

Introduction

The question of forgiveness in politics has attained a certain cachet. Indeed, in the fifty years since Hannah Arendt commented on the notable *absence* of forgiveness in the political tradition, a vast and multidisciplinary literature on the politics of apology, forgiveness, and reconciliation has emerged.¹ A number of historical events can account for this sudden turn: the efforts of former Soviet Bloc countries to acknowledge state spying and other infractions on the rights of their citizens; the establishment of truth commissions in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile (among others) to investigate state-sanctioned disappearances, kidnappings and tortures; and, perhaps most famously, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa.² At the same time, there have been gestures by parties to World War II on both sides of the conflict to apologize and repair for various war crimes and infractions, and settler societies like Canada, the USA and Australia have been called to task for past injustices by various members of their own citizenry: indigenous peoples, the descendants of former slaves, linguistic and ethnic minorities, and immigrant groups who have suffered from discrimination and exploitation.

Analyses of these new politics typically touch on the potential role for a *political* notion of forgiveness, although few have provided a detailed or consistent theoretical explanation of what would make an act of forgiveness political, and what distinguishes political forgiveness from its more familiar counterparts in everyday life.³ Instead, this task has fallen to philosophers, and they have embraced it with no small degree of cynicism. To a novice scouring the relevant literatures, it might appear that the only discordant note in this new veritable symphony of writings on political forgiveness has been sounded by philosophers writing on the topic. Where others see new hope for politics, philosophers fear an uncritical promotion of forgiveness, which risks distorting and cheapening forgiveness as a moral ideal, on the one hand, and ignoring justice, accountability and the need to end harmful relationships, on the other.⁴ After all, when philosophers take up the question of forgiveness, it is usually in order to shape it into

¹ Forgiving... has always been deemed unrealistic and inadmissible in the public realm". See Arendt 1958: 243.

² For more detailed, empirical analyses of these events, see Haynor 2001, Villa-Vicencio and Verwoerd 2000, Andrews 1999.

³ Peter Digeser (2001) is a notable exception to this; I discuss his account of political forgiveness below. Trudy Govier also offers a detailed analysis of forgiveness between groups, and in political contexts – most specifically the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission – although she does so by extending the Emotional Model to account for group resentment. See Govier 2002: 90-92.

⁴ The work of Jeffrie Murphy (1988) and, more recently, Thomas Brudholm (2008) represent excellent examples of this cynicism.

something resembling a rationally defensible moral ideal.⁵ This ideal, many argue, depends on the rich nature of our private interpersonal relationships, and the space for trust, empathy and emotional expression afforded by them. Once transported to the political realm, forgiveness is subject to inevitable distortion and decay.

Are philosophical fears about the dangers of thinking about forgiveness in political terms warranted – or do they perhaps depend in part on conceptual conservatism regarding what exactly political forgiveness might be? In this paper, I will make the case that most – if not all – objections to political forgiveness emerge from theoretical reliance on a picture of forgiveness I will call the Emotional Model. Once we make conceptual space for descriptions of forgiveness in performative and social terms, the concept is more easily adapted to a political account without the risks feared by philosophers.

My argument takes the following form. First, I present and briefly defend a multidimensional account of forgiveness. Next, I consider how best to understand forgiveness as political. Third, I respond to the major objections to extending forgiveness to political contexts, in turn:

1. Political actors have no right to forgive on behalf of individual victims;
2. Forgiveness imports inappropriate and illiberal notions of deep, psychological change into politics.
3. Only persons, not collectivities, can forgive.

My answers to each of these draws partly on the account of multidimensional account of forgiveness I advocate. Finally, I consider a slightly different sort of objection to political forgiveness. Given that, as I have argued, forgiveness is a personal reaction to wrongful harm, forgiveness cannot be a political matter because:

4. Acts of political forgiveness cannot be grounded in the appropriate kinds of reasons.

I counter this claim by examining some political grounds for forgiveness. Having argued that there are no unanswerable philosophical objections to forgiveness as a political concept, I conclude by reflecting on some of the forms that political forgiveness might take. Obviously the politics and particularities of reconciliation are enormous: the main purpose of this discussion is to remove some of the most salient *philosophical* objections to political policies that employ the language of forgiveness. While the language of forgiveness may be more or less appropriately applied (depending on the context of the political dispute) to policies of amnesty, pardon, or apology, as gestures of reconciliation or restoration, certain examples of each are capable of performing the work of forgiveness.

⁵ I discuss the philosophical interest in forgiveness *qua* ideal, and some its shortcomings, in another paper. I argue that the mainstream philosophical approach to forgiveness results in a narrow and unhelpful set of dichotomies: we either resent or forgive; either forgiveness is deserved or it is unwarranted; either forgiveness is conditional on repentance or it is unconditional. See MacLachlan 2009.

A Working Theory of Forgiveness

Since forgiveness is very much a part of the everyday moral of the contemporary western world, it makes sense for a theory of forgiveness to take, as its starting point, ‘average’ or ‘everyday’ understandings – insofar as these can be extracted.⁶ In philosophy, forgiveness is typically understood as a personal reaction to wrongful harm, which both confronts the wrongdoing *qua* wrongdoing and is characterized by either a shift from a negative to a positive stance toward the wrongdoer, or the adoption of a positive stance when a negative one is expected. Philosophers have also argued that the change of stance in forgiveness is essentially – or ideally – characterized in cognitive-affective terms: that is, as the effort to overcome or reduce resentment, undertaken for moral reasons. I call this the Emotional Model of forgiveness, since it characterizes forgiveness essentially as a change in emotion.⁷ Outside of philosophy, on the other hand, social practices of forgiveness are varied. Acts of forgiveness can manifest themselves as primarily affective (a change in feelings), cognitive (a change in judgments and attitudes) and/or socially performative (participation in some established action or ritual – perhaps the simple acts of saying “I’m sorry” and “I forgive you”). While many typical cases of forgiveness will have elements of all three, no one dimension – affective, cognitive or performative – is essential to ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ forgiveness. In other words, I advocate a *multidimensional* account of forgiveness. In long-standing and complex relationships marked by distrust and resentment on both sides, words of forgiveness alone may be deeply unsatisfying – and somewhat suspicious. In a more casual, distant or formal relationship, talk of deep emotional change or moralized judgments might actually exaggerate and sustain what would otherwise have been minor, even fleeting hostilities. What ‘counts’ as an act of forgiveness, will depend in part on whether those involved see it as such.

How then do we determine when someone has forgiven? Since practices of forgiveness vary in their expression, we can better understand what constitutes an act of

⁶ Here, any philosophical author confronts the danger of speaking in the voice of an authoritative “we”, presuming social and cultural homogeneity where there is little or none. Contemporary notions of forgiveness in English-speaking philosophy draw heavily on the cultural inheritance of the Judaic, Christian and Islamic religious traditions, as well as cultural norms that have developed in European cultures. Jacques Derrida (2001) has written about how this “Abrahamic” tradition of forgiveness is now writ global. I am not convinced that this is a *fait accompli* and suspect that social practices of forgiveness, like social practices of apology, admit of significant cultural variation. For a discussion of cultural variation in practices of apology, see Renteln (2008).

⁷ Trudy Govier has rightly noted that the term “Emotional Model” suggests that she and others reduce forgiveness to a matter of mere feelings when in fact she understands it primarily as a change in reactive attitudes, which have cognitive and volitional content not reducible to feelings. Let me be clear, therefore, that I understand emotions to be complex adaptive responses to certain situational factors, often socially experienced and understood, an episode of which may or may not include physiological changes, ways of feeling, motivations and dispositions to act in certain ways and – importantly – particular thoughts, perceptions and evaluations of this situation. In other words, rich emotional experiences like resentment include but are not reducible to evaluative construal of the agent’s environment that is open to rational assessment. Thus, in overcoming resentment, the forgiver – on the Emotional Model – experiences a change in attitude, perception and evaluation of the wrongdoer, which takes place for moral reasons.

forgiveness by examining its function or meaning to those involved rather than looking for a singular phenomenology of emotion, gesture, or performance. An act of forgiveness can have three functions: it can *release* the wrongdoer from emotional remainders like subjective guilt, it can offer *relief* to the wrongdoer (or indeed, the victim) and it can assist in the *repair* of right relationships, trust and the re-establishment of moral values.⁸ The nature of a particular act of forgiveness will depend very much on the context in which it arises: the characters of forgiver and forgiven, the relationship between them, and the extent of the original harm. Finally, we forgive for a multiplicity of reasons; these reasons are typically drawn from the context of the harm, the wrongdoer's subsequent behavior and the forgiver's anticipation of future states of affairs. The forgiver's reasons may also appeal to broader norms and values she takes to be important (e.g. the importance of interpersonal harmony). In many situations, our reasons to forgive are compelling but not conclusive; thus, potential forgivers have a certain amount of discretion regarding when it is appropriate to forgive. When we forgive for *good* reasons, however, our actions respond appropriately to the moral needs of the victim and wrongdoer, contribute to morally valuable states of affairs, and are capable of expressing moral values of trust, compassion and sensitivity.

Making Forgiveness Political

When theorists take up the question of 'political' forgiveness, they often have in mind large-scale cases of wrongdoing between social and political groups on a national, or even international, scale.⁹ Yet there are plausible counterexamples to the claim that all political forgiveness is collective forgiveness, and vice versa. Equating the two would exclude those cases where individual political actors (state representatives) seek or offer forgiveness, except insofar as they represented a larger collectivity, and there are plausibly cases of political forgiveness where those individuals involved (as victim and wrongdoer, in any case) speak for themselves alone.¹⁰ For example, many of the cases heard by South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission involved atrocities

⁸ The three functions of forgiveness can be seen in the multiple metaphors used to describe it we talk about forgiveness as a change of heart, or the decision to turn the other cheek, but equally, forgiving can wipe clean the slate, release the wrongdoer (and victim) from the burden of the harm, remit the wrongdoer's moral debt, or function as a gift.

⁹ Trudy Govier moves quickly from discussing skepticism over forgiveness in politics to asking, "can *groups* forgive?" Donald Shriver also speaks of political forgiveness as a "*collective* turning from the past," and Mark Amstutz claims: "political forgiveness represents an extension of interpersonal forgiveness to the actions of *collectives*." See Govier 2002: ix, Shriver 1995: 9 (italics added); Amstutz 2005.

¹⁰ Nicholas Tavuchis' (1988: 48) taxonomy of "structural configurations of apology and forgiveness" is helpful here. Tavuchis divides apologies (and gestures of forgiveness) into four categories:

One to One

One to Many

Many to One

Many to Many

Tavuchis assumes that the first is interpersonal, and the other three importantly different from the first. He is right to acknowledge the implications of a *public* apology, but in dismissing the first, perhaps fails to consider the role of the public as witness (or relevantly located third party) in politically charged acts of One-to-One (interpersonal) forgiveness.

committed by a single individual against another, within the context of systemic political oppression and struggle. In those cases, politics entered the equation as the motivation for the wrong, the context that made such occurrences possible, and in the scene of (possible) forgiveness: a public, state-mandated tribunal with the power to grant amnesty. Furthermore, we can imagine situations of collective forgiveness that are not *especially* political in nature: for example, collective forgiveness among members of an extended family or between factions of friends, fans of two rival sports teams, or colleagues in a workplace dispute.

Instead, we might recognize that much of the philosophical work on interpersonal forgiveness takes as its starting point, a very particular (if familiar) kind of interpersonal relationship: most typically, a casual friendship or acquaintance between agents who are relatively equal, and fairly independent from one another – friends, neighbours, or colleagues. But a philosophical theory of forgiveness that aimed to be comprehensive would need to apply to a wide variety of interpersonal relationships (partners, family, friends – ranging to complete strangers or new introductions), while acknowledging that these relationships vary in importance to the agents involved, as well as in closeness, affection, knowledge of the other, and in power. Rather than treating political forgiveness as a *sui generis* phenomenon, to be contrasted with interpersonal forgiveness understood as a singular paradigm, we might recognize how forgiveness potentially emerges from within a host of different types of relation – with political relationships being one type among these (admittedly, one with its own unique complications).

Finally, any straightforward contrast between ‘personal’ and ‘political’ forgiveness risks the implication that all acts of forgiveness not identified as political forgiveness are thus somehow apolitical. Yet forgiveness occurs in the aftermath of wrongdoing between agents – and in many cases, individual acts of wrongdoing reveal deeper asymmetries of power, voice and privilege. Theorists of forgiveness would do well to attend the second-wave feminist adage, ‘the personal is political’, in order to appropriately attend to the political dimensions of forgiveness following, for example, an act of gendered domestic violence, a schoolyard racist slur, or workplace exploitation between employer and employee from different class backgrounds.

Thus, I propose the following definition of political forgiveness. An instance of forgiveness is political, when it takes place in one of the following three types of circumstances:

- (1) Forgiveness between collectivities that are clearly recognizable as politically constituted or organized, or between their mandated representatives (e.g. states, political organizations, ethnic groups or other national minorities, or between groups of marginalized and disadvantaged individuals and the larger political society).
- (2) Forgiveness between individuals or groups whose primary relationship, or the relationship in question (i.e. that relationship implicated in the wrongdoing), is political, for e.g. forgiveness for politically motivated or politically charged

wrongdoings: hate crimes, for example, or the torture of political prisoners and hostages, as well as individual acts that are part of – and made possible by – wider systemic state policy (e.g. atrocities committed under apartheid policies).¹¹

- (3) Forgiveness enacted as part of – or in service to – the ongoing process of making the conditions for political society possible (that is to say, a broader political effort to establish lasting peace, build democratic institutions, and take responsibility for past political wrongdoing).¹²

While the first set of circumstances will entail collective forgiveness, if any, both the second and the third set can produce political forgiveness without it necessarily being collective. Yet insofar as they concern the structure and arrangements determining a political society and arise in the aftermath of political conflict, instances of forgiveness in (2) and in (3), whether individual or collective, are reasonably described as political.

In fact, philosophical discussions of political forgiveness suffer from a failure to recognize how many different events and processes are already referred to under the rubric of political forgiveness (whether or not those writing subscribe to a broad account of forgiveness, as I do). Those arguing for or against the possibility of political forgiveness describe it, in turn, as a collective effort to engage in “knowing forgetting,”¹³ a collective “process of overcoming resentment and anger,”¹⁴ “the decision to relieve individuals and groups from their moral debts or deserved punishments,”¹⁵ specific decisions to pardon or offer debt relief,¹⁶ a value that *must* be present for any successful political policy of reconciliation,¹⁷ or the authoritative academic discourse governing contemporary political transition.¹⁸ While I do not necessarily object to any one of these qualifying as an act of political forgiveness, this kind of equivocation can confuse the question of whether political *forgiveness* is a good idea. It is not always easy to know what collective, knowing forgetting might entail, or how the specific decisions to pardon, relieve punishment or release moral debts might contribute to the collective process of overcoming resentment. Those who endorse and those who criticize political instances of forgiveness are often talking past one another.

¹¹ I realize, of course, that (2) could include any act of crime between two citizens, provided they did not have a prior personal relationship. I do not intend to discuss forgiveness in judicial systems – at least not in those of a functioning democracy – at this point. I focus on political wrongdoing rather than purely criminal wrongdoing. However, I am open to the possibility that much of my analysis could be applied to discussions of restorative justice in the ordinary functioning of a criminal justice system, as well as situations of political upheaval and change.

¹² This last set of circumstances is very much in keeping with a claim by Hannah Arendt (1958: 198) that forgiveness is fundamentally a political faculty, since she claims that political activity always concerns itself with the conditions of its own possibility; that is, we are political when we act in order to create or sustain conditions of public plurality and debate.

¹³ Elshstain 2001: 42-56.

¹⁴ Govier 2002: viii.

¹⁵ Amstutz 2005: 77.

¹⁶ Digeser 2001: 7.

¹⁷ Rigby 2001: 184.

¹⁸ Moon 2004: 185.

This is exactly why the multidimensional account of forgiveness is helpful for its political application. Perhaps even more than in the case of interpersonal forgiveness, there are clearly multiple, competing and sometimes conflicting intuitions about the character of political forgiveness. Those writing on the topic struggle to combine acts, policies and the occasionally intangible effects of broader social change into a single philosophical concept. Thus, treatments of political forgiveness in the literature will refer to the following distinct phenomena almost interchangeably, without acknowledging a shift in reference:

- i) A specific act or government policy of reconciliation or peace-making: for example, the decision to implement truth commissions, to grant collective amnesty to perpetrators, to offer an individual political pardon, to issue a public apology or to make (or accept) an offer of reparation following harm.
- ii) Individual acts or events that take place within the context of such policies: for example, the actual ceremony of apology between two heads of state, or the ‘scenes’ of forgiveness between individual victims and wrongdoers that Desmond Tutu describes as taking place in the context of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.
- iii) The goal or end result of such policies; this third category treats political forgiveness as a synonym for a rich notion of political reconciliation. Thus, political forgiveness – in this sense – is achieved when such acts or policies are concluded with some standard of success, or to the satisfaction of those involved.
- iv) A side effect of these policies, such as a widespread shift in general social attitudes and behaviors between former victims and perpetrators. This could be measured by a number of indicators, including media reports, polling, records of inter-community incidents and police reports, success of integrated schooling, and through cultural artifacts like novels, films, plays, and songs.
- v) A value governing policies and process of social reconciliation, a value usually listed alongside truth telling, justice and peace. Such values function as reference points for the mandates and commitments of specific committees, task forces, commissions, and so on.

One might endorse policies described in i) without insisting on a rich notion of reconciliation, like iii) – or equally, promote the kind of broader social change described in iv) without believing that specific government policies or actions are the best way to achieve it. Finally a government or set of governments could demonstrate commitment to forgiveness as a value (as in v) without implementing any of the specific policies in i) or ii).

Which one of these is ‘real’ political forgiveness? First, I see good reason *not* to condemn any of these scenarios as necessarily incomplete – or to view them necessarily as partial fragments of a larger, unified *real* ‘political forgiveness’. In the first place, it is unclear what (or how desirable) that larger, unified phenomenon is: that is, how i) through v) are all necessarily required for any particular process of political transition (or reconciliation with history) to meet relevant moral and political standards.¹⁹ Second, there may be times when items on the list actually conflict or are in tension with one another, as when policies listed in i) and ii) detract from the broad social change described in iii) and iv) or do not represent the best strategy for striving to meet and respect the values described in v). And finally, even if all five were potentially compatible, in a given case, I see reason to resist treating their combination as ‘real’ forgiveness; such a phenomenon would represent a difficult, almost impossible ideal, for those struggling through the messy, difficult and heart-wrenching business of reconciliation; impossible ideals can discourage and undermine moderate successes in peacemaking.²⁰

Should the length and complexity of the list above lead us to dismiss the question of political forgiveness as incoherent or ill formed? I think not, for the following reason: there is power in the language of forgiveness, accrued from its legacy in many of the religious, cultural and literary discourses of the western world.²¹ This power is potentially valuable and the functions I attributed to forgiveness – *relief, release and repair* – are very much needed in the aftermath of political conflict. We have at least a *prima facie* reason to keep looking for a workable definition of political forgiveness, even if that definition turns out to be more pluralistic and particularistic than some would like. Once we accept that forgiveness is already a multidimensional set of overlapping acts and practices, the appropriate questions shift from “whether political forgiveness?” to “which act of political forgiveness, if any, is appropriate here and now?” We can focus on how these different acts and occasions of political forgiveness intersect, cause and react with one another, which (if any) are most politically valuable in a particular situation, and how we can best understand the political grounds for these acts of forgiveness and the conditions under which they are morally, as well as politically, appropriate.

I return to the potential moral and political values grounding political forgiveness in my conclusion. First, however, I take up the major objections to political forgiveness, and demonstrate how they can be answered.

¹⁹ For an excellent discussion of the appropriate moral and political standards, please see Murphy 2010.

²⁰ I am grateful to Nir Eisikovits, another contributor to this volume, who brought this point home to me in his talk entitled “Truce!” at a focal conference on reconciliation, held at the Boston University Institute for Philosophy and Religion in March 2009.

²¹ Of course, this legacy is sometimes as problematic as it is powerful. As I note elsewhere, the Christian overtones of forgiveness, in particular, and the association between Christianity and European global colonialism may give reason to avoid discourses of forgiveness in some post-colonial situations of reconciliation. Also, conflicting religious understandings of forgiveness may render it a contested topic in conflicts inflected by religious difference, such as Northern Ireland or Israel and the Palestinians.

First Objection: Political Actors Cannot Forgive for Victims

“No government can forgive... No commission can forgive... Only I can forgive. And I am not ready to forgive.” – a South African woman reacting to the testimony of her husband’s killer at a TRC hearing.²²

This woman’s testimony encapsulates much of what people find disquieting, even distasteful, about political applications of forgiveness. There is something alarming in imagining a situation where the choice to forgive is taken from victims, or they are unduly influenced. Such a situation offends against the elective character of forgiveness, the particularistic nature of the reasons we have to forgive or not forgive, and also, belies the respect we rightly assume is due to those who have suffered wrongful injury. Victims’ forgiveness should not be politically mandated.

But acts and policies of political forgiveness, even as enacted by a government or political body, need not be mandated victims’ forgiveness. In cases of serious, political wrongdoing, it is unlikely that the primary victim of wrongdoing was the only person harmed.²³ Furthermore, not all acts of forgiveness are victims’ forgiveness, primary or other. As several philosophers have argued, not only are there plausible instances of secondary and tertiary victims’ forgiveness, but under certain conditions the so-called victim’s prerogative can legitimately be extended to relevantly connected third parties: those who have a prior relationship to the wrongdoing, and who are prepared to engage appropriately with the victim’s experience.²⁴ These are not equivalent to the primary victim’s forgiveness, but they may also play an important role in the aftermath of wrongdoing. In a society torn about by civil war, for example, it is likely that very many people will find themselves in at least a position of a secondary or tertiary victim, as well as of a relevantly connected third-party; sadly, there is no shortage of relevant connections to harm.

Nevertheless, the argument that forgiveness by a government or state falls neatly into third-party forgiveness is perhaps a little too quick. While third-party forgiveness does not, in theory, replace victim’s forgiveness, there is a danger that the initiative to forgive, if taken by others, may feel like pre-emption to the victim. This danger is magnified exponentially when the others whose initiative it is to forgive act from positions of institutional authority and political power. Proponents of the South African TRC, for example, note that the commission’s mandate was truth for amnesty on behalf of society, not forgiveness on behalf of victims; it offered the occasion for individual acts of victim’s forgiveness, but did not compel or command them. However, in early hearings, Archbishop Desmond Tutu would sometimes ask victims if they were ready to forgive and reconcile after they had recounted their stories. A request from such a charismatic, morally authoritative figure, made in a public forum, may well have felt like

²² As recounted by Desmond Tutu and by Alex Boraine, Deputy Chair of the TRC. Cited in Ash, 1997: 36. Also cited in Gutmann and Thompson, 2000: 31 and Derrida, 2001: 43.

²³ For a discussion of primary, secondary and tertiary victims of wrong, see Govier and Verwoerd, 2002.

²⁴ For discussions of third-party forgiveness, see MacLachlan 2008, Norlock 2009, Pettigrove 2009 and Radzick 2009.

pressure to conform to the wider political culture of forgiveness and reconciliation.²⁵ Similarly, the leaders of a particular group may accept the official apology of another group before all their constituents are prepared to put the wrongdoing in the past. In doing so, they may have the power, effectively, to put the question to rest before victims would like.

An institutional expression of forgiveness carries authority that other acts of third-party forgiveness may not. Not only is its voice more powerful than those of individual victims but also, in some cases, it has been elected to speak on their behalf. And it is simply true that sometimes the political leadership of a particular group is prepared to forgive before all members of the group are prepared to do so – or to endorse the equivalent public action.²⁶ But of course this is not always a bad thing. Cultures of enmity and resentment can become so deeply entrenched that it appears impossible to imagine a resolution to longstanding social and political conflict. Political decisions to forgive – manifested as the cessation of hostility, promotion of better relations, or agreements to power-share, to hold truth hearings instead of trials, or to grant amnesty for moral-political reasons – may play an important role in shifting the broader culture. External researchers investigating the long-term effects of the TRC on particular South African townships noted, “it appears that for the most part the Commission has contributed to a greater commitment to the process of reconciliation.”²⁷ Sometimes policies of forgiveness may be an extremely effective part of wider political peace making. While respect and reparation will always be important ways of honoring victims’ experiences, assuming that in all cases policies of forgiveness must be postponed until each individual victim has done the same risks over-sanctifying the victims’ position, at tremendous cost.

Finally, not all acts of political forgiveness *are* acts of third-party forgiveness. Gutmann and Thompson suggest: “crimes like those committed against apartheid are acts not only against particular victims but also against society and state. In addition to the victims of crimes having something to forgive, so do society and state.”²⁸ Insofar as entire groups can be harmed by violence, injustice, and discrimination, their political leadership may have the appropriate standing to forgive as secondary or tertiary victims of wrong.

The relationship between government acts of forgiveness and individual victims’ forgiveness is variable, and must be negotiated carefully. While the quotation with which

²⁵ See Haynor 2001: 156, Brudholm 2008: 30-31, and – especially – see Verdoolaege’s discussion in this volume of the reconciliation discourse at the TRC.

²⁶ Indeed, a political leader may be prepared to enact political forgiveness before he or she has *personally* met the criteria articulated by the Emotional Account (i.e. overcoming his or her own, individual resentment). I am indebted to Mathias Thaler for directing me to consider how public acts of apology of forgiveness, when given by figures who are privately ambivalent or resentful, may be instances of hypocrisy with ‘civilizing force’ described by Judith Shklar. For more discussion, see Shklar 1984, 45-86.

²⁷ Taken from a report by Hugo van der Merwe, *The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Community Reconciliation*, Johannesburg: Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, 1998. Cited in Haynor, 2001: 157.

²⁸ Gutmann and Thompson, 2000: 30.

I began this section expresses one victim's frustration at a politically negotiated process of forgiveness, a second quotation is cited nearly as often, expressing the *need* for exactly this process: "I am ready to forgive, but I need to know whom I have to forgive. If they would just speak up and acknowledge what they have done, they would be giving us the opportunity to forgive."²⁹ Insofar as some acts of forgiveness incorporate profoundly personal changes of attitude and beliefs, it seems that these cannot be politically commanded, nor can a commission or a government perform them on behalf of an individual victim. A political body *can* set the scene for individual acts of deeply emotional forgiveness, and can even promote it as part of a wider culture.

The extent to which such political efforts will be interpreted as forceful or coercive will depend on the sensitivity and wisdom of the policy in place. Furthermore, there are other plausible practices of forgiveness in which a government or political body appears perfectly able to participate on behalf of its constituents: issuing and accepting official apologies, making other public gestures of conciliation and contrition, welcoming estranged perpetrators back into civil society by re-establishing certain civil rights, for example, or waiving penalties for the appropriate reasons. Indeed, individual victims will never have the power to perform these acts. One final note regarding political forgiveness and victims' forgiveness: I have spoken of a political relationship between a powerful political body and its (presumably) less powerful citizens. The dangers of authority and coercion reduce when the parties in question are two groups of roughly equal power or two political actors; forgiveness could end a political feud, for example, or hostilities between two heads of state.

Second Objection: Political Forgiveness is Illiberal

There is a second source of discomfort with political forgiveness, which once again arises from the intuition that forgiveness is personal and thus private, best kept between individuals.³⁰ Politics should not concern itself with the deep-seated sentiments and attitudes motivating the behavior of political actors; forgiveness involves a 'change of heart', and the state has no place in the hearts of its citizens. In other words, the second objection begins from the premise that forgiveness is always a matter of deep psychological attitudes, namely, the effort to overcome resentment and restore goodwill. In a liberal society, we cannot demand that citizens *feel* a certain way towards one another, so forgiveness is ruled out from the start.

²⁹ Cited in *The Report of the Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation*, Part Three, Chapter Four. Accessed Online at the United States Institute of Peace (http://www.usip.org/library/tc/doc/reports/chile/chile_1993_pt3_ch4.html)

³⁰ Timothy Garton Ash warns that political forgiveness, as "reconciliation of all with all" is a deeply illiberal idea while Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson note that a certain degree of moral disagreement, and even animosity, is important to a flourishing democracy See Ash 1997: 37 and Gutmann and Thompson, 2000. Rich notions of forgiveness and reconciliation, they argue, deny the space for debate and accountability that is required for a healthy political society. Peter Digeser, 2001: 17, describes a fear of 'politics as soul-craft' as generating much of the skepticism surrounding political forgiveness.

Not surprisingly, this objection is very much geared toward the Emotional Model of forgiveness.³¹ If one accepts the premise of the Emotional Model, then there are two possible responses to the claim that emotional work has no place in politics. The first is to bite the bullet, and reject the liberal premise of a political sphere free from thick moral and emotional demands. Mark Amstutz takes this approach, arguing for an explicitly communitarian account of political reconciliation.³² Political forgiveness, as Amstutz sees it, resembles the change in attitudes and rich reconciliation described in iii) and iv) listed above.

The other possible response from within the framework of the Emotional Model, is to accept that standard notions of forgiveness just cannot be applied politically, but to argue for a secondary, related account of specifically political forgiveness.³³ Peter Digeser does this, focusing only on the image of debt relief; in politics, “to forgive means to release what is owed, either financially or morally” and so an act of political forgiveness “relieves what is due and is done for reasons.”³⁴ In focusing on public commitments to release debt (moral or political), Digeser argues for what he calls an action-based rather than sentiment-based theory of political forgiveness. Yet Digeser discounts the role of attitudes and sentiments in the political realm perhaps a little too quickly; it is not clear that political acts of forgiveness always take place according to the model of debt relief. For example, sincere gestures of respect, contrition and acceptance can play an important ‘face-saving’ role, particularly in international relations. Here, the scene of forgiveness resembles a collective change of attitude or a symbolic effort to ‘turn the other cheek’ more than it does the release of what is due.

Viewing forgiveness according to the Emotional Model demands either that we choose between all or nothing: either we always appeal rich emotional attitudes and personal responses to explain an act of political forgiveness or we create a separate, restricted notion of political forgiveness that merely resembles its interpersonal cousin, excluding affective dimensions altogether. The former sits uneasily with liberals, and while the latter could account for policies of pardon, collective amnesty and – arguably – decisions not to retaliate violently against aggression, it cannot explain many political practices of truth-telling and reconciliation, institutional apologies and their acceptances, or more general political exhortations to forgive collectively. Thus, neither response is ultimately satisfying. Attitudes and subjective responses are a larger part of political life than Digeser gives them credit, but not all acts of political forgiveness require deep emotional change.

³¹ Implicated are those theorists who argue, like Charles Griswold, that “forgiveness is necessarily connected to the sentiments” or who, like Murphy, comment that forgiveness is “a matter of how I *feel* about you, (not how I treat you)...” See Griswold 2007: 268 and Murphy 1988: 21. This is not to suggest that Griswold would disagree with the limit placed on political forgiveness. In fact, for this reason among others, Griswold argues that what he calls the scene of forgiveness does not have a place in political life.

³² Amstutz 2005: 225-227.

³³ Griswold cites the political acts of pardon and debt relief as cases of non-paradigmatic or “imperfect” forgiveness: see Griswold 2008.

³⁴ Digeser 2001: 4-20. The concept of remitting a debt is only one of six possible metaphors for forgiving: for a complete list, see footnote 9.

The core of the second objection – that, no matter what the potential benefit to social stability, *compelling* citizens to experience a change of heart is illiberal – is true. Governments or other political bodies may enact policies of forgiveness, but they cannot legislate the inner life of their citizens. Furthermore, given that even the promotion of certain attitudes and relationships (without sanctions or legal enforcement) may require a thick understanding of the common good, communitarians like Amstutz are far more likely to be comfortable with primarily affective accounts of political forgiveness than those with liberal leanings. But once forgiveness is conceived as a multidimensional set of practices rather than a unitary phenomenon, this is not a damning conclusion even for committed political liberals. While government policies may not be able to legislate anything resembling a collective ‘change of heart’, they can certainly wipe the slate clean so that wrongs are no longer held against the wrongdoers, either in public record or in terms of their legal standing as citizens. Government policies can also promote wider forgiveness without thereby demanding it as an obligation. Government policies of forgiveness might resemble mildly paternalistic safety or literacy initiatives, or educational efforts to change a broader social culture of discrimination; there need not always be legal coercion or political sanctions involved. Political forgiveness need not entail the harmonizing of all interests, attitudes and beliefs, but can merely serve to “[bring] matters into a framework within which conflicts can be adjudicated short of bloodshed.”³⁵

This second objection shares a moral intuition with the first: any effort to institutionalize forgiveness, in a particular body or through the political representatives of larger collectivities, ends up either taking something from individual victims (their prerogative to forgive) if they are not involved in the process of forgiveness, or demanding too much of them (their emotional commitments, for example), if they are. In both cases, the danger is that individual victims are not given due respect; that is, the state infringes on a properly personal matter. This issue is pragmatic as well as principled; if the percentage of the population victimized by past wrongdoings is resentful of a particular policy of forgiveness, larger efforts to promote social reconciliation may fail. Thus, peace advocates suggest that the distinction between constructive and destructive post-conflict forgiveness lies in negotiating some congruence between “sociopolitical public statements” and “psychological private readiness” to forgive. Public policies and statements of political forgiveness must remain sensitive to the conditions of other members of the offended social or political group; political forgiveness can happen too soon or too late, and risk further conflict and casualties as a result.³⁶ In general, a successful (constructive) policy of forgiveness must be combined with more general policies of social justice and reparations to victims.³⁷

³⁵Elshstain, 2001: 41. So, for instance, it seems that Ash moves too quickly from a specific policy of forgiveness to the assumption that what is entailed, as an end result, is “harmony of all with all.”

³⁶Montiel 2000: 95.

³⁷Orr 2000: 239-249; Montiel 2000: 201.

Third Objection: Groups Cannot Forgive

The third objection to political forgiveness arises from its close association with collective forgiveness. Persons can forgive, but groups cannot; to argue otherwise, the claim goes, is to attribute too rich a notion of moral agency to political collectives. Govier deals with this claim at great length, noting that we have no trouble ascribing *negative* moral agency to groups: “many who speak without hesitation of groups hating each other, resenting each other, or seeking revenge against each other tend to become skeptical when they are told that groups might be characterized by more positive attitudes such as compassion, understanding, trust or forgiveness.”³⁸ Since we regularly attribute many kinds of activity to groups *qua* agents, including rational deliberation, policy-making, decision, and even the ascription of certain attitudes, just how rich a notion of moral agency is necessary to forgive? To be forgiven?³⁹

Certainly, groups of people can suffer from harm; wrongs done to groups of people can be collective or distributive. And while we may take pains to identify individual perpetrators and hold them accountable, there are some situations in which it is simply the case that entire groups have either participated in wrongdoing or passively acquiesced, while benefitting from the results. If groups can act to harm one another wrongfully, what is the resistance to groups forgiving? Once again, the answer can be found in part within the Emotional Model of forgiveness. We have less trouble imagining a large group electing to have their representatives waive certain claims or penalties, or even perform certain gestures or utterances, than we do imagining a group granting their representatives the power to overcome resentment, or to have a similar change of heart.

But this does not yet explain the asymmetry that Govier describes; why do we attribute negative and not positive attitudes to groups? In the case of forgiveness, the answer seems to lie in its elective nature, discussed above – the extent to which many decisions to forgive will be underdetermined by reasons. The phenomenology of forgiveness is highly particularistic; insofar as reasons to forgive depend on particular, contextual perceptions of the wrongdoer, the wrong, the wider situation and the potential moral value in any future relationship between victim and wrongdoer, the extent to which different individuals forgive – and the time in which they do it – will vary tremendously. Our hesitation over ascribing collective forgiveness is, I suspect, not so much a matter of rejecting collective attitudes in general, but difficulties imagining a collective *readiness* to forgive. More than with many attitudes, forgiving seems to be something that people (rightly) do at very different paces and for different reasons, and about which they have very different attitudes. But such variation, combined with a general reluctance to disrupt the victim’s prerogative, makes it difficult to imagine how, in a large group, all the affected individuals could come to the decision to forgive without some level of coercion.

³⁸ Govier 2002: ix. See also her contribution to this volume.

³⁹ Indeed, because Govier covers this issue so thoroughly – albeit from a slightly different understanding of forgiveness than the one I espouse – I do not go into substantial detail here. See Govier, in this volume.

The intransigence of groups would be an insurmountable barrier to forgiveness, if all acts of forgiveness required a spontaneous, unanimous and whole-hearted group decision. And given that such a happy event is unlikely, there are certainly limits to the kind of forgiveness we can ascribe to groups. Elshtain notes that political forgiveness always involves “the painful recognition of the limits to forgiveness, if what one seeks is full expiation, a full accounting, total justice, or a kind of annihilation of the past...this recognition is itself a central feature of an overall structure of political forgiveness.”⁴⁰ Dissent and reluctance are often intractable features of group experience, even at the best of times; resentment, recalcitrance and unwillingness to cease bearing grudges will often be a significant feature of any collective effort to put wrongdoing in the past. For this reason, I identified potential acts of political forgiveness not only in terms of individual policies or events, but also in longer processes of social change and struggle. The multidimensional account is a broad, ‘lowest common denominator’ approach to forgiveness; not only the best, most whole-hearted acts of forgiveness are counted as such, but also painful, reluctant and resistant efforts to do the same.⁴¹ It is an unfortunate truth that political forgiveness may see more examples of the latter than the former.

Fourth Objection: Acts of Political Forgiveness Lack Appropriate Reasons

I have described forgiveness as a *personal* reaction to wrongful harm, described the reasons we have to forgive as particularistic, contextual and even relational, and argued that the prerogative to forgive is ultimately grounded in our ability to take the wrongdoing personally. While I argued above that all interpersonal relationships should neither be seen as identical to one another nor necessarily apolitical, it seems intuitively true that our political relationships are more formalized and distant (both affectively and physically) than most interpersonal relationships. We see family, friends, colleagues – and even the stranger who confronts us – face to face, while many political relationships are conducted through representatives and media. Given this rather sustained emphasis on the personal qualities of forgiveness, can political forgiveness ever get off the ground? Perhaps politics and political relationships alone cannot generate sufficient reasons to forgive. Political policies may resemble acts of forgiveness in all other ways, but if they lack this necessary property they ought not to be described as such.

In part, any answer to this objection will depend on how we understand political relationships. In the section following this one, I consider a theory of political relations that might generate acceptable grounds for political forgiveness: Hannah Arendt’s account of political action.⁴² I turn to Arendt for several reasons. First, she is among the first political philosophers to take seriously the idea that forgiveness is a legitimate part of the political sphere, and thus the conception of politics she envisions is of particular

⁴⁰ Elshtain 2001: 44.

⁴¹ I borrow the term ‘lowest common denominator’ forgiveness from Glen Pettigrove, 2004, who cites Iris Murdoch.

⁴² For a far more detailed and thoughtful discussion of Arendt on forgiveness, please see Guisan in this volume. I am convinced by Guisan’s argument that Arendtian forgiveness, in itself, is insufficient for political reconciliation: understanding and promises are also required. However I do not have space to consider that relationship here.

interest to those of us who want to defend her claim. Second, Arendt writes during the period when responsibility for political crimes and repair of historically damaged political relationships was beginning to the forefront of international relations, from the Nuremberg trials to transitions away from former colonial rule. Arendt is unstinting in her concern for those without political rights or their precondition – what she calls “the right to have rights”, and for victims of political violence. Thus, she concerns herself with exactly the kinds of political relationships in which forgiveness comes into question. Furthermore, her normative account of political speech and action resonates with much of what I have described as the *work* of forgiveness. For Arendt, action and speech become political when they reveal the agent who speaks or acts (and thus, represent a risk to that agent), when they create or contribute to a new political narrative (i.e. an authoritative public record) and when they forge some new political relationship. Finally, Arendt represents a kind of puzzle for philosophers of forgiveness: she advocates its application to politics even as she resists any effort to import moral norms or affective, emotional standards into the political sphere. Given the difficulties inherent in applying a primarily Emotional Model of forgiveness to political situations, it is hardly surprising that Arendt has become an appealing authority for those considering forgiveness in political life.

But before turning to Arendt and her account of political action, I first consider the objection itself. I have argued that we are able to forgive insofar as we have good reason to take the wrongdoing personally, and furthermore, we forgive *well* if we forgive when we have good reasons to do so. There is no reason to think either of these conditions is impossible in a political context. The frequency of ethnic and political conflict suggests that many people take the wrongs associated with their collective identities and political affiliations very personally indeed. In situations of political occupation, civil war or ideological conflict, individuals will commit themselves to a political cause with a fervor and determination that they reserve for little else, even sacrificing their lives. Moreover, the stories that emerge in the aftermath of political oppression or violence are often very personal. Molly Andrews recounts how in the weeks following the release of the “Stasi” files and under the auspices of the East German Truth Commission, opponents of the regime were horrified to learn how their colleagues, neighbors and friends had spied on them.⁴³ We have no trouble recognizing ways in which these *conflicts* can be personal; it seems strange to insist that their resolution cannot be equally personal.

Indeed, this final claim resembles the claim that collectivities cannot experience positive attitudes of trust and compassion. Our skepticism is skewed toward constructive, positive gestures; we tend not to doubt the reality or the sincerity of their negative, destructive counterparts. But political actors, public figures, and spokespeople for institutions of authority can have reason to take wrongs personally (and thus, a prerogative to forgive) from a number of different positions: as secondary or tertiary victims, as relevantly connected third parties, as the sincere, committed, elected

⁴³ Andrews 1999, 110.

representatives of the same, or – in some cases – as these and *also* as primary victims of wrongdoing.⁴⁴

Of course, it could be argued that while political figures can take things personally, they cannot do so in their roles as political figures. In the latter role, they are not acting as individual persons, but on behalf of institutions, collectives, states etc. Attempts to personalize these roles risk distorting and corrupting their proper, impersonal function. One critique, lodged at acts of public apology as well as public acts of forgiveness, is that when political actors make public displays that are meant to be personal, they engage in an insincere display of ‘crocodile tears’ or ‘trembling lips’ that imports inappropriate tropes from personal life. We can trust interpersonal displays of emotion – in seeking or granting forgiveness, for example – because they are a reliable gauge for determining an individual’s commitment to change her behavior, alter her attitudes, and otherwise shift her stance. But inasmuch as political decision-making is not an individual affair, whatever attitudes and feelings a political figure has regarding a particular political decision or policy do not play the same determining role as they would in her personal life.⁴⁵ Instead, public ‘personal’ displays are, at best, a distraction from the real political work to be done and, at worst, a strategic ploy for ‘cheap grace’ or an easy exit strategy.

This would perhaps be a troublesome consideration, if it were the case that public acts of forgiveness always amounted to public displays of emotion, that is, if political forgiveness is conceived along the lines of the Emotional Model. But while ceremonies and gestures of remembrance and reconciliation may play a role in a larger process of political forgiveness, and while these may include tearful gestures and utterances by the parties involved, political forgiveness usually goes beyond public ceremony – and we can account for this within the terms of the multidimensional account.

Moreover, it is perhaps a mistake to dismiss the potential sincerity of such ceremonies, simply because the close causal connection between emotion and motivation we rely on in our interpersonal relationships is not available. Public gestures of forgiveness can mark measurable commitments to future behavior (providing *release* or *release* from past injustices), can initiate just and compassionate decisions of policy and, especially, and can represent an authoritative change to the public record. Truth Commissions find their primary purpose in the need to uncover atrocities of the past; the

⁴⁴ For example, Nelson Mandela suffered personally under the apartheid regime and, following his release, he was able to forgive his jailors as a primary victim, then speak on behalf of South African black communities who suffered under apartheid, etc. Mandela is perhaps a rare example, where the multiple prerogatives to forgive are almost overwhelming, but many political leaders will stand in at least some personal relationship to the political harms that have faced their people.

⁴⁵ Other reasons cited for distrusting expressions of sorrow and remorse include the ability of political figures to compartmentalize between their own lives and their political work. Robert McNamara spoke of this ability at great length in the documentary about his role in the Vietnam War, *The Fog of War*, describing the need to leave decisions of state behind when returning home. Moreover, decisions made in the context of a particular role may affect our self-understanding less than decisions we make in our personal life – it is easier to blame the burdens of office, or the constraints of an institution, and we may be less willing to incorporate them into a robust sense of our own agency.

earliest truth commissions in Chile and Argentina had a specific mandate to investigate the disappearance of political activists and opponents of previous regimes. Donald Shriver comments, “to have your story of unjust suffering entered into a public record and thence into future history-writing is to experience an increment of justice.”⁴⁶ In other words, personal acts and statements in the public realm are not without reliable standards altogether, but their evaluation will be slightly different from that of private utterances: we assess them as acts of disclosure, as efforts to take risks on behalf of a potential greater good (peace-making), their contributions to public record, and their ability to issue new commitments and – in particular – to initiate new and just political relationships (i.e. *repair*).⁴⁷

Are there *reasons* to forgive available to political figures that are at once politically appropriate and appropriate to forgiveness? The kinds of reasons to which a potential forgiver might appeal include the nature/extent of the harm and the wrongdoer’s intentions, the victim’s suffering and ongoing vulnerability, the wrongdoer’s subsequent behavior and the victim’s assessment of how forgiveness might affect it, their pre-existing relationship and the victim’s desire for future reconciliation or closure. I see no good reason why political analogues of these reasons cannot manifest themselves in public life: the desire for future reconciliation or closure seems particularly compelling reasons in political cases, when the costs of wrongdoing are so high, as does the victim’s assessment of her (or their) vulnerability and the wrongdoer’s likely reactions.

Yet, an opponent of political forgiveness might argue, the point is not that we lack good reasons to forgive in political life, but that our *good* reasons to forgive are somehow fatally compromised by the other kind of reasoning that takes place in politics; after all, political decisions are almost always strategic. They appeal to necessity, advantage, negotiation, power and control. Even the decision to release (moral or legal) power over the wrongdoer, in the form of a release from retaliation or penalty, is always – ultimately – a calculation of interests and agendas. Indeed, the desire for political reconciliation is also a kind of calculation; Nelson Mandela admitted that “without these enemies of ours, we can never bring about a peaceful transformation to this country.”⁴⁸ This was not a vague or metaphorical realization: the former apartheid regime had only agreed to hand over power on the condition of some kind of amnesty. Political reconciliations thus lack the voluntary, unconstrained quality of interpersonal reunions – or at least, interpersonal reunions at their best.⁴⁹ Or so, the final case presented against political forgiveness might go.

⁴⁶ Shriver 2001, 37.

⁴⁷ Interestingly, these standards of evaluation conform to what Arendt describes as properly political action: an act is political insofar as it reveals something about the doer (self-disclosure), is courageous (self-risk), produces meaningful narrative (contributes to public record) and initiates new relationships (1958, 236-244).

⁴⁸ Cited in Shriver 2001, 33.

⁴⁹ Here, again, I see evidence of a tendency to idealize the interpersonal at the expense of the political. Many interpersonal reconciliations take place because of the need to co-exist in shared households, neighbourhoods, or workplaces – or because the animosity is too costly for third parties, or because of other interests and commitments.

Political Grounds for Forgiveness: An Arendtian Account

In fact, the fourth objection reveals yet another danger inherent in sharply dividing forgiveness into mutually exclusive categories of ‘interpersonal’ and ‘political:’ our notions of interpersonal forgiveness are all too easily idealized, and treated with undue reverence. Here, the multidimensional account – focusing as it does on actual, everyday practices of forgiveness – is particularly helpful. In all walks of life and in any type of relationship we forgive for a multiplicity of reasons, and these reasons include assessments of our own needs, our expectations of remorse and reform by the wrongdoer – or the overriding desire for harmony or peace of mind. We can forgive for self-pertaining reasons, we can forgive reluctantly and over a long period of time, and we can forgive in better or worse ways. While individual practices of forgiveness may not include formal calculations of public relations, material reparations and strategic security initiatives, we are capable of taking into account our vulnerability, safety and our various needs, in deciding whether to forgive, without hopelessly ‘tainting’ the act itself so that its characteristic ‘work’ of relief, release or repair is no longer recognizable. Praiseworthy acts of forgiveness express important social values of trust and compassion, may alleviate the suffering of all concerned, and may produce better states of affairs, but none of these consequences relies on a pure, disinterested act of spontaneous generosity, without reason. In other words, the idealized contrast used to ignite skepticism about political forgiveness is itself a misrepresentation of actual interpersonal forgiving practices.

Perhaps the skepticism surrounding political forgiveness simply reflects deeper skepticism about the moral possibilities of the political sphere: somehow, forgiveness is always necessarily too much to expect from politics and, if astonishing acts of political forgiveness appear too good to be true, then they probably are. Certainly, the first wave of enthusiasm over the groundbreaking approach of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was followed quickly by a barrage of criticism, much of which rightly noted the South African government’s failure to compensate and acknowledge victims appropriately, the remaining civil tensions and social violence across the country, and so on. While our personal relationships may involve conflicts of interest, selfishness and other calculation, these are balanced by richer relationships of concern and mutual goodwill. In politics, one might argue, the relevant political relationship is not substantial enough to generate the kind of thoughtful, contextual reasoning necessary to identify truly compelling reasons to forgive.⁵⁰ The quotation from Arendt at the beginning of the chapter goes on to cite as the reason for forgiveness’ absence from the public realm, its close connection with the intimate and what she calls *apolitical* relation of love.⁵¹ Forgiveness cannot be political because our political relationships cannot sustain it.

⁵⁰ Recall, for instance, that the second scenario in which forgiveness might properly be called *political* is when the wrongdoer and victim have no relationship beyond a minimal, political one. Scenes of political forgiveness can be identified by the *lack* of prior relationship between those involved.

⁵¹ Arendt 1958, 243.

Is there a political analogue for the kind of love that Arendt believes grounds interpersonal acts of forgiveness? Arendt characterizes forgiveness as one of two essentially *political* faculties; along with our ability to make and keep promises to others, our ability to forgive and be forgiven grounds the political will to “live together with others in the mode of acting and speaking.”⁵² That is, forgiveness grounds our ability to enter into and sustain political societies.⁵³ For Arendt, forgiveness is not only possible in the political realm; it is actually essential. Given a plurality of free but mutually dependent individuals, conflicts, competitions and confusions – what Arendt calls ‘trespassing’ – are inevitable. Thus, Arendt acknowledges that relationships conducted politically will occasionally fall short of what we might want and expect from other people, morally speaking. But, she argues, efforts to import private morality into the political realm will either fail, or distort the importantly free and plural nature of political action and will, in the worst instances, lead to political tyranny and violence. For the most part, politics and morality cannot be reconciled in Arendt’s eyes.⁵⁴ In other words, Arendt is sympathetic to the skepticism about political morality I described above. But – significantly – she sees forgiveness as an exception to this general injunction against political morality: “[morality] has, at least politically speaking, no more to support itself than the good will to counter the enormous risks of action by readiness to forgive and to be forgiven, to make promises and to keep them.”⁵⁵ Unlike most ethical mandates, Arendt claims, forgiveness actually *depends* on plurality: that is, on a multiplicity of agents with conflicting interests and wills, all sharing a public space.

What exactly does Arendt mean by forgiveness? Her account differs from more recent philosophical discussions in that she pays little, if any, attention to the emotional dimension of forgiving. Indeed, her very willingness to acknowledge forgiveness as political indicates her resistance to anything resembling the Emotional Model. Arendt has little time for moral sentiments in politics; she claims that sentiments like pity – while virtuous in the private sphere – become vices in politics.⁵⁶ Rather than a matter of emotional change, therefore, Arendt describes the act of forgiveness as a ‘release’ or a ‘dismissal,’ noting that “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover.”⁵⁷ Forgiveness ‘undoes’ those acts whose consequences have bound us – either as the doer or as the sufferer of the deed – and from which we wish to escape. Indeed, Arendt suggests that forgiveness bears the same relation to action as destruction does to creation.⁵⁸ In other words, Arendt’s conception of forgiveness resembles the metaphors of relief from burden and remission from debt; forgiveness frees us, and fixes the wrong in the past so that its consequences are politically ‘undone.’

⁵² Guisan discusses these two political faculties alongside our capacity for *understanding*. See Guisan, in this volume.

⁵³ Ibid, 246.

⁵⁴ For a longer discussion of the relationship between politics and morality in Arendt, please see Williams 1998; MacLachlan 2006.

⁵⁵ Arendt 1958, 243.

⁵⁶ Arendt 1963, 84.

⁵⁷ Arendt 1958, 237-8.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 238.

Clearly acts of forgiveness, however magnanimous, have no supernatural or counterfactual abilities. They cannot literally undo the events of the past. Neither does Arendt imagine forgiveness to be an act of historical amnesia, in which past traumas are covered over and ignored completely. While she describes forgiveness as the opposite of vengeance, she also calls it an alternative to punishment, “but by no means its opposite.”⁵⁹ Both forgiveness and punishment have the same function, Arendt argues: to put an end to cycles of violent reaction. But if forgiveness is relevantly like punishment, it cannot forsake responsibility and accountability for the past – this would defy the purpose of retributive punishment altogether. Nor would an amnesiac response be in keeping with Arendt’s respect for narrative and shared history.⁶⁰ So the ‘release’ that Arendt takes forgiveness to offer is not relief from the very fact of our actions, nor is it relief from our accountability for them. Instead, an act of forgiveness is an act that prevents the past from continuing to wholly determine the present (as it would in an ongoing cycle of revenge and retaliation) and which thus returns us to a condition of relative freedom (a condition for the possibility of politics, in Arendt’s eyes).

In forgiving, Arendt claims, “*what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it.”⁶¹ Forgiveness allows us to assume identities beyond the restrictive ‘victim’ and ‘wrongdoer’ identities created by the original (wrongful) act. In a political context, where both sides may see themselves as ‘victim’ and the other as ‘wrongdoer,’ such identities may freeze debate in an endless litany of wrongs done on each side. Forgiving does not mean that the deed vanishes from public memory, however this new, revelatory act shifts its original meaning. Just as an apology by the wrongdoer can change the initial significance of a wrongdoing, in the eyes of the victim, so too can forgiveness by the injured party alter the relationship between the two. As Andrew Schaap explains, Arendtian readiness to forgive displays a willingness to re-enter the sphere of political debate with former enemies and combatants, forsaking the apolitical methods of vengeance and violence.⁶² Forgiveness returns the actor and the act to the shared political realm. It does not signal an end or final reconciliation, therefore, but – like all Arendtian political action – a new beginning.⁶³

In other words, what Arendt refers to as acts of forgiveness are the renewals of trust required to sustain a political space of verbal and not violent disputes. They are grounded in our ongoing commitment to political society as well as our respect for those who are our co-participants in it and, as a result, our willingness to trust them enough to enter into a space of political action. Arendt describes the appropriate relation of political respect as something akin to Aristotle’s *philia politike* (political friendship) and also as analogous to love in the private sphere; just as appropriate private relationships express love, so too do appropriate political relationships express respect.⁶⁴ Since it concerns our personhood as speaking and acting beings, such respect is sufficient ground – Arendt

⁵⁹ Ibid, 241.

⁶⁰ She cites the creation of meaningful narrative as the only appropriate product of political action.

⁶¹ Ibid, 241.

⁶² Schaap 2005, 75-78.

⁶³ “Forgiving... tries the seemingly impossible, to undo what has been done, and succeeds in making a new beginning where everything seemed to have come to an end.” Arendt 1994, 308.

⁶⁴ Arendt 1958, 243.

believes – to forgive others when necessary, and it sits alongside the presumable awareness that we, ourselves, will eventually need forgiveness in turn and the trust that it too will be offered.⁶⁵ A culture of mutual political respect is also a method of sustaining the *personal* aspect of the political; Govier acknowledges Arendt's insight that so long as "public life does not become completely depersonalized and maintains a basis for respectful relations...we can make sense of forgiveness in public life."⁶⁶ Respect, defined here as the willingness, however grudgingly, to continue to share an intersubjective political world together, can legitimately ground political acts of forgiveness. As a reason grounding decisions to forgive, Arendtian respect lies somewhere between realist determinations of sheer necessity and the demand that forgiveness not take into account any need to negotiate co-existence, that it be somehow 'purified' of any political consideration.

Admittedly, Arendt's conception of politics is itself highly agonistic. Political citizens live with one another, but not necessarily *for* one another and will, in fact, strive to distinguish themselves against others (in both word and deed). Therefore forgiveness cannot represent political closure; total harmony would mean the end of politics, and the ongoing commitment to politics is what grounds and motivates political forgiveness in the first place. In other words, the political sphere cannot, and perhaps ought not, achieve the same kind of close reconciliation that some acts of interpersonal forgiveness may – though they certainly need not – initiate. Acts of political forgiveness release us just enough to be able to move forward, together. The *meaning* of the wrong is fixed in the past, so that it no longer continues to determine and dominate the present in cycles of violence.

The relative merit of acts of forgiveness depends, in part, on their relationship to and expression of other important moral values: moderation and restraint in retaliation, trust, compassion, the alleviation of suffering, moral sensitivity and self-reflection. Particularly important in a political context are trust and the moderation of anger and revenge. Arendtian forgiveness-as-release certainly contributes to a political culture of greater trust, insofar as it attends to public records and official history, new political beginnings, willingness to live with one another. Charles Villa-Vincencio, national director of research for the South African TRC concluded, regarding the potential limitations of the Commission's mandate, "it is important that we all treat one another in the best possible manner – that even if we are not fully reconciled to one another, we do not kill one another."⁶⁷ In other words, the regeneration of trust is a gradual, relative matter. Political forgiveness may represent the beginning of such a restoration, rather than its conclusion.

⁶⁵ Of course this respect, and the forgiveness it engenders, is not an all-encompassing solution to political violence. Arendtian commentator Michael Janover (2005) comments that while "respect...may be a possible grounding for forgiveness in political situations of conflict... we stand in greatest need of the circuit-breaker of forgiveness when the ground of respect itself has been shattered by intra-communal violence and hatred" (230) – the difficulty is that such respect may have vanished just when forgiveness is most needed.

⁶⁶ Govier 2002, 80. Digeser also acknowledges Arendt in his account of political forgiveness.

⁶⁷ Elshstain 2001, 51.

According to the Emotional Model, concessions like this cannot be genuine forgiveness, because they fall short of its expressed goal: the eradication of all resentment and angry feeling, and the restoration of goodwill. But this is a deeply problematic political goal and, if we are honest, often an unrealistic personal one. In accepting that we forgive to various degrees of reconciliation and restoration, and that our forgiveness is compatible with a certain degree of ambivalence, recalcitrance and anxiety, the multidimensional account generates an understanding of political forgiveness that is at least amenable to liberal concerns of dissent, expression and autonomy. Insofar as we understand that forgiveness, in any realm, is not immune from considerations of interest, security and calculation, the possibility of political negotiation and strategy entering into political decisions to forgive does not prevent us from recognizing them as both politically and morally valuable. Furthermore, an account of mutual political respect, like Arendt's, explains how political relationships can be sufficiently 'personal' to ground and motivate decisions to forgive.

Conclusion

The multidimensional account offers a workable definition of political forgiveness that sits within the same framework as discussions of forgiveness in everyday life. The standard objections to political forgiveness – that it violates the victim's prerogative, that it is essentially illiberal, that we cannot make sense of forgiveness between groups – either do not apply to the multidimensional approach, or are left as cautions to policy-makers, and not conceptual obstacles. There is nothing in the concept of forgiveness, understood as a determinate range of moral practices, which prevents its cautious application to political conflicts. In fact, considering forgiveness in social-political contexts reveals that any sharp distinction between 'political' and 'personal' acts of forgiveness is perhaps more problematic than is ordinarily recognized. Failing to acknowledge the extent to which our interpersonal conflicts are politicized risks idealizing interpersonal forgiveness as a spontaneous, unmeasured act of utterly disinterested generosity, even while caricaturing political forgiveness: either as a radically illiberal effort to impose emotional states on large groups of people or as a cynical calculation of power. This caricature not only fails to be faithful to the multiple meanings of forgiveness, but also ignores many ways in which political leaders, institutions and even collectivities, *are* capable of assuming the role of forgiver: in individual acts and ceremonies, in policy choices, in the values governing widespread policy, and the social consequences of political change. If the political sphere retains the common respect Arendt describes, and at least some minimal will to continue to share political institutions, forgiveness is potentially both a politically legitimate and a morally valuable option for political reconstruction and renewal.

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