

ESF Exploratory Workshop

FORGIVENESS: POLITICAL AND PERSONAL

Dublin, 29 September – 1 October, 2010

Newman House, University College Dublin

Convened by Christopher Cowley, Maeve Cooke
and Joseph Cohen, University College Dublin

SCIENTIFIC REPORT



1. Executive summary

The workshop gathered together nineteen people from eight different ESF member countries to discuss forgiveness. The main disciplinary focus was philosophical, but there were also significant contributions from the perspectives of the social sciences, theology, literature and law. The main tasks were to define the concept of interpersonal forgiveness, to examine whether the practice of intuitively appropriate forgiveness was governed by relevant norms or conditions, and finally to compare interpersonal forgiveness with 'political' forgiveness, insofar as there is such a thing.

It was our belief that the concept of forgiveness, while apparently familiar to most people, contains a number of confusions and ambiguities, especially when spelled out in concrete interpersonal situations (such as those likely to be encountered within the three historical contexts above). We also believe that the word is over-used within the political discourse, and are unsure about the genuine meaning it could have when used by politicians or other civic leaders.

The interdisciplinary input was important. The philosophical discussion was greatly enriched by the application to real cases of forgiveness in the context of three historic European conflicts: Northern Ireland (two participants were from Belfast), Eastern Europe (two participants were from Prague and one from Budapest), and Germany after World War II (two participants were from Germany). The social scientists presented important empirical data and historical detail that corroborated or undermined many philosophical intuitions about the appropriateness of forgiving former perpetrators in the above contexts, once democracies had been restored.

The theologians expanded many of the philosophical points by examining the original theological meanings of forgiveness and related words such as repentance, penance, atonement, and the relation between human forgiveness and divine forgiveness. Finally, there were frequent comparisons between the moral and the legal aspects of forgiveness, both interpersonal and political.

Unfortunately a number of people had to cancel as the workshop neared. We had hoped to have Avishai Margalit from the University of Princeton, and Eveline Goodman-Thau of the Hermann Cohen Academy for Religion Science and Art, but neither was able to make it. Nevertheless the group of 19 participants worked well together, and the discussions were spirited.

2. Scientific content of the event

The workshop was divided into seven sessions, with an eighth session devoted to the following three items: (i) a presentation by the ESF Rapporteurs, (ii) a discussion of dissemination options, and (iii) an open discussion to recapitulate some of the dominant themes that had emerged from the previous seven sessions. Each session comprised a main presentation of 30-40 minutes, followed by a response of 15-20 minutes, followed by a discussion of 30-45 minutes. This division meant that seven participants were presenting main papers and seven were responding. The remaining participants were chairing sessions, and so everybody was formally involved in at least one session.

The main presenters prepared drafts of their presentations for circulation a month ahead of the workshop so that all participants could prepare, and especially the seven respondents. The role of the respondents was crucial to focus the ensuing discussion by highlighting problems in the main paper, and offering alternative solutions to those problems. In addition, a number of relevant past published papers were made available to the participants, especially papers written by the participants themselves.

Session 1. The first paper was given by Lucy Allais, a philosopher from the University of Sussex, UK, who spoke on 'Elective forgiveness'. The question of electivity is a real problem in any analysis of forgiveness. On the one hand, one is tempted to say that forgiveness should not be gratuitous or arbitrary, and that it must be possible for forgiveness to be appropriate or inappropriate in a particular situation and for the wrongdoer to be liable to praise or blame. Someone who forgives too quickly or too repeatedly, for example, could be liable to blame for condone the wrong; someone who forgives too slowly could be liable to blame for being unforgiving. If forgiveness is not norm-governed, it seems to depend too much on the mood of the victim whether a given perpetrator is forgiven. On the other hand, there should be an essential electivity at the heart of forgiveness: the wrongdoer cannot *expect* to be forgiven just by fulfilling certain conditions. Allais provided an excellent survey of the issues, drawing from her lengthy article in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*: 'Wiping the slate clean: the heart of forgiveness'.

Session 2. The next paper was given by Raimond Gaita, a professor at both King's College London and the Australian Catholic University. His piece comprised a response to *Guilt About the Past*, written by Bernhard Schlink, author of *The Reader* (recently adapted into a film). Schlink had claimed that we become guilty only for what we have culpably done or failed to do; while we can become 'entangled' in others' guilt, especially that of our forbears, we cannot share responsibility for what they did – although we can, and sometimes ought to, refuse solidarity with them. Gaita rejects the concept of solidarity for being too weak, and argues for a notion of collective responsibility that is wider than mere collective guilt. In doing this, Gaita focused on the example of the 2008 apology by the Australian government to the Aborigines.

Session 3. Gaelle Fiasse is a researcher at the Fonds Ricoeur in Paris, named after the major philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Fiasse is interesting because her work straddles the divide between philosophy and theology. Her paper asked the following question: 'Should I merely excuse the ignorant but forgive the wicked?' Drawing on the work of Derrida, Jankelevitch, Aquinas and Aristotle, Fiasse examines the difference and possible overlap between excusing and forgiving, and distinguishes different kinds of wrongdoing by the motivation behind them.

Session 4. Roman David from the Institute of Sociology at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague presented the fourth paper 'Lustration systems and forgiveness'. The neologism 'Lustration' comes from the Latin word for purification, and it denotes the controversial practice, throughout Eastern Europe after the various revolutions of 1989, of removing former senior Communist party members from the powerful positions in the civil service, state businesses, universities and the judiciary. Partly this was a form of collective punishment, partly it was a safeguard to prevent sabotage of the new democratic regime. David surveys not only the different types of lustration, but the different attitudes of the public to it in the different countries.

Session 5. David Levy, a philosopher from the University of Edinburgh, presented the next paper, 'A need for forgiveness?' While it is traditional in the philosophical literature about forgiveness to focus on the victim, Levy shifted the perspective onto the wrongdoer, and asked whether there might be a sense in which the wrongdoer could be said to need forgiveness. This need might then generate a certain kind of normative pressure on the victim, although something falling short of a moral obligation.

Session 6. Professor Nigel Biggar is the Regius Professor of Theology at the University of Oxford. He is also the editor of a collection entitled *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice After Civil Conflict*. His paper at the workshop was called 'Melting the icepacks of enmity: forgiveness and reconciliation in Northern Ireland'. Biggar started with the unconditionality that characterises the Christian account of forgiveness – the thought that the Christian should not wait for any conditions, such as the wrongdoer's apology or repentance. In contrast, Biggar proposed a two-part account. On the one hand, there is a "unilateral and unconditional part of forgiveness—there *is* a moment of sheer grace," and this involves primarily the "reining in of resentment." On the other hand, there is 'forgiveness-as-absolution', which is properly reciprocal and conditional, waiting for repentance before it opens the door to reconciliation.

Session 7. Maeve Cooke is professor of philosophy at University College Dublin... She presented a paper entitled 'Hegel's account of forgiveness'. The paper examined Hegel's lengthy and complex discussion of moral consciousness in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which ends with the stage of 'forgiveness'. Cooke looked critically at Hegel's account of forgiveness, considering its relevance for contemporary moral and political philosophy. She suggested that even its weaknesses are instructive. Its most important contribution, in her view, is to tie forgiveness to freedom: to see forgiveness as inaugurating a new form of mutuality between selves, in which each self – the forgiving and the forgiven self – is liberated from its solipsism and enabled to 'be itself in another'

3. Assessment of the results, contribution to the future direction of the field

In the final session we discussed the options for dissemination, and the favoured option was a special issue of a journal, to which participants would be invited to submit their pieces. Following the workshop, the convenors contacted the *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, a high quality journal with a policy of welcoming submissions from both the Anglo-American and the Contemporary European philosophical traditions. The spring 2012 issue has been reserved for the topic of forgiveness, with Christopher Cowley as the guest editor. There is room for eight pieces of 6000 words each. We have therefore written to all the workshop participants (not just the ones who presented), together with some people whom we invited but who could not make it, and invited them to submit pieces by the deadline of 1 September 2011. Since we anticipate more than eight submissions, we will have them blindly refereed, and will take the best eight. We believe that some of the points raised at the workshop are sufficiently original to make a lasting contribution to the philosophical literature on forgiveness.

4. Final programme

Wednesday 29 September 2010

- 19.30** Meet in lobby of Staunton's hotel, then walking on foot to the restaurant
20.00 Dinner at Odessa restaurant, 13 Dame Court

Thursday 30 September 2010

- 09.00-09.30** Welcome at Newman House, 85 St. Stephen's Green
- 09.30-09.40** Introduction by Prof. Maeve Cooke, Head of the School of Philosophy, University College Dublin
- 09.40-10.00** Presentation by the European Science Foundation (ESF)
- Dr. Pasqualina Perrig-Chiello (Standing Committee for the Social Sciences)
 - Dr. Margaret Kelleher (Standing Committee for the Humanities)
- 10.00-11.30** Session 1
Speaker: Lucy Allais, University of Sussex:
'Elective forgiveness'
Respondent: Graham Finlay, University College Dublin
Chair: Christopher Cowley, University College Dublin
- 11.30-12.00** Break: Tea & Coffee
- 12.00-13.30** Session 2
Speaker: Raimond Gaita, King's College London:
'A response to Bernhard Schlink's book *Guilt About the Past*'
Respondent: Antti Kauppinen, University of Amsterdam
Chair: Lilian Alweiss, Trinity College Dublin
- 13.30-14.30** Lunch
- 14.30-16.00** Session 3
Speaker: Gaelle Fiasse, Fonds Ricoeur, Paris:
'Should I merely excuse the ignorant but forgive the wicked?'
Respondent: Joseph Cohen, University College Dublin
Chair: Marina Barabas, Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences
- 16.00-16.30** Break: Tea & Coffee
- 16.30-18.00** Session 4
Speaker: Roman David, Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences:
'Lustration systems and forgiveness'
Respondent: Peter Losonczi, Goldziher Institute Budapest
Chair: Joseph Cohen, University College Dublin
- 19.30** Meet in the lobby of the Staunton's hotel
20.00 Dinner at Café on Seine, 40 Dawson st.
(on the other side of St. Stephen's Green from the hotel)

Friday 1 October 2010

- 09.30-10.00** Welcome at Newman House
- 10.00-11.30** Session 5
Speaker: David Levy, University of Edinburgh
'A need for forgiveness?'
Respondent: Camilla Kronqvist, Åbo Akademi University, Finland
Chair: Marina Barabas, Institute of Philosophy, Czech Academy of Sciences
- 11.30-12.00** Break: tea & coffee
- 12.00-13.30** Session 6
Speaker: Nigel Biggar, University of Oxford
'Melting the icepacks of enmity: forgiveness and reconciliation in Northern Ireland'
Respondent: Jeremy Watkins, Queen's University Belfast
Chair: Maureen Junker-Kenny, University of Tuebingen
- 13.30-14.30** Lunch
- 14.30-16.00** Session 7
Speaker: Maeve Cooke, University College Dublin
'Hegel's account of forgiveness'
Respondent: Cillian McBride, Queen's University Belfast
Chair: Graham Finlay, University College Dublin
- 16.00-16.30** Break: Tea & Coffee
- 16.30-18.00** Final session
Chair: Christopher Cowley, University College Dublin
(i) a discussion of publication possibilities arising from this workshop
(ii) an opportunity to return to any of the themes.
- 19.30** Meet in the lobby of the Staunton's hotel
- 20.00** Dinner at Dunne & Crescenzi, 14 South Frederick st.
(on the other side of St. Stephen's Green from the hotel)

5. Statistical information on participants

Number of participants: 19, of which

- *Gender:*
 - 8 were women (42%)
 - 11 were men (58%)
- *Age:*
 - 3 were aged 20-30
 - 7 were aged 30-40
 - 5 were aged 40-50
 - 4 were aged 50-60
- *Countries of institutional affiliation:*
 - 5 were from Ireland
 - 6 were from the UK
 - 2 were from the Czech Republic
 - 1 was from France
 - 1 was from the Netherlands
 - 2 was from Germany
 - 1 was from Finland
 - 1 was from Hungary

6. Final list of participants

1. **Lucy ALLAIS**,
Department of Philosophy,
University of Sussex,
Brighton, UK
2. **Lilian ALWEISS**
Department of Philosophy
Trinity College Dublin
Ireland
3. **Marina BARABAS**
Institute of Philosophy
Czech Academy of Sciences
Prague, Czech Republic
4. **Nigel BIGGAR**
Faculty of Theology
University of Oxford
UK
5. **Joseph COHEN**
School of Philosophy
University College Dublin
Ireland
6. **Maeve COOKE**
School of Philosophy
University College Dublin
Ireland
7. **Christopher COWLEY**
School of Philosophy
University College Dublin
Ireland
8. **Roman DAVID**
Institute of Contemporary History
Czech Academy of Sciences
Prague, Czech Republic
9. **Gaelle FIASSE**
Fonds Ricoeur
Institut Protestant de Théologie
Paris, France
10. **Graham FINLAY**
School of Politics and International Relations
University College Dublin
Ireland
11. **Anne FUCHS**
Department of German
University of St. Andrews
UK
12. **Raimond GAITA**
Department of Philosophy
King's College London
UK
13. **Maureen JUNKER-KENNY**
International Centre for Ethics in the Sciences
and Humanities
University of Tuebingen
Germany
14. **David LEVY**
Department of Philosophy
University of Edinburgh
UK
15. **Antti KAUPPINEN**
Department of Philosophy
University of Amsterdam
Netherlands
16. **Camilla KRONQVIST**
Department of Philosophy
Åbo Akademi
Finland
17. **Peter LOSONCZI**
Goldziher Institute
Budapest, Hungary
18. **Cillian MACBRIDE**
School of Politics, International Relations and
Philosophy
Queen's University
Belfast, UK
19. **Jeremy WATKINS**
School of Politics, International Relations and
Philosophy
Queen's University
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