

FORGIVENESS, THE HOLOCAUST AND THE EVIL

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Resumen: In this piece, the author discusses the concept of 'forgiveness', according to western and eastern cultures and religions, and how the contemporary societies justify its application to restore order after a period of atrocities where an 'holocaust' has happened, for instance, the Nazi Holocaust or the more recent massacres in Rwanda. The tools and mechanisms to erase the Historic Memory for running away the 'evil' using the forgiveness are analysed. Author proposes ways of preventing such tragedies in the future by the study of episodes of those recent holocausts.

Palabras Clave: contemporary societies, Forgiveness, Historic Memory, holocaust, Nazi Holocaust, Rwanda.

"Do not think lightly of evil, saying 'it will not come to me'. Even a water pot is filled by the falling of drops. Likewise, the fool gathering it drop by drop, fills himself with evil. Do not think lightly of good, saying: 'it will not come to me.' Even as a water pot is filled by the falling of drops, so the wise man, gathering it drop by drop, fills himself with good"
(The Buddha)¹

In this brief commentary I shall argue that forgiveness is a shoddy concept—one that is understood differently in each culture, in each tradition and by each individual. It is a concept heavily laden with religious baggage and meaningful only within its own context. Nevertheless and with that said, the word has entered our vocabulary and has affected our attitudes towards one another and towards evildoers as well as towards evil itself.

Since genocide in many respects is the quintessential evil—it's commission involves murder, lying, stealing, the breaking of implicit promises, self-deception and the inversion of any and all systems of generally acknowledged

morality—I shall use the Nazi genocide to give examples, to grapple with the concept of forgiveness and to examine whether one can learn something which might go a few steps towards preventing these recurrent outrages in the future.

Truly forgetting a horrible injustice experienced by oneself or a terrible wrong done to one is, in my view, not truly possible. Beyond this, forgetting such an injustice (even if that were possible) would be ethically problematic: it would leave the perpetrator off the hook and thus be a stimulus towards further injustice and it would tend to make a disciplined examination of what constitutes injustice (and why a particular wrong can be classified as such) more difficult. When we evade facing an injustice and close our eyes to it we help it along—evil not only is not mainly the fault of evildoers but also and perhaps more importantly the fault of bystanders who are "good" people but allow it to happen. And forgetting about evil done to one is tantamount to standing by and allowing it to happen to someone else.

Key events in our lives may be psychologically suppressed but they are not really forgotten. They smoulder on in our subconscious mind and will, even if only tacitly, interfere with our relations with ourselves as well as our relations with others. I am here speaking about forgiving individuals not about "forgiving" a nation or society—forgiving the Germans for the Holocaust (or the Americans for slavery and the treatment of minorities) is, if we believe culpability to be personal and not collective, an incoherent concept. Not that individuals who are not personally culpable or societies can escape responsibility for ameliorating a wrong from which many continue to suffer and others continue to profit—but that is hardly the same as being culpable².

My starting point is the highly interesting discussion between David Thomasma and David Weisstub. It gives a superb introduction to the theme –a theme which is part of all great literature³. This theme (found in Sophocles, Tolstoy, Dostojewski, Goethe, Lessing, Dickens, Primo Levi, Viktor Frankl and Elie Wiesel to name but a few) is the theme of Simon Wiesenthal's *Sunflower* and of the commentaries which follow that brief, personal and tragic story⁴.

Since we are fallible and prone to error –since in all of us there is the potential for the crassest evil and the greatest good– how to deal with those who, like us, err is a theme which has engaged mankind and will, as long as this potential remains, engage it.

To forgive (whether we speak English, German or French) has within it the notion of "giving away". In a sense, to forgive is to give away some of our self-deception and to acknowledge that we too recognize our ability to fail or err. To forgive is, in part, to acknowledge our fallibility and to give away something of our armor of virtue. In that sense, it is difficult to envision how within the Christian tradition God, who is infallible and without potential or actual error, could forgive. Perhaps one could understand God forgiving more readily within the Jewish tradition that defines the relationship as one of covenant in which each calls the other to account. Central to the theme of forgiveness is that the perpetrator had a choice –he or she could have chosen not to do the evil they in fact did.

I want to be clear at the outset –I am speaking here about forgiving the evildoer, not forgiving the evil itself. Further, I do not believe that not forgiving necessarily denotes hatred nor that forgiveness and reconciliation are one and the same thing or even that they are necessarily connected. I may forgive someone and set aside (as we shall see a concept which I think is easier to come to terms with) and yet wish to have no further contact with that person –perhaps because doing so is too distasteful or painful, perhaps because “forgiveness” was only partial. On the other hand, one can envision a situation in which forgiveness for a deed is emotionally impossible for the person asked to forgive but continuing to associate with the (now reformed) evil-doer is not. I am, furthermore, not concerned with “forgiveness” as something which is done so as to allow the person

forgiving to "feel good" or with forgiveness so as to allow the person forgiving to attain inner peace. Important as that may be, it does not seem to me to be what we are talking about – forgiving under such circumstances is done for self-serving purposes and makes the perpetrator into merely a means towards the forgivers ends.

The everyday use of the term “forgiveness” is a social lubricant –a form of politeness: "Pardon" as I inadvertently step on your toes or interrupt your musings. Such a statement implies that we are sorry for the other's pain but not that we accept guilt in a moral sense. If the person instead of saying, "never mind" began to rail or strike at us, we would feel justified in feeling morally outraged. In this examination, we are talking about forgiving the perpetrators of a grievous wrong –a wrong like that committed by Nazi discrimination (and subsequent murder) of the Jews, a wrong as was committed in Rwanda, a wrong such as slavery or racial separatism in the United States or what is happening in Yugoslavia today. Some have (especially within religious circles) argued for an obligation or even a duty to forgive. Such an argument is invariably grounded in some particular religious belief. But forgiving is not only rationally but predominantly emotively driven. One can no more command one to forgive than one can command one not to "lust"⁵. Christ's statement: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," is another way in which forgiveness seems out of place. Persons who truly "did not know what they were doing" cannot have moral blame attached to them. Likewise it is, in my view, empty to forgive someone for something done to another. I can only forgive that which was done to me, not that which was done to another: for that reason God, in Judaic tradition, cannot forgive a murderer. To forgive someone a wrong done to another is in a sense stealing another's prerogative: to forgive. Forgiving, if it is to have any sense, is the prerogative of the one hurt.

Before we can address the question of "forgiving" we need to grapple with another concept –that of responsibility. It is incoherent to even think about forgiving someone who was not responsible for what they did. Responsibility can be attached to a given role –that of teacher, parent, physician or plumber; but responsibility can also be general– that is, it is a responsibility all humans qua humans have. Clearly there are negative duties (Kant would call them perfect duties and claim that they are absolute) such as

refraining from killing, robbing or lying to others as well as positive (Kant would term these imperfect duties) duties of mutual helpfulness⁶. Nor is responsibility an all or nothing thing –responsibility can be lessened or aggravated by a number of factors⁷. Furthermore, responsibility does not only attach to persons who actually perform an evil act but likewise (and perhaps more importantly) to those who could have –but failed to– ameliorate or prevent it. To be able to forgive someone must mean that those we think about forgiving were responsible for what they did –that is, that they could have acted otherwise, knew what they were doing and deliberately acted as they did. Since responsibility can have many meanings (I am causally responsible, I have a role responsibility, I have a responsibility common to all humans and so forth) culpability may be the better term.

To be responsible or culpable for something means that one has, in fact, done that something. It does not denote, as I shall argue that we all have, merely the capacity to do it –indeed if we did not have the capacity to act within us our acting would be impossible and refraining from acting meaningless. I shall claim that all of us (all societies, individuals and nations) harbour within us not only the capacity for great generosity but also for the doing of incredible acts of evil. It is the structure and circumstances of communal association that can foster the one and suppress the other.

I return to the holocaust because it is such a stark and excellent example of what we are talking about. We must, I think, refrain from looking at the holocaust as a sudden or isolated event –evil rarely is and evil deeds rarely are. The Nazi period and its atrocities did not start with the holocaust: that, after all, was only the very apex of the pyramid. Likewise, if we reduce the holocaust and the events leading up to it to a peculiar German thing perpetrated against these odd people the Jews and the Gypsies, we will have missed the point. If nations and those responsible for educating the young, forget about the Nazi period or reduce it and its evil to the holocaust, they will –as they already show signs of doing– be doomed to repeat it. We therefore need to ask what the forgiving of people who were implicated in such atrocities or who watched them occur without any attempt to ameliorate them might mean.

The Nazi holocaust went in small steps –in and of themselves each step not terribly much worse than the step before. One acquiesced with or averted one's eyes from evil carried by the momentum of previous acquiescence or previous deliberate lookings away⁸. The steps (each of which consists itself of a set of smaller ones to implement) can be divided into 1) thou shalt not live as one of us (social ostracism and the later Nürnberg laws); 2) thou shall not live among us (ghettoization) and last 3) thou shall not live (extermination). It starts with social ostracism, with the recognition, fear, dislike and ultimately hatred of "otherness"⁹. These steps started, were nurtured and were allowed to progress in a soil which in Germany was well prepared by the Catholic and Protestant churches' pervasive and often strident anti-Semitism. From that initial step and in such a soil the other steps –depending upon many circumstances– may, and in the case of Germany did, follow. I shall argue that only a well functioning democratic society that recognizes the equal rights of all its members and takes on a responsibility for protecting the weak can –if circumstances are right– prevent that progression.

This seems far afield from the topic of forgiveness –except that the Nazi period with its slow progression from so-called "minor" to grotesque evil, with its perpetrators, bystanders, helpers and rescuers makes such a superb model for acts which must certainly evoke a response and might evoke forgiveness. At this point I want to examine the concept of forgiveness a bit more closely, briefly return to the holocaust after that and then attempt to draw some conclusions.

To be able to elicit the notion of forgiveness rationally I believe that several conditions must be met: 1) the act must be morally blameworthy; 2) the act must be perpetrated against the person who is supposed to be forgiving; 3) the act must be done with the full knowledge of the actor that he/she is acting and that this action is morally wrong –it cannot be a morally acceptable one nor one inadvertently or unknowingly done; 4) blameworthiness for the act must be acknowledged by the actor; and 5) a desire never to repeat such an act must be demonstrated over time and in the ways appropriate to what was done. Unless these criteria are met, forgiveness in any sense becomes either incoherent or perhaps (as I shall argue) even ethically problematic.

Let us examine and briefly analyze several possible statements which ask for forgiveness:

1) "I know that I intentionally hurt you very badly ten years ago. I have taken some satisfaction in having done so then and would gladly do the same thing now. Forgive me."

It seems that to forgive me under such circumstances is not only incoherent but is morally offensive because doing so condones a morally unacceptable act. To say "never mind" when a great wrong has been committed is to trivialize the wrong.

2) "I know that I intentionally hurt you very badly ten years ago. I have not thought of it since and really don't know whether I would or would not want to do so again. I just want you to forgive me."

To forgive under such circumstances would allow a morally reprehensible act to be viewed indifferently rather than positively.

3) "I know that I intentionally hurt you very badly ten years ago. Since that time a friend of yours has become my supervisor and he will not let me forget what I did. Since what I did to you has made my life difficult, I am really sorry to have done it. Forgive me."

Here we have a person who is indeed sorry –but sorry not for what is recognized as having been a morally unacceptable act but for the sheer consequences that act has had on the perpetrators (and not the victims) life.

4) "I know that I intentionally hurt you very badly ten years ago. Since then I have recognized how very terrible that was. I have thought about it a great deal, tried in every way not to hurt others since and honestly believe that I would no longer be capable of doing such a thing today. Can you forgive me?"

Here, and for the first time, the notion of "forgiveness" takes on more than an incoherent, a superficial or a politically or religiously correct meaning. It is here that the concept begins to take on shape. But note –the person here asking forgiveness has psycho-physiological continuity with the original perpetrator. But he/she has fundamentally changed and in that sense is no longer the person who committed the act. To forgive such a person

is, perhaps, empty –what can it possibly mean to forgive someone who is fundamentally changed? To forgive someone is to recognize his or her identity with the one to be forgiven. That which has been is the necessary condition of that which is but that which is, while derived from that which was, is not identical with it. Is it meaningful to forgive a sixty-year old highly honourable friend of yours for having stolen a toy from you at the age of three or even at the age of twenty? To turn the case around: would it seem morally acceptable, would it make sense, to avenge yourself now on your sixty-year old friend? Should he perhaps be spanked, put in a corner or jailed? In a sense it is what the statute of limitations is all about.

What makes forgiveness, if it is to be conceived, possible? There are several I think necessary conditions: 1) the recognition and acknowledgment by the evildoer that the act in itself was evil; 2) the fact that this recognition has truly evoked repentance; and, and perhaps above all, 3) that consequent action demonstrating not only that "being sorry" but that "having changed" has occurred. The question then is: under circumstances in which the evil nature of a prior act is recognized and regretted and in which the actor has done what he or she could to prevent a repetition, is forgiveness –if it ever is– possible?

What do we say when we say we "forgive?" We may say that we recognize that the act, even if it hurt you, was not morally wrong –but then, there is nothing to forgive. We may recognize that the person doing the act at the time that he was doing it was not acting badly –perhaps because he did not understand (because he did not know what he was doing) or because he did not realize the consequences of what he was doing. We may have been hurt but it was not done with malice aforethought: the actor, then, was not really morally culpable. When we say that we forgive an evil act without true repentance and without a genuine attempt to "make good" on the part of the actor we trivialize or even perhaps condone evil –and in so doing perpetuate it. It is true that in Wiesenthal's *Sunflower* all of us, regardless of how ethical we believe ourselves to be, could have been in Wiesenthal's as well as in the SS man's shoes. But we were not and the SS man was –ours is a latent capacity; his was an act carried into horrible reality. And that critical difference makes the one culpable (one cannot be responsible for having an innate capacity

only for –if one could otherwise– acting on it) and the other not.

What can it mean to "forgive" someone for a horrendous act committed against us, who has repented and who has tried to "make good" again what he/she has done or, if that is not possible, who has opposed such evil wherever and however it rears its ugly head? After all, is it possible to hold something against a person done before they (fundamentally) changed? When we say that "we forgive" such a person we recognize the evil of both actor and action, recognize as well that the act, however looked at, continues to be evil but also recognize that the actor him/herself has fundamentally changed. Therefore, while continuing to despise the act and while continuing to despise the sort of person the actor was when he committed the act, we begin to recognize that from the one who did it a new person has emerged. To revenge oneself on such "new" persons for that which the "old" person did seems as incoherent as to forgive him. To set something aside does not mean to forget it and it does not mean to forgive in the conventional sense: it is a recognition by both the perpetrator and the victim that the act was morally unacceptable and that the actor freely did it; it is uniting the perpetrator and the victim in a common loathing for this moral evil and a united front in opposing its future occurrence. Furthermore, it is a realization by the victim that the shoe could have been on the other foot.

"Setting aside" rather than "forgiving" seems to be a better way of expressing what I have in mind. The term and the concept forgiving carry an inevitable religious and cultural baggage. It has a different meaning to persons of diverse religious backgrounds or cultures and, therefore, makes any discussion of the subject among such persons difficult. The term "setting aside" does not have this disadvantage. Furthermore: in common parlance the concept of forgiveness carries within it the seed of forgetting, of rendering something as though it had never been. Setting aside, on the other hand, does not denote that what has happened is nullified. Rather it indicates that what has happened is no longer central to a given relationship or to the treatment of the person who has committed the evil. But setting aside also indicates that what has happened continues to be background information in judging the future actions of the perpetrator. The slate is not wiped clean; it is merely put aside and a new slate used. If

perpetrators continue to show –by word and especially by deed– that they have fundamentally changed, their past stays hidden; if, however, they again are seen to move in the direction of evil, their past will be used to judge their present deeds. In some cultures there is the concept of being "vorbestraft" –one has committed a crime but is, because of circumstances, allowed to go free. When, however, another crime is committed the past as well as the present crime again become relevant to judgement.

The motive for forgiving (or for setting aside) has both rational and emotional components. When either reason or emotion is lacking (when our mouthing "forgiveness" has merely emotional or merely rational roots) the meaning is distorted and rendered incoherent. The very reason we bother to look at the concept to start with as well as the way we look at the concept itself, cannot be reduced purely to reason: our culture, our childhood beliefs and understandings, our past experiences and indeed our entire world-view leads us to see concepts in different ways.

To forgive or to set aside means to see oneself in the other's shoes, to acknowledge that we too are fallible and are, if circumstances are right, capable of committing great evil. However, we also know that we have control over our actions even when –as is the case– we may be able to do little to control our immediate desires and impulses. Furthermore, we also know that as we resist the impulse to do evil our character is molded, our virtues are strengthened and our vices attenuated.

Acting driven by emotion and uncontrolled by reason can be most dangerous, acting merely on cold-blooded reason on the other hand, without allowing our emotions to enter in, can result in cruel and heartless acts. Rousseau when he speaks of the early condition of man or "the state of nature" gives us some insight into the dynamics of reason and emotion. In the original condition (or state of nature) humans were not out to hurt or injure one another. Humans were driven by two impulses: self-regard and a primitive sense of compassion or pity. Self-regard led to the drive for self-preservation; compassion to a sense of unease in being confronted with the suffering of another and hence an impulse to offer help. One modified the other. Morality was a social construct with the expression of these inborn human traits

dependent upon the type of society in which persons were educated, nurtured and existed¹⁰. The sense of compassion appeals to our emotions, the sense of self-preservation is both rationally based and (as when we fear for our lives) translated into emotion.

What is important here is that in dealing with one another we can deal either with persons we know (or who are at least known to us) or with those we have no direct or indirect knowledge of. The former (also called "identified lives") consist of friends, enemies, acquaintances or those we have heard about from others we directly know. They appeal primarily to our emotions—their joy or suffering touches us and we may, if we only listened to the promptings of our feelings, deal inappropriately with them. On the other hand, persons we do not know (also called "unidentified" or "statistical" lives) are not apt to engage our emotions but instead to appeal to our reasons. Decisions made about such persons may be cold and uncaring. Neither reason nor emotion (compassion in this case) can help us to reach a truly satisfactory answer.

The point of "otherness" is important. As the Nazi terror advanced, trying to place the Jew as an exotic stranger was one of the pillars of propaganda. In *Mein Kampf* Hitler already describes that the "danger of the Jew" did not "come home to him" until he saw Eastern Jews on the streets of Vienna. They often wore eastern dress with Kaftans, side-locks and a different sort of hat: and Hitler says that he first asked himself "is this a Jew?" and then changed the question to "is this a German?" Only then his latent and undoubtedly always present anti-Semitism combined with this fear of the stranger to start Hitler's rabid anti-Semitism that ended in tragedy¹¹. What was done was to change identified to at least less identified lives. The issue can again be seen as the events leading to the holocaust progressed. In newspapers, magazines and children's books pictures of Jews showed them as strangers (and as unsavory strangers) —persons with whom one could not identify. Later as the extermination program proceeded perpetrators had relatively little difficulty in brutally and cold-bloodedly killing men, women and children who demonstrated this "otherness" (who became unidentified) but had considerable hesitation in dealing with Jews from their own cities who they either knew or who "looked and acted differently"¹². Beyond this —when by happenstance members of the police battalion being studied actually knew and

identified the persons to be killed there was greater hesitation and even, at times, refusal to participate¹³. The deliberate and near-complete depersonalization in the extermination centers (where persons were stripped of clothing, all hair shaved away and were they —if they were "allowed" to undergo destruction by being worked to death (*Vernichtung durch Arbeit*) instead of being gassed at the outset— they became a number and were stripped of their name) was a like psychological attempt. It is at least interesting that a man like Stangl (the commander of Sobibor who rose to this position from the notorious T-4 Program) avoided seeing prisoners until after they had been stripped, shaved and depersonalized and then observed "merely a herd" being driven into the gas chambers¹⁴. Making persons into strangers and depersonalization, in many ways was aimed at making the identifiable or indeed identified into a mass of unidentifiable persons who could then be dealt with in a dispassionate manner.

When we deal with "identified" lives which appeal to our emotions —especially when they strongly appeal to our emotions as is the case when we have been grievously wronged or very much helped— we are apt to deal with them unjustly: we may take vengeance on our enemies when vengeance is not called for (if it ever is) on the one hand and we may unduly advantage our friends. Or, because they appeal to some positive emotion (because, for example, we feel sorry for the old Nazi before us) we may forgive at a time when the criteria making forgiveness possible have not been met. It is here that we need to temper emotion with reason — something I have called "rational compassion" in prior works. When, on the other hand, we deal with so-called "unidentified" lives and do so in a purely rational manner we may easily deal with them in a manner that is callous and inhumane. Here we need to temper reason with emotion — something I have termed "rational compassion"¹⁵.

How can we do this? Central to our ability to temper compassion with reason or to season reason with compassion are two other often-neglected traits: curiosity and imagination. I have argued elsewhere that these traits are, in fact, prior to either reason or compassion. To recognize something (to know it again) when confronted with a sensory perception (say a movement in the corner of our eye) requires a stimulation of our curiosity —the question "what is it". To go beyond mere perception is to

engage our imagination and with it to evoke past experience. Curiosity prompts our initial looking, imagination offers a variety of hypothesis, curiosity prompts us to explore these further and reason engages to sort these out. These are not linear events which follow one another in lock step fashion – rather they are interacting and interwoven¹⁶.

When we are asked to forgive a perpetrator (or to set aside what they did) we need to walk a few steps in their direction. We need to understand not only what they did but also who they are, where they are coming from and what motivated them. In other words: we must be curious about what it would be like to be in their shoes, to be driven by a similar social milieu or a set of (even if erroneous) beliefs. To understand is not to condone; to understand may well be to loath more. But whether our stepping into their shoes makes us see their guilt as greater or smaller – it is curiosity and imagination that has allowed us to do so.

On the other hand, when we must judge an unknown perpetrator or group of perpetrators (especially one remote to us –say Nero or the human sacrifice of the Incas) we must come to realize that this essentially unknown life is not unknown but merely unknown to us: it was (or in many cases is, as when we deal with "those on welfare") very much identified by others. To understand what such a person might be, we once again need to step into their shoes and in the case of assessing blame into the shoes of the victims. Curiosity and imagination here once again play a crucial role in allowing us to do this. We come to realize that we might well have been in either Wiesenthal's or the SS man's shoes.

Ultimately, we must ask: what can we learn? First of all, we cannot and must not dwell on but on the other hand cannot and must not forget an evil done to us or to others. While the individuals affected cannot and will not forget, those not affected frequently do. They forget or they reduce events like the holocaust to extermination and forget its antecedents. Evil, injustice and atrocities often start small. When Germans today claim that "no one knew" one needs to ask what that something they knew nothing about was: were they unaware of the boycotts (1933), did they not see the persecution on the streets (which went on from 1933 on), were they unaware of Kristallnacht (1938), did they not know of their local concentration camp

(if one counts the Nebenlager or auxiliary camps, there were thousands –first established immediately after the take-over in 1933– by the time Hitler's Reich ended), did they not know of the Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog) Program (1940's), a program instituted to strike terror into every heart and one in which secrecy would have been counter-productive? The holocaust was the apex but it had a beginning. The beginnings are small, they come (as T.S. Elliott said about something else) in coffee spoons, not in quart measures.

Secondly we must acknowledge that events such as the holocaust are not unique –they happened before, they happen now and unless we learn our lesson and above all act upon it they may well happen again. The antecedents are not lacking today: the hatred and the greed are here and our own national middle-class and self-serving blindness is well entrenched. If justice is to play a meaningful role in our lives, if we are to truly remember, and because we remember, learn, then we must oppose all evil: evil in ourselves, evil in our nation and evil in our world. Such a task is a formidable one. It is a task we cannot accomplish alone but it is a task that we can accomplish together over time. It is a task that we must –everyone in our own way– start. It is the only way of controlling and perhaps banishing the lurking SS man in all of us. Mouthing empty words of forgiveness -which make us feel good and possibly make the perpetrator feel smug- is a form of sentimentality that can be injurious to the job of prevention. Forgiveness (or setting aside) can be seen as a symbol for our own fallibility. Symbols are the epiphenomena of a reality for which they stand. When, however, we begin to value the symbol more than the reality (when we value the act of forgiveness because it makes us or the perpetrator feel good more than we do the necessary conditions which alone make meaningful forgiving possible) we have changed sentiment into sentimentality, abandoned reason and fled into the arms of evil.

Thirdly we must learn (and perhaps this is the most important lesson) that our only hope of preventing such tragedies in the future is to create, maintain and foster a society in which all are given an equal voice and in which the strong recognize and take on a special task of protecting the weak. A truly democratic society (a society which is more than merely politically democratic) of prosperous individuals who recognize their necessary dependence on each

other and on their community will not allow such events to start, let alone to continue. We are far from having such a society –a nation in which many are hungry, in which a minimum wage does not provide one with an above poverty-level income, in which health care and full education are denied to many and in which a pernicious individualism has been allowed to run rampant is not a society in which any of us are safe. Political democracy, as John Dewey has pointed out long ago, is meaningless and can easily degenerate into tyranny unless certain necessary preconditions are satisfied. These preconditions are personal democracy (in which persons are willing to respectfully listen to differing opinions and arguments and engage with them; economic (Dewey calls it industrial) democracy –in which none are allowed to go without basic necessities and in which the gap between the least and the highest earners is not enormous; and educational democracy– in which all have equal access to full education¹⁷. To create a democracy means to enfranchise the disenfranchised, to educate the uneducated, to shore up the weak and to protect those so weak that they cannot speak for themselves. Only when such conditions are approximated and to the extent that they are can we hope to prevent such recurrent and repetitive disasters. To forgive evil when evil continues about us unchecked may satisfy one's ego and tickle one's sentimentality –but it does nothing to ameliorate existing or prevent future evil. A political democracy without these three pre-conditions is a dangerous sham and easily becomes the plaything of the powerful who offer the possibility of choosing but fail to give us a real choice.

This paper might well end with the problem of choice –the story of Kayin (Cain) in the Old

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¹ Dr. Alan Cribb of King's College suggested this quotation to me.

² The difference between personal culpability for an act and responsibility (societal and personal) for working to right a wrong in which one had no part but from which one –whether one wishes to or not–profits is discussed in Loewy, E.H., *Freedom and Community: the ethics of interdependence*. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1993, 215-224.

³ Thomasma, D.C. and Weisstub D.N., "Forgiving and Forgetting: A post-holocaust dialogue on the possibility of healing". *Cambridge Quarterly Health Ethics*. 9, 4, (Fall 2000), 542-561.

Testament. In that lovely tale God is said to have said to Kayin: "... if you intend good, bear it aloft (also translatable as 'there is forgiveness' or 'there is uplift'), but if you do not intend good, at the entrance is sin (ignorance), a crouching demon, toward you his lust: but you can ('timshel') rule over him". In the King James Version the word Timshel is translated as "thou shalt rule over it"; in the American Standard "do thou rule over it": the one is a promise, the other a command. The Hebrew word, however, I am told properly translates as "thou mayest rule over it" or in the most recent translation as "and yet you can be its master". That latter is a possibility open to us –we may choose to rule over evil. But we cannot rule over it if either we fail to recognize its presence in all of us or if we forgive the actions originating in that evil all too readily.

There is a sense in which, perhaps, we can say: "Because of what you have become, I can set aside the person you once were. You and I now both hate what that old person once did and we both in fact would be morally outraged to see another do the same thing today. So in that sense, we both are angry at the old you and in that sense are both morally outraged by the evil done. We can both recognize the evil done, even if only as a memory, set it aside and pursue our lives together." And perhaps there is also a sense in which we can say: "without that act of evil you would not have become the person you are; without that subsequent repentance, moral outrage and effort to remedy and extinguish such evil, you would not be who you are today." And in that sense we can celebrate with one another.

⁴ Simon Wiesenthal in his *The Sunflower* (New York, NY, Schocken Books, 2nd ed., 1997) relates a personal story. As a young engineer in a Nazi concentration camp he was led to the bed-side of a dying SS soldier who wanted to speak to "a Jew" so as to ask his forgiveness for atrocious acts he had committed. Wiesenthal listened to him for several hours but ultimately was unable to forgive him

⁵ The biblical commandment that directs us (in most translations) not to "lust after our neighbours wife" has always seemed incoherent to me. I may be commanded not to make advances to her but I cannot be commanded not to have certain feelings.

⁶ This is not the place to discuss the whole notion of positive and negative duties nor to discuss Kantian ethics. Suffice it to say that negative duties to Kant

are duties which we can always discharge and which (according to Kant—a serious problem with accepting strict Kantian ethics) never conflict either internally or with one another. See: Kant, I., "Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten", in Weischedl, Wilhelm (ed.), *Immanuel Kant Werkausgabe VII*. Frankfurt a/M, Deutschland: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989 (or one of several excellent translations such as the one by Lewis White Beck).

⁷ One of the finest discussions of what it means to be responsible and how one can assess degrees of responsibility can be found in Jones, D.H., *Moral Responsibility in the Holocaust: a study in the ethics of character*. Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999.

⁸ One of the best descriptions of this incremental process can be found in the interview with a German academic who found himself trapped by his past acquiescence. Vid. Mayer, M., *The thought they were free: the Germans 1933-1945*. Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1955, 166-173.

⁹ This point is especially well made in the author's preface to *Survival in Auschwitz*. See: Levi, P., *Survival in Auschwitz* (transl. Stuart Woolf). New York, NY, Collier Books, 1960, 9. It is worth quoting in part: "many people—many nations— can find themselves holding, more or less wittingly, that 'every stranger is an enemy'. For the most part this conviction lies deep down, like some latent infection; it betrays itself only in random, disconnected acts and does not lie at the base of a system of reason. But when this does come about, when the unspoken dogma becomes the major premiss in a syllogism, then at the end of the chain there in the Lager."

¹⁰ Hitler, A., *Mein Kampf*. Berlin, Druck Deutscher Verlag, 1936.

¹¹ Rousseau's work is important for my argument. Vid. Rousseau, J.J., "Du Contrat Social" and "Discours sur l'origine et les Fondements de l'inegalite parmi des Hommes", in *J.J. Rousseau Oeuvres Complete*, Paris, France, Editions du Seuil, 1997 or the excellent translation by G.D.H. Cole: *The Social Contract and the Discourses*. New York, NY, Everyman's Library, 1973.

¹² This process of brutalization of what were formerly ordinary Hamburg police men is beautifully described in Browning, C.R., *Ordinary men: reserve police battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland*. New York, NY, HarperCollins, 1992. In this he shows how the members of this battalion soon learned to shoot and brutalize hundreds of Jewish men, women and children but how they became squeamish when the persons to be exterminated were Jews from their own home city.

¹³ There is an excellent section devoted to this point in Clendinnen, I., *Reading the Holocaust*. New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 114-133.

¹⁴ One of the best studies of a highly placed person within the extermination program can be found in a series of interviews with Franz Stangl. Vid. Sereny, G., *Into that Darkness: an examination of conscience*. New York, NY, McGraw Hill, 1974. In

an autobiography which reveals similar attitudes, Hoess (the commander of Auschwitz) reveals similar attitudes. Vid. Hoess, R., *Commandant of Auschwitz: the autobiography of Rudolph Hoess* (transl. C. Fitz Gibbon). London, UK, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1959.

¹⁵ I have developed the concept of rational compassion and compassionate rationality in several works. Vid. Loewy, E.H., *Moral Strangers, Moral Acquaintance and Moral Friends: connectedness and its conditions*. Albany, NY, State University of New York Press, 1997; and Loewy, E.H., "Compassion, Reason and Moral Judgements", *Cambridge Quarterly of Health Care Ethics*, 4 (1995), 466-475.

¹⁶ Loewy, E.H., "Curiosity, Imagination, Compassion, Science and Ethics: do curiosity and imagination serve a central function?", *Health Care Analysis*, 6 (1998) 286-294.

¹⁷ This notion of democracy as an ethical ideal and of political democracy being impossible without the preconditions noted is central to Dewey's work. See: Dewey, J., "Creative Democracy: the work before us", in Boydston, J.A. and Sharpe, A. (eds.), *John Dewey: the later works 1939-1941*. Carbondale, IL, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991.