in a sense it is too easy to love, because we can imagine it as we please. We run the risk of loving a fiction under this name. If the love of the fiction is strong enough it makes all virtue easy, but at the same time of little value.
>
> Let us love the country here below. It is real; it offers resistance to love. It is this country which God has given us to love. He has willed that it should be difficult yet possible to love it.
>
> We feel ourselves to be strangers, uprooted, in exile here below. We are like Ulysses who had been carried far away during his sleep by sailors and woke up in a strange land, longing for Ithaca with a longing that rent his soul. Suddenly Athena opened his eyes and he saw that he was in Ithaca. In the same way, every man who longs indefatigably for his country, who is distracted from his desire neither by Calypso nor by the Sirens, will one day suddenly find that he is there.

The country 'here below' should be loved *despite* the fact that it is not home, not because it is home. The longing for the country that *is* home leads to the surprise of finding that one is actually there. Weil never fully resolves the ambiguity here: namely of whether one finds that one was in Ithaca *all along*, and all that was needed was a change perspective; or whether the journey to Ithaca is an actual journey, with a destination different to its starting point (or in the terms frequently employed by Derrida, of whether there is something Abrahamic about this Odyssey). Weil frequently describes faith as the belief that the indefatigable desire for the good is never in vain (and as a result, anyone who is convinced of this is not an atheist, whatever they may claim).[58] To believe that those who hunger for righteousness will not go hungry can only come from a glimpse 'behind the curtain', in the same way that real mercy can only come from a glimpse of an entirely absent divine mercy. Desire implies hope, just as hope makes desire possible. In fact, for Weil, it is as though the desire for the good is itself a promise. It arrives somewhat miraculously demanding our consent, and those who consent to this desire in doing so trust in a 'domain' that is real but not given or accessible. One particularly interesting entry in the notebooks outlines the way that different conceptions of afterlife each provide an essential way of contemplating death, whilst at the same masking reality in different ways. Whilst the unthinking acceptance

[58] Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 138.

of immortality that sometimes accompanies Christian belief masks the bitter truth of death and finitude, the materialistic conception of annihilation masks the 'essential, primordial truth that the one and only need of the soul is salvation, and that the whole meaning of life lies in making preparation for the moment of death'.[59] The materialistic conception shuts off the sense that what is needed is transcendent to this life, and that however much perspective is altered, the deepest desire remains for what is real, but beyond. It is clear, then, that there is no clear line to be drawn between those ideas which represent an evasion of reality and those that which emerge from some kind of difficult acceptance. Or put differently, the point, for Weil, is not to arrive at a fixed set of conceptions of life, death and purpose, but rather try to find a way of using concepts as opportunities for a certain kind of contemplation. One can contemplate the truth of atheism, and the truth of theism in different ways, because each may involve a genuine challenge to settled beliefs that in different ways cushion one from real contact with the world. Andre Devaux suggests that for Weil, the contradictions that draw one upwards only exist for the consciousness that is searching for unity, so that it is not the formal qualities of any particular contradiction that represents its value, but rather the nature of our confrontation with it - the resistance it offers. Hence the significance of the acceptance of death, or the reality and nature of suffering is that in the process one is fundamentally de-centred, made to 'look up and wait'.[60] The atheist is not necessarily

[59]Since it is a particularly dense and suggestive passage, the full entry is reproduced here: 'The three conceptions, first that of annihilation in the sense understood by atheists, secondly that of reincarnation and purgatory, and thirdly that of paradise and hell – all three of which are indispensable for pondering on the subject of death – can very well be accepted as true and conceived of simultaneously if we bear in mind the fact that death lies at the point of intersection between time and eternity. They only seem incompatible to us because we cannot prevent ourelves from visualizing eternity as a duration.

All three are necessary. Reincarnation and purgatory mask the truth that this life is unique, irreparable, the only one in which we can either be lost or saved. Paradise and hell mask the truth that salvation is solely the accompaniment of perfection, and damnation solely the accompaniment of betrayal, and that the soul which is imperfect, but nevertheless turned in the direction of good, is not susceptible of either the one or the other. The materialistic notion of annihilation shuts out the essential, primordial truth that the one and only need of the soul is salvation, and that the whole meaning of life lies in making preparation for the moment of death. The belief in immortality breaks up the pure bitterness and the reality itself of death, which remains for us the most precious gift bestowed by divine Providence.' (*Notebooks*, pp. 467-8.)

[60]Andre Devaux 'On the use of contradiction in Simone Weil' in *Simone Weil: the philosophy of culture: readings for a divine humanity*, pp. 151-2.

better off than the Christian when it comes to the acceptance Weil describes, since belief in annihilation may be a form of 'sweetening what is bitter'.

Weil's account of the good of the world in relation to the goodness of God is complex, and closely linked to her understanding of what real acceptance entails. On the one hand, contemplation of the natural order as a route to the understanding of God is absolutely central to her thought. She reprimands the Christian tradition for its failure to nurture a sense of awe towards the order and beauty of the world ('How can Christianity call itself catholic if the universe itself is left out?')[61] and states that because beauty is an attribute of God, the beauty evident in the natural world is 'the experimental proof that the Incarnation is possible.'[62] Similarly, she has a high regard for the close contact with the rhythms of the natural world involved in farming, and feels that the Christian tradition has consistently failed to see the importance of physical labour as the spiritual core of human society, and as an essential symbol in the Christian gospel.[63] On the other hand, she states very simply, as if it is perfectly obvious, that there is no good to be found in the world, and held very simply that the source of all error is the search for an earthly good. The task humans are given is not to seek or believe in God, but to refuse to love everything which is not God, and to recognise that all the goods the world can offer are radically incapable of satisfying the desire for an infinite and perfect good. The spiritual life is conceived in terms of a cultivation of a desire which is necessarily beyond satisfaction. This understanding is felt by everyone at some point, but is dishonestly covered over and suppressed, because that knowledge feels like death: '[a]nd their feeling is true, for that knowledge kills, but it inflicts a death which leads to a resurrection. But they do not know that beforehand; all they foresee is death; they must either choose truth and death or falsehood and life.'[64]

It seems correct to assume that Weil's comments are deliberately paradoxical in this

[61]Weil, *Waiting on God*, p. 94.

[62]Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 440 and *First and last notebooks*, p. 341.

[63]See in particular *The need for roots*, tr. Arthur Wills (London: Routledge, 1952), pp. 295-298, and *Science, necessity and the love of God* pp. 150-151. Weil has a curious interpretation of Genesis 3: she suggests that the story must reflect the thought of some more ancient civilisation for whom physical labour was revered above all else, and this idea has somehow been incorporated into a myth about divine punishment. The punishment of physical labour is, then, the means for humans to be re-immersed in the 'current of the Good', and from this perspective is not a curse at all.

[64]Weil, *Science, necessity and the love of God*, p. 158.

area, rather than simply inconsistent: the world must be both renounced and loved, and both in the appropriate manner. More than this, both the renunciation and the love of the world correspond exactly to the love of God, *are* the love of God, while at the same time cannot be thought of as such. Again, the notion of attention is important: it is the form of attention more than the object of attention which matters for Weil. For Weil, to love God is a change in the way the world is loved and accepted, and this change is primarily negative, a cutting away of false attachment. It involves two movements which seem to oppose each other: unyielding desire for the good that is to be found nowhere in the world, and an unconditional acceptance and love of the world as it is, as completely absent of the object of this desire. Hence the notion of 'waiting' that Weil develops, although it seems like a stoic resignation, contains within it a greater tension, because it includes continual protest against evil and the refusal to be reconciled with it. In order to forgive, one must first condemn, and in a sense, for Weil the acceptance in love of reality as it is given involves at the same time protest, and even accusation of God.[65] In other words, there is a necessary inner conflict within the genuine love of God. To desire God as the good is necessarily difficult, and involves moments of rupture, because it involves accepting the void left by various idols without knowing how to fill it. Similarly, to love the world is necessarily difficult because it involves loving through the evil and suffering which can only ever be hated. Although Weil very clearly states that suffering should never be thought of as being productive of itself, or justified by being part of some divine scheme, the way in which she describes the love

[65]This idea does not appear often in the notebooks, and so it is difficult to discern whether these comments should be seen as an experiment or a part of a more developed line of thought. Either way, they carry a certain force: 'In [the saintly soul] the dialogue of Christ's cry and the Father's silence echoes perpetually in perfect harmony.

Before an afflicted man, this soul immediately responds with the true note. "My father, why have you forsaken him?" And in the centre of the soul the Father's silence replies. . .

One can only excuse men for evil by accusing God of it. If one accuses God one forgives, because God is the Good.

Amid the multitude of those who seem to owe us something, God is our only real debtor. But our debt to him is greater. He will release us from it if we forgive him.

Sin is an offence offered to God from resentment at the debts he owes and does not pay us. By forgiving God we cut the root of sin in ourselves. At the bottom of every sin there is anger against God.

If we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, He will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures.' *First and last notebooks*, p. 94-5.

of God, the desire for the good, and the love of the world is naturally allied with trauma, and so with an image like the cross. The meaning of the cross is considered in relation to the traumatic interaction of the love of God, desire for the good and acceptance of reality, and the understanding of this interaction is developed through consideration of the place of the cross in Christian worship.

A further aspect is important in order to develop this point. For Weil, an essential characteristic of Christian devotion is the idea that to worship God in the form of a crucified man is to purify the love of God (and therefore also the love of the world, since the two things are so closely related for Weil). There is nothing intrinsically desirable about the cross: it is not dignified or noble, it is not reasonable or fruitful. For Weil, the value of the cross for salvation is primarily as an object of contemplation; she frequently refers to the image from John 3 in which the crucified Jesus is described as the bronze serpent lifted up in the desert: one is saved by looking at something perfectly pure. However, to contemplate the cross is to contemplate affliction, that which most repels the gaze, not a secret purity or beauty. And so again, there is a distinction between levels of affirmation: at one level the cross is simply another instance of the interaction of human injustice, divine indifference and physical necessity – appalling, but no more significant than any other horror; at another level it is the absolutely pure presence of God in the form of obedience through suffering, an affliction that has acquired 'an infinite value'.[66] Weil is far from clear on this subject, but what she seems to suggest is that Jesus' anguished yet unbroken obedience to the Father on the cross represents, or instantiates, a love that contains within it the full contradiction of a pure love of God and an unconditional acceptance of creation. And both of these at their most intense pitch. To contemplate God through the cross is to begin to occupy the same position, to love God without imagination, false consolation, or resentment. It is an entirely unresentful acceptance of the world, that somehow continues to desire what is absent.

The halting of evil.

As well as being an affirmation and acceptance of reality, the cross is also thought of in

[66]Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 152.

terms of a stopping point for the contagion of evil. A number of slightly different ideas gather under this basic theme. In an important sense, Weil has an implicitly incarnational approach to atonement, that is, evil is extinguished simply through contact with perfect purity: nothing more is 'required' other than the presence of God.[67] But evil cannot be passed on to God so that it might have contact with purity, and so simply 'falls back' as a curse, and circulates from human to human.[68] The cross is seen as a purification of the mixture of sin and suffering which characterises human evil ('sin makes us suffer and suffering makes us evil'),[69] but on the cross, evil becomes pure suffering. Weil sees the vicious cycle of violence and cruelty within human life as a mechanism based upon the search for equilibrium. Suffering, at whichever level, and however it is imposed, is felt as a diminishment of energy, and as a lowering of the self; we seek to return to a lost (and fictional) equilibrium through making others suffer, seeking to raise ourselves through the lowering of another.[70] The search for equilibrium is 'bad because it is imaginary'; it is a refusal to accept void, and it results in evil being passed from person to person like a disease, which never stops because equilibrium is never reached. Evil cannot be represented in a form which satisfies the horror we feel towards it; every attempt produces another void, and every such void is refused through the same process. Weil understood suffering as an opportunity to accept the void *as* void, and so to halt the spread of evil – it is as though, once refused, the void becomes mobile and travels in the desire to punish, harm and diminish others. To accept it in oneself is to stop this malevolent and circular journey. In a sense, *any* moment in which one renounces the opportunity to express outwardly one's frustration or anger, or in which one refuses the temptation of seeking to make someone else suffer as we have, is, for Weil, analogous to suffering. To accept suffering, or the wrong done to one, without seeking to represent it externally is difficult for the same reason compassion is difficult; not only is it the acceptance a particular void, it is acceptance of the *existence* of void.

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[67]This relates closely to her insistence that it is only lack of time that makes complete holiness impossible to achieve during one's life. The evil within us is finite, but the purity which destroys it is infinite. See *Notebooks*, p. 378.

[68]Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 153-4.

[69]Weil, *Science, necessity and the love of God*, p. 149.

[70]This is a theme particularly drawn out in the selections from the notebooks in *Gravity and Grace*, although it should be noted that proportionally this theme is not as dominant in the notebooks. See especially pp. 5–10.

It is to let evil appear as such, so that its reproduction might cease:

> The man who receives and transmits malediction does not let it penetrate to his core. He does not feel it. But it penetrates to the core of the man upon whom it settles, the man who arrests it. He becomes a curse. To become a curse, it is necessary to be pure.
>
> The plenitude of joy is necessary in order to make a being so pure that he can become a curse. [71]

Evil only penetrates to the core when it is accompanied by a continuing love of God, and desire for the good (it means to refuse the final form of consolation that remains when all other forms have been taken away - to 'curse God and die').

At this point, we can pause to consider Miroslav Volf's work on justice and 'embrace' which, despite the dissimilarities of tone, makes a similar point in a discussion of the relationship between reconciliation and justice. The similarity is in the importance given to the acceptance of imbalance. Volf argues that forgiveness would be impossible if considered as that which is possible only after justice has been done, not only because this would render the act of forgiving unnecessary, but because when examined, it turns out that justice in itself is impossible, and so the time for forgiveness would never come.[72] That is, a 'strict justice' which aims at a perfectly balanced outcome, in which each is given only what they deserve, is a practical impossibility. Volf's point is that not only must forgiveness be sought along with justice, rather than outside or after it, but that there can only be justice where something more than justice is envisaged; 'true justice will always be on the way to embrace.'[73] On the basis of Volf's discussion of justice in *Exclusion and Embrace*, we can discern two aspects to this necessity, both of which concern the relationship between justice and abstraction. Firstly, the desire for strict justice carries the tendency to be continually unsatisfied: the point is not just that if everyone took an eye for an eye the whole world would be blind, but that if everyone took an eye for an eye the whole world would be

[71]Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 69.

[72]Miroslav Volf, 'Forgiveness, reconciliation and justice: a christian contribution to more peaceful social environments' in *Forgiveness and Reconciliation: religion, public policy and conflict transformation*, ed. Raymond G Helmick S.J. and Rodney L Peterson (Philadelphia and London, Templeton Foundation Press 2001), pp. 38-47.

[73]Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1996), p. 225. See also 'Forgiveness, reconciliation and justice', p. 44.

blind but still unsatisfied. If the first eye is taken in an act of unprovoked aggression, and therefore without consent, the eye taken in return has the appearance of a more reasonable exchange; it lacks the element of theft and violation of the initial crime, and so can never really be its equal. And if, for this reason, the justly-demanded eye inevitably fails to restore balance, there seems to be no way of saying how many eyes *would* be enough, and the search for justice turns into the excessive yet impotent repetition of evil. If justice is conceived in terms of the accurate measurement of wrong-doing, so that it may prescribe some kind of counter-balancing measure (whether this is framed as punishment or a form of restitution) it soon becomes clear that it has no means by which to accomplish the measurement.

Secondly, if justice is merely concerned with the ending of injustice, there exists no easy way to distinguish between rival claims to know who the victims of injustice are, and therefore, when justice has been done. Any attempts to attribute the status of perpetrator or victim can themselves become strategies for maintaining or increasing power, or quelling dissent. Given the complexity of most situations of protracted conflict, in which people on the whole think of themselves primarily as victim rather than perpetrator, injustice cannot be ended without at least one party feeling that more injustice has been done in the process, and there is simply no possibility of a return to an equilibrium where no-one holds anything against anyone else and all debts are calmly acknowledged to have been paid. If justice is to be considered a finished business, those perspectives that consider that justice has not yet been done must be disregarded as false, and possibly silenced, in favour of superior, allegedly impartial perspective. However, on closer examination it seems as though this perspective would not only have to be unswayed by imbalances of power, and so be able to survey each situation in its totality, but also be infinitely sensitive and attentive to *every* difference between people, and so in a sense infinitely partial rather than impartial. And once it is admitted that such a perspective is difficult to imagine in theory, let alone achieve in practice, it must also be admitted that justice has never, strictly speaking, been done, and if it is to be considered coherent at all must be seen as an ongoing, never completed task, only possible when pursued within a wider context of grace and the desire for reconciliation.[74] It is only, for Volf, the desire for renewed and deepened relationship beyond the simple execution of justice, which includes the willingness to at least

[74]Weil, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 217-18.

partially relativise one's own just cause and make space for another's, that can ensure that there is any justice *at all*. It is only such a desire that will be willing to overlook the inevitable inadequacy of any settlement, restitution or punishment, and renew relationships despite the fact that some wrongs are yet to be righted, and that ultimately no full restitution - in the sense of a complete undoing of what has been done - is possible.

In Weilian terms, what Volf articulates here is the way in which the search for a equilibrium is 'bad because imaginary'.[75] However, on Weil's account, the acceptance of imbalance is always a painful moment of acceptance, because it involves at the same time an acknowledgement of the absence of good 'here below'. In other words, she provides an analysis of why it is that the recognition of the impossibility of 'strict justice', or 'justice-as-balance' is so difficult to come by: it is actually part of how we think, such that our thinking is, at times, a search for equilibrium.[76] Some thoughts are formed so as to counter-balance certain experiences. To incorporate Volf's insights here, we might say that evil must be experienced in order to be stopped; otherwise one passes it on either through intentional vengeance, or through the insatiable nature of the sense of justice which rises up against it. But it is only experienced *as* evil when the energy of the protest, the desire for justice, is maintained. The desire for justice, then, is not to be regretfully left to one side, but held in a different way within the soul, in a way which includes recognition of one's own powerlessness to achieve or effect it.

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[75]Volf's more recent book *The end of memory: remembering rightly in a violent world* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006) proposes something similar in relation to memory. If memory is to be redeeming, one will need to accept that some memories simply cannot be assimilated. Volf argues that rather than take this as a call to incessantly recall the horrors of the past out of a sense of justice, justice in fact requires that at some point, the choice be made to forget. Volf is consciously opposing the almost ubituitous Western injunction 'never forget', and does so persuasively and profoundly. See pp. 3-35, 131-151. I have focused on *Exclusion and embrace* here, because the emphasis on imbalance is more consonant with Weil's work.

[76]As a consequence, it is Weil' own insight that provides the best critique of her more speculative metaphysical statements that suggest that the destiny of the created subject is to decreate itself, so as to repent of our original sin, which is to let our selves be created. (*First and last notebook*, p. 213). J. P. Little's essay in *Simone Weil: the philosophy of culture, ed. Richard H. Bell*, is incisive on this point: at certain points, her metaphysics of decreation is motivated by the desire to counter-balance the moment of creation, so as to return to equilirium. See Little, 'Simone Weil's concept of decreation', pp. 28 - 9. Rowan Williams' point is also crucial here: for Weil there does not seem to be the possibility of seeing the act of creation as a miraculous expansion. See Williams, *Wrestling with angels*, p. 224.

Failure, to recognise this aspect of futility or impotence can easily lead to an insatiable repetition of evil, each imbalance justifying further injustice, each injustice producing further imbalance. Weil makes the desire for equilibrium a more fundamental part of the human condition, and the acceptance that is necessary to exit from the futility is conceived in more violent terms: one has to be wrenched away from one's commitment to seek equilibrium, by the experience of suffering. The kind of resentment that Griswold, Murphy and others frame as a significant part of the sense of human value, dignity and right, would for Weil be an indication that we do not accept the vulnerability that is part of being human, or a way of counter-balancing the thought of death (because it is the threat of death, of being nothing rather than something, that threatens us even in insult). Resentment directs attention in the wrong direction: what matters is not the wrongdoing of the one who inflicts suffering, but the suffering inflicted; the innocent part of the soul that cries out from within even the most hardened criminal 'why is this happening to me?'. Resentment could also be understood as a desire 'cloaked in imaginary satisfaction'. When we are surprised that we are not satisfied when we attain what we desired, it is because there was an element of imagination in the desire.

This point is related to her comments on the 'liberation of energy'. Although this cannot be dealt with adequately here, resentment provides a good example of what she means by this. Resentment may be directed at the author of a particular deed, and be felt as a desire to repay in some form, the desire to make them understand what they have done, or the desire to triumph over them, whether symbolically or physically. But on Weil's account, the protest that destructive suffering issues in (suffering that produces a sense of isolation, despair, or in Amery's terms, that destroys one's trust in the world) contains an energy that is degraded through being attached to finite objects.[77] The energy of resentment is not simply to be suppressed, as if it were judged to be criminal in itself, but rather torn from its attachment to the finite, and addressed to God, so that 'why is this happening to me?' becomes 'why have you forsaken me?'. The deepest resentment is protest, not simply against this or that person, but against the world, and against the creator. In this sense, Weil is thoroughly in agreement with Ivan

[77]See Miklos Veto, *The religious metaphysics of Simone Weil*, pp. 56-69 for an exposition and discussion of Weil's conception of the transference of energy. See also J. P. Little's analysis in *Simone Weil: the philosophy of culture: readings towards a divine humanity*, pp. 35-6.

Karamzov, except rather than return the ticket in silent protest, she envisages more of a confrontation:

> One can only excuse men for evil by accusing God of it. If one accuses God one forgives, because God is the Good.
>
> Amid the multitude of those who seem to owe us something, God is our only real debtor. But our debt to him is greater. He will release us from it if we forgive him.
>
> Sin is an offence offered to God from resentment at the debts he owes and does not pay us. By forgiving God we cut the root of sin in ourselves. At the bottom of every sin there is anger against God.
>
> If we forgive God for his crime against us, which is to have made us finite creatures, He will forgive our crime against him, which is that we are finite creatures.
>
> By accepting that we are creatures we win freedom from the past.[78]

In this sense, for Weil, to forgive involves resentment passing through the void. It is not that one tells oneself that one is wrong to be so angry, or finds reasons to justify or excuse those who harm us (or ourselves where we have harmed others), or even that one says 'enough is enough', but that resentment is detached from finite objects and directed at God, which is to say, undirected. Despite the idiosyncrasy of Weil's work, there does seem to be something important in this idea. Jean Amery's description of the experience of torture and life in the concentration camp emphasises the discrepancy between the fairly average cruelty of individual Nazi soldiers, with the desolation of his experience. Torture produces not just a sense of being attacked and degraded by a particular person, but a sense of cosmic abandonment:

> Whoever has succumbed to torture can no longer feel at home in the world. The shame of destruction cannot be erased. Trust in the world, which already collapsed in part at the first blow, but in the end, under torture, fully, will not be regained. That one's fellow man was revealed as the anti-man remains in the tortured person as accumulated horror. It blocks the view into a world in which the principle of hope rules.[79]

The resonances between Weil and Amery are particularly striking here (especially when one considers that the experiences Amery describes may well have been happening as Weil was writing). Both attest to the shock of realisation that 'all those

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[78]Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 95.

[79]Jean Amery, 'Torture' in *At the mind's limits: contemplations by a survivor on Auschwitz and its realities*, p. 40.

things that one may, according to inclination, call his soul'[80] are exactly as vulnerable as the flesh, and describe the way in which this realisation - either through real experience, or through a heightened sensitivity to the possibility of such suffering - has a profound effect on one's view of the world and the human person.[81] In Weil's terms, experiences like Amery's produce a protest that is out of proportion to any human target; there is no-one to receive it, no-one capable of weighing its seriousness. And as the essay on resentment suggests, the desire that fuels resentment of the kind that Amery knows is a desire that exceeds the limits of what is possible. To 'forgive' in the way that Weil describes above is not to cease resentment, but to wrench its energy away from particular aims so that it can be seen without the imaginary sense of fulfilment that the anticipation these aims produces.[82] For Weil, the command to forgive is a command to let one's desire (for satisfaction, for equilibrium, for vindication, etc.) be without determinate object, and in the case of resentment, this means to accuse God whilst desiring the good that only God is.

For Weil, the cross is an image and an instance of what this means. For Weil, the prayer of forgiveness that comes from the cross, combined with the cry of abandonment is an indication that here there is the co-existence of an acceptance, protest and love. Christ has no resentment not because of a failure to recognise the reality of injustice, or a refusal of anger, or a contemptuous attitude towards those that crucify, but because the energy of the protest is torn away from finite objects, and directed, in love and pain, towards the Father.

Conclusion

It is difficult to sum up what is learnt through an encounter with Simone Weil. Her work has proved essential for this thesis precisely because of the direct attempt to wrestle

[80]Amery, 'Torture' p. 40.

[81]Eric Springsted and Diognees Allen suggest that it was this realisation that launched Weil into her later views in which she often talks about the 'supernatural' part of the soul as a distinct, inacessible aspect of the person. See *Spirit, nature and community: issues in the thought of Simone Weil* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994) p. 83. See also pp. 97-110 for a comparison between Epictetus and Weil's conceptions of the effect of suffering on the person.

[82]Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 175.

with problems that seem essential to this subject, and for the immense sensitivity she demonstrates at times towards these issues. At the risk of overlooking some serious problems with Weil's thought, we can draw out a number of points which will be instructive in what follows.

Firstly, Weil sensed that compassion, as an honest and loving response to the human experience of suffering, involves an elusive but very real character of thinking. This is construed in terms of the motivation of thought: not to look for false compensation or hurry past the intolerable, but equally, not to justify or normalise what is continually exceptional. Just as the experience of suffering produces thought, and one's response to it shapes thought, so one can say something similar about forgiveness: the intellectual processes through which we name and reflect upon wrongdoing are already responses to it. This is consonant with the argument made in the previous chapter, that forgiveness involves both a suspension, or abandonment of judgement, and a re-learning of judgement. Secondly, Weil emphasises the centrality of the experience of contradiction, such that one cannot be compassionate without feeling it 'with one's whole soul'. However, for Weil, the contradictions of existence are encountered, not in an instant, but through an openness of posture which is intrinsically temporal: waiting is a way of being in time, and attention, which involves an embrace of contradiction, is given only through time. The notion of waiting will prove to be a way of interrogating Derrida's insistence on the importance of aporetic instants. Finally, the tortured contours of many of Weil's notes indicate that there is an inherent ambiguity to many of the most important things that there are to say about suffering and grace. This aspect of her thought sheds more light on why it is that describing the nature and meaning of forgiveness is necessarily precarious, risky and provisional. In the chapters that follow, I will continue to use these aspects of Weil's work as a resource in the discussions.

Chapter three

Forgiveness and the cross: atonement, perspective and necessity

This chapter explores the change of perspective that forgiveness might involve through constructive use of a number of sources. As well as continuing discussion on Charles Griswold and Vladimir Jankelevitch, I also engage with the debate about atonement engendered by the work of Rene Girard, and reflect upon biblical scholar Michael J. Gorman's recent work on Pauline theology. The argument is suggestive rather than conclusive: it is an attempt to give a sense of what forgiveness might be when exposed to seemingly contradictory concerns, namely, that it be comprehending and vigilant as well as excessive and mysterious: 'as wise as snakes and as innocent as doves'. I hope already to have shown that it is necessary to let one's understanding of forgiveness be open to these sometimes opposing concerns, through the discussions in the first chapter. I also hope to have shown, through interaction with Charles Taylor, further extended in engagement with Simone Weil, the way in which understanding itself is already pressured by these concerns. Just as for Weil, thought itself is a form of response to suffering, so it seems that the unavoidable questions posed in the figure of forgiveness are always already shaping understanding, so that our thinking is itself already a form of response to wrongdoing (the question 'what now?' which any violation poses, is one which we are always answering, in one way or another). In this chapter I suggest a way of seeing the significance of the ambiguity which seems to remain even in the most thorough account of forgiveness, such that when embraced - or taken up, and carried, like a cross - it may become redemptive.

Rene Girard's work is chosen here for two reasons. Firstly, Girard's work, as well as that of those who have made theological use of it, is concerned with a purification of thinking: as we will see, the gospel is thought in terms of the collapse of a whole complex of significance which grows up around compulsive violence. As we have seen in the case of Jankelevitch, there is a tendency when trying to articulate the gratuity of forgiveness to oppose the moment of forgiveness to any condition, principle, motivation or goal. In other words, the desire seems to be for an uncontaminated understanding of forgiveness. I have already indicated the way in which I think that this tendency actually results in diminished understanding, in which the tension of the forgiving

moment is actually reduced by the lack of contact with the pragmatic necessities of judgement. Similarly, Girardian theology can be seen as the attempt to purify theology from the sacrificial mentality that requires and produces victims, and more than this, from the sense that some evil is always necessary to drive out evil. In this sense, the difficulties that this attempt encounters can be seen as another example of what Charles Taylor calls 'cross-pressures'. I hope to show how the tensions evident in this task parallel those that I have been exploring thus far. Secondly, and more positively, Girard's thought may be read as a description of how one set of necessities are revealed to be unnecessary, and therefore as a description of a liberating change in perspective: the death and resurrection of Jesus reveals the way in which scapegoating is futile and unnecessary. This gives a particularly helpful way of exploring the way in which forgiveness may be an unforeseen possibility, either invisible or incomprehensible from certain perspectives, so that the discourse on forgiveness involves articulating this sense of discovery.

The chapter begins with a discussion of necessity and forgiveness that lays out in more depth the issues that are at stake, before briefly summarising the main points of Girard's theory, as well as some of the problems with it. The discussion then moves to examine some of the constructive theological uses of Girard's work, with a particular emphasis on the way that any discussion of atonement involves giving meaning to death. Finally, I propose a slightly different approach to the question of learning or discovery, with reference to the textual dynamics Michael Gorman finds in the Philippi hymn, and use this to suggest that the 'impurity' that appears to haunt discussions of both forgiveness and atonement may actually play a more constructive role in the transformation of perspective. I end with a return to Charles Griswold's work in an attempt to flesh out what this means more concretely.

Girard, forgiveness and necessity

What is necessary in order for us to forgive, or be forgiven? One of the issues we have been concerned with so far is the way in which forgiveness may be in opposition to a calculating, measured or retributive mentality, so that to forgive may mean to give up on giving reasons, and on the necessity of condition preceding response. We have seen the way in which where forgiveness is presented as a well-regulated giving of what is,

in any case only proper, it appears somewhat diminished and pallid. Vladimir Jankelevitch gives one explanation of why reasons are found for forgiveness. He writes of the way in which, when interrogated, the loving person loses confidence in their ungrounded generosity, retreating back into the realm of 'becauses' and 'whys' so as to justify themselves:

> Thus the generous man sometimes clings to a semblance of mitigating excuse or excusing circumstance, immeasurably exaggerates the justificatory occasion, or even invents it whole, so as to be in accordance with rational logic. Love, solicited to say why it loves (as if it were necessary that there be a *why*!), looks into itself and naturally finds for itself, right away, some becauses. The creator, interrogated by journalists about the mystery of creation, reconstructs a retrospective causality - for he finds it more fitting to write his poems for this or that reason. And likewise, impulsive forgiveness gives itself an explicative etiology and some reasonable motives for indulgence after the fact; retrospectively, it finds reasons for excusing what it was wholly disposed to forgive without reason.[1]

There is a sense here that from the perspective of the truly forgiving person, the question 'what is necessary in order for us to forgive?' simply does not arise, and so cannot be answered without betrayal. The explanation of what from one perspective is without need of explanation, according to the norms and principles of another, is framed as a failure of nerve, or a result of shame. The 'becauses' and 'whys' that make up this retrospective causality lack the generosity, creativity or impulsive nature of the act they are given to explain, but most people are unprepared to remain silent for long, or renounce the opportunity to exercise their reasoning. One possibility here is to see the difference between the two perspectives - the way that what appears obvious from one must be justified from another - as analogous to the way that the wisdom of God is found to be foolish from the perspective of the wisdom of the world. For John Caputo, this is precisely what the impossibility of forgiveness indicates. In 'the kingdom of the impossible', the principle of reason is upended by an event in excess of logic: 'this coming of the impossible, of the gift, of the kingdom, shatters the horizon of economics, of balanced payments and carefully conducted cost analyses'.[2] As the

[1]Jankelevitch, *Forgiveness*, p. 113.

[2]John D. Caputo, *The weakness of God: a theology of the event*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 109. See pp. 101-112, and 208-235 for his discussion of forgiveness as the impossible. This thesis does not focus on Caputo directly, but since his work so clearly follows Derrida, especially on the subject of the impossibility of the gift, much of what is discussed in chapter

impossible, forgiveness necessarily appears groundless and unreasonable, but this foolishness is wiser than the wisdom of the world.

But the 'retrospective causality' that Jankelevitch describes above also calls to mind the resurrection appearances of Jesus, in which the risen Jesus, with a note of impatience, explains that there were reasons for the events in Jerusalem: 'Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter his glory?'[3] Luke narrates a story of discovery, the experience of finding sense where there was no sense, reasons where there were none. However, in the New Testament, the 'retrospective causality' that looks for, and finds, a 'because' or a 'for this reason' in the death of Jesus is not framed as a compromising co-operation with unforgiving standards, but almost as the opposite. In this case, the generous, creative one gives his reasons as illumination rather than compromise, and the reasons are given so as to challenge and change minds, not pander to them. Nevertheless, the Christian doctrine of atonement, which attempts to describe in more detail what 'for this reason' might mean remains notoriously unresolved, and the kind of thinking that lies behind 'was it not necessary?' is a matter of ongoing contention. René Girard's work has provoked an attempt to re-think the nature of this necessity, one that centres on the interaction between human desire, ritual behaviour, mythology and violence.

Through his early work as a literary critic, Girard began to formulate a theory of mimetic, or triangular, desire. Rather than assuming that human desire is primarily a matter of someone desiring and something desired, Girard suggests that desire is always mediated through a third party, or model: I desire that which is already desired by another, *because* it is desired by another, or in James Alison's words, 'I desire according to the desire of another'. In practice, this mimetic desire seems to be inextricably linked with conflict: the model for my desire tends to become my rival, and an antagonistic spiral ensues, in which despite the intensification of desire on both sides, the attention gradually shifts from the object of desire to the opponent who blocks the way to the object.[4] This feature of human behaviour leads inevitably to violence, and the

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four in relation to Derrida applies to Caputo.

[3]Luke 24: 25-6.

[4]Mimetic desire is not the subject of this discussion, but there are important questions about Girard's account of mimesis, in particular over whether he implies, willingly or not, that desire is inherently violent. Rebecca Adam's essay 'Loving mimesis and Girard's scapegoat of the text' in *Violence*

possibility of murder, which in turn creates further spiralling of aggression within communities, the risk of a complete deterioration of relations within them, and a latent fear of this possibility haunts collective consciousness. Girard hypothetically re-creates a foundational moment in which a new form of consciousness is born. During a period of uncontrolled aggression, fuelled by mimetic desire, and without any means of being quelled, the attention of a seething mob is diverted onto an unfortunate individual, usually someone noticeably unusual, weak or marginal, who is spontaneously murdered. It is not simply the fact of murder that is significant, but the unanimity: 'suddenly the opposition of everyone against everyone else is replaced by the opposition of all against one. Where previously there had been a chaotic ensemble of particular conflicts, there is now the simplicity of a single conflict: the entire community on one side, and on the other, the victim.'[5] A grateful peace descends on the community, but it is a peace linked to the presence of a dead body. This body commands attention in a new way, it brings about 'the first non-instinctual attention', and as such this moment is truly foundational – it precedes all cultural institutions and systems of signs. Here is the origin of worship, because the dead victim is the object of both horror and reverence. For Girard, this ambivalence lies behind the unstable figures within mythology that shift between benevolence and malevolence, gods and monsters.[6]

In this way, a mechanism emerges for the maintenance of relative peace within communities, and as Girard sees it, this mechanism lies in the background of most myths, and nearly all religious practices. The practice of sacrifice is a way of repeating the essence of what actually happened in this foundational moment in a safer, more controlled and sustainable way, and myths are re-tellings of the foundational moment of violence from the perspective of the newly-united community. In both cases there is an unconscious collective compulsion to repeat in narrative or ritual form the logic of

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Renounced, ed. William M. Swartley (Telford: Pandora Press 2000) is a particularly helpful discussion of this question, and focuses on the desire for others, and the way in which it is not just what is desired by the other that is imitated, but how the other desires, and so imitative desire can be positive if it imitates a non-possessive desire for another's continued subjective flourishing.

[5] Girard, Oughoulian and Lefort, *Things hidden since the foundation of the world*, (The Athlone Press: London), 1978, p. 24.

[6] Girard, *Violence and the sacred*, tr. Patrick Gregory, (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London), 1977, pp. 251-253.

scapegoating. Both sacrificial practice and founding myths are necessarily deceptive, though, because the violence directed at the victim is presented as being in some way necessary or deserved, not as the random re-directing of internal rivalry and antagonism, and ultimately, not as murder. The actual source of conflict is thereby occluded, and Girard repeatedly stresses the way in which many modern attempts to examine ancient myths or rituals fall straight back into the same perspectives that the myths are developed in order to perpetuate.[7] Much of Girard's work has been concerned with emphasising the way in which the bible has been the primary vehicle for revealing the innocence of the victim of scapegoating, and so enabling a conception of God fundamentally different to that which is found in all religious systems, as well as a more honest reading of both ritual practice and myth. The truth of human violence is revealed at the same moment as the victim is revealed to be innocent, because once the necessity of the murder is no longer believed, attention is directed onto the real cause of the eruption of violence.

Interestingly, despite the obvious way in which this perspective links sacrifice with the most destructive patterns of behaviour, it highlights something that most interpretations of sacrifice miss, according to Girard; namely, that scapegoating (and its ritualised repetition, which sacrifice involves) actually works. That is, it produces a powerful effect because it temporarily stills the storm of mimetic conflict within a community through a redirection of aggression and attention. Primitive religious

[7]A particularly striking example of this point is given by S. Mark Heim from a book on myth by Joseph Campbell and Bill D Moyers. Campbell and Moyers discuss a religious festival which involves a sexual orgy in which taboos are broken, and some of the young boys undergo sexual initiation. The boys enter one by one into a specially constructed log hut to have their first sexual experience with a young woman dressed up as a deity: '**Campbell**: . . . And when the last boy is with her in full embrace, the supports are withdrawn, the logs drop, and the couple is killed. There is the union of male and female again, as they were in the beginning, before the separation took place. There is the union of begetting and death. They are both the same thing. Then the little couple is pulled out and roasted and eaten that very evening. The ritual is the repetition of the original act of the killing of a god followed by the coming of the food from the dead saviour In the sacrifice of the Mass, you are taught that this is the body and blood of the Saviour. You take it to you, and you turn inward, and there he works within you. **Moyers**: What is the truth to which the rituals point?' Heim goes on to note that the shocking thing here is not the ritual itself, but the fact that the meaning of the ritual is seen as entirely separate from the very real violence that it is actually composed of. See S. Mark Heim, *Saved from sacrifice*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 57-59.

practices do not just reflect an unscientific world-view, which supposes that the smell of burning fat is 'well-pleasing to the LORD', but rather, they draw upon fundamental human impulses, and testify - albeit deceptively - to a basic truth about human sociality: violence can be used to expel violence, as long as no-one recognises that this is what is happening. Once the victims of scapegoating are recognised as innocent, and the killing unjust, the mechanism begins to falter. For Girard, the crucifixion of Jesus is the story of an act of scapegoating told, for the first time, entirely from the perspective of the victim, with all the communal illusions highlighted rather than consented to. The reasons given for Jesus' execution are shown to be fabrications, and the innocence of Jesus is stressed through dissenting voices, but more importantly, the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus is presented as an escalating contagion, out of the control of any one person or group.

Crucially, Girard stresses that 'the sacred plays no part in the death of Jesus'.[8] That is, although the New Testament witnesses assert (and in fact, much more strongly that Girard allows) that within the dishonesty and compulsion of the rushed execution there was the work of a different intentionality, already alluded to by the prophets, and which was also that of Jesus himself, the cross is nevertheless the work of evil.[9] In this sense, the gospel texts reveal how things have been and at the same time show that they need no longer be this way, or as James Alison puts it: '[a]s it becomes possible to perceive humans as constitutionally violent, so it becomes possible to understand God as entirely without violence'.[10] It is not God who demands sacrifice, but violent, frustrated humanity; for God, only one thing is needed, and it is not sacrifice. This is a crucial point, because for Girard the central thrust of Christianity is found in this revelation, and it is this revelation that opens up the possibility of peaceful community no longer based on expulsion. As Girard describes it, the truth of the innocent victim is resisted not by individual perversity, but by a powerful communal blindness, and made visible only through a remarkable (and costly) disentanglement from mimetic fascination. However, it is a perspective that is difficult to be true to, since the draw towards sacrificial thinking is so strong. Where the New Testament begins to lose sight of the

[8]Girard, *Things hidden*, p. 231.

[9]Hence the formula in Acts: 'this man Jesus... whom you crucified... God has raised'. See Acts 2:23-24, 2:14-15, 5:30-31

[10]James Alison, *The joy of being wrong: original sin through Easter eyes*, (The crossroad publishing company: New York), 1998, p. 83.

role of sinful human agents in bringing about the crucifixion, it also loses the sense of the innocence of the victim, and the perspective that this makes possible. When the cross is framed as a necessity (as, for Girard, it is in the book of Hebrews),[11] we succumb to a mentality that needs, and demands, death in order for life to continue.

We can see, then, that there is a parallel here with the two interpretations of forgiveness we are considering: reasoned conditionality and excessive unconditionality. For Jankelevitch, the creative, generous man slips out of a genuinely forgiving perspective as he gives his reasons for that which, at the time, there were no reasons (forgiveness being its own reason). Similarly, for Girard, the movement towards a greater elaboration of the sacrificial meaning of the death of Christ is a movement backwards into the compromised perspective of scapegoating. The following discussion aims to examine in more detail the way in which Girard's work can be used to form a new perspective on the death of Jesus, and to show the way in which this perspective necessarily involves more compromise with the perspective it aims to leave behind than is admitted.

The impurity of the gospel

Girard's thought has had an important impact upon Christian theology, in a number of ways. The way in which the life of Jesus is, at important junctures, concerned with the influence of crowds and the influence of collective mentalities upon the individual, seems increasingly significant in the light of Girard's work, given his description of a collective mentality formed at moments of heightened tension.[12] Similarly, the emphasis on the link between the drama of the gospel narrative and its inner meaning is crucial, so that the need to explore the historical event of the crucifixion has become

[11]Girard, *Things hidden*, p. 230.

[12]An excellent example of the theory of mimetic desire 'in action' is James Alison's essay on the Sermon on the mount sayings on prayer, recently included in the collection *Broken hearts and new creations*. Alison highlights the way in which the emphasis on secrecy does not equate to an affirmation of the private sphere and a judgement of public life, but rather indicates that desire is only renewed when it is nurtured away from the pressures of mimetic desire. Hence the focus of the teaching, on this reading, is not on the danger of pride, as if our appearance before others were itself an evil, but on the way that a positive, non-rivalistic desire must initially be learned through isolation.

more important in attempts to explore the logic of atonement.[13] Closely linked with this is the sense that the resurrection attains a new significance, because it is only the undoing, in a certain sense, of the unjust murder that allows it to be revealed as unjust murder.[14] Another distinctive feature of the Girardian picture is that in its use of biblical texts, passages not normally taken to be crucial begin to appear to take on a new, perhaps central, significance. Jesus' statement about his affinity with a long line of murdered prophets, his description of Satan as both a murderer from the beginning and the father of lies, the enigmatic response to the question about authority ('How can Satan cast out Satan?) and Caiaphas' declaration that 'it is better for one man to die than the whole nation to perish' all come to be vital in drawing out the significance of the passion narratives. Any picture of what the death of Jesus was motivated by, what it meant and what it means is built up through the way in which key texts are linked together, and if nothing else, Girard has demonstrated how different the picture can be if we link different texts together in different ways.

Most important, though, is the way in which it highlights the problematic nature of talk of Jesus' death as part of a divine plan, and therefore as something which, from this point of view, 'had' to happen. It may be that this has always been one of the central problems in discussing the significance of the cross, but the picture presented by Girard highlights it in a new way. It highlights the way in which any talk of meaning in the cross relies upon two layers of intentionality - the purposes of God, the purposes of those that crucify - and yet at the same time draws attention to the conflict between these. In fact, it might be said that this tension is particularly problematic in the Girardian picture, precisely because the revelation that deaths like that of Jesus are futile and unnecessary is the main content of the gospel, and it is this perspective that the non-mythological preservation of the story in subsequent human history makes possible. If there is a discrepancy between the message and the way which it comes to

[13]Despite some major reservations concerning Girard, John Milbank is still happy to use his insights positively, and his essay on the crucifixion in *Being reconciled: ontology and pardon* (London, Routledge, 2004), assumes that Girard is right to stress the way in which Jesus' death is in part the result of a mob. See pp.79-93, especially pp. 92-3. See also *The word made strange: theology, language, culture* (Oxford: Blackwell 1997), pp. 159-161.

[14]Rowan Williams' much loved book *Resurrection: interpreting the Easter gospel (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2002)*, anticipates some of this significance, as Williams notes in the new introduction, where he suggests the book should now be read with Girard's work in mind. See p. viii.

light, it is especially serious in this case, where the link between violence, deception and story-telling has been stressed so distinctively. The gospel makes possible a new realisation: we do not need to create arbitrary victims in order to find an outlet for murderous rage, we do not need to keep warding off impending crisis with just one more sacrifice, we do not need to collude with the temporary wishes of a violent crowd so that order can be kept, and we do not need to distance ourselves from the victims of these acts in order to hold onto our own fragile place in the world. But in order for any of this to be seen, a violent death had to be suffered in a certain way. And so violence is necessary, and redemptive: God ends up in the background of the lynching, holding the cloaks of the mob.[15]

The point is not to claim that Girardian insights can or should be reduced to such a stark contradiction, but simply to suggest that even if the Christian gospel is construed primarily in terms of the unmasking of violence and the potential for forming peaceful human community, rather than as an overcoming of humanity's alienation from God, *some* kind of link between violence and reconciliation remains, and the difficulty is of how to articulate this. Thinkers attempting to use Girard's insights as a way to flesh out an alternative approach to atonement have the task of expressing this link without leaving God compromised in human violence. One might conclude, as Mark Heim does, that on this point the difference between being very right and very wrong can be 'vanishingly small', which means that atonement theology is by definition the task of walking along this knife edge, and Girardian insights simply bring this tension into particularly sharp focus by highlighting the scapegoating pattern.[16] Equally, though, one might see this knife edge as a sign that Girardian approaches are still an attempt to present sacrificial death as necessary, and instead of reinterpreting the death of Christ, propose that the natural movement of understanding provoked by the New Testament is away from the cross as a significant moment in its own right. I will explore this latter possibility first, since it sheds light on the former.

This position is taken up by Stephen Finlan. Finlan claims that Girard attempts to hold on to the sacrificial mentality whilst explaining it, and that only a more thorough soteriology of incarnation can free theology from the idea of atonement by sacrifice,

[15]See S. Mark Heim, *Saved from sacrifice: A theology of the cross* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 192-207 on this point, and more critically, Stephen Finlan, *Problems with atonement: the origins of, and controversy about, the atonement doctrine* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), p. 93.

[16] Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice*, p. 7.

which is by definition a 'strange marriage of primitive concepts of a violent god and the revealed teaching of a loving God.'[17] Essentially, then, Girard's framework faces the same problem that all atonement theologies face; namely, that it *is* an atonement theology: even in Girard, there is still the trace of 'sacrificial blood magic'.[18] Finlan begins with a description of the process of the spiritualisation of sacrifice that was already well under-way by the time the New Testament was being written, and describes this process in terms of six stages: substitution (animals for humans), moralising (insertion of new meanings into existing practice), internalisation (attitude and motive become more important that accurate practice, and can sometimes count as sacrifice in a further substitution), metaphorical use of cultic terms (e.g. the idea that one's body becomes a temple), actual rejection of sacrifice (whether because it is insincere or hypocritical, as in some prophetic sayings and Psalms, or more radically, because it is not needed, as is frequent in ancient Greek philosophy), and finally, the culmination of these moves in the notion of spiritual transformation: the whole of life seen as an offering up in which what is human becomes divine, as for example in the Christian notion of *theosis*.[19] For Finlan, the problem with making atonement through the cross a central doctrine is that in the background lurks the idea that God is somehow dependant on ritual process, or that the underlying structures of sacrificial ritual flow from God, or are written into being itself. Thus, the movement of spiritualisation is impeded, as assumptions about the efficacy of ritual that should be naturally left behind (that sins can be unloaded onto a scapegoat, that blood purifies, that God needs to be appeased, that divine economy mimics human economy, etc.) are cemented into the meaning of the gospel.[20] Instead, Finlan argues, it is the doctrine of the Incarnation that is crucial; atonement theology can be helpful in as much as it 'transmits' the notion of God entering into human life and suffering, but this could be transmitted just as well without it.[21] The central meaning of the cross should instead be something like Irenaeus' notion of recapitulation, although with Irenaeus' unfortunate references to transactional terms like ransom, propitiation and redemption omitted: 'the divine Son salvaged each phase of human life by his living through it. The living of this life had

[17]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, pp. 98 and 101 for the same critique applied to Walter Wink.

[18]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, p. 94.

[19]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, pp. 20-29.

[20]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, pp. 43-44 and 80.

[21]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, pp. 120.

the effect of re-making human life itself, of restoring the potential for union with God.'[22] The notion of recapitulation is naturally allied to the drama of the gospels, in that if it is simply the living of this particular life which is salvific, rather than some extrinsic achievement, then to imaginatively enter into Jesus' life to perceive is character and potency, is already to begin to understand its saving significance.[23]

One might say, then, that for both Girard and Finlan, there is a movement towards purification, so that the gospel becomes, to echo Wittgenstein, more and more 'limpid'.[24] However, for Finlan, the movement only has integrity when it is allied to a more robustly theological perspective (of creation, incarnation, the solidarity of God with suffering humanity, and ultimately, theosis), rather than a rationalising explanation which allows death, under certain circumstances, to mean something, or accomplish something. Something important should be noted here, however. The significance that the incarnation gives to temporal events means that one contemplates those events differently (so that, for example, for Jesus to feast with tax-collectors and sinners means something more than an average feast involving tax-collectors and sinners). This is particularly true when it comes to the crucifixion. The sense of divine humanity gives the event of death - even the cruellest, most unjust death - the significance of showing God's 'willingness to go the full measure of participation in human suffering',[25] rather than simply being another instance of political violence. But in this change of perspective, too, one can see a sacrifice. The beginnings of a sense of redemptive purpose alters, surely, the way in which the horror of crucifixion is contemplated; in Weil's terms, there is the potential here for an evasion of the full sense of affliction - it sweetens what is bitter. Does Finlan's perspective not equally cultivate a tendency to look away from suffering, insofar as the image of Christ on the cross somehow dilutes or distracts from the senseless horror of the human body nailed onto wood to hang till it dies? It is important to note here that there is tendency for these discussions to proceed

[22]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, p. 121.

[23]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, p. 121.

[24]See his comment in Lecture on ethics, culture and value in *The Wittgenstein Reader*, p. 298. Although he is referring to 'what his nose tells him' about the difference between the gospels and Paul's epistles in terms of humility, not sacrificial language, the way he qualifies his own criticism is relevant here. Perhaps, he says, it is my own impurity which causes the turbulence, for why should my impurity not be able to pollute what is limpid?

[25]Finlan, *Problems with atonement*, p. 110.

by way of a trade in accusation: Girard accuses the 'sacrificial' interpretation of Christianity of violence, and proposes instead that the gospels unveil the futility of sacrifice; Finlan accuses Girard of further complicity in sacrifice, through affirming the need for there to be 'one last sacrifice' that exposes the violence. But there is no reason why this process cannot be continued: Simone Weil might accuse Finlan of refusing, still, to contemplate the destructive depths of affliction, because the cross is always seen through the lens of incarnation, in advance.

However, the accusation need not stop there. Susan Taubes' criticism of Weil is that despite her concern with suffering, she, too ends up rationalising and justifying the sufferings of the afflicted in the same way that Weil construes much of Christian orthodoxy as doing.[26] A traditional belief in heavenly consolation may, as Weil argues, encourage a lack of attention to affliction (the present reality of suffering and injustice can be accepted because one day they will be forgotten - it is a counter-balance) but Weil's account of a traumatic awakening produced through affliction may equally render real physical, emotional or social suffering less significant because of the fruit it is believed to produce if undergone in the right way. But for Taubes, both attempts at reconciliation could encourage passivity and be used to justify or tolerate violence or injustice, or else to make sense of the feeling of impotence in the face of evil and suffering by ascribing a similar impotence to God.[27] For Taubes, Weil's meditations on the cross, despite their severity, still give suffering and death a theological glow, and

[26] Susan Taubes, 'Simone Weil: The Absent God', in *Toward a new Christianity: readings in the death of God theology*, ed. Thomas Altizer (Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.: New York 1967).

[27] *Toward a new Christianity,* pp. 116, 118. For Taubes, despite Weil's descriptions of the absence of God, and the *kenosis* involved in creating a world governed by necessity, in the background there is still the all-powerful God of traditional theism, who voluntary abdicates his power. In practice, then, Weil's picture is not so different from that which she opposes, and giving suffering a supernatural use is not so different from anticipating a supernatural remedy; the former may simply be a more sophisticated route to reach the same destination. Both strive for a perspective from which to be reconciled with reality, and are prepared to sacrifice one aspect of life to do so. Where beliefs about future reward for the poor and the suffering can become a legitimation of inequality and oppression, the presentation of an absent God and a spiritually purifying suffering may give dignity to impotence and passivity. Despite Weil's strongest intentions, the theological framework that she builds around her description of the reality of suffering and its place in spiritual life is still a divinisation of the human order; and theodicy has not been avoided, only displaced. For Taubes, then, Weil's account is lacking because it could easily fail to produce the right kind of attention towards suffering and injustice, just as a more traditional theodicy might.

this requires a sacrifice of our attention towards the real suffering of others. The problem with this process is that it is not obvious how any way of giving meaning to suffering or death could completely justify the change of perspective that is thereby encouraged. More specifically, it is not obvious how any statement about the theological significance of a crucifixion can avoid the risk that it thereby justifies violence retrospectively. The demand for a complete escape from the idea of necessary violence produces its own accusation, and, in Taylor's terms, the desire to definitively avoid being impaled by one horn of a dilemma may simply push one more firmly onto another. If this demand *is* made then it is difficult to see how any positive statement about the death of Christ can meet it, or defend itself against the accusation completely. This is pointed out not to induce a despairing resignation towards the whole endeavour, but to highlight that discussion about atonement is necessarily precarious, and seems to involve a mixture of sometimes competing perspectives.

What does this imply with regard to the discourse on forgiveness? There is a different parallel in the case of each of the approaches to forgiveness outlined. For Griswold, as we have seen, the task is for an affirmation of forgiveness to avoid the charge that it is a complicity in evil, or that it cultivates in those who practice it a dangerous indifference, resignation or naivety.[28] What the ambiguities above suggest is that something similar holds for the attempt to articulate the theological significance of the cross: how can any affirmation of its goodness or meaning avoid being complicit in the violence that it is a result of? In each case, behind the appearance of grace, real dangers are perceived: what if the affirmation of saving significance in the cross (whether sacrificial, or revelatory) encourages acquiescence in the demands of violent mimetic contagion? what if the affirmation of leniency, compassion or pardon encourages moral laxity? But as Jankelevitch draws out, in the case of forgiveness,

[28]Lucy Allais' account of the distinct conceptual shape of forgiveness is instructive here. It goes to great lengths to show how forgiveness is coherent by showing that one can justifiably alter one's attitude towards someone whilst upholding the judgement that names their crime, so that forgiveness does not disappear into either pointlessness or injustice. We have 'more rational options with respect to feelings than beliefs' so that there is a neutral zone in which we can decide to respond more positively to a person in our affective stance towards them. But it is not obvious that in the long run it is any less dubious to alter one's attitude towards someone than to alter one's judgements concerning them, especially since there is a good case that cognitive judgements emerge to a large degree from less articulate feelings. See Lucy Allais, 'Wiping the slate clean: the heart of forgiveness' in *Philosophy and public affairs 36*, no. 1 especially pp. 35, 60-1.

along with the satisfaction of justification comes a sense that one loses something essential to the force of the ideas in hand - what Cyril O'Regan calls 'the explosiveness of forgiveness'.[29] So the parallel here is rather different. Just as the sacrificial perspective demands that someone pay for sin, so a compromised forgiveness seeks the assurance of conditions. Part of the unease that motivates the reformulation of atonement theology along Girardian lines is precisely the sense that there is a discordance with the stance that the teaching of Jesus encourages one to adopt. On the one hand the doctrine appears bound up with 'an attitude that insists on a precise balance between debit and credit';[30] on the other, one is taught to give without expectation of return and to forgive without insisting on reparation.

The suggestion here is that there is a reason for the parallels between the dynamics of the discussion concerning Girard and these two very different approaches. In each case there is a desire to adopt what we might call a 'completed perspective', whether it is in the way one contemplates the cross, or the way one contemplates the character of forgiveness. As I have tried to show, the difficulty with this movement is that the concerns which motivate this search, and which would be necessary to know if one had attained it, are themselves in question. This will be explored more thoroughly below, but first I will briefly explore two attempts at constructive theology that use Girard, with an emphasis on the way that death is given positive meaning.

Resurrection and the use of death

Taubes' criticism of Weil is unsatisfying for the same reasons that Finlan's criticism of Girard is; both are right to point out the problem, but wrong to assume that this problem itself necessitates abandoning the insight which gives rise to it. Taubes suggests that there is a preoccupation evident in Weil's work with the *thought* of suffering in the absence of a direct experience of its reality. She notes Weil's failure to live up to her ideals of sharing the poverty and servitude of the working classes - she only managed one year at the Renault factory – and her distance from the experience of those suffering

[29] Cyril O'Regan, 'Forgiveness and the forms of the impossible', *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association 82*, p. 68.

[30] Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, tr. J. R. Foster, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1968), p. 281.

in France due to the war, and suggests that there is a naivety in her concern:

> It is a romantic illusion that one can go to the people and share their lot as long as one retains the possibility of returning to one's former life of security whenever one chooses. . . . If one would share the condition of the poor, one must go among them as one enters a cloister, leaving one's securities and resources behind. Otherwise one remains a spectator. For the gravity of their lot consists just in its hopeless finality.[31]

The resonances with the Christian gospel are obvious here: just as Weil's privileged background means that she can never experience the affliction of a factory worker with no option but to work, so perhaps the Son never fully shares the sufferings of humanity because of his unique identity. In other words, Taubes is claiming that sharing another's hopeless suffering is impossible so long as one does not share their hopelessness. What Taubes completely fails to note (however correct she may be in her analysis of Weil's romanticism) is that if it is a romantic illusion to believe that one can share another's suffering without the sense of inevitability and finality that they experience, it is also an illusion, and perhaps an equally romantic one, to suppose that one can share another's suffering *as it is*, leaving it unchanged. This is why Weil's notion of creative attention is so significant, perhaps in ways that she did not stress sufficiently herself. By attending honestly, one affects that to which one attends. This is a central paradox for Weil: when time is accepted as time, it becomes a doorway to the eternal, when the world is loved as the world, it becomes a way of loving God. One has to wait in a void without grace, but only grace allows one to wait without grace. And something very deep seems to resonates within the idea of creative attention, because to know that someone has noticed one's sufferings and allowed themselves to be exposed to the frustration and futility one may feel, one's experience is changed - indefinably but powerfully. Job does not primarily desire restitution, but *attention.*

In other words, if speaking meaningfully about suffering is morally risky because of the tendency to seek an easy reconciliation with the world for the sake of one's own peace of mind, it is also *precarious*, because the subject matter changes as it is made significant. Here, this precariousness, the change that is hard to define, is of course related to the resurrection. And this is also what Finlan fails to observe in his criticism of Girard and the theological uses of Girard, and what is lacking in his own incarnational soteriology; the resurrection construed as the making-possible of a new

[31] Taubes, *Towards a new Christianity*, p. 117

perspective on the cross, and so of death.[32] This aspect is more obviously drawn out by Raymund Schwager and James Alison, whose work I will now turn to.

At the heart of Schwager's discussion of Jesus' 'use of death' is the following reflection on the 'act' of dying:

> Whoever in dying places himself in the hands of another person renounces entirely any further self-determination and hands himself over to the treatment of this other, to whom he thereby entrusts himself without reserve in love. Every act of surrender made during a person's life has its limits, arising at the least from the demands of one's own life and one's own identity. At the moment of dying, these limits can be broken down. But since in death all a person's strengths fail, death in itself is extremely ambiguous. . . Whoever no longer determines himself by his own spirit, but entrusts this to the heavenly Father in order to allow himself to be totally determined by him, achieves a sort of openness and availability which goes beyond our earthly experience and can only be hinted at by parables. . . [Jesus] turned the radical delivering of himself to his enemies, as he experienced this in being executed, into a radical surrender to his Father.[33]

This is an extremely provocative passage, and a fair distance from the often formal nature of Girard's reflections. Schwager's point is that Jesus is indeed a scapegoat, victimised for all the usual reasons people are victimised, but that Jesus was able to use this experience differently, to inhabit his enemies' intentions and subvert them, so that his own will (or rather, the will of the Father that he is obedient to) determined the meaning of the act.[34] Here something much more than an simple uncovering of underlying human structures is being claimed; the aspect of Jesus' death that makes such a subversion of his enemies' intentions possible is the way in which passive suffering of 'sacrificial' violence could be turned into a peaceful offering to the Father, through the Spirit. If this is what Jesus *made* his death mean - the peaceful offering of

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[32] One of the most powerful visual representations of the meaning of the resurrection compatible with a Girardian perspective is in the recent South African film, *Son of Man.* Jesus is 'disappeared' by the authorities, but his mother and some of his followers find and unearth his body, displaying it on a cross on a hill. As soldiers arrive to take down the body, Mary begins to dance defiantly beneath the cross, accusing the regime of murder. As a result, the actual resurrection moment (which is still portrayed) carries a weight that is largely lacking in film versions of the life of Jesus, which on the whole manage only to convey a sense of relief that seems disconnected from the story.

[33]Raymund Schwager, *Jesus in the drama of salvation: Towards a Biblical doctrine of salvation.* Tr. James G Williams and Paul Haddon, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company), 1999, pp. 188-9.

[34] Schwager, *Jesus in the drama of salvation*, p. 187.

self to the Father and the making available of himself to humanity – this meaning is only made visible when it is already a death undone through the resurrection;[35] and in that sense it only becomes possible to see Jesus' own interpretation of his death when the obvious level of intention – to silence, kill and remove – has been shown to have actually been futile. In other words, the victory of God in Jesus is in determining the meaning of his own death, but this is possible because he is no longer dead. This may not be 'sacrificial blood magic', but it is 'magical' in that its possibility is not given in advance, or outside of itself.

Schwager arrives at this point after a careful consideration of the gospel material, and in particular the significance of Jesus' prayer for his killers and the words of the last supper – the apparent contradiction between the will to give oneself through death and the judgement that the act through which this is to happen is an evil (implied throughout, but particularly emphasised in the prayer for forgiveness).[36] The question is of how Jesus can have 'intended' his death as an act of self-giving without also being an accomplice in an unjust murder. Here Schwager argues that Jesus' cry for forgiveness is to be taken as a continuation of Jesus' identification with the victims of sin and its oppressive power, because to take part in evil is to become a victim of it oneself, to be out of control and not fully conscious of the meaning of one's actions. Therefore, Jesus' death on the cross can begin to be seen as an act of transformative solidarity with both victims and victimisers: '[a]t this deeper level, Jesus no longer stood over against his opponents, but he underwent together with them the blows of a destructive power, but in such a way that he alone experienced this suffering for what it was.'[37] This links up with the idea that teaching non-violent response to aggression presents a 'third way', a response which refuses the choice that violent action seems to impose between being simply dominated and overcome by it as a victim, or becoming a mirror image of the perpetrator through counter-strike or revenge, both of which affirm the power of violence. If non-violence gains its power through a refusal of the assumptions of violence, one might see Jesus' attitude towards his own death in a similar light, namely as a refusal to place himself over and against his killers, and as an affirmation that it is they who are in need of liberation and rescue, combined with a

[35] Schwager, *Jesus in the drama of salvation*, pp. 187.

[36] Schwager, *Jesus in the drama of salvation*, pp. 170-173.

[37] Schwager, *Jesus in the drama of salvation*, pp. 187.

belief that suffering, and even death, could somehow be active and effective, despite being imposed from without.

It is through the resurrection that the intentions of Jesus, which undo those of his persecutors and killers, are revealed: the will to enter and overcome the darkness of humanity, and in doing so to continue to trust and give himself to the Father. In other words, the problem of how to walk the fine line of affirming some kind of divine involvement in the death of Jesus without succumbing to the 'sacrificial' perspective of the mob leads directly to the question of the meaning of the resurrection, because it is only through this that the divine perspective (in Girardian terms; the innocence of this, and all other victims of collective purifying violence) is made visible. For Schwager, then, it is only through resurrection that this death is revealed to have been, and to be, self-giving. Here, though, as Schwager admits, there is still a break between the logic of a new practice - the love of enemies, forgiveness without recompense, the refusal of violence, etc. - and the event through which such a logic is proclaimed. Put differently, the movement is out of a substitutionary understanding of Christ towards an exemplarist one, but it is not a movement that is ever completed. The death of Christ only appears as something more than surrender to evil, and therefore as something that could give rise to example, through the resurrection, but one cannot imitate the resurrection, only the obedience of the cross. What this means is that although for Schwager the resurrection is a testimony to the inherent vivacity of certain ways of living (difficult withdrawal from mimetic conflict, the refusal to return evil for evil, forgiving rather than taking vengeance, etc.), this vivacity is not visible without an event which exceeds it. In order to learn the power of innocent love over violence, it is not enough simply to contemplate innocent suffering; we must witness the vindication of such innocence, and the power of such love.

James Alison provides a more detailed account of the link between resurrection, revelation and self-giving. For Alison, as for Girard, the resurrection is primarily a 'foundational scene of origin in reverse',[38] insofar as Jesus founds a new community based on the memory of his own unjust killing, rather than a continual cover up. Reading Girard, one sometimes gets the impression that the resurrection is a conceptual necessity – required so that the story of the crucifixion can be told honestly (and in this sense, the resurrection is necessary because Jesus is the only faithful witness to the

[38] Alison, *The joy of being wrong*, pp. 77

crucifixion), but something more than this is being asserted here. Alison's theology is more obviously Eucharistic, and relies on interpreting the sense in which Christ is present within the church. The presence of the Christ 'the risen victim' within the new community is not an accusation, but the presence of forgiveness, because 'Jesus' resurrection is not revealed as eschatological revenge, but as eschatological pardon.'[39] Complicity in violence is not exposed as brute fact, or along with the threat of retaliatory violence, but as part of an invitation to belong differently, as forgiven. This is not a new knowledge of what victimisation is, and how best to avoid it; it is, in Alison's words, a new form of intelligence – 'the intelligence of the victim' - that is 'in fact identical with salvation, or redemption.'[40] This new intelligence cannot be detached from the disciples' actual experience of finding themselves approached, without vengeance, by the resurrected Jesus, and this, in turn, is how the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is understood. Jesus is given back as 'simultaneously dead and alive',[41] in that his presence is both an ongoing reminder of complicity (hence the marks of death are present), and invitation to begin an entirely new form of human unity, 'a unity received from the self-giving victim.. . a unity based on penitence at complicity in violence rather than the much stronger-seeming sort of unity that comes from shared hatred.'[42] Simply, then, the resurrection is primarily a movement of love, which includes the love of enemies, not simply an exposure of truth, which is the sense that often emerges in Girard - although it is also this.

As with Schwager, Alison's development of how Jesus actively intends his dying to mean something depends on a sense that Jesus had a unique freedom to creatively act within the processes of mimetic compulsion, even whilst being unable to avoid the consequences of such compulsion. This is Alison's means of approaching the sense of purpose that pervades the synoptic gospels, which is, as we have seen, problematic within the Girardian framework.

> In the synoptic gospels he even refers to his death as necessary. What came to be understood was that Jesus was no merely passive participant. There is a deliberate element in the way in which Jesus goes to his death, and this deliberate element has nothing to do with any masochism or death wish. Quite the contrary. It is the attitude of someone who is so

[39] Alison, *The joy of being wrong*, pp. 98.

[40] Alison, *The joy of being wrong*, pp. 84.

[41] Alison, *The joy of being wrong*, pp. 76.

[42] Alison, *The joy of being wrong*, pp. 90.

> entirely free of being involved in death that he manages to mount, to stage, a show, a mime, in such a way that other people will be able to learn to live as though death were not. That is the difference between dying and redeeming death. Someone who is totally and utterly free with respect to his death is capable of making of his death a sort of "show" which takes the sting out of death's tail, detoxifying the reality of death, revealing it to be without power and doing this forever.[43]

The concern evident in this passage is to show that there is a way of seeing the necessity of death (the perspective of Jesus) that undoes the sacrificial sense of necessity. But whereas in Girard, the uncovering of truth tends to refer simply to human violence, for Alison, it is a new perspective towards death *as such* that is made possible by the cross. Jesus goes to his death to 'create a belief'; that the Father is deathless.[44] The intelligence of the victim, for Alison, is to perceive not simply the futility of mimesis, rivalry, expulsion, etc., but also a more ontological sense of freedom and peace. One senses here that sin is conceived not simply in terms of mimesis, rivalry, expulsion, etc., but in terms of a fearful and resentful attitude towards finitude as such: the sense that one's place in the world is always threatened, that one has to be 'over against' another in order to be at all.[45] Alison emphasises particularly the way in which the process of forming a sense of identity tends to be determined by the threat of exclusion, and so becomes a constant struggle to avoid occupying the place of the victim, a constant positioning of oneself in reference to this position. Identity, then, is formed and maintained at the expense of victims, and this itself is a kind of continual involvement with death (and this is the case even where one seeks the identity of 'victim', and the righteousness it might seem to hold).[46] This threatened perspective is, for Alison, closely linked to, and understood through, social processes of exclusionary violence, but is not simply identical with it. We are fearful of death because of our methods of building identity, peace and belonging are all bound up with the threat of death, and are complicit with this threat; but at the same time, there is a sense that it works the other way round as well. That is, we die because we sin (i.e. sin, as

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[43]James Alison, *Living in the end times: the last things re-imagined*, (London: SPCK 1997), p. 58.

[44]Alison, *Living in the end times*, p. 61.

[45]Here I am summarising Alison's project in general, rather than any particular passage, based on listening to many talks, and the short essays in his more popular work.

[46]James Alison, *On being liked*, (London: Darton Longman and Todd 2003), p. 39, and chapters 1-3 generally.

scapegoating ultimately leads to death), but at the same time, we sin because we die, and so are threatened.[47]

There is much more detail in Alison's work than I have shown, and there are many developments of Girardian perspectives which could be further explored.[48] The central point here is that when understood in this way, the resurrection appears less as a stripping away of one form of significance (the significance produced by the mysteriously pacifying murder) than as the giving to death of a new kind of significance, one that includes the transfigured presence of the old. Because the meaning of this death is only given, presented, or recovered through its undoing, there is no simple presentation whatever it is that is demonstrated, achieved or exemplified by the cross. The resurrection presents and transforms, or transforms as it presents, and here Weil's notion of creative attention might prove useful as way of considering the attention that is given to the victim of crucifixion: perhaps it is an attention that dwells without fear or revulsion upon affliction and death, and in doing so, re-creates. And this leaves a tremendous ambiguity as to how we can see meaning in death, or indeed, see meaning in a particular approach to death as a way of living. If the death of Jesus can be said to bring life, we are left with the question of what, in this case, we mean by 'death', just as, if it is the *crucified* Jesus who is raised to life, we are left with the question of what, in this case, is meant by 'life'. Put most simply, life may be said to come *to* the crucified Jesus, as death's opposite, and *from* the crucified Jesus, as its fruit.

Although/because: forgiveness and the logic of *kenosis*.

A recent study within Pauline scholarship provides another way into an exploration of what may be involved in a fundamental change of perspective, such as the one Girard perceives in the gospel narratives. Here, through a creative interaction with recent work of Michael J. Gorman, I wish to suggest that conflict between different perspectives

[47]I believe that a very similar phrase appears in one of John Milbank's essays; however I have been unable to trace it. It is also possible that it was a phrase used in a lecture.

[48]In particular, a fuller treatment would need a discussion of the way that Alison - using the work of Margaret Barker - tries to articulate in more detail the way that the violent perspective of sacrifice is subverted through an understanding of God as unthreatened creator. Alison argues - following Margaret Barker - that the First Temple, and the rites of atonement associated with it, should be seen in terms of a receiving of divine life, that sustains creation, so the violent aspects of sacrifice are already being re-interpreted.

towards the same reality (whether it is the death of Christ, or the possibility of forgiveness) may contain more opportunity than some of the tendencies to attain a 'completed perspective - shown above - acknowledge. This point will, in turn, be the basis for an interaction with debates concerning the meaning of the gift contained in the next chapter.

Michael J. Gorman argues that the most basic structure of Paul's theology can be found in Philippians 2: 6 – 11.[49] The voluntary self-humbling and self-emptying of Christ is held by Paul to demonstrate not only the essentially 'cruciform' character of God, but also the basic shape of life in Christ. However, this shape does not appear from a simple description of what or how God is, but emerges from an ambiguous textual dynamic, found in the first lines of the Philippi hymn, which the NRSV translates as follows:

> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
> who, though he was in the form of God,
> did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,
> but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

The interpretative difficulty Gorman is interested in concerns the participle *hyparchon* in the phrase *en morphe theou hyparchon* ('being in the form of God') and whether this should be understood primarily concessively ('*although* he was in the form of God' – favoured by the translation above) or causatively ('*because* he was in the form of God'). Gorman argues for both, and argues that the text has a surface structure ('although he was in the form of God'), and a deep structure ('because he was in the form of God'). However, these have very different theological implications: '[o]ne implies that Christ's condescension was a contravention of his true identity, while the other implies that it was the embodiment of his true identity.'[50] This movement from surface to depth is crucial, otherwise one misses the full import of what is being said: 'God, we must now say, is essentially kenotic, and indeed essentially cruciform. Kenosis, therefore, does not mean Christ's emptying himself of his divinity (or of anything else), but rather Christ's *exercising* his divinity, his equality with God.'[51]

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[49] Michael J Gorman, *Inhabiting the cruciform God: kenosis, justification and theosis in Paul's narrative soteriology,* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pp. 10.

[50] *Gorman, Inhabiting the cruciform God,* pp. 26.

[51] Gorman, *Inhabiting the cruciform God,* pp. 28. See also N. T. Wright, *Climax of the covenant: Christ and the law in Pauline theology*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), pp. 86 - 87 on this point.

Gorman argues that a similar dynamic is found at important junctures of Paul's letters, and summarises it in terms of a formula: 'although [x], not [y] but [z]' or 'although [status], not [selfishness] but [selflessness]';[52] this, he says, is Paul's basic storyline.[53] This structure is seen most clearly in Paul's words about his rights as an apostle: although Paul has the rights of an apostle, he does not use them, but rather gives them up in order to serve, but in doing so, he actually expresses his identity as an apostle and shares most fully in the gospel.

> That is, the "[x]" in the pattern represents a status that is already possessed and that can be either exploited for a selfish gain or not. Moreover, the evidence of truly possessing such a status is in the refusal to exploit it selfishly and thus to use it in such a selfless way that its use seems to be a renunciation of the status but is in fact a different-from-normal-manner of incarnating that status.[54]

The renunciation of the status actually affirms the status, but in a way that changes forever what this status now means, and therefore what it always meant. The text, it seems, expresses, or speaks out of a transformation of understanding, but it is not obvious that it is a transformation that ever yields a completed perspective, or rather, whether it is a transformation that is somehow endlessly in progress.

In one sense, this structure appears to undo itself; if being an apostle *means* not acting from a sense of what one is and is not due, refusing to insist upon one's rights, etc., then in what sense were those rights *ever* the rights of an apostle? Surely, the most apostolic apostle would no longer even think in terms of rights? And yet, Paul is not - somewhat embarrassingly - ashamed to insist on the rights that he forgoes, and flag up his forgoing of them. It is as though the conscious holding back from full potency itself demonstrates potency more fully. Similarly, if the divinity of Christ is most fully expressed in the refusal to hold onto divinity, in what sense is it divinity that is thereby let go of?

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[52] Gorman, *Inhabiting the cruciform God*, p22. This also seems to be the logic of John 13: 3 – 4.

[53] See 1 Thess 2:7; 1 Cor 9:12-23; 2 Cor 8:9; Rom 15:1-3 for statements expressing a similar logic. Equally, this also seems to be the logic of John 13: 3 – 4. I am grateful to Matthew Malcom for conversations clarifying this point.

[54] Gorman, *Inhabiting the cruciform God*, pp. 24. The potential for this structure to be collapsed into a superficial paradox of straightforward (and therefore potentially endless) reversal is brought out in perhaps the most profound of all Jesus films, Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*. After hearing the beleagured Brian vigorously and explicitly denying that he is the Messiah, an avid follower declares, after an awkward pause: 'Only the true Messiah denies his divinity!' To which an exasperated Brian replies: 'What?! Well, what kind of chance does that leave me? Ok, I *am* the Messiah!'

The common-sense that is assumed by the surface structure and the new understanding hinted at in the deeper structure seem to be opposed, and yet they depend on each other. On this reading, the text somehow articulates, and presupposes, two perspectives at once, and the difficulty is in knowing how these are related. There seem to be two possibilities here. If one understands the text to speak *from* the emergent perspective, which sees humility as expression of divinity, then perhaps the 'although' is a concession to the less enlightened, subversively using their assumptions to produce a new understanding – like the healing of a lame man being used to demonstrate the authority to forgive sins (in Jankelevitch's terms, this would be the sad necessity of finding retrospective causality in one's groundless generosity). One can understand that God actually *is* cruciform, so that humility and service flow naturally from the divine, but nevertheless seek to draw those who do not understand this truth up – or rather down – into this more profound understanding, where this truth is not scandalous, but simply, although remarkably, how things are. But in this case, one would perhaps expect that the first perspective could in time be left behind, so that it is no longer a scandal that one who had equality with God should also take the form of a servant, no longer unusual for an apostle not to insist on being given their due or for freedom to be expressed through self-limitation. Once it is understood that real divinity is found, not in power and success but in service and humility, a continuing emphasis on the paradoxicality of *kenosis* may start to seem misplaced, and in bad faith.

Perhaps, then, the dynamic of the text keeps alive the interaction of the two perspectives – permanently - and is therefore written out of a continual undergoing of this movement rather than a settled point of view. This seems better, in that one can then understand this movement as one that is not simply a matter of replacing one set of conceptions with another, such that it could be completed, but about a more fundamental change in ways of evaluating - ways of perceiving what true wealth consists in.[55] In this case, one might say that as long as *anything* has 'the form of God' it is never finished, the movement is never complete. But here too there is a problem. On Gorman's reading, the movement of the text is only in one direction; from the 'although' of a scandalous *kenosis*, to the 'because' of an expressive *kenosis*. Once *kenosis* is understood to express divine identity, and the giving up of rights to

[55]These reflections are indebted to Philip Goodchild's *The theology of money* (London: SCM, 2007), especially pp. 1 - 27.

essentially characterise a true apostle, this understanding does not give way again to renewed shock at divine condescension. For the movement to be genuine, a real journey, the direction has to be respected. And this would seem to mean that one cannot hold on forever to the moment of transformation; if one learns something, one cannot seek to endlessly replay the moment of enlightenment. That is, if the moment of transformation is really something like an eternal moment, a continual interplay between two perspectives - one in which *kenosis* is paradoxical, one in which it is expressive, then in a sense what one has is no longer a transformation, because its temporal reality is compromised; nothing really happens.

Perhaps the point here is that the thought expressed here cannot be articulated in terms of one perspective superseding another, nor by finding a way to let the perspectives co-exist. If a real change of mind is possible, then the change is a change of depth, or to use Weil's terms, of levels; the perspective of the 'because' is true at a certain level; it is somehow important how the insight arises, as if the trace of its development were part of its content. In a sense, Gorman portrays the tension between the 'although' and the 'because' in the Philippi hymn as a crucible in which a fundamental change in perspective, evaluation and expectation occurs. It involves a moment of challenge, an overturning of expectations, but it also involves real, positive learning, where scandal opens out onto a more enduring perspective. In this sense, the 'although' sense of the text is allied with iconoclasm or negative theology, it opposes and suspends a particular way of thinking about God, about rights, status and fulfilment, whereas the 'because' sense of the text is allied with more constructive, positive theological affirmation. Richard Rohr makes a similar point about the logic *kenosis*, in a far simpler way: it is not simply that 'we must go down in order to go up', but that 'we have to go down before we even know what "up" means.'[56]

For Gorman, Paul's understanding of holiness should be thought in terms of participation in the cruciformity of God, or in his paraphrase of Leviticus, the command to 'be cruciform as I am cruciform'.[57] We can make a few suggestions, then, about how forgiveness, as an aspect of holiness, might be seen to be animated by a similar tension to *kenosis*, when understood in this way. The scandal of *kenosis* disturbs a presumed stability; namely, that God is thought of in relation to power and prestige, command and

[56]This phrase was included in a daily email sent by the Centre for Action and Contemplation.

[57]Gorman, *Inhabiting the cruciform God*, p. 106.

authority. This understanding is suspended by the moment of 'although', which invites a contemplation of divinity and self-emptying at the same time. Similarly, it is possible for forgiveness to be understood in reference to a stable moral order, so that it is deserved in some cases, undeserved in others, possible under certain circumstances, not under others. The act of forgiveness is then seen as simply one component of an ordered moral sphere, subject to similar norms of reciprocity that govern the whole. But wherever forgiveness is affirmed in extreme cases, in the face of its apparent injustice or impossibility, then as an imperative or invitation it enters into opposition to this stability, it causes surprise or outrage, it is seen, felt and lived as disruptive of reciprocal norms. Hence to affirm forgiveness in the extreme cases always involves a suspension of judgement and evaluation, it involves what appears to be a giving up of reciprocity, measure and even justice. One can only forgive 'although', not 'because', because there is no 'because' that has enough weight (and in this sense, I think that Derrida is right to say that forgiveness lives by the unforgivable). But if Gorman is correct, then for Paul the logic of *kenosis* pushes further than a simple moment of suspension or reversal, so that the opposition between divinity and the cross gives way to a sense of continuity, or expression; God *is* cruciform.

Can one say something similar about forgiveness - for example, that forgiveness is a virtue *because* it is unconditional, excessive, undeserved, just as for Paul Christ took the form of a servant *because* he was in the form of God? In fact, this is one way in which forgiveness *is* construed (as will be shown with Derrida). But this move is subject to similar difficulties to those outlined above: should one then entirely abandon the moral background and the expectations associated with it, against which forgiveness appeared counter-intuitive, potentially dangerous and unjust? Or is this background kept as a concession, so that the appeal to what is 'deserved' in the appeal to forgive those who do not deserve *even though* they don't deserve it has a way of taking root in the unforgiving minds of most of us? But then, if one begins to be more convinced by the sometimes counter-intuitive goodness of forgiveness than by the background against which it appears counter-intuitive, perhaps one will want to re-sketch the background, to fit with the new foreground. Is this possible? Once again, if forgiveness is often found to involve a challenge to existing modes of evaluation, measure, and reasoning, then it is difficult to see how the forgiving perspective can be expressed straightforwardly without moving a long way from ordinary human experience. Someone who has always already forgiven everyone for anything they suffer may seem

emotionally disconnected or diminished as a person; perhaps one might say that they have attempted to bypass the moment of conflict between forgiveness and understanding; they want to understand too soon. Equally, one might feel that someone who assumes in advance their own right to be forgiven, and lacks understanding towards the fierce resentment of their victim needs reminding of the way that to be forgiven is an exception, not a rule. In other words, forgiveness opens out from the 'although' to the 'because' only with difficulty, and perhaps very slowly.

This difficulty is seen in Charles Griswold's discussion of the murder in 2006 of ten young Amish girls by Charles Roberts, a local milk truck driver, who then committed suicide. 'With stupefying speed - I believe it was within 24 to 48 hours - the families of the murdered schoolgirls announced that they had forgiven the killer.' Griswold expresses his suspicion that this is not really forgiveness, since it appears that resentment is simply refused, rather than given up or let go of: '[i]t would seem that the Amish ideal is the proleptic, universal and unilateral forswearing of anger altogether, such that not only all past evil but all future evil is forgiven.'[58] But if forgiveness promises a more enduring form of understanding that is born through moments of embrace of paradox and difficulty, then we might ask how we would evaluate this act? According to Griswold, several Amish men went to the home of the shooter's family to console them, they attended the burial of the killer and set up a charitable fund for the family in the name of the murderer, and finally burnt the schoolhouse in which the atrocity took place to the ground. Perhaps these actions do indicate an almost perverse commitment to an ideal that is inhuman and cold, and perhaps there lingers tremendous unacknowledged rage as a result. But then, perhaps this response reflects something deeper. Griswold suggests that this kind of forgiveness emerges from a failure to aim high enough, because it does not experience the crime as intolerable. But what if this forgiveness emerged, on the contrary, from people who had aimed very high indeed? Perhaps these people, when contemplating the victims of violent crime on previous occasions (a news story watched in quiet moment, the memory of something once witnessed), had begun to feel these sufferings more deeply, each one intolerable in its own way. Perhaps they had spent long periods perplexed and grieved, and had prayed, as Weil suggests that we must, 'my god, why have you forsaken them?' And perhaps they had also gradually accepted the reality that these things are possible where some

[58]Griswold, 'A reply to my critics', pp.308-9.

people nurture deep and malignant resentments (which they do) and have access to deadly weapons (which they do). And here again, perhaps this possibility had been allowed to conflict and challenge their conception of God, and of the command to forgive, so that having contemplated the horrors others *have* suffered, they were no longer able to conceive of the mercy of God as they did previously, despite not having undergone these things themselves (for as Weil also says: what is the difference?).[59] Perhaps, through this experience, a deep commitment emerged - not always comprehended, and subject to doubt - that despite everything, there is a merciful presence that shines, like the sun, on the just and unjust. Painfully hidden, maybe, but real nonetheless. Finally then, perhaps, on the dreadful day, when time was violently divided into 'this' and 'everything before', there arose a deep and fearful conviction - almost as if it came from another within them - that this man, *even this man*, whose trigger finger was unjustly and incomprehensibly allowed the power of causing utter ruin, could be forgiven, and his family comforted.

Perhaps, perhaps not. But this, I think, is the 'perhaps' of forgiveness. There is not a single principle that guarantees that forgiveness can be embraced as a good, such that we could always forgive 'because' it is just, or wise, or safe to forgive. But equally, there is not the possibility of an 'although' that simply suspends understanding for the sake of a daring moment, since whenever it is a case of the incomprehensibility of evil, this temporary and insubstantial 'although' will collapse (just as the fiercest cynics are the chastened optimists).[60] But perhaps there is the possibility of a forgiveness that has been formed in the real and never finished movement from one to the other. In other words, perhaps there is a deeper 'because', a perspective that appears fleetingly, but in a way that provokes real learning. If the Amish families recounted above really forgave, then it can only be because of a 'because' that they did not fully know, but only glimpsed, dimly, and hoped for.

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[59] Simone Weil, *Notebooks*, pp. 432.

[60] Here I echo Gillian Rose's description of postmodernism as the refusal to consider the ratioanlity of the exertion of power as 'despairing rationalism without reason.' See Gillian Rose, *Mourning becomes the law*, pp. 5-6, and the whole of chapter one. I find it far easier to comprehend what Rose is opposing than to comprehend what she is proposing. However, there are certainly resonances with what I am suggesting here, as for example in her description of a legal and rational authority which would be '*alive to its implication in both nihilism and reason*, and which *does not know the outcome in advance*.' p. 58.

Conclusion

It should be admitted that what I provided above is largely suggestive. Nevertheless the resonance between the dynamic that Gorman argues is written deeply into the Pauline text and the conflict within forgiveness seems to be important. Both suggest a conflictual and yet fruitful co-existence of perspectives, and this, in turn, I have argued, is apparent, but not always acknowledged within discussions of scapegoating and sacrificial violence within atonement theology. The arguments above should not be taken as a shrugging of the shoulders in the face of real confusions, but rather, an assertion that if, after serious examination, the confusions remain, then perhaps they are significant in some way. The description of forgiveness above is, on my account, a way to understand what it would mean to commit to live a life of forgiveness in a way that is not easy acceptance, indifference, or despair, but is - indefinably but genuinely - a way of continuing to desire. Or put differently, a way of embodying the love that bears all things, and yet hopes all things. This suggestion points forward to the next chapter, which interrogates Jacques Derrida's work on ethics, particularly as concerns the meaning of decision and gift. In my description, above, of the attitude that perhaps animates the seemingly incomprehensible forgiveness offered by the Amish families, forgiveness might be said to involve to a certain posture: not just acceptance, but a way of accepting; not just hoping, but a way of hoping. This notion of posture will be an important part of my encounter with Derrida.

Chapter four

Jacques Derrida: forgiveness, decision and gift

As has been argued, forgiveness can be understood in terms of a posture that suffers the tension between hope and acceptance, understanding and mystery. In this chapter I will examine closely the way that Jacques Derrida describes the resistance that some of our most important notions offer to thought. Not only has deconstruction proved to be one of the most influential streams of philosophical thought in recent decades, Derrida's work on forgiveness has become an important touchstone in the public discussion of forgiveness, not to mention a critical influence upon the shape of postmodern theological thought.[1]

My argument will be that Derrida's work on decision, gift and forgiveness can be viewed as implying a notion of redemptive suffering. Only through the adoption of a certain posture, one that suffers the perpetual indeterminacy that haunts language and thought, do we enter the ethical realm. In view of this, I then compare this aspect of Derrida's thought with that of Simone Weil, in a further discussion her work. However different these thinkers are (it is very difficult to imagine Weil reading *Glas*) there is nevertheless a shared concern for cultivating an exposure to that which exceeds thought, and a shared concern to demonstrate the way in which experiences of intellectual paralysis become a point of entry - for Weil into an awakened spiritual state, for Derrida, into a traumatic form of ethical responsibility. What I hope to draw out is the way in which for all its idiosyncratic features, Weil's work allows for a more convincing account of the importance of the experience of conceptual impasse, because of the way she allows for the possibility of learning. Whilst Derrida implies that the undergoing of aporia is repeated identically, Weil suggests that one's understanding continually affects the tonality of these experiences. This discussion is intended to further explore the nature of 'the moment', which in is a central part of this understanding of forgiveness.

After this comparison, I go on to engage in the discussion concerning the gift with

[1]See Richard Holloway, *On forgiveness* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2002) for an example of the former, Jan-Olav Henrickson, *Desire, gift and recognition: Christology and post-modern philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2009) for an example of the latter.

reference to John Milbank's work on reciprocity, which is formed partly in response to Derrida's notion of the 'impossible' gift. Here the concern is with the relationship between the rupture involved in forgiving, and the task of forming understanding and expectations concerning the reciprocal norms that relationship. John Milbank provides a convincing account of why it is that Christianity encourages trust in reciprocity, rather than complete abandonment of self in unilateral giving. However, my interest in the interaction between Milbank and Derrida is more to do with their assumptions about the character or tone of ethical life: is the generous life allied to confident trust, or traumatic exposure? Here I continue to utilise Charles Taylor's analysis to highlight the ambiguities in the position Milbank arrives at through interaction with Derrida. My argument here will be that there is, in John Milbank's critique, rather more of 'the moment' than might be obvious at first glance. Overall, this chapter should be seen as a further development of the approach suggested at the end of the last chapter. With reference to Michael J. Gorman, I attempted to show how the understanding of the cross involves both confrontation with existing norms or expectations, and the need to reconstruct those norms in its light. I conclude with some suggestion of what this approach would mean in the case of forgiveness.

Derrida and the posture of ethics

From his earliest work, Derrida was concerned with articulating a moment of openness that allowed real re-thinking; deconstruction as 'that fragile moment when the question is not yet determined enough for the hypocrisy of an answer to have already initiated itself beneath the mask of the question.'[2] Throughout his work, Derrida will be concerned with similarly fragile moments, situating himself within them, taking up the particular posture they require. It is his assumption that there is an intimate link between this kind of genuine questioning and a commitment to ethics, to the extent that he can claim that deconstruction *is* justice.[3] Rather than being an amoral deferral of responsibility, deconstruction, as Derrida sees it, is driven and made possible by

[2]Derrida, 'Violence and metaphysics' in *Writing and difference*, tr. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 100.

[3]See, for example, Derrida, *Acts of religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 243.

justice.[4] On this account, the deconstructive suspicion towards straightforwardly present meanings, stable oppositions, etc, is not evidence of a destructive or anarchic impulse, but is linked to an ethical vigilance concerned to uncover the hidden violence of certainty and good conscience. And ultimately, the ethical vigilance that is said to drive deconstruction is linked itself to something that sounds intrinsically mystical, that is, to an excessive *desire* for 'the impossible', the pure gift, unlimited hospitality, and unconditional forgiveness.[5]

Throughout this chapter I intend to explore these three aspects that seem to make up Derrida's ethics, namely; deconstructive suspicion, ethical vigilance, and impossible desire. Each of these may be taken to be a way of opening, and remaining within, the 'fragile moment' that is necessary for a real change of mind. Or, more theologically, we might say that for Derrida these are the moments that make up repentance, the changing of mind. The question of how useful or coherent Derrida's ethical project is can then be seen in terms of whether these three aspects cohere, whether they add up to a 'posture' that includes each of them, a stance or movement that they are each a necessary part of, and of whether this posture is a genuinely human posture. It is difficult to describe exactly the sense the word 'posture' has here, but it seems the easiest way to express the way in which I want to approach Derrida's work. It is not simply a question of particular arguments made concerning the gift, hospitality or forgiveness, but of an underlying approach that is sketched out and implied by the various discussions, one that links a certain kind of thinking with the possibility of ethics. In the same way that Weil articulates 'waiting' as a spiritual, intellectual and ethical posture, the gateway to any real learning, goodness or mystical experience, my assumption here will be that Derrida is trying to articulate something similar through the examination of ethical problematics that he finds operative within the concepts of gift, justice, forgiveness and hospitality. Hence, although there are ways in which one could deconstruct Derrida's own work, showing, perhaps, that it fails on its own terms or is based on faulty assumptions, this is not the purpose here. I want to describe and explore the posture

[4]Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 364, *Negotiations: interventions and interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and tr. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 104, and *Questioning ethics*, ed. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London and New York, Routledge, 1999), p. 77.

[5] See, for example Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 244, and 'On the gift: A discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion' in *God, the gift and postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael Scanlon, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 72.

that emerges from these analyses, and ask what this may have to do with the position of someone facing the test that is forgiveness.[6] Although this could be approached from many different directions, here I want to explore Derrida's notion of forgiveness as related to two other themes; decision and gift.

I
The undecidable

In a sense, the whole thrust of Derrida's late work is to demonstrate that an awareness of the fundamental indeterminacy which haunts any attempt to speak, to *make* sense, is crucial if one is to maintain a genuine sense of the gravity of responsible decision. As Richard Bernstein has said, Derrida is, in the most complimentary sense, an 'obsessive thinker', and his obsession is undecidability.[7] Although on the whole, Derrida aimed to work from within the structures and tensions of other texts, rather than as an independent voice asserting a well defined positive vision, in a number of late interviews he gave surprisingly clear descriptions of what a decision has to be, if it is to be a genuine moment of responsibility, and it is from these comments on decision that I wish to work back to his earlier explorations of gift.[8]

For Derrida, a decision is suspended between two possibilities, which, although seemingly opposite, are complicit in taking away the burden of the moment of decision. On the one hand, the sense that a reliable body of knowledge provides one with a guarantee that one is making, and will have made, a right decision; on the other, the sense that the lack of reliable ethical knowledge or principles relieves one of the burden of responsibility, or allows one to defer it (his main target is more obviously the former; the latter is the interpretation of his early work he attempts to distance himself from).[9]

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[6] See Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p380 for a discussion of hospitality as an ordeal or test.

[7] Richard Bernstein, 'Aporias of forgiveness?' in *Constellations* vol. 13, no. 3, 2006, p. 398.

[8] See in particular Derrida, 'On the deconstruction of actuality' and 'Nietzsche and the machine' in *Negotiations*, and 'Hospitality, justice and responsibility: a dialogue with Jacques Derrida' in *Questioning ethics*.

[9] In fact, as early as *Of grammatology* Derrida indicated something similar in his description of two approaches that deconstruction differs from: on the one hand, a 'doubling commentary' which is content to elucidate the meaning of a text as if it spoke with a unified voice, and on the other, a more suspicious

In other words, in order for there to be responsible decision, the responsible subject must be somehow suspended between these two possibilities, so that one does not disappear into the certainty that knowledge promises, nor the ease that unprincipled spontaneity appears to offer. As we have seen in previous discussion, a very similar problem attends descriptions of forgiveness, which are subject to a similar tension. Where forgiveness is presented as an obvious response given certain given principles, it appears that forgiveness becomes simply a moral duty, and there is no moment of suspension or gratuity - no 'give' in the moral framework. This means that the theoretical descriptions seem to move a long way from experience, and the intuitive sense that forgiveness is a free response to another. However, it appears that if forgiveness is presented as simply a kind of choice or exertion of the will, with no deeper reason or grounding, once again, forgiveness seems to be lost, somehow, in insignificance.

As Derrida presents it, if a decision is taken to be the mechanical application of a body of knowledge to a specific case, then the moment of decision is simply the point at which a cause produces an effect, an effect which was already pre-existent as theory. If this is the case, then nothing really happens:

> As to a decision that is guided by a form of knowledge – if I know, for example, what the causes and effects of what I am doing are, what the program is for what I am doing, then there is no decision; it is a question, at the moment of judgement, of applying a particular causality. When I make the machine work, there is no decision; the machine works, the relation is one of cause and effect. If I know what is to be done, if my theoretical analysis of the situation shows me what is to be done – do this to cause that, etc – then there is no moment of decision, simply the application of a body of knowledge, of, at the very least, a rule of norm. For there to be decision, the decision must be heterogeneous to knowledge as such. Even if I spend years letting a decision mature, even if I amass all possible knowledge concerning the scientific, political, and historical field in which the decision is to be taken, the moment of the decision must be heterogeneous to this field, if the decision is not to be the application of a rule.[10]

But if decision necessarily means the emergence of something new, unforeseen, it does not mean that a decision is simply anarchic, ultimately arbitrary and disconnected from

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reading that too-quickly finds the deeper meaning of a text by inscribing it within some alien structure (say, psycho-analysis) without the initial rigour of an accurate reading. See *Of grammatology*, corrected edition, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) 'The exorbitant. Question of method', especially p. 158.

[10] Derrida, *Negotiations*, p. 231.

any knowledge; if the notion of responsibility is a civilised veneer over the top of an essentially random event, then either the moment of decision would lack any real seriousness, or could be deferred at one's leisure. For Derrida, a decision consists in the fact that one must always make it without knowing enough, and at the same time, with acceptance of the responsibility to know a much as one can. A decision is suspended between normativity and creativity, not at some kind of meeting point, or combination of the two, but rather through a double injunction: to decide on one's own, without the cover of legitimating discourse; to decide responsibly, justly, well.[11] Already the relevance of this problematic to the discussion of forgiveness should be obvious; the forgiving subject faces a similar dilemma. To forgive is to be motivated by concerns that do not, of themselves, show obviously that they can be harmoniously combined.

This structure, in which the burden of responsibility always exceeds the actual means there may be to ensure that one can carry it, is expressed in the essay 'Force of law' which announced most clearly the ethical intent of deconstruction:

> Law is not justice. Law is the element of calculation, and it is just that there be law, but justice is incalculable, it demands that one calculate with the incalculable; and paretic experiences are the experiences, as improbable as they are necessary, of justice, that is to say moments in which the decision between just and unjust is never insured by a rule.[12]

The need to do justice does not itself guarantee that one can do justice; 'ought' does not imply 'can'. More than this, it is essential that it does not, for where this is taken for granted, then the desire to keep a good conscience will determine what justice is and is not allowed to demand. And so, on Derrida's account, a just decision will never appear as such, one will never have a guaranteed way of knowing whether one has been just or unjust. One's justice will never appear unambiguously, as a subject of any knowledge. The important point here is that Derrida is not proposing that there is an underlying arbitrariness to any talk of justice, or advocating a cheap relativism in which the stakes are lowered by the lack of clarity. The tension of a moment of decision is maintained by the desire to be just. The desire for justice leads naturally to a concern for law - 'it is

[11] It is interesting that when discussing this theme, Derrida appears to present a kind of phenomenology of the decision, rather than simply bringing forth the inner tensions of a *particular* discourse. In this sense he comes close to speaking as if there is an essence of decision, so delicately poised between complicit opposites that it continually risks being lost, but nevertheless glimpsed in the tension between these losses.

[12] Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 244.

just that there be law' - which is to say, to be just is to want justice to be *done*, to be put into practice, become possible. But law also offers protection from criticism, refuge from the risk that enacting justice always involves, and so can be desired not simply for the sake of justice, but as a reassurance: '[i]f I were to be content to apply a just rule, without the spirit of justice and without in some way and each time inventing the rule and the example, I might be sheltered from criticism, under the protection of law, my action conforming to objective law, but I would not be just.'[13] To act responsibility involves a moment of what might be called tragic awareness; that is, desire maintained in the full awareness that what is desired has not come, and perhaps will never fully arrive.

The relation between justice and law, then, takes a shape that appears throughout Derrida's late work: the two are heterogeneous yet indissociable. Justice is always beyond the law, and yet justice demands law. Justice demands that it be exercised in the name of a legitimate authority, and law always claims to be acting in the name of justice.[14] The moment of decision is intimately related to the moment when justice and law meet, or when their meeting is attempted, the moment when laws are made (or broken) in the name of justice. In both cases need, demand and urgency exceed capacity, there is no mediating principle that guides the emergence of decision from the sense of responsibility, or the law from the call for justice; the moment has (or must have) 'a certain madness' about it.[15] There is an imperative to refuse to allow law to be dissociated from justice, and justice from legality, one *must* negotiate their relation, but this 'must' is not straightforwardly allied with either: '[t]he order of this *il faut* does not properly belong to either justice or to law. It only belongs to either realm by exceeding each one in the direction of the other, which means that, in their very heterogeneity, these two orders are undissociable: de facto and de jure.'[16]

The moment of decision is related to the position of the judge, who must not simply follow the law, 'but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value by a reinstituting act of interpretation, as if, at the limit, the law did not exist previously - as if the judge himself had invented it in each case.'[17] It is as though Derrida is attempting to think

[13] Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 245

[14] Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 251.

[15] Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 257.

[16]Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 258.

[17] Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 251.

together extremes of creativity and duty, such that in a decision, I must be entirely passive, accepting the burden of responsibility, with no choice to defer it, and entirely active, creatively interpreting the demands of justice as if one is founding the law at that moment. The time of decision is both passively suffered and actively constituted by the self. The decision is an unfounded making of the future, as absolutely new, and yet the decision is that which arrives in me: '[t]his relation to the future is active, it is affirmative; and yet, however active it is, the relation is also a passive one. Otherwise the future will not be the future.'[18] In fact, for Derrida, there is a sense in which the crucial ethical question is not of the content of a decision, but rather of the form; a decision as such is constitutive of ethics, the question is whether one will engage with the aporia of decision, or else elude the aporia either through deferment or by taking refuge in a principle. It is as if, to put it crudely, if one gets the form right, the content looks after itself.

Aporia, contradictory virtues and tragic conflict

Before continuing, it is worth noting at this point the structural similarities between this account of the moment of decision, and Simone Weil's account of continuing to love in suffering, to desire the good in the knowledge of its impossibility. In both cases there is the sense that the certainty of knowledge acts as a way out of full commitment to a particular moment, a refusal, in some sense of the passage of time, and therefore that acceptance (of undecidability, in Derrida's case; of suffering and contradiction in Weil's) purifies. A series of thoughts in the Marseilles notebooks explores this in relation to 'contradictory virtues'. A naturally sensitive and gentle person may lack courage, and vice-versa; both are virtues, yet they seem, naturally, to exclude each other. In human terms, the only way to move beyond this is through violence to one's nature: the gentle person suppresses their sensitivity to produce courage, and so 'amputates' their sensitivity.[19] Real progress, progress that does not amputate, is only made through grace, through an ascent to another level where these virtues do not exclude each other. But this level is inaccessible. The first step, therefore, consists in knowing this, and so

[18]Derrida, *Negotiations*, p. 233.

[19]Weil, *Notebooks*, pp. 345-6.

in realising that 'God alone is good', because at the level at which we find ourselves, certain virtues in fact exclude and conflict with each other. In this sense, Weil already assumed what Derrida states explicitly, that ethics begins with the impossible. However, Weil also assumes that if used in the right way, contradiction and impossibility can become stages on the way:

> The simultaneous existence of contrary virtues in the soul as pincers for reaching up to God; the simultaneous conception of contradictory truths for the same purpose.[20]

> Correlations of contradictories are like a ladder. Each of them raises us to a higher level where resides the connexion which unifies the contraries; until we reach a spot where we have to think of the contraries together, but where we are denied access to the level at which they are linked together. This forms the last rung of the ladder. Once arrived there, we can climb no further; we have only to look up, wait and love. And God descends. . . .[21]

For Weil, then, conflict has to be acknowledged and felt, in the same way that the intellect contemplates the paradoxes of Christian doctrine, rather than resolving them:

> The impossibility of having together the incompatible forms of behaviour necessary for the accomplishment of good – or, more briefly, the impossibility of good plays the same role for the will as the absurdity of religious dogmas does for the intelligence. The experience of this impossibility brings about the transmutation of the will into love.[22]

Finally, mysticism is essential for any real virtue, and real virtue is itself a mystery, not exhausted by a description and impossible to fully understand:

> A man inspired by God is a man who has ways of behaving, thoughts and feelings which are linked together by a link impossible to define.[23]

The recognition that 'God alone is good', combined with the willingness to continue to desire goodness nonetheless, constitutes the posture Weil understands as 'waiting'. The pain of waiting, the willingness to be torn by this tension, liberates the energy of desire, it 'transmutes' the will into love. To continue to desire then becomes itself an act of faith, which elsewhere Weil compares to a little child who wants an object so badly that their whole body is focused on gaining it, but lacking the power to do so, they simply

[20]Weil, *Notebooks,* p. 395.

[21] Weil, *Notebooks,* p. 412.

[22]Weil, *Notebooks,* p. 410.

[23]Weil, *Notebooks,* p. 412.

continue to want, and cry.[24]

Some comparison may also be drawn here to Martha Nussbaum's discussion of ethical conflict in Greek tragedy, particularly in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Tragedy does not simply present good people being ruined by situations out of their control, but something more disturbing: 'good people doing bad things, things otherwise repugnant to their ethical character and commitments, because of circumstances whose origins does not lie with them.'[25] On rare occasions, life presents situations in which one is forced to choose between the bad and the bad, or in which the limits of one's character become impossible to avoid. For Nussbaum, the significant thing about these situations in tragedy is the sense that the characters are blameworthy not primarily because of what they did or did not do in a situation involving some kind of ethical conflict (for example, being torn between the one's duty to the gods, and one's duty to one's family), but rather because of their refusal to recognise this situation *as* tragic, and to remain within it tragically. Agamemnon is told that the whole Greek expedition is in grave danger that will only be averted if he sacrifices Iphigneia. He is horrified initially at this terrible decision, but once he has accepted the necessity, he 'now begins to co-operate inwardly with necessity, arranging his feelings to accord with his fortune. From the moment he makes his decision, itself the best he could have made, he strangely turns himself into a collaborator, a willing victim.'[26] It is for the failure to recognise the depths of the conflict, to remain conscious of it and feel it whilst acting, that the Chorus reprimands Agamemnon. For Nussbaum this suggests a broadening of the horizon of ethics beyond individual action and decision, so that ways of dwelling within and feeling ethical conflict are themselves the subject of ethical discussion (which as we have already seen suggests the importance of viewing narrative as vital in forming ethical sensitivity because it is through the empathy engendered by narrative we learn to feel tragic conflict). And again, it is, in a sense, desire that is the crucial factor in this kind of dwelling or feeling of tragic conflict: to continue to let one's desire (for example, Agamemnon's fatherly desire for Iphigenia's well-being) be at odds with the confines of the situation, rather than accommodated to the possibilities on offer.

The similarity, then, is something like this: all three presentations show how in

[24]See Weil, 'Some thoughts on the love of God' in *Science, necessity and the love of God*.

[25] Martha Nussbuam, *The fragility of goodness: luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*, revised edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 25.

[26] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 42.

certain situations the irreducibility of experience to knowledge (whether Derrida' *aporia*, Weil's affliction, or Nussbaum's tragic conflict) becomes a form of suffering, and the willingness to undergo this suffering honestly is in some sense crucial for ethics. But there seems to be a key difference, which is highlighted by a further comment of Nussbaum's:

> An honest effort to do justice to all aspects of a hard case, seeing and feeling it in all its conflicting many-sidedness, could enrich future deliberative efforts. . . . It is, of course, possible to work towards such a just appreciation of the complexity of the claims upon us in the course of ordinary life, without tragic conflict of tragic suffering. The tragedians, however, notice that often it takes the shock of such suffering to make us look and see.[27]

Failure to consider one's manner of bearing oneself within tragic situations may be to miss an important dimension of how progress is made. The ability to feel the helplessness of a tragic situation fully may, on this account, actually be a vital part of a learning process that could aid one in future conflicts, or lead to a richer understanding of one's existing relations and the duties they include. Nussbaum is not proposing, as Weil seems to, that the illumination gained through suffering is *the* essential truth, merely that its importance has been overlooked in western discussions of ethics, but the point is that for both, undergoing suffering in a particular way teaches; that is, the before and the after are different, the suffering of the moment reorients one in some way.

Although, as the second chapter tried to show, the attempt to articulate the truth that 'grace fills the void' is fraught with difficulty for Weil, there is the clear sense that one can learn how to undergo suffering redemptively, or, put differently, one can somehow speak *from* the perspective of 'grace' rather than simply 'the void'. Both Derrida and Weil share the assumption that ordinarily, the experience of 'void' or *aporia* is covered over in various ways, and it is the task of their thinking to uncover it. For both, the experience of void/*aporia* is a kind of pre-condition: in the case of Weil, for any real spiritual insight; in the case of Derrida, for any worthwhile ethics or politics. However, if we ask the question of how this conviction is arrived at by each, the situation is quite different. In Weil's work, the moment of learning that the experience of void has this hidden significance is consciously included and reflected upon within her work. However much it still remains a mystery, it is because she has learned in practice that

[27]Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 45.

there is grace that fills the void that she can say 'grace fills the void'. Obviously, for Weil, the undergoing of suffering is linked to a mystical closeness to Christ, and Christ is in turn seen primarily as the one who shares or makes available the secret of suffering. Contemplation of the cross, of innocent suffering not turned away from, enables one to face the void, and it through this that one learns. This is partly why the language of ascent permeates Weil's notebooks; it is not primarily a result of a hierarchical metaphysics, but is rather linked to the way in which her religious thought is a reflection upon the conditions of learning. In this sense, Weil's own life is inseparable from her religious writing, her writing is seen as a kind of explication of her experiences.[28]

For Derrida however, the conviction that it is the experience of *aporia*, above all, that is the most important condition for the thinking of ethics, is largely assumed, not shown to have been learned in time. It is the background assumption of all of his work on gift, hospitality, forgiveness, justice, etc; that the willingness to undergo aporetic experiences, to dwell in this posture, is, for want of a better term, purifying, such that we 'begin by the impossible.' There is something like a belief in redemptive suffering in the background here; *aporia* is a form of suffering, and the 'ethics of the impossible' is in a sense a form of redemptive suffering. His work in these areas can understood as an assault on any certainty that allows a good conscience on the assumption that if a good conscience is bad, a bad conscience must therefore be good. But the goodness of a bad conscience is largely assumed, not shown.[29] But this sense that confidence in decision making is definitively negative is linked to the sense that, for Derrida, each decision appears to be formally identical, and as a result, unrelated to other decisions. One does not learn, gradually, how to take up the posture required to honestly undergo a moment of decision, or allow the *aporia* to be uncovered in experience; it is identically troubling and undecidable each time. Although Derrida obviously intends his explorations of the

[28]It seems to have been her intention to present the thoughts in the notebooks in this way, given that both are have the same short story as a prologue, which narrates a very austere mystical experience. See Joan Dargon, *Simone Weil: thinking poetically* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1999), pp. 51 - 65 for an excellent analysis of these prologues.

[29]Derrida's response to John Milbank's (very long) question at the *Questioning God* conference is particularly instructive on the question of bad conscience. See 'On forgiveness' in *Questioning God*, ed. John D Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), p. 69.

undecidable to articulate actual experience (and it seems that Derrida is at his closest to pure phenomenology at this point), the result is that 'the undecidable' is almost entirely detached from human life; it arrives, identically each time, leaving the human person to negotiate some double injunction or other, but is not itself affected by the life of the particular human person who receives or endures it. There is no give and take between the two, and it is not a moment that teaches, it is somehow mute. There is no transference from the experience of deciding under conditions of undecidability and future occasions of decision, as if one had no possibility of reflexive consideration of what one is undergoing, even while one is undergoing it. Weil's realisation of this possibility is one of the things that motivates her talk of levels, the 'secret architecture' of the soul, and so on.

The objection here is that there is not a single *aporia* of 'the undecidable', indifferent to the particularities of those who find themselves undergoing it; there are, rather, human persons engaged in different ways with the difficulty of making responsible decisions, in different ways. Of course, Derrida wants to avoid claiming that there is a concept of *aporia* under which a certain range of experiences are included, so that there is strictly speaking, no concept of *aporia*, the *aporia* is always singular. But despite this protestation, the formal nature of the experience of the double injunction misses something basic: if this experience is as important as Derrida claims it is, then one would expect one's understanding of this to affect the tonality of the experience itself. Simply put, if one understands *aporia* to be the first step on the way to ethics (even if one thinks that this is a first step that will have to be taken over and over), this understanding changes the experience, and one's way of negotiating the experience. Although Derrida presents experiences of the undecidable almost as if they had the significance of a spiritual practice, a preparation for ethics, he actually describes these experiences in a way that forbids any real learning or integration into life.

Forgiveness as decision

The isolated nature of the instant of decision has an important impact on the way that forgiveness is understood. Like the decision, forgiveness is said to pass through the impossible: it is 'not merely difficult for a thousand psychological reasons, but

absolutely impossible'.[30] For Derrida, in the same way that decision lives by the undecidable, forgiveness lives by the unforgiveable. It is only the unforgiveable, the instance when forgiveness seems unjustified and unthinkable, that allows one to ask the question of forgiveness.[31] The lack of knowledge that constitutes a decision, and the lack of justification that constitutes forgiveness, both imply a basic isolation in these moments. One has no access to the sphere of universality, to principles that appear to one and all. The ordeal of forgiveness as a moment of decision cannot be made comprehensible to the public sphere, and the wisdom of the public sphere is of no use in making the leap that is required. Like Johannes Silentio's Abraham, one facing this ordeal cannot speak, cannot make their decision publicly comprehensible, or even make the dilemma clear in the first place. In this sense, for Derrida, the burden of decision is almost a figure of God, in that God demands obedience without giving reasons, just as responsibility demands that one decide from within the undecidable. God remains in the darkness, without one's responsibility being diminished as a result of this lack of vision, and it is God who 'hands down' decisions without being seen.[32]

We will return to Kierkegaard shortly but first we can note that, as Derrida recognises, this means that there is something potentially terrible or amoral about a decision, and so about forgiveness. On this account, both are difficult to distinguish from a moment of arbitrary, sovereign choosing.[33] If there are no principles that

[30]Derrida, *Acts of religion*, pp 385. Derrida's account of the impossibility of forgiveness is heavily indebted to Jankelevitch's book. As we have seen, for Jankelevitch, forgiveness needs the final simplicity of evil to finally get to work, otherwise it is either just another form of the gradual forgetting of things, whereby everything seems less serious over time, or a form of excusing, which claims that nothing and no-one is ever simple enough to judge in the first place. Forgiveness, therefore, is allied with the last word of judgement, so that can replace its finality (in this sense, a condemning judgement and the act of forgiveness are formally similar; they impose a perfectly simple verdict). However, as Derrida shows, in his actual treatment of the question of forgiveness in the wake of the Shoah, Jankelevitch backs away from the implications of his position. The Shoah is unforgivable, in that its scale is inhuman, it is beyond any possible punishment or reparation. How can we forgive that which we cannot begin to understand, or punish? Derrida then takes the logic of Jankelevitch's notion of forgiveness, and pushes it so as to say that forgiveness is by *definition* concerned with the unforgivable, it is the unforgiveable that raises the question of forgiveness *as* forgiveness.

[31]Derrida, 'To forgive: the unforgivable and the imprescriptable' in *Questioning God*, p. 30.

[32]See Derrida, *The gift of death.* tr. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), chapter 3, especially pp. 56 - 57.

[33]Derrida, 'To forgive', p. 22.

guarantee the rightness, the wisdom, or the justice of forgiving, and if in this sense it is moment of undecidability, what it is that makes the leap an ethical one (or, in Derrida's terms, a moment of 'ethics beyond ethics'), rather than simply a moment of arbitrary madness? When dealing with this issue, Derrida is at his most mystical. If a moment of decision were the work of a subject, of a self-present 'I', there would be no way to mark it out as responsible, and so he alludes to an 'other in me':

> If I forgive in my name, my forgiveness expresses what I am capable of, me, and this decision (which is therefore no longer a decision) does no more than deploy my power and abilities, the potential energy of my aptitudes, predicates, and character traits. Nothing is more unforgivable, more haughty sometimes, more self-assured than the "I forgive you". . . . What must be, therefore, is that I forgive what is not mine to forgive, not the power of giving or forgiving: what must be is that I forgive beyond me (this is close to what Levinas says, that I must welcome the infinite, and this is the first hospitality, beyond the capacity of the I – which is obviously the impossible itself: how could I do what I cannot do? How to do the impossible? Only the other in me can do it, and decide – this would be to let him do it, without the other doing it simply in my place: here is the unthinkable of substitution). . . . And that this, this gift, this forgiveness, this decision, would be done in the name of the other does not exonerate in any way my freedom or my responsibility, on the contrary.[34]

Forgiveness is not something in my power, so that forgiveness, if there is forgiveness, takes place within me, rather than being something I do. It is in *this* sense that Derrida wants to talk about forgiveness as 'the becoming possible of the impossible as impossible'. It is very tempting to see the trace of something Christological here: forgiveness is the impossible, but it takes place nonetheless through an other within, and in this sense the impossible becomes possible *as* the impossible - this has a similar shape to Paul's phrase 'it is not longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me' and to Jesus' words in the gospel: 'what is impossible for humans is possible for God.' In a sense, at this point Derrida actually comes close to confirming John Milbank's point namely, that the lone individual is not authorised to forgive, since they cannot represent all the victims of any wrongdoing, even if they are themselves the primary victim. Hence, for Milbank, Christ makes forgiveness possible by being, in some way, a 'sovereign victim', able to represent the multitude of victims.[35] But Derrida, here, is

[34] Derrida, *Acts of religion*, p. 387. See also 'To forgive', p. 62.

[35] See John Milbank, *Being reconciled: ontology and pardon* (London, Routledge, 2004), chapter 3, especially p. 50.

hinting at something very similar; that unless the decision to forgive that is in some way the work, not of the self-present subject, but of an 'other' within, it is haughty, assuming, and ultimately violent.

Regardless of this speculation, however, the tension I want to highlight here is that on the one hand, one is fundamentally alone in the moment of forgiveness, and yet at the same time, forgiveness as a decision is not accomplished through my own, self-present will. On this point Derrida is suggestive but unclear. I cannot explore these issues fully, but this briefly invoked mysticism can be tied, again, to the question of learning, and to the formal, identical nature of the moments of *aporia* that Derrida wants to uncover. Because the 'I' and the 'other-in-me' remain other to each other, there is no question of the 'I' being affected by the taking place of decision, or of the other within, who considers forgiving the unforgiveable, affecting the 'I' who only conceives of the possible. The two can never get to know each other, and so one does not learn to forgive by forgiving. Or at least, Derrida seems to leave no room for this. It is not a mysticism that gives any lasting understanding, because the moment can never unfold, or teach us what it meant.

It is interesting to note that although Derrida takes on almost uncritically Kierkegaard/Johannes Silentio's presentation of the inner tension of Abraham's journey to Mount Moriah, he does not take on the sense, which seems crucial in *Fear and trembling*, that Abraham, and his relation to Isaac, is transformed by the near-sacrifice. For Kierkegaard, the before and the after are irreducible to each other. The faith of Abraham lies not in his willingness to sacrifice the finite for the sake of the infinite, but in his willingness to hold to the finite whilst raising the knife, so that the mark of greatness is Abraham's ability to receive Isaac back with joy after having given him up: 'it is great to give up one's desire, but greater to stick to it after having given it up; it is great to grasp hold of the eternal but greater to stick to the temporal after having given it up.'[36] The relation between Abraham and Isaac after Mount Moriah is externally the same, and yet all is different, and it is this difference that makes the story so difficult to communicate, to pass on.[37] The difference itself is secret, like the command and the moment of decision it produces. And the faith that receives Isaac back, that hopes for

[36]Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling: a dialectical lyric by Joannes de silentio*, tr. Alastair Hannay, (London: Penguin books, 1985), p. 52. See also p. 77.

[37]Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling*, p. 62.

the impossible to be possible, is said to affect Abraham, to keep him young: 'he who is always prepared for the worst becomes old prematurely: but he who has faith retains eternal youth.'[38] Silentio's Abraham is kept young by the willingness to continue to desire in circumstances that seem to forbid this desire, or render it meaningless.

At the end of the last chapter I suggested that part of what is missing in Charles Griswold's criticism of 'instant' forgiveness is the sense that the command to forgive may itself produce a destablisation of thought in advance, so that the paradoxical demand to love justice and yet show mercy has already begun to be incorporated into one's life. This is one of Weil's motivations, and it is an ambiguous one: because torture is a possibility, one should form one's conception of God through consideration of torture. Even if Weil is too demanding here, there does seem to be a kernel of truth. Our ideals, whatever they are, are likely to produce a process of rehearsal, in which we ask 'yes, but what if...?' One counts the cost in advance, because one cannot help but anticipate difficulty of one kind or another. In this sense, one can see ideals as opportunities to shape this process of rehearsal, as Walter Wink suggests regarding the practice of non-violence.[39] Active non-violence is so counter-intuitive that one must rehearse it internally, for the simple reason that any exposure to violence produces in us the question 'what if...? We will be rehearsing in any case, the question is how. On Wink's account, the command to turn the other cheek invites a process of rehearsal through which to let re-shape our instinctive responses to aggression. Similarly, one might say that the gospel sayings on forgiveness encourage a similar process. The sayings in Matthew and Luke concerning how often one should forgive deliberately encourage an anticipation of victimhood. But perhaps the point here is that this kind of anticipation is almost inevitable, as evidenced by the question it is a response to: 'Lord, how many times...?' In fact, it may even make up a reasonable percentage of one's conscious thought, in which case the saying is concerned to utilise this tendency so as to nourish the capacity to forgive. And it does so through extremity, and through an exposure of one's sense of justice to outrage. One must forgive, but without ceasing to expect repentance and reform, in conditions that seem to forbid these expectations. The account of the experience of aporia that Derrida offers is, in contrast, so formal that

[38]Kierkegaard, *Fear and trembling*, p. 32.

[39]See Walter Wink, *Engaging the powers: discernment and resistance in a world of domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 231-242.

there is no sense that these experiences occur within *lives.*

II

The gift

As well as being a further example of the way in which aporia is held to be a form of suffering essential to ethical life, the figure of gift is also in a sense the more positive, substantive content of Derrida's ethics, in contrast to the more formal articulation of ethics as responsibility and decision. More than this, the relationship between the free gift and forms of reciprocity underlies his approach to forgiveness as a 'relation without relation' between a purely unconditional moment and a reasoned, conditional process. The question of desire will prove crucial in assessing Derrida work on gift, and the logic of gift within forgiveness.

The 'posture' alluded to earlier, and the three aspects or moments involved, can also be seen more clearly through Derrida's discussion of gift, in something like the following way. The concept 'gift' is deconstructed, its inherent instability exposed, so that the difference between gift and exchange becomes problematic: gift always hides exchange, and one cannot finally differentiate reliably between the two. We say 'gift', but this meaning never becomes present, the promise made with this word is never made good, never delivered. Whenever anyone says 'here it is' or 'there it is', one can be sure that there will be something other than gift.[40] At the same time, this suspicion towards simple conceptual identity or presence is also linked to an ethical vigilance, because by appearing to be a charitable gift, exchange may become secretly coercive, and so the task of exposing gift as always exchange is also that of uncovering hidden violence and its victims. Finally, though, despite being impossible to locate, conceptually or practically, the gift remains for Derrida that which is to be desired; to desire the gift is to desire something beyond exchange, in fact, it is the desire for the pure gift that is said to drive the deconstructive vigilance.[41]

[40]John Caputo frequently uses this turn of phrase to get at the ethical import of deferral.

[41]Theodore Jennings points out that there is an importance difference between the discussions on justice and gift concerning the 'excess' of justice. Whereas in the discourse on gift, the sense is that gift is unconditional by way of excess, in the case of justice, this aspect is almost entirely absent. This is perhaps part of the difficulty in seeing the continuity between the discourse on gift and 'early'

The importance of this last aspect has been elaborated, with a fair amount of breathlessness, by John Caputo:

> There is in Derrida what one might call a certain overreaching, trespassing aspiration, what I have been calling here, all along, a dream, or desire, a restlessness, a passion for the impossible, a panting for something to come. This passion is not a determinable wish or will for a definable goal, or foreseeable objective, however hard any such goal may be to attain. It is not a search for something planable and foreseeable, the fulfilment of which can be steadily approximated, our progress toward which regularly measured. Over and beyond, beneath and before any such determinate purpose, there is in Derrida, in deconstruction, a longing and sighing, a weeping and praying, a dream and a desire, for something non-determinable, un-foreseeable, beyond the actual and the possible, beyond the horizon of possibility, beyond the scope of what we can sensibly imagine.[42]

Caputo takes deconstruction to be a movement of excessive desire for what remains outside of the circle of exchange that constitutes both human behaviour and thinking. And so the gift, as the thought of this beyond, is like the thought of God, 'it has not so much a semantic content as a restless force or desire; it is a promise, or even a sigh.'[43] In Derrida's words, the impossibility of the gift is that through which 'we continue to desire, to dream'.[44] In Caputo, then, the implication of Derrida's talk of 'undecidability' becomes clearer: it is the *desire* for the impossible that mediates between the conditional and the unconditional, or one might almost say that it is *the experience of the lack of mediation* that mediates. The lack of mediation is only felt because of the 'desire for the impossible'. Put more simply, Caputo says, following Derrida's trajectory, gift never really appears, but somehow this recognition itself is a force for good, because without the sense that real gift always eludes us, and the desire for the impossible 'outside', we have no way to 'slacken the circle' of exchange.[45] The gift may

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deconstruction; there is a more positive sense of excess in the idea of impossible gift. See *Reading Derrida/thinking Paul: on justice,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 91-3.

[42]John Caputo, *The Prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion,* (Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 333.

[43]John D Caputo, *The weakness of God: a theology of the event*, p6. The importance of desire for Derrida's ethical work is also emphasised by Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh in their recent introduction to Derrida, *Derrida's philosophy* (Stocksbridge: Acumen 2007).

[44]Jacques Derrida, 'On the gift: A discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion' in *God, the gift and postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University 1999), p. 72.

[45]Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida*, p. 161. See also Hent de Vries account of

never appear, but it somehow makes its absence felt.

Perhaps the easiest way to say what Derrida is trying to do in *Given time* is to say that he is exploring 'what giving wants to say';[46] that is, he is teasing out the tensions and contradictions that appear as we try to articulate what a gift is, or should be. As Derrida discusses Marcel Mauss' essay *The gift* (which inaugurates the interdisciplinary discourse on gift and exchange), Levi-Strauss, Heidegger, and a prose-poem from Baudelaire's collection *Paris spleen*, Derrida finds that giving can never say what it wants to say. *Given time*, like many of Derrida's books, is difficult to subject to straightforward criticism, because although there are moments of very close reading and deconstructive rigour, there are a number of more obviously speculative and playful detours which are also used to carry the argument forward. However, since Derrida has discussed the central claims of this work in interviews, and in an important conference published as *God, the gift and postmodernism*, it is fair to assume that 'the impossibility of the gift' can be treated as a fairly unified thesis. Firstly, Derrida claims that this *aporia* appears, inevitably, and secondly understands that it is constitutive of ethical life, and the form of thinking it requires. My concern here is not primarily with whether there is, or is not, finally, an aporia of gift, but rather of the way in which the moment of aporia is taken to be important. However, some consideration will be given to the validity of the first claim, that the thought of gift is necessarily 'impossible' in some way, through interaction with John Milbank's work, which presents one of the most penetrating criticisms of Derrida's work on gift to date.

Derrida builds towards a sense of the impossibility of gift from a number of directions. Firstly, there is the problem of recognition. For a gift to be given, there must be one who gives, that which is given, and one who is given to; these are structural requirements, one might say. But for that which is given to be given *as gift*, there are what we might call ethical requirements: a gift must be given freely, above or beyond obligations and expectations, and with no conditions attached to its receipt. It

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Derrida's relationship to Levinas. On de Vries' account, Derrida's aim is not to produce an entirely non-violent discourse, since this will always mean a certain blindness to the violence that is inherent in all discourse. Rather, the aim is to avoid the worst violence, which means acknowledging one's inevitable complicity in it. See *Religion and violence: philosophical perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), pp. 133 - 138.

[46]Derrida, *Given time: I. Counterfeit money* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press 1992), p. 30.

must be a surprise, and it must not impose any indebtedness. The gift must be excessive, asymmetrical, unconditional, disinterested, and alien to all economy; this is what we find that giving 'wants to say'. Except, for Derrida, if this is what we want a gift to be, then we should admit that this desire is continually frustrated, because something always returns; no act of giving can lift itself out of economy. This is not simply because of the human tendency to seek some way of returning to equilibrium after the imbalance of giving, nor because human relations are always involved in some kind of power dynamic, such that giving may always emerge from a mixture of motives (a gift may be a means to gain approval, win influence or pay tribute, etc). It is not even because real generosity tends without any coercion to produce further generosity; the desire to give as one has received. It is rather because a gift is always already its own payment, its own return, and therefore its own annulment. Even the most simplistically generous act, given with no strings attached, and no end in view is always re-inscribed in economy through its very meaning. One who gives always receives the meaning of their gift, 'the gratifying image of goodness or generosity',[47] as a return, so that one always takes by giving.[48] For there to be real giving one must not only give 'in secret' from others, but one's giving must also be a secret from oneself. A gift, as such, can appear to no-one. But this means that as soon as a gift appears *as* a gift, as soon as this meaning is given at all, its gratuity is betrayed.[49] The impossibility of gift, then, is closely linked to the impossibility of presence.[50]

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[47]Derrida, *Given time*, p. 23.

[48]Derrida, 'To forgive' in *Questioning God*, p. 22.

[49] Derrida, *Given time*, p. 81. After hearing these ideas, a perceptive undergraduate student noted that on this account, a victim of credit card fraud, where the fraudsters accidentally transferred the stolen money to a charity bank account, might be classed as having given an authentic gift.

[50]There appears to be a lack of fit between the role that absence plays in Derrida's later work on gift, as compared to the role that it plays in the earlier work on signification. In both cases, there is the sense that the search for pure presence (gift without exchange, self-sufficient intelligibility) is what drives a circular movement (of reciprocal exchanges, of the play of signifiers). However, the whole movement of the early work is to affirm this condition: the absence of a transcendental signified is pronounced as a kind of liberation, so the real nature of meaning (deferral, difference, play, etc) can be affirmed as what it really is. The desire for a final, self-sufficient intelligibility not corrupted by differing and deferral is linked to suppression of real human difference; violence. In contrast, the desire for the impossible gift is affirmed as that which has the potential to produce a less violent economy. In other words, the desire for an 'outside' is framed in contradictory ways at different times. Both are 'impossible', but the desire for an outside of signification (one that grounds signification) is taken to be oppressive; the desire for an

Another issue concerns the force of giving. Giving is seen as a form of benevolence, it is for the one given to, not for the one who gives. And yet precisely because a gift is uninvited, it is always potentially an unwelcome imposition. One can never guarantee that one's giving will be received as a blessing, rather than as an unwelcome intrusion, or even as violation. Every moment of giving exerts some kind of force, it does something, alters things, but since one never knows how, or when, or what to give, one will always need to be forgiven for one's giving. In a sense, the thought of gift is of a force that is not violent, but there is no way that this non-violence can appear definitively, or be guaranteed, because the non-violence of the gift depends on it being received as non-threatening. This relates in turn to the question of indebtedness; since the imposing of obligations is one way in which the gift could come with a certain force, as a means of control of the future, and since the non-obligatory character of gift never appears straightforwardly, there is no way to guarantee that a gift does not, or will not threaten in this way. A gift may always be violent, because it is by definition not invited, paid for, or demanded.

If, then, Derrida still wishes to speak of a desire for the gift, a desire linked with the impossible, then it goes along with something beyond subjectivity and the capacity for knowledge, in a similar way to the way decision takes place in me, without being made by me. At this point, again, Derrida is pointing to something beyond the difference between activity and passivity, or between intention and chance. There is no gift without a wanting-to-give, but there is no gift with clear, conscious intention, for the reasons already outlined:

> This is the paradox we have been engaged from the beginning. There is no gift without the intention of giving. The gift can only have a meaning that is intentional - in the two senses of the word that refers to intention as well as intentionality. However, everything stemming from the intentional meaning also threatens the gift with self-keeping, with being kept in its very expenditure. Whence the enigmatic difficulty lodged in this donating eventiveness. There must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must - miraculously, graciously - agree with each other. [51]

Needless to say, these two conditions never coincide, hence the gift remains 'the impossible'. It is difficult to pin down, exactly, the sense in which Derrida uses the term

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outside of economic give-and-take is held to be liberating.

[51]Derrida, *Given Time,* p. 123.

'the impossible'; it is not that he believes 'gift' to be a word with no reality to signify, or that each human attempt to give somehow falls short of 'pure' gift through inadequate intention. The following comments provide the beginnings of a description of what it is like to think 'the impossible':

> The gift as such cannot be known, but it can be thought of. We can think what we cannot know. Perhaps thinking is not the right word. But there is something in excess of knowledge. We have a relation to the gift beyond the circle, the economic circle, and beyond the theoretical and phenomenological determination. It is this excess which interests me. It is this excess which puts the circle into motion.[52]

> I am looking for another possible experience of truth, through the event of the gift, with all these conditions of impossibility. What I am interested in – and I repeat often that the deconstruction I try to practice is impossible, is the impossible – is precisely this experience of *the* impossible. . . . What I am interested in is the experience of the desire for the impossible. That is, the impossible as the condition of desire. Desire is not perhaps the best word. I mean this quest in which we want to give, even when we realize, when we agree, if we agree, that the gift, that giving, is impossible, that it is a process of reappropriation and self-destruction. Nevertheless, we do not give up on the dream of the pure gift, in the same way that we do not give up the idea of pure hospitality.[53]

It is statements like those above that have been found particularly tempting for theologians, in that if Derrida's interpretation of the human phenomena of giving is correct, it may prove to be a trace of transcendence; transcendence in the form of a desire for what is absent, the effects of which can be seen in certain disturbances within language and thought.[54] If we briefly follow this theological temptation, we might say that Derrida is hinting at something very similar to what Weil writes about the absence of good 'here below': the gift is never present, but its absence is somehow experienced through desire; it is a defining and significant absence. But then, following Weil, one might expect to push this further and say that despite being utterly absent, that somehow through desire, when the absent gift is desired *as such,* this absence becomes a mode of presence. However, despite his reputation as a destabliser of binary

[52]Derrida, 'On the gift' in *God, the gift and postmodernism*, p. 60.

[53]Derrida, 'On the gift, p. 72.

[54]As Sarah Coakley has put it, the discourse of the gift, when seen in this light, appears to provide a way to 'keep the notion of the divine afloat', hence its appeal for postmodern theology. See 'Why gift? Gift, gender and trinitarian relations in Milbank and Tanner' in *Scottish journal of theology*, no. 61 vol 2, 2008, p. 226.

oppositions, it appears that the difference between presence/absence is fixed much more firmly in place for Derrida than it is for Weil. Weil has more to say about this seeming transformation, in which hunger becomes a form of nourishment, and about why the recognition of the absence, or impossibility, of good 'here below' is a starting point for all virtue, compassion and genuine religious insight. The following comments from her notebooks on attention, beauty and desire, demonstrate this:

> A poem is beautiful to the precise degree in which the attention, whilst it was being composed, has been turned toward the inexpressible.
> The world is beautiful. God has composed the world whilst thinking on himself.[55]

Good is 'produced' not through working towards appropriate ends with effective means, but through a law of attention: one reproduces the quality of that to which one is attentive. But the process is not reversible; that is, one cannot be attentive for the sake of this imitation, since this is not attention. Attention can only really be learnt through contemplating without 'approaching', whether the lack of approach is through necessity or conscious restraint:

> To contemplate what cannot be contemplated (the affliction of another), without running away, and to contemplate the desirable without approaching – that is what is beautiful[56]

> What produces good is the attention turned lovingly toward the non-representable form of good, which one is unable to approach.[57]

The only way to learn how to contemplate the desirable without approaching is if that which is desired is inaccessible. So for Weil, some kind of absence, inaccessibility or suffering is essential if one is to learn to attend, just as for Derrida the impossible is the condition for desire; for both, some kind of rupture is crucial. The difference, however, is that Weil conceives of this in terms of a transformation of ordinary desire, so that as the desire for the good is painfully formed through absence, one's relation to actual present objects of desire is also transformed. More than this, one's attitude towards the most mundane of things (a geometry problem) can become a spiritual practice, so that, in a sense, one intends God not through the content of attention but through the form and quality of attention ('God is attention without distraction'). Learning to attend to

[55]Weil. *Notebooks*, p. 412.

[56]Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 71.

[57]Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 354.

transcendent goodness in its absence involves the same posture as learning to attend to the finite as finite; that is, to love the world *as* the world. To love the world as the world is to love God as God, and vice-versa ('praise to God, and compassion for creatures, it is the same movement of the heart'). It is possible to believe in God in such a way that one's thought of God emerges from the need to avoid the thought of void; that is, unredemptive and destructive suffering, desire without satisfaction, absence of any final good, etc. It is a terrible thing for a gambler to love their game as the saint loves their God, but still more terrible for the saint to love God as a gambler loves their game.[58] In this sense our usual ways of responding to the absence of final good in the world corrupt our perspective of *both* God and the world, and our manner of giving attention to each, so that God is thought of or loved dishonestly, as part of an escape from the reality of the world, and the world is grasped at desperately, loved as something it can never be.

However, this emphasis on absence, on desire maintained through absence, runs alongside a sense of shift in perspective such that absence and presence are no longer simply opposites. In fact, there is a sense that the oppositions God/world, presence/absence are actually the product of thought-as-compensation. If God is present through absence, then one no longer knows exactly what 'presence' and 'absence' mean, or meant. This ambiguity is closely related the possibility of a lasting change of perspective, or real learning. And yet, as already explored in the previous chapter, this does not operate simply according to a logic of reversal; that is, it is not that poverty is wealth, weakness strength, and absence presence, but rather that neither poverty nor wealth, weakness or strength, absence or presence are seen in the same way on the other side of a shift in perspective. They are 'read' differently:

> If we want only the absolute good, that is to say, if we reject all the existing or possible, sensible, imaginary or conceivable good that is offered us by creatures as being insufficient; if we prefer to choose nothing at all rather than all that, then, (with time), being turned toward that which we cannot possibly conceive, a revelation of it comes to us – the revelation that this nothingness is really the fullest possible fullness, the main-spring and principle of all reality. Then we can truthfully say that we have faith in God.[59]

Finally, the revelation of 'the fullest possible fullness' leaves open the possibility of a

[58]Weil, *Gravity and grace*, p. 59.

[59]Weil, *Notebooks*, p. 492.

perspective from which desire for what is absent ceases to be traumatic in the same way, since desire is already on the way to possession:

> It is in respect of false goods that desire and possession are different things; for the true good, there is no difference.[60]

Although there is a sense here of a final unification of desire and desired, this does not necessarily entail suggesting that absence becomes presence in Weil's understanding. For Weil, the point seems to be that there is a 'level' at which desire and possession, absence and presence, *are* different, hence the difficulty of truthful speech, the need for a 'secret architecture' which allows one to know without knowing. In other words, there remains an internal fluidity (as opposed to instability) to these kinds of expressions; since one does not know whether the good one desires is truly the good - that is, to what extent one's desire is compensatory - one can only continue to desire the presence of what is absent, which means to maintain the sense that desire is an intentional movement, and meaningless as a self-sufficient state without an external aim. The space in between accepting that there is a desire for good which cannot be satisfied and the revelation that somehow this hunger itself satisfies (that desire is possession) proves essential for Weil, because it is a space in which the form of our love, desire or attention may be transformed, rather than simply redirected or inverted. However, as already noted, the emphasis on learning in Weil means that this space - the experience of absence, void, etc. - is not identically repeated, it is felt differently depending on how it is construed, so that the difference between presence and absence becomes less and less clear as one learns to 'read' the world differently. Here there are parallels with the structure Michael J. Gorman sees in the Philippi hymn. On Gorman's reading of Paul, the conception of God is fundamentally challenged by the servant form of Christ, so that an initial experience of challenge issues in a more lasting form of understanding. But as we have seen, there is something perpetually unfinished about the movement from the 'although' to the 'because', in that some sense of paradoxicality remains in the new form of understanding of Christ, or the rights of an apostle, or the behaviour of a Christian. The difference between the norm and the overturning of the norm does not disappear, just as for Weil, the difference between presence and absence is neither fully reversed, nor fully dissolved, although both are suggested.

[60]Weil, *First and last notebooks*, p. 157.

Forgiveness divided

To examine these issues further I want to return to Derrida's discussion of the presence of two orders of meaning within the discourse of forgiveness. corresponding to two obligations, within the heritage of forgiveness:

> It is important to analyse at its base the tension at the heart of the heritage between, *on the one side*, the idea which is also a demand for the *unconditional*, gracious, infinite, aneconomic forgiveness granted *to the guilty as guilty*, without counterpart, even to those who do not repent or ask forgiveness, and *on the other side*, as a great number of texts testify through many semantic refinements and difficulties, a conditional forgiveness proportionate to the recognition of the fault, to repentance, to the transformation of the sinner who then explicitly asks forgiveness. And who from that point is no longer guilty through and through, but already another, and better than the guilty one. To this extent, and on this condition, it is no longer *the guilty as such* who is forgiven. One of the questions indissociable from this, and which interests me no less, concerns the essence of the heritage. What does it mean to inherit when the heritage includes an injunction at once double and contradictory?[61]

There are two essentially different logics at work under the same word, one that gestures towards an entirely unconditional moment in which forgiveness is given as a gift without regard for rational grounding or moral justification, and one in which forgiveness is part of a norm governed life, so that it is given responsibly, according to a pattern (apology, repentance, reconciliation, etc). In this sense, the term 'forgiveness' refers not to a single coherent meaning, but is rather the site of a conflict between two heterogeneous meanings. But in another sense, for Derrida, 'forgiveness' refers properly only to the unconditional moment, so that really, under one heading, there is forgiveness and pseudo-forgiveness. Or rather, there is forgiveness, and there are other human movements that are what forgiveness collapses into as it becomes. So there is apology, pardon, repentance, reconciliation, mourning, forgetting, excuse, understanding, and acceptance; all these involve exchange, or are linked to particular conditions (e.g. reconciliation is possible if there is repentance, acceptance might be easier if there is understanding) and in any particular case, when one talks about forgiveness, one is talking about some kind of suspension of these elements. These are all forms of interaction or processes that take time, that can be seen to start, progress and even reach some kind of completion, and one can observe to a certain extent when they are present.

[61] Jacques Derrida, *On cosmopolitanism and forgiveness*, tr. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routeledge, 2002), p. 35.

But pure forgiveness, according to the logic of the gift, is something essentially alien to all of these, even though in a sense it is the desire for pure forgiveness that sets in motion all these other movements.

In another essay, Derrida comments further on the relation between the conditional and unconditional, repeating again the formula 'heterogeneous yet indissociable':

> We thus dissociated *on the one hand* unconditional forgiveness, absolute forgiveness – I am not saying absolution in the Christian sense – absolutely unconditional forgiveness that allows us to think the essence of forgiveness, if there is such a thing – and which ultimately should even be able to do without repentance and the request for forgiveness, and on the other hand conditional forgiveness, for example, that forgiveness which is inscribed within a set of conditions of all kinds, psychological, political, juridical above all (since forgiveness is bound up with the juridicary as penal order). Yet the distinction between unconditionality and conditionality is shifty [retorse] enough not to let itself be determined as a simple opposition. The unconditional and the conditional are, certainly, absolutely heterogeneous, and this forever, on either side of a limit, but they are also indissociable. There is in the movement, in the motion of unconditional forgiveness, an inner exigency of becoming-effective, manifest, determined, and, in determining itself, bending to conditionality.[62]

Two things are of particular interest in this version of the relationship. Firstly, it is the unconditional sense that 'allows us to think the essence of forgiveness'. It is the unconditional, the impossible, that produces a thinking of what we cannot know, as suggested above - this forgiveness signals 'another possible experience of truth'. As such, it is the thought of the unconditional that most truly 'is' forgiveness, that is what forgiving 'wants to say'. The thought of a forgiveness that did not in any way depend on someone being deserving - whether this worthiness came from the past in the form of mitigating factors, the present in terms of apology and remorse, or the future in terms of reconciliation and reform - is the real force of forgiveness. Secondly, although the conditional and the unconditional are 'forever' on either side of a limit, they should not be thought of as straightforwardly in opposition. The unconditional is linked to 'movement' and 'motion' (the unconditional 'bends' towards the conditional), and as such, to a destination; unconditional forgiveness needs to become manifest and determined. In this sense, the unconditional is already orientated towards the conditional, to determinate presence, reality made possible by particular conditions, etc.

[62]Derrida, 'To forgive', p. 45.

In this sense, again, there is a parallel to the notion of *kenosis*, and to the tensions already highlighted, in that it is the nature of the unconditional to become conditional. The thinking of the unconditional is not without a certain trauma, then, because it involves the burden to become effective, just as the call for justice demands the effectiveness of law, but this becoming is inevitably a loss of essence, a loss of self. The unconditional is destined, in a sense, for a loss of self that is also betrayal. For Derrida, recognising this inner tension, or inner incommensurability is crucial if one wants to get the best out of our discourse on forgiveness. A number of statements indicate why this point is so important for Derrida:

> I shall risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble or 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. 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.[63]

> It is not in the name of an ethical or spiritual purism that I insist on this contradiction at the heart of the heritage, and on the necessity of maintaining the reference to an aneconomical and unconditional forgiveness: beyond the exchange and even the horizon of a redemption or a reconciliation. . . . Because if I say, as I think, that forgiveness is mad, and that it must remain a madness of the impossible, this is certainly not to exclude or disqualify it. It is even, perhaps, the only thing that arrives, that surprises, like a revolution, the ordinary course of history, politics and law. Because that means that it remains heterogeneous to the order of politics or of the juridical as they are ordinarily understood.[64]

On the one hand, the absolute difference between the unconditional and the conditional is necessary to maintain, to keep pointing out, because it is only by not being in the service of any 'finality' that forgiveness can be a real interruption, something that surprises the 'ordinary course of history'. It is the unconditional sense of the heritage that must be preserved because it possesses or produces the real force of forgiveness; forgiveness is an interruption, and interruption is necessary if there is to be any real space for change. However, at the same time, the difference must be tirelessly

[63]Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and forgiveness,* tr. by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, *2001)* , pp. 31 - 32.

[64]Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and forgiveness,* pp. 37 - 39.

flagged up not simply to preserve the force of the unconditional aspect, but so as to protect against the use of the 'mystique' of forgiveness for politically expedient ends:

> In all the geopolitical scenes we have been talking about, the word most often abused is 'forgive'. . . . There is always a strategical or political calculation in the generous gesture of one who offers reconciliation or amnesty, and it is always necessary to integrate this calculation in our analyses. . . . It is always the same concern: to see to it that the nation survives its discords, that the traumatisms give way to the work of mourning, and that the Nation State not be overcome by paralysis.[65]

When the language of forgiveness is not properly distinguished from notions like amnesty, forgetting, healing, reconciliation, and so on, forgiveness can be co-opted, and as result, must be severed in its concept from any other kind of *telos.* To forgive, to desire to forgive, is not to seek any particular outcome, or protect any current state of affairs; to forgive is simply to forgive.

Forgiveness is dangerous for two reasons, then; firstly because it upsets or interrupts an order - it is out of joint with the usual sense of what is deserved, what is reasonable, what is sensible, possible, and so on. Secondly, however, this appearance of exceptional grace, extreme generosity or interruption carries along with it a sort of mystical aura, linked to the height of the sovereign power that pardons whenever it pleases, and this aura can cover over the actual power dynamics involved in ensuring the stability and health of any political body. The very fact that at times it may be prudent to forgive means that the unconditional 'aura' can be co-opted, the sense of goodness associated with the forgiveness abused. Once again, the deconstructive impulse that sees otherness in every presumed conceptual simplicity is linked to the capacity to recognise real abuses in practice: if one can see that forgiveness is never itself, one might be able to see the hidden exchanges, forms of coercion, complicity, etc, that may go along with a seemingly gracious discourse. And these two capacities are both linked to a desire for what is always beyond.

At this point we can briefly refer back to the 'cross-pressures' that Charles Taylor believes characterises contemporary ethical reflection in order to understand more of the concerns that shape Derrida's presentation. For Taylor, ethical reflection is pulled in a number of different directions, which I have characterised in terms of the relationship between aspiration and affirmation. Firstly, in the background to all western thinking

[65]Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism and forgiveness,* pp. 40 – 41.

lies the sacrificial logic of Christianity, which paradoxically attempts to combine incarnational affirmation of the ordinary with transcendent aspiration and obedience. The highest ethical moment is not the stripping away of the insignificant so as to attain the significant, but rather the giving up of what is already precious for the sake of something higher.[66] Secondly, there is the growing awareness in the modern era that transcendent references, or ethical targets that are outside of the ordinary human sphere may mutilate life, and conversely, therefore, there is held to be a liberating power found in the affirmation of ordinary life; the peace that comes when strenuous ascetic demands cease being made. The affirmation of ordinary life then begins to become a kind of criteria for ethical discourse; if a particular injunction, or the affirming of a particular goal does not cause ordinary life to flourish then it cannot be ethical.[67] Finally, there is, in conflict with this, a sense that something about the modern, humanising trajectory is profoundly dissatisfying, and crushes the most powerful human drives, so that life becomes flattened, weak and therefore toxic. The affirmation of life, from this perspective, may also include affirmation of potentially destructive drives and impulses. Peace is not necessarily normative or 'natural', and, just as for the religious perspective, the fullest realisation of human potential does not necessarily include a promise not to do any harm.[68]

Derrida's 'impossible gift' could then be understood in relation to these latter post-Christian trajectories, or as an attempt to negotiate all three. In relation to the latter, what Taylor refers to as the neo-Nietzschean current, the impossible gift points beyond the human, and humanism; it is not a product of sovereign subjective intention, nor is it an idea the understanding of which promises to produce more human flourishing. If ethics 'begins by the impossible' - with the madness of decision, the desire for a gift without return, with an unconditional hospitality, etc - then ethics can make no promises to safeguard ordinary human living. Derrida's insistence, as de Vries puts it, that the very best is close to the very worst, is in this sense a defence of danger.[69] The very stability of the conditional realm, in which there is measured giving, careful application of law, reasonable expectations concerning hospitality, and so on, is itself put into motion by a thought, or the experience of a thought, that has about it a certain

[66]Charles Taylor, *A secular age,* pp. 17 -18.

[67]Taylor, *A secular age,* pp. 618 – 710, and p. 619 in particular.

[68]Taylor, *A secular age,* p. 637 and 640.

[69] de Vries, *Religion and violence*, pp. 137 – 138.

madness, and a definite danger.

Except at the same time, the whole impetus of deconstruction could be said to be developed as a response to the dangers of *transcendent* aspiration; every fixed meaning naming an ideal that might demand some kind of sacrifice of ordinary life can be deconstructed, and therefore stripped of its power, and disarmed. The 'negotiation' between the unconditional imperative or desire (to welcome, to give, to forgive) and the realm of conditional necessities (to maintain one's home, to keep cycles of reciprocity turning, to protect oneself) is never made presentable, it is always hidden by fear and trembling, and shown to be itself pre-ethical and pre-rational. But at the same time, this obscurity acts as a buffer between the two, in the sense that the moment of decision, in which the two are negotiated, is essentially private and incommunicable.[70] Although the insistence on a purified unilateral gift could be taken as a classic example of an ethical aspiration that mutilates ordinary human life - in which giving is always accompanied by some concern for oneself, awareness of oneself, of one's connectedness and reciprocal ties - the very sense that pure gift is 'the impossible' could also be taken as a kind of protection of ordinary life from the demands that some higher ideal of giving might impose.

So if Taylor's analysis is at all correct, Derrida's 'desire for the impossible' (which in many respects is crucial for the unity of Derrida's work, and yet somewhat under-theorised) becomes the way in which one pays one's dues to the humanist imperative to do no harm, and the neo-Nietzschean imperative to affirm the highest, however dangerous. Desire for the impossible tries to reach beyond the stifling moderation of modern humanism, whilst the gap between this excessive desire and real possibilities attempts to ensure that this excess can do no harm. Taylor writes that ethical reflection is caught between these competing currents, so that it is far too easy to accuse one perspective of being, e.g., a failure to affirm the reality of bodily existence, or of imposing mutilating demands upon human life, without recognising the great difficulty there is in living up to 'the maximal demand'. The maximal demand is for an harmonious combination of aspiration and affirmation: 'how to define our spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation

[70]This point underlies Richard Bernstein's objection to Derrida's view of decision, which on Bernstein's reading resorts too easily to an either/or jump between decision and procedural judgment, and reflects what Bernstein calls Derrida's 'hidden existentialism'. See Berstein, 'Aporias of forgiveness?' p. 404.

involved which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity.'[71] In Taylor's sense, then, we might say that Derrida attempts to fulfil the maximal demand by acknowledging its impossibility. That is, there is the consciousness of the incompatibility of aspiration and affirmation, but the way in which this incompatibility is presented itself is an attempt to negotiate them.

This evaluation is not intended to invalidate Derrida's presentation, but rather to highlight something which seems crucial to discussions of forgiveness as such, namely, the management of risk. The idea of forgiveness immediately produces a sense of danger - it produces 'yes, but what if...?' thoughts. The gospel sayings and stories associated with forgiveness seem to consciously include and negotiate this tendency, presenting unfair situations, provoking and then problematising one's judgment of them; for example, the parable of the unjust servant. The story draws forth one's sense of justice, so as to encourage the practice of forgiveness, which may be difficult precisely because it does *not* always appear to be just. Although, as will be further explored below, there are problems with Derrida's approach, to gift in particular, his account is extremely sensitive to the way in which forgiveness is necessarily concerned with an ambiguous, potentially dangerous idea. His insistence that forgiveness 'lives by the unforgivable' may in some respects artificially exaggerate a problematic (why not simply say that forgiveness lives by the inexcusable?), but it may also be taken to assert that forgiveness will always remain something to be learned; that is, part of what we mean by 'forgiveness' is a situation in which our capacity to continue to give is stretched. However, the way that the 'explosiveness' of forgiveness is linked to isolated moments of time that are not themselves acknowledged to be sewn into more ongoing patterns of desire, anticipation and expectation, means that forgiveness is presented as that which always remains to be learned, without also being that which is actually learned.

III
Reciprocity

As we have seen previously, there is a great difficulty in saying that one 'wants to

[71]Taylor, *A secular age*, p. 640.

forgive', for if what one wanted all along was 'to forgive', there would be nothing to forgive in the first place, no opposition to one's desire, no disfigurement of one's deepest hopes. Someone who wants to forgive is never, in this world, disappointed, and so never needs to. If forgiveness can be understood in terms of a desire that exceeds and opposes circumstance, what is it a desire *for*? What do I want, if I want to forgive? A sophisticated, yet fairly common-sense answer, has been outlined by John Milbank, in large part as a response to Derrida's work, but drawing upon many sources. For Milbank forgiveness is the desire for the renewal of reciprocity. The discussion that follows is largely sympathetic towards Milbank's critique. However, what I hope to show is that there is a sense that this affirmation of reciprocity when seen through the lens of Weil's emphasis on the acceptance of void, contains an element that is something rather more like an unconditional, or unilateral, giving that might be supposed. In this sense, I want to try to try to show that the 'asymmetrical reciprocity' that Milbank proposes is, in one sense, at least, less starkly opposed to Derrida's 'impossible gift'.

In 'Can a gift be given?', Milbank takes note of Pierre Bordieu's suggestion that the non-contractual obligations of giving can be described in terms of two requirements: that one give back after a suitable delay (after visiting a new friend for dinner, one waits for a certain amount of time before inviting them in return), and that one give back differently, but with equivalence and difference (one invites them for a meal, not simply a cup of tea, but one does not cook exactly the same meal). For Bordieau, these requirements maintain the appearance of gratuity, whilst remaining within the safety of a rule bound system; one appears generous whilst minimising the risk of losing, or being exploited. Delay and non-identical repetition, then, are the way in which the phenomenon known as giving differs from contractual obligations or market exchange; it is a different way of exerting influence. For Milbank, though, this is not necessarily an indication of any sinister hidden coercion or attempt to accumulate virtue, but rather it indicates that the phenomenon of gift exchange is something beyond the modern difference between free, individual action, and regulated contract. When one gives, one is neither simply free, nor simply bound, and when one gives in return, the 'return' is both a real response to an initiating moment, and a new act of giving in its own right. This, for Milbank, is the paradox that is pointed to by such seemingly mundane practices as buying rounds in a pub, or tipping, and it is a paradox that can only really be expressed in an ethic which is based on the paradox of a command to love, which construes indebtedness as opportunity rather than burden: 'let no debt remain

outstanding, except the ongoing debt to love one another.'[72]

In this way, a purified giving would not be a gift that imposed no obligation, but rather one that gave opportunity to give in turn, and so as to establish relationship, which ultimately, as familial and erotic love suggest, is based on expectations of ongoing giving and exchange.[73] Whereas for Derrida, one senses that a perfect gift would be given almost unconsciously, with an impossibly light touch, hardly noticed, barely there, for Milbank, the perfect gift would be one that was perfectly *suitable*, and this perfection is one that can never be guaranteed by rule, as it depends on judgement irreducible to knowledge.[74] Hence, for Milbank, the non-violence of the gift is never simply guaranteed formally, but rather depends on an aesthetic agreement between giver, gift, and recipient; that is, the peacefulness of giving, in which a gift turns out to be blessing rather than curse, is in the whole movement. In this sense, 'gift' refers to the whole movement or sequence, and it is an intrinsically temporal concept: a gift is not (truly) gift unless it is received as such. The art of giving is cultivated through understanding of the whole sequence, not simply the initial moment. It is allied to a gradual learning of the particularity of the other, and as a result is better suited to the peculiar distance of intimacy, where it is essential that the loved one remain apart and other so that I can continue to approach them and so that they may give in return, rather than the distance of disinterested charity, where the distance safeguards the purity of my own intentions, allowing my giving to remain outside the circle of exchange.[75]

So, although Derrida assumes that he is following a trajectory began by Christianity, for Milbank, Derrida's attempt to be 'more Christian than Christianity' entirely misses the sense that the Christian elevation of agape above and beyond the law is made possible by the advent of the church, a new relationality constituted and governed by giving and receiving.[76] Agape is not affirmed simply by advocating an even more rigorous set of conditions for giving, an 'ethics beyond ethics', but through the giving of

[72]John Milbank, 'Can a gift be given?' in *Rethinking metaphysics*, ed. L. Gregory Jones and Stephen Fowl (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 120-6.

[73]'Milbank, Can a gift be given?' p. 124.

[74]'Can a gift be given?', p. 134. For further examples of the importance of specificity in giving, see *The word made strange*, p. 230, and *Being reconciled*, pp. 143, 156, 181.

[75]Milbank, 'Can a gift be given?', p. 124, 132., 133 - 144

[76]See Milbank, *Being reconciled*, pp. 140 - 142, and Derrida 'On forgiveness', pp. 64 - 65.

a new context for action.[77] The 'purifying' move of Christianity, for Milbank, does not concern the stripping away of reciprocal expectations, returns, and recognition so as to reveal pure, unmotivated, undemanding gift (as, for example, might be thought in certain interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount sayings concerning secrecy). It is rather, a purifying, freeing or heightening of reciprocity, and this is enabled not through learning, somehow, to give into the void with an accompanying loss of self, but through the consciousness of having always already received, through receiving one's own being as already a gift, waiting to be given in turn. In other words, generosity is made possible not by the trauma of severing one's giving from any expectations concerning reciprocal relationship, but rather through faith and hope; that one has received, and will continue to receive, oneself.

As already suggested, this picture is inseparable from a particular re-interpretation of Christian metaphysics, and this is not a intended to be a metaphysical discussion, so there is a limit to how far into these issues we can go. However, a brief look at how Milbank construes the significance of this understanding of gift exchange at a metaphysical level may be instructive. Just as Derrida wants an 'ethics beyond ethics', so Milbank advocates a 'metaphysics beyond metaphysics':

> Such reciprocity would be consonant, not with a metaphysical circularity, but with a broken circularity between a relatively fixed, ontological theatre for events on the one hand, and events which constantly exceed the theatrical stage of their performance, and yet thereby extend this stage, on the other.[78]

This reference to a spiral, broken circularity or 'strange loop' is repeated in a number of places, and is closely tied to the notion of non-identical repetition referred to already. Because each moment of giving is in some sense an echo, or reply, it means that the gift is not, and should not be removed from a certain kind of circularity; one has always already received, and so giving is always a reply, a return, never an entirely new beginning. Even if one gives to one who is unable to reciprocate, one has already received their presence as, in some sense, a gift.[79] However, Milbank also wants to

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[77] Milbank, 'Can a gift be given?' p. 119. See also 'The transcendentality of the gift: a summary' in *The future of love* (London: SCM Press, 2009) p. 361, and *Being reconciled*, p. 153.

[78] Milbank, 'The soul of reciprocity (part two): reciprocity granted', in *Modern Theology* 17:4, 2001, p. 486.

[79] Milbank, 'Liberality and liberalism' in *The future of love*, p. 257.

insist that to respond to having received by giving in return is not simply to give back, but is rather to give again. This, then, is held as a paradox, in that the gift that is given out fully returns home only by a further moment of going out into new territory; the 'tick' of giving is completed by another variation of 'tick', not by the 'tock' of a resolved ending.[80] Giving is a rule-bound performance, through which one takes part creatively in a pre-existent scenario, rather than an individual, heroic madness, but in a certain sense it is also a continual extension of the rules of the game, and 'exceeding of the stage'. The requirements of return (to wait before giving back, which allows giving, for a certain period, to seem to be, or actually become, loss; and to give back differently, so that there is always surprise in receiving, and therefore potentially intrusion), mean that there is a certain openness about this reciprocity. There is a necessity to risk being 'off-stage'. Or put differently, there really is a moment of indeterminacy, when a gift is given but not received, when giving is loss, before the stage is extended to incorporate the performance, or the broken circularity continued. Simply put, if giving 'is' reciprocity, then it is also the case that giving 'may not be' reciprocity - it is that which may fail to become reciprocity, that which may fail to become itself. What is gift, when it does not become itself? Or, if giving is an endless spiraling movement, in which each moment is both outward extension and further reception, what happens what the movement is interrupted, perverted, or comes to a dead halt? In other words, how does one give in the absence of reciprocity?

Giving, forgiving and loss

What I wish to do now is to explore the question of giving and loss in Milbank's work, primarily through a close reading of two important essays, 'Can morality be Christian', and 'Grace: the midwinter sacrifice'.

A major thrust of Milbank's work is concerned to critique the sacrificial emphasis in modern and post-modern ethics, the sense that the highest virtue is always linked with the loss, in some way, of oneself, and in its place to suggest that ethics is unavoidably eudaemonistic, concerned neither with pure interiority through assessment of motives,

[80]See Frank Kermode, *The sense of an ending: studies in the theory of fiction (*London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 45.

nor pure exteriority through recognition of sheer otherness of the other, but with the 'festive between' of love - a real state of affairs, not simply an intention or affective state. The valourisation of self-sacrifice is shown to be in complicity with a modern understanding of the human as an isolated and self-sufficient subject. In contrast, and alongside the affirmation of reciprocity rather than unilateral gift, Milbank aims to recover a concept of soul which is opposed equally to the notion of an enclosed interiority that passively receives, and to the concept of radical self-loss or donation.[81] On this account, the 'straight line' of an unilateral gift, disinterested and given without reference or regard for reciprocal norms, supports what appears to be its opposite, the closed circle where one goes out, and gives out, only so as to return more securely.[82] The articulation of a completely 'purified' ethic, defined by the gesture towards an entirely one-way movement of giving, stripped of all expectations, in fact supports the notion of an isolated, self-sufficient self: I do not need anyone else in order to give unilaterally; I do not need anyone else to be good; I do not need anyone else to 'gain myself'.

Properly interpreted, Christianity is distinct from this modern and post-modern tendency firstly in its refusal to define ethics in relation to death, and secondly in the re-imagining of the ethical in terms of an acting out of faith in and hope for the continuation and transformation of reciprocity beyond death, and in excess of death. This produces a very different picture of forgiveness; the nature of the act, and the context within which it might make sense. To forgive is necessarily linked with the conditions of interpersonal life - with what is actually possible in human interactions - since it is concerned with the renewal of giving and receiving, which found and constitute human relationships. Forgiveness does indeed have its own particular 'reason', both in the sense of a ground or motivation, and in the sense of an animating principle or rationale.

In his essay 'Can morality be Christian?' Milbank outlines the way in which morality, as usually understood, is predicated upon scarcity and death. The first mark of virtue is its reactivity; the virtuous person is marked out by the way in which they ward off some danger, whether it is a threat to the body, the soul or the city. Morality is always a secondary movement that responds to some intrusion, contamination or risk:

[81]See Milbank, 'The soul of reciprocity (part two)' in particular for development of this theme.

[82]Milbank, 'The soul of reciprocity (part two)', p. 486.

virtue 'always secretly celebrates as its occasion a prior evil, lives out of what it opposes.'[83] Since virtue is always concerned with response to a threat, whether internal or external, it requires effort, the giving up that which would otherwise be enjoyed peacefully - it is necessarily strenuous. But this also means that virtue always maims in some way, it defines what shall count as the lower so that it can be given up for the sake of the higher, it introduces hierarchy through the assumption of threat. And as a result, there is never any entire good, and only a remnant (of the self, of the social body) can be saved. It is the perception of threat which introduces the need to prioritise, to decide what is to be protected, and what sacrificed. The reactive and sacrificial nature of morality means that the virtuous are always in complicity with death. Without the real threat of death, there is no danger, and equally, without the possibility of death, no way for sacrifice to appear and prove itself; 'ethics must covertly celebrate death, for only our fragility elicits our virtue.' [84] All this adds up to a logic of scarcity: because life is in short supply, measures must be taken to protect what little there is, and generalised rules or norms established to ensure this. Not only is morality in league with mortality, it is ultimately indifferent to particularity, since the need to protect life is learned from the universal situation of life's scarceness, not from the particular value of individual human lives.

In contrast to the five 'marks' of virtue - reaction, sacrifice, complicity with death, scarcity and generality - are the five 'notes' of Christianity: gift, end of sacrifice, resurrection, plenitude and confidence. For Milbank, Christianity's moral vision (if it can be called 'moral') is based on plenitude, on confidence in life as the gift of God which exceeds death and continues through it, a confidence made possible by the event, in time, of the overcoming of death in Christ. As a result, Christian ethics is inextricably linked to belief in resurrection, and therefore to expectations concerning oneself. This does not simply concern the belief in a particular doctrine, but more of an altered perspective toward death: to see in death not a threat but further evidence of the way in which one's entire being is excessive gift that cannot be possessed, only continually received and returned: '[r]resurrection in fact does not simply negate fallen death, but reinstates a fully human and natural death, namely the offering of ourselves back to God in recognition of our own absolute nullity and entire derivation from

[83]Milbank, *The word made strange*, p. 221.

[84]Milbank, *The word made strange*, p. 223.

him.'[85] Drawing heavily on Luther's 'On good works', Milbank suggests that virtue is first of all faith, and the specific details of a virtuous life flow naturally from this trusting attitude (all 'sins' being rooted in some way in fear, the sense of one's life being threatened). Since the goal of human life is reciprocal relationship, giving *and* receiving, it now follows that one moves towards this not through a painful purification in which giving is severed entirely from receiving (in thought, as well as practice), but through trust in this reciprocity, despite the present distortion of it. Whereas for Derrida the enemy of gift is the circling back motion, the gravitational pull of the subject, for Milbank, the enemy of gift (exchange) is mistrust, a suspicion that the delay and openness involved in gift-exchange may reveal an underlying scarcity, or potential threat. In consequence, there is a 'bad conscience' that is necessary for the Christian, but it is not the bad conscience that is alert to the possibility of 'return' in every possible guise, eternally unsatisfied in the absence of pure gift. It is rather the bad conscience of a growing disregard for morality in favour of a new confidence in a goodness of 'improvisation': 'the Christian man is not a moral man, not a man of good conscience, who acts with what he knows of death, scarcity and duty to totalities. He has a bad conscience, but a good confidence: for he acts with what he does not know but has faith in. In absolute faith he gives up trying to be good, to sustain a right order of government within himself.'[86]

One ambiguity in this account is the view of death it supposes. On the one hand, Milbank suggests that a Christian morality, if there be such a thing, must, if it is to follow the *risen* Christ, envisage an overcoming of death, not simply human evil. In this sense, sin and death are partners, as the New Testament suggests, and one learns to give not simply through an intensification of one's concern for others in their mortality, but through a confidence concerning one's own being, which is identified with Christ who is beyond death. However, at the same time, it is death *as interpreted* which is complicit with sin, and which in a sense, *is* sin. It is to perceive finitude as scarcity, rather than dependence. In this sense, death must be reinterpreted, received differently, so that it no longer indicates scarcity, but rather passage and dependence. It is this point which distinguishes Christianity from Nietzsche's vision of eternal return: the re-interpretation of death is not made through a private resolution to affirm everything,

[85]Milbank, *The word made strange*, p. 230.

[86]Milbank, *The word made strange*, p. 231.

however terrible, but on the grounds of actual transformation, magically given in the resurrection. Death can only be taken as more than, or other than, simple loss and negation of life, if it *is*, in fact, more than this. This paradox is expressed in the following point about meaning and event:

> '[t]here are no events outside the assignment of meanings, and there are no construable meanings not ultimately including some reference to an active rearrangement of things in time. . . . Thus in the case of new legends, ideologies and fictions, one legitimately asks after the real occasions that have helped to give rise to such novel configurations of sense.'[87]

There is no 'death' prior to interpretation, but equally, no re-interpretation without 'active rearrangement'.[88]

Forgiveness, therefore, has a *telos* beyond or in excess of death*;* the unbroken restoration of mutuality and reciprocity, the ongoing *ecstasis* which is love. The moment of forgiveness, the time of forgiveness, is conceived of as a time of trust, not of trauma. The command to forgive, from this perspective, is not the command to act entirely without regard for conditions that would frame the act of forgiveness (the repentant heart of the wrong-doer, the possibility of healing, the prospect of reconciliation). It is, rather, an exhortation to trust in the eschatological promise of restored community - to trust that there will be, and is now, a context in which forgiveness makes sense. Only when seen in this context and motivated by this hope is forgiveness possible, and non-pathological. These two points are closely linked, because for Milbank, if forgiveness remains one-sided but is nevertheless endorsed or held up as a good, it can only signal a diminishment of life, or consent to such diminishment. If one 'forgives', and moves beyond resentment without hope of response from the wrongdoer, then one is *simply* complicit in evil, accepting malevolence and abuse. Similarly, if one 'forgives' without hope of reconciliation, one is simply confirming the breakdown of trust, accommodating oneself to it. In other words, forgiveness is distinguished as such by being bound up with hope; without hope there is no forgiveness, simply complicity, apathy or despair. The presence of faith and hope mark the attitude of the forgiving person out from the attitude of someone who simply wishes to forget for the sake of convenience, or someone who finds acceptance easy because their expectations of what human life could be, and should be, is so low.

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[87]Milbank, *Being reconciled*, p. 94.

[88]See also *The word made strange*, p. 247.

But clearly, faith and hope are themselves subject to the same interpretive difficulty: is faith willful naivety, is hope blinkered optimism?

This approach is taken further in 'Grace: the midwinter sacrifice.' Drawing heavily on Robert Spaemann's discussion of virtue, happiness and time in *Happiness and benevolence*,[89] Milbank examines the question of receptivity, grace and fortune. There is a tension within the New Testament concerning stability and virtue. In one sense, since love is dependent on one's receiving of grace, and linked therefore to one's openness - to God, to others, to what time brings generally - there is a sense in which virtue is unstable, by definition not secured. The life of the Christian is, from this perspective, one that is continually trusting and dependent - 'do not worry beforehand about what you are to say; but say whatever is given you at that time' [90] - rather than one that is in confident possession of a principle. And yet, at the same time, the highest command - to love - can be seen as radically non-context dependent, in that love can continue even in entirely passive modes (patience, humility, forgiveness). If the law is summed up in one command, and there is never a situation in which this command could not be obeyed, then the aspect of self that is constituted by this orientation would appear to be completely safe from any unforeseen developments.[91]

What Milbank proposes is a delicate combination of these aspects: the Christian command to love goes along with a sense of security, but one based on *reception*, rather

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[89]See Robert Spaemann, *Happiness and benevolence,* tr. Jeremiah Alberg (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), chapters 1- 6, particularly 'The antimonies of happiness' on this point. For Spaemann, 'life's turning out well' must be thought of as both subjective and objective, concerned both with the passing moments of life as experienced, and the 'whole' that - somehow - life may be seen as. Attempts to bracket one or the other inevitably end in inner collapse as displayed by Greek hedonism, and Stoicism.. On the one hand, one's subjective happiness in the present moment most often exists in the modalities of anticipation and memory, which necessarily contain an element of instability by virtue of their intentionality, their concern with reality. One is happy if one expects to be, and to continue to be, happy, and unhappy if worried that something awful awaits in the future. Equally, if some previous happiness is poisoned by subsequent knowledge, it no longer seems to 'count' as happiness (a friendship which turns out to have been false cannot be enjoyed in memory, even if it was enjoyable at the time). If the turning out well of life is linked exclusively with subjective pleasure in the present moment, then the open, vulnerable nature of one's existence in the present moment requires one to modify the conception of happiness, so that what is aimed for is more a sort of painless contentment. See pp. 35, 38 - 9.

[90]Mark 13:11 (NRSV)

[91]Milbank, *Being reconciled*, p. 141.

than the guarantee of infallible principle. In this sense, it is hope that links happiness and benevolence; one cannot be good or happy without hope, since all action is based upon some kind of anticipation, whether fearful or trusting, and most, if not all, affective states are related to one's thoughts concerning the future - however pleasant one's present circumstances, it is difficult to enjoy them if one expects disaster the following week. And so the capacity to give, or forgive, in the way that *agape* requires is not nurtured through pre-emptive exposure to the prospect of absolute loss - a kind of bracing of oneself - but through contemplation of the plenitude of divine giving that exceeds and continues through death. Insofar as it is described as an excessive giving (forgive not seven times, but seventy times seven), forgiveness is an exhortation to trust in a deeper reciprocity, not to simply disregard receiving altogether. Happiness and benevolence are indeed unthinkable without each other: there is no deep happiness without some objective sense of a life lived well. And there is no goodness without the desire for happiness - for oneself or for another - only a sterile moralism tending towards self-obliteration. At the same time, however, they are only thinkable *together* through hope, the form and content of which is mystically presented through the Christian notion of resurrection in Christ. The fundamental ethical posture, then, is not one of traumatically maintained desire, but rather of trusting anticipation: 'a total exposure to fortune, or rather to grace.'[92]

As a result, the relationship between giving and loss is ambiguous. On the one hand, to really give, one must be willing to accept what giving entails - delay, an element of unpredictability, an openness to the unexpected return, and, inevitably, to the risk of exploitation or rejection. The affirmation of reciprocity as the ethical ideal also involves the acceptance of risk and unpredictability, the refusal to interpret these as threat or scarcity of gift. It is also an acceptance that the good unfolds over time, not instantaneously; since gift is gift-*exchange*, it is not found whole in a single intentional moment, but in a perpetually open-ended movement. A further implication of Milbank's emphasis on 'delay' and 'suitability' can be drawn out here. Gifts can be refused, or their intentions mistaken, so that in order to give one must be open to rejection, and in being open to receive, one must be open to harm or exploitation, but more than this, the 'gift-character' of a gift is not instantaneously apparent; one has to receive a gift for it to be a gift. How long does this take to receive? 'Receiving' is not

[92]Milbank, *Being reconciled*, p. 147.

necessarily an instantaneous process, in fact on Milbank's account, it is necessarily temporal. If this is the case, then just as there is no guarantee that the delay it is necessary to leave before responding appropriately to a gift is not simply blank unresponsiveness, so there is no guarantee that the 'suitability' of a gift - its gift character - will be apparent without delay, or ambiguity. In other words, loss appears very closely woven into the business of giving-receiving by virtue of the necessity for interpretation (interpretation as a form of active reception).

On the other hand, Milbank also states that giving is only possible, can only be held out for in hope, if loss can be surmounted, and if, in some sense (i.e., eschatologically), gift is destined to become unending reciprocity, by divine promise. And so, holding to reciprocity as the highest, rather than unilateral gift, also means holding to the hope for a horizon that exceeds death, and therefore for an 'answer' to the passive modes in which goodness 'waits' - humility, patience, forgiveness, and so on. Without the eschatological hope for a reciprocity beyond death, these modes simply cannot be ethical, since they would then only represent the gradual diminishment, or even obliteration of the person. In that case, affirmation of patience, humility, forgiveness, etc, would simply be a will to non-existence, as Nietzsche diagnosed. These modes of virtue can only be affirmed if the hope that charaterises them appears:

> [T]hey can only assume an ethical complexion as a waiting on God - in other words, as a kind of meta-ethical trust that it will (beyond perpetual postponement) be given to us to be ethical, given to us to again to receive and again to give in such a way that a certain 'asymmetrical reciprocity' or genuine community will ceaselessly arrive (for now in part, and eschatologically without interruption).[93]

But what this also means is that in some sense, and this is only briefly hinted at, the sheer impossibility of reciprocity in conditions governed by death must be accepted. And this would also be to say that we do not yet know reciprocity. It is interesting, then, that the phrase 'waiting on God' is used here, since the acceptance of the impossibility of goodness 'here below' is a large part of what Weil means when she uses this phrase. The passage that immediately follows confirms this sense that goodness is paradoxically linked to the recognition of its impossibility:

> It ceases, on this perspective, to be the case that the Christian is the person who knows that he can be good in any merely given situation. On the contrary, the Christian can rather be seen as the person who

[93]Milbank, *Being reconciled*, p. 148.

> recognises that there is no apparent good to be found or performed in any given situation. Original sin and death (the results of the Fall) are perceived as locked in a complicity which prevents the ethical from coming to pass. . . Death, the experience of loss, contaminates our wills: this leads in turn to more barriers, more wars, more loss. Loss is ineradicable, and so we tend to assume that ethics is a sort of maximum possible minimization of loss. Yet I have shown that so long as there is loss, there *cannot* be any ethical, not even in any degree.

It appears, then, that for Milbank ethical life *is* linked to a certain acceptance of futility - a *full* recognition of death - and it is against this backdrop that hope appears as the most important aspect of the posture of giving, the characteristic that ensures that there is no virtue without mysticism, as Weil would put it (because, in a certain sense, one has to 'see' hope before one hopes; or hope *is* a kind of seeing). Hence the paragraph continues:

> Hence hope, hope that it may be given to me in the next moment to act well, is inseparable from hope that there may be universal acting well, and at last a non-futile mourning; to be ethical therefore is to believe in the Resurrection, and somehow to participate in it. And outside this belief and participation there is, quite simply, no 'ethical' whatsoever.[94]

What is interesting here is that the hope that 'it may be given to us to be ethical' might be said to have a positive and a negative side. Positively, hope is linked to intimations of plenitude, the sense of the 'ceaseless arrival' of a relationality unbounded by death. Negatively, this hope is linked to an awareness that there is no apparent good (that is, no simply present good) and with an acceptance that 'loss is ineradicable'. Although this is not stated explicitly the implication here, which is borne out by the strategy that Milbank uses generally, is that one cannot have an ethical hope that has not in some sense passed through an awareness of the nullity of the finite in itself, the way which all that is, is excess that has no immanent ground. This means that Milbank largely agrees with Derrida's deconstructive moves, insofar as they illustrate the way in which without reference to a transcendent *telos* beyond the ethical, ethics is subject to inner collapse and sterile aporia.[95] Hope is not ethical if it is the hope to produce a purely human goodness, wholly present within time, and the passage from one to the other carries

[94] Milbank, *Being reconciled*, p. 148.

[95] See, for example, 'The ethics of honour and the possibility of promise' available at the website of the Centre for Philosophy and Theology, http://winster.nottingham.ac.uk/saturn2/formating/search_header.asp, pp. 9 - 10.

with it an element of loss, and the acceptance of loss.

However, there is sense in which gift as such implies something like loss, or at least, something that can appear as loss, something that can 'develop into' loss, as already explored.[96] Real giving, because it involves an interaction between free beings, rather than simply an isolated inner intention, involves a moment of limbo when a gift 'hovers in the desert', or, to use the image referred to earlier, the moment when the actor may simply be 'off-stage'. Milbank's point is that to give may involve loss, and in that sense, may fall outside of exchange, but to give in this way is also to hope and anticipate a context which expands so as to include such giving, so that loss or imbalance open out to be seen to have been delay, or non-identical return. In other words, hope is the hope that loss *will have been* delay. Without the hope for such an unveiling or an extension of the 'stage' of exchange to include moments of self-giving, to accept or affirm loss in giving (as in excessive generosity) or imbalance in relations (as in humility) is simply to passively accept diminishment or damage, or isolation. But if this hope is held in the wrong way - or perhaps at the wrong 'level', in Weil's sense - it is simply a looking away from the reality of loss, finitude, imbalance, and so on. Hope requires a change in how we see and feel the significance of instability, openness and risk, it is to trust that there may be given a way in which what it will have been is not quite what it appears as now. But as we have already seen, this is why concrete beliefs that are associated with hope are, for Weil, so ambiguous; perhaps this change of perspective is simply evasion, or the injection of purpose into purposelessness. How do we affirm loss in the right way; in such a way that loss is not celebrated perversely for its own sake, but is accepted as a potential moment in any self-giving? Milbank continues:

> Of course, one's celebration of such an encounter [between the specificity of the other and myself] may require one in certain circumstances to sacrifice oneself, even unto death, and one can go further to say that in a fallen world the only path to the recovery of mutual giving will always pass through an element of apparently 'unredeemed' sacrifice and apparently sheerly unilateral gift. But the point is that this gesture is not *in itself* the Good, and indeed I have argued is *not* good at all outside the hope for a redemptive return of the self: albeit that this is an eschatological hope which never permits us to expect a return at any particular place or specific moment of time, or to elicit any specific *mode* of return.

[96] I am deliberately echoing Hans Urs von Balthasar here: 'if we ask whether there is suffering in God, the answer is this: there is something in God that can develop into suffering.' See Balthasar, *Theo-drama vol IV*, p. 328.

We can note here that on Weil's account, to admit the presence of a desire which does not correlate to any particular object may seem to be a consent to a kind of death, or giving up of desire, rather than any kind of fulfillment. For Weil, this transition is from imagination to reality, and as it passes through something like atheism it is only made through shock of some kind, so that, no longer being able to look ahead, one waits, and looks up. Similarly, insofar as one's expectations are shaped by the sense of an exchange continually balanced and restored *in time*, one might say that to maintain hope for reciprocity - or negatively, to refuse despair - without concrete expectations may necessarily appears as an abandonment of expectation as such. Indeed something slightly similar appears in what follows:

> To speak of such a return is not at all, however, to surrender to the lure of contract, because it is not the case that actual, self-present life is a mode of self-possession which we then surrender in the sacrificial gesture unto death. Quite to the contrary, it is when we are giving, letting ourselves go, at certain times or always in fallen time with unavoidable sacrificial pain, that we are always receiving back as ever different a true, abundant life (this is the Gospel). Therefore the resurrection hope preserves this logic at the limit: we do not hope (as Patocka and Derrida allege) for an extrinsic super-added reward for our giving up of an illusory self-possessed life; rather we take it that a final surrender of an isolated life, a life indifferent to the pain of others, issues of itself - dare one say *automatically* - in a better more abundant life . . .[97]

A hidden principle ('dare one say *automatically*') connects the unavoidable sacrificial pain of giving with the receiving of an abundance of life, and of oneself. The 'gospel' here is essentially the purification of gift exchange: giving purified of self-securing hesitancy; receptivity purified of suspicion and the fear of obligation; generosity made possible through trust; endurance of loss made possible though excessive divine giving. The progression is from reciprocity to reciprocity; redemption is a transfiguration of ordinary human life, rather than a leap away from it. But how does the reciprocity of the gospel appear as reciprocity, if the receiving that giving is intimately linked with is not found anywhere in particular? And how is the eschatological hope that distinguishes forgiveness from despair and resignation itself distinguished; how does hope appear as hope?

What am I suggesting is that within the reciprocal ethic which forms, for Milbank,

[97]Milbank, *Being reconciled,* p. 155.

the context for forgiveness there is rather more ambiguity that is at first obvious. What I have tried to show is the way in which the treatments of decision, gift and forgiveness explored above are in large part determined by a desire to preserve the right character, or tone. Or put differently, the posture that is presumed be at the heart of ethical exerts an important influence on the shape of the arguments. For Milbank, the sense that Derrida's ethics drives one towards an inhuman preoccupation with an abstract otherness that provides the most important impetus towards the articulation of reciprocity, and equally, it is the concern that one remain exposed to what in undecidable that drives him to continually 'uncover' underlying *aporias*. Milbank's work on the gift is very persuasive, since, it appears more attentive to the deep ambiguities of actual practice than does Derrida's: it is far more perplexing that my giving should be both obliged to be creative than that I am always on the lookout for a recuperation, even on my selflessness. However, it appears that there remains a moment in which giving and forgiving are indeed an exposure to death, even within the more affirming reciprocal ethic that Milbank describes.

Conclusion: forgiveness as loss; loss as gain

The discussion of the Philippi hymn in the previous chapter suggested that the desire for elevation - to be equal to God - is assumed, but then suspended, and transformed. Paul introduces the hymn by encouraging imitation of Christ ('let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus') which is already to utilise the desire to be like God, for Christ is not just another who possesses a particular characteristic, but one who has the form of God. But the hymn uses the force of this desire to suspend it; one's desire to be like God passes through Christ, who desires differently - a difference that is first felt as opposition. This change can be described both as a sharp cutting-off of ambition and as a relearning of what this ambition meant; it is neither a condemnation nor a straightforward affirmation of this desire. But, in Weil's terms, this transformation is possible through a space in which there is *nothing* for this desire to attach to. Both negative and positive construals of forgiveness can be described in terms of desire. To forgive might be to cease to desire: to stop wanting revenge or exact reparation for wrongdoing, to allow the desire to put another down so as to raise oneself up to die; in this case, forgiveness is a kind of death, as has been noted. But equally, one might

construe forgiveness as the painful continuation of desire: to persist in wanting peace when hostility has been offered, to continue to want reciprocity when one's openness to others has proved dangerous, etc. In both cases, one might say that forgiveness consists in a desire that the circumstances seem to restrict, or make difficult, even in some cases unthinkable.

For both Derrida and Weil, in different ways, the lack of fit between desire and context is understood as a trauma, a form of redemptive suffering, and more specifically, a trial in which one is isolated from universal forms of understanding. This isolation is also some kind of prefiguring of death, or loss of self: for Derrida, because pure gift, or unconditional forgiveness can only be thought negatively in relation to ordinary human life; for Weil because to desire the good is to anticipate the 'decreation' of the self, the consent not to be. It is this sense that the highest good can only be thought through opposition to exchange or the stripping away of illusory desire, that Milbank so strongly rejects, in favour of an account that stresses analogy between the goodness of ordinary life and transcendent goodness. Although the ethical hope described above is in a sense only apparent after an acceptance of the universal sway of death, at the same time, it is held to be implicit within the 'mundane, everyday hope that community is possible, that people and objects can analogically blend beyond identity or difference'.[98] On the one hand, hope, and therefore ethics, is only possible with and in the particularity of the Christian gospel; on the other, this hope is already everywhere. But this leaves the problem of how to interpret optimism: is it the denial of finitude, a futile holding out for an ethics not dependent on the irruption of eternity into time, or is it an inchoate glimpsing of an eschatological peace, trust in the vague outline of a promise? And if the answer is 'both', then question of the character that ethics should have, the posture one should adopt, becomes more problematic.

A similar issues arises in relation to 'everyday forgiveness' from Milbank's perspective. Should the Christian teaching of forgiveness function so as to force a realisation of the impossibility of forgiveness within a 'purely immanent' framework, so that the command forces open the self-enclosed person, forces hope, expectation, receptivity? Or, on the contrary, should it shed light on what is already practiced, so as to bring it to fulfillment? In one sense one might point to the frequently economic nature of what passes for forgiveness, noticing that it may often be a careful process of

[98]Milbank, *Being reconciled*, p. 148.

negotiation, such that risk is minimised (I forgive once I am satisfied that to do so will not leave me too vulnerable), balance guaranteed (I forgive once I am satisfied that I will not be left definitively lowered), propriety ensured (I forgive those whom I am expected to forgive) and my interests secured (I forgive those whom in it is in my interest to forgive). Or, perhaps more seriously, forgiveness may be practiced as an acceptance of what should not be accepted, so that I forgive in despair or self-hatred, with an accompanying loss of belief in human dignity. If forgiveness is only possible as an opening out onto eternity, and immoral, corrupt or poisonous apart from this hope, then perhaps such forgiveness is not forgiveness at all. In this case, forgiveness comes into conflict with forgiveness, just as reciprocity comes into conflict with reciprocity. But then, these attitudes and behaviours might be described as a distortion of a truly open and trusting reciprocity, or an immature beginning, and therefore as not entirely alien to a genuinely 'asymmetrical' reciprocity. Perhaps even the most calculating, economic and self-interested 'forgiveness' is, in fledgling form, the beginnings of something more trusting, open and risky.

If, as in the case of optimism, 'everyday forgiveness' can be understood, from Milbank's perspective, both in terms of a false attempt to ground the possibility of ethical interaction within time, *and* in terms of an inchoate reaching for what is promised in the Christian gospel, then the question is of how the one is transformed into the other; through a sudden shock, or a gradual refinement? It may be important to remember that in the Christian tradition, forgiveness begins as a command, or more specifically, a command and promise at the same time: forgive, and you will be forgiven. The question then concerns what this command gives: shock and purging, or refinement and strengthening? One's expectations concerning how giving and receiving should be conducted may be such that the command to forgive is felt as an invitation to entirely abandon reciprocity, rather than as an invitation to continue to give, trusting in an eschatological gift-exchange. Refinement might be felt as shock. Even if forgiveness is described as a renewal of gift-exchange - sewn in to the logic of ordinary life - so that to forgive is simply to choose to continue live and give, it may appear as more akin to dying, or, in Derrida's terms, an embracing of the impossible. Forgiveness may follow the logic of gift-exchange, rather than suspending or opposing it, but we may not be at the level at which they are united. And if this is the case, if may well be that the command to forgive is felt primarily as a negative, emptying moment – a ceasing to desire (balance, revenge, guarantee), rather than a continuing to desire

(mutuality, reciprocity, freedom).

It appears that even if forgiveness is seen as inscribed within a horizon of reciprocity, so that it is thought of as implying a hopeful, trusting posture rather than the fear and trembling of the impossible, it is nevertheless true that forgiveness remains subject to a certain inner tension. In fact, the exploration above is intended to demonstrate that to conceive reciprocity along the lines of gift-exchange as outlined in fact necessitates this tension, in a way that is not always apparent in Milbank's treatment: giving may or may not be loss; delay may or may not be rejection; imbalance may or may not be exploitation. Forgiveness may be linked to promise – it may, ultimately, only be meaningful and moral *as* a promise, for the reasons outlined in Milbank's essays – but in the gospels, it is first of all command, from teacher to pupil. In keeping with the logic of Milbank's work, one might say this command exemplifies the ambiguity of gift; it is only a promise when received as a gift, rather than a threat. It does not guarantee its character of promise objectively, or without ambiguity, prior to being received. To command that one accept the loss of giving without recuperation, or the imbalance of offence without seeking redress, to command that one forgive when forgiveness is *obviously* unjustified, is neither straightforwardly to affirm an ethic of reciprocity, nor an ethic of unconditional giving. The command/promise does not simply provide guarantee of a heavenly scheme of reciprocal activity so that one can ignore the gaping holes in the earthly one; rather it encourages one to act *in* the ambiguity, when one does not know what one will receive, or how, or when, when one does not know all of what it means to give, or receive, to gain or lose, how far these terms may bleed into each other, or which of them will prove decisive. Perhaps forgiveness must be re-imagined as a form of giving that patiently awaits completion; perhaps we must re-imagine giving as itself a form of forgiveness. On my account, part of the trial of forgiveness is the lack or resolution which means we must treat both of these as true, and through this trial, learn what it means to give.

Conclusion

Forgiveness as a change of mind

In Jean Hatzfeld's third collection of interviews with survivors and perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide, Alphonse Hitayaremye (a Hutu man recently released from the prison at Rilima) describes the lessons the perpetrators were taught at a compulsory civic reconciliation course:

> "They taught us how to conduct ourselves around the families who had suffered - to behave humbly, to appear timid in confrontations, to avoid provocation when facing distraught survivors. To avoid as well the disorders of AIDS and suchlike illnesses. To learn how to bake bricks for grieving widows or abandoned children.
>
> "But the number one lesson had to do with our wives. The instructors warned us that all the prisoners would run into epidemics of adultery, kids born on the sly fields sold behind our backs. They taught us that since the government had pardoned us, we in turn had to pardon our unfaithful wives, who'd had no way of knowing we would ever leave prison alive, and who had taken up the hoe without a strong man to help shoulder their burdens."[1]

Alphonse's description reads almost like a perverse version of the parable of the unforgiving servant. The government pardon, given as a result of the sheer necessity of ensuring sufficient labour to produce food for the country, imposes upon the guilty the obligation to pass on a similarly self-interested pardon. The threat of being called to account for one's participation in a crime so immense produces a fear of judgement and a willingness to please that can be channelled into co-operation, just as the parable produces in its listeners an outrage that is subsequently turned against them: 'So my heavenly Father will do to you every one of you if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.' A Tutsi man, Boniface, devoted himself to life as a priest after surviving the massacres, and he also notes the practical necessity of the message of forgiveness and reconciliation:

> "Of course, I must restrain myself: I must bear the sight, in my congregation, of those who hunted us down with machetes.
>
> "In my sermons, I speak of God, of commiseration, of reconciliation. Then things go well with the singing and the lessons; the congregation listens attentively. But target the killings, mention the marshes - and the

[1] Jean Hatzfeld, *The strategy of antelopes*, tr. Linda Coverdale (London: Serpant's Tail, 2008), p. 13.

> Hutus get angry: their faces scrunch into scowls and that's it. The killings are not acceptable at Mass, or the Hutus take offense. They can stand up during the homily and walk out for good. If I play the killjoy, I empty out my church.
>
> "It's the same thing everywhere: all the priests fear the genocide. So I preach forgiveness, love thy neighbour, help one another during droughts. I persist, I teach patience, because faith has been tarnished. If I personally do not believe that God always redeems Himself in the end, then I saved myself for nothing."[2]

In the wake of the genocide, the past is feared by both survivors and perpetrators. For the former the fact that the horrors they endured remain inexplicable means that the fear of repetition is difficult to banish, and since they live amongst those whose former violence they still do not understand they fear the effects their own resentment might have in stirring a future eruption.[3] For the latter, the past threatens because it cannot be gotten rid of; they know that the survivors cannot forget it and there is no punishment sufficient to mark a break from it.[4] The message of forgiveness, here, seems to be a surrender to necessity, a fearful co-operation with the flow of time in the hope of preserving a fragile peace for as long as possible. But is this co-operation not exactly what is suggested by the words from the Sermon on the mount? As the Father in heaven causes the sun rises on the evil and the good, so enemies are to be loved and prayed for. The rising of the sun is an image that conveys the sense of infallible regularity, the indifference of time. What could be more forgiving than the sun,

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[2] Hatzfeld, *The strategy of antelopes*, p. 186. Boniface's second name is not given here. Interviewees are referred to by their first names throughout the three volumes.

[3] See also Innocent Rwililza's comments on this point. 'Survivors complain about injustice, but they can understand that they will thereby gain something in return: a sense of security and a full belly.' The acceptance of the part of some Tutsis of the obvious lack of justice in the aftermath, for Innocent, is a result of the fear of the consequences of pushing more firmly for punishment. See *The strategy of antelopes*, p. 131.

[4] Berthe Mwanankabandi's comment is chilling in its clarity on this point: 'Delivering justice would mean killing the killers. But that would be another genocide, and would bring chaos. Killing or punishing the guilty in some suitable way: impossible. Pardoning them: unthinkable. *Being just* is inhuman.' I am grateful for a post by Brad Johnson at the philosophy blog *An Und Fur Sich* which drew my attention to this passage, and to Anthony Paul Smith for pointing out the possible double meaning of the last four words.

which shines unfailingly upon the righteous and the wicked? And yet what could be more unjust?

These problems are by now familiar. The comments above, regarding a particularly extreme, perhaps unprecedented situation nevertheless draw out deep tensions within the language of forgiveness that are felt in more everyday uses. Forgiveness is concerned with release from proper judgement, and yet with the gift of forgiveness comes an even greater set of obligations (to demonstrate his goodwill, and merit the pardon retrospectively, Alphonse must be lenient with his wife, should she be found to have been unfaithful). Equally, the gratuitous aura of forgiveness may not simply cover a hidden contract or obligation, it may also hide a deep impotence to do anything other than forgive. The message of forgiveness, love of enemies and reconciliation may be a message of challenge, a call to a higher, perhaps difficult way of living, as is suggested in the Sermon on the Mount. What is more radical, gracious and dignified than for a priest to celebrate Mass with those who previously hunted him with machetes, knowing that they do not know, and can never know what they did? But equally, perhaps it is exactly the opposite; perhaps it is judgement that is the difficult demand, requiring as it does a stubborn refusal to bend the demands of justice for the sake of tranquillity.

In this thesis, rather than try to negotiate way through these ambiguities so as to provide a concept that is sufficiently well qualified to reduce the kinds of misuse illustrated here, I have instead attempted to dwell on the tensions that they reflect. The reason for this are twofold: first, it seems that the obvious areas of conflict in the gospel material are integral, rather than eliminable. Secondly, as I have tried to show, it appears that those treatments of forgiveness which deliberately try to eliminate the possibility of forgiveness appearing unjust or incoherent tended simply to compress or shift the tension elsewhere. In other words, I have assumed that there is something in the injunction to forgive that requires a moment of confrontation, whether it be with existing conceptions of what is just, with expectations about what is reasonable to expect from a person, or with the limits of what it is meaningful to say and possible to do. I have, then, attempted to articulate the significance of the fact that forgiveness is not simply difficult to give or receive, but difficult to think, and I have asked what this difficulty *gives*.

The first task, which chapter one attempts, is to show that there is this 'resistance to thought', as I have expressed it. My interaction with Charles Griswold is intended to show that the understanding of what forgiveness is is shaped and determined by certain concerns. Griswold's account is shaped by the concern to produce a workable and safe concept of forgiveness, to present the justice of acting graciously on occasion. Given the possibilities of mis-uses like those indicated above, this is an understandable endeavour, and in the process many important clarifications are produced. However, the limitation with this approach is that the concerns which shape and determine the direction that Griswold's account takes are themselves called into question by the notion of forgiveness. If forgiveness is a display of the virtue of trust, then if forgiveness were to be presented as unambiguously just, we would need to know that justice is always served through trust; but we do not. The result is that the actual description of forgiveness is at odds with the qualities it is said to demonstrate: there is little sense in Griswold's account that one would actually learn to trust through forgiving, since forgiveness is defined as a response that is entirely accounted for by the activity of the wrongdoer. Charles Taylor's description of the 'cross-pressured' situation of contemporary ethical reflection is invaluable here, in that it points out so clearly the competing demands that mean that the task of articulating forgiveness is so fraught.

However, Taylor's work also makes the straightforward preference for an account such as Jankelevitch's more problematic. In a sense, the difference between Charles Griswold's forgiveness and Jankelevitch's forgiveness is the difference between theodicy and mystical theology: one attempts to justify the ways of forgiveness to men, so that its meaning and goodness do not compete; the other tries to capture the highest through a process of poetic negation. But because Jankelevitch's account pays so little attention to the way in which one might, through one's life, struggle to combine the cultivation of just understanding with the embrace of the moment of forgiveness, one suspects that there is a complicity of opposites here: the perfectly simple judgement that provides the solid ground from which to launch into forgiveness is never questioned. And in fact, as demonstrated through attention to a number of passages which go against the grain of the book, there is in fact the basis for a more nuanced way of approaching the excessive, ungrounded aspect of

forgiveness. Jankelevitch already recognises that understanding, love and mercy are related, and that to really understand another may involve a renunciation of one kind or another, which may be akin to forgiveness. The question emerges here of what motivates this insistence on a momentary, incommunicable forgiveness, given that there is a clear understanding of the way that real judgement must be tempered by something like sympathy, compassion, mercy or even forgiveness. I take another opening in Jankelevitch's presentation as a suggestion here: forgiveness may well issue in repentance, reform, or reconciliation; however the attention of the forgiving person is not focused on this possibility, but is rather consumed with the present. There is a sense here that an immersion in the present, attention to the other and the moral ambiguity of forgiveness are linked in some way: one has to take one's eye off what might be in order to attend to what *is* now. We do not need to conclude, as Jankelevitch does, that the moment of forgiveness involves an abandonment of desire, but instead that it involves a way of desiring, of continuing to desire.

Chapter one concludes that there is a necessity to hold together both aspects of forgiveness: its reasonability, justice, necessity and wisdom with its excess, ambiguity, risk and foolishness. The question then becomes one of how this might be possible. Chapter two turns to Simone Weil, who is concerned precisely with the experience of intellectual, ethical and spiritual conflict, and whose work informs the whole thesis. Here I have emphasised the way in which forgiveness is associated with the seemingly paradoxical character of the kingdom of God, as approached through the gospel saying:'[t]hose who want save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.' My suggestion is that this saying does not collapse either into denial of one's ordinary desire for one's life, nor into a counter-intuitive way of continuing to desire it, but rather a paradoxical way of learning what one's life is. My suggestion here is summed up very simply by phrase of Richard Rohr's: 'it is not that we have to go down in order to go up, but that we have to go down in order to know what "up" means.' The movement of trust that is summoned here is not based on pure promise grounded in power, nor expressive of a principle grounded in given intelligibility, but somehow invokes both. My approach to Weil is based on the attempt to read her work in the light of this productive tension.

Weil's explorations of the character of suffering suggest that compassion must involve a preparedness to encounter the unintelligible, and a resistance of the urge for thought to 'fly' from affliction. In this sense, the attention of compassion involves an openness to perplexity, just as for Jankelevitch, forgiveness involves an embrace of madness. However, Weil's work also suggests that the encounter with contradiction is necessarily a matter of time, an experience of waiting, just as attention is a matter of giving time. The conflict that she sees at the centre of ethical and spiritual life is between desire and acceptance, or protest and compassion, and so her account is closely related to the tensions within the notion of forgiveness. Forgiveness cannot be adequately justified because it seems to include competing virtues or necessities, and so Weil's work provides a way of construing the significance of this tension. For Weil, this is the tension one must accept if one is to learn how to love: to love is to desire without approaching, that is, to desire without guarantee, to wait. One only loves reality as it is through patience. Here the relation between acceptance and determinate desires for justice, repentance, and real changes in relationship is rather different: it is a case of how one is concerned with these things, not whether or not one is.

What this also means for Weil is that through waiting one learns. Time spent with contradiction does not necessarily resolve it (unless it is simply a mistake), but it may, through the promise and/or principle of grace, disclose a deeper level of reality. Contemplation of suffering with loving acceptance does not mitigate it, or justify it, but it does transfigure it somehow. Something occurs which enables one to say 'grace fills the void', without this thereby meaning that grace *removes* the void. Attention, then, produces insight, but it is not insight that can be straightforwardly affirmed, because its truth is only true at a certain 'level', or put differently, is true in only a very ambiguous way. This sense of learning proves important in the interaction with Derrida, because despite a concern that is in some ways similar to Weil's, Derrida's framework seems to disallow the possibility of learning through suffering. Talk of 'levels' may seem odd, or unappealingly hierarchical. However, I try to show that what Weil is describing can be seen more clearly in the debates over forgiveness, particularly in terms of the way in which acceptance is evaluated. Certain models of forgiveness are rejected on the grounds that they seem to involve interfering with moral

responses to wrongdoing, or encourage us to accept what should not be accepted. Weil's account takes the discussion beyond this two-dimensional picture, in which acceptance is in direct competition with judgement. Whereas there is a tendency for some discussions (for example, Tara Smiths's) to treat forgiveness as a balance or meeting point between two forces competing at the same level, for Weil, loving compassion somehow incorporates, in a way that is very difficult to demonstrate, the fullness of both protest and desire.

However, this introduces a problem, namely that of incompatible perspectives. In her many, many attempts to articulate these ideas, Weil implies that the kind of attention that suffering demands is not easily described, since it is both acceptance and desire, both compassion and protest, and that these ambiguities, ultimately, emerge from the way in which God is both present and perfectly absent in creation. On my account, something very similar is true of the goodness of forgiveness. The sense of surprising generosity that attends Jean Amery's account of resentment is instructive here: perhaps Amery refuses forgiveness, or perhaps he expresses an inarticulate longing for it, insofar as his desire is for what would have first to be in order for there to be forgiveness. If, then, forgiveness has a truth, it is one that is partially shrouded in secrecy, because the perspective from which it is true is not yet accessible; in Weil's terms, we are not yet at the level where the contradictories meet.

In order to explore the question of perspective more fully, I have briefly examined the debate produced by Rene Girard's work in reference to Jankelevitch's thought, and in relation to the theme of necessity: the necessity for sacrifice, the necessity for certain conditions to be met before one forgives. In one sense, what Girard attempts can be seen as an attempt at purification of perspective, so that the sacrificial perspective which sees necessity in death is definitively left behind. However, the pursuit of purity here seems to lead to a disavowal of what one nevertheless presumes: it was not 'necessary' that Christ die; and yet this realisation is somehow the fruit of his death. In another sense, Girard's work leads to an interpretation of the death of Christ based upon discovery. Here I have used Raymund Schwager and James Alison's work to show that when taken in more richly theological direction, the Girardian thesis produces a sense of the death of Christ as an enacting of the possibility of a different 'use of death'. Here the resurrection necessarily renders the meaning of

self-offering through the cross and the relationship between death and life ambiguous: does life come to the crucified Jesus as its undoing, and so as its opposite, or from the crucified Jesus, as its fruit? Here I am arguing for the necessity of a mingling of very different perspectives, rather than the possibility of a clean break between them.

With these issues in mind, I engage with the suggestion of Michael Gorman, that the Philippi hymn contains two conflicting but complementary ways of construing descent: as contravention of an existing order, and as expression of a hidden reality. This allows another way of considering the way in which forgiveness involves both the conflict between different ways of thinking and the possibility of new insight emerging through this conflict. Christ Jesus took the form of a servant both 'although' and 'because' he was in the form of God. The 'although' relates to the sense that radical forgiveness suspends or opposes a pre-existing and normative order; the way in which forgiveness may be perceived as a challenge to one's sense of justice, possibility and meaning, such that the truly forgiving person appears to forgive without reason. My argument throughout the thesis is that this moment of opposition inevitably appears, however reasonable forgiveness is taken to be. In this sense, I have tried to show more concretely the way in which Derrida is right about the 'impossibility' of forgiveness: the idea of forgiveness pushes at the the edge of our moral landscapes, and our sense of possibility. However, Gorman's point is that for Paul, the scandal of *kenosis* opens out into a new, yet fragile, understanding of how one's status or nature finds expression. The 'because', therefore, relates to the way in which forgiveness may become a (perhaps fragile) new pattern of living, with corresponding expectations and norms, rather than simply a moment of confrontation. This allows for a way of seeing the character of a life committed to learn the ways of forgiveness. This is in contrast to Griswold, for whom forgiveness is a necessarily controlled virtue that submits to what one already knows to be just, and to Jankelevitch, for whom the madness of forgiveness issues in no continuous habits, patterns or insights. Here I attempt to use Gorman's template to express what Weil may mean by truths that can only be seen only at a certain level: a commitment to radical forgiveness, if it has passed through the acceptance of contradiction of love and protest may express a form of desire and hope, rather than a culpable resignation. This is the heart of

my understanding of forgiveness; it follows the pattern of Christ, who ascends through descent.

Chapter four explores some of the ideas that lie in the background to the preceding discussions, and furthers articulates the conclusion reached at the end of chapter three. I begin by exploring Jacques Derrida's notion of the undecidable. Here I try to show that Derrida's emphasis upon the way that decision is suspended impossibly between the responsible concern for knowledge and a creative embrace of indeterminacy implies something like a notion of redemptive suffering. The insufficiency and indispensability of knowledge must be suffered honestly and without evasion if one is to enter the ethical realm. Here I am sympathetic to the attempt to link the difficulty of forgiveness with 'the undecideable'. There does not seem to be any simple way of showing the justice, or reason, of forgiveness, without losing something crucial, so that, in a sense, the goodness of forgiveness remains ambiguous, and to forgive necessarily means to decide in advance of 'forgiveability': forgiveness takes place, to a greater or lesser degree, in the dark. Despite this agreement, I am nevertheless critical of the way that Derrida's construal of the suffering of thought seems to rely on the formality of an identically repeated moment. There is little space left for the way in which the reflexive interpretation of the moment affects the moment itself: the growing understanding that the experience of 'the undecideable' may prove to be a constitutive part of one's ethical development must, surely, affect the tonality of the experience, just as with experience an athlete might learn to interpret the pain involved in their training differently. It is as though there is a perpetual divide or incommunicability between the aporetic self and the enduring, reasoning self, so that one cannot learn from, or through, *aporia*. Put differently, there is little sense that an encounter with 'the impossible' might actually stretch or challenge one's sense of what is possible, because although deconstruction (which is possible through the impossibility of justice, decision, etc.) is assumed to have a positive impact upon determinate conceptual structures (as John Caputo puts it, the impossible gift 'slackens the circle' of exchange), there is no sense that any learning takes place, just identically repeated collision. My argument here is that the potential of an encounter with 'the impossible' is found in its duration, in the capacity to wait, in

Weil's terms: in order to learn from the way that experiences exceeds understanding, one has to be patient.

This critique is developed through exploration of Derrida's work on gift. Many of the concepts Derrida engaged with in the later part of his career may be thought of as implying a common posture: deconstructive suspicion, ethical vigilance, impossible desire. The notion of gift is the main way in which Derrida incorporates desire for the impossible into his framework, and in turn provides the basis for his understanding of forgiveness. The difference between what I am claiming and the kind of 'impossible forgiveness' espoused by Derrida is shown more clearly through my discussion of John Milbank's response to Derrida's work on gift. Where Derrida understands the ambiguities found in gift-language to be evidence of an impossible desire for a 'pure' gift, which would escape the cycle of reciprocity, a gift that neither invites or demands any return, Milbank argues that these ambiguities reveal that reciprocity – always already in motion, aiming at no final moment of balance *or* imbalance – underlies all human exchange, however distorted they may be by contractual relations, or abusive and controlling giving. For Milbank, this understanding frees Christian ethics from the stultifying ideal of pure altruism, or 'self-less' generosity. Because goodness (which is neither simply aesthetic nor simply moral) is fundamentally concerned with relationship, it includes receptivity, and where it appears that goodness demands a unilateral movement, this should be understood in terms of trust, patience, anticipation, rather than an 'impossible' acceptance of absolute loss or final imbalance. However strenuous generosity, grace, patience, or forgiveness may appear to be in conditions of risk and scarcity, God promises the advent of a genuinely peaceful gift-exchange, that is not limited by the horizon of death. For Milbank, then, despite the appearance - in the extreme cases - of an intimate link between forgiveness and loss, imbalance ('void', in Weilian terms), forgiveness is still, essentially, a moment of reception, possible through hope. Because there is no such thing as a 'pure' gift outside of exchange (even the gift of creation by God makes possible a 'return' of creaturely gratitude), for-giving must equally be reciprocal: possible in human relationships because of the prior receipt of divine forgiveness, and the hope and possibility of future restoration of relationships.

My account differs from Milbank's only insofar as I am concerned to stress the ambiguity of forgiveness, and to develop the theological significance of this ambiguity. Put differently, I am concerned to show that if forgiveness reveals a deeper, riskier reciprocity – one that continues even in the absence of mutuality – so it may also be that just as gaining one's life through following Christ may first be perceived and received as loss, so forgiveness may first appear as an embrace of giving without hope of return, giving into a void. In fact, what I argue is that precisely because real giving involves the willingness to receive the unexpected, and to endure delay in return, it can appear as, be experienced as, loss. On my account, there is a fundamental ambiguity in the gospel sayings concerning where and how, exactly, 'reward' is to be found, and indeed, whether it is to be sought, and it is this ambiguity that allows for a change of perspective: one must first learn to act in secret, without thought of reward before one learns that the Father who sees in secret rewards *differently*. As a result, despite my appreciation of Milbank's critique of the ethics of altruism – 'moral heroism in conditions of scarcity' – I am more sympathetic to the idea that forgiveness must appear, at times, as a direct contradiction of the law of reciprocity, rather than a fulfillment of it. As a result I have stressed the way in which even in the conception of Christian ethics offered by Milbank, there is, nevertheless, a moment which is not entirely dissimilar to Weil's notion of acceptance of void: Christian hope is found after, or along with, a recognition of the universal sway of death.

My suggestion in this thesis is that there is, as Derrida tries to show, something perpetually and ineliminably problematic, disturbing, or excessive about forgiveness – something unfinished, or irresolvable. However, I also want to show that if one sees a permanent divide, and unchanging relationship between the economic, reasonable forgiveness that has its proper place in a social order, and the aneconomic, impossible forgiveness that only ever disturbs and confronts the social order and the rationality that upholds it, then one actually has an impoverished sense of the 'impossibility' that surrounds forgiveness. More than this, I have tried to show that there are hints that Christian theology offers a way to understand the relationship between these two faces of forgiveness, and so a way of construing the difficulty of thinking forgiveness. In the Philippi hymn it is as though one’s prior understanding of

God is both reversed and completed, because the desire to be like God is neither condemned or affirmed, but rather made to pass through the humility of Christ: one should strive to be like God, insofar as one should strive to be like Christ, who had equality with God. Similarly, in the synoptic saying quoted above, the desire to save one's life is made to pass through the trauma of loss through following Christ, so that one's desire for one's life could be said to have been given up, but somehow equally to have been fulfilled. In both cases, one only learns what it might mean to become like God, or what might mean to truly possess 'life', through giving up one's conceptions of each.

My argument is that forgiveness follows a similar logic, and that both aspects – the reversal, or renunciation; the completion, or fulfillment – are part of the business of understanding what forgiveness means, and, perhaps more importantly, what it might demand of us. As a result, I have tried to argue that forgiveness is conflicted because it challenges our *way* of expecting, hoping and desiring, not because it dispenses with them. The command to forgive may be difficult because it asks for something other than justice, or because it refuses to guarantee its final position in relation to justice: no promise is given to the concerned disciples that their daily practice of forgiveness will produce a more effective repentance in their sinful brother, no guarantee is given that the radical love with which one loves one's enemies will miraculously produce friendship out of enmity. However, the difficulty of forgiveness may also lie in the *in*justice of our existing conceptions of justice, so that the command to forgive is an invitation to give up a perspective that distorts one's vision, so as to be *more* just: one takes the plank out of one's own eye so as to see more clearly to take the speck out of another's eye; the practice of forgiveness will be rewarded justly and fittingly with divine forgiveness. In other words, forgiveness may be difficult both in its comprehensibility and its incomprehensibility, both in its transcendence and in its immanence, its possibility and its impossibility. Or put differently, forgiveness is difficult – to live and to think – both because it is human, and because it is divine: it may involve both an expansion and a shattering of one's limits.

On my understanding, then, forgiveness is a changing of mind – *metanoia* - that we find ourselves within. It is not so much that we repent in order to be

forgiven, or repent of our unforgiveness in order to forgive, but more as though we forgive, and are forgiven, so that we might repent.

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