

WHY MUST WE FORGIVE?¹

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Personal forgiveness, in a worldly setting, is an act performed by a human person to overcome resentment, among others, in order for that person to open up to possibilities of accommodation of, acceptance of, and reconciliation or communion with the Other.² I want to argue that such an act is spiritual in nature or has an element of divinity in it. To forgive is to be lovingly compassionate, and the act of being lovingly compassionate in the midst of being wronged or downtrodden, or exploited and so on—real or imagined—is an act that goes beyond being human: it appears knowingly or unknowingly—even for a non-believer—to have the guidance of a spiritual support. One overriding reason, among many, on why we must forgive is to have peace of mind, that is, to overcome the inherent spiritual distress or emotional burden, or both. In this regard, personal forgiveness may be considered as a form of an enlightened self-interest.

INTRODUCTION

The human being is finite and imperfect. He or she inhabits a world, which is a natural setting filled with natural beauty and natural calamities. Likewise, the human world is imperfect and filled with good and evil. We are unsure which predominates. Is human existence largely good or bad? Is human nature good or selfish, or neither, and does the situation make it so?

The human person, as Heidegger³ says, is thrown into the world, which is not of his or her own making; he or she falls into it and finds himself or herself lost in it.

In society, the home has its own culture. Most people are nurtured within the cultural setting of the home, and this basically defines their general upbringing. In a religious home, the child grows up generally good and compassionate while the one in a non-religious home generally grows up selfish and unforgiving. The home, however, which in itself is not necessarily a perfect cultural setting, is a microcosm. The neighborhood, the community, and society-at-large compose the macrocosm. In this macrocosmic cultural milieu, the upbringing in the home can be reinforced, redirected, or extinguished and replaced with a different or even an opposite character.

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² I use the word “Other” here to refer to either the singular noun “Other” or the plural form of this noun “Others”, depending on context.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 119-220.

The macrocosmic world is highly competitive. Cooperation could be limited and is availed of only to the extent that it can lead to successful competition. The world is filled with struggles: it is in this world, far more extensively than in the home, where one—or his/her family—can be wronged or emotionally wounded, taken advantage of, discriminated against, ostracized, and so on. For some, it is difficult to forgive and forget such wrongs; for others, the wrong can be forgiven, but it is difficult to forget, and still for a third group, the wrong can be forgiven and forgotten in order to move on.

In a situation where we are wronged, the overriding question is—if we desire to forgive at all—why must we forgive?

FALLEN HUMAN NATURE

The act of forgiving appears contrary to human nature—contrary to being human. That is why it is not easy for us to forgive. What does it mean, however, to be human—from a Christian perspective?

The story of the fallen nature of man, that is, after both Adam and Eve, ate the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge,⁴ explains the sinful human nature.⁵ The immediate consequence of this fall is spiritual death (or the loss of the “grace of original holiness”).⁶ The long-term consequence is physical death.

The consequences of a fallen human nature in the long-term are the manifestations of evil acts in terms of envy, faithlessness, irresponsibility, hard toil, killings, sexual misconduct, lies, excessive pride, desire for power, and so on.⁷ Cain (the farmer) murdered his younger brother Abel (the shepherd) because he was jealous that God did not accept his offering while He accepted Abel’s offering. It is said Cain had no faith in the goodness of God (St. Augustine’s version of *Gen. 4:6-10*) and brought a poor quality offering to God (Septuagint version of *Gen. 4:6-7*) since he was predisposed to sin (Hebrew Masoretic and Dead Sea Scrolls version) or his works were evil (*1 John 3:11-12*).⁸ The Lord banished Cain to the Land of Nod, east of Eden, and there he built the city named after his first son, Enoch.⁹ Adam and Eve lived for 930 years

⁴ *Gen. 3:6*.

⁵ According to Clifford, “Historically, creation myths were not told for their own sake with the goal to explain objectively how creation happened. Their purpose was to celebrate the majesty of the Creator and acknowledge their dependence on this deity. Second, the authors of these religious myths assumed that the originating moment explains the present. Finally, there is no good evidence for holding that there were two distinct traditions of creation, one for the creation of the world and the other for the creation of beings.” See Anne M. Clifford, “Creation,” *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, 2nd ed., ed. Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (New York: Fortress Press, 2011), 304-10.

⁶ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997). Available at <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm>. Accessed: 30 October 2012. See also Wayne Goforth, “The Family of Adam and Eve.” Available at <http://floralheightschurchofchrist.org/bulletins/The%20Family%20of%20Adam%20and%20Eve.pdf>. Accessed: 3 October 2012.

⁷ Human nature was good in the mythical Garden of Eden (see Clifford, “Creation”), but when human nature became fallen, it was *basically* transformed into something bad with occasional goodness in it. The sustainability of this goodness depends upon how one nurtures it spiritually within oneself, as in the case of Abel. See Chap. one, Par. 6, Art. 4 (“Man in Paradise”) and Chap. one, Par. 7 (“The Fall”), *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

⁸ Jared L. Olar, “Cain and His Family,” *Grace and Knowledge*, Issue 22 (December 2006). Available at <http://graceandknowledge.faithweb.com/cain.html>. Accessed: 3 October 2012.

⁹ Seth, the third important brother of Cain and Abel, also had a son called Enoch who built the city of Zion.

and bore many sons and daughters.¹⁰ Cain earlier took one of his sisters as a wife¹¹ and remained with her in the Land of Nod, but his descendants worshipped many gods and practiced polygamy. Eventually the Cainites perished in the Great Flood.

We may construct a vertical spiritual spectrum (ladder or post) where the topmost level is one hundred percent spiritual growth while the bottommost level is zero percent spirituality (the death of spirituality). By “spirituality”, we mean here a transcendent religious or secular experience, or feeling of something much deeper than one’s personal self in communion with something infinite or indescribable power.

We can locate Cain at the bottom and Abel at the top of the spiritual spectrum. A rise of spirituality will reflect a changing human nature and will depend on many situational factors. At the bottom of the spectrum is non-belief or loss of faith in God and the disposition to commit evil of all sorts, that is, lies, lust, enmity, envy, and the like. At the top of the spectrum is belief in God and the outward manifestation to do the good, that is, being obedient, loving, forgiving, compassionate, humble, sympathetic, etc. At the time both Cain and Abel made the offerings to God, Abel’s spiritual nature was perfect or near-perfect while Cain’s spiritual nature was, perhaps, only about sixty percent. After God failed to accept his offering, Cain’s spiritual nature slid down the spectrum to near zero as he plotted to kill Abel, and was completely reduced to zero when he carried out the act of murdering his brother.

Thomas Hobbes

It seems that Thomas Hobbes is right in depicting human nature as essentially selfish. A person always behaves in such a manner that the consequences of his or her actions will always redound to his or her benefit. From this perspective, it does not seem possible for one to act against one’s best interest. The philanthropist somehow benefits from the publicity of his or her donations either as a person or as an oblique endorsement of his or her company’s products or both. Even in anonymity, the donor may still think in terms of spiritual benefit that may accrue the good works. Some people doubt whether there can truly be a selfless act, whether pure altruism exists, that is, a kind of sacrificial act without expecting anything in return.

Hobbes argues that cooperation is not possible in a situation where every man is at war with every man, and where life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹² When people realize that they do not have to live in fear for the rest of their lives, they can cooperate—surrender their individual disparate wills to a sovereign—by setting up a government to regulate their social and political conduct in order for them to enjoy commodious living or the life of ease and comfort.

Friedrich Nietzsche

It appears, however, that the more accurate portrayal of a person with a fallen nature—the being who suffers a spiritual demise—is that of Friedrich Nietzsche. Not only that Man has

¹⁰ According to the historian, Josephus, Adam and Eve had 33 sons and 23 daughters. See William Whiston, trans., *The Complete Works of Josephus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1981), 27.

¹¹ Ken Ham, Jonathan Sarfati, and Carl Wieland. “Where did Cain get his wife?” Trans. Don Batten. Adapted from *The Revised & Expanded Answers Book* (Masters Books 2000). Supplied by Creation Ministries International (2001). Available at <http://www.christiananswers.net/q-aig/aig-c004.html>. Accessed: 3 October 2012.

¹² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. John Plamenatz (London: Fontana Library, 1969), 143.

Arthur Schopenhauer's Will to Live,¹³ but that he is more consumed with the Will to Power.¹⁴ Everything he does is for the sake of power—be that of seeking knowledge, truth, naked domination, political success, wealth, and so on. Nietzsche believes that essentially Man lives to dominate or subjugate others.

Both Hobbes and Nietzsche were materialists, although Hobbes was more optimistic while Nietzsche was more pessimistic. Hobbes finds the salvation of Man's selfish situation in the Commonwealth while Nietzsche looks at the self as essentially a body that is consumed with passions, struggles, conflicts, pains, joys, and the like. Reason or soul, or spirit is simply an aspect of the body, which it uses in order to survive.¹⁵ Nietzsche says that the possibility of an Overman (*Übermensch*) who is beyond current morality and who can transcend the present nihilistic culture—the “human-all-too-human” condition or the mentality of the herd—by creating new values should be the goal of each human individual.¹⁶ An “overman uses the will-to-power to influence and dominate the thoughts of others creatively from generation to generation. In this way, his existence and power live on even after he dies.”¹⁷ Such a goal that Nietzsche portrays is not easily perceivable among the common people, who have the “herd instinct,” compared to the Hobbesian creation of the Commonwealth.

TRANSCENDING FALLEN HUMAN NATURE

Before discussing the idea of forgiveness, it will be helpful to discuss how to transcend this fallen human nature from the perspective of Hobbes and Nietzsche.

While accepting the Hobbesian and Nietzschean ideas of human nature as essentially selfish and power-centered but setting aside their projected solutions, how then is forgiveness possible as a consequence of the idea of a fallen nature? It seems in this view that a person who is wronged has the right to avenge oneself. It appears that there is no gain in being weak, humble, sympathetic, apologetic, wallowing in suffering, etc. There is no room for the weak of heart; there is no room for forgiveness.

Self-interest

Assuming—in agreement with Hobbes and with Nietzsche—that human action is always motivated by self-interest and this desire of one-upmanship, there are some people, however, who believe that they do things selflessly or altruistically—that they do not expect anything in

¹³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as My Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), passim.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), §259; idem, *The Gay science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), §349; and idem, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), passim.

¹⁵ See Rolando M. Gripaldo, “Foucault on Nietzsche, History, and Truth,” *History, Philosophy, and Culture* (Quezon City: C & E Publishing, Inc., 2010), 33-34.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. In *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), §3. The Overman or “Superman” must have achieved “self-direction,” “self-cultivation,” “self-overcoming,” and “self-mastery.”

¹⁷ Anon, “Nietzsche's idea of an overman and life from his point of view,” posted on 27 August 2003. Available at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/determinism/message/3628>. Accessed: 5 October 2012.

return. It is not their intention to get anything in return, and if there is anything given in return, it is an unsolicited reward.

For selfish-motive advocates, the equation does not appear that simple. They believe that while what is avowed and felt now is pure altruism, it is the subconscious motive of a fallen human nature to seek favorable gratification of one's altruistic or utilitarian act. Any humanitarian act always carries some form of a reward—it could be visible or invisible. The visible rewards are publicity of oneself and one's products, increase in donations from some agencies, and so on. The invisible ones could be spiritual gains of good works and ego-boosting admiration by the recipients ("thank you" notes and remarks), among others. It does not matter whether it is consciously or unconsciously sought. There is always that unconscious expectation of a reward of some form as a consequence of fallen human nature.

Bertrand Russell takes the middle ground. He does not think that pure altruism and blind selfishness absolutely exist in the long-term, the former because it is too ideal to be true and the latter because it is self-destructive, but rather altruism and self-interest coincide at a certain point.¹⁸ As Rowe says:

Understanding that [pure] altruism is impossible allows us to move from blind selfishness to what Bertrand Russell called "enlightened self-interest," which is the ability to order our priorities according to which in the long term will matter most to us. We might come to see improving the quality of people's lives as actually improving the quality of our own.¹⁹

Enlightened Self-interest

Many people nowadays have accepted the self-interest point of view but make a distinction between an unenlightened self-interest (pure selfish motive) and an enlightened self-interest (altruistic/utilitarian motive). It is not *enlightened* in the sense of not expecting anything rewarding, but *enlightened* precisely in the corporate sense of expecting something beneficial in return.

To give an example of an unenlightened self-interest or a purely selfish motivation: we may have a clandestine scientific organization that will sell a nuclear bomb to a terrorist group without regard for how many millions will die as a result as long as the organization receives its profit. To give an example of an enlightened self-interest: we have this idea of "corporate social responsibility." According to Jennings, enlightened self-interest (altruism) for business is to serve the larger society by responding to society's needs as a sense of corporate social responsibility. It is expected that this gesture will contribute to the business' long-term success.²⁰

¹⁸ Charles R. Pigden, "Moral Philosopher or Unphilosophical Moralist?" In *The Cambridge Companion to Bertrand Russell*, ed. Nicholas Griffin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 497.

¹⁹ Dorothy Rowe, "Hearing but Not Listening: Why Charities Fail." In *The Right Use of Money*, ed. David Danton (Bristol: University of Bristol, 2004), 102.

²⁰ Marianne M. Jennings, *Business: Its Legal, Ethical and Global Environment*, 9th ed. (Mason, OH: South-Western Cengage Learning, 2012), 50.

Rational Self-Interest

Enlightened self-interest may be rational, but its starting point is selfishness or non-rationality, that is, human nature is bad or selfish. This is the starting point of Hobbes and Nietzsche. Rational self-interest, the position of John Locke, starts with the premise that human nature is basically good or cooperative. It is the human situation, in some cases, that makes one selfish. A person, says Locke, cooperates because he or she realizes *rationally* the need for the others in order to live comfortably in this world. One knows that he or she is not self-sufficient and therefore needs others for survival.

Locke argues, however, that one cannot be rational at all times. A human person becomes selfish to the extent that he or she claims for himself or herself what is beyond the basic needs to exist. Everyone, for example, can drink from a clean river and can fetch as much water as needed to store in his or her house. However, when one claims the entire river as his or her own, when one prevents others from drinking freely from the river, then this idea of property—what is mine is not yours and vice-versa—renders the human being selfish. Since a human being is not always *rational* at all times and in all cases, then—according to Locke—the establishment of the government becomes necessary to regulate decent behavior.²¹

Unlike Hobbes who bases the establishment of the Commonwealth as a transition from naked selfishness (unenlightened self-interest) to enlightened self-interest, Locke grounds the existence of the government as a response to the non-sustainability of rational self-interest. Why Lockean rational self-interest cannot and will not be sustainable can probably be explained by the inherent weakness of human nature—its being fallen or lacking, in some situations, of spiritual support.

In the spiritual spectrum, we earlier constructed a situation in which Cain is at the bottom and Abel at the top. In the same vein, I will position Nietzsche near the bottom, somewhere at about twenty-five percent, while Hobbes at about forty percent. Now, this is a subjective estimate and not one that bears any mathematical accuracy. The reason why I do not place Nietzsche at zero percent is that his remark that “God is dead”²² is more of a negation of the presence of God to affirm the presence of Man and the primordially of human existence. It is not the same as saying that there is no God in reality or that we can demonstrate the non-existence of God. It is on a similar level to those who claim themselves as agnostics who live life without the presence of God. I think Nietzsche’s position is an existentially acceptable one, spiritually speaking, than the one of Cain where while knowing the existence of God, he deliberately committed spiritual suicide by murdering Abel. Afterwards, his entire life became an open defiance against God. Cain’s position is similar to the position of an atheist who originally believes in God but eventually declares not only that there is no God, but also that he can demonstrate by proof that God truly does not exist.

Hobbes, for me, is higher in the spiritual spectrum compared to Nietzsche in that Hobbes affirms God’s existence despite interpreting God’s nature in materialistic terms;²³ at least, Hobbes did not negate or defy God. The Hobbesian or Nietzschean person can go down or up the

²¹John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, introduction and notes Peter Laslett (London: New York: Mentor Books, 1965), particularly, Book II, chaps. 2, 3, 5, and 7.

²²Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, §3.

²³According to one view, God for Hobbes, though material is “the ‘subtlest’ (sparsest) material object in existence.” He “is located in the world—in our hearts, in churches, and everywhere—therefore, He must be material.” See “Substance Monism.” Available at <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil1020/Monism.pdf>. Accessed: 6 October 2012.

spiritual spectrum, depending on one's circumstances. I will place Locke at the higher spiritual level, about eighty-five percent, because he begins with the positive premise that human nature is good.

FORGIVENESS

How do we situate forgiveness in the spiritual spectrum? Is forgiveness a spiritual act that is guided by the Holy Spirit? Alternatively, is it simply a form of enlightened self-interest?

Definition

Forgiveness as used in this paper is a sincere personal act of letting go or of giving up an emotional feeling of resentment or anger,²⁴ retribution, hatred, depression, spiritual devastation, "claim to requital or compensation,"²⁵ or the like—which in general may be called negative "reactive attitudes"²⁶—by a victim of the harm, wrong, injury, fault, debt, or the like committed on her or him by someone else. A genuine kind of personal forgiveness has three components: (1) dyadic (involving a victim and a wrongdoer), (2) consciously sincere, and (3) interpersonal (involving directly two persons). The term "interpersonal" in some ways can be "intersubjective," but not always necessarily the case. Although there is an epistemological difficulty whether the forgiveness given is sincere or not, it is the person who forgives who should know whether he or she is sincere. An insincere forgiveness is pseudo-kind.

What Forgiveness Is Not

It is important that we should distinguish personal forgiveness from other similar acts.²⁷ First, forgiveness is not a condonation of an evil act done to a victim. To condone is to tolerate the harm done and therefore is a form of colluding with the wrongdoer. Second, forgiving is not the same as excusing someone from the wrongdoing. To forgive is to recognize that the wrongdoer has done something injurious to the victim. To excuse is to negate the culpability of the wrongdoer as if the harm is not serious or real. Third, forgiveness (which is love combined with compassion from the Christian tradition) is not the same as mercy (which is pity combined with compassion), but mercy can be the basis or vehicle of forgiveness as stressed in the Islamic tradition.²⁸ Fourth, forgiveness is total, not partial. If it is partial, then it is a pseudo kind of forgiveness. One cannot say sincerely without contradicting oneself, "I forgive you for slapping me but I am still angry with you." What is forgiven, the act or the person? Mahatma Gandhi

²⁴ See Joseph Butler, *Fifteen Sermons Preached at Rolls Chapel*. In *The Works of the Right Reverend Father in God, Joseph Butler, D.C.L., Late Bishop of Durham*, ed. Samuel Halifax (New York: Carter, 1846).

²⁵ Paul M. Hughes, "Forgiveness," *Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2010). Available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/forgiveness/>. Accessed: 2 October 2012.

²⁶ Peter F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), 1-29

²⁷ Hughes, "Forgiveness."

²⁸ God is addressed as "In the name of Allah, Ever Beneficent, *Infinitely Merciful*. Praise be to Allah! 'Lord' of the 'Universe'" (italics mine). See Mahmood Ashraf, *The Holy Qur'an* (Karachi: University of Karachi, 2004). Another translation uses "the Gracious, the Merciful." See the translation of Maulawi Sher Ali of the Holy Quran. Available at <http://www.alislam.org/quran/tafseer/?page=1®ion=E2>. Accessed: 30 October 2012.

enjoins us to “hate the sin and not the sinner,”²⁹ which in effect is telling us to “forgive the act and love the person”. Last, forgiveness is not always a moral term. It is a generic term that applies to either a moral or a non-moral behavior such as a “poor musical performance by a pianist,”³⁰ which can be forgivable.

Setting Aside Other Types of Forgiveness³¹

In view of the above definition of forgiveness and the criteria of being dyadic, consciously sincere, and interpersonal, I will set aside other types of forgiveness. These other types may be considered forgiveness from different levels of interpretation but not from what I am presently interested in.

First is self-forgiveness. Some writers, like Hannah Arendt, doubt that such forgiveness is possible.³² Others grant its possibility but doubt its authenticity because, though it is dyadic, it is not interpersonal—it involves only one being, that is, the victim and the wrongdoer are one and the same person.³³

Second is forgiveness as a response to minor and unintentional acts as a matter of custom or etiquette. When someone unintentionally bumps us in a busy escalator, for example, and says, “Sorry,” “Excuse me,” “Pardon me,” and the like, forgiveness on the part of the victim is automatic, which means it is not sincerely conscious, but is given customarily as a matter of course.

Third is third-party forgiveness. An example is political forgiveness where the president of a nation or a governor of a state pardons a prisoner, especially a political prisoner, for a sentence served for a very long time, or for the purpose of reconciliation. A second example is a commuted sentence authorized by a prison board, which reduces a sentence from life imprisonment to parole for good behavior. A third example is when a state president grants forgiveness to another nation that once devastated his nation—i.e. killed and maimed a great number of the local population—during a previous war in order to maintain good relations and normalize international trade. A last example is the parents of a murdered child forgiving the murderer given that justice was meted and he was imprisoned as retribution for them and their child. This is set aside because only the child can forgive on his or her behalf, but unfortunately he or she is no longer around. There may be other examples, but these four, I think, will suffice. Some quarters—and this is debatable—do not consider political or legal pardons, commutations, or reconciliations as authentic forgiveness but simply cognates of authentic forgiveness. These types of forgiveness are triadic—involving three parties—and not interpersonal. In many cases, the act of forgiveness is bestowed upon the wrongdoer by someone—a political person or board—without even the prior knowledge of the victim or victims themselves.

²⁹ S. F. Heart, “Quotes from Mohandas K. Gandhi” (1997-2012). Available at <http://www.sfheart.com/Gandhi.html>. Accessed: 28 October 2012.

³⁰ Hughes, “Forgiveness.”

³¹ For an extensive discussion of these types, see *ibid.* See also Jakub Jirsa, “Forgiveness and Revenge: Where Is Justice?” In *Thinking Together. Proceedings of the IWM Junior Fellows' Conference, Winter 2003*, eds. A. Cashin and J. Jirsa (Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, 2004), vol. 16. Available at <http://www.iwm.at/publ-jvc/jc-16-05.pdf>. Accessed: 29 October 2012.

³² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

³³ Hughes, “Forgiveness.”

Another type of third-party forgiveness appears to me to qualify as a genuine interpersonal forgiveness, but not from an individual level. Here, I refer to collective forgiveness. This involves a third party. In this instance, however, the victims have collectively decided to forgive the offender or offenders through an intermediary—a political leader, religious priest, or minister, or the like—to relay the message of forgiveness. In this regard, I will include this type of forgiveness in my category of genuine interpersonal forgiveness. This will also include a third-party forgiveness, involving two individuals where the victim makes use of a third party to relay the message of forgiveness.

Fourth is forgiveness by forgetting. There are occasions when a person eventually forgets the offense committed or harm inflicted on him or her by someone over a long period. The offense is forgotten, because the pain has disappeared, and it is now possible to interact with the offender normally, as if nothing ever happened before. One example is expressed in the song, “I remember the boy, but I don’t remember the feeling [of love or of pain] anymore.”³⁴ I set this aside for inclusion in my spiritual-spectrum analysis because although it is dyadic and interpersonal, it is not consciously given unless—and this is the exception—the victim tells the offender, “I have now forgiven you.”

FORGIVENESS AS GUIDED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Earlier, we posed the question on whether forgiveness in the personal sense is guided by the Holy Spirit or is simply an act of enlightened self-interest. To answer the first alternative, it is important to relate our spiritual spectrum to the Christian tradition of forgiveness. Since my knowledge of forgiveness in other religious traditions is limited, my discussion will focus on the Christian tradition.

The Christian ethical tradition of forgiveness is reflected in the Lord’s Prayer. The wrongdoer beseeches God to forgive his or her sins as he or she forgives those who trespass against him or her. In other words, the Lord’s Prayer enjoins the victim to forgive his or her trespassers as God has forgiven his or her sins to gain salvation. There is a third party involved here but the peculiarity of this relationship is that the third party simply sets forgiveness as a prerequisite for ultimate salvation. The indirect involvement of the third party makes the act of forgiveness between the victim and the wrongdoer interpersonal.

Christian forgiveness is not always a perfect duty in the sense where an individual will have to forgive immediately after the wrong is done. This means that the victim may still have the choice to determine when and where it becomes appropriate to bestow forgiveness to the wrongdoer. The notion of “appropriateness” connotes something situational or circumstantial. If the victim, for example, is convinced that the wrongdoer’s apology is sincere, then he may consider the grant of forgiveness as justified.

An instance of Christian forgiveness as a perfect duty—or what otherwise may be expressed as “forgiveness as a perfect Christian duty”—can be gleaned from the television movie, *The Confession*.³⁵ The early part of the movie portrays a situation in which someone performed an unforgivable act and retribution came in the form of an execution at the hands of a

³⁴ Hear Lea Salonga’s version of this song. Available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HVD729FQ98> [song]. Accessed: 8 August 2012.

³⁵ Kiefer Sutherland, *The Confession* (2011). A television movie written and directed by Brad Mirman. DVD version released on 24 January 2012. See in this connection, “The Confession (TV Series),” *Wikipedia* (7 October 2012).

hired gun. The offender was a Christian who backslid but returned to Christ again. The hired gun, who caught up with him, informed him that he would be shot. The victim requested that the killer give him a moment to make peace with God. The victim closed his eyes, prayed, opened his eyes, and said, “I forgive you.” The hired gun shot him with professional coldness. This is an example of forgiveness as a perfect Christian duty because right there and then—without any precondition—the victim forgave the hit man on the spot. His act of forgiveness—a charitable act, a perfect gift to the killer—was an act of perfect Christian duty.

Forgiveness as a unilateral act

Forgiveness as a perfect Christian duty is given without preconditions. There are also occasions, in imperfect Christian duty, where the offended party decides to bestow forgiveness to the offender unilaterally—through his or her own initiative—even without the latter repenting. This is in line with Jesus’ act of unconditional forgiveness, as man in his God-man nature, of his tormentors. Human beings can sometimes forgive unilaterally or without conditions, but God’s forgiveness of humans, though given from the divine perspective unilaterally and unconditionally to all, is always conditional from the human perspective—one cannot be saved unless he or she forgives those who sin against him or her.³⁶ Human forgiveness of one’s trespassers is a requirement for salvation. After Jesus, as man, had forgiven his tormentors, he besought God to forgive them for they did not know what they were doing.

This twist in forgiveness as Christian charity, gift, love, and compassion is interesting. Although a legal provision may stipulate that ignorance of the law excuses no one, this case is a special instance in which the ignorance of His tormentors exonerates them from culpability. Apparently they were deserving of God’s charity—laden with understanding, grace, love, and compassion. God’s forgiveness of Jesus’ tormentors is a situational exception. The tormentors, however, are not exempted from the general requirement of salvation, viz., that they should forgive their own tormentors.

SECULAR FORGIVENESS

Devout Christians can readily understand the nature of spiritual forgiveness. But nominal Christians, the agnostics, and the atheists do not appear to have a clear understanding of spiritual forgiveness, or are simply ignorant of the facts. Nominal Christians are those who are only Christians in name but are not strictly practicing the faith. Many, e.g., regularly go to church to hear Mass on Sundays and holy days, but after that they go to cockpits, casinos, and nightclubs. In one sense, they generally form part of the populace with the “herd instinct,” as Nietzsche would say.³⁷ Agnostics and atheists are nonbelievers or freethinkers. Collectively, I will call these three groups the “seculars.”

³⁶ In the course of the seminar, Dr. Varghese Manimala of India stressed the distinction between the divine and human perspectives as *objective* and *subjective* salvation. From the divine perspective, salvation through Christ is given by God *objectively* and *unilaterally* to everyone. From the perspective of the human being, however, one’s personal salvation depends upon his or her *subjective* fulfillment of God’s tenets as in the Lord’s Prayer of forgiving those who have sinned against oneself.

³⁷Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, §116.

Forgiveness with preconditions

In the light of fallen human nature forgiveness among the seculars—in many instances—is subject to a number of conditions. For many of them, repentance or apology is a condition. In some cases, amends through compensation may be necessary. Someone who overruns a calf may apologize to the owner and pay or replace the calf, and, in this regard, may be forgiven.

Another condition is in the change that the victim perceives in himself or herself with respect to the offender who may have suffered long enough, e.g., in a prison cell. In this situation, compassion—or the “virtue of empathy for the suffering of others”³⁸—on the part of the victim becomes a prior condition for forgiveness.

Spiritual courage may also be a condition for forgiveness. It takes courage to humble oneself. When the wrong or hurt is deep, it will take courage—and in some cases, even with prayers—for one to humble oneself and be lovingly compassionate in overcoming resentment. This is not the political, nationalistic, or patriotic courage that one may encounter in the battlefield of warring nations, nor is it the courage of a law enforcer in legally enforcing the law as a matter of duty. When the wound is deep, to be compassionate takes *spiritual* and *emotional* courage, because in this case the battlefield is essentially between good and evil; it takes place not only in one’s mind or in the spiritual realm but also in the emotional realm as one attempts to transcend or get rid of the pain or hatred or emotional resentment from one’s heart.³⁹ Before one can forgive, when the wound is deep, the struggle to humble oneself and be compassionate must first be won.⁴⁰

Humility with love and compassion will require some soul-searching for non-believers or some spiritual guidance for believers. The non-believer will have to resolve internally whether to remain continually in distress or to be relieved of the emotional burden.⁴¹ The believer has his or her faith in God as the spiritual guide.

Forgiveness as Emotional and Physical Therapeutic Well-being

A wronged person is essentially in turmoil. He or she is agitated, angry, full of hate, depressed, vengeful, resentful, or the like. Something is gnawing his or her inner being—slowly perhaps but with a lingering duration—that is psychologically or spiritually disturbing. If unchecked or unresolved, this may erupt into violence either to oneself or to the Other. The one who has been wronged—as in cases of having been raped or publicly insulted or unfairly separated from one’s job—may become excessively depressed as to commit oneself to drugs or to commit suicide. On the other hand, the one who has been wronged may be consumed by avenging the wrong, and this may end up in a long-standing animosity or murder of the Other.

³⁸ See “Compassion,” *Wikipedia*. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Compassion>. Accessed: 11 August 2012.

³⁹ The emotional part of courage was discussed during the seminar, particularly with Dr. Firoozeh Papan-Matin of Iran/United States.

⁴⁰ While the individual who has been wronged may humble oneself in order to forgive, there are also situations whereby the wrongdoer may humble oneself in order to ask for forgiveness. It is said, for example, that had Adam and Eve humbled themselves and asked forgiveness from God, then God in all likelihood would have forgiven them. See the lively debate in “Only If Adam Had Asked For Forgiveness!—Religion—Nairaland.” Available at <http://www.nairaland.com/108638/only-adam-asked-forgiveness>. Accessed: 29 October 2012.

⁴¹ “Forgiveness: Atheists can do it too,” *The Atheist Revolution* (2010). Available at <http://www.atheistrev.com/2010/06/forgiveness-atheists-can-do-it-too.html>. Accessed: 11 August 2010.

In this kind of situation, to forgive or not is to make a choice. Fairchild argues that, for believers, “forgiveness is a choice” one decides through the will in obedience to God’s command to forgive, and prayer is one of the means to overcome the “wall of unforgiveness in [the] heart.”⁴²

But can a non-believer forgive? If it is not out of Christian duty or out of Christian charity, love, and compassion, in what sense can he or she forgive? The answer to this is that forgiveness can be bestowed upon the wrongdoer out of the benefit one derives from one’s physical, mental, or spiritual health. As someone once remarked:

When we hold grudges, resentments, or hatred, we invest our own emotional resources in something that typically ends up being toxic for us. Forgiveness, when possible, relieves this burden and is good for our physical and emotional well-being.⁴³

FORGIVENESS AS ENLIGHTENED SELF-INTEREST

Why must we forgive? In the earlier section of this paper, I tried to show that in light of fallen human nature, human action is always motivated by self-interest either explicitly (consciously) or implicitly (unconsciously). I mentioned, however, the distinction between pure self-interest (selfishness) and enlightened self-interest (altruism). While enlightened self-interest has human nature as bad as a backdrop, rational self-interest has human nature as good as a backdrop. From the broader perspective of the spiritual spectrum, however, rational self-interest is a form of enlightened self-interest.

To forgive is to perform the act of overcoming resentment through Christian charity, love, and compassion or as a therapeutic means of alleviating or overcoming the emotional burden that one has in his or her heart against the Other. Forgiveness, therefore, is a human action. As such, it is motivated by self-interest in either the Christian or the secular versions.

Christian forgiveness is a form of enlightened self-interest. A Christian believer forgives either as an expression of perfect Christian duty in direct obedience to God’s command to forgive, that is, without preconditions, or as an expression of imperfect Christian duty, that is, with preconditions. Even when the Christian forgiver does not think of salvation from fallen human nature as a reward at the precise moment he or she forgives, there is that tradition that is always at the background. For as long as he or she sincerely forgives—all things being equal—he or she finds that salvation.

Secular forgiveness is likewise a form of enlightened self-interest. In principle, a devout Christian such as a monk, priest, or nun would not think that fallen human nature is a good nature. That is why the concept of salvation is important and necessary. In other words, rational self-interest—as Locke posits—is not possible at this level. If a devout Christian believes that fallen human nature is good, then he or she errs. Continually nurtured and guided by the Holy Spirit, the Christian, however, will have the attitude of John Locke and act as if human nature is good.

Some nominal Christians may erroneously think that [fallen] human nature is good, but that sometimes a human being falls into the trap of temptation to commit something bad. In this regard, many nominal Christians—probably most of them—will require preconditions for

⁴² Mary Fairchild, “What Does the Bible Say About Forgiveness?” *About.Com Christianity*. Available at <http://christianity.about.com/od/whatdoesthebiblesay/a/bibleforgiveness.htm>. Accessed: 12 August 2012.

⁴³ See “Forgiveness: Atheists can do it too.”

forgiveness. Such preconditions serve as a reminder to the wrongdoer that the act committed is indeed wrong and ought not to be committed again.

I think many of the non-believers—especially those of the Sartrean persuasion—believe that human nature is neutral upon birth, and it is one’s own choice or the environment that makes a human being good or bad. Jean-Paul Sartre argues that existence precedes essence.⁴⁴ Human nature is undefined before birth and will acquire its nature only after birth when it chooses what he or she wants himself or herself to be in the future. He or she is solely responsible for the choice, not the past, not heredity, and certainly not God, for He is not. So when one forgives, it is given for secular reasons, that is, among other things, the overcoming of an emotional burden.

Among the humanistic atheists,⁴⁵ rational self-interest is possible. Many are devotees of science and they believe that human nature is good even without God. Technology was invented to serve the good side of man, although some people who had negative environmental exposure made use of these technological inventions for bad purposes.⁴⁶ Forgiveness as a human act is rationally given as a realization of common humanity and of overcoming emotional distress.

FORGIVENESS AND THE SPIRITUAL SPECTRUM

How then are we to situate personal forgiveness in the spiritual spectrum? First of all, I will put the devout Christians at the level of ninety-five percent, a little higher than Locke (at eighty-five percent), in the spectrum. Although devout Christians recognize that human nature is bad, they live their lives spiritually as if human nature is good. Nominal Christians, I think, will be within the vicinity of sixty-five percent because while acknowledging fallen human nature, a great number of them, especially women, behave generally along the Christian ethical precepts.

Agnostics like Bertrand Russell and atheists like Jean-Paul Sartre, I think, will be at fifty percent because human nature for them is neutral. People with Russellian and Sartrean persuasions will go up and down the spectrum depending upon the circumstances. Finally, I will put the humanistic atheists at a higher level, about seventy-five percent, because while ignoring God’s presence they behave as if the Holy Spirit is around to guide them in the service of humanity.

CONCLUSION

Forgiveness is a relation with four possible combinations. The present paper is limited to the first combination, the person-to-person category. The other combinations—person-to-group, group-to-person, and group-to-group—are, in the main, set aside because they include more factors, oftentimes quite complicated, to consider in the present analysis. There is a fifth category mentioned in the course of this seminar, viz., the person-to-animal (or the environment in general) forgiveness. This will also be set aside.

⁴⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism Is a Humanism.” In *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (Cleveland and New York: Meridian Books, 1964), 287-311.

⁴⁵ Michael Caputo, “Humanistic Atheism: The New Messiah?” Available at http://atheismexposed.tripod.com/humanistic_atheism.htm. Accessed: 30 October 2012. For more entries please see his *Militant Atheism Exposed* (2007). Available at <http://atheismexposed.tripod.com/index.htm>. Accessed: 30 October 2012.

⁴⁶ See Rolando M. Gripaldo, “Georg Iggers and Historiography,” *History, Philosophy, and Culture*, 61-62.

Personal forgiveness is basically a spiritual category that pervades human nature whether such a nature is bad, neutral, or good. If human nature is bad, then forgiveness—which is a good act—is a kind of spiritual transcendence of fallen human nature; if we assume that human nature is good, then forgiveness is a spiritual interpenetration with what is divinely common with humanity; and when human nature is simply neutral, then forgiveness is a positive addition to the enhancement of human values in an otherwise amoral universe. Ordinarily, forgiveness is an act to relieve oneself of resentment or emotional burden and the like, but on a higher level of interpretation, personal forgiveness is a form of enlightened self-interest.⁴⁷ It is pursued knowingly or unknowingly either for spiritual salvation, for emotional catharsis, or for both.

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⁴⁷ Asseily calls it an “act of self-preservation.” Though she applies this term to nations, it may as well apply to individuals. See Alexandra Asseily, *Breaking the Cycles of Violence in Lebanon—and Beyond* (Brighton, East Sussex: Guerrand-Hermès Foundation for Peace Publishing, 2007), 9.