

Forgiving someone, what does that actually mean? And how could one proceed to reach forgiveness? Philosopher Joachim Duyndam, professor of Humanism and Philosophy, wrote a manual. “Perpetrator and victim go back in time together, to change the meaning of the wrongdoing in the past for the present in such a way that the relationship has a future again.”

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What is forgiveness and what is it not? When is forgiveness possible, and when not? Forgiveness can be considered a special form of reconciliation. While reconciliation in general may relate to all kinds of conflicts – from minor to severe ones – forgiveness almost always concerns serious facts: suffering caused to someone, injury or damage done to somebody, humiliation, abuse, rape. The philosophers Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) have written profoundly and importantly about forgiveness. Both thinkers emphasize how difficult forgiveness processes can be. That forgiveness does not always succeed; and that for forgiveness, the involvement of two parties is essential: victim and perpetrator.

In this article, based on the thinking of Levinas and Arendt, I will inventory a number of conditions and steps that I believe are necessary for a successful process of forgiveness. I present the intended conditions for forgiveness schematically as steps that must be taken in a forgiveness process if forgiveness is to occur. The somewhat rigid form in which these steps are conceived does not alter the fact that these are debatable positions, not infallible evidences. This article is therefore explicitly intended as a discussion paper.

A MANUAL

FORGIVENESS

1 Definition

The forgiveness process is a complex event involving at least two acting subjects, usually referred to as perpetrator and victim. Although collectives can also be parties to a forgiveness process, perpetrator and victim usually refer to individuals.

When the forgiveness process between perpetrator and victim succeeds, it culminates in the actual forgiveness. This happens when the victim expresses forgiveness to the perpetrator, “I forgive you.” This expression of forgiveness by the victim toward the perpetrator is essential. For forgiveness is a so-called ‘performative speech act’. Like making a promise, or “I hereby open the meeting” said by the chairperson, performative statements do not so much refer to an action, but they themselves form the action.

2 Prelude

Wrongdoing and tolerance threshold

A forgiveness process is always preceded by something. Someone – the perpetrator – has done something seriously wrong to someone else – the victim. This wrongdoing, sometimes called the misstep, offense, fault or transgression, can range from an insult, betrayal, humiliation or adultery to psychological and physical harm and violence. The seriousness of the wrongdoing is related to a threshold of tolerance, which is usually culturally determined. For example, if one accidentally bumps into someone in a busy street, one says “I’m sorry” or “pardon me”. Although sorry and pardon can be regarded as rudimentary requests for forgiveness, such incidents normally remain well below the usual tolerance threshold, unlike the more serious wrongdoings just mentioned. The fact, however, that some people nowadays experience the smallest incitements in social intercourse as offensive, and react to them with aggression, says something about our culturally determined (individual) tolerance threshold.

Rupture in the relationship

The wrongdoing has caused a rift in the relationship that perpetrator and victim previously had. A rift may mean that trust has been violated, that there is no longer any mutual respect, that joint communication has been disrupted, or that contact has broken down altogether. This may involve any kind of relationship: family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, business partners and so on. But also – and perhaps especially – in power-unequal relationships, such as those between parents and children, teachers and students, managers and subordinates. Even if perpetrator and victim did not know each other beforehand (as in the case of assault by a stranger), there is a relationship at the moment of the transgression, albeit an immediately violated one.

4 Steps to be taken by the perpetrator

The perpetrator asks the victim for forgiveness. *Potential pitfall:* The perpetrator is unwilling or afraid to ask for forgiveness. He/she is afraid of the dependent position in which he/she will end up in relation to the victim (which is true, indeed). He/she is afraid that forgiveness will be refused.

The perpetrator acknowledges the transgression as wrongdoing; realizes his/her share; takes responsibility for the transgression. *Potential pitfall:* The perpetrator makes excuses, for example, by blaming the victim for the offense.

The perpetrator openly admits the transgression to the victim. *Potential pitfall:* The perpetrator acknowledges the transgression only inwardly; or believes he/she can forgive himself/herself.

The perpetrator regrets his wrongdoing and shows remorse. *Potential pitfall:* If the perpetrator acknowledges and confesses his act unfazed, he does not (really) consider it a transgression. So, no forgiveness can follow.

The perpetrator promises not to commit such a transgression in the future. *Potential pitfall:* See complication 1 at block 7.

3 Stepping back in time together

Forgiveness, then, is the healing of the breach in the relationship caused by the transgression. Not by undoing the wrongdoing, for how could that be? Nor by concealing or repressing the offense, let alone forgetting it. But, indeed, by stepping back in time together as perpetrator and victim, to the time or period of the transgression, in order to change the meaning of the past fault for the present in such a way that the relationship has a future again. This going back in time to change the meaning of the transgression occurs through the steps listed below, to be taken by the perpetrator (4) and by the victim (5), respectively, within the preconditions to be mentioned subsequently (6). If the perpetrator and victim succeed in taking these steps, the forgiveness process culminates, as mentioned, in the victim’s pronouncing forgiveness. This is the final and decisive step, which completes the previous steps in the shaping process and accomplishes the forgiveness.

‘The sad truth of the matter is that most evil is done by people who never made up their minds to be or do either evil or good.’

Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind*, p. 180.

5 Steps to be taken by the victim

The victim addresses the perpetrator’s wrongdoing (with a reproach or an accusation, for example). *Potential pitfall:* The victim wants to forgive the perpetrator silently, without saying anything and without the perpetrator needing to know.

The victim takes the transgression seriously, realizes the pain and hurt it has caused. *Potential pitfall:* The victim downplays the offense; shrugs off or represses the pain; or hides it all behind ‘understanding’ for the perpetrator.

The victim openly shows the pain and hurt to the perpetrator. *Potential pitfall:* The victim keeps it to himself/herself, allowing the perpetrator to remain unaware of the impact of his/her transgression.

The victim waits to express forgiveness until the perpetrator asks for forgiveness. *Potential pitfall:* The victim (eagerly) wants to forgive the perpetrator without the perpetrator asking for it. Or worse: the victim provokes the perpetrator’s demand for forgiveness.

6 Additional preconditions

- There is a clear and unchangeable role distinction between perpetrator and victim. Both cannot take each other’s steps from each other.
- There is a (sufficient degree of) shared situation definition. Perpetrator and victim interpret the nature and severity of the offense and its context in substantially the same way, otherwise forgiveness cannot occur.
- The forgiveness process requires proper timing. Practically speaking, this is one of the most difficult conditions: the steps must be taken at the right time, not too soon but not too late either. A forgiveness requested too soon is not credible; a forgiveness given too soon does not heal. But it can also be too late for forgiveness: the poisoning effect of the transgression has become too great, or the people involved can no longer reach each other, for example because they have grown apart or because one of them has died.
- The victim expresses forgiveness freely, and thus has the freedom to refuse the perpetrator forgiveness. Moral or physical pressure on the victim to forgive renders it worthless.

7 Possible complications

The following impediments complicate the forgiveness process:

Transgressions are often not isolated but part of a pattern (a pattern of oppression, adultery, domestic violence, sexual abuse, humiliation of a subordinate by his superior, family feuds, bullying, discrimination, and so on). Forgiveness in such cases does not concern one single fault – which is difficult enough – but a series of faults.

In many situations where a perpetrator has done something wrong to a victim, either incidental or patterned, there is a double perpetrator-victim structure. That is, if A is perpetrator toward B, there is often another transgression of which B is the perpetrator toward A. This second wrongdoing, even if it is a consequence of the first, is a different one, with a different perpetrator and a different victim. Recognizing this double perpetrator-victim structure does not imply that the perpetrator would be a victim as well (of the same transgression), nor does it imply blaming the victim, but it means that a double perpetrator-victim structure involves two different forgiveness processes. These complications can sometimes be recognized, better than by those involved themselves, by a relative outsider such as a mediator or a chaplain.

8 It doesn’t always work out

In situations of wrongdoing, hurt and blame, emotions usually run high. This step-by-step plan is not so much a reduction to reason as it is primarily intended to bring some order to the emotional turbulence surrounding forgiveness processes, with the aim of increasing the chances of successful forgiveness.

Perpetrator and victim may be so willing to reach forgiveness, fulfill all the conditions and take the distinguished steps in the process, but whether it will actually come to forgiveness is uncertain. Perpetrator and victim are, even together, not in complete control of forgiveness. Precisely because forgiveness involves changing the relationship, it is not certain in advance that it will succeed. The latter may be read as a warning against overly high expectations regarding forgiveness. But that should not be a reason not to try.

9 The results of successful forgiveness

As mentioned, the wrongdoing is not undone, but its meaning has changed: the past transgression no longer exerts its destructive effect on the present.

The victim’s completion (pronouncement) of forgiveness – after all the steps have been taken – heals the breach caused by the perpetrator’s transgression.

The promise of betterment contributes to the relationship having a future again.

The forgiveness has changed the relationship. Sometimes forgiveness has even improved the relationship. Contact, trust, respect and communication have not only been restored but have risen above their old level. Levinas speaks in this context of *felix culpa*, a ‘happy guilt’: thanks to the guilt that could be forgiven, the relationship has risen to a higher level.

This change means that forgiveness goes beyond the settlement of guilt by law, but of course does not make the rule of law redundant.