DERRIDA ON FORGIVENESS:
NOTES FROM A WITTGENSTEINIAN THERAPIST

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In an interesting twist, in recent years philosophers have become interested in the issue of forgiveness while theologians have neglected it.[1] Philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricoeur have approached the issue by means of the idea of the gift and drawn out the implications for forgiveness. In both of these cases, their conclusion is basically that forgiveness should be unconditional in the sense that it does not even require repentance. This is in contrast to a philosopher like Richard Swinburne who argues that forgiveness entails repentance as a necessary condition.[2] I want to explore this debate by drawing on Ludwig Wittgenstein's understanding of philosophy as therapy in order to see if the polar opposition is driven in part by neglect of the actual use of forgiveness language and practice and possibly then to open up a fresh perspective. I will focus on Derrida who has written a great deal in recent years on the subject.

More specifically, Derrida emphasizes primarily that forgiveness, as a kind of gift-giving, not lapse into an economy of exchange whereby one expects to get something in return for forgiveness.[3] Forgiveness thus should always reflect extravagance that can never be repaid. This of course makes it difficult to conceive of an actual genuine act of forgiveness. While Derrida pairs this impossible ideal with the realities of bringing forgiveness into the world of exchange, he certainly emphasizes in a sense the "descontructibility" of forgiveness. I suggest that Wittgenstein's emphasis on turning to actual use and practice helps us see several important things. One is that there may not be just one kind of forgiveness but several that do not share a common essence. A second is that, ironically, Derrida's highlighting of an ideal of forgiveness results in a highly theoretical approach that divorces forgiveness from relationship altogether. Third, when the relational dimension is opened up again by looking at actual use, forgiveness can best be understood as a relational and not as a unilateral phenomenon. In order to substantiate these conclusions, I will first briefly delineate the basic nature of Wittgenstein's approach. Second, I will look more closely at Derrida's understanding of forgiveness. Then I will draw out the conclusions of engaging Derrida with Wittgenstein.

Wittgensteinian Therapy

Wittgenstein perceived that a common source of confusion in philosophy is looking for an essence where there is none. For example, he notes:

> When philosophers use a word—"knowledge," "being," object," "I," "proposition," "name"—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.[4]

Second, he suggested that much of the time what we have are crisscrossing relationships or family resemblances rather than a common essence.[5] Thirdly, in looking for the meaning of a word, he not only famously suggested that we should look for its use but also for paradigmatic cases.[6] Rather than trying to define all essential properties that belong to each and every instantiation in the more traditional Aristotelian mode, we should look for the characteristic use of a word and understand that there will be "blurred edges," boundary situations where the proper use is unclear.[7]

Applying this outlook to forgiveness, it becomes immediately evident that there is a tendency to collapse several different kinds of forgiveness into one essence of forgiveness, and thus end up with incompatible clashes. Philosophers in this area move quickly from one paradigmatic example to a theoretical attempt to place all in the same category. One can hear Wittgenstein saying to them, "Don't say: "There must be something common . . . but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all.""[8]

When one looks, the examples of forgiveness do not all seem to be the same. In trying to make them all fit one exemplar, some cases are left out and some are awkwardly forced to fit. Derrida reflects this when he takes the case of forgiving without regard to the response of the other as the best exemplar.[9] In this situation, Wittgenstein would say, "Back to the rough ground!"[10] When we do, it appears that this extravagant case is certainly crucial, but it may well be argued that a better case can be made that the primary paradigm of forgiveness involves the pattern of initiative of love of the other, followed by repentance, followed by forgiveness, followed by actual reconciliation. Another instance is to restore the relationship but insist on consequences. In yet other cases, there is clear need for forgiveness to be given or at least offered, but when it is not requited nor is the relationship restored, further vigorous resistance is demanded. Too often, this last case is cast by the wayside, fostering cheap forgiveness and abusive situations, leading others to reject unconditional forgiveness altogether.[11] Understanding the plurality of cases can help prevent such a dilemma. In this sense, taking any one of these as the essential paradigm of forgiveness undermines the validity of the others. The therapy of removing the craving for generality which Wittgenstein compared to trying to walk on the crystalline purity of slippery ice and turning to the "rough ground" of practice for more traction may help us thus dissolve an artificial problem.[12]

Derrida and the Ideal

As he has done so often, Derrida has opened up a new front for philosophy in his discussion of the gift and giving. He is especially concerned that giving easily becomes reduced to a logic of exchange. He pays scrupulous attention to the way a gift yields a response and, thus, is no longer a pure gift. What Derrida does which is his gift, so to speak, is, in fact, to deconstruct giving. The paradox of the previous sentence exemplifies the paradox that Derrida sees in giving. As soon as the gift has an effect, it becomes a medium of exchange involving vested interests. The gift is not offered without desiring something in return but has resulted in a return on an investment. Derrida says, "But it's very appearance, the simple phenomenon of the gift, annuls it as gift, transforming the

apparition into a phantom and the operation into a simulacrum."[13] He adds, "If it presents itself, it no longer presents itself."[14] To make matters worse, at the same time that the gift is propelled towards equivalent return, it can never succeed. The response can never match the gift, even though such a match is attempted, exhibiting in this arena another manifestation of the Western assumption of a "metaphysics of presence."[15] As he sees that interpretation can never restore original meaning, the response to a gift can never provide a reciprocal exchange. The difference is a gap that can never be surmounted.[16]

For Derrida, therefore, the only way to give a gift is, paradoxically, for it not to be known as a gift, or even to be noticed at all. It must destroy itself in its act. Or to characterize it in Derridean terms, it can only be present in its absence. At best, it can only be a trace which, in the very detecting, is effaced. In this approach, the extravagance of the gift is so extreme as to be squandering. The excess of the gift, however, is ratcheted so tightly that giftedness disappears as a live option. Derrida opines, "For one might say that a gift that could be recognized as such in the light of day, a gift destined for recognition, would immediately annul itself."[17]

Similarly, in Derrida's probing of the mystery of the gift, it is not clear whether anything can pass muster. The squandering must be so pure and one-sided that nothing in the thick tissue of human life can measure up. Yet he is reluctant entirely to let go of the idea. It is present only as absent. He notes, "This gap between, on the one hand, thought, language, and desire and, on the other hand, knowledge, philosophy, science, and the order of the presence is also a gap between gift and economy. This gap is not present anywhere; it resembles an empty word or a transcendental illusion."[18] It thus becomes a paradox, as Derrida questions: "What would a gift be in which I gave without wanting to give and without knowing that I am giving, without the explicit intention of giving, or even in spite of myself? This is the paradox in which we have been engaged from the beginning."[19]

The other side of the question that Derrida raises is the very real way in which gift giving often lapses into exchange. This is the question that Marcel Mauss and Bronislaw Malinowksi have raised with regard to many tribal societies where gift giving can be seen as a form of exchange with rules so carefully constraining it that it functions as precisely as any currency that one might imagine.[20]

Derrida applies the same line of reasoning to the related notion of forgiveness. He begins an essay on forgiveness by saying, "In principle, there is no limit to forgiveness, no *measure*, no moderation, no "to what point?"[21] He adds a little later that forgiveness is "...infinite, aneconomic...even to those who do not repent or ask forgiveness."[22] In this text, he considers that this notion of forgiveness arises from what he terms the Abrahamic tradition and, yet, has been appropriated on the national scene by secular politics and nonwestern nations.[23] Especially in the latter context, the other side of this ideal notion is one of forgiveness that is political, conditional, and proportionate, resulting in an injunction that he calls "double and contradictory."[24] Derrida concludes that we cannot resolve this tension, nor should we. We have to live in the sphere of the conditional, but it

should always be measured by the unconditional. "It is between these two poles, *irreconcilable but indissociable*, that decisions and responsibilities are to be taken."[25]

Derrida's critique of the instrumentality of forgiveness is on the mark, whereby one gives in order to receive, even if only from a Heavenly donor, thus reducing a free gift to a quid pro quo. He strives mightily to prevent such a depreciation of value and to maintain the reality of gifting and forgiveness. In this he is surely correct. It is also no doubt true that the gift of grace and forgiveness in the original Abrahamic context often gets reduced to a form of exchange, a contract whereby God grants one thing in exchange for another. We are all aware of religious salvation being hawked as another get-rich-quick deal or as a life insurance policy. Although the idea of covenant is central to Abrahamic faith, a legalistic and impersonal appropriation is usually seen as a distortion. When penance becomes simply payment and forgiveness becomes a means to my own salvation, the religious idea of grace and gift has lost its meaning and its power. Derrida, who cannot bring himself to be considered religious despite his Jewish background, ironically preserves the excessive and lavish nature of grace much better than many theologians.[26]
Nevertheless, Derrida leaves one in an almost impossible situation. He intensifies tension into a polar opposition with such vehemence that, despite his intentions, it almost seems impossible to live in the consequent vortex. Given this problem, we might question whether Derrida, for all of his salutary warnings, has unnecessarily led us into a dead end.

The Clarification

This kind of aporia is precisely where therapy in general can help, whether in psychology or in philosophy. In this case, Wittgenstein would likely accuse us of trying to walk on the slippery ice of theory and abstraction—skating on thin ice, as it were. He would call us back to the rough ground of concrete examples in all of their complexity. In this case, he might well notice that all of the different kinds of examples only with great difficulty can be collapsed into one essential paradigm.

With this insight, we might simply acknowledge that there are many kinds of forgiveness. This may solve many problems without offering any content at all! That is the magic of therapy. It doesn't seem to do anything, but its clarification can make all of the difference. In other words, perhaps there is sometimes unilateral forgiveness, in secret, and sometimes not. And perhaps it distorts concrete situations to force every situation into a one-size-fits-all solution. In perusing the contemporary landscape, this forced essentialization seems to be the common practice, creating a false dilemma. One takes Jesus on the cross as the paradigm case and then forces every passage and situation into this one. Or one takes an example of repentance leading to forgiveness and reconciliation as a paradigm case, then tries to make every case fit this size. In the end, neither can do justice to all of the concrete situations without forcible distortion.

Derrida says, "The moment the gift, however generous it be, is infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge [*connaisance*] or recognition [*reconnaissance*], it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges, in short it gives counterfeit money, since it gives in exchange for payment."[27] Is not this

comment raising a basic idea of giving or forgiving to a kind of purity that he himself recognizes does not exist? Perhaps he is correct, but is it possible that he is "subliming the logic," as Wittgenstein might say, and reifying an idea by wrenching it out of any concrete context?[28] Is he staying with the rough ground of use, or has he left rough ground far behind in the crystalline purity of slippery ice? And in so doing, does he perhaps raise unnecessary tension? In short, I suggest that in an ironic fashion that Derrida, the master critic of Platonism, has Platonized the idea of forgiveness, creating an ideal that represents a dream of total presence that distorts the roughness of actual life. In another sense, rather than seeing that there are many kinds of forgiveness that share overlapping "family resemblances," has he not proffered an Aristotelian essence that betrays an essentialist fallacy, forcing actual practice into an essentialist Procrustean bed? Looking at and seeing actual practice reveals that Derrida has forced us into a false dilemma, an all-or-nothing choice.

In a stronger sense, against Derrida and with Swinburne, I would argue that the more paradigmatic case is the one involving repentance. In Wittgenstein's thought, one can find prototypes that other cases more or less resemble. Rather than looking for a set of necessary and sufficient properties, one looks for a central prototype. This allows for cases on the edges to be debatable. As Wittgenstein says, "What's ragged should be left ragged."[29] In the case of forgiveness, I contend that the forgiveness and repentance pairing is more of the prototype, and unilateral forgiveness is closer to the ragged edge. This is because I contend that forgiveness is deeply if not almost inherently relational.[30] How could it be otherwise? In other words, I think that—usually—one can no more forgive by oneself any more than one can get married by oneself! Forgiveness is deeply allied with reconciliation and is incomplete without it. Derrida's insistence on a Platonic ideal causes him to break forgiveness away from relationality altogether. In other words, the only pure forgiveness cannot possibly be relational but must be private—a very odd conclusion indeed. This is where Wittgenstein would likely say, "A *picture* held us captive."[31] We have been bewitched by language.[32]

Wittgenstein warned against taking a word or an instance and essentializing it far beyond the realm of practice. The result was often insoluble aporias. While Derrida and Wittgenstein both would see Plato as a great culprit of this practice, Derrida, for all of his strengths and sensitivity, seems to have fallen prey to the same temptation with regard to forgiveness. Wittgensteinian therapy characteristically reveals a plurality disguised by essentializing; in this case, it reveals a relational dimension to forgiveness that opens up a space between a manipulative economy of exchange and an impossible demand beyond any relationship or economy at all, namely, an economy of the gift that is not ideal but actually realizable in the thick tissue of human practice.

Notes

1. See Jones, *Embodying* xi, 35-36 for the rare treatment of forgiveness, but also for noting the paucity of treatments of forgiveness.
2. Swineburn, *Responsibility* 81.
3. See, especially, Derrida, *The Gift of Death* 112. Also, cf., Ricoeur, *Memory* 412-506.

4. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §116.

5. Wittgenstein § 67.

6. Wittgenstein § 43, 141-42.

7. Wittgenstein § 71.

8. Wittgenstein §. 66. In fact, at this point he says even more strongly in the same paragraph, "Don't think, but look!"

9. Interestingly, this parallels the way many theologians take Jesus' forgiveness on the cross, "for they know not what they do," as the paradigm for all forgiveness (Luke 23:24). See Jones 94.

10. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §107.

11. In a theological context, Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this "cheap grace." See Bonhoeffer, *Cost* 44.

12. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §107.

13. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* 14.

14. Derrida 15.

15. For example, see Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1973) 102.

16. For the importance of the category of "difference" in Derrida, see Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982) 3-27.

17. Derrida, *Gift of Death* 29.

18. Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* 29.

19. Derrida 123.

20. For a concise discussion of the issues, see Stephen H. Webb, *The Gifting God: A Trinitarian Ethics of Excess* (New York: Oxford UP, 1996: ch. 1.

21. Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001) 27.

22. Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism* 34.

23. Derrida 28.

24. Derrida 34-35.

25. Derrida. 45.

26. For example, see the remarkable reflection on Jesus' teachings in the Sermon on the Mount in Derrida, *Gift of Death* 102-12. Here he shows greater insight than a Christian philosopher like Swinburne.

27. Derrida, *Gift of Death* 112.

28. The reference stems from Wittgenstein's question, "In what sense is logic something sublime?" Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §89.

29. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value* 45e.

30. A typical statement is the following: "The purpose of forgiveness is the restoration of communion, the reconciliation of brokenness." Jones 5.

31. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations.* §115.

32. The actual quotation is: "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language," Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §109.

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