

Forgiveness as an expression of the psychological difference: The sin which is not a sin
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There is a memorable line in the classic American film “A League of Their Own,” where Tom Hanks exclaims, “There’s no crying in baseball!” Likewise, I would begin with the claim that *there’s no forgiveness in psychology*.

Why is this? The psyche of psychology is understood as self-referential; it exists as *self* relation. So right off the bat, forgiveness makes the crucial error of positing *otherness* (as in, “*You* committed an offense against *me*”). The notion of forgiveness, which in its very definition requires a perpetrating “other” as its object, is a mark of modernity, an indicator of the fact that “the logic of otherness rules” (Giegerich, 2013, p. 246). Here in modernity, Giegerich writes, “the otherness of the Other has become irreducible. I and Thou...stand vis-a-vis each other in mediation-less opposition...[which] shows [itself] concretely, for example, in *the unbridgeable difference* between guilty perpetrator and innocent victim” (p. 282, my emphasis).

Forgiveness would imagine an external interpersonal transaction between myself and the other who wronged me. But, as Giegerich (2013) observes, “there is no ‘between’ between me and my pain. ...[P]sychologically it is all wrong. The soul is self relation. Interpersonal relations cannot appear in psychology. They are not a psychological category” (pp. 246-247).

Giegerich notes too that forgiveness as a humanistic concept posits a “not-yet-ness” insofar as one’s salvation or freedom exists in the future dependent upon its achievement. Of forgiveness, he writes, “What is in its sites is correction, development,

the substitution of one “wrong” behavior for another “mature” one; for example: Where there was resentment, there love and kindness shall be” (2005, p. 109). Similarly, psychoanalysis largely dismisses forgiveness as an avoidant defense against conflict. Derrida (1997/2001) critiques forgiveness as employed by the ego for its own ends. He writes:

I shall risk this proposition: each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble or spiritual ([such as] atonement or redemption, reconciliation, [or] salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality...then the ‘forgiveness’ is not pure--nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalising. It should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of temporality.” (pp. 31-32)

In fact, Derrida claims that true forgiveness is only possible in the face of what the ego deems to be *unforgivable*. So in the fantasy to correct, reconcile, repair, normalize - in fact, in the attempt to achieve any aim whatsoever - forgiveness is hijacked by the ego and cannot be considered “pure” or psychological.

So, if there is no forgiveness in psychology, what am I doing here? In the film I referenced earlier, Tom Hanks exclaims, “There’s no crying in baseball!” -- to a player *who is already crying*. Clearly there *is* in fact crying in baseball. And what of forgiveness? Is forgiveness already in psychology, despite our protests? Well, let’s find out!

Before proceeding, let me clarify what I mean by forgiveness. The standard dictionary definition of forgiveness reads simply, “to absolve or to acquit, pardon, or release.” The abstract notions of *absolution* and *release* inherent in forgiveness are properties of absolute negation. However, a prominent psychologist in the field of

forgiveness studies, Robert Enright, dramatically restricts and revises the dictionary definition to the following:

Forgiveness is the willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity and even love toward him or her. (Enright & The Human Development Study Group, 1991, p. 123)

This is what I would call a *neurotic* or unpsychological definition. Forgiveness defined in this way allows the forgiver to avoid the absolution demanded by pure forgiveness, opting instead for a simple (or undialectical) negation; one's "right to resentment" is merely suspended, the love remains "undeserved," and the literal nature of the offense stays intact and is reified. The semantics are negated but the syntax or logic that gives rise to the victim/perpetrator dynamic is not left behind (i.e., think of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic). It is unpsychological because it relates to the injury as externally caused. Psychologically, however, wounds are exclusively *one's own*, *absolutely contained, and self-sufficient within oneself*. "Psychologically, [wounds] are not caused, there is no cause. Any cause is outside the range of [one's] psychological sphere" (Giegerich, 2013, p. 387). Enright's definition of forgiveness is neurotic because it singles out the offense, trapping it out of the flow of time like a fly frozen in amber, which is precisely what happens with neurosis. Giegerich writes:

Neurosis begins when a disruption takes place. The stream of events is stopped, the flow of time is arrested. How does this happen? The one disappointing event or condition is singled out, wrenched from, and protected against, the natural process that ultimately would inevitably end in forgetfulness, and is raised to ultimate importance. The one event is frozen, fixated and thereby made to last. It is held on to beyond its time. (p. 280)

Returning to the dictionary definition of forgiveness, we can see that to forgive would require not a mere simple negation of the offense in question, but its *absolute*

negation; the offending event would be *absolved* of its semantic content, *released* back into the flow of time, thereby exposing it to the natural process resulting in forgetfulness. However, such absolute forgiveness would be unthinkable to the neurotic soul precisely because it would emancipate it from its identity with The Absolute (Giegerich, 2013). By withholding true forgiveness, the neurotic soul stubbornly prevents the offense from allowing it to come home to itself as absolute negativity, as truth. The offense remains categorically characterized as “that which shall not be!” (IBID) - “frozen, fixated, and made to last.”

In the New Testament, where forgiving is first referenced historically in earnest, forgiveness has two distinct meanings. When Jesus says, “Forgive, and you will be forgiven,” (Luke 6:37) the Greek word used is “ἀπολύετε” (transliteration = *apolyete*, *apolyehete*) meaning to “release” or “set free” (biblos.com/luke/6-37.htm), which is consistent with the dictionary definition. Jesus’ use of forgiveness is astonishingly psychological in that it negates the semantic reality not merely of the sin in question, but of *otherness itself*, instead affirming the uroboric nature of relating to another, as one’s *own* other. “Forgive, and you will be forgiven” is consistent with the law of *comprehensive subjectivity* in which “consciousness has its own otherness no longer out there in some Other, but in itself as its own ontological self-contradictoriness: integrated into its very Being, into its Concept” (Giegerich, 2008, p. 106).”

In Jesus’ prayer on the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,” forgiveness holds a distinctly different meaning than “release” or “set free”. Here the Greek word used is ἄφεσις (transliteration *aphes*, *afehss*), which means “to allow,” “to permit,” “to let be,” “to suffer” (<http://biblesuite.com/greek/863.htm>). In Christ’s

petition, “Father, forgive them,” we hear the extraordinary entreaty to God to *allow* the event of the crucifixion - God’s own death. (That the object of forgiveness is “them” may foreshadow the imminent *sublation* of the substantial figure of the transcendent God in Jesus into the transubstantiated form of the Holy Spirit, which exists only *as* the virtual presupposition of the activity of finite individuals, in other words, the actions of men [Zizek, 2013].) Christ’s injunction to “forgive” the crucifixion can be seen psychologically as a plea from the soul *to itself* to “suffer” this event, “to permit” its own absolute negative interiorization, allowing it to go under into itself, dissolving into Spirit and Love. Forgiveness *is* the soul’s absolute emancipation from itself, it’s “catapulting consciousness to a higher stage and status of itself,” (Giegerich, 2013, p. 321). Giegerich writes, “The dying on the Cross IS the absolute *kenosis*, the going under, the resistanceless bowing down under evil, and this IS nothing else but a spelling out of what Love is. And it is *in itself* and *as such* absolute forgiveness...” (p. 49).

The combination of “releasing” and “allowing” as seen in the New Testament reflects the important dialectical notion of *sublation*. According to Hegel (1977),

To sublimate [*aufheben*] has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to.... Thus, what is sublated is at the same time preserved; it has only lost its immediacy but is not on that account annihilated. (p. 107)

With sublation, the dialectical process provides a crucial alternative manner of “holding” reality that reaches beyond other modes, such as denying, forgetting, recalling or retaining. Where neurotic forgiveness stops short with an undialectical negation, positing the semantic offense as empirical fact, psychological forgiveness recognizes the new logical status of the offense and the logic that gave rise to it as *sublated*, no longer explicit or immediate. It is “released” from immediacy and also “permitted” its existence

insofar as it is “not annihilated.” In this way forgiveness maintains the psychological difference, engendering a perspective in which the “sin” is seen in a way that is different truly in itself, “that as one and the same is at the same time posited and negated” (Giegerich, 2012, p. 81).

I am not attempting to re-define forgiveness as dialectical or psychological. Jesus’ use of forgiveness already *is* dialectical or psychological. The sharply restricted form of forgiveness found in modern ego discourse is a neurotic re-definition and deprives forgiveness of its psychological character. Yet even with the more abstract definitions of forgiving as “release,” “absolution,” “setting free,” “permitting,” “allowing,” and “suffering,” we really only *begin* to approach forgiveness as a purely psychological notion. Forgiveness still needs to be methodologically *thought forward*, negatively interiorized and released into its truth as a psychological notion.

If we look further, “indirectly,” or psychologically, forgiveness’ primary problems emerge as the reification of the literal offense and the victim/perpetrator dynamic. Our *prima materia* is just this un-psychological nature of forgiveness: its assertion of semantic reality and otherness. And it is this error *itself* that opens up the space to overcome the error (Zizek, 2013). Consistent with psychology as the discipline of interiority, “the dialectic proceeds via the self-application of the notion or category that happens to be at stake in each case” (Giegerich, 2005, p. 17), in this case the notion of forgiveness. Applying forgiveness to itself - i.e., “forgiving” the notion of forgiveness - would entail both (1) *releasing* the notion from itself, “letting go” of the very construct of otherness, such that the logic that posited the sin and its perpetrator/victim dynamic is itself released, absolved from its intentionality and semantic meaning *and* (2) permitting,

allowing, and suffering the construct of otherness and the event arising *from* it to exist *as* sublated. Forgiveness would absolutely negate what the soul itself posited, what it itself produced, opening the way to a psychological perspective by methodologically “forgetting” the semantic content of the “sin”, thus making possible a structural perspective.

Forgiveness is remarkable because it is an inherently dialectical negating process that both *presupposes the fundamental unpsychological errors of semantic reality and otherness AND exists as the process of overcoming them*. The paradox of forgiveness “destroys its own premises within itself. ... It implies a sublimation or *sublation* of the logical form or status in which the message first occurred” (Giegerich, 2008b, p. 261). While true forgiveness lives at the level of thought or logos, at the same time, forgiveness has no meaning on that level because there is nothing to forgive, no substantiality or content to be attacked or threatened. Forgiveness is utilized by, yet irrelevant to, soul and renders itself obsolete upon reaching its goal.

“In the negation of the negation,” Zizek (2013) explains, “the subject includes itself in the process, taking into account how the process it is observing affects its own position.” He writes, “[The] properly Hegelian “negation of negation” ... resides in the decisive shift from the *distortion of a notion to a distortion constitutive of this notion*, that is, to this notion as a distortion-in-itself” (p. 298). In other words, where absolute forgiveness is concerned, the posited error or “sin” undergoes a radical translocation from the object to the subject - it isn't what or who I am seeing that is the problem, but *my* seeing *per se*. And the problem I see is *necessary to exist* so that I may *see* that I am the problem; “for only what is explicit for consciousness can also be explicitly overcome”

(Giegerich, 2013, p. 351). The negation of the negation involves a shift in consciousness from *seeking* to *seeing*.

On a human level, to forgive would mean to “reach the truth in its own conceptual element” (Zizek, 2013), in other words, to cross the “unbridgeable difference” from horizontal to vertical logic, from semantics to syntax. The seeming “impossibility” of forgiveness lies in its ability to span this infinite divide. Zizek writes, “[T]he transubstantiation of the subject from a “concrete” self immersed in its life world into the subject of pure thought [requires undergoing]...a process of “abstraction” which has to be accomplished in the individual’s “concrete” experience, and which as such involves the supreme pain of renunciation” (p. 111). On a human level, forgiveness can be likened to the alchemical acid bath of “silvering” as Hillman describes, the excruciating purification process of *mundificatio* as depicted in the *Rosarium* woodcuts, or the Judaic notion of *Teshuvah*, in which one dies to oneself and is reborn a “new person” (Sandoval, 2013). All entail the releasing of one’s archetypal “mythical garments,” letting go of being identical with the “God-man in the shape of a servant” (Giegerich, 2014), suffering the substantial absence of The Absolute, permitting the reality that “‘I am *only* that!,’ neither servant-shape, nor God-man” (p. 344).

True forgiveness functions as a dialectical logic as it relates to and overcomes injustice, the wrongs of the world, and even evil itself. One does not overcome these antagonisms, Giegerich (2010) writes,

by powerful conquest and subjugation, not by rejection and condemnation, but conversely by, with resistanceless sufferance, allowing them to *be*, indeed, even embracing them, and *ipso facto* unrelentingly exposing oneself to them, letting them permeate oneself...[T]his is first of all a concept, an insight, a truth on a very deep and remote soul level. It is a *logic* to be comprehended, not a maxim to be acted out. It is the logic of Love. (pp. 43-44)

Love, as the soul's direct knowing of itself, is not forgiveness. It does not know of forgiveness. And yet the precondition of Love *is* forgiveness as that very bridge that spans the unbridgeable difference between semantics and syntax, between guilty perpetrator and innocent victim, between I and Thou. Giegerich's work is fundamentally one of forgiveness - we could say that he practices psychological forgiveness - and that psychology as the discipline of interiority exercises the dialectical logic of forgiveness. So we have answered our question, is there already forgiveness in psychology? No, there is no forgiveness *in* psychology; forgiveness is the *way* in to psychology. And as such there is no psychology *without* it.

Regarding the clinical implications of forgiveness, it is not something to be intentionally taken on by patients in the hopes of freeing themselves from neurosis, for example. As mentioned above, when forgiveness is *intentionally* undertaken with some goal in mind, it becomes an ego activity. Nor does forgiveness necessarily "fix," "repair," or reconcile the relationship to its former status. From Zizek (2013) we read,

[When] Hegel introduces the notion of reconciliation as the way to resolve the deadlock of the Beautiful Soul, his term designates the acceptance of the chaos and injustice of the world as immanent to the Beautiful Soul which deplores it, the Beautiful Soul's acceptance of the fact that it participates in the reality it criticizes and judges, not any kind of magical transformation of this reality. (p. 478)

Forgiveness *is* a transformation of *consciousness*. But nothing actually *happens*, it is not an "experience"; "The change from one stage or logical status of consciousness is something very real...but it cannot be an experience inasmuch as it is something syntactical and not something semantic, something psychological and not something psychic" (Giegerich, 2010, p. 54). Forgiveness is merely a shift in perspective.

Forgiveness in the way I've described today applies to psychology at large - it is meant to describe the activity of the soul toward itself - and the human person actively involved would be the psychologist insofar as the soul achieves its actuality in human consciousness. And, when a patient finds himself freed from a neurosis, he may find he has forgiven (and been forgiven).

Summary

- Dialectical forgiveness, in accomplishing the psychological tasks of sublating semantic content and overcoming otherness, is a condition of the psychological difference.
- Forgiveness follows the Hegelian dialectical logic of absolute negation (position, negation, absolute negation), and is only truly *achieved* through absolute negation
- Forgiveness is inherently kenotic, involving the emptying or absolving of substantiality (the "supreme pain of renunciation").
- Forgiveness spans the unbridgeable difference between horizontal and vertical logic, realizing the transformation "from myth to logos, from substance to Spirit (logical form, syntax, function)" (Giegerich, 2010, p. 57).
- Forgiveness defines the emancipative movement of soul out of the world back into itself (that it may know itself directly as Love).
- Forgiveness is an entrance requirement for psychology, but it is not present as a notion *within* psychology. *Soul, insofar as it has already come home to itself as truth, as human consciousness, makes forgiveness obsolete.*
- Soul uses forgiveness for *itself* for the purpose of overcoming itself (*its animus need*). The neurotic soul would withhold forgiveness to support its insistent claim upon the substantiality of the Absolute.
- Psychologically, forgiveness is used for individuals for the purposes of individuation (emancipation from its identity with the unconscious/soul/the Absolute) and neurosis (withholding forgiveness/maintaining identity with the neurotic soul).

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