

# ON FORGIVENESS

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## Introductory Comments

I chose the topic of forgiveness for this presentation. It was the subject of my very first philosophical essay, a very long one of 58 pages that I wrote between 1957 and 1959, between age 12 and 14. I had read (enthusiastically devoured) before a very profound but the most difficult work of Hildebrand, the *Metaphysik der Gemeinschaft*, and prior to that some works of Plato and some ethical and epistemological writings of Hildebrand, as well as some writings of Adolf Reinach.<sup>1</sup> In what follows I will add little about forgiveness that is not

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<sup>1</sup> *Metaphysik der Gemeinschaft. Untersuchungen über Wesen und Wert der Gemeinschaft*, 3., vom Verf. durchgesehene Aufl., Dietrich von Hildebrand, Gesammelte Werke IV (Regensburg: J. Habel, 1975). I read the book in its second edition: (Regensburg: Verlag Josef Habel, 1955). During my work on forgiveness, I read Hildebrand's book *Christian Ethics*. (New York: David McKay, 1953/Toronto: Musson, 1954/London: Thames & Hudson, 1954); Deutsch: *Christliche Ethik* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1959). The second edition of both the English and German book was published under the title *Ethics*. I had also read Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Die Umgestaltung in Christus. Über christliche Grundhaltung*, in the first or second edition. 5th ed., (St. Ottilien: Eos Verlag, 1988). *Transformation in Christ. On the Christian Attitude of Mind*, last edition with a new sub-title: *Transformation in Christ. Our Path to Holiness*. Reprint of 1948 (New Hampshire: Sophia Institute Press, 1989). I also knew somewhat Adolf Reinach's „Über Phänomenologie“, in: Adolf Reinach, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Ausgabe mit Kommentar*, Bd. I: *Die Werke, Teil I: Kritische Neuausgabe (1905-1914), Teil II: Nachgelassene Texte (1906-1917)*; Bd. II: *Kommentar und Textkritik*, hrsg.v. Karl Schuhmann und Barry Smith (München und Wien: Philosophia Verlag, 1989), Bd. I, *ibid.*, pp. 531-550; in English: 'Concerning Phenomenology,' transl. from the German ("Über Phänomenologie") by Dallas Willard, *The Personalist* 50 (Spring 1969), pp. 194-221. Reprinted in *Perspectives in Philosophy*, ed. Robert N. Beck (New York: Holt, Reinhart, & Winston, 1961 and 1969).

contained in this early essay of mine. I will chiefly order it a bit more and restrict myself to summarize in English what I say on the first nine of 58 pages on the topic in German.

Doing this, I omit a long part of the original essay on the relation and difference between repentance and asking for forgiveness and other parts contained in the earlier essay: Analyses of examples of Starez Zosima's asking for forgiveness in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*<sup>2</sup> and of Creusa's asking for forgiveness in Grillparzer's *Medea*.

On the impossibility of forgiving a person who is eternally remaining evil (like the devil and the damned).

On pseudo-forgiving from pride instead of from love.

On the summit of pagan forgiveness in Socrates and Antigone.

On the newness of the Christian forgiveness.

On the difference between hating injustice and hating the person who commits it.

On the different kinds of *synchorein*, of forgiving by seeing a wrong done to us from the side of the wrongdoer.

On the relation between happiness and forgiving, peace and forgiving, reconciliation and forgiving.

On the difference between the *gift* of being asked to forgive and of forgiving.

On why forgiveness does not contradict justice.

On legal clemency (pardoning) and forgiveness.

Morality and forgiveness.

On the psychological and moral obstacles to asking for forgiveness.

On the nature and depth of forgiving someone for the harm he caused me by offending a loved one.

On free will and heart in forgiveness.

On the difference between reproaches based on justice and others based on love.

On the radical newness of the Christian virtue of forgiveness in comparison with natural forgiveness; and yet the fulfilment of natural forgiveness in the Christian virtue of forgiveness; and on many other topics.

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<sup>2</sup> Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*. Tr. Constance Garnett (London: William Heineman, Ltd., 1912), Part II, Book VI, chap. 2, pp. 307-308.

I see the signs of satisfaction, and feel in my heart the deep relief, of Crosby Father and Son over my announcing all the parts of my essay that I omit here and over my not even completing their mere and truly frighteningly long list. Hildebrand, a close friend of my parents from times before my birth, read this essay of my earliest youth carefully and discussed it with me at length. It was the basis for his tremendous encouragement for me to study philosophy and to dedicate my life to it – in the service of God. At age 14, it was hard for my parents to dissuade me from disrupting my high-school studies in order to go to New York to participate in Hildebrand's classes at Fordham University before his retirement, in order to draw all truth and wisdom from him I could.<sup>3</sup> For me, writing this essay was the overwhelming experience of philosophizing about things themselves, the very goal of my later studies of philosophy and of founding The International Academy of Philosophy, with its motto *Diligere veritatem omnem et in omnibus, to love all truth and to love it in everything*.<sup>4</sup> One may say that writing this essay was an experience of falling in love with philosophizing, of being inebriated by the marvelous experience to discover eternal truths in philosophy.

I chose this topic for the first meeting of the Schülerkreis also because Hildebrand posed to me some deep questions about forgiveness, which I have not quite solved since 60 years and hope to solve finally with your help. I will also point out some deep contributions concerning forgiveness Hildebrand made in his posthumously published *Moralia* and some differences between his philosophy of forgiveness and mine. Now to the essay itself:

***What Forgiveness is Not.***

Some philosophers claim that forgiveness is just the cessation of the anger, aversion, indignation, bitterness or even, in cases of grave wrongs, hatred which I feel towards another person who has committed some offense or injustice against

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<sup>3</sup> I owe also religiously speaking very much to Hildebrand to have overcome a crisis of my faith during these years.

<sup>4</sup> The International Academy of Philosophy in Texas 1980, The International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein 1986, and at the The International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality of Liechtenstein and at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2004, and my involvement in the founding of its fourth Campus, the Academia Internacional de Filosofía en el Principado de Liechtenstein y en el Instituto de Filosofía Edith Stein (2011-).

me, and the renewal of my previous benevolent intention towards him. Others claim that forgiveness consists in some declaration that the offense and injustice I have suffered are not so bad after all. “No pasa nada,” “Everything is quite alright!” Though I cannot yet clearly say what forgiving is, I can clearly understand that these and similar “explanations” of what forgiving is are false. I think there is no definition of what forgiving is. Nonetheless, each of us in some fashion knows what it is. Moreover, though we cannot define forgiving through something else, it being an *urphenomenon*,<sup>5</sup> we may ask ourselves what its characteristics are and eventually give some “essential definition” of forgiveness in terms of its essential characteristics. How does it differ from other acts, and what are the conditions and the effects of this peculiar deed?<sup>6</sup> In this way, the essence of forgiveness will gradually disclose itself more clearly to our minds if we open, in the fundamental attitude of philosophical wonder, our intellect to reality.<sup>7</sup>

***What Is Forgiveness?***

It is clear that forgiveness is something beautiful and positive and not the mere

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<sup>5</sup> See my explanation, and comments on the origin of this term in Goethe, in Josef Seifert, *Discours des Méthodes. The Methods of Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology*, (Frankfurt / Paris / Ebikon / Lancaster / New Brunswick: Ontos-Verlag, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> See on this also a longer treatment of different kinds of definition in Josef Seifert, *Sein und Wesen. Philosophie und Realistische Phänomenologie/ Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology*. *Studien der Internationalen Akademie für Philosophie im Fürstentum Liechtenstein/Studies of the International Academy of Philosophy in the Principality Liechtenstein*, (Hrsg./Ed.), Rocco Buttiglione and Josef Seifert, Band/Vol. 3 (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1996), ch. 1.

<sup>7</sup> We have in mind here a specifically philosophical method of grasping the intelligible essence of forgiveness as distinct from an empirical psychological, sociological or historical-cultural investigation that considers very different aspects of forgiveness. This is not to exclude that also the sociological and psychological investigations necessarily presuppose certain philosophical insights and are using, or should at least use, philosophical methods in order to identify and place the empirically given psychological, sociological, or historical-cultural aspects of forgiveness. See Josef Seifert, *Discours des Méthodes. The Methods of Philosophy and Realist Phenomenology*, (Frankfurt / Paris / Ebikon / Lancaster / New Brunswick: Ontos-Verlag, 2009).

cessation of some negative feelings.<sup>8</sup> It is likewise evident that, preceding forgiveness, a real offense or injustice must have occurred in order for forgiveness to have meaning. Therefore, as soon as I declare that the offense or injustice I suffered was not bad at all, I deny the condition for a meaningful act of forgiving. This touches two important points about forgiveness:

1. Perceiving that one person has committed a wrong against another one is not enough for forgiveness. A wrongdoing against a third person could only be the object of indignation or wrath, or of a wish for a change of heart of the person who offended the other one, but not of forgiveness. If we witness a crime committed against another person, at least a person with whom we have no special solidarity such that each offense of him or her offends us as well personally, we cannot forgive the perpetrator of such an offense. We cannot forgive the Nazis for having murdered 7 million, or Stalin for having murdered many more persons. If a wrong has been done, however, to our friend, wife, or child, and these evils become evils *for us* because they are evils for them; we can forgive based on a unique *benevolence of love*. We can forgive the trespasser having wronged us by wronging persons we love, without being able to substitute thereby that primary forgiveness that solely the directly offended person can

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<sup>8</sup> Writing this, I was no doubt inspired by what Adolf Reinach writes on forgiveness in “Über Phänomenologie”, in: Adolf Reinach, *Sämtliche Werke. Kritische Ausgabe mit Kommentar*, Bd. I: Die Werke, Teil I: Kritische Neuausgabe (1905-1914), Teil II: Nachgelassene Texte (1906-1917), S. 531-550 (which I read in the 1951 edition by Kösel), ‘Concerning Phenomenology,’ transl. from the German (“Über Phänomenologie”) by Dallas Willard, *The Personalist* 50 (Spring 1969), pp. 194-221. Reprinted in *Perspectives in Philosophy*, ed. Robert N. Beck (New York: Holt, Reinhart, & Winston, 1961 and 1969), and on promises in “Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes”, in: Reinach, Adolf, *Sämtliche Werke. Textkritische Ausgabe in zwei Bänden*, Bd. I: Die Werke, Teil I: Kritische Neuausgabe (1905-1914), Teil II: Nachgelassene Texte (1906-1917); hrsg.v.

Karl Schuhmann & Barry Smith (München und Wien: Philosophia Verlag, 1989), 141-278; “The Apriori Foundations of the Civil Law,” transl. by J. F. Crosby, *Aletheia* III (1983), pp. xxxiii-xxxv; 1-142, and by what Hildebrand writes on the topic in *Die Menschheit am Scheideweg*, (Regensburg: Habel, 1955). “Die rechtliche und sittliche Sphäre in ihrem Eigenwert und Zusammenhang”.

realize.<sup>9</sup>

2. Nor could we forgive a person who has inflicted harm on us by being thrown on us, and thereby hurting us, but without any free intention or action on his part to do us harm. To use another example: to the extent to which a person would be under hypnotic power, magic spells, or demonic mental enslavement, we cannot forgive him or her even the most horrible misbehavior and infidelity, at least to the extent to which these factors completely enslaved a person, depriving her of her reasoning powers and free will. This might never happen completely in reality, but if such a bewitchment were to happen, as some believe it can happen, we would have no cause to forgive.

One sees here the necessary and mysterious laws that govern not only the object of empirical science but also, and more rigorously, the objects of philosophical knowledge. (Of course, the laws empirical science investigates are very different from a priori or essentially necessary laws mathematics or philosophy investigate.)<sup>10</sup>

The condition for my forgiving, then, is that an objective evil was inflicted on me, a promise or vow was broken, or another offense has been committed against me freely by another person. Now, on a first level, the appropriate response to this situation is reproach, indignation, or a demand for the other's apology, or – if his deed is a crime – a demand for the other's due punishment. This is the appropriate response of justice. However, the response of forgiving the other person is more beautiful and deeper and has further conditions in the person

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<sup>9</sup> This thought was not found in the original essay. It goes back to the magnificent chapter 7 of the *Wesen der Liebe* of Hildebrand, on which I have also written. See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, trans. John Crosby and John Henry Crosby (South Bend, Indiana: St. Augustine's Press, 2009), ch. 7, and Josef Seifert, "Dietrich von Hildebrand on Benevolence in Love and Friendship: A Masterful Contribution to Perennial Philosophy," in *Journal of Philosophical Inquiry and Discussion: Selected Papers on the Philosophy of Dietrich von Hildebrand, Quaestiones Disputatae* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 85–106. Also audio/video registration

<http://www.hildebrandlegacy.org/main.cfm?r1=7.50&r2=1.00&r3=1.00&r4=0.00&id=109&level=3>.

<sup>10</sup> See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Che cos'è la filosofia?/What Is Philosophy?*, English-Italian, 4th ed. (Milano: Bompiani Testi a fronte, 2001).

who forgives.<sup>11</sup>

*A Two-fold Offense: against God (Sin) and against a Human Person (Doing him some Wrong), and A Twofold Disharmony*

In order to understand better forgiveness as well as the effects of forgiveness, we have to comprehend that offending another person or committing some injustice against her is cause of a twofold offense and a twofold disharmony in the moral-metaphysical sphere. We should distinguish at this point likewise the offense itself from the disharmony between persons that flows from it. We understand their difference best when we consider the wrongdoing against another human person. The offense can be forgiven, at least as far as this is possible for the offended person alone, by some inner solitary act of forgiveness such as the forgiveness of St. Stephan addressed to those who stoned him to death. The disharmony, however, can solely be dissolved by some interpenetration or spiritual meeting between the act of forgiving with an act of regret, or an asking for forgiveness, by the person of the offender. Now let us consider more closely the two offenses and the two disharmonies that follow from them.

1. The person of the offender of another human person incurs guilt by acting against the eternal laws of which Antigone speaks in Sophocles' play of the same name. When we look more deeply into this offending against the "eternal law", against what justice, kindness etc. demand from us, we recognize that this offense is not directed only against some impersonal eternal laws of which Antigone might be speaking. Rather, it is an offence committed against a personal God, who embodies moral goodness itself. We can distinguish this offense of God that we call sin from guilt, the stain in the soul of the offender that results from sin. We can distinguish both from the further moment of the disharmony that is, in ultimate analysis, the consequence of sin, of an offense against God which results in some separation of the soul from the divine light. In the case of our consideration, an offense against another human being, sin, guilt, and a disharmony and violation of the bond between God and the soul, are inseparable from committing evil acts against another human being and result from them.

2. This metaphysical-religious dimension of our wronging a fellow man is entirely beyond the reach of the offended or otherwise wronged human person.

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen Schwarz shows well in his quoted book that a person, for example parents, can forgive and nevertheless, not remit punishment. Of course, they can also punish without forgiving. Thus, these two acts are not necessarily interconnected.

Neither can I in any way absolve another person from his sin as offense of God, nor can I, through my act of forgiving, in any way dissolve the disharmony between the offending person and God. It is thus also philosophically evident what the Jews expressed when they reproached Jesus because he said to the paralytic whom he had cured: "Your sins are forgiven." They insisted correctly: "God alone can forgive sins." God alone can dissolve the disharmony that enters the world through sin.<sup>12</sup> (Therefore, Jesus, absolving men from their sins, would have acted wrongly and blasphemed, if He was not God, which we, as Christians, believe he is).<sup>13</sup>

3. On the other hand, there is an offense committed against another human person, as it were a "sin against him". (One is reminded of the word of King Lear in Shakespeare that he is "more sinned against than sinning"). And inasmuch as this wrongdoing is directed against me, I can forgive it and in some sense delete the offense of the other person against me, the "sin against me".<sup>14</sup> Also the disharmony, the breaking of the bond between the offended human person and his offender, can be dissolved through the act of forgiving, although, as we shall see, neither this disharmony between us, nor the "guilt against us," can be dissolved, nor the reconciliation and the renewal of our union and community can be achieved by the offended person's forgiveness alone.

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<sup>12</sup> There is some human analogy to a forgiveness of objective sin in the legal sphere when a judge or a kind king or governor pardons (*veniam dat*) or gives amnesty to a criminal. The German word "begnadigen" brings this analogy out very well. A judge or a king, who decides to bestow grace (to *begnadigen*) a criminal, exercises "mercy". In a very beautiful passage from a letter of Don Quijote to Sancho Panza about his government on the island, and in the response and application Sancho gives to these pieces of advice of his master, this analogy between the grace bestowed on a criminal and the divine pardon is beautifully brought out by Cervantes.

<sup>13</sup> As Catholics, we believe that the power to forgive sins has been invested by God in the priest who, in the sacrament of confession, forgives sins, acts as it were in the name of God, and has received the power to absolve from sins which Christ gave to the apostles in a very explicit way: "to whom you forgive their sins, they are forgiven".

<sup>14</sup> On all these points, and on the essential difference Hildebrand sees between divine forgiveness of sin and human forgiveness, there was perfect agreement between Hildebrand and me. Disagreement between us arose, however, with respect to two other points, namely about:

In view of the truth about the two different things which we could call “the sin against God” and “the sin against me” (or the offense against God, and the offense against man) I can say: I forgive you. May God pardon you as well!

i) Hildebrand’s assertion that forgiveness, in none of its forms, is a social act, I.e. an act that the other person has to perceive consciously, and to which he has to give a peculiar response for it to be realized and to achieve its effect. Hildebrand argues much later in his *Moralia* (published posthumously) that only, on the one hand, the *Verlautbarung* (declaration of forgiveness), and, on the other hand, reconciliation and restoration of the bond broken, or at least wounded, by wrong-doing, requires the special interaction between forgiving and asking for forgiveness that are, or entail, social acts. Forgiveness itself, however, Hildebrand considers to be a purely inner act that does not need to be perceived by its addressee.

ii) Hildebrand argued, secondly, that forgiveness can on its own dissolve or destroy the bond of obligation (of debt) the offended person holds against his offender, without any regret of the offender.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Moralia*, pp. 335-336. Hildebrand uses as argument that we can even forgive the dead, and hence forgiveness cannot be a social act. However, this seems to presuppose two things: a) that no difference exists between a purely inner forgiveness and a forgiveness that addresses itself to another person; and b) that the deceased cannot perceive our forgiving them, which, for example, Plato denies, holding that the perpetrators of crimes against others can only be freed from their hard punishment of the yonder world, when their victims have pardoned them. See Plato’s *Phaedo*, 113 e – 114c (transl. Jowett):

Those again who have committed crimes, which, although great, are not irremediable--who in a moment of anger, for example, have done violence to a father or a mother, and have repented for the remainder of their lives, or, who have taken the life of another under the like extenuating circumstances--these are plunged into Tartarus, the pains of which they are compelled to undergo for a year, but at the end of the year the wave casts them forth--mere homicides by way of Cocytus, parricides and matricides by Pyriphlegethon--and they are borne to the Acherusian lake, and there they lift up their voices and call upon the victims whom they have slain or wronged, to have pity on them, and to be kind to them, and let them come out into the lake.

I held, on the contrary, that (a) the act of forgiving, like that of renouncing my claim to the fulfillment of a promise, must be perceived by the addressee. Moreover, I held that b) the act of forgiveness of the offended part alone is not only insufficient to restore harmony and dissolve the dissonance between offending and offended person (which Hildebrand recognizes and stresses strongly in his *Moralia*), but is also insufficient to dissolve the “certificate of debt”. It can certainly dissolve the “sin against me” and the resulting disharmony from one side, but it seems that, just as the demand for a just sanction, also that forgiveness that eliminates the certificate of debt and additionally may renounce any demand for a just punishment, is a social act and requires an appropriate response of the offender.

The chief question or critique Hildebrand raised to the essay of my youth was that I argued that I couldn’t effectively forgive as long as the offender does not regret what he has done to me. Hildebrand pointed out to me the examples of Christ, St. Stephen and the prodigal son, where the act of forgiving is, or seems to be, entirely independent of the response of the wrongdoer and at least precede it. I objected that we could not be greater than God. If even God cannot forgive, not even in the sacrament of confession, an unrepentant sinner, how can we forgive an offender who identifies himself with his offense and does not ask for forgiveness or regret what he has done?

This discussion led me to distinguish in my essay two kinds of forgiving, a point on which I seek especially your further clarifications, but which I wish to introduce by analyzing forgiving and its object in general more closely:

***On the Essence, Characteristics and Kinds of Forgiveness***

1. In forgiving, speaking quite generally, I do not simply respond to the evil deed, as perhaps in indignation or sadness over what another person has done, but

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And if they prevail, then they come forth and cease from their troubles; but if not, they are carried back again into Tartarus and from thence into the rivers unceasingly, until they obtain mercy from those whom they have wronged: for that is the sentence inflicted upon them by their judges. Those too who have been pre-eminent for holiness of life are released from this earthly prison, and go to their pure home which is above, and dwell in the purer earth; and of these, such as have duly purified themselves with philosophy live henceforth altogether without the body, in mansions fairer still which may not be described, and of which the time would fail me to tell.

the addressee of my forgiveness is the other person who has offended or injured me. Forgiveness has, however, at the same time, besides the addressee, an object; a “what” I forgive him. Moreover, this object of forgiveness, distinct from the person whom I forgive, is not simply the harm or objective evil I have suffered.

A young and saintly friend of mine, an African named Anthony, founder of a new order, who was deliberately infected with Aids by a dentist, from a motive of pure envy and evil vengeance for a good my friend did, could not forgive the dentist the objective evil of Aids he had inflicted on him. He has fully forgiven, however, “*that the other person has inflicted this evil unto him,*” when the dentist, on his deathbed, revealed his crime to my friend. My friend Anthony, thus, did not pardon the dentist Aids, nor the state of affairs that he had committed this horrible crime against him, but he pardoned *him having committed a horrible act of wrongdoing against him*. He pardoned the dentist his grave offense, having directed an act of injustice and mean vengeance against him. He forgave the vicious and revengeful dentist his wholly devious attack on his health and life. The object of this forgiveness, the “what he forgave” presupposes the intimate connection of the harm he had done him, result of his action, with his free will and responsibility for his action. Forgiveness thus responds to a wrongdoing against me inasmuch as it proceeds from the other person’s free will as cause of the objective evil for me.

Forgiveness is a central act of the person in which she dissolves not only the resentment, anger, or even, in grave cases of offense, the hatred she might feel towards another person, who has inflicted an objective evil on her. Rather, through the act of forgiveness, the person who has suffered the offense, also when she nourished no grudge whatsoever against her offender before, nullifies or tears up, as it were, the peculiar “certificate of debt” that the offender (debtor) incurs not only towards God through his morally evil deed, but also toward the offended human person. He has this debt towards the person against whom he has committed an injustice, whom he has insulted, treated cruelly, or on whom he has inflicted another kind of harm.

Thus we must ask how the act of forgiving, and its fruit, are possible, and how forgiving can achieve such a ripping of the “bond of obligation” or of the “promissory note” the offended person holds against his offender. We can also ask whether the described effects occur only in the case of a cooperation between the forgiving person and his offender or proceed simply from the act of forgiving and from the forgiving person.

2. At this point, we can distinguish two kinds of forgiveness that may help to settle the discussion I had with Hildebrand: an inner act of forgiving and an interpersonal or social act which Crespo in his book describes in a way that allowed him to call it to me a “proto-social act”<sup>16</sup> of forgiving, to which we turn first. Besides the inner forgiveness in my heart, there is, I think, a peculiar act of forgiveness, which we might call a social act, or, with Stephen Schwarz, the “responsive act” of forgiveness. It is responsive when it follows a petition by the offender to be forgiven. In that case, it is a response not merely in the sense in which we respond to a question, but in the sense of granting a petition and fulfilling the request of being forgiven. This kind of “responsive forgiveness” directs itself to the other person and needs to be perceived by him.

We might ask ourselves whether the “responsive forgiveness” of which Schwarz is speaking is only one very clear case of this act of forgiveness that is a social act in Reinach’s sense, i.e., that needs to be perceived by the other person to become real. For example, we might, as loving father or as loving son, already anticipate that through our explicit offering forgiveness to our child or to our father, the father or the child will see their wrong-doing and regret their offense against us. In this case, we could speak of an “anticipatory” instead of a “responsive” forgiveness. The word “I forgive you”, the forgiveness that needs to reach its addressee to be what it is or intends to be, is an important part of the human forgiveness of a trespass committed against us. Of course, this forgiveness can also be expressed in other ways besides words; for example in a gesture, an embrace, or a handshake.

I think this outward-directed forgiveness is far more than the social act of declaration, let alone of mere communication, of the inner act of forgiveness. No, the promissory note or debt of the other towards us is cancelled by this act. It is a speech-act or even an act through speaking. This forgiveness is definitely more than a mere “declaration” of a forgiveness I have realized in my heart. This inner forgiveness or readiness to pardon precedes such a declaration and is independent of the offender asking for forgiveness. Through the second kind of the social or proto-social act of forgiving, however, I am actually ripping the certificate of debt. Thus, through this act, something important happens in the interpersonal world, nothing less great than what happens when I renounce my claim that another

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<sup>16</sup> See Mariano Crespo, *El perdón. Una investigación filosófica*. 2nd corrected and enlarged ed. (Madrid: Encuentro 2016), pp. 121-127.

person fulfill his promise, and when I thus liberate him or her from the obligation the other person incurred by giving me his or her promise. In forgiveness, something else of no lesser importance happens. I dissolve an account of debt I hold against the other person. Forgiving occurs often “in response” to an act of asking for forgiveness and does, like answering another person’s petition to be freed from the bond his promise created, require that the other person perceives our act of forgiveness, through which he receives a great gift and relief from a debt he has towards us.

I would add that this “social act of forgiving” does not only require, in this case, what Reinach says of all “social acts”,<sup>17</sup> namely that the other person must “hear” or perceive my act of forgiveness. Rather, he has also, if he has not already asked for forgiveness, to accept it, he has to admit his fault, and, at least implicitly, ask for forgiveness. If he does not, I cannot strike out his debt nor forgive him in an interpersonally fruitful way. This seems to me quite analogous to how even God, although his mercy is always ready to forgive, cannot forgive sins to the unrepentant sinner.<sup>18</sup>

This is not only impossible but an additional disharmony arises when the offender does not retract his offense and apologize, and hence does not accept the gift of forgiveness. In other words, a forgiveness that is not met by acceptance of, or is not preceded by asking for, forgiveness does not effectively make the other person forgiven. Moreover, it does not overcome the rift and debt of the other, but gives rise to a new rift and disharmony between the offender and the offended person.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it seems clear that this interpersonal or social act of forgiving

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<sup>17</sup> See Adolf Reinach, „The Apriori Foundations of the Civil Law,“ transl. by J. F. Crosby, *Aletheia III* (1983), pp. xxxiii-xxxv; 1-142.

<sup>18</sup> Consider the parable of Jesus about the lord, who remitted all debts to his servant upon his pleading (an image for God’s forgiveness of his sins and remitting of just punishments), and the servant who, released from his own debt, absolutely refuses to heed a similar plea directed to him by his fellow servant to forgive and to rip his “bond of obligation”. In response to this ungrateful and merciless act, the lord revokes his remittance of the debt and demands that the first servant be duly punished. Thus even God does not remit the debt in forgiveness if the debtor remains evil and refuses to forgive others.

<sup>19</sup> Like Hildebrand in his treatise on forgiveness in his *Moralia*, so also Mariano Crespo denies in ch. 5 of his book that there is a distinction between the two acts of forgiving I

needs much more than a perceiving of the forgiveness of the other person. It stands in need both of being heard and of being responded to. It is not only *vernehmungsbedürftig* but *antwortbedürftig* or *bittebedürftig*.

3. There is, on the other hand, besides the interpersonal forgiveness that requires a cooperation between offender and offended person, an inner forgiveness in my heart, which is a solitary act, though directed at the offender. It differs from the forgiveness, which requires a mutual participation of offended and offending party. It is a “purely inner forgiveness in our heart” that can perfectly well occur without the offender asking the offended person for forgiveness or accepting the gift of forgiveness. This forgiveness is, on the one hand, the noblest and most sublime forgiveness. On the other hand, it does not reach its goal through itself alone, as it were. As long as the offender does not accept the gift of forgiveness and does not regret what he has done, forgiveness remains in our heart and does not reach him. Actually, one might even ask whether we can actually forgive in such a situation, or only have *a complete readiness to forgive*.

In this case, forgiveness (like that of St Stephen and his prayer for God’s forgiveness for those who stoned him to death) remains a tremendous gift the person who forgives in his heart, and declares this forgiveness, offers. However, it does not become fruitful for the offender; it cannot do what it intends to do: to burn the note of obligation, and to make that the other person be truly forgiven. Again, we find here an analogy to divine forgiveness: the unrepentant sinner cannot be forgiven his sin. In an analogous way, the offended human person alone cannot destroy the promissory note nor dissolve the disharmony nor give rise to the reconciliation intended as a fruit of forgiveness, until the offender disavows his wrongdoing.

4. This is connected with another important fact. In the natural moral order, forgiving is not strictly speaking something that I owe to another person; at least, the offender cannot claim a right to my forgiveness, he can only ask for it or plead for it. There is perhaps an exception to forgiveness being neither a moral nor a

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distinguish. I still think that there is clearly such a distinction. This follows from several of the points mentioned, especially clearly from the fact that the inner forgiveness in one’s heart (and with one’s will) must be repeated often, is again and again threatened by the opposites of forgiveness, while for the outward forgiveness as social act applies con Hildebrand’s statement that I can forgive the same injury only once.

legal obligation, nor a right of the offender. It seems that toward a person who has a thousand times forgiven me my offenses, such as parents, a husband or wife whom I have repeatedly “sinned against” and been forgiven by them, I have an obligation to forgive, and the other person has acquired some right that I forgive him. There is a certain mutuality here, analogous to the mutuality of love.

Even if we prescind from Christian Revelation, we can say that if we love the person who has offended us with a natural love, like parents love their children, or children love their parents, friends their friends, or husbands their wives, we will not only be prone to forgive. Rather we will feel a strict obligation to forgive, if we look at the other person’s love and perhaps, in gratitude, at her preceding multiple forgiveness of our offenses. We look to her in love, with the gaze of benevolent love and unique affirmation of the other person in her absolute value and lovability. If the other person deserves love, we may say, she deserves in the eyes of the loving person also forgiveness. (Somewhat paradoxically, in her own eyes, the offending person will feel not deserving forgiveness, as the parable of the prodigal son shows).<sup>20</sup>

If the offense is grave and the evil done to the other definitive, such as in Anthony’s case, an offended person who is not filled with a supernatural love, as Anthony was, might think and feel that the other person does not deserve forgiveness. This often happens when parents of a murdered child absolutely refuse to forgive the murderer of their child.<sup>21</sup>

5. Towards other persons, who have done me an irreversible wrong, and with whom no special bond or call to the mutuality of love and forgiveness unites me, (like to the murderer of my only child) I have, on a purely natural level, no strict obligation to forgive. Nor does the offender have a right to my forgiveness (while he has a duty to ask for forgiveness). In fact, without a deeper religious background, I may be unable to forgive. The offender cannot claim the forgiveness of the one whom he has offended as his right. Therefore, the Romans called the act of forgiveness “*veniam dare*” – bestowing a grace on the other.

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<sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still in the distance, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. The son declared, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet...’

<sup>21</sup> This is dramatically depicted in the movie *Dead Man Walking*.

6. However, as Christian, I have towards God, whose mercy will forgive all of our sins if we implore His forgiveness, a strict obligation to forgive all those who trespass against us – completely and from all our heart. Thus this absence of a strict obligation to forgive all offenses against us in natural morality,<sup>22</sup> changes radically in a supernatural perspective of Christian revelation. The infinite mercy and forgiveness we have all received from God obliges us strictly to forgive those who have offended us, as the parable of the forgiveness of the master and the unforgiving attitude of the evil servant and the “Our Father” petition teach us: “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”. This unconditional *inner* forgiveness, however, neither the human nor the divine, cannot destroy the bond of obligation (of debt) nor achieve reconciliation and the previous community, as we have seen, without a response on the side of the person to be forgiven. The latter point is very strongly affirmed by Dietrich von Hildebrand in his *Moralia*. He even adds that the full interhuman reconciliation and restoration of the relationship which existed before the offense, requires the offender also repent the sin he has committed and is reconciled with God.

7. Let us return to a purely human phenomenological investigation into forgiveness: Forgiveness, especially for great and horrible evils done to a person, is extremely difficult. Think of the woman-physician who was raped for years by a guard in Peru where she was held prisoner by a terrorist organization. Years later, the evildoer knelt down before her and asked her to forgive him; she forgave him from all her heart. Forgiveness - in such cases - requires that we do not only overcome pride, hatred, resentment, etc., etc., but also in a mysterious way go beyond the attitude of just reproaches and demands for atonement or punishment and become tremendously generous. It demands that love melts our heart to the point that we drop our demand for justice.

However, this “dropping” our just claims and reproaches directed against the other person must not be superficially done in the sense of a “simple dropping of demands of justice”. Rather, the true forgiveness penetrates into the depth of the wrongdoing of another person against me, it recognizes fully that he deserves, especially if his transgression is grave, reproach or punishment and ought to desire himself some human interpersonal “atonement” of his “wrong (sin) committed against me.” At the same time, it recognizes that forgiveness is the

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<sup>22</sup> On this point, I differ from Stephen Schwarz, who claims that there is a universal moral obligation to forgive that addresses itself to all men and does not require Christian faith.

most adequate, the deepest and the most authentic response to the other person who has acted badly against me.

8. We can add that the mystery of forgiveness is profoundly linked to the mystery of love. Only through love, forgiveness can be perfect and is even possible in cases of grave and terrible offenses.

9. This is also connected with the answer to another deep problem regarding forgiveness. Is forgiving a mere act of the free will, is it an act of a dry will that stays fully within our power, or has it also an affective dimension, and, inasmuch as it involves an affective response, does not stand in our power? Is it also a forgiving in my heart, a unique affective and loving response to the other person? A being affected by the value of the person in spite of his evil deed, with which I do not identify him and to which I do not nail him down when I forgive him, seems necessary both for the purely inner, and for the interpersonal forgiveness, at least for their fullest realization that includes precisely “forgiving in one’s heart”.<sup>23</sup>

10. The full fruitful interpersonal forgiveness and dissolving of the debt and disharmony between the offender and the offended person that results in a full reconciliation between both, does not only require being affected in love by the dignity and value of a person, but also being affected by his asking for forgiveness, by his regret. This affective dimension of forgiveness emerged beautifully in the example of the woman, the South American victim, who forgave her rapist his repeated and horrible rape, and in the greatness of her soul that made her forgive this rapist from all her heart.

11. The respective roles of will and heart in forgiveness constitute perhaps also a chief difference between the “inner forgiveness” of the heart and the “social act of forgiving”. In the first one, the heart plays a very important role. The second one, in which I erase the certificate of debt I hold against my debtor, is more a deed of the free will. It seems that the distinction between two authentic acts of forgiveness and the irreducibility of interpersonal forgiveness to inner forgiveness, though denied by Hildebrand, can also be gathered from a deep observation Hildebrand himself makes and that does not apply to the inner

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<sup>23</sup> See on this affective dimension and “moral feelings” also Jean Hampton, “Forgiveness, Resentment, and Hatred,” en J. Murphy and J. Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 35-87.

forgiveness of the heart but only to forgiveness as social act.<sup>24</sup> He says that, unlike thanking or gratitude, forgiveness for the same offense can be granted only once. Now precisely this does not seem to be true of the inner forgiving from one's heart. This forgiving must repeatedly be renewed and recuperated when devastating memories or bitter reproaches re-emerge in our heart, when we blame another person in our heart, are overcome by anger and indignation, and are tempted to fall out of this inner and total forgiveness of the heart. This can occur perhaps upon being provoked by certain acts of the other person that repeat or recall his past transgression. Or it can happen by unbearably sad memories that evoke bitter thoughts or sarcastic remarks and jokes that demonstrate that our inner forgiveness still is painfully falling short of perfect charity, and that we must repeatedly descend into the depth of our soul and the gift of charity to truly and completely forgive the same wrong-doing in our heart.

However, what Hildebrand says about the unrepeatability of forgiveness of the same trespass, does indeed seem to be true for the social act of forgiveness. In this act, I can forgive the same offense only once. For in this act of forgiving I destroy once and forever the 'letter of debt' and cannot return to the other person

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<sup>24</sup> In his book, *Conduct and Character* (12 of January 2010), chapter 9, "Forgiveness," Stephen Schwarz distinguishes two kinds of forgiveness. The first one he calls "initiating forgiveness" because it does not presuppose that an offender asks for forgiveness; he believes that this forgiveness (in the heart, as I call it) is morally obligatory not only for the Christian but for every person because it's moral goodness is part of morality itself. The second one he calls "responsive forgiveness" because it answers a begging forgiveness of the trespasser. He says that this forgiveness is a social act, in need to be perceived. Apart from the different terminology, and his view, deviating more from Hildebrand's position than from mine, that an absolute obligation to forgive is part of natural ethics, I do not see a great difference between our positions. Schwarz adds, however, many very interesting observations on forgiveness and its opposites. I do not wish to comment in this short paper, on the book on Forgiveness, another important member of the Hildebrand Schülerkreis, Professor Mariano Crespo, has published: *Das Verzeihen. Eine philosophische Untersuchung*, (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002). It also was published in Spanish in the author's own translation: *El perdón. Una investigación filosófica*. 2nd corrected and enlarged ed. (Madrid: Encuentro 2016).

a second time to forgive him the same deed.<sup>25</sup> In spite of the difference between these two acts of forgiving, it seems to me the second, social act of forgiving presupposes the first one, at least in a weak form, in order to be appropriate and not in some measure hypocritical or “dead”. Moreover, any refusal to forgive in words and to speak “I forgive you” to the others pleading for forgiveness contradicts the claim to have forgiven another person in one’s heart. The complete readiness to the second kind of forgiveness is part of the first one: of the forgiving in one’s heart.

12. Another observation Hildebrand makes in his beautiful treatise on forgiveness applies only to “inner forgiveness”, to the inner affective and free forgiveness of the heart. Namely, this forgiveness does not stand entirely in our own power. It must emerge in us; it is a gift, a grace.

The deed of forgiving someone, in contrast, the ripping the certificate of his debt, stands in the power of our will, at least much more clearly and completely than the “inner forgiveness in our heart”. This holds true even if the “social act of forgiveness” is not separable from the inner forgiveness, such that Crespo understandably thinks they are not two acts. The “social act” or forgiveness as well entails, though far less markedly, a dimension of affective response and ought to grow out of the inner forgiveness of the heart. Moreover, the inner forgiveness in my heart is not genuine if it does not urge me to express this forgiveness towards the offender and to forgive him also in the intersubjective way that stands in need of being perceived and responded to.

If what the other person has done to me, is horrible and grave, as it is in the case of a rape, forgiving is terribly difficult and, at least in its depth, only possible in the light of the love of God revealed to us in Christ. For the vision of a God who IS LOVE itself, and who has poured out his love and mercy on us through the God-Man, who united in His single person true divinity and true humanity, giving his own life for us, motivates a response of love and unlimited forgiving. It is hard or even quite impossible to achieve in a spiritual universe without Christ. The forgiving person, who forgives “from his whole and absolute heart” imitates in a very special way Christ. He is, like St. Stephen, a living image of His love and mercy.

Forgiveness is thus an immensely deep, complex and mysterious act. It is not

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<sup>25</sup> See Hildebrand, *Moralia*. Nachgelassenes Werk. Gesammelte Werke Band 5, (Regensburg: Josef Habbel, 1980), p. 335.

only a problem but also a mystery. I exclaimed in my youthful falling in love with philosophy by thinking about forgiveness, that to claim that understanding the mysterious depth of forgiveness is easier than understanding Hegel's philosophy, is the opinion of a fool. And I still uphold the same opinion with the proviso that Hegel's and other false philosophical constructs contain contradictions and are therefore not only difficult to understand but cannot even be understood at all. The better we understand them, the darker and more contradictory they become. In contrast, forgiveness possesses a true and supremely intelligible essence that, the deeper we understand it, the more luminous it becomes, and the more we grasp its mysteries, the more it spends our minds clarity and light.