

THE LOGIC OF FORGIVENESS

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I

Thank you very much for the invitation to participate in this new edition of the "Holy Land Dialogues." It is a pleasure and an honor to contribute to this dialogue in a city as significant as Jerusalem. In my presentation, I would like to offer you all some reflections on this year's central theme, namely forgiveness.

To do so, I would like to start by showing you a photograph. It was taken on December 23, 1985 moments after retired general Juan Atarés, then 67, married and the father of four children, was killed in my city of Pamplona by a man and a woman who shot him in the back. As the press at the time pointed out, General Atarés was an easy target for terrorists. He usually walked without an escort through a park near his house in the center of Pamplona and was killed there. At the scene, police found three ammunition shells that the terrorist group "ETA" characteristically used. As many of you all know, ETA was a terrorist organization that aimed to gain the Basque Country's independence from Spain. Founded in 1958, and dissolved in 2018, it was responsible for 873 deaths.

Two years after the assassination of General Atarés, his murderers were arrested, tried and sent to prison without demonstrating any apparent regret. In the photograph, you can see General Atarés's wife, María Luisa Ayuso, kneeling with an expression of serenity on her face, along with two of their children. Moments after this photograph was taken, his widow said she forgave the terrorists. "At this moment when people speak only of hate, I forgive them," she declared and continued, "In this house there is nothing but words of forgiveness for those who have taken my husband from me."

In the face of an evil act like murder and the suffering it causes, all words are, in a way, impertinent. What can we say to the suffering of a murdered man's wife? Words seem useless. Perhaps when witness to the suffering of others, the most appropriate thing is to remain silent and instead, as St. Paul recommended, to "weep with the weeping." But it is not just evil that leaves us speechless. The same happens when we are witness to the goodness inherent in an act like the forgiveness General Atarés's widow expressed. What can we say in the face of the heroic act of forgiving someone who has inflicted an objective evil of such magnitude? Somehow, silence, this time of admiration, imposes itself in the face of such forgiveness. What words could even sufficiently reflect such moral stature?

Despite the limitations of all language surrounding forgiveness, attempts to approach this phenomenon still abound. Thus, for example, forgiveness has been analyzed from the perspective of psychology and we can speak of "psychological models of forgiveness" and even forgiveness as therapy. A sociological analysis of it is also possible. In this order of things, research also touches on how different cultures and eras have understood this phenomenon. This "sociology of forgiveness" also includes issues such as the influence of certain historical and social events on its current understanding. The question of forgiveness can also be considered from the theological or religious point of view. In this sense, we can ask after different religious confession's ideas and understandings of forgiveness.

As interesting as the psychological, sociological and theological-religious approaches to our problem may be, the analysis I offer in my presentation today is purely philosophical. This does not mean that it is incompatible with the aforementioned perspectives; rather, they are simply different. Instead of dedicating part of my presentation to explaining the characteristics of this type of analysis, I will dive right in.

Let us return for a moment to the initial example, that is, the forgiveness that General Atarés's widow granted to her husband's assassins. Many questions emerge in light of the

forgiveness that took place moments after this terrible act. Some, although not all, of these questions include the following:

1. How is it possible to forgive someone for such a heinous crime so, might we say, "immediately?" If forgiveness consists, to a large extent, in the suppression of negative feelings with respect to the wrongdoer, does that not entail a process that takes a certain amount of time? Isn't it necessary to let some time pass so that the negative feelings that the "wrong act" engendered can be "attenuated" and, in this way, the ground is prepared for truly mature forgiveness? To what extent is forgiveness granted so quickly truly forgiveness?
2. Does quickly rendered forgiveness that renounces any kind of revenge denote an attitude of disrespect for oneself and, ultimately, the moral order? To what extent was General Atarés's widow fully aware of the evil involved in her husband's murder and the objective evil inflicted upon her? Wouldn't it be more appropriate to respond to the evil of this murder with some kind of "vindictive passion?" In this sense, some contemporary authors have argued that, "at least some vindictive passions (particularly resentment) are tied to self-respect and self-defense and since, self-respect and self-defense are good things, a reasonable degree of resentment is a good thing to the degree that it is so tied."¹ Thus, these "vindictive passions" as initial responses to being wronged stand "in defense of important values – values that might be compromised by immediate and uncritical forgiveness of wrongs."² Therefore, a "vindictive passion" such as "resentment" "stands as emotional testimony that we care about ourselves and our rights."³ The problem with "vindictive passions" might not be, then, their existence, but rather "their tendency to get out of control—to so dominate the life of a victimized person that the person's own life is soured and, in his revenge seeking, he starts

¹ MURPHY, J. G., *Getting Even. Forgiveness and its Limits*. Oxford University Press. New York 2003, p. 18.

² MURPHY, J. G., *op. cit.*, p. 19; MURPHY, J. G., *Punishment and the Moral Emotions- Essays in Law, Morality, and Religion*. Oxford University Press. New York 2012, p. 11.

³ MURPHY, J. G., *Punishment and the Moral Emotions- Essays in Law, Morality, and Religion*, *Ibid.*

- to pose a danger to the very moral and legal order that rightly identifies him as a victim of immorality.”⁴
3. To what extent is it possible to forgive my wrongdoer without him showing any regret? Going to our example, can General Atarés’s widow forgive her husband’s murderers without even knowing if they have repented? If forgiveness is, to a large extent, the "cancellation of an account of guilt" between the wrongdoer and the offended person, is the wrongdoer’s cooperation not necessary through repentance?
 4. To what extent is the offended person’s sincere forgiveness compatible with the demands of justice? Can the widow forgive her husband's murderers and, at the same time, demand that human justice punish the guilty? Is there not something of an incompatibility between what we might call the "logic of forgiveness" and the "logic of justice?" It is not uncommon to oppose these logics, that is, a logic of love, with the so-called “logic of justice,” understood as a logic of equity, of “rendering to every man his due” (*suum cuique tribuere*). It would seem as though the logic of forgiveness goes beyond the limits of justice since forgiveness exceeds what is rendered to the wrongdoer as his due, what is rendered to him, as we say, “in justice.” Some have even claimed that forgiving the wrongdoer means giving up the demands of justice in order to reconcile with the wrongdoer.

As we can see, many questions arise around forgiveness, none of which are easy. I have mentioned only some of them. Addressing all of them would require much more time than we have. Here, I will only refer to the two that, in my mind, encompass the others, namely: What is forgiveness? And what is its “logic?”

II

What, then, is forgiveness?

⁴ MURPHY, J. G., *Punishment and the Moral Emotions- Essays in Law, Morality, and Religion*, p. 13.

Firstly, forgiveness is an experience that, so to speak, occupies a central place in people's moral life. In this respect, forgiving someone reveals a special depth to moral life. Thus, it seems impossible to sincerely forgive a wrongdoer and, at the same time, harbor wishes of revenge against another. The latter reveals a kind of disharmony that could even lead to seriously doubting the sincerity of the forgiveness granted. Regardless of the existence of moral experiences that are more central than forgiveness, a genuine act of forgiveness is such that it somehow "colors" our entire moral life.

Secondly, it is important to emphasize that the center of genuine forgiveness is not, in fact, the person who forgives, but rather the person who is forgiven. Let me explain what I mean by this statement. We could, for example, think that General Atarés's widow forgave her husband's murderers because, ultimately, forgiving is the best strategy for recovering the inner peace she lost. Forgiveness would, then, be a therapeutic tool that would contribute to better psychic health, to a deeper sense of self-worth and security in the world, to a greater feeling of freedom, etc. The widow could even recommend forgiveness based on the following: "Forgiving means that you have decided not to carry the weight of all that misery any longer... Get rid of that burden. Free your soul from the chains of misery and look at the light of healing and really begin to live again."⁵

One might also think that the widow's forgiveness is nothing but the cessation of negative feelings such as indignation, contempt, resentment, etc. One might even think that these kinds of negative feelings are the right answer to the objective evil inflicted on her. The eighteenth-century English philosopher and theologian, Joseph Butler, defended a similar position. Permit me to quote one of his short texts:

The indignation raised by cruelty and injustice, and the desire of having it punished, which persons unconcerned would feel, is by no means malice. No, it is resentment against vice and wickedness: it is one of the common bonds, by which society is held together; a fellow feeling,

⁵ Sally Santana , "Forgiveness is a way to find personal and perhaps global peace" in: *The Sun*, 20.07.2003, Bremerton, USA (<http://www.thesunlink.com/redesign/2003-07-20/features/religion/206845.shtml>).

which each individual has in behalf of the whole species, as well as of himself.⁶

Certainly, forgiving her husband's murderers would be a way for the widow to recover her psychological or, if you prefer, spiritual peace that was damaged by such an evil act. In fact, her face gives off an expression of peace, of serenity. On the other hand, this forgiveness would be impossible if the negative feelings that the murder engendered had not somehow ceased. However, do you think that the widow's forgiveness consists only in the suppression of negative feelings towards those who murdered her husband or in a "strategy" to recover the peace she lost?

I do not think so. If so, the center of forgiveness would be located in the person who forgives (in our example the widow), while in true forgiveness, like that of the widow in our example, the center of forgiveness is instead found in the person(s) forgiven. The widow genuinely forgives her husband's murderers not for her sake, but rather for the sake of the murderers themselves. All genuine forgiveness contains, then, a kind of gift directed at the person or persons forgiven.

To better explain what I mean, we have to take into account two more issues. The first one has to do with the object of forgiveness, that is, what we forgive. If we return to our example, we perceive two types of negative qualities: on the one hand, the moral negative value of the murder and, on the other hand, the objective evil that, through the murder, was inflicted on the widow. Although they are closely related negative qualities, they are still different. On her own, the widow can forgive the evil intentionally inflicted upon her. It is not a matter of a kind of abstract negative import outside of real life or of a general negative posture or attitude, but rather involves an evil with a very specific "direction." *She* is the one upon whom evil was inflicted. This "concrete" direction of the act of inflicting an evil means that we cannot, in principle, forgive an evil that has been inflicted upon a third person. If we "forgive" people who have not inflicted any wrong on us, we speak of a false kind of forgiveness that lacks objective foundation. On the other

⁶ BUTLER, J., "Sermon VIII. Upon Resentment" ("Fifteen Sermons preached at the Rolls Chapel"), in *The Works of Bishop Butler*. Edited, with an Introduction and notes by D. E. White, University of Rochester Press, Rochester 2006, p. 92.

hand, forgiving the moral negative value involved in her husband's murder is something that, so to speak, exceeds her powers.

The second question refers to the type of act found in forgiveness. We can say that, basically, it consists of a rejection of the moral negative value required for the offense to be committed and the objective evil inflicted, but also of an acceptance of the person of the wrongdoer. We are thus faced with a characteristic element in forgiveness, namely a clear rejection of the offense does not necessarily imply a rejection of the person of the wrongdoer or a negative attitude towards him. In addition, acceptance of the wrongdoer's person is, to a large extent, but not exclusively, of an emotional and "cordial" nature. Therefore, it is often said that genuine forgiveness contains a "change of heart" with respect to the person of the wrongdoer.⁷ This does not mean that this change of heart or affect with respect to the wrongdoer is something in which our will does not intervene at all. In a way, I can "mold" my heart, my affectivity.

III

The other large group of questions I referred to a moment ago has to do with what, in a broad sense, is called the "logic of forgiveness." I will thus argue that this logic is a logic of overabundance. Let me explain.

How might we understand the special logic that operates in forgiveness? To answer this question, we must consider two fundamental aspects contained in forgiveness. On the one hand, we observe that, in all genuine forgiveness, the logic of "an

⁷ "The forgiver who previously saw the wrongdoer as someone bad or rotten or morally indecent to some degree has a change of heart when he "washes away" or disregards the wrongdoer's immoral actions or character traits in his ultimate moral judgement of her, and comes to see her as still *decent*, *not* rotten as a person, and someone with whom he may be able to renew a relationship (HAMPTON, J., "Forgiveness, Resentment, and Hatred", in MURPHY, J., HAMPTON, J., *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, p. 83); "The change of heart is the new understanding of the wrongdoer as a person one can be 'for' rather than 'against.' The forgiver trusts that, although he has undergone no rebirth, he is still 'good enough' despite what he has done. Forgiveness is thus the decision to see a wrongdoer in a new, more favourable light" (HAMPTON, J., *op. cit.*, p. 84).

eye for an eye" is broken. By this I mean that he who forgives renounces a certain claim with respect to the wrongdoer and "pays off the debt" of guilt that the wrongdoer had incurred. We can call this first element the "purification of memory."

This "purification" is a process that aims toward the release of all forms of resentment or negative feelings. It implies, then, a calm relationship with the past offense. This relationship is different, for example, from the one that resentful or bitter people hold. In his well-known book on forgiveness, Vladimir Jankélévitch referred to these two types of relationships, while distinguishing them carefully. Forgiveness, as Jankélévitch wisely notes, frees us from spiteful hypertrophy. By "eliminating" a former grudge, our conscience travels light.

The "purification of memory" is founded on a new posture before the person or persons who inflicted an evil on me. Instead of responding to the evil inflicted by inflicting another evil, the one who forgives overcomes all hostile will and "conquers evil with good." To forgive the one who has wronged me is not simply to "purify the memory" or not to take into account what was done to me; it also implies a recognition that the other's personal being is more than the offense. Obviously, this does not eliminate the demands of justice. Forgiveness does not capitulate to evil, but rather recognizes and rejects it and, in spite of it all, accepts the wrongdoer as a person.

Thus, this does not just involve saying to the wrongdoer "I will no longer take your offense into account," but also involves affirming him as a person. With this, I refer to the recognition that the wrongdoer has a higher value that "transcends" the objective evil inflicted and the moral negative value involved in the act of inflicting it. To forgive someone is to see "with new eyes" the abiding fullness of value that resides in each person. Certainly, we recognize the moral negative value of his action—without which forgiveness would not even enter into the picture—but we do not identify him with his unjust action in such a way that rejecting the action leads to rejection of the person. This new attitude gives us the ability to overcome responses based on unjust action and take the moral high ground.⁸

⁸ HILDEBRAND, D. v., *Moralia*, Gesammelte Werke, Bd. IX, Verlag Josef Habbel, Regensburg 1980, p. 94.

With this new attitude, the one who offers forgiveness with respect to his wrongdoer gives the latter a "credit of trust" that looks to the future rather than to the past. Even if the wrongdoer has betrayed the person who trusts in the past, it is possible to trust him again. If I trust the one who inflicted an objective evil on me, I completely "expose myself" or am "available" before him, even though he may betray me. This exposure to the other that takes place in the trust at the base of forgiveness highlights the vulnerability involved in trusting. Trust can certainly be betrayed, but continually worrying about betrayal eliminates trust and, therefore, authentic forgiveness. In any case, in terms of genuine forgiveness, this positive and trustworthy attitude overcomes and "defeats" the wrongdoing.

In short, ascribing his offense to a wrongdoer, holding him accountable for it, and, at the same time, recognizing him as a person does not controvert the injustice of an action or its consequences. The positive attitude present in forgiveness makes it possible to see beyond the evil inflicted and instead focus on the person's inviolable value. When this happens, the wrongdoer, the object of this positive attitude, does not feel humiliated, but rather rediscovered and "reconsidered."

I also believe that the two previously mentioned elements of forgiveness are not symmetrical, meaning that the latter, that is, the positive attitude towards the wrongdoer, not only justifies the former, i.e., the "purification of memory," but also somehow "exceeds" or "overflows" it so much so that it resides at a deeper level of moral life.

Indeed, where an objective evil is inflicted and the moral negative value of inflicting such evil occurs, the positive attitude that I have called "the affirmation of the wrongdoer as a person" abounds. Therefore, forgiving a wrongdoer is "much more" than telling him that his offense will not be taken into account. In fact, the foundation of not taking it into account is precisely this new attitude. This asymmetric relationship between the two elements of forgiveness reveals that its logic is not that of justice understood in the sense of fairness, but rather corresponds to a logic of overabundance.

IV

Allow me to summarize some of the results of this analysis on forgiveness offered here today.

I have tried to analyze the phenomenon of interpersonal forgiveness in the sense of an authentic and immediate encounter and relationship between individual persons. Future reflection would also do well to analyze the difficult case of what, in general terms, we could call "collective forgiveness," i.e., when several or many people are and must be the subject of forgiveness. It seems that some actions that inflict evil have more than one recipient. People belong to various groups, like families, nations, churches, and towns. Such groups are obviously made up of individual, concrete people. If someone inflicts an evil on such a group, concrete members of that group suffer the consequences of that action. But if several people are on the receiving end of the offense, can we say that all members of the affected group constitute the subject of eventual forgiveness? Answering these difficult questions exceeds the limits of today's presentation, but is a fruitful line of inquiry to follow up on.

The first result of the present analysis has to do with the "irreducibility" of the phenomenon of forgiveness. In this sense, we must reject any attempt to reduce it to, for example, the cessation of a negative feeling or resentment. Certainly, forgiveness includes these phenomena, but it cannot be reduced to them. Forgiving is something else and is in fact much more.

The second result involves the discovery of two fundamental elements of forgiveness that share a certain "asymmetric" relationship. I refer to the "purification of memory," on the one hand, and the new, positive attitude of the one who forgives in face of the wrongdoer. Based on the act of inflicting an objective evil, an "account of guilt" emerges, so to speak, between the wrongdoer and his victim. Forgiveness, as we have tried to show, contains an element of closure, of "payment" of this account. Forgiving means saying, "Your action will no longer be taken into account." But it goes further. The "purification of memory" is based on the subject who forgives taking on a new attitude

with respect to the wrongdoer, an attitude that allows her to overcome and go beyond responses based on the evil inflicted and to "adopt a morally noble position." This positive attitude qualitatively exceeds merely not taking into account the evil inflicted, thus we can speak of an "asymmetry" of forgiveness. In the words of Edgar Morin,

Forgiveness is a very difficult act that brings us to our limits... It requires generosity and goodness and involves an essential asymmetry: instead of returning evil for evil, I return good for evil, while clemency consists only in stopping evil and refraining from punishing it. Forgiveness is an individual act; clemency is often a political act.⁹

Third, forgiveness is always invited to manifest itself before the person to whom it is addressed. My forgiveness "wants" to make itself known to the one who inflicted an objective evil on me. Therefore, communication and perception on the part of the recipient is proper to forgiveness. Now, this not happening does not mean that forgiveness ceases to be such. It is perfectly possible to forgive someone without the wrongdoer perceiving it as such. Think of the case of forgiving wrongdoers who have either died or are not in a position to perceive forgiveness.

Fourth, in forgiveness, by intuiting the fullness of the forgiven person's value, we give the latter a "credit for her sake alone." This "betting" on the other person "for her sake alone" and not based on an alleged inner peace that would make the forgiven person a means to feeling better, brings forgiveness close to resembling love. As in love, the person who forgives does not seek with his forgiveness confirmation or proof of his "goodness." In fact it is quite the opposite. An arrogant forgiveness that intends to reveal the "moral superiority" of the person who offers it is not forgiveness at all. In the act of forgiveness, the person who forgives focuses completely on the addressee of this act and the "credit" he is granted is simply "for his sake." This is exactly what I was referring to when I pointed out that the center of forgiveness is the forgiven person and not the forgiving person.

⁹ MORIN, E., «Pardoner, c'est résister à la cruauté du monde», *Recherches libertaires*, 30.08.2005 (<http://www.plusloin.org/plusloin/spip.php?article60>). Author's translation.

The credit discussed here is not at all naive. It is not a kind of "cover your eyes," blindness or illusory confidence in the person who has inflicted an evil upon us. As in love, this "credit" goes hand in hand with the awareness of our own fragility and vulnerability. This awareness does not nullify the wrongdoer's responsibility. This credit may not be reciprocated; it may be thwarted when the person to whom it was freely offered offends us again. This credit goes hand in hand with trusting the wrongdoer—a trust that is different from acceptance of or complicity with the offense— with the hope that the other will adequately respond to the gift of forgiveness.

In this order of things, it is worth reflecting on the way in which the person who receives forgiveness and people in general are presented to us. Trust, which, as we have had occasion to note, is at the base of forgiveness; thus, when I trust a person, she is not given to me as an object. Objects are reliable, but not trustworthy. Therefore, the person in whom I trust is not given to me as an object, but as a mystery, as non-objectifiable. In short, the other is revealed. The same happens, in my opinion, in the case of forgiveness. The forgiven person is revealed to us; she is presented to us with evidence that differs from that which an object would present. It is, therefore, a *revelatory givenness* in which the affective component or, more specifically, love plays a central role. In the words of Saint Gregory the Great, "*The force of love is an engine of the soul, which, while it draws it out of the world, lifts it on high.*"¹⁰

In this sense, love, which also underlies the moral phenomenon of forgiveness, constitutes a dynamic orientation and movement towards another person that makes revelation possible and in which what happens, for example, perception, does not occur. Unlike forgiveness, love is never "satisfied" or fulfilled. Something new can always spring up in love. Awareness of this is precisely the main condition of the possibility of forgiveness because, in short, loving a person is an openness to her as given in her unique character. Loving is the process of living in the presence of that radiance that we call "person," not an attempt to possess that which radiates from this personal form.

¹⁰ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT, *Morals on the Book of Job*. Trans. Charles Marriot and James Bliss [Oxford: John Henry Parker, London: J.G. F. and J. Rivington, 1844], Vol. I, Parts I and II, p. 358.

I would like to conclude my presentation by quoting a text from Saint Augustine in which he poetically points to the two elements of forgiveness to which I have been referring, namely, purification of memory and a new way of viewing the recipient of forgiveness. All in all, my presentation is really just a modest commentary on these beautiful words from the Bishop of Hippo:

We do not in any way approve the faults which we wish to see corrected, nor do we wish wrong-doing to go unpunished because we take pleasure in it; we pity the man while detesting the deed or crime, and the more the vice displeases us, the less do we want the culprit to die unrepentant. It is easy and simple to hate evil men because they are evil, but uncommon and dutiful to love them because they are men; thus, in one and the same person you disapprove the guilt and approve the nature, and you thereby hate the guilt with a more just reason because by it the nature which you love is defiled.¹¹

¹¹ ST. AUGUSTINE, *Letter 153 (to Macedonius)*, in *The Fathers of the Church*. Vol. 20. Saint Augustine. Letters, Volume III (131-164). Transl. by W. Parsons, Catholic University of America Press. Washington 1953, p. 282.