The Politics of Mercy, Forgiveness and Love: A Nietzschean Appraisal

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Abstract
This paper critically examines Hannah Arendt's claim that we should conceive forgiveness as a specifically political or worldly virtue. According to Arendt, the virtue of forgiveness is necessary if we are to halt the reactive rancour that always threatens to destroy the space of politics. This paper suggests that in building her case for the politics of forgiveness Arendt confusingly intermingles three conceptual threads - mercy, Christian forgiveness and forgiveness driven by eros. Drawing on Nietzsche's scattered analyses of these threads, it argues that all three of these modalities of forgiveness jeopardize rather than restore the circuits of mutual recognition that are integral to democratic communities. Nietzsche shows that these shadings of unconditional or unilateral forgiveness do not necessarily arise from a will to live together, as Arendt assumes, but are anchored in and oriented by our need to console ourselves for the narcissistic wounding we inevitably suffer in the struggle for recognition.

Introduction
The recent emergence of the idea and practice of political reconciliation has brought renewed attention to the place of mercy, forgiveness and love in public life. Well before the birth of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions and sorry days, Hannah Arendt, in her magnum opus, The Human Condition, asserted that we should conceive forgiveness as a specifically political or worldly virtue. In a work that has since become part of the canon of modern political philosophy, she argues that the virtue of forgiveness is necessary if we are to halt the reactive rancour that always threatens to destroy the space of politics. Although she acknowledges the Christian roots of the idea of forgiveness, she nevertheless claims that it is an ‘authentic political experience’, which we can take ‘seriously in a strictly secular sense’ (Arendt, 1958: 238-239). Once we strip it of its theological aura, she believes we can legitimately defend forgiveness – along with promising – as one of the ontological conditions of political action (Arendt, 1958: 236-247).

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Arendt's conception of inter-human forgive-
ness has been marshalled in the context of understanding, interpreting and supporting what we have come to know as the politics of reconciliation and its restorative rather than retributive mode of justice (see for example, Schaap, 2003). For Arendt an ethics of forgiveness is vital to restoring a community of political equals after the condition of isonomy has been ruptured by acts of violence or disrespect. Without forgiveness as a circuit-breaker, she fears, political actors all too easily find themselves entrapped in an unending cycle of transgression and vengeance. On this basis, Arendt argues that forgiveness is necessary if we are to establish and maintain a political sphere that allows agents the paradoxical kind of non-sovereign freedom that she conceives as unique to this domain of human experience and action.

Arendt's claim that forgiveness is an ontological condition of action obscures the fact that this condition is only realised through individual victims deciding to turn the other cheek rather than pursue retributive justice. If we are to comprehend forgiveness, in other words, we need to more than simply attribute it to a reified “faculty of action”. We need to analyse how and why victims make the politically and ethically charged decision to forgo their legitimate claims for justice. By explaining forgiveness as an ontological condition, Arendt short-circuits an investigation of the psychological or affective grounds that explain why individuals might make this moral choice. Only by understanding these grounds, as I argue, can we begin to differentiate between particular modes of forgiveness and critically evaluate their political implications.

Yet despite – or perhaps because of – the political premium she places on this virtue, Arendt skirts the issue of the psychological motives that might underpin and explain our willingness to overcome resentment and forgive. On this score, she merely speculates in passing that the moral precept of forgiving arises ‘directly out of the will to live together’ (Arendt, 1958: 246). Nietzsche's interpretative art of suspicion targets precisely this kind of naïve, uncritical assumption that moral phenomena must originate from such noble values. Through what he calls the ‘chemistry’ of moral sensations, he attempts to expose how even ‘our most magnificent colours have been extracted from base, even despised materials’ (Nietzsche, 1995: §1). Among many other moral sensations, he applies this method of ‘chemical’ analysis to forgiveness.

If we bring together his reflections on forgiveness we discover that in each case, he

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2 Arendt is not alone in her desire to draw a shroud over the psychological underpinnings of forgiveness. Jacques Derrida, for example, goes so far as to claim that forgiveness belongs to a “zone of experience” that “remains inaccessible”. See Derrida (2001: 55).

3 At first glance, aphorisms like The Wanderer and His Shadow might seem to suggest that Nietzsche in fact shares a conception of forgiveness with Arendt:

> Whether we are able to forgive. – How can one forgive them at all, if they know what they do! One has nothing whatever to forgive – But does a man ever know completely what he does? And if this must always remain questionable, then men never have anything to forgive another and pardoning is for the most rational man a thing impossible ...

Nietzsche's point here, however, concerns the logical presuppositions of forgiveness. Far from endorsing forgiveness, he claims that it rests on untenable presuppositions about the human capacity for agency. His key point is that the concept of forgiveness can only apply to human affairs if we can attribute our injuries to responsible agents. We can only forgive those who we rightly believe are responsible for their actions. If, however, as Nietzsche clearly assumes, human beings are never fully responsible for their actions, then the idea of forgiveness is nonsensical. Forgiving is impossible for the rational man because there simply is no one to forgive, so to speak. Or to put Nietzsche's point another way, it is as irrational to speak of forgiving other human beings as it to say that we forgive an avalanche for sweeping us away. Contra Arendt, then, Nietzsche argues that, strictly speaking, if we accept Jesus' claim that “they know not what they do” (Luke 23:32-34), then the very idea of forgiveness is absurd. Nietzsche's inten-
claims that it is our wounded vanity we are trying to soothe when we abandon or check our resentment towards those whose actions have damaged our self-respect and made us painfully aware of our vulnerabilities and dependencies. Nietzsche is undoubtedly one of the great analysts of narcissism. ‘Nietzsche’ as Elliott Jurist points out, ‘demands that we take into account narcissism, not that we endorse it’ (Jurist, 2000: 220). It is this critical focus on narcissism that makes him such an acute thinker of forgiveness and revenge. For forgiveness, of course, comes into play precisely when others damage our narcissistic sense of self-sufficiency. If Nietzsche is right, our vanity or narcissism reaches its highest pitch, and we seek the most extreme remedies or therapeia when others wound us. Nietzsche makes this point in a little squib at Kant’s expense:

_The human ‘thing in itself’. _– The thing most vulnerable and yet most unconquerable is human vanity: indeed, its strength increases, and can in the end become giant, through being wounded (1991: 46).

Nietzsche assumes, to put his point in psychoanalytic terms, that we only ever modulate and transform, never abandon our wish to recover our absolutely self-sufficient narcissism. Vanity, he claims, is unconquerable. While he acknowledges that our entry into social life and moral relations might begin with a decentering of primary narcissism, he also recognises that this personal ‘Copernican revolution’, so to speak, is always accompanied by efforts to recoup our losses, often in and through the relations we forge with others (see Ure, 2005). Our incorrigible narcissism, he argues, leads us to seek out various consolations for the painful decentering of our personal universe. According to Nietzsche, whenever we are deeply wounded, we seek to reclaim a blissful state of imagined independence from uncontrollable others. This is significant, because Nietzsche claims that it is often a desire for one or another kind of narcissistic consolation, not a will to live together, that motivates our acts of forgiveness. In other words, for Nietzsche forgiveness is a therapy for narcissistic wounding. Or more precisely, he identifies what we might call unconditional or unilateral kinds of forgiveness – that is, forgiveness granted regardless of whether or not perpetrators repent or undergo any kind of moral transformation – as extreme therapies. They are extreme in the sense that through them, we make a wholesale retreat from the struggle for recognition into a state of (imagined) narcissistic self-sufficiency.

Nietzsche differentiates at least three motivational complexes that account for this kind of unconditional or unilateral willingness to relinquish retributive anger and resentment, each of which is oriented around our desire to console ourselves for the loss of our narcissistic self-sufficiency. If we systematise Nietzsche’s scattered comments, we can identify these three distinct complexes as mercy, forgiveness based on Christian agape, and forgiveness driven by erotic attachment. All three of these conceptual threads are present, indeed often confusingly intermingled in Arendt’s analysis; a fact is to deflate Christian forgiveness by way of this reductio ad absurdum. By the same logic, of course, he also suggests that vengeance and punishment are equally irrational. According to Nietzsche, at least in his middle period, once we have recognised the absurdity of forgiveness or punishment, what ought to take their place is a quasi-Stoic apatheia. Nietzsche, then, quotes Luke 23:32-34 not to endorse Christian forgiveness, as Arendt does, but to shows its absurdity and point to an alternative remedy for our wounds – Stoic ‘coolness’ (see 1991: 1, 34).

4 The relevant texts treated in this paper are _Genealogy of Morals_ I.10 & II.10, _The Wanderer & His Shadow_ 33, 34, _The Anti-Christ_ 30, 35; see also _Thus Spoke Zarathustra_, II.3 and _Ecce Homo_, ‘Why I Am So Wise’, 6.
testified to by the wildly conflicting interpretations her notion of forgiveness has generated. By explaining how overcoming resentment can serve as a means of securing some form of narcissistic consolation, Nietzsche enables us to draw clear analytic distinctions between these different modes of unilateral forgiveness.

More importantly, his explanation also gives us plausible grounds for scepticism regarding Arendt's claim that transcending justice in the name of forgiveness – or at least in the name of these unilateral modes of forgiveness – is essential to sustaining or restoring democratic political communities. Contra Arendt, Nietzsche argues that these kinds of unilateral forgiveness are personal therapies – 'a kind of hygiene' – that are neither based on, nor promote a will to live together (Nietzsche, 1969b: 6). As Jiwei Ci puts it, drawing directly on Nietzsche, 'forgiveness) may well promote the well-being of individuals by relieving them of the negative affects of resentment and yet may not necessarily promote the social cause of justice' (Ci, 2006: 188). As we shall see, Nietzsche shows how, through unilateral forgiveness, individuals seek to flee from the agon of recognition into imagined states of narcissistic self-sufficiency. They do so because it is the struggle for recognition that makes them vulnerable to being wounded by and resentful of others. If, as Arendt and others claim, the struggle for recognition is a central feature of democracy, then unilateral forgiveness, as a retreat from such struggle, is also a retreat from the relational conditions of democratic participation.5

We can see how Nietzsche throws a sidelight on Arendt's political hopes by unpacking in turn his analysis of mercy, Christian forgiveness, and forgiveness driven by eros. As we shall see, if he is correct, each of these shadings of 'forgiveness', which Arendt leans on at different points in her analysis, carries serious dangers for any politics concerned with sustaining democratic communities, or restoring them in the aftermath of civil conflict.

Mercy
Initially in The Wanderer and his Shadow (1879) and later in the Genealogy of Morals (1886), Nietzsche attempts to fathom mercy as one distinct mode of overcoming retributive anger and resentment. In origin and temper, as Nietzsche recognises, mercy is a Roman political virtue par excellence. Augustine highlights this point: ‘Did not Sallust praise the Romans for having chosen to forget injuries rather than punish the offender? Did not Cicero praise Caesar because he was wont to forget nothing but the wrongs done to him?’ (quoted in Shriver, 1995: 242). In glossing the political history of ideas and practices of pardoning and amnesty, Arendt suggests that the Roman principle of sparing the vanquished (parcere subiectis) is the earliest ‘rudimentary sign’ of Christianity's political discovery that forgiveness is ‘the necessary corrective for the inevitable damages resulting from action’ (Arendt, 1958: 239).

This is a puzzling claim, since the Roman principle does not involve releasing trespassers from wrongs, but sparing the vanquished complete annihilation. It can hardly be said, therefore, to be a portent of forgiveness. If there is any foreshadowing of Christian forgiveness in Roman antiquity, it lies not in the principle of parcere subiectis, but in the Roman Stoic concept of mercy. Arendt comes close to acknowledging this when she adds that we should also see ‘the right to commute the death sentence’, which is ‘probably also of Roman origin’, as a rudimentary sign of forgiveness.

5 On agonistic democracy as a struggle for recognition, see for example Mouffe (1999) and Acampora (2003).
In *On Mercy*, the *locus classicus* on this topic, Seneca identifies mercy with the right to commute the death sentence and with mitigation in sentencing more generally. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, that Arendt is better understood as claiming that the Stoic concept of mercy prefigures Christian forgiveness, rather than the principle of sparing the vanquished, which pertains to a conqueror’s relation to the conquered, not a victim’s relation to a perpetrator.

Indeed, some Arendt interpreters go so far as to claim that it is actually something akin to this Roman notion of mercy, rather than the Christian model of forgiveness, that she conceives of as the ontological condition of political action. This claim finds particular favour among those keen to identify Arendt’s notion of action with a Machiavellian or a (quasi-) Nietzschean sense of *virtù* or virtuosity (see Vila, 1992; Honig, 1993). Bonnie Honig, for example, silently edits out Arendt’s own identification of the Christian Gospels as the source of her understanding of forgiveness. She claims that Arendt in fact rejects ‘the moral practice’ of forgiveness (Honig, 1993: 86). Like Nietzsche, she argues, Arendt conceives Christian forgiveness as too ‘vengeful’ insofar as it enmeshes the perpetrator in a relationship of indebtedness to the victim (1993: 86). Despite Arendt’s explicit dependence on the Christian Gospels’ concept of forgiveness, then, Honig claims that it would be closer to the truth to say that Arendt relies on the notion of mercy that Nietzsche analyses in the *Genealogy of Morals*.

In fact, Honig explicitly identifies Arendt’s ethic with the kind of mercy exercised by the masters Nietzsche fantasises in the *Genealogy of Morals* (1.10). ‘Arendt’s theorisation of forgiveness’, as she puts it, ‘recalls not the imperatives of [Christian] moralists but the indifference of ... lords and their lordly practice of dismissing ... Indifferent to trespasses, they dismiss them without ceremony in what might be called a process of constant mutual release’ (1993: 86). This interpretation of Arendt as an advocate of the type of mercy exercised by sovereign, self-sufficient subjects has some merit insofar as she sometimes expresses significant reservations about using the concept of forgiveness because of its theological and emotional baggage. Rather than identifying the action of releasing as forgiveness she prefers to describe it as a ‘dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on’ (Arendt, 1958: 240). In Arendt’s sense of the term, dismissing amounts to releasing trespassers so that they may once again act, or exercise the power ‘to begin something new’, without requiring that they do penance or undergo a moral conversion (Arendt, 1958: 240). However, the capacity to dismiss injuries requires agents whose indifference to injury is so great that they can

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6 One might well think that it is perverse to describe forgiveness as “vengeful” on the grounds that it may require perpetrators of gross human rights violations to confess their guilt, repent and offer reparations. Honig’s case, which she takes to be distinctively Nietzschean, rests on the assertion that the notion of a morally responsible subject, a doer behind the deed, is a metaphysical fiction, the weak construct in order to disable the strong.

7 In her closing comments Honig belatedly recognises that this lordly shrug of indifference cannot achieve what Arendt desires, viz., the healing and reconstitution of relationships between equals. Lordly indifference to others is hardly the basis for establishing relationships of mutual recognition! For this reason, Honig is compelled to dramatically qualify, if not retract, her claim that Arendt’s celebrates Nietzsche’s lordly mercy. Arendt’s tribute to Nietzsche’s masters, she writes, is “cautious and not without reservations” (1993: 87), though since this claim lacks any textual basis, she cannot elaborate the exact nature of these reservations. Honig paints herself into a corner: having canvassed two kinds of virtues that might free political agents from being entrapped in the consequences of their own actions, (Christian) forgiveness and (Roman) mercy, and dismissed both on political grounds, the former as too vengeful, and the latter as too callous, she leaves both herself and Arendt with no exit routes.
slough off their resentments without ceremony – without conventional legal remedies or even the cathartic therapy of truth commissions.

Nietzsche's dissection of this kind of mercy demonstrates that it neither derives from a 'will to live together', nor serves to restore relationships of mutual recognition between citizens. In fact, as we shall see, he exposes mercy as a virtue that serves to restore an order of rank. For Nietzsche, mercy certainly illustrates one way of overcoming retributive anger, but it is not the kind of overcoming that can create the reciprocal, democratic political relations that form the core of Arendt's political vision. According to Nietzsche, if social institutions and individuals exercise mercy, they pay no heed to restoring trespassers to the status of equal citizens in the public sphere. Rather, he argues that mercy is a demonstration and reinforcement of a condition of sovereign invulnerability to injury.

Nietzsche identifies two insurmountable difficulties with the practice of mercy as a way of restoring mutual recognition and reciprocity between political actors. We can clarify his argument by distinguishing between mercy exercised by a third party and mercy in the context of dyadic relations. In the first case, he argues that when a third party, like a sovereign monarch or the judiciary, grant clemency to perpetrators, it does so at the expense of victims. In this context, mercy confronts us with the obvious problem that it rides roughshod over the demands of justice; it is, as Nietzsche says, 'beyond the law', or a kind of lawless exceptionalism that pays no heed to the right of victims to re-establish their equal standing through legal remedies and penalties (Nietzsche, 1969a: II.10). By exercising clemency monarchs and magistrates certainly demonstrate their own majesty and nobility, but they do not thereby make good the losses sustained by the victims. Mercy does not 'season justice', as Portia claims in The Merchant of Venice; it contravenes it (IV, 1, 197).

It is for this reason, as Nietzsche recognises, 'that no bench of judges may conscientiously practice mercy' if it aims to fulfill the principle of restoring equilibrium (Nietzsche, 1991: 2.2 §34). If the judiciary were to practice mercy, in other words, it must flout the right of victims to have any infringements of their status as free individuals acknowledged and to have this status restored through the imposition of penalties on their trespassers. In cases where third parties grant amnesty or pardon to perpetrators on behalf of victims, these victims have no means of recouping their losses. This is precisely the criticism often levelled at South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, on the basis of its decision to grant amnesty in exchange for full disclosure. By exercising mercy through its amnesty provision, the TRC unjustly places the burden of dealing with past violence on the victims rather than on those responsible for apartheid, by giving the former no choice but to accept their losses (see Nagy, 2002: 8-9).

In the second place, Nietzsche argues that, if we examine the significance of mercy from the perspective of individual agents who grant it to their trespassers, we will see that it is founded on a sovereignty (or better still, it is an attempt to establish such a state of sovereignty) that is profoundly at odds with mutual recognition. He takes aim at accounts of mercy like those found in Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, which assume that it is a reciprocal blessing:

The quality of mercy is not strained:/It droppeth as the gentle rain from

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8 Jeffrie Murphy develops a rigorous Kantian argument for conceiving justice and mercy as fundamentally incompatible moral principles (see Murphy and Hampton, 1988: 165-177).
heaven. Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest: / It blesses him that gives and him that takes (IV, I, 184-186).

Martha Nussbaum elaborates Shakespeare's gentle interpretation of mercy. Mercy, she maintains, is 'respect for others' that flows from 'a powerful and secure nature' able to 'waive the pleasure of retribution and 'overcome itself' in the direction of gentleness' (Nussbaum, 2001: 367).

In the context of dyadic relationships, Nietzsche, by contrast, argues that mercy is in fact only a blessing for those who grant it, not for those who receive it. If he is correct, we should not conceive mercy as an altruistic virtue, but as a virtue of pride, through which we restore ourselves to invulnerable self-sufficiency and by the same stroke cast out the offender from the circuits of mutual recognition. The fact that Augustine counts mercy as one of Caesar's virtues should already alert us to its potential dangers. 'Mercy' as Nietzsche explains '(is one of the) virtues of rulers' bearing the sense: 'I am sufficiently powerful to put up with this palpable sense of loss, this is proof of my power' (Nietzsche, 1991: §34).

Nietzsche conceives mercy, then, as a virtue through which rulers attempt to construct, or more truthfully perhaps, reconstruct a sense of their own sovereignty after it has suffered damage; they do so by dismissing perpetrators as impotent inferiors unable to inflict significant harm. Through the act of mercy, rulers remind those who attack them of their impotence, and in doing so, remind themselves of their own potency. The merciful ruler does not think of revenge "because", Nietzsche explains, he 'despises perpetrator(s) ... because as people he despises, they cannot accord him honour and consequently cannot take any honour from him either' (Nietzsche, 1991, 2.2 §33).

If Nietzsche is correct, the aim of mercy is not to establish a Stoic or proto-Kantian kingdom of ends, but quite the opposite: its aim and attractiveness consists in restoring an order of rank between the sovereign and the impotent, the honourable and the despised. Through mercy we soothe the injuries others inflict on our narcissistic self-sufficiency by denying them recognition as individuals on a par with ourselves; our sense of potency turns on treating them as impotent, even comic figures of ridicule. Far from treating their perpetrators with gentle benevolence, Nietzsche suggests that the merciful take renewed pleasure in themselves by dismissively laughing away the raging resentment of the impotent. Nietzsche memorably illustrates how mercy works as a balm to our narcissism by short-circuiting those networks of recognition and memory that makes us vulnerable to others:

To be incapable of taking one's enemies ... seriously very long – that is a sign of a strong, full nature in whom there is an excess of plastic power to form, to mold, to recuperate, and to forget (a good example in modern times is Mirabeau, who has no memory for insults and vile actions done to him and was unable to forgive simply because he – forgot). Such a man shakes off with a single shrug many worms that eat deep into others ... (Nietzsche, 1994: I.10)

We can see that Mirabeau's bravado in forgetting his enemies, which one suspects can

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9 Nussbaum argues that, in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche himself gives an eloquent defence of the Stoic notion of mercy and the vision of political community it carries – namely an early version of the Kantian kingdom of ends (see Nussbaum, 1994: 139-167). Whether Nussbaum is right to identify Nietzsche's ethics as a brand of Stoicism is beyond the scope of the current discussion; what is at stake here is whether Nietzsche shares her conception of mercy as a virtue of reciprocity.
only be false bravado – although Nietzsche seems oddly and uncharacteristically blind to this self-deception – is only possible because he transforms these enemies into “worms” who cannot get under his skin – or who do so only once before they are shaken off with, as Nietzsche emphasises, a single shrug. In other words, Mirabeau’s mercy turns on denying that how others perceive or act towards oneself can actively constitute one’s identity, or shape one’s emotional landscape. This retreat into an illusion of narcissistic self-sufficiency in the face of the perils of intersubjectivity may well work as a perverse kind of therapy, but its paranoid construction of a world divided between humans and worms does not, needless to say, restore trespassers to active, respected, equal citizens. Nor, we might add, does its flight from the risks associated with the agon of recognition count as a sign of strength, even, or especially, by Nietzsche’s own standards. In any case, mercy on his analysis is not the virtue Arendt requires, since rather than restoring mutual recognition – the foundation of democratic community – it reinforces an order of rank between the honourable and the despised.

Later in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche returns to the topic of mercy, and analyses it as a specifically political virtue. Here he underscores the view that mercy is premised on a flight from our dependency on recognition from others, one we try to achieve through repairing the breach in the order of rank that had hitherto secured us against our vulnerability and fragility before others:

> The ‘creditor’ always becomes more humane to the extent that he has grown richer; finally, how much injury he can endure without suffering from it becomes the actual measure of his wealth. It is not unthinkable that a society might attain such a consciousness of power that it could allow itself the noblest luxury possible to it – letting those who harm it go unpunished. ‘What are my parasites to me?’ it might say. ‘May they live and prosper: I am strong enough for that!’ ... This self-overcoming of justice: one knows the beautiful name it has given itself – mercy; it goes without saying that mercy remains the privilege of the most powerful man, or better, his – beyond the law (Nietzsche, 1969a: II.10)

Nietzsche assumes here that, through mercy, individuals isolate themselves from the travails of recognition by diminishing others to the status of non-subjects, ‘worms’ or ‘parasites’ who, as such, cannot deprive them of recognition or honour. This point is evident in the rhetorical question Nietzsche poses: ‘What are my parasites to me?’ [the merciful] might ask’. The answer obviously and chillingly is nothing. Nietzsche’s analysis of mercy as a flight into narcissistic self-sufficiency through the ‘abjection’ of others echoes the very first discourse on this topic in the Western canon, Seneca’s essay, *On Mercy*, which, is addressed to one of history’s greatest narcissists, the young Roman emperor, Nero. ‘Some you would be glad to spare, against others you would disdain to assert your rights, and you would forbear to touch them as you would to touch little insects which defile your hands when you crush them’ (Seneca, 1995: I.22). We might speculate that Seneca’s failure to cure Nero of his monstrous narcissism might not only have been due to this psychopathology, but also to the fact that mercy as a virtue of pride only served to further undermine Nero’s respect for others.

**Forgiveness and Christian Agape**

Perhaps it is such considerations as these that compelled Arendt to lean more heavily on the Christian gospel of forgiveness, rather than Roman mercy, in her search for a solution to cycles of violence and resentment. One of the questions left over from
Nietzsche's analysis of mercy is whether it is possible for us to become 'more humane' without needing to ascend to the lofty plane of absolute self-sufficiency, without a growing consciousness of power and wealth that ensures that we will not suffer from the injuries others inflict on us. Can we become more humane and overcome our resentments without needing to consign our trespassers to the realm of parasites, worms or little insects we disdain to crush? Derrida sees this as the fundamental question of forgiveness, since 'a forgiveness worthy of its name', as he puts it, 'would be a forgiveness without power ... without sovereignty' (Derrida, 2001: 59).

Arendt turns to the Christian Gospels in order to identify and defend a mode of forgiving without power or sovereignty.10 Contesting the claim, ancient and modern, that Christianity is an intense moral individualism concerned with 'the 'one thing needful' ... the absolute importance of eternal personal salvation', as Nietzsche puts it, she claims that the Jesus of Nazareth made significant political discoveries, none more so than his teachings of forgiveness (Nietzsche, 1982: §132). Arendt applauds Jesus for challenging the reigning theological orthodoxy that forgiveness is a divine prerogative in the name of his scandalous commitment to inter-human forgiveness (Arendt, 1958: 239). As she understands it, Jesus’ political revolution lay in discrediting the vertical, theological picture of divine forgiveness and replacing it with a horizontal, political conception that affirms forgiveness as a doorway through which members of fractured communities can come together and re-establish intra-communal harmony (Shriver, 1995: 38-45). Jesus’ political importance, she claims, lies in tipping the vertical axis of prayer for God's grace into the horizontal axis of inter-human forgiveness.

Although Arendt builds her case almost exclusively on the Gospels, she tries to distance her politics of forgiveness from its roots in love or agape.11 Despite her best efforts, however, what she calls the Christian assumption that "only love can forgive", with its embrace of loving one's enemies, remains entrenched in her position. After having built her entire analysis of forgiveness entirely on the relevant passages from the Christian Gospels, Arendt tries to back-pedal and distance herself from the claim that forgiveness turns on victims extending Christian love to perpetrators. She does so by claiming that forgiveness between citizens arises from respect rather than love. However, as James Bernauer suggests, Arendt's terminological shift does not establish a significant conceptual distinction between love and respect (Bernauer, 1987: 15). As Arendt describes them, love and respect are indistinguishable. Just as Christian love entails forgiving others because of who they are (or might become), 'respect' between citizens entails exactly the same thing: "forgiving ... what a person did, for the sake of the person" (Arendt, 1958: 243). In other words, what Arendt calls 'respect', functions in a manner identical to Christian love: it forgives others for what they have done because of who they are.12 At least tacitly, then, she assumes that Christian agape is necessary if we are to establish and maintain a political sphere that allows agents the para-

10 While Arendt and Derrida agree that a forgiveness worthy of its name precludes the sense of sovereignty or invulnerability that underpins and explains acts of mercy, they disagree over the limits of forgiveness. Derrida controversially claims that forgiveness ought to extend to all acts, whereas Arendt argues that some crimes against humanity – radical evils – are unforgivable. Michael Janover lucidly analyses this philosophical and ethical dispute (see Janover, 2005: 221-235).


12 Such is Arendt's failure to sustain this distinction between love and respect, that Julia Kristeva unwittingly overlooks it and assumes that, for Arendt, love alone is the source of forgiveness. "Hannah Arendt", she writes, "[believes] forgiveness is aimed at the person, and not the act ... By being aimed at someone and not something, forgiveness becomes an act of love" (Kristeva, 2001: 232).
doxical kind of non-sovereign freedom that she conceives as unique to this domain of human experience and action.

Yet Christianity’s loving forgiveness is fraught with dangers for the project of restoring a community of political equals, ruptured by acts of violence or disrespect. In his analysis of Christianity, Nietzsche suggests that its mode of loving forgiveness must cut against the Arendtian hope that it might be the key to restoring a vibrant public sphere of equal citizens engaged in contests over recognition and distinction. Nietzsche’s psychological dissection of primitive Christianity shows how its mode of forgiveness is part of a full-scale retreat from, rather than a restoration of the struggle for recognition.

In his treatment of primitive Christianity, Nietzsche suggests that its ethic of forgiveness is the exact reverse image of Roman mercy. If Caesar asks, ‘What are my parasites to me?’, the Christian asks “Who am I that I should resist my enemies?”. In other words, Nietzsche argues that, although both mercy and forgiveness soothe our narcissistic wounds, they do so in very different ways. On his analysis, then, both virtues enable us to avoid the traumatic emotional upheavals that arise in the struggle for recognition – anger, resentment, envy and so on. By exercising mercy or forgiveness, we avoid being eaten from within by these emotions that painfully register our unavoidable dependence on others. Through mercy we reclaim a sense of self-sufficiency by denying recognition to others; they become superfluous ‘worms’, whose attacks cannot damage our honour. Through forgiveness, by contrast, we remove ourselves from the possibility of further suffering by denying our own need for recognition; we become passive, unresisting objects yielding to others without condition or resentment. According to Nietzsche, the secret pleasure of this masochistic self-denial lies in allowing us to revert to a ‘blessed’ or painless state of repose, an absence of resistance to the painful stimulus that streams in from the external world.13 If mercy is premised on an ascent to a lofty plane of invulnerability, forgiveness is premised on a descent into the perverse pleasures of abject humility. Mercy is a virtue of pride, forgiveness of humility.

The difficulty Nietzsche confronts in his analysis of Christian agape and its love of enemies to the point of unconditional forgiveness, is analogous to this difficulty he has fathoming the high value we moderns (at least as represented by Rousseau and Schopenhauer) give to pity. According to Nietzsche, when we allow ourselves to become objects of pity, we also make ourselves objects of contempt (Nietzsche, 1991: 2.2 §50). Similarly, he believes that, in order to practise the Christian ethic of forgiveness we must engage in masochistic self-denial and a denial of our rights. ‘(Jesus) does not resist’, Nietzsche writes ‘he does not defend his rights, he takes no steps to avert the worst that can happen to him – more he provokes it ... Not to defend oneself, not to grow angry, not to make responsible ... not to resist the evil man – to love him ...’ (Nietzsche, 1968: §35).

Kantians too rail against Christian forgiveness as an irrational assault on our self-respect, but Nietzsche goes further by attempting to explain the origins and motives of a self-abasement that consists in loving precisely those who deny us recognition (see

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13 Freud claims that this is a recurrent response to narcissistic wounding: "(B)y being born we have made the step from an absolutely self-sufficient narcissism to the perception of a changing external world and the beginnings of the discovery of objects. And with this is associated the fact that we cannot endure the new state of things for long, that we periodically revert from it, in our sleep, to our former condition of absence of stimulation and avoidance of objects (Freud, 1989: 80)"
Murphy, 1988). While Christians forgive their persecutors ostensibly from ‘love’, according to Nietzsche, this love of one’s enemies itself is symptomatic of a desire to attain a state of repose beyond all struggle and resistance, including the struggle for recognition. If he is right, to love one’s enemies in the Christian way simply means that one has successfully abolished all resistance, all struggle to attain or reclaim due recognition from those who refuse it.

As Nietzsche learned from Schopenhauer, the price we must pay for seeking to soothe our narcissistic wounds by reverting to a state of willlessness is complete self-abasement and self-mortification. He understands the Christian love of one’s enemies as merely an element in a cure by self-mortification; it is the flipside of a complete absence of desire. One ‘loves’ one’s enemies, and forgives them their trespasses, in other words, so that one does not have to suffer the displeasure of engaging in the struggle for recognition. Here is how Nietzsche sums up primitive Christianity’s radical therapy, which consists in severing all of those emotional investments and orientations that would otherwise fuel acts of resistance to the harm others inflict on us when they refuse to recognise us as independent agents:

Instinctive exclusion of all aversion, all enmity ... consequence of an extreme capacity for suffering and irritation ... which already feels all resisting, all need for resistance, as an unbearable displeasure ... and knows blessedness (pleasure) only in no longer resisting anyone or anything, neither the evil or the evil-doer – love as the sole, as the last possibility of life (Nietzsche, 1968: §30).

If Nietzsche’s analysis is correct, then Arendt is mistaken to hold that Christian forgiveness is an interpersonal act animated by the desire to end the cycles of vengeance that prevent citizens engaging with one another in the public sphere; it is rather a moral standard drawn from a private relationship ‘between me and myself’ (Arendt, 1958: 237)\(^{14}\). On closer inspection, the Christian precept of forgiveness springs from the beggar’s dream of living in the world without suffering, without enduring the displeasure we incur through the struggle for recognition, rather than arising, as Arendt holds, ‘directly out of the will to live together’ (Arendt, 1958: 246). Contra Arendt, the Christian model of forgiveness is fundamentally anti-political: it urges us to console ourselves for our worldly humiliations by a full-scale retreat from political engagement, or the \textit{vita activa}. From this Christian perspective, politics, at least as Arendt understands it – as a space where we take pleasure in appearing before and competing with others for recognition – is a precisely what we need to abolish to attain a state of complete repose. In the context of Christianity, forgiving our trespassers is merely one means among others of seeking escape from the \textit{agon} of recognition.

\textbf{Forgiveness and Eros}

Forgiveness can spring from a love very different to Christian \textit{agape}: the ‘raging demon’, \textit{Eros} (Nietzsche, 1974: §14). Even if, as we have seen, Arendt implicitly anchors her ethic of forgiveness in Christian \textit{agape}, she also recognises that \textit{eros}, which she describes as a spell that enthrals lovers, is one of the most potent sources of forgiveness. Curiously, however, although both \textit{agape} and \textit{eros} are present in her discussion of the sources of forgiveness, she tends to run them together in her analysis, and

\(^{14}\) Avishai Margalit echoes this claim in his argument that forgiveness is a duty we owe to ourselves – one that stems from not wanting to carry the burden of poisonous feelings of resentment and the desire for revenge – and not a duty we owe to others (Margalit, 2002: 207)
in doing so, fails to make explicit the fact that they generate very different modalities of forgiveness. It is worth dwelling on these differences so that we can specify their political outcomes.

If, as Nietzsche suggests, Christian agape entails a total abolition of the will that relieves us of the possibility of resenting or resisting our enemies, eros allows us to overcome resentment and forgive another because, in doing so, we are indirectly paying homage to our own narcissistic ideal. As Nietzsche explains:

[The lover] will refrain from revenge in the not uncommon case that he loves the perpetrator: he will thus lose honour in the perpetrator's eyes, to be sure, and he will perhaps become less worthy of love in return. But to renounce even all claim to love in return is a sacrifice he is prepared to make if only he does not have to hurt the beloved being: this would mean hurting oneself more than any sacrifice hurts (Nietzsche, 1991: §33).

Arendt, similarly, acknowledges that when we forgive out of love for others, we do so because we are spellbound to the point that we are ‘unconcerned to the point of total unworldliness’ about their ‘failings and transgressions’ (Arendt, 1958, 242). We can understand Nietzsche's account of this self-abasing love that forgives others even though they harm us, in terms of what Freud calls narcissistic idealisation – that is, as the projection of our own unattained ego ideal into the loved object. In the case of such narcissistic idealisation, our submission to the beloved, which, as Arendt acknowledges, goes to the point of ‘being always willing to forgive him whatever he may have done’, is submission to our own highest self (Arendt, 1958: 243, emphasis added).

If, then, Christian agape takes us down the path of radical self-abnegation in order to escape narcissistic wounding, eros consoles us for this wounding by preserving our narcissistic perfection in the figure of the beloved into whom we have projected all our fantasies of wholeness, perfection and inviolability. When lovers forgive, they do so out of masochistic submission to the beloved who embodies their own long-abandoned narcissistic grandiosity.

This way of soothing our narcissistic wounds carries with it, if possible, even grimmer political consequences than Christian agape. For not only are those under the spell of eros prepared to abase or sacrifice themselves to the point of forgiving those who harm them, which also applies to the good Christian; they are also willing to forgive their narcissistic love object all the harm it does to others and to protect it from their vengeful attacks. If Christian agape leads to what Nietzsche sees as the tragic-comic idiocy of blessing our enemies, raging eros, enthralled by the image of its own perfection, is prepared to forgive the beloved object everything, including the worst crimes it commits against others. ‘Conscience’ as Freud explains this point, ‘has no application to anything that is done for the sake of the object, in the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime’ (Freud, 1989: 57). We see this eros in its political guise in individual and collective submission to a charismatic authority, into which we have projected our narcissistic perfection. Under the spell of this authority, we forgive it everything and protect it from all vengeance.

Conclusion

In summary, then, Nietzsche gives an account of three ways of overcoming resentment and retributive anger, each anchored in and oriented by our need to console ourselves for the narcissistic wounding we inevitably suffer in the struggle for recogni-
Contra Arendt’s claim that forgiveness can counter the risk of political action and restore the circuits of mutual recognition, Nietzsche’s analysis of these modalities of forgiveness shows that each in different ways works against the realisation of her vision of political action. Mercy reclaims a state of invulnerable sovereignty by banishing others from the game of recognition, and in doing so reinforces an order of rank between masters and slaves, the honourable and the despised. Christian agape defeats resentment only at the price of a radical denial of our own need for recognition; it leads to the abyss of self-abnegation and the collapse of any interest in worldly politics. Eros, finally, enables us to overcome retributive anger, but only for the sake of a love object for which, because it embodies our lost narcissistic perfection, we are willing to forgive everything, including the crimes it perpetrates against others.

Bibliography


