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Hannah Arendt and Collective Forgiving – Glen Pettigrove
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In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt argued that forgiveness is one of two faculties that are necessary for political life: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever . . .”¹ While Arendt was speaking of forgiveness between individual persons, recent years have witnessed a rapid growth in the employment of the language of forgiveness in a rather different arena of political life. Almost overnight requests for forgiveness and offers of forgiveness by political, collective agents have become commonplace.² The aim of this paper is to contribute to the philosophical analysis of the practices and norms of forgiveness in both of these arenas, i.e., both between individuals and between collectives. I shall begin by articulating and refining Arendt’s account of forgiveness between individuals. We shall then be in a position to explore its implications for forgiveness of and by collectives.

Individual Forgiveness

Our ability to act, to begin something new, is double-edged. On the one side, Arendt observes, acting enables us to emerge as distinct individuals from the backdrop of the undifferentiated life of the species. Action both reveals and makes possible the particular persons we are and are in the midst of becoming. At the same time, the ability to act supplies the necessary condition for harming another. Without agency, there is

neither blame nor offense. There is at most annoyance, inconvenience and pain. Thus the ability to act brings with it the possibility of both praise and blame, of becoming a person and a perpetrator.³

Part of what makes Arendt's theory of action interesting is that she notices the way in which one's identity and one's ability to act are 1) intimately intertwined and 2) not entirely up to the individual. One's identity is neither something over which one has exclusive control nor something of which one has exhaustive knowledge.⁴ As a result, one's ability to begin something new, especially in the aftermath of wrongdoing, is limited by the readiness of those with whom one has to do to see it as new. I cannot, for example, reconcile myself to another if they see my show of repentance as another insincere strategy in the selfish pursuit of my own goals.⁵ I take it that this dimension of who one is and what one does, the dimension that takes shape between oneself and others, is what Arendt is speaking of when she observes in the passage quoted earlier, "Without being . . . released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell."⁶

Fortunately, while action generates what she dubs "the predicament of irreversibility," it also carries with it the remedy to this predicament.⁷ The remedy, like the predicament, depends upon the presence and actions of others. Others can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. They can forgive.

The faculty of forgiving, as Arendt describes it, is the ability to redeem another "from the predicament of irreversibility," i.e., from her inability "to undo what [she] has

done.” Arendt goes so far as to say, “forgiving serves to undo the deeds of the past.”⁸ In one sense, of course, the latter claim is false. Undoing what is done is precisely what forgiving cannot do. The transgression cannot be removed from the realm of social facts. Forgiveness itself necessarily presupposes the transgression. Each time forgiveness is offered a transgression is invoked, is remembered. Without the transgression there would be nothing to forgive, so forgiveness cannot eliminate the transgression. The closest the request for and offer of forgiveness can come to undoing past deeds is to redistribute their costs and prepare the way for a new future.

In another sense, however, forgiveness does serve “to undo the deeds of the past.” Our actions are partly constituted by their consequences. The death of the archduke changes our act. It is no longer an assassination attempt. It is an assassination. The response of the person to whom we speak invites the transition from the description “I said *x*” to “I offended (or delighted or amused) *y*.” The nature of the act, at least in many cases, is altered by its outcome. This quality of actions allows forgiveness to alter the nature of the transgression.

However, were this all forgiveness did, it would not be distinctive in the way Arendt suggests. The wrongdoer’s subsequent actions would have the same potential. Rather than being the beginning of a life of crime, the deed could become the inspiration for reform. We need to attend to something other than the way consequences constitute deeds in order to locate the unique way in which forgiveness can undo the deeds of the past.

The distinctiveness of forgiving rests on the fact that it cannot be seen as a consequence of the initial transgression. Forgiveness, unlike revenge, is not merely a reaction to the misdeed.

[T]he act of forgiving . . . is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.⁹

Seen in this light, forgiving undoes the deeds of the past in three ways. It moves outside the domain of the natural consequences of the misdeed, thereby setting it aside. The deed is now a thing of the past rather than something continually present. Second, setting the deed aside in this way reinterprets its importance in the present and reinterprets the perpetrator in the light of present and future possibilities rather than exclusively in terms of past actions. Third, by so doing it creates the opportunity for new actions and new relations not determined (or at least not wholly determined) by the transgression and invites the transgressor into this new future.

Our discussion suggests that forgiving is even more like what Arendt identifies as the other faculty necessary for political life, viz., promising, than she recognized.¹⁰ To ask forgiveness is to imply and sometimes even to express a promise: You can count on me not to do this sort of thing again. Forgiving likewise involves a promise-like commitment. To forgive is to commit oneself not to act on the basis of the hostile reactions that stem from the transgression and its consequences. To say, "I forgive you,"

is to let the other know that you shall not define her as wrongdoer, reducing the scope of who she is to this transgression. It is also to let her know that your actions toward her shall not be governed by the transgression. In so doing, you express a commitment not to behave toward her in certain ways, and you invite her to expect certain kinds of interactions from you. The utterance invites her to trust you not to give rein to your vindictive streak, not to treat her as an enemy. It is this commitment that enables forgiveness to undo the past in the sense we have explored. It is this commitment that makes possible a new future, which is the chief function of promising.

Thus, the dynamics of forgiving depend upon those of promising. That is not to say that the commitment of forgiving involves everything that we associate with a promise. It is generally thought that to promise one must utter certain words, such as “I promise to . . .,” whereas forgiving does not require such an utterance.¹¹ Under ordinary circumstances, when one makes a promise, one gives the person to whom the promise was made a right. She has a right to the thing promised, by virtue of one’s having promised. If one fails to follow through on the promise, one has wronged her. However, if the person who says, “I forgive you,” subsequently gives vent to anger grounded in the transgression she forgave, we don’t tend to think she has wronged the other. The reason for this difference between the commitments of forgiving and the commitments of promising may stem from the thought that the wrongdoer “has it coming to her” or “is getting what she deserves” in a way that the promise recipient does not. Or it may arise from the thought that the one who fails to follow through on her forgiving commitment always has an excusing condition, whereas the one who fails to fulfill her promise typically does not. While the commitment of forgiving may not be like a promise in

every respect, forgiving shares with promising a distinctive quality that Arendt used to define promising. Both of them make possible a shared future, reducing the uncertainties of that future by letting others know what they can expect from us.¹²

One of the virtues of Arendt's account of forgiveness is reflected in the connection between forgiving and promising. Arendt's description focuses on the active elements of forgiveness.¹³ To forgive is to release the other from the consequences of his actions, to commit oneself to act in ways not determined by the hostilities the transgression begat, and thereby to initiate and invite a new future. The activity of forgiving, which is central to the New Testament discussion of *aphienai* on which Arendt draws, is often overlooked in the contemporary philosophical literature on forgiveness. The latter tends to focus on the emotions one experiences rather than the activities in which one engages in forgiving.¹⁴ Consequently, Arendt offers an important corrective to the current discussion.

However, she does so at the expense of the "psychological emotional overtones"¹⁵ that are also an important part of the phenomenology of forgiveness. These emotions form a crucial component in our conception of forgiving. One may tell the wrongdoer he is forgiven and commit oneself to act in ways not determined by hostilities rooted in the transgression. But if, in spite of one's efforts to eradicate them, the hostilities continue unabated, at some point we are inclined to describe the forgiveness as imperfect or incomplete. We feel the need under such circumstances to reinterpret our actions as an *attempt* to forgive. We feel this need even if our hostile attitudes are never manifested in action toward the other. This fact suggests that a more complete account will require attending to both the active and the emotional components of forgiving.

One might think that the inclusion of an emotional condition highlights another difference between forgiving and promising. After all, a felicitous promise does not require an emotional condition. Ordinarily, it makes no difference to the success of one's promising whether one is angry, sad, anxious, happy, confident or serene, either at the time of making it or at the time of its fulfillment. However, in some cases it does, viz., when one is promising to feel a certain way in future. For example, one might say, "I promise I will be more cheerful tomorrow." How I am feeling at the moment is not relevant to the constitution of the promise as promise, but it *is* relevant to the *content* of that promise. Something akin may be involved in forgiving, viz., a commitment not to feel certain ways or indulge certain emotions in future.¹⁶

The account of forgiving that is taking shape thus far involves three elements. It involves 1) releasing the transgressor from the consequences of her action, which in turn involves 2) a commitment not to act from hostilities rooted in the transgression, and 3) the eventual diminishment of such hostilities. To this account Arendt adds two further conditions. First, the transgression being forgiven must have been "done unknowingly."¹⁷ Second, forgiving is done for the sake of the one forgiven.

Throughout her discussion of forgiving Arendt insists that what is forgiven is a deed that was done unknowingly. Indeed, at one point she sets the bar for the forgivable even higher, saying that forgiving redeems one "from the predicament . . . of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and *could not*, have known what he was doing . . ."¹⁸ Putting the point in this way makes it sound rather indefensible. Doesn't this qualification take us out of the realm of forgiving altogether? Doesn't "they

know not what they do” usher one into the realm of excusing? And if “they did not know” excuses, “they did not and could not have known” would seem fully to exculpate.

A more careful reading of Arendt will address some of these objections. Arendt distinguishes between transgressions, on the one hand, and crimes and willed evil on the other. The latter “are rare, even rarer perhaps than good deeds.”¹⁹ Her point echoes Francis Hutcheson’s contention that, “If we examine the true Springs of human Action, we shall seldom find their Motives worse than Self-Love.”²⁰ The thought is that most misdeeds, even most quite horrible ones, do not make wickedness their aim. They aim at comfort, convenience, personal advancement, the success of one’s family and friends, etc. They arise from the “motives of self-interest, greed, covetousness, resentment, lust for power and cowardice.”²¹

True crimes and willed evil, Arendt argues, are fit only for just retribution.²² Perhaps this is because their perpetrators are beyond redemption. New and better relationships not just *should not* but *cannot* be established with them. But mundane transgressions, and even many extramundane ones, are not nearly so damning. Transgressors’ motives, while evil, are familiar. Our “solidarity in human sinfulness” allows us to comprehend their actions.²³ Our own experiences as transgressors help us recognize that transgressors can “change their minds and start again” and can “be trusted with so great a power as that to begin something new.”²⁴

The deed done unknowingly, then, should not be interpreted after the pattern of the infant whose ignorance exculpates. She does not realize that grabbing her mother’s hair causes her mother pain, so she is not blamed. Rather, the meaning of ‘unknowing’ is nearer to a particular sense of ‘unintentional.’ In the paradigm case one may be aware

that acting in a certain way will cause harm to others, but that harm is not the intentional object of the act. One intends to promote one's own welfare or satisfy one's own desires. In such a case, one's actions are intentional and can be ascribed to one's own agency. The harm to the other need not be just an accidental side-effect. It may be willed as a means to achieve one's end, making one's actions self-conscious and intentional in one sense. Nonetheless, one's action may remain unintentional in another sense, since wronging the other is not one's aim. One does not intend to wrong the other, one simply intends to achieve some other desirable objective. Such actions can be blameworthy in a way that the infant's cannot, but they can still remain distinct from the category of willed evil insofar as they are not willed *as* evil, even if they are both willed and evil. So construed, Arendt's claim can avoid the objection voiced above. We are still speaking of genuine wrongdoing, and so are still in the domain of forgiveness.

Reading Arendt's "unknowing" in the way I have suggested makes the claim that only actions done "unknowingly" can be forgiven more plausible than it at first appeared. But it does not render it uncontroversially true. Whether or not her claim is correct will depend, in part, on the rarity of willed evil. (Arendt's reflections on the Eichmann trial raise the question whether, in the end, she thought there were *any* real instances of willed evil.)²⁵ Her claim also depends upon whether those whose wrongdoing is willed *as* evil really are moral monsters with whom new and better relations both cannot and ought not be established.

While not uncontroversial, there is something attractive about Arendt's view. Distinguishing between transgressions and willed evil as she has invites us to see others' actions, even their clearly wrong actions, in a light that is likely to promote forgiveness.

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem* Arendt suggests that our ability to establish new relations with transgressors stems, in part, from our ability to see ourselves in them. “The reflection that you yourself might have done wrong under the same circumstances may kindle a spirit of forgiveness . . .”²⁶ Often this reflection will involve seeing that, even though the action was wrong, it was not willed as evil. In those rare instances where we are forced to conclude that an action was willed as evil, forgiveness seems pointless. If forgiveness is about creating the possibility of a new future whose conditions and opportunities are not determined by past wrongdoing, and those rare individuals who will evil are incapable of acting in new and better ways, forgiveness in such cases fails to serve a purpose. We cannot remain in community with such a wrongdoer. We are forced to continue to see the irredeemably evil in the light of his wrongdoing and to respond accordingly.

Now let us turn our attention to the one for whom forgiving is done. Arendt claims, “Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it.”²⁷ This assertion runs counter to the discussion of forgiveness in much of the current therapeutic literature. There it is argued that one ought to forgive for one’s own sake.²⁸ Rather than being burdened by the continued presence of anger and resentment, one should let go of these hostilities so that one can begin to grow in a healthier direction. As long as one is still in the grip of resentment, one remains a victim, says another line of thought. One must assert one’s freedom by letting go of the past and embracing one’s own better future.

How might one adjudicate the dispute between Arendt and the therapists? On the one hand, the therapists are speaking well within the conventional use of the language of forgiveness. They aren't mistaken in the way one would be if one tried to use 'amplify' for the process of letting go one's anger. On the other hand, something important has dropped out of the picture, viz., the relationship with the one forgiven.²⁹ One might try to settle the matter by insisting that what the therapists are talking about isn't "really" forgiveness. The "real" forgiveness campaign might try to decide the issue by introducing an alternative term, e.g., we might call one forgiveness and the other anger management. But this strategy is not likely to be widely adopted, partly because there are important similarities between the activity of which Arendt speaks and that with which the therapists are concerned. These similarities are reflected in the employment of a common term for the two activities in a way that would be obscured by separate labels. It seems to me the best thing to do is allow both the use of the term 'forgiveness' and find some other way to distinguish them. A value-neutral approach might use 'therapeutic forgiveness' and 'Arendtian forgiveness,' but that, too, tells us very little about the relationship between the two activities. I think the best option is to situate the two on a continuum, one end of which is a highest manifestation of forgiveness and the other end of which is a lowest common denominator forgiveness. The former would contain everything we hope for in an optimal instance of forgiving. The latter would possess the minimal attributes we would require before an activity could competently be called forgiving. On this scale, Arendtian forgiveness would be nearer the highest manifestation end of the spectrum while therapeutic forgiveness would be less near, although still well above the lowest common denominator. When we are forgiving or being forgiven we hope for a situation

where forgiveness can be offered for the sake of the transgressor. When we fall short of that situation, perhaps because the wrongdoer is not someone with whom we can reestablish relations, then we settle for a second-best forgiveness of the therapeutic sort.

I shall have more to say on the matter of forgiving for the sake of the other when we come to the discussion of collective forgiveness. Before we turn to that discussion, let me pause and reprise the account of individual forgiveness that has emerged from our examination of Arendt. Forgiving of a higher manifestation sort involves releasing the transgressor from the consequences of his actions and committing oneself not to act on hostilities rooted in the transgression, *for the sake of* the transgressor. Eventually forgiving will also involve the diminishment, perhaps even the elimination, of those hostilities.

Collective Forgiveness

In the late 1980s the language of apology and forgiveness began to appear with increasing frequency on the political scene. Nations and other collective agents began to ask for forgiveness and to offer it in hitherto unprecedented ways. There are a number of reasons to think this development good. First, it breaks the self-perpetuating cycle of resentment, retaliation and revenge. Joseph Butler observed,

Malice or resentment towards any man hath plainly a tendency to beget the same passion in him who is the object of it; and this again increases it in the other. It is the very nature of this vice to propogate itself . . . hence it comes to pass, that the first offence, even when so slight as presently to be dropped and forgotten, becomes the occasion of entering into a long intercourse of ill offices.³⁰

By breaking this cycle, forgiveness creates the possibility of a new future not determined by the past, not destined to perpetuate hatred.³¹ Apology and forgiveness offer the

possibility of healing in a way that ignoring and even forgetting do not. They are able to mend old wounds in part because they acknowledge the significance that certain past events have for the personal identities of present agents. They do so in a way that declares allegiance to the moral order, affirming the standing and importance of the other.³² From the vantage of virtue theory, forgiveness has a further benefit. It is an act of magnanimity that can encourage future magnanimity both in the one forgiven and in the one forgiving.

In spite of the abovementioned reasons for welcoming this new development, a number of objections might be raised against the extension of forgiveness to collectives. Some of these objections concern the permissibility of political forgiveness. Should one nation forgive another which has done it wrong, or would forgiving show an insufficient commitment to justice? These questions have been the subject of recent work by Peter Digeser, Martha Minow and others.³³ Another sort of objection, however, has received considerably less attention. These objections are concerned with the very possibility of collectives, especially nations, forgiving or being forgiven. Forgiveness of the sort we have been discussing to this point in the paper involves emotions, commitments and other conditions that may strike us as dubious when ascribed to collectives. Because the permissibility of collective forgiveness has received more attention than its possibility, I shall focus on the latter. I shall identify six objections to collective forgiveness, four of which pertain to contexts in which a collective is offering forgiveness and two of which refer to situations in which a collective is being forgiven. I shall argue that only the last objection presents a clear problem for the extension of the practices of forgiveness from individuals to collectives.

a. Forgiveness by Collectives

The first objection stems from a conception of the relationship that exists between nations. Moral obligations, it is asserted, bind within but not between nations.³⁴ Relations between a nation and persons or groups outside her membership may be more or less peaceful or violent, but they may not be more or less moral. Forgiveness assumes the existence of moral relations between forgiver and forgiven. In order for forgiveness to be proper, the forgiver must have been wronged by the forgiven. If moral relations do not hold between the two, then one cannot be wronged by the other, and thus cannot forgive the other.

The assumptions on which this objection depends are more at home in the 17th century than in the 21st. After the Second World War we are less willing to accept the claim that nations cannot have moral obligations to those outside their citizenry. And in an age where the lives of corporations and individuals routinely extend beyond national boundaries, the claim that those boundaries are morally significant is decreasingly plausible.

A second objection that might be raised against the idea of collective forgiveness stems from a concern about whether collectives can meaningfully be said to have emotions. We observed above that forgiveness involves an important emotional component. It involves at the very least a reduction in anger, resentment and other hostile attitudes rooted in the wrong one has suffered. Reflecting on this emotional dimension makes talk of collectives forgiving puzzling. Can collectives have emotions?

There are two ways that we might speak meaningfully about collective emotions. First, to speak of a collective's emotion might be a shorthand way of referring to an emotion experienced by a significant percentage of the individuals of whom the collective is made up. On this way of speaking, all of the members of the group need not have the emotion. It might even be present in fewer than half of them, although the smaller the percentage the less useful it will be to speak of "them" feeling a certain way. Further, the emotion needn't be felt by the relevant members of the group all at the same time. They may be predisposed to feel a certain way if reminded of a particular fact, e.g., another group's unprovoked aggression. But that predisposition needn't be activated in each of them at the same time. The ten members of a student political club, let's say the College Democrats, might all hold President George W. Bush in contempt. Under the circumstances, we might be inclined to say "The College Democrats contemn Mr. Bush," even if most of them are not currently experiencing feelings of contempt. In some cases we would say "The College Dems contemn Bush," even if *none* of them is currently feeling contempt for him. Imagine, for example, that each of the College Democrats had felt contempt for Mr. Bush during the past seven days, and was disposed to feel contempt for him any time his name or the name of any of his associates was mentioned in their presence, but that all of them were presently studying for exams and, as a result, Mr. Bush was not on any of their minds. In such a case we could rightly say, "The College Democrats contemn Mr. Bush," even though none of them is currently feeling contempt. The emotion ascribed to them in this case picks out a dispositional state rather than an occurrent feeling.³⁵

A second way of speaking about a collective's emotions does not amount to the mere shorthand just discussed. On this way of thinking, it makes sense to speak of a collective emotion if there are structural features of the collective that reinforce the experience of a particular emotion among its members. These structural features may be formalized. The anti-Japanese sentiment reflected in the Chinese educational curriculum and the government's encouragement of anti-Japanese protests would be examples of formalized structural features that reinforce anti-Japanese sentiment. The structural features may also be informal. The recent student protests in front of the Japanese embassy in Beijing provide an example of this sort.³⁶ The anger and resentment that the Chinese students felt toward Japan was reinforced by the informal but nevertheless real structural features of a mob. Often, as in the Chinese case, both formalized and informal structural features are present and reinforce one another. The result of these structural features is that the emotion experienced together differs from what each of the members experienced or would have experienced separately.

We needn't decide between these two ways of thinking about collective emotion in order to respond to the objection at hand. Either conception will allow us to speak meaningfully about a collective's emotions. Nevertheless, I think the second has certain advantages over the first. Among other things, it attends to some of the ways in which the whole can be more than the sum of its parts.

Even if collectives are capable of emotion and this emotion can be ascertained, one might think these considerations are irrelevant to the offers of forgiveness by collectives with which we have become acquainted in recent years. When Pope John Paul II offered forgiveness to those who had wronged the Church, he was not reporting

on the emotional condition of the Church. If forgiveness involves a change in emotion, then any representative of a collective who offers forgiveness on the collective's behalf is speaking out of turn if she has not first ascertained the emotional condition of the collective.

One of the strengths of Arendt's account is that it can address this objection by showing that the emotional model fails fully to capture our understanding of forgiveness even in personal contexts. When we say, "I forgive you," we are not simply offering a report of recent and future emotional conditions as though we were a kind of psychological meteorologist. We are committing ourselves to a future course of action, one not determined by the wrongdoing. We are assuring the one forgiven that he can count on us not to act from anger or resentment in future. Once we attend to the active and commissive dimensions of forgiving, the forgiveness offered by collectives appears less problematic. Collectives can act and can commit themselves to acting in ways not determined by the wrongs they have suffered. They are capable of releasing transgressors from the consequences of their actions. Likewise, collectives are capable of committing themselves to future courses of action, including refusing to act on hostile motives grounded in the transgression.

But what would it mean for a representative to commit her collective to refusing to act from anger or resentment? How one answers this questions will depend, in part, on which view of collective emotions one adopts. The practical measures will be the same on both accounts, but the rationales will differ. The representative's commitment of the collective to forgiving can involve a commitment to revoke retaliatory policies, eliminate narratives that vilify the other from institutional documents and training curricula, and

proscribe actions that manifest hostility. The representative can commit the collective to adopting policies that will penalize persons acting in an official, institutional capacity when their actions display hostile, reactive emotions. And she can commit it to staging events that are likely to promote good will between the two groups. For the person who adopts a structuralist account of collective emotion, the rationale behind such measures is that it is part of the emotional work of forgiving. For someone who adopts a reductivist account of collective emotion, these steps are merely the preliminary work needed to encourage forgiveness to take hold in the collective's individual members.

Assuming one is persuaded that it makes sense to speak of collectives having emotions, and that one is convinced such emotions are relevant to collective forgiving, one might still wonder whether representatives have either the authority or the ability to commit their constituents not to act from certain emotions.³⁷ Of course, the answer to this question depends in part on the nature of the organization and on the role assigned to the representative. But there is nothing in principle problematic about a representative having the authority to commit its constituents to refrain from acting on certain emotions. Nor is there anything peculiar about representatives attempting to make good on such commitments. Nations do both of these things all the time. In all judiciaries influenced by the British legal system, for example, there are strictures against acting maliciously. There are laws against certain actions motivated by hatred. Ambassadors can be upbraided and dismissed for failing adequately to respect foreign dignitaries. These regulations are by no means easy to enforce, given the challenges of knowing another's motivations, which is why malice, hate and respect are so often defined in terms of very

specific, externally observable ways of behaving. But in spite of the difficulties involved, our legal institutions enforce these regulations on emotions surprisingly well.

Whatever the challenges involved, representatives regularly commit their constituencies to acting or refusing to act on particular emotions. But as in the case of individuals, the ability to make good on these commitments will depend in some measure on the continued presence of these emotions in the members of the collective. If hostilities continue unabated in its members, then its forgiving commitments may be undermined. Either the body will refuse to follow through on the commitments of her agents, or new agents will be appointed who still harbor hostilities toward the transgressor and who do not feel bound by their predecessors' commitments.

b. Forgiveness of Collectives

We have considered four reasons one might object to the possibility of collectives forgiving. Now let us consider a couple of reasons one might question the possibility of collectives being forgiven.

Arendt argues that, while it makes sense to speak of "collective responsibility," it is a mistake to think this responsibility is moral. In particular, she insists that there is no such thing as collective guilt. "Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal."³⁸ If a necessary condition for being forgiven is that one has done wrong, and thus is morally guilty, and if collectives cannot be guilty in this way, then collectives cannot be forgiven.

Arendt offers three reasons for rejecting the idea of collective moral guilt. The first is that collectives lack the mental states necessary for moral responsibility. She claims, collectives cannot have the “*mens rea* or bad conscience, the awareness of wrongdoing” necessary for doing morally blameworthy acts.³⁹

Arendt’s case assumes a close parallel between the standards of ethics and those of the criminal law. In criminal law, *mens rea* is an important category. However, the criminal law does not reflect the conditions for all of our moral obligations. The conditions for some of our obligations are better articulated in the law of torts. In civil law not all of our obligations, not even all of our moral obligations, depend upon our state of mind. The tort law highlights the general obligation not to harm another and, if one has, to make that person whole again.⁴⁰ Once we reject Arendt’s conflation of the conditions for criminal guilt, on the one hand, and moral guilt, on the other, it becomes easier to see how a collective could meet conditions necessary for moral guilt. Collectives can fail to meet moral obligations. They can wrongly deprive innocent others of life, social standing, respect and property. They can benefit at others’ expense. They can systematically discriminate against those who deserve better treatment of them. When agents, collective or individual, fail to meet their moral obligations, they incur objective moral guilt. Collectives can also fail to *try* to meet their obligations, and thus can acquire subjective moral guilt.⁴¹ Consequently, collectives can have the moral standing necessary for being forgiven.

Arendt’s second reason for objecting to collective guilt suggests a rejoinder to the preceding argument. When we speak of collective moral failings, what we are really doing, she suggests, is referring to the individual moral failings of those of who make up

the collective.⁴² What we mean, or should mean, when we say, for example, that in “the postbellum Southern social system, only the ‘alienated residents’ or the ‘outcasts’ are innocent” of discriminating against “black” Americans, is that each of the others living in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Tennessee, Georgia, Virginia and the Carolinas was individually guilty for his or her own particular, discriminatory acts.⁴³ She or he treated people less well than they deserved on account of their race, failed to object when others did so, or voted for laws that deprived black Americans of access to public goods.

In many instances where one might be inclined to speak of collective wrongdoing, Arendt is right. Reference to the guilt or wrongdoing of the group is a shorthand way of referring to the wrongful actions that are widespread among a certain population. But not all wrongful acts are fully reducible to the wrongful acts of particular individuals, even if all wrongful acts depend upon the actions of particular individuals. Some harms result from the reasonable, at times even laudable, actions of persons caught up in morally corrupt institutions. For example, someone might take a job in advertising because it will allow him to support his family and develop his own creativity, and by industriously applying himself he may contribute to the flourishing of an industry that encourages consumerism, material waste, the depletion of the environment and the growing economic gulf between the first and third worlds. Other harms are the result of individual wrongdoing whose effects have been magnified by systemic features of the collective to which those individuals belong. To this category would belong those harms Arendt discusses that resulted from the actions of individuals whose mundane, selfish desires to advance their personal careers contributed to the smooth operation of the Nazi war

machine. Recognition of collective guilt enables us to acknowledge systemic evils as well as individual ones.

Arendt offers a third reason for objecting to collective guilt. “[I]n postwar Germany . . ., the cry ‘We are all guilty’ that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty. Where all are guilty, nobody is.”⁴⁴ There are three ways in which this objection might be construed. One involves a claim about the conceptual meaning of the guilt, the second about the functional meaning of guilt, the third about the consequences of widespread adoption of the idea of collective guilt. She might be saying that the meaning of ‘guilt’ either conceptually or functionally depends upon its contrast with ‘innocence.’ Conceptually, one might think, guilt must be defined in contrast with innocence. Functionally, where all are guilty the social sanctions brought against the guilty no longer make sense, because these sanctions depend, for their effectiveness, on being employed with the ‘abnormal.’ Where wrongdoing is the norm, one might argue, these sanctions fail to be useful and thereby lose their point. Finally, even if it made sense to speak of collective guilt, we might not want to if it led people to disregard other instances of wrongdoing that more urgently needed to be addressed.

However plausible “Where all are guilty, nobody is” may sound, none of these three ways of construing the claim is ultimately defensible. As a claim about conceptual meaning, even were it the case that one must understand innocence in order to conceive of guilt, that understanding does not require one to think there are any agents who, in reality, conform to that conception. As a claim about the functional meaning of guilt, it is less dubious. However, there are too many counter-examples for the claim to withstand

close scrutiny. There is perhaps no place where the idea of guilt had a more important social function than in the American colonies of the 17th and 18th centuries. At the same time, the idea of universal guilt shared by all of humanity was taken for granted, and played an important role in the social and religious consciousness of many in the colonies. Perhaps the most worrisome construal is the consequentialist one because of the way in which the postwar German embrace of the idea of collective guilt obscured the real differences between the ways in which particular Germans participated in Nazi wrongdoing. But it is important to observe that these consequences needn't follow from the idea of collective guilt or its widespread acknowledgment within a collective. On the contrary, reflection on the nature of systemic guilt may cause us to take both personal and systemic evil more seriously. This seems more likely if we are careful to distinguish between cases where collective guilt is and is not transferrable to its members, i.e., between cases where the guilt of the collective can be ascribed to the members as individuals and cases where it can only be ascribed to them as members of a collective.⁴⁵

Five objections to collective forgiveness can thus be addressed. A sixth, however, poses a more serious problem. The objection does not eliminate the possibility of collective forgiveness. Instead, it shows the limitations of collective forgiveness, its inability to do everything we might ask of it.

As noted above, Arendt claims, "Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it." Arendt insists that our knowledge of the one for the sake of *whom* we forgive not be confused with a grasp of true propositions about that one. *Who* somebody is cannot be captured in generic terms

by a list of attributes, achievements and transgressions. *Who* somebody is can only be known in person. “The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a ‘character’ in the old meaning of the word, with the result that his specific uniqueness escapes us.”⁴⁶

The application of Arendtian forgiveness to the forgiving of collectives invites the question, Can a collective be known as a *whom*? I think the answer is, No. To put the point somewhat differently, while it makes sense to speak of a collective as an agent, it does not make sense to speak of a collective as a person. And personhood is what is required in the one for the sake of whom we forgive.

In forgiving a group, one can attend to whom one forgives only in a negative sense. One can recognize whom one does *not* forgive. For example, one can recognize that the Germany with whom one is engaged is not the Germany of 1941. The Hutu with whom one is dealing are not the Hutu who killed one’s family. It is not the agent of whom one’s vilifying narratives speak. But in these instances it is not clear that we are any longer speaking of forgiveness. In the first instance, there has been so much change in the membership, leadership, ideology and infrastructure of the collective that it no longer makes sense to speak of the agent’s moral responsibility.⁴⁷ In the case of Hutu violence, membership in the ethnic group did not necessitate membership in the guilty collective. There were many who neither participated, be that participation active or passive, nor benefitted from violence against Tutsis. In such contexts we are releasing the other from the consequences of someone else’s actions. If this counts as forgiveness,

it certainly isn't forgiveness in its paradigmatic sense. After all, if we haven't done the wrong, how can we be forgiven for it?

Even if a collective could be one for the sake of whom another acts, forgiveness of a collective may not scratch where we itch. On occasion we might feel guilt as a member of a collective because of our membership in this guilty collective. In such a case, the forgiving of our collective might put these feelings to rest. But ordinarily, if we feel that we are guilty, what we feel is the guilt of an individual as an individual. This is true even if the guilt we feel is on account of a collective act. We feel guilty for our part in it and want to be forgiven as an individual for that part. If we long to be forgiven as a member of a collective, what this will typically mean is that we don't want our group membership to be held against us. We feel that, as an individual, we are innocent and we want to be treated as such, i.e., both as innocent and as individual. A forgiveness for the sake of a collective would satisfy our individual desires for a future not enslaved by the past in a very incomplete way.

I don't think this problem can be addressed by political forgiveness. What we long for is the possibility of new relations between individuals. What collective forgiveness offers cannot function at this level. Instead it offers normalized relations between groups in which the policies of one are no longer hostile to members of the other. These relations are clearly better than nothing. The commitment to release Protestants or Catholics in Northern Ireland from the violence of the past is something to be welcomed. The commitment not to shape group actions around anger, resentment and hatred is obviously good. But it must be recognized as inevitably incomplete. Its fulfillment can only come as individual members of these groups release other members

of these groups from the consequences of the past for the sake of those individuals. In other words, collective forgiveness will always be something less than a highest manifestation of forgiving.

Conclusion

So what has our investigation brought us? It has provided two things. First, it has given us a clearer sense of individual forgiveness, a sense that highlights the activity of forgiving without neglecting its emotional valence. Second, it has given us a clearer sense of both the possibilities and the limitations of collective forgiveness. As a result, we can better understand both why one might want collective forgiveness and simultaneously be dissatisfied with it. To the extent that it involves altering the systemic conditions of a collective that contribute to or encourage hostilities between groups, collective forgiveness is not merely symbolic. But to the extent that it fails to focus on the individual members of the collective and to be offered for their sake, it may fail to accomplish everything that we desire in being forgiven.⁴⁸

¹ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1958) 237. The other necessary faculty is promising.

² The conceptual ground for political forgiveness had already been prepared by Arendt's and Jaspers' discussions of collective guilt in the 1940s, but it was not until the late 1980s that the concepts and practices of collective forgiveness began to flourish.

³ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 8, and 175ff. Larry May discusses the relationship between institutional evil and the emergence of individuals from anonymity in "Socialization and Institutional Evil," *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, Larry May and Jerome Kohn, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) 83-105.

⁴ One's identity takes shape in community and often "the 'who,' which appears so clearly and unmistakably to others, remains hidden from the person himself" (Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179).

⁵ This dimension of actions that depends upon the interpretations and responses of others is what John Austin highlighted in his discussion of perlocutionary acts. Cf. *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd edition, J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, eds. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975) 101ff.

⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 236.

⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237.

⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 241.

¹⁰ For a discussion of Arendt's disclosure of the relationship between forgiving and promising, see Annette Baier, "Ethics in Many Different Voices," *Hannah Arendt: Twenty Years Later*, esp. 330-334.

¹¹ I am uncertain this view of promising is correct. Perhaps the words that make up one of the socially recognized formulas of promising are necessary, but even if that is so, they needn't be uttered aloud. There is a long tradition of people making vows to God simply by thinking the promise. Likewise, people may make promises to themselves without uttering words. The crucial thing about a promise is that it binds one to a future course of action. The presence of witnesses may help to strengthen that bond, but I don't think they are necessary to constitute it.

Even if the difference between promising and forgiving in the domain of utterances is not that the former must and the latter needn't involve speech, there does seem to be some difference between them. Although there is nothing weird about promising without speaking, it would be quite odd to say "I promised *you* that I would do *X*" if I had neither spoken nor written to you about the matter nor asked anyone else to communicate my promise to you. The same is not true of forgiving. There is nothing peculiar about forgiving someone without speaking to them about so doing.

¹² For a more extensive discussion of the commitments of forgiving and their relationship to promising, see Glen Pettigrove, "The Forgiveness We Speak," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 42.3 (fall 2004): 371-392.

¹³ And of repentance.

¹⁴ Cf. Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988); Norvin Richards, "Forgiveness," *Ethics* 99 (October, 1988): 77-97; Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald, "What Should 'Forgiveness' Mean?" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 36 (2002): 483-498; Howard McGary, "Achieving Democratic Equality: Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Reparations," *The Journal of Ethics* 7 (2003): 93-113; Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003).

¹⁵ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 240 note 78.

¹⁶ I am grateful to a referee from the *Journal of Social Philosophy* for encouraging me to clarify this point. For more on the relationship between the emotions and commitments of forgiveness, see Glen Pettigrove, "The Forgiveness We Speak."

¹⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 240.

¹⁸ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 239-240. The distinction between transgressions and willed evil already points in the direction of her later reflections on the "banality of evil" in *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (revised and enlarged edition [1965] [New York: Penguin, 1994] 252).

²⁰ Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* [1728] (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002) 77. Kant reiterates Hutcheson's claim, with some modification, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* [1793] (Allen Wood, trans. [New York: Cambridge UP, 1998] 59 [AK 6:36]). Arendt developed her own thinking on the nature of evil in conversation with Kant's remarks in the *Religion* (cf. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New Edition with Added Prefaces [New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1973] 459).

²¹ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 459.

²² Arendt, *Human Condition*, 240.

²³ Arendt, *Totalitarianism*, 459.

²⁴ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 240.

²⁵ See Arendt, *Eichmann*, 287-8, and her reply to a letter from Gershom Scholem, the relevant part of which is cited by Richard J. Bernstein in *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2002) 218. Yaacov Lozowick, by contrast, argues both that there are genuine cases of willed evil and that Eichmann was a notable example of it ("Malicious Clerks: The Nazi Security Police and the Banality of Evil," in *Hannah Arendt in Jerusalem*, Steven E. Aschheim, ed. [Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001] 214-223).

²⁶ Arendt, *Eichmann*, 296.

²⁷ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 241.

²⁸ Cf. Roy F. Baumeister, Julie Juola Exline and Kristin L. Sommer, "The Victim Role, Grudge Theory, and Two Dimensions of Forgiveness," *Dimensions of Forgiveness: Psychological Research & Theological Perspectives*, Everett L. Worthington, Jr., ed. (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1998); Robert Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice: A Step-by-Step Process for Resolving Anger and Restoring Hope* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001); Sharon Lamb, "Reasons to Be Cautious about the Use of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy," *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, Sharon Lamb and Jeffrie Murphy, eds. (New York: Oxford UP, 2002); Fred Luskin, *Forgive for Good: A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 2002). These authors do not argue that one's own benefit is the only reason for forgiving. But it is a sufficient reason for forgiving, and on any number of occasions it could be the only reason from which a particular agent acts when forgiving.

²⁹ I do not mean to suggest that the therapists are unconcerned with the relationship between wrongdoer and wronged. Often they are quite concerned about this relationship. But the relationship is seen as a secondary dimension of forgiving rather than a primary one.

³⁰ Joseph Butler, "Upon Forgiveness of Injuries," *Fifteen Sermons* [1729] (Lincoln-Rembrandt Publishing, 1993) 103.

³¹ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 237. See also Peter Digeser, *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001) 11 and 21.

³² See Glen Pettigrove, "Unapologetic Forgiveness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 41.3 (July 2004): 187-204.

³³ Cf. Elazar Barkan, *The Guilt of Nations: Restitution and Negotiating Historical Injustices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000); P.E. Digeser, *Political Forgiveness*; Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull: Guilt, Sorrow, and the Limits of Forgiveness in the New South Africa* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000); Thomas McCarthy, "Vergangenheitsbewältigung in the USA: On the Politics of the Memory of Slavery," *Political Theory* 30.5 (October 2002): 623-648; Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Martha Minow, *Breaking the Cycles of Hatred: Memory, Law, and Repair* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002); Robert Rotberg and Dennis Thompson, eds., *Truth v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000); Ruti Teitel, *Transitional Justice* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000); John Torpey, ed., *Politics and the Past: On Repairing Historical Injustices* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

³⁴ Arendt's distinction between moral and political obligations differs from the distinction drawn in this paragraph and will be discussed under objection four below.

³⁵ For more on the distinction between dispositional and occurrent emotions, or what he calls emotions and feelings, see Michael Stocker, *Valuing Emotions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³⁶ Joseph Kahn, "Riot Police Called in to Calm Anti-Japanese Protests in China," *The New York Times*, 10 April 2005; Howard French, "China Allows More Protests in Shanghai Against Japan," *The New York Times*, 17 April 2005.

³⁷ I am grateful to a referee from the *Journal of Social Philosophy* for raising this concern.

³⁸ Hannah Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," *Responsibility and Judgment*, Jerome Kohn, ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 2003) 147.

³⁹ Arendt, "Collective Responsibility," 147-8. Manuel Velasquez develops a similar argument in "Why Corporations Are Not Morally Responsible for Anything They Do," *Business and Professional Ethics Journal* 2.3 (1983), reprinted in *Collective Responsibility: Five Decades of Debate in Theoretical and Applied Ethics*, Larry May and Stacey Hoffman, eds. (Rowman and Littlefield, 1991).

⁴⁰ Thus, even if one requires the same conditions of a collective that one requires of an individual, in the way that Angelo Corlett and others have done, less than "highly organized conglomerates" could still satisfy the conditions for moral responsibility. Cf. J. Angelo Corlett, "Corporate Punishment and Responsibility," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 28.3 (winter 1997): 86-100, and "Collective Moral Responsibility," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32.4 (winter 2001): 573-584.

⁴¹ See Richard Swinburne, "Guilt, Atonement, and Forgiveness," *Responsibility and Atonement* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989) 73ff.

⁴² H. D. Lewis, likewise, defends this position in “Collective Responsibility,” *Philosophy* 24 (1948), reprinted in *Collective Responsibility*, May and Hoffman, eds.

⁴³ Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 149. Of course, racial discrimination was widespread in Northern States as well.

⁴⁴ Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 147.

⁴⁵ Cf. Joel Feinberg’s discussion of “collective but nondistributive fault” in “Collective Responsibility,” *Doing and Deserving* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970). Arendt’s “Collective Responsibility,” was a response to an earlier version of Feinberg’s paper that was presented at a Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in 1968.

⁴⁶ Arendt, *Human Condition*, 179-183, and 241-3.

⁴⁷ For more on this point see Glen Pettigrove, “Apology, Reparations and the Question of Inherited Guilt,” *Public Affairs Quarterly* 17.4 (October 2003): 319-348.

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