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COLLECTIVE FORGIVENESS AND THE UNFORGIVABLE

BY

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THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

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In

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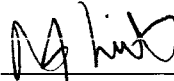
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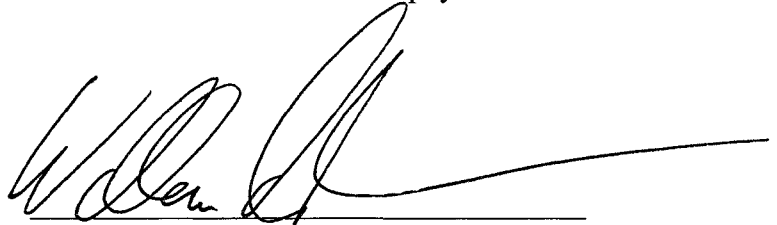
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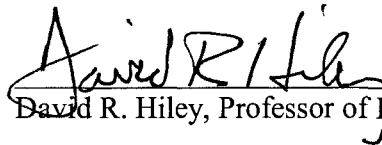
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## ABSTRACT

### COLLECTIVE FORGIVENESS AND THE UNFORGIVABLE

By

Robert Woon Chul Fisher

University of New Hampshire, May 2009

Forgiveness is an intricate part of our everyday moral interactions, although it is fundamentally a difficult concept. Unforgivable crimes are inexcusable, and equally as difficult a concept, because the unforgivable often references collective crimes. This paper will provide an analysis of forgiveness, the unforgivable, and how both relate to collectives by distinguishing the crimes from their perpetrators. At a fundamental level, individual forgiveness can be expanded to allow for collective forgiveness, despite the inherent difficulties of such collective forgiveness. Similarly, unforgivable crimes can be expanded to accommodate collective injuries. To accommodate for the unforgivable, I distinguished an unforgivable act from an unforgivable offender, and these ideas of unforgivability can also be expanded to collectives, and indeed such collective injuries are most often cited as examples of the unforgivable.

## INTRODUCTION

God has seen two World Wars in this century alone plus the Holocaust, the genocide in Cambodia and Rwanda, the awfulness in the Sudan, Sierra Leone, the two Congos, Northern Ireland, and the Middle East, and the excesses that have characterized Latin American. It is a baneful catalog that records our capacity to wreak considerable harm on one another and our gross inhumanity to our fellow humans.

- Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*<sup>1</sup>

The horrendous crimes cataloged by Desmond Tutu are intuitively beyond the possibility of forgiveness, because they invoke Kant's notion of "the radical evil of human nature which ... constitutes the fowls strain of our species - and so long as we do not remove it, it hinders the germ of the good from developing as it otherwise would."<sup>2</sup> The conception of radical evil is adopted by Hannah Arendt as "neither punishable nor forgivable, because punishment and forgiveness presuppose what radical evil eliminates: that is, human action."<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida also believes that such massive injustices are unforgivable: "monstrous crimes ... [are] 'unforgivable.'"<sup>4</sup> However, Derrida's interpretation of forgiveness is paradoxical, because "if there is something to forgive, it

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<sup>1</sup> Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 124.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61, Royal Prussian Academy of Science Pagination 6:38.

<sup>3</sup> Richard J Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996), 149.

<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," from *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 33.



would be in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm. ... Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable.”<sup>5</sup> Despite the many differences and disagreements between Arendt’s and Derrida’s discussions of the unforgivable, both are underlined by the massive scale of the injustices, not to mention the vagueness with which the unforgivable is discussed. This paper will address such collective crimes to determine whether they are unforgivable. I will provide an account of forgiveness that accommodates the unforgivable for both individuals and collectives by addressing the relation between the collectives that commit such crimes, the crimes themselves, and forgiveness. I will argue some crimes cannot be forgiven, and in some instances the groups that commit such crimes cannot be distinguished from the injuries, thus making the group unforgivable. However, individuals within collectives that are unforgivable may be forgiven, even if the collective as a whole cannot, because forgiving the injuries suffered can be distinguished from forgiving the offenders. I do not presuppose that the following is a complete account of forgiveness, or the unforgivable. Instead, I am attempting to demonstrate how forgiveness and the unforgivable can remain consistent when applied to individuals and collectives.

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<sup>5</sup> Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” 32.

## CHAPTER I

### FORGIVENESS

It is important to begin with a discussion of what is meant by “forgiveness,” because our conceptions of forgiveness are muddled by its many uses. For example, we forgive our peers and ourselves for the minor offenses we commit against each other; we forgive debts; we forgive the dead, and many of us pray for God’s<sup>6</sup> forgiveness. Forgiveness is further confused by its similarities and relations to our conceptions of punishment, pardon, and mercy. The different uses of forgiveness are contextually dependent, and given the variety of the contexts in which forgiveness is appropriate, can have vastly different meanings. However, all forms of forgiveness are predicated on the assumption that there was, or at least is perceived to have been, an injury, crime, immoral act, sin, etc, committed. These notions of wrongdoing are widely varied, and for the sake of simplicity, will generally be referred to as “injuries” or “offenses.” Also, forgiveness is generally “a certain kind of ethical response to injury and the injurer”<sup>7</sup> that is primarily aimed at the reconciliation between the victim and the offender. By no stretch of the imagination do I suppose that the following analysis is a completely encompassing and

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<sup>6</sup> See Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) for a detailed account of the relationship between forgiveness and Judeo-Christian traditions.

<sup>7</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 39.

authoritative account of forgiveness. However, what follows can generally be referred to as forgiveness at its best, or an ideal interpretation of forgiveness.

The many uses and interpretations of an ideal forgiveness traditionally require the offender to feel remorseful, and to repent by “approaching the victim to apologize and ask for forgiveness.”<sup>8</sup> Continuing in this vein, I will argue the offender’s remorse is an ideal condition for forgiveness, although forgiveness may still be achieved without an apology. Although apologies can have different meanings and may be offered in many different forms,<sup>9</sup> it is the victim’s responsibility to judge the offender’s apologetic sincerity, and the truthfulness of the offender’s remorse.<sup>10</sup> For our purposes, “to be appropriately forgiven, the wrongdoer must morally regret the wrong he did to the other, and feel remorse,”<sup>11</sup> because this allows for a moral dialog between the parties. I believe an offender who is not remorseful for the injuries she occasioned is unworthy of forgiveness, despite the instances where the regret cannot be demonstrated to the victim,<sup>12</sup> because forgiveness is a moral exchange between the victim and the offender that is aimed at reconciliation. Forgiveness can be interpreted as a deontological duty if the offender expresses appropriate remorse for the injuries. Forgiveness also promotes the end of reconciliation.

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<sup>8</sup> Trudy Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” from *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1, (Jan. 1999), pp. 59-75, (University of Illinois Press), 59.

<sup>9</sup> See Nick Smith, *I Was Wrong: The Meanings of Apologies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 62.

<sup>11</sup> Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 63.

<sup>12</sup> Apologies are not always necessary for forgiveness, such as forgiving the dead. However, I believe forgiveness is best achieved when the offender acknowledges her guilt and remorse.

My account of an ideal forgiveness, and its aim of reconciliation, requires an apology from the offender, because apologies recognize the moral standing of the victim.<sup>13</sup> Apologies also allow for the dialog that is necessary for B to forgive A for the injuries A caused B to suffer. The dialog is important, because it allows for agreement on the nature of the injuries suffered. An agreement on the injuries is important to forgiveness, because it would be inappropriate if I forgave you for one perceived injury, whereas you apologized for another. Apologies allow the offender to accept blame for causing the injury, and acknowledge the blame to the victim. The moral dialog that is necessary for forgiveness is referred to by Charles Griswold as the “narrative”<sup>14</sup> of forgiveness:

The narrative characterizes what is happening or happened; in so doing it reshapes it, or remembers it, or re-imagines it, but does not thereby fabricate it out of thin air. So narrative here claims to represent, in some sense, how things are (or were), what happened, and why - not just causally “why” but why from the perspective of the agent.<sup>15</sup>

The dialogical nature of the narrative between the victim and her offender is important, because it recognizes the moral dignity of both parties, as well as remembers the injuries. However, the narrative itself does not constitute forgiveness. Instead, it is a necessary component of any morally significant forgiveness. The narrative acknowledges the agency of the offender, and her responsibility for causing the injuries. But if the narrative establishes the moral standing of the offender and the victim, as well as serves as an account of the injuries, yet does not constitute forgiveness, then what does forgiveness

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed account of the role of apologies see Smith, *I was Wrong*.

<sup>14</sup> See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 98-110.

<sup>15</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 99.

entail? Bishop Butler believes forgiveness boils down to loving the offender, whereas “‘love’ is being understood here not so much as a feeling but as the recognition that even the most heinous human being is still ‘ a sensible creature; that is, capable of happiness or misery.’”<sup>16</sup> Repentance is important for an ideal forgiveness, because it initiates the moral interlocution. Forgiving without a remorseful apology raises motivational concerns for the victim, because “people who forgive too readily ... do not manifest the right degree of self-respect; they underestimate their own worth and fail to take their projects and entitlements seriously enough,”<sup>17</sup> as well as devalue their own moral standing in the process.

Conversely, the victim may require an apology in order to accept her offender “as a morally worthy person capable of more than wrongdoing.”<sup>18</sup> If the victim demonizes her offender by only understanding her through the sufferings she caused, then forgiveness is impossible, because forgiveness requires a dialog between the parties. Or rather, the “recognition of shared humanity by the injured party is a necessary step on the way to forgiveness ... though it is not sufficient for it.”<sup>19</sup> It is this acknowledgement of the humanity of the other that I feel is important a dialogical forgiveness, because serious wrongs may prohibit the victim from understanding her offender as anything other than the source of her sufferings. If the offender is demonized in the eyes of the victim, then the distinction between the offense and the offender, which I will argue allows for the unforgivable, becomes blurred. Of course, there are forms of forgiveness that are not

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<sup>16</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> David Novitz, “Forgiveness and Self-Respect,” from *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 58, No. 2 (Jun., 1998), pp. 299-315, (International Phenomenological Society), 299.

<sup>18</sup> Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 60.

<sup>19</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 79.

dialogical, such as forgiving the dead, or forgiving an unspecified offender. However, the current discussion will only address such varieties of forgiveness briefly, because a victim cannot seek revenge against her offender if the offender is dead. Although much more can be said about the offender's remorse and the relationship of apologies to forgiveness, for the sake of brevity I conclude that an apologetic expression of remorse is an ideal condition for forgiveness, regardless of whether the victim forgives the offender, or its deontological standing. I will now begin to unpack what forgiveness entails.

Many commentators have followed Bishop Butler's definition of forgiveness as the forswearing of resentment.<sup>20</sup> Butler defines resentment by distinguishing it "between two species: the first is 'hasty and sudden' anger; the second is 'settled anger,' which turns out to be 'deliberate resentment, malice, and revenge.'"<sup>21</sup> Although some offenses may not involve resentment, "we recognize, albeit tacitly, that it is always possible that others will see these wrongs differently, take umbrage, or feel resentful."<sup>22</sup> So at the very least, forgiveness requires that there has been an injury, however insignificant. Minor offenses often do not engender "hard feelings of anger and resentment consequent on the wrong; hence no need to banish these feelings through forgiveness."<sup>23</sup> The forgiveness associated with minor offenses can easily be attained, because such forgiveness does not challenge the victim to overcome and forswear her resentment. If forgiveness could always be attained as easily as the forgiveness

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<sup>20</sup> See Griswold, *Forgiveness*.

<sup>21</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 301.

<sup>23</sup> Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect," 302.

associated with minor offenses such as stepping on someone else's toes, then it would similarly be morally insignificant.

The forswearing of resentment in individual instances of forgiveness requires the victim not to respond to her anger by seeking revenge or reciprocating her "pain and misery."<sup>24</sup> To be more precise, Butler "claims that forgiveness is the forswearing of revenge."<sup>25</sup> Note how the forswearing of revenge cannot be applicable to non-dialogical forms of forgiveness, such as forgiving the dead. It is important to distinguish resentment and the desire for revenge, because the presence of resentment is also important for forgiveness. The victim of an offense could seek revenge in many different ways. Revenge vaguely encompasses any retaliation the victim embarks on herself against the offender, but does not exclude any retributive justice the victim may wish to claim in response to her injuries. For example, the victim may require her offender to be punished by a court of law before she is willing to forgive. The Kantian principle of justice is based on "the principle of equality (in the position of the needle on the scale of justice), to incline no more to one side than to the other. Accordingly, whatever undeserved evil you inflict upon another within the people, that you inflict upon yourself."<sup>26</sup> However, revenge may surpass the "eye for an eye" mentality that the punishment should fit the crime, because the victim may want her offender to suffer disproportionately. Retributive justice may be distinguished from revenge, because "forgiveness is [not] incompatible with punishment."<sup>27</sup> For example, I could refuse to forgive a friend for crushing my foot

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<sup>24</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 105, Royal Prussian Academy of Science Pagination 6:332.

with her car when drunk until after she had been punished by a third party, presumably a court of law. Conversely, I could refuse to forgive my friend at all, and instead seek disproportional revenge by trying to inflict similar physical pains, and also seeking to inflict additional mental and emotional anguish. Although such vengefulness is not morally legitimized by the original injury, it is worth noting that any vengeful retaliation can be subsumed under the notion of revenge that forgiveness forswears.

Revenge is forsworn because it is the reciprocation of a moral offense, and thus another moral offense, regardless of the victim's justification. For example, if a rape victim were so emotionally distraught that she sought revenge against her attacker by killing him, then she is still guilty of murder, regardless of her motivations. Forgiveness, on the other hand, counters a moral offense with a promise not to seek revenge. Although this does not right the wrong caused by the original offense, that the desire to seek revenge is forsworn is morally praiseworthy, because the offender remains a moral agent. That is, forgiveness is morally praiseworthy, because of the moral respect it grants the offender, despite her offenses. When we forgive, we forgive our offenders, but we do not condone their offenses. In this way, revenge and retaliation are acts that are in response to another act. They need to be directed at the offender as a person, but at her as the cause of the injuries. It is important to distinguish revenge as retaliation against a deed, and revenge against the person for the discussion of the unforgivable. Similarly, forgiveness forswears revenge against either the injury, the offender, or both.

The role of resentment in forgiveness is more muddled than that of revenge, because resentment must be expanded to include other negative emotions and reactions to

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<sup>27</sup> Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," 60.



the crimes, such as contempt or sadness,<sup>28</sup> which do not simply disappear when the victim forgives her offender. Instead, “the serious wrongs that require our forgiveness cannot be morally condoned, and their pardon, if secured, will only involve the renouncement of our claims against the wrongdoer but will not straightforwardly result in the abandonment of the bitter feelings that these wrongs have occasioned.”<sup>29</sup> Resentment is important for forgiveness, because “to forgive is not to forget the wrongs we have suffered but rather to regard their perpetrators, and the wrongs themselves, in the moral light of acceptance and compassion rather than in the glare of resentment and hatred.”<sup>30</sup> Forswearing resentment allows the victim to overcome the emotional and psychological damages the injuries occasioned. Resentment must also be forsworn to understand the offender as a moral interlocutor who is worthy of moral respect, and not merely demonized by the lingering resentment. Also, the forswearing of resentment may be psychologically and emotionally beneficial to the victim; it allows forgiveness to be understood as more than the morally beneficial absolution of the offender’s crimes. But not all resentment is demonizing, nor does it necessitate that the offender is interpreted as a “moral monster.”<sup>31</sup> Forgiveness requires that resentment is forsworn if the resentment causes the victim to demonize her offender, and if the resentment is be psychologically and emotionally detrimental to the victim’s well-being. Thus forswearing revenge can be beneficial to the victim, especially in instances where revenge is impossible, such as forgiving the dead.

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<sup>28</sup> See Norvin Richards, “Forgiveness,” from *Ethics*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (Oct., 1988), pp. 77-97 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 79.

<sup>29</sup> Novitz, “Forgiveness and Self-Respect,” 301.

<sup>30</sup> Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 60.

<sup>31</sup> See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 73-7.

However, the challenge of forswearing resentment may pose many difficulties for the victim,<sup>32</sup> because the resentment may not be initially apparent, and the victim may not feel any negative emotions towards her offenders until well after the injuries have occurred. Once an injury has been forgiven, the victim may regain her resentfulness years later. The victim may be incapable of completely overcoming her resentment. The lingering resentment depends on the nature of the injury. For example, if I resent a close friend for damaging and forgetting to return a valued book, then the value of our continued friendship may allow me to forgive her, and the resentment may dissipate with time. However, if this friend intentionally set fire to my home, then our friendship will become strained, if it is not ended. Furthermore, I may continue to resent her for such irreparable malice, and wish to inflict a similar misfortune. However, I may still forgive this friend when I promise not to seek retribution for the injuries suffered. Furthermore, my resentment need not demoralize or dehumanize my friend, because of the history of our friendship. Instead, I would be able to engage in the moral dialog of forgiveness with my former friend, despite my resentment. On the other hand, my resentment may be necessary for my desire to seek revenge for the injuries suffered, and thus resentment is necessary for forgiveness. Although the resentment may linger, resentment is necessary for forgiveness, because resentment encompasses revenge. That is, without feeling resentment, the victim would lack a desire to seek revenge, remembering that revenge can be distinguished from punishment or retributive justice, because the desire for revenge may be subsumed under resentment. However, once forgiveness has been achieved, resentment is no longer a necessary condition. That is, the moral value of the

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<sup>32</sup> Richards, "Forgiveness," 77.

achievement of forgiveness does not speak to whether or not the victim retains her resentment. At the very least, the retention of resentment is dependent on the nature of the forgiveness and the injuries, and thus resentment cannot be categorically supposed to last after the injuries have been forgiven.

The indefinite nature of the victim's negative emotions and resentment does not imply that the act of forgiving is similarly indefinite. If forgiveness is indefinite, then inaction would constitute forgiveness: the absence of retaliation does not imply that the victim has forgiven her offender. The silent harboring of resentment, which does not lead to retaliation, does not mean that the offender has been forgiven.<sup>33</sup> Also, it is worth noting that memory is important to forgiveness, forgetting could be mistaken as the forswearing of revenge, and thus forgiveness. However, forgiveness is not a passive act, and "remembrance itself ... can to some extent repair the past wrongs and express respect for the victims."<sup>34</sup> Instead, I believe that forgiveness is a definite moral act that is worthy of moral appraisal, and that it is not a moral virtue,<sup>35</sup> nor can it be achieved by passively forgetting the injuries. The victim must perform a definitive act of forgiveness by forswearing revenge and resentment. Although retribution and revenge may be morally blameworthy, the blame is intensified if they occur after forgiveness has been achieved.

The satisfaction or expression of anger and resentment through revenge is incompatible with forgiveness, because any ensuing forgiveness would seem insincere, if not inappropriate. Forgiveness and revenge are mutually exclusive, but forgiveness is not

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<sup>33</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 21.

<sup>35</sup> Although a detailed account of these differing interpretations of forgiveness would be appropriate, they will merely be acknowledged for the sake of brevity. For a comprehensive discussion of these differing interpretations, see Griswold, *Forgiveness*, pp. 1-89.

binary; it is not the case that forgiveness is either granted or it is not. There are many other ways a victim could react to her injuries that do not involve retribution or forgiveness, and refusing to seek revenge is not the same as forgiving the offender.<sup>36</sup> Revenge, on the other hand, need not be enacted by the victim. Instead, she may allow a third party, such as the judicial system, to punish her offender. Forgiveness and revenge can be distinguished from third party punishment,<sup>37</sup> “especially where the injured party is no longer capable of responding to the offender, those intimately affected often assume they have a right to forgive or to refuse to forgive.”<sup>38</sup> Individual forgiveness can be achieved even if the offender has been punished by a third party.

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<sup>36</sup> Forgiveness and revenge are distinguished from “the administration of justice,” see Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 32.

<sup>37</sup> See Smith, *I Was Wrong*, 135.

<sup>38</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 117.

## CHAPTER II

### INDIVIDUAL FORGIVENESS AND THE UNFORGIVABLE

The previous chapter outlined some of the ideal conditions for forgiveness as it applies to individuals. I will now turn to a discussion of the unforgivable. It is important to note that a majority of the philosophical literature on forgiveness denies the possibility of some crimes being completely beyond the possibility of forgiveness. Those that accept the unforgivable, namely Arendt and Derrida, are hopelessly vague in their discussions. In order to try to unpack a notion of the unforgivable, I will distinguish the crimes from their source; the offender. So although an offender may never be completely beyond the realm of forgiveness, the injuries she occasioned may be unforgivable. However, following Griswold, "I cannot assert or deny, in the abstract, that every wrongdoer is in practice forgivable" because "it is possible - indeed it is the case - that some offenders turn out to be incapable of remorse, choice, and moral transformation."<sup>39</sup> If forgiveness requires a remorseful apology from the offender, then it would seem that those incapable of remorse are unforgivable. But this raises questions concerning the sincerity of the remorse, the nature of the injuries that could prohibit regret, the moral agency of the unremorseful, and any psychological conditions that may prohibit remorse, among others. Furthermore, the victim may refuse to accept the apology, regardless of the sincerity of the remorse. So it would be a great undertaking to assess the

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<sup>39</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 94, 93.

unforgivable solely in light of the requirement that the offender express her regret for forgiveness, especially since apologetic remorse is debated as a requirement for forgiveness.

It could be assumed that if forgiveness requires the forswearing of revenge and resentment, then a crime that is beyond the possibility of forgiveness would be beyond the possibility of forswearing revenge and resentment. However, the unforgivable cannot require the victim to seek revenge, because it would be a mistake to understand the unforgivable as requiring the continuation of offenses. That is, it would be inappropriate for a moral system to include a requirement for offenses to be perpetuated indefinitely. And although this could be what Arendt meant by saying that radical evil is beyond the possibility of forgiveness or punishment,<sup>40</sup> it also seems that the unforgivable can be punished. For example, if murder is an unforgivable offense, then it would be a mistake to think of murderers as beyond the possibility of punishment or retributive justice.

Beyond the forswearing of revenge, forgiveness also requires the forswearing of resentment, but only if the injuries caused such resentment that the victim demonizes her offender. Such demonization prohibits the moral interlocution for forgiveness. But if the injuries are beyond the possibility of forgiveness, then it would be appropriate if the offender is demonized, because the offender would be inseparably tied to the evilness of her crimes. There are certainly injuries, such as rape and murder that elicit immense resentment. However, the resentment associated with such crimes may still be forsworn, and the victims<sup>41</sup> may still forgive. Forgiving such violent crimes might only occur after

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<sup>40</sup> Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 137-50.

the offender has been punished. For example, a convicted murderer may be remorseful and forgiven by the families of his victims. But just because the murderer is forgiven does not mean that murder is a forgivable crime. Deontological accounts of forgiveness never excuse murder, because it is inherently wrong to take another's life, although forgiving the murderer might be allowed for any number of reasons. For example, killing in self defense is still taking the life of another, but the attacked can be excused if the attacker was unprovoked, and the victim's life was unquestionably threatened. My account of the unforgivable requires a distinction between the offender and the offense. This line of argument would raise the concern that any offense is unforgivable, because of its offensive nature. That is, we cannot forgive any act, although we may forgive the actor. But this line of thinking is only inappropriate if forgiveness forgives both the offender and the offense she occasioned, because although we may never condone certain acts, we often forgive their actors. This brings us to the distinction between the unforgivable injuries, and an unforgivable offender.

In unpacking the unforgivable, it is important to note that Archbishop Desmond Tutu "insisted that though their deeds were monstrous, human beings should never be described as monsters, [and] he expressed a long tradition of Christian thought emphasizing that the sinner should be separated from the sin."<sup>42</sup> A secular account would distinguish agents from their actions, and allow for an account of both unforgivable crimes, and unforgivable agents. If the offender is understood as separate and distinct from the injuries she caused, and not as a moral monster, then she may be forgiven,

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<sup>41</sup> Murder victims obviously are not in any position to forgive their offenders. However, secondary victims, such as the deceased's family, could forgive the murderer. See Piers Benn, "Forgiveness and Loyalty," from *Philosophy*, Vol. 71, No. 277, (July 1996), pp. 369-383.

<sup>42</sup> Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," 65.

because “forgiveness is something we extend or do not extend towards persons, and it fundamentally affects the relationships between persons. And yet, it is deeds which are said to be unforgivable.”<sup>43</sup> For example, rape, torture, and murder are often cited as unforgivable acts, because they are so repulsive and heinous. Intuitively, we would not require an analysis of why such crimes are unforgivable. For the sake of argument, however, it could be asked whether or not such crimes could be forgiven. The offender may be forgiven for the victim’s “peace of mind” and ability to overcome the trauma she suffered, but are the crimes themselves forgivable? For example, we may forgive a murderer, but we would never condone such malicious killing. So it seems to me that the answer would have to be negative, although this is clearly debatable. The fact that we can never condone such malicious acts is sufficient justification for their unforgivability, even though we may forgive the perpetrators. This represents a disconnect within forgiveness: we endorse forgiveness as morally praiseworthy, but we never endorse the crimes being forgiven. Instead, we only support that the offender is forgiven.

This would appear to lead to the contradiction, because if all offenses can never be condoned, then all offenses are unforgivable, but forgiving the offenders is endorsed. There are some offenses that might have dire moral consequences, such as forgetting to drive a sick friend to a scheduled doctor’s appointment, that are forgivable in principle. I may be forgiven for my forgetfulness, because we have all forgotten to fulfill important promises at some point, and the outcome of the offense can have dire consequences. So it need not be the case that all offenses that cannot be condoned are themselves unforgivable. However, it is rarely the case that we forgive the injuries we suffer, but not our offenders. For example, I may forgive a friend for forgetting to pick me up at the

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<sup>43</sup> Govier, “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable,” 65.



airport, thus causing me to miss an important event, say a funeral. But in so doing, I am excusing my friend, but I am not forgiving her forgetfulness itself. This is not to say that we ignore the injuries we suffered when we forgive our offenders, or that we never forgive the injuries themselves. But whenever we do forgive an offense, we usually forgive the offender as well. Forgiveness typically includes both the crime and the offender, but some injuries may be so profound that is humanly impossible<sup>44</sup> to forgive either the crime itself, the offender, or both.

It should be noted that the previous example does not intuitively qualify as an unforgivable offense. Instead, my unwillingness to forgive my friend does not mean that she is unforgivable, merely unforgiven. It is important to distinguish the unforgivable from the unforgiven. The unforgiven is simply an offense that has not been forgiven by the victim. Although the offense may be morally blameworthy if the offender has expressed remorse and offered to make amends for the sufferings she caused, the offender is not beyond the possibility of forgiveness. The unforgivable, on the other hand, cannot be forgiven. But the unforgivable does not imply that the offender cannot be forgiven, unless the offender is incapable of being distinguished from her offenses. Instead, it means that a particular injury cannot be forgiven, but unless the offender is reduced to her offenses, then the offender may still be forgiven.

So why are some injuries beyond the possibility of forgiveness? If it is impossible to understand the offender as a moral interlocutor, presumably because of the severity of her offenses, then forgiveness becomes impossible. That is, one cannot offer a moral forgiveness to a non-moral entity. This may seem odd, and raises questions concerning forgiving the dead, who are no longer moral agents, or forgiveness in general.

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<sup>44</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 94.

Forgiving the dead is interesting, because as stated above, I believe that remorse is essential for an ideal forgiveness, and the dead clearly cannot express remorse to their victims. But I do not wish to rule out the possibility of forgiving the dead, because such forgiveness clearly has psychological implications for the victims. But the psychology of such forgiveness is very ends-oriented, and does not necessitate deontological forgiveness. Even if there is a moral duty to forgive the dead, then the forgiveness is not directed at a moral agent, but instead at the moral importance of the memory of the deceased. That is, the dead are not beyond the possibility of forgiveness, because to forgive the dead is more directly tied to the victim's well being, and not the moral interlocution of forgiveness.

So how is an offender reduced to a non-moral entity that is beyond the possibility of forgiveness? Such dehumanization is the result of the immense resentment the offender has caused. If the offender cannot be understood as separate and distinct from the sufferings she caused, then she may be understood as beyond the possibility of forgiveness. The demonization of the offender cannot be subjectively determined by the victim alone, but by the moral community. The moral community does not imply the legal system as a third party, because such unforgivable offenses are not beyond the possibility of punishment. This goes against Arendt's conception of radical evil and the unforgivable as being beyond the possibility of forgiveness or punishment.

This is not to say that notorious individuals such as Hitler are forgivable. However, Hitler is indistinguishable from the Holocaust, which is beyond the possibility of forgiveness. "Nonetheless it would be true that a person who is in principle

unforgivable warrants resentment forever.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, resentment would be tied to the unforgivable more so than the forgivable. But imagine a murderer getting away with killing, and never being accused of the crime, thereby not invoking any resentment. Furthermore, imagine that her victim did not have any close friends or family, and lived in obscurity, thus leaving no survivors to mourn her death, let alone resent the murderer. If murder is unforgivable, then it would seem that this particular murderer is not exempt simply because of the circumstances of her crime. But how are such deeds unforgivable, and can the unforgivable truly be distinct from the offenders who are the sources of such injuries? Forgiveness requires the forswearing of resentment only if the resentment dehumanizes the offender. The unforgivable is primarily concerned with those who have been demonized by their victims, and would not be distinct from the sufferings she caused. Although an individual offender may be unforgivable, the above discussion is purposefully complicated. I will now demonstrate how collective injuries are more easily understood as unforgivable.

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<sup>45</sup> See Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 92-3.

## CHAPTER III

### COLLECTIVE FORGIVENESS

The defining characteristics of individual forgiveness in the previous chapters are primarily applicable to individuals, and pose difficulties for collective forgiveness. This chapter will address some of the inherent difficulties with collective forgiveness. The first of which is determining what constitutes a collective. A collective may be a random group of individuals, or a group “whose members have some property or properties in common and whose identity is something more than the aggregated identities of its individual members.”<sup>46</sup> A group may be identified as a collective by its members, or by an external group; the members of a collective need not identify with the group. Instead, the members of a collective can be identified as belonging to a particular collective by others: “the possession of common features by the members of a [collective] does not entail that the group has coherence as an entity in its own right and that its members are unified in some way. ... They may not even be aware of each other’s existence.”<sup>47</sup> Collective forgiveness requires that the group has suffered similar injuries, because it would be useless to define a collective as unrelated individuals who have suffered

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<sup>46</sup> Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, 119.

<sup>47</sup> Blustein, *The Moral Demands of Memory*, 119.

unrelated injuries from completely different offenders. For our purposes, a collective is a group that has been identified as such, and has suffered at the hands of another group. However, the collective injuries are not necessarily the result of such identification.

Not all collectives must be defined negatively by such characteristics, or identified because of its collective injuries. For example, doctors and lawyers are generally understood favorably, because of the prestige and honor associated with their positions. The positive classification of doctors and lawyers is applied to them as a collective, regardless of individual experiences with incompetent doctors or “greedy lawyers.” In terms of collective forgiveness, however, it is often the case that negative characteristics are the defining features that allow such a group to be systematically discriminated against, or the justification for the injuries the group suffers. For example, the United States’ history of racial discrimination shows how “historically, blacks were oppressed and discriminated against because they were black, in a legal-political order that assumed they deserved less than equal respect and consideration because of their race.”<sup>48</sup> African Americans were viewed collectively by their offenders, and discriminated against because of such collective identifications.

It is important to note that the identification of a collective is often blurred. The discriminatory injuries suffered by African Americans shared the underlying theme of racial motivations, and can thus be understood as collective in nature, despite how each individual suffered separately. However, African Americans are a sub-collective of

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<sup>48</sup> McCarthy, “Coming to Terms with Our Past, Part II,” 753-4.

Americans, and their offenders also belong to the umbrella collective of Americans.<sup>49</sup>

The distinctions between the offenders and the victims have become so blurred that any forgiveness would seem impossible. Collective injuries are the crimes committed against the collective, and are composed of a multitude of individual injuries. However, the victims all suffered similarly because they had been collectively identified and targeted by their offenders. The Holocaust is an example where European Jews collectively suffered similar injuries because they had been collectively targeted by the Nazis. It is not the case that an individual's sufferings in the Holocaust were merely an instance of a single offender targeting a single victim. In this way, the overarching and indiscriminate<sup>50</sup> nature of the Nazis' persecution of Jews can be understood as a collective injury.

Collective injuries are not necessarily the sum of the individual injuries, although such may be the case. For example, American segregation is a collective injury that inevitably fails to catalog all instances of racially-justified and racially-motivated injuries, because countless injuries have been unrecorded and lost to the pages of time. The loss of such details does not prohibit collective forgiveness, although collective forgiveness for the entire history of American slavery, segregation, discrimination, and racism may be impossible to achieve, and will be argued to be unforgivable. Collective injuries create difficulties for understanding the role of the individual, because of their

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<sup>49</sup> This does not include the European slave traders who also committed collective injuries.

<sup>50</sup> I use "indiscriminate" here to refer to the unspecific nature of a given individual's injuries. Collective injuries are often motivated and justified by discrimination.

impersonal nature. Although a collective injury may be collectively forgiven, a member of the victimized collective may be unable to endorse the group's forgiveness. That is, there is a problem with consensus. This is not to imply that all collective forgiveness can be categorically rejected as conceptual and practical impossibilities. Instead, the size of a collective directly influences whether or not collective forgiveness is possible. But in theory, collective forgiveness remains possible, despite the practical difficulties of achieving reconciliation. To achieve collective forgiveness, the offenders would have to offer the collective a remorseful apology, and then the collective would have to forswear revenge against their offenders, as well as acknowledge their shared humanity.

The achievement of collective forgiveness depends on the size of the collective. For example, if a rock and roll band uses offensive lyrics towards women in its songs, then the band as a whole is held responsible, not just the composer of the lyrics. The band could apologize to the public, promise to never perform the songs that include the offensive lyrics, make efforts to support women's rights, and subsequently be forgiven. Despite the oversimplification of this example, most notably the unspecified victims and the ease with which such forgiveness appears to have been achieved, it can be understood how small groups can also be viewed as collectives. Furthermore, collective forgiveness seems, at least on the surface, to be practically attainable for small groups. However, larger collectives, such as those affected by American slavery and the ensuing segregation, would clearly pose a greater difficulty.

Collective forgiveness resembles individual forgiveness, in that Collective B forgives Collective A for X injuries Collective A caused B to suffer. Similar to individual forgiveness, the offending collective would have to offer a remorseful apology in order to be forgiven. However, agreeing on the nature and extent of X creates problems for collective forgiveness. That is, collective forgiveness requires the Collective B to agree not to retaliate for the injuries they have suffered. A substantial difficulty of any attempt at collective forgiveness is the accommodation of the interests of the individuals within a collective. For example, each member of the collective presumably suffered the collective injuries differently, and thus the forgiveness would have different meanings to each individual. Some members may refuse to forgive their offenders; they need not all agree to forgive. Even if the collective can decide collectively not to retaliate for injuries x, y, and z, does not imply that the members agree on the nature of such injuries, or that the injuries in question are the only ones that are appropriate for the forgiveness.

The difficulties of individual interests and collective agreement are compounded as the sizes of the collective increases. Another example could be a nation forswearing revenge against an offending neighbor by not going to war, and forgiving the neighboring nation for their trespasses. It is not expected that every member within the collective agree to such forgiveness, because of the inevitable difficulties of achieving a consensus. Indeed, some members of the victimized nation might desire violence and retribution for the injuries they have suffered. However, a collective can be a separate agent that is



distinct from its members. For example, the United States is a collective that is understood as an individual entity, not as the sum of its citizens. The policies and acts of the US are rarely endorsed or opposed by an overwhelming percentage of the population, and often times there is strong disagreement. The difficulty of achieving consensus is one of the primary difficulties in any discussion of collective forgiveness. Agreement becomes more problematic as the size of the collective, such as the United States, becomes larger. As with any collective, actions may be taken without a consensus, and such acts reflect on the collective as a whole. Furthermore, the collective's desire to seek revenge, or at least be resentful for the injuries, will inevitably lack a consensus.

Agreement in a collective becomes more important when dealing with collective injuries. Although the collective forgives as a whole, single, unified agent, its members presumably suffered differently. For example, imagine the United States government offering a collective apology for its endorsement of the enslavement and the ensuing discrimination of Africans throughout its history. Attempting to exemplify such an apology seems impossible, because it is either too brief and does not adequately quantify the moral significance of the injuries, or it could be too long, making it unwieldy and causing many of the injuries to be "lost in the shuffle." However, as argued above, my interpretations of forgiveness require that the offenders offer sincere and remorseful apologies for the injuries they caused. Apologies are necessary for individual forgiveness, because they start the moral dialog about the nature of the injuries. Collective apologies serve the same purpose, but are complicated as collective

forgiveness. But even if an acceptable apology was to be offered, and the African American community was to collectively decide to accept it and forgive the US government, some members would have suffered differently. This is important, because of the tensions created between collective forgiveness, and the interests of its members. Non-dialogical forms of forgiveness (forgiving the dead) was mention briefly above, and but the difficulties of one-sided forgiveness is also compounded for collectives.

Another difference between individual and collective forgiveness is the role of memory. Although it was only alluded to briefly above, individual forgiveness requires the memory of the injuries, so that the appropriate harms can be forgiven. However, the remembrance of the injuries is not necessary after they have been forgiven, although such remembrance could explain any lingering resentment. Large instances of collective forgiveness, on the other hand, require a different sort of remembrance of the injuries. Returning to the example of American history of endorsing racially based slavery and segregation, if such forgiveness could be achieved, it is not the case that every American citizen must remember the details of each and every injury subsumed under the collective injury. A collective is not the sum of its members, so it is not required that all members of the collective remember the injuries, and such remembrance would be impossible. Instead, the injuries are remembered through a generalized history, specifically the history of the collective.

When nations or otherwise organized groups involving multiple individuals attempt to establish an agreement on the injuries suffered with another large group, the

inevitable disagreements could be insurmountable. Beyond the initial limitations of the countless unrecorded injuries suffered that could not be included, there are instances in which the offending parties refuse to participate in the dialog, or refuse to admit to committing such crimes. Such a refusal to participate in a dialog to establish a narrative could be interpreted as an instance in which the offenders are unwilling accept the moral standings of their victims, and thus may not allow the offenders to be fully forgiven. At the same time, a partially agreed-upon narrative and an unforgiving group of victims could further the animosity between the victims and the offenders. But even a partially agreed-upon narrative would accomplish the task of acknowledging the moral standing of both parties, because of the moral dialog necessary to agree on at least some of the injuries. In this sense, even if resentment is not forsworn and the victims' claims against their offenders are not disavowed, the moral standing of both groups would be recognized. The offenders' recognition of the morality of their victims could also acknowledge the wrongness of the injustices, and could indirectly promise that such crimes will not be repeated. Even if they do not forgive their offenders, this indirect promise may suffice for the victims. The collaboration on a narrative runs the risk that if important details are neglected or forgotten, then additional harms could result from such a loss of details. For example, it would seem that in reconciling with Germany after the Holocaust, additional harms would be created if the Auschwitz death camp were completely forgotten. In this sense, there seems to be a duty to remember such harms, and to fail to remember them is itself another injury. From here, it is important to

remember the distinction between collective identities, and how the collective remembers particular details, from individual memory and how individuals may suffer greater harms from the lack of such details. Just because a collectively agreed-upon narrative may not include some particular details does not imply that the individuals within the collectives would forget them, or that their particular sufferings can be accounted for as the collective forgiveness is then disseminated. That is, the individual details can be encompassed by the collective memory and forgiveness, and then acknowledged by the individuals themselves.

The injuries that are necessary for individual forgiveness are required to cause the victim to resent her offender, because she cannot forswear revenge unless the revenge is motivated by resentment. However, the role of the resentment loses its importance after forgiveness has been achieved: whether or not the victim retains her resentment does not influence the forgiveness after it had been achieved. Collective forgiveness, on the other hand, need not require resentment at all. More specifically, the resentment need not be experienced by all members of the collective, or even the collective as a whole, because there could be other motivations for collective forgiveness that are not subsumed under resentment and revenge. That is, “both offenders and victims have reasons to overlook obstacles confronting collective [forgiveness]”<sup>51</sup> that are dependent on the nature of the collective injuries, and the relationship between the parties. The many difficulties of achieving collective forgiveness are readily apparent,<sup>52</sup> but do not imply that the

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, *I Was Wrong*, 157.

collective injuries are unforgivable. However, unforgivable injuries must be collective.

The next chapter will discuss the collective nature of the unforgivable, and distinguish the unforgivable from the unforgiven.

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<sup>52</sup> See Smith, *I Was Wrong*, 157.

## CHAPTER IV

### COLLECTIVE FORGIVENESS AND THE UNFORGIVABLE

The previous chapters defined forgiveness, and showed some of the ways forgiveness is more difficult to achieve for collectives. The difficulties of some instances of collective forgiveness cause the injuries to remain unforgiven. I now will argue that the collective crimes cataloged by Tutu in the introduction are not merely unforgiven, but unforgivable. Similar to the difficulties of interpreting the unforgivable for individual injuries, collective injuries can be understood as distinct from the offensive collective. If a collective is defined by its offenses, then the group may be unforgivable, even though some of its members may be forgiven for their individual participation in the injuries. Although there are difficulties in separating the injury from the offender for individual forgiveness, the offender has a different moral relationship to the victim than the injury. If the crime can be distinguished from the offender, and if the moral community cannot endorse such injuries, then the crime may be unforgivable. A collective, on the other hand, may be defined by the injuries it inflicts. If a collective cannot be separate from the suffering it inflicts, and if such injuries are unforgivable, then the collective may be unforgivable as well. This clearly requires some greater explanation.

I argued above that crimes are never condoned, even though the agents that cause such injuries may still be forgiven. The agent and her act are fundamentally distinct. If the injustice of the crime is granted, and if the agent cannot be distinguished from the

injustice, then the agent and the injustice would also be indistinguishable: the agent is unjust. A collective may be defined in many different ways, but in regard to collective forgiveness, the offending collective may be defined by its members' shared participation in the collective injuries. If a collective cannot be distinguished from the injuries it causes, and if such injuries are deemed unforgivable, then the collective may also be unforgivable. However, each individual member of the collective is not similarly unforgivable, because individuals may not be beyond the possibility of forgiveness. For example, the Ku Klux Klan is a militant white supremacist group that was formed out of racially unjust motives, and participated in the murder of countless African Americans. These murders are unforgivable, and the Klan is a collective that has been united by such violence, so the KKK can be interpreted as an unforgivable collective.

A collective that has been defined by its unforgivable crimes may be beyond the possibility of punishment, but this is not to say that every individual member of the collective is similarly unforgivable. For example, the Nazis cannot be discussed without invoking World War II and the Holocaust. The Holocaust is the epitome of an unforgivable offense, and so the Nazis may be unforgivable because of their inseparable association with the Holocaust. However, not every member of the Nazi party must likewise be unforgivable. Several were coerced to join the Nazi party, and they opposed the persecution of the Jews. These individuals were nominally Nazis, but that is the extent of their association with the Holocaust, and thus they are not unforgivable. Conversely, Hitler is inseparable from either the Nazis or the Holocaust, and so he may be unforgivable.

The ability to forgive some members of an unforgivable collective cannot be reduced to the fact that all members of the collective can be forgiven, because such a reduction would imply a distinction between the collective and its members. Although such a reduction is not impossible, and depending on how the collective has been grouped, could be possible, this is not always the case. Just as there are difficulties in achieving collective forgiveness, because of the different roles each individual played in the injury, some individuals within a collective are inherently tied to the collective's crimes. For example, the president and/or CEO of a corporation may be held accountable for the company's actions, because her position is so closely related to the company that the individual cannot be divorced from his position. Similarly, many of the company's employees have little to no input concerning the company's affairs, and thus are separate and distinct from the company collective. Of course, if the collective is punished as a whole, or if its victims seek collective revenge against it, then all members might share equally in such retributive justice.

The unforgivable is not merely beyond the possibility of forgiveness because it deals with collective crimes. Instead, the unforgivable is based on Hannah Arendt's notion of "radical evil." Arendt's description of "absolute evil" in the first edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* illustrates the unforgivable: "When the impossible was made possible it became the unpunishable, unforgivable absolute evil."<sup>53</sup> The unforgivable must be beyond the possibility of punishment. However, the key members of the collective can surely be punished for their roles in the collective injuries. For example, the CEO could be indicted for authorizing her company's actions, but a legally sanctioned punishment of all members of the company is not applicable.

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<sup>53</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1951), 433.



In Chapter I, I argued that a victim can still forgive her offender, even after the offender has been punished by a third party. Individual forgiveness allows for a distinction between punishment and revenge. Although collectives may have difficulty of designating a third party arbitrator as a moral authority to punish their offenders, punishment can also coexist with collective forgiveness, and is distinct from the forswearing of revenge. If the unforgivable is beyond the possibility of forgiveness and punishment, then revenge and punishment become similarly impossible. Because of this, the unforgivable does not require a distinction between revenge and punishment, because they are both impossible retaliations against the offenders. This means that an unforgivable collective injury cannot be forgiven by a third party.

If a crime can be punished, then the punishment must fit the crime. This is not to say crimes that are neither punished nor forgiven are instances of the radical evil, as Arendt believes. One could argue that murder is unforgivable. However, according to Arendt, the unforgivable is beyond punishment and forgiveness. A murderer can be forgiven, and she most certainly may be punished. Such forms of punishment often include capital punishment, or life imprisonment, both of which represent the “eye for an eye” mentality that the punishment should fit the crime.

Collective murders are beyond the possibility of punishment, because there is no punishment that would adequately fit the crime. In the case of American slavery and the ensuing segregation, there are no ways such injuries could be reciprocated or reflected in an appropriate punishment. Furthermore, the notions of offenders and victims are so blurred that the collective recipients of the punishment would be unwieldy and difficult to comprehend. But just because the punishment is beyond the realm of practicality does

not imply that the collective crimes, American slavery, are unforgivable. The notion of collective forgiveness, and its connection to the unforgivable will need to be unpacked further. Furthermore, it must be asked whether the notion of “beyond punishment” can be understood theoretically, if such punishment cannot possibly be realized. If punishment is beyond practicality, then the crime is unforgiven, but not necessarily unforgivable. It is conceivable that a small group of white extremists could be punished for their racially motivated collective crimes against a small group of African Americans. If the offenders are neither punished, nor forgiven, then their crimes remain unforgiven. However, as a sample of the large issue of racially motivated discrimination, their part of the overarching collective injuries cannot be forgiven; it is unforgivable.

Collective injuries are unforgivable because they are dehumanizing in nature. Although I primarily rely on Arendt’s description of the unforgivable as radical evil, it is worth examining a few other interpretations of the unforgivable. Charles Griswold believes that “no agent is absolutely and forever unforgivable.”<sup>54</sup> First, it is noteworthy that Griswold denies the possibility of the unforgivable for individuals, which coincides with my argument that only collective injuries are unforgivable. More importantly, his justification is that deeming someone unforgivable is to demonize her and view her as less than human. This is interesting because my discussion of the unforgivable had primarily focused on how the collective injuries dehumanize the victims, but not the offenders. The demonization of the offenders poses interesting questions about whether or not additional harms would be inflicted on the offenders. “For to respect [the offenders] qua human is to refuse to reduce them to their wrong-doing and to hold open

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<sup>54</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 93.

‘their capacity for reflection and transformation.’”<sup>55</sup> Of course, the possible demonization is applicable to all instances of forgiveness, and such harms are incomparable to the dehumanization for the unforgivable collective injuries. That is, the concern of such demonization pales in comparison to the unforgivable injuries, especially because the victims would not be able to retaliate against their offenders in turn. Their suffering is unforgivable because they cannot reciprocate against their offenders. Although this paper is primarily focused on the victims’ role in forgiveness, this is clearly an important concern for this discussion. Initially it appears that demonizing offenders could be, at least in part, the cause of the injuries being unforgivable.

The notions of the unforgivable are furthered by Jacques Derrida, who argues that “forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable. One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable.”<sup>56</sup> According to Derrida, the unforgivable are the highest examples of what forgiveness hopes to achieve, yet is inherently impossible. Derrida’s inherent contradiction of forgiveness and the unforgivable is only worth noting to show the difficulties amongst the different interpretations of collective injuries, because it illustrates the complications of such discussions. Continuing with our topic, it is important to note the role of agency in the unforgivable. In order to forgive, an individual agent must forswear revenge. For example, a survivor of the Holocaust may forgive the Nazis to cope with the memory of her sufferings. And yet, the Holocaust is undoubtedly an absolute and radical evil that is

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<sup>55</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 93.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, “On Forgiveness,” 32.

unforgivable,<sup>57</sup> because it cannot be punished, let alone by an individual. Such an individual agent lacks the moral authority to forgive on behalf of all survivors.

If the unforgivable involves collectives, then there is the difficulty of constructing an adequate notion of collective agency to allow for collective forgiveness. More importantly, however, is that the unforgivable, as radical evil undermines the very possibility for agency. For example, Kant's use of radical evil presupposed human will and that there are comprehensible motives that can explain radical evil. But this is precisely what Arendt is calling into question: "we actually have nothing to fall back on in order to understand a phenomenon that nevertheless confronts us with its overpowering reality."<sup>58</sup> Arendt understands radical evil as the attack against humanity, which in turns undermines morality. An attack on humanity and morality cannot be countered with the humanist morality of forgiveness, because these are the very features being destroyed by radical evil. Radical evil represents the unforgivable, because of its superfluousness: "To make human beings superfluous is to eradicate the very conditions that make humanity possible: ... Mass murder, genocide, unbearable large-scale suffering by innocent people, systematic torture and terror."<sup>59</sup> Radical evil necessarily deals with collectives, so there is collective unforgivable.

Similar to forgiveness, the unforgivable requires resentment. However, such resentment is not a necessary condition, as it is in forgiveness. Instead, resentment is an unavoidable result of the collectively unforgivable injuries:

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<sup>57</sup> Indeed, it was the incomprehensible nature of the Nazis and the Holocaust that first prompted Arendt adopt the notion of "radical evil." See Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 139.

<sup>58</sup> Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 143.

<sup>59</sup> Bernstein, *Hannah Arendt and the Jewish Question*, 144.

If the offenders are not forgivable, [then] the injured should let go of as much anger as possible for other reasons, including peace of mind. Nonetheless it would be true that a person who is in principle unforgivable warrants resentment forever. Similarly, it would also be a mistake to hold that, given the frequency with which humans have treated each other cruelly and brutally, the thesis that such behavior is unforgivable ‘offers a blueprint for lasting hatred ongoing conflict, and sagas of revenge.’<sup>60</sup>

The unforgivable does not serve a purpose, since it does not strive for any particular ends, although care must be taken, because of the propensity for the unforgivable to be dehumanizing. Furthermore, “the magnitude of the wrong done generates doubt that anything could ever ‘make up for’ a truly atrocious wrong whose effects on you are permanent. The doubts are not dispelled by the argument that acknowledgement of our humanity is sufficient reason for forgiveness.”<sup>61</sup> Radical evil undermines the agency and humanity of its victims, and thus the shared humanity of the victimized and offending collectives is not sufficient for forgiveness.

Radical evil and the unforgivable dehumanize its victims, but the victims must still be capable of resentment: “The issue of ‘unforgivability’ arises with respect to levels of evil that elicit resentment so deep as to be accompanied by rage; indeed outrage.”<sup>62</sup> Similar to the forms of forgiveness previously discussed, resentment remains consistent in the unforgivable. The resentment cannot dissipate, because forgiveness can never be achieved. If anything, the presence of resentment is a necessary condition for the unforgivable.

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<sup>60</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 92-3.

<sup>61</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 94.

<sup>62</sup> Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 91.

But if resentment is a necessary condition for the unforgivable, then African Americans would be required to be resentful for the unforgivable history of slavery and discrimination. However, they have not sought retaliation on the same scale of the injustices they have suffered, and are not nearly as resentful as such a requirement would seem to necessitate. But this does not mean that they have forgiven themselves, the European slave traders, American slave owners, and nearly everyone else that has been in some way culpable for their sufferings. The crimes are unforgiven, but only because they are quantifiably unforgivable. But even here there is the problem that the unforgiven implies the possibility of forgiveness, whereas the unforgivable excludes such possibilities. The legacy of American segregation and discrimination could be interpreted as unforgivable, because of the collective nature of the crimes, and the difficulty of achieving an appropriate forgiveness for such collective injuries.

## CONCLUSION

My discussion has been admittedly brief, and does not presuppose to offer an encompassing account of forgiveness. However, the definitions of forgiveness that I have laid out can be transferred from individuals to collectives. The inherent difficulties of collective forgiveness often result in the crimes remaining unforgiven, but this does not constitute the unforgivable. To understand the unforgivable, I have distinguished offenses from the offenders. Although it would be a mistake to interpret all crimes as unforgivable, just as all offenders are not immune to unforgivability, the agent must be separate from her actions. Collectives, on the other hand, may be defined as a group because of their collective acts, and thus be inseparably tied to their unforgivable crimes. While some individuals within such unforgivable collectives may be forgiven in spite of the associations with the group, figureheads of the group are likewise inseparable from the collective and its crimes. Although the distinction between an agent and its deeds may seem unintuitive, it is equally unsettling to think of the collective injuries cataloged by Tutu in the introductory quotation as forgivable. Indeed, such atrocities demand that they are unforgivable. Although my arguments may not be the most eloquent, I hope to have provided an understanding of forgiveness that allows for such crimes to remain beyond the possibility of forgiveness.

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