WHAT HAPPENED IN AND TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY?

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Forgiveness at the Limit

Impossible or Possible?

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Several contemporary thinkers have responded to the question of the limits of forgiveness. Jankelevitch and Primo Levi have both affirmed the impossibility of forgiving those who do not ask for forgiveness. Arendt talked of the impossibility of forgiving radical evil; and more recently Derrida has written of the impossibility of pure forgiveness *tout court.*

Paul Ricoeur seeks an alternative response to the limit of forgiveness. In an essay entitled "Difficult Forgiveness"—which serves as epilogue to his last major work, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004)—he attempts to give due credence to the strong arguments of Derrida, Jankelevitch, and Arendt, while seeking to shift the final emphasis from "impossible" to "difficult." (As he confesses, the key word separating his work from Derrida's is *impossible.*) In what follows I will address this contemporary debate on forgiveness at the limit, with particular reference to the question of pardon as a secret gift.

I

Let me begin with a short account of Derrida's approach to forgiveness before looking to Ricoeur's alternative reading. I believe this crucial debate

serves to illustrate the different moral positions adopted by hermeneutics and deconstruction at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Why is pardon impossible for Derrida? We can only forgive the unforgivable, he says, and that is precisely what cannot humanly be forgiven. If someone asks for forgiveness, that person has already atoned and so does not require forgiveness. Only radical evil and hatred, the imprescriptible crime, the irreparable effect, the inexpiable act, are matters for forgiveness. Such forgiveness is therefore, for Derrida, unconditional, undeserved, and ultimately impossible.[1] But if it were possible, it, and it alone, would be true.

How does Derrida come to this conclusion? Pure forgiveness, if it existed, would be beyond repentance, atonement, or any account of the crime. It would include the pardoning of radical evil and would have nothing to do with reconciliation, healing, remorse, or repentance. It would be forgiveness of the "guilty as guilty";[2] and, as such, it would not be applicable to those who had repented or apologized (and were therefore no longer guilty). Conditional forgiveness is not forgiveness, argues Derrida, because it is "corrupted" by calculations of the weight of crime and punishment. Unconditional forgiveness, by contrast, would involve forgiving the unforgivable (*pace* Arendt and Jankelevitch) and is impossible. It has nothing to do with judgment, punishment, or recompense. It is beyond laws, norms, and obligations. Even the Abrahamic account of forgiveness is ultimately compromised, Derrida suggests, in that it introduces the notion of pardon in proportion to repentance and, so doing, limits its own ostensible message of pure gratuity and generosity. True unconditional forgiveness is *madness,* a private and inaccessible event, never a matter of public or political action. It lies beyond the logic of rights or duties.

Unconditional and conditional forgiveness are, Derrida concludes, irreducibly heterogeneous and irreconcilable.[3] Forgiveness calls for a "hyperbolic ethics" beyond ethics. And in this sense Derrida holds out forgiveness as an impossible ideal, even as he admits that in everyday life and history we have to engage in acts of pardon "in a series of conditions of all kinds ('psycho-sociological, political' etc.)."[4] But the problem, as I see it, is that there is no way for Derrida to *transit* or *translate* between the conditional and unconditional. There are no criteria, mediations, or orientations. Pardon is, at best, a leap in the dark, a form of insane guesswork or indiscriminate decision. All we know is that we can forgive only the

unforgivable, except perhaps for the unforgiving, namely those who refuse to forgive. And this, of course, places a heavy burden to forgive on the victims of radical evil while affirming that all perpetrators of radical evil be unconditionally forgiven. This seems unjust, to say the least; but we must remember that we are not talking here of what is possible. Maybe pure forgiveness has little to do with real human beings, since it is unrealizable in any case?[5] Who knows?

II

Ricoeur takes Derrida's account on board while moving from the impossible to the possible. From the outset, Ricoeur confesses that his analysis will be formulated in the "optative" mood. It will operate under the sign of a certain "eschatology" of memory.[6] In other words, he lets us know that he is going to discuss the possibility of "difficult" forgiveness in terms of a projection of an act of unbinding—an act that goes beyond the limits of law and prescription, crime and punishment, fault and reparation (limits to be respected and recognized as necessary in the order of politics and justice). But unlike Derrida, who sees such forgiveness as a hyperbolic and impossible ideal, Ricoeur wants to inscribe it under the sign of an "anthropology of capable being": an anthropology grafted onto a philosophy of religion that says, "*You can forgive*" (463).

How does he propose to do this? Let me briefly trace Ricoeur's argument. Just as the voice of evil, fault, and guilt proceeds from the unfathomable depths of human selfhood, the voice of forgiveness is a "voice from above" (467). To the abyss of radical evil responds the vertical height of forgiveness. There is a radical disproportion between this polar dichotomy of depth and height that, Ricoeur concedes, constitutes the "torment" of his analysis. But while he is prepared to agree with Derrida that forgiveness is indeed directed toward the unforgivable (it is without condition, exception, or restriction), he refuses to conclude that it is therefore *impossible.* Suggesting how the seeming impossibility of forgiveness gives way to possibility is the difficult task of his reflection.

First, Ricoeur insists we separate the unforgivable and the imprescriptible, for while the imprescriptible—for example, crimes against humanity, genocide—requires justice to be done, pardon operates at a level

of surplus love beyond the limits of justice. "To forgive [genocide] would be to ratify impunity, which would be a grave injustice committed at the expense of the law, and even more so, of the victims" (473). This does not mean of course that forgiveness dispenses with justice, only that it supplements it with a logic of excess and gift beyond the economy of exchange, and outside the circle of accusation and punishment. His solution to this dilemma will ultimately be an unbinding of the agent from the act (or, as Augustine might have put it, of the sinner from the sin). But I shall return to this shortly.

Ricoeur, unlike Derrida, accepts that a certain stage of exchange is part of the odyssey of the "spirit of forgiveness" (478). Ricoeur believes (again *pace* Derrida) that at the level of practice there does exist a correlation between forgiveness requested and forgiveness granted. And he cites the example of certain exceptional public gestures like Chancellor Brandt kneeling in Warsaw or the pope during his visit to Jerusalem. Ricoeur agrees that while only the victims can forgive (no one can do it for them), there is still a possibility of verticality that can supplement, without dispensing with, this limit of forgiveness. This is where Ricoeur rejoins the question of forgiveness as gift (*par-don, ver-geben*). The difficulty with gift as a model of exchange is, Derrida and other critics argue, that it can place the beneficiary under a debt he or she cannot repay. But this is to remain within the economic model of market exchange. And that is precisely what the commandment to love one's enemy contests insofar as it breaks the rule of reciprocity and "requires the extraordinary." Proposing a nonmarket form of gift as love or "extravagance," Ricoeur proposes that "faithful to the gospel rhetoric of hyperbole, according to this commandment the only gift that is justified is the one given to the enemy, from whom, by hypothesis, one expects nothing in return. But precisely, the hypothesis is false: what one expects from love is that it will convert the enemy into a friend according to a vertical event of surplus. And this surplus implies an unfathomable enigma of asymmetry between the height of forgiveness and the abyss of guilt" (482–83). For Ricoeur, forgiveness is difficult indeed—but, again, not impossible!

Ricoeur cites the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa (1996–99), established by Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu, as a model of exchange that seeks to purge a violent past. As a public political process Ricoeur commends it, while recognizing its limits. The

purpose of the commission was, in its own words, to "collect testimony, console the injured, indemnify the victims and amnesty those who confessed to committing political crimes" (483). The aim of this process was not in fact pardon as such but reconciliation, in a political sense. And the benefits were clear in therapeutic, moral, and political terms. "In offering a public space for complaints and the recounting of suffering, the commission certainly gave rise to a shared *katharsis,*" but the "amnesty granted by the competent committee did not amount to forgiveness on the part of victims" (484). It was a matter of the victims having their memories and stories of suffering told and recognized as true by the perpetrators and the committee. While acknowledging the clear limits of this process of "understanding without revenge" or recompense (the victims were deprived of the satisfaction of any normal sanction of a trial—punishment and judgment of perpetrators), Ricoeur nonetheless celebrates the commission as a "historic opportunity for a public form of the work of memory and mourning in the service of public peace" (485). But Ricoeur goes further, for he dares suggest the possibility of seeing under the figure of such a "public exercise of political reconciliation something like an *incognito* of forgiveness": something that can occur only at the "most secret level of selfhood" and personhood. Pardon is not a universal law to be prescribed or imposed; it is an act of surprising gratuity that may emerge through reconciliation but is by no means necessitated or even implicated by it. In short, the exchange model of reconciliation may be inspired or informed by some secret spirit of forgiveness, though it is by no means its equivalent. Pardon and reconciliation operate at different levels; but they may nonetheless interanimate each other in secret, nonprescriptive ways.

But here again Ricoeur is faced with the vexed question: How does one overcome the ostensible incommensurability between the unconditionality of forgiveness and the conditionality of the request for forgiveness? Again Ricoeur proposes a nonmarket model of exchange of gift and receptivity that nonetheless preserves the polarity of the extremes—of conditional and unconditional. (In asking for pardon one must be open to receiving a negative response from the other: I cannot forgive you). But the ultimate question is: "What force makes one capable of asking, giving or receiving the word of forgiveness?" (486). In short, to what power do we appeal in asking for forgiveness?

Ricoeur looks to the capacities of unbinding (forgiveness) and binding (promising) to suggest a way of mastering the course of time and giving a continuity to the present by giving a future to the past. He borrows here from Hannah Arendt's notion of the continuation and renovation of action (natality) outlined in *The Human Condition* (a response, in part, to Heidegger's preference for Dasein's mortality and rupture). What is crucial for both Ricoeur and Arendt is the notion that forgiving and promising are capacities that depend on human plurality—that is, the idea of persons relating to each other in an intersubjective context. Acknowledging that forgiveness has a religious aura that promising does not, Arendt nonetheless wants to argue that forgiveness, which opposes vengeance, is a *human* power. Even the Gospels, she notes, require that humans forgive each other before they seek forgiveness from God. And this act of unbinding is the token of human freedom, of the ability to find some release from the evils and errors of the past in order to be able to start all over again: what she famously calls the event of natality. Only through a mutual release from what they have done can humans remain free agents (487). But while promising represents the possibility of a political act of will (treaties, accords, pacts between governments and peoples), forgiveness is, concedes Arendt, an act of love that keeps a distance from the political.

Ricoeur agrees with much of this; but he goes further than Arendt in insisting that forgiveness needs to be understood not only as the unbinding of debt but, at the very "heart of selfhood," as the unbinding of the *agent from the act.* But how, we may ask, do we move from the unforgivable fault to the miracle of forgiveness? Ricoeur responds that forgiveness renders the guilty person *able to begin again* by unbinding the person as agent from the act, which, qua act, remains condemned and unforgivable. Here he also goes further than Derrida, who argued that to forgive a person but condemn his act is like pardoning a subject other than the one who committed the act (490): in other words, one would be talking about two different people. But Ricoeur takes a decisive step from impossibility to possibility by appealing to his fundamental notion of *l'homme capable.* This is crucial. The person who committed the crime is *also* an agent *capable* of doing otherwise, that is, of committing good acts (including those, post hoc, of repentance and remorse). Here Ricoeur speaks of the radical uncoupling "at the heart of the very power to act—of agency—namely, between the effectuation and the capacity that it actualizes. This intimate

dissociation signifies that the *capacity* of commitment belonging to the moral subject is not exhausted by its various inscriptions in the affairs of the world. This dissociation expresses an act of faith, a *credit* addressed to the resources of self-regeneration" (490).

It is telling that at this pivotal point in his analysis Ricoeur speaks of an "ultimate act of trust," an act based on an "intimate" pairing proposed by the Abrahamic memory of the Religions of the Book—namely the pair "forgiveness" and "repentance." This forms a paradox in that the response to forgiveness is implied in the gift itself, "while the antecedence of the gift is recognized at the very heart of the inaugural gesture of repentance" (491). And he goes further to suggest that if forgiveness is indeed the supreme height—responding to the abyss of fault—it lasts "forever" beyond notions of before and after—and this in contrast to repentance, which occurs in historical time (whether sudden or protracted). So the paradox relates to a circle—namely, the circle between the gift of forgiveness that remains *forever* and what comes to be *in each instance.* Is this not pardon as the entry of eternity into history?

Rather than engaging here in standard theological arguments about grace and nature, divine or human initiative, Ricoeur prefers to remain within the limits of a philosophy of religion grafted onto (1) an anthropology of human persons as "capable beings," (2) a fundamental ontology of being as act and power *(dunamis),* to be traced from Aristotle to Leibniz, Spinoza, and Bergson; and finally (3) a moral philosophy, as in Kant, which recognizes that the "predisposition to good" is more original than the radical propensity to evil *(Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason)* (491). Moreover, Ricoeur extends his plea for the primacy of goodness, capacity, and natality—evinced in the circle of forgiveness and repentance—to a hermeneutic analysis of the great myths of creation, previously presented in his *Symbolism of Evil* (1960). There, referring specifically to the Adamic myth, he speaks of the narrative of the Fall as symbolizing something irremediable but in no way inevitable in its consequences.[7] This is a pivotal point for Ricoeur—the excess of capacity over the past. In *Memory, History, Forgetting,* he states that "the gap with respect to creation holds in reserve the possibility of another history inaugurated in each case by the act of repentance and punctuated by all the irruptions of goodness and of innocence over the course of time" (492). Indeed, Ricoeur goes on to add that this "immense project of restoration" can in turn be aided by a philosophical reading of the Jewish and Christian "imagination" of the suffering servant. (The terms *philosophical* and *imagination* are telling.)

Refusing recourse to speculative or transcendental solutions to the paradox of forgiveness and repentance, Ricoeur returns once again to his insistence on a practical philosophy of action uttered in the "optative mood." He endorses, in the final analysis, a discreet eschatology whose ultimate word is happiness. "Under the sign of forgiveness," concludes Ricoeur, "the guilty person is to be considered capable of something other than his offences and his faults. He is held to be restored to his capacity for acting, and action restored to its capacity for continuing. This capacity is signaled in the small acts of consideration in which we recognized the incognito of forgiveness played out on the public stage. And finally, this restored capacity is enlisted by promising as it projects action toward the future. The formula for this liberating word, reduced to the bareness of its utterance, would be: you are better than your actions" (493). In short, the power that enables us to give and receive forgiveness is the phrase: *You are able!* In spite of the ostensible impossibility of forgiveness, you *can* forgive and be forgiven. You can be restored to the world of action and the hope of happiness.

It is significant, I think, that in spite of his insistence on the philosophical nature of his analysis, Ricoeur signs off with the suggestion that under the sign of the ultimate *incognito* of forgiveness can be found an echo of the words of wisdom uttered in the Song of Songs, "Love is as strong as death" (506). The terms *incognito* and *echo* are safety nets here, but one senses that the sacred is not far off.

III

So how does Ricoeur make the final leap from impossible to possible forgiveness? How does he surmount the claim by Derrida, Arendt, and Jankelevitch that forgiveness of radical evil is impossible? Acknowledging that such forgiveness is extremely "difficult" (the title of his essay), Ricoeur ultimately seems to point to a superhuman origin of gift and capacity that belongs to the order of spirit and love, an order that observes a logic of surplus and superabundance. In short, what is impossible to

humans—as Derrida rightly notes—is not impossible to God or, by extension, the divine capacity for renovation and rebirth that is the mark of the "gap of creation," the miracle of origin, in each human being. Derrida too admitted that forgiveness is possible only for something or someone beyond the human, but he does not name a tradition of memory, faith, or love to which one might adhere. He leaves the space of the "inhuman" empty, without hermeneutic or practical bridge back to the human. Derrida does not sign off by citing the Song of Songs or giving the last word to love over death. Nor, finally, does he give primacy to the origin of good over evil, restoration over rupture, reconciliation over aporia, happiness over angst. Perhaps it is a similar miracle of love that Derrida privately intends in his call for a messianic "democracy to come"? But he does not say so, and it is impossible to know.

Ricoeur, by contrast, makes his intentions clear even if he acknowledges the huge difficulties involved in moving from the impossible to the possible. First, he openly if gently confesses his adherence to the Jewish and Christian imagination of the suffering servant and the vertical height of forgiveness (it comes "from above"). This is somewhat analogous, I would suggest, to the crucial move in Alcoholics Anonymous where adherents incapable of controlling their lives hand themselves over to "a higher power," who in turn empowers them to do the impossible—unbind themselves as agents from the past acts of addiction, and thereby realize that they are more than their past history and can be restored to a capacity to begin again.

Ricoeur also differs from Derrida, it seems to me, in acknowledging numerous ways in which the leap toward forgiveness can be prepared for, though never guaranteed or demanded as a law or method. One of these ways is the narrative power of exchanging memories and stories with one's enemies, those we cannot forgive.

In conclusion, let me say a few words about the hermeneutic of narrative preforgiveness. In an essay entitled "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," Ricoeur outlines an *ethic of narrative hospitality* that may nurture a predisposition but by no means a guarantee of forgiveness. Forgiveness comes from beyond us, as Ricoeur insists, but humans may be more inclined to receive and offer this gift if they learn to love their enemies by exchanging narrative memories with them. This involves "taking responsibility in imagination and in sympathy for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern the other."[8] In the case of genocide or famine memorials (I am thinking, for example, of the Holocaust and Irish Famine memorials side by side in Battery Park, New York), this takes the form of an exchange between different peoples' histories in such a way that we practice an art of transference and translation that allows us to welcome the story of the other—the memory of the stranger, the victim, the forgotten one.

This practice of narrative hospitality poses a particular problem in the limit case of hereditary hatred. Here, Ricoeur insists, there is no quick therapeutic fix or exoneration but a difficult labor of attending to founding events that are not my own and, at times, to life stories that belong to my long-sworn adversary. As he describes in *Memory, History, Forgetting*, we are faced with the difficult task of learning to "recount otherwise" (477). But the best that such narrative hospitality can achieve is to serve as a "secret alchemy" that may induce a certain "disposition to consideration." Such gestures of narrative imagination and empathy can sometimes lead to an exchange between a request and an offer of forgiveness. But this can never be institutionalized as a political right or duty. And questions of guilt and accountability are not suspended. At best, translating the stories of the other resists the reification of a historical event into a fixed obsession by showing how each event may be told in different ways by narrators other than ourselves. Not that everything becomes relative and arbitrary. On the contrary, acts of trauma and suffering call out for justice, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives. The resulting overlap may thus lead to what Gadamer calls a "fusion of horizons" where diverse horizons of consciousness may at last find some common ground—a reciprocal transfer between opposite minds.[9] "The identity of a group, culture, people or nation, is not that of an immutable substance," writes Ricoeur, "nor that of a fixed structure, but that, rather, of a recounted story." A hermeneutic exchange of stories effectively resists an arrogant or rigid conception of cultural identity that prevents us from perceiving the radical implications of narrative hospitality—namely, the possibility of "revising every story which has been handed down and of carving out a place for several stories directed towards the same past."[10] Of course, while this model of narrative hospitality may work in historical conflicts like Northern Ireland, the Balkans, or South Africa, it is not easily applied to limit situations like the Holocaust. For while a plurality of

narratives by the victims is desirable (as Primo Levi says, the story must be told again and again so that the Holocaust will never be repeated), a plurality of narratives by the perpetrators—unless explicitly expressing apology, guilt, and remorse—can easily lead to relativism or revisionism. And there are other cases of genocide where a reciprocal exchange of memories is equally difficult. One thinks of the Armenian genocide in Turkey. Might it ever be possible for an open exchange of memories between Turks and Armenians to bring about some kind of reconciliation, preparing eventually for the miraculous "incognito of forgiveness"? Or for a narrative hospitality between Jews and Arabs?

A plurality of narratives should increase, not diminish, respect for the singularity of the events narrated through the various acts of remembering. It might even be said to increase our sense of awareness of such events, especially if it is foreign to us in time, space, or cultural provenance. "*Recounting differently* is not inimical to a certain historical reverence to the extent that the inexhaustible richness of the event is honoured by the diversity of stories which are made of it, and by the competition to which that diversity gives rise."[11] And Ricoeur adds this critical point: "The ability to recount the founding events of our national history in different ways is reinforced by the exchange of cultural memories. This ability to exchange has as a touchstone the will to share symbolically and respectfully in the commemoration of the founding events of other national cultures, as well as those of their ethnic minorities and their minority religious denominations."[12] When it comes to the question of reconciliation and forgiveness, this point applies particularly to events of pain and trauma (as in famine or war memorials). And here again it is a question, not of guaranteeing pardon but, as Ricoeur reminds us in *Memory, History, Forgetting,* of carrying out "an exchange between a request and an offer, in which the unforgivable begins to be chipped away" (477–78). I think the term *chipped away* is critical here. It is a matter of a long working through, not some cheap therapeutic magic.

Narrative hospitality may also prepare for forgiveness insofar as it allows for a retrieval of the betrayed promises of the past, so that we may respond to our "debt to the dead" and endeavor to give them a voice. The goal of narrative retrieval is, therefore, to try to give a future to the past by remembering it in the right way, ethically and poetically. In *Memory, History, Forgetting,* a crucial aspect of reinterpreting transmitted traditions is the task of discerning past promises that have not been honored. For "the past is not only what is bygone—that which has taken place and can no longer be changed—it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted" (8). In other words, the unfulfilled future of the past may well signal the richest part of a tradition—its unactualized *possibilities;* and the emancipation of "this unfulfilled future of the past is the major benefit that we can expect from the crossing of memories and the exchange of narratives" (8). It is especially the founding events of a community—traumatic or dramatic—that need to be reread in this critical manner in order to unlock the potencies and expectancies that the subsequent unfolding of history may have forgotten or travestied. This is why narrative hospitality often involves a recovery of some seminal moment of suffering or hope, of the repressed traumas or impeded promises that are all too often occluded by Official History. "The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept," notes Ricoeur. And narrative hospitality can, at best, offer ways of "bringing them back to life like the dry bones in the valley described in the prophecy of Ezekiel" (9). And, for Arendt as for Ricoeur, promising is the other side of forgiving, as it opens history to natality and enables agents to begin again.

One of the ultimate goals of narrative hospitality between enemies is *pardon,* though the goal is of the order not of teleology but of eschatology, not of necessity but of surprise. And here again we encounter the boundary situation of unforgivable guilt and the possibility of "something other" that might make impossible forgiveness possible. If empathy and hospitality toward others are crucial steps in the ethics of remembrance, there is something *more*—something that entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness. In short, the exchange of memories of suffering demands more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). And this something "extra" involves pardon insofar as pardon means "shattering the debt." Here the order of justice and reciprocity can be supplemented, but not replaced, by that of "charity and gift." Such forgiveness demands huge patience, an enduring practice of "working through," mourning, and letting go. But it is not a forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. It remembers our

debt to the dead while at the same time introducing something other, something difficult almost to the point of impossibility, but something all the more important for that reason. One thinks of Brandt kneeling at Warsaw, Havel's apology to the Sudeten Germans, Hume's preparedness to speak with the IRA, Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, Hillesum's refusal to hate her hateful persecutors—all miraculous moments where an ethics of reciprocity is touched and transfigured by a poetics of pardon. The leap made. But I repeat: one does not replace the other—*both* justice *and* pardon are equally important in the act of remembering past trauma. Ricoeur insists on this point. "To the degree that charity exceeds justice we must guard against substituting it for justice. Charity remains a surplus; this surplus of compassion and tenderness is capable of giving the exchange of memories its profound motivation, its daring and its momentum" (11).

When we dare to listen to the stories of enemies or strangers, to other peoples and communities not our own, are we not suddenly all famine sufferers, genocide victims, casualties of war—at least for a special, fleeting moment? A moment, out of time yet also in time, that bears the trace of the incognito of forgiveness?

We return finally to the limit situation of evil that serves as abyssal opposite to the gift of forgiveness. Unforgivable evil is not just something we struggle against. It is also something we undergo. To ignore this passivity of evil suffered is, Ricoeur concludes, to ignore the extent to which evil strikes us as shockingly strange and disempowering. One of the wisest responses to evil is, on this count, to acknowledge its traumatizing effects and work through them *(durcharbeiten)* as best we can. Practical understanding can redirect us toward action only if it has already recognized that some element of estrangement almost always attaches to evil, especially when it concerns illness, horror, catastrophe, or death. No matter how prepared we are to make sense of evil, we are never prepared enough. That is why the "work of mourning" is so important as a way of not allowing the inhuman nature of suffering to result in a complete "loss of self" (what Freud called "melancholia"). For without selfhood no pardon could be possible. Some kind of catharsis is necessary to prevent the slide into fatalism that all too often issues in despairing self-destruction. The critical detachment brought about by cathartic mourning elicits a wisdom

that may turn *passive lament* into the possibility of *active complaint*, that is, *protest*.[13] Though protest is, of course, not yet pardon.

Here narrative testimonies, mentioned above, may help the victim to escape the alienation of evil, that is, to move from a position of mute helplessness to a form of self-renewal. Some kind of narrative working through is necessary, it seems, for survivors of evil not to feel crippled by grief or guilt (about the death of others and their own survival) or to succumb to the game of the "expiatory victim" that makes pardon impossible. What the catharsis of the mourning narrative allows is that new actions and responses—including pardon—are still possible *in spite of evil suffered.* It detaches us from the obsessional repetitions and repressions of the past and frees us for a future. For only in unleashing the agent from the act and the victim from the evil—in the miracle of secret pardon—can one escape the disabling cycles of retribution, fate, and destiny: cycles that alienate us from the possibility to forgive by instilling the view that evil is overpoweringly alien—that is, irresistible.

Working through the experience of evil—narratively, practically, cathartically—helps us to take the paralyzing allure out of evil. And in so doing it enables us to remain open to the incognito gift of pardon. Working through is central to an anthropology of capability and an ontology of potency and act in what makes evil *resistible.* In sum, by (a) transforming the alienation and victimization of lament into a moral response of just struggle, and (b) opening the possibility of a spiritual response of forgiveness, we refuse victory to evil, declaring love as strong as death. But while narrative working through, testimony, and catharsis may bring us to the threshold of pardon, they cannot cross it of their own momentum. They can predispose us to the gift of forgiveness but cannot deliver it.

Something "more" is required. Radical evil calls for an answering power of radical good. Against the "never" of evil, which makes pardon impossible, we are asked to embrace what Ricoeur calls the "marvel of a once again" that makes it possible.[14] But the possibility of forgiveness is a "marvel," we noted, precisely because it surpasses the limits of rational calculation and explanation. There is a certain gratuitousness about pardon due to the very fact that the evil it addresses is not part of some dialectical necessity. Pardon is something that makes little sense before we give it but much sense once we do. Before it occurs it seems impossible, unpredictable, incalculable in terms of an economy of exchange. There is

no science of forgiveness. And yet this is precisely where hermeneutic sensibility, attentive to the particularity of specific evil events, joins forces with the practice of patient working through—their joint aim being to ensure that past evils might be prevented from recurring. Such prevention calls for pardon as well as protest so that the cycles of repetition and revenge give way to future possibilities of nonevil. This is a good example of Ricoeur's claim that pardon gives a future to the past.

Cathartic narration can, Ricoeur concludes, help to make the impossible task of pardon that bit more possible without ever allowing amnesty to fall into amnesia. The past must be recollected and worked through so that we can identify what it is that we are forgiving. For if pardon is beyond reason, it is never as blind or mad as Derrida suggests. And if it is mobilized by the gratuity of love—which calls for that element of extra—it is never insensitive to the logic of justice. Or to put it in Pascal's terms, pardon has its reasons that reason cannot comprehend. Perhaps only a divinity could forgive indiscriminately. And there may indeed be some crimes that a God alone is able to pardon. Even Christ, as Ricoeur notes, had to ask his father to forgive his crucifiers: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." As man alone he could not do it. Impossible for us, possible for God. Here an ethics of pardon approaches the threshold of a religious hermeneutics.

But, finally, what kind of religious hermeneutics are we talking about? In his essay on evil and in the essay on pardon in *Memory, History, Forgetting,* Ricoeur seems to work within an exclusively Judeo-Christian tradition. But in his last testament, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort,* Ricoeur extends the horizon of "the sacred that makes possible" (God as *Posse,* as he puts it) to all great wisdom traditions, amounting to a call for a radically interconfessional hospitality. Here too there is need for pardon, to forgive the great crimes committed by one religion against another in history. And so in this confessional testimony, which uncharacteristically bridges the divide between the philosophical and the theological, Ricoeur speaks of a "grace" that takes the form of an "intimate transcendence which rips through the veils of confessional religious codes."[15] Some might suggest that Ricoeur is approximating here Derrida's anonymous structure of messianicity, a religion without religion, an Other without face, tradition, or voice. But I think not. For while the advent of such an Other is impossible for Derrida,

for Ricoeur it is a sacred marvel that makes the impossible possible in each lived moment that pardon is given or received.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), esp. "On Forgiveness" (in dialogue with Richard Kearney et al.) in *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness,* 52–72. See also Jacques Derrida, "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy,* ed. Mark Dooley and Richard Kearney (London: Routledge, 1999), 65–84. Our discussion of forgiveness here is largely though not exclusively focused on contemporary debates within so-called continental philosophy. A more extensive treatment of the theme would ideally address similar debates within the so-called Anglo-American tradition. For a fine example of the latter, see Charles Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). One of MacIntyre's great talents is his ability to draw equally from both schools of thought, along with thinkers like Ricoeur, who is the central figure of our analysis here.

2. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness,* 3.

3. Derrida, "On Forgiveness," 44.

4. Ibid., 49.

5. Derrida, "To Forgive," in *Questioning God,* ed. John Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 21–51. See also the excellent commentary by Marguerite La Caze, *Wonder and Generosity: Their Role in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming), esp. ch. 6.

6. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004), 459. Subsequent page citations to this work are given parenthetically in the text.

7. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

8. Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe," in *Paul Ricoeur: The Hermeneutics of Praxis,* ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage Publications, 1996), 7.

9. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975).

10. Ricoeur, "Reflections," 7.

11. Ibid., 8.

12. Ibid., 9.

13. Paul Ricoeur, "Memory and Forgetting," in Dooley and Kearney, *Questioning Ethics,* 5–12. See also Paul Ricoeur, "Evil: A Challenge to Philosophy and

Theology," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Indianapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 250–51. See also my analysis of this theme: Richard Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity and the Sublime," in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (London: Routledge, 2003), 83–84.

14. Ricoeur quoted in Richard Kearney, "Evil, Monstrosity," 105–6. See also William Desmond, *Beyond Hegel and Dialectic* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), 238–39. And for a comparative and contrasting "Eastern" perspective on the topic of pardon as it relates to a number of contemporary political situations of violence and war, see Joseph S. O'Leary, "Buddhism and Forgiveness," *Japan Mission Journal* 56 (Spring 2002): 37–49.

15. Ricoeur, *Vivant jusqu'à la mort* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2007), 45.

PART III

Thematic Analyses