

Narrating Forgiveness:

Conscious and Unconscious Dimensions

Mark Freeman

College of the Holy Cross

During the course of the past several years, I have been exploring (among other things), the work of Emmanuel Levinas, who perhaps more than any other contemporary thinker has underscored the primacy, or priority, of others – other people – in coming to terms with the human condition. In brief, what Levinas suggests is that moral life is not a function of some sort of utilitarian calculus. Nor is it a function of one’s knowledge or some well-articulated set of moral principles. First and foremost, moral life – the life of care and responsibility, brotherly and sisterly love – derives from the presence of the Other: specifically, from the Other’s face, and the immediate and spontaneous demands it makes upon us. “(T)here arises before the face of the other,” Levinas writes, “a responsibility for the other to whom I was committed before any committing” – that is to say, before reflecting upon my possible obligations. “(A)ccess to the face,” he adds, “is straightaway ethical. . . . the face is meaning all by itself.” More to the point still: “The face is what one cannot kill, or at least it is that whose *meaning* consists in saying: ‘thou shalt not kill.’”

The human being, Levinas goes on to suggest, “is the being who recognizes saintliness and the forgetting of self.” Indeed, the human being is the being who recognizes justice and even, perhaps, its ultimate source. “We live in a state,” he writes, “in which the idea of justice is superimposed on that of individual charity, but it is in that

initial charity that the human resides; justice itself can be traced back to it.” Justice itself, in other words, is a direct outgrowth of our “initial charity.” What I’ve come to call the priority of the Other thus lies at the very source of whatever explicit formulations we might fashion regarding goodness and its maintenance.

There is a kind of optimism running throughout Levinas’s thought. In an important sense, his work is about the spontaneity and primacy of goodness itself. One might even say that, for Levinas, *the priority of the Other is the priority of the Good*; and this dual priority is signified by the very spontaneity of our care, devotion, and *love* in the face-to-face situation. Put in the simplest of terms, the other person comes *before* me, comes *first*. Now, none of this, Levinas acknowledges, means that one can’t be quite awful to other people or that one cannot kill: “Murder, it is true,” he says, “is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity.” But the commandment *not* to do so remains, as he puts it, “the first word of the face.” What’s more, even in those kinds of situations in which we might most want to strike back at the Other, where it would seem that justice calls for retribution and revenge, the face of the Other remains in view. There is no negotiation of our responsibility here, no room for qualifying the nature of our obligation; the matter is simply unconditional.

There is much that is appealing about Levinas’s perspective. The very spontaneity and unconditionality of the Other’s priority has a certain “cleanliness” about it. In many ways, it jives with a good deal of experience too: when one truly sees the faces of others, including one’s enemies, especially when one sees them suffering or in pain, there does often seem to be a kind of unmediated power, a magnetic force that somehow draws forth our care. The other thing that’s appealing about Levinas’s

perspective is that it provides an opening not only for forgiveness but for peace. Rather than seeing the war of all against all as primary, rather than seeing hatred and cruelty to be inevitable, the suggestion here is that our most primordial impulses are in fact other-directed – or, maybe more appropriately, directed by the Other. “The concreteness of the Good,” Levinas insists, “is the worth of the other [person]. It is only to some formalization that the ambivalence of worth appears, as undecidable, at equal distance between Good and Evil. In the worth of the other [person], the Good is more ancient than Evil.” I hope he’s right.

But there is a problem here. As Levinas would surely admit, he is not doing psychology. He’s offering an *ethics*, which is his own version of first philosophy. But the fact remains that psychological matters are very much relevant to the practicability of Levinas’s ethical program. I’ve therefore found myself wondering, despite the great appeal of Levinas’s way of thinking, whether it is in fact *right*. After I knew I’d been giving a talk at this conference, I found myself being extra attentive to issues and events bearing on the idea, and ideal, of forgiveness. I remember hearing relatives of the Oklahoma bombing victims essentially insisting that forgiveness was simply out of the question, that indeed nothing short of death would fit Timothy McVeigh’s crime. I also remember seeing the awful outcry of friends and relatives of the 21 victims of a Palestinian suicide bomber, who had decimated an Israeli café filled with innocent young people, just out for a good time. Then there was the response of the parents of the British child who’d been brutally murdered by two young boys, upon learning that these boys were to go free. There was no question of forgiveness here either; the wound was too

deep, the rage at injustice too strong. We can, of course, add to this list the dreadful events of the past week.

Now, there are other situations in which I may *want* to forgive the other person. It may even be the case, some have suggested, that people have a *need* to forgive, or at least to repair the damage that's been done, to somehow re-bind oneself both to the person of the perpetrator and, by extension, to the community of one's fellow human beings, struggling through the world. I may in fact try to forgive the other person and, in the aftermath of my efforts, consciously believe that I *have* forgiven this person. But none of this means that I have truly done so. Here, then, the issue has to do with the psychological limits of forgiveness.

Let me present an example from a memoir called *My Father's House* I wrote about some time ago that brings this issue into relief. The book, by Sylvia Fraser, is a quite remarkable story of a woman who, sometime during her late forties, arrived at the startling realization that she had been sexually abused by her father throughout her childhood and on into early adolescence. Without going into too many of the details of the book, suffice it to say that her reconstruction of the past, made in the wake of her discovery, made for a most sordid story. As a child, she would cry when her mother put her to bed, though because of the incredible power of dissociation never knew quite why. There had also been fits, in which she would turn blue and need to have her tongue held in place with a wooden stick. And there was intense fear and anger. As for how it was that she managed to keep quiet about those terrible trysts with her father, her newly-found memories had indicated that her father had made awful threats, for instance to kill her beloved cat. It was easy to recall the magnitude of her hate; it had been right there,

palpable and real, at the time it happened. The reason for it, however, would remain a secret, for many years to come. Much of the book seeks to articulate the consequences of this terrible secret, for her sense of self, for her relationships, for her very life, with its countless blank passages and irrational fears. There would be weeping and rage, pouring out of her, she writes, “like lava, devastating everything in her path.” At one point, she came to openly hate her father as well, though “without knowing why.” Eventually, there would be depression, “seeping like poisonous fog through the cracks in my life.” Even when the sun was shining – i.e., when all seemed to be going well – she had found herself “slipping into the shadows.” In a distinct sense, her life had been like a puzzle, with some of the most significant pieces missing.

Upon discovering what had happened, many years later, her entire history had undergone a drastic shift: “The mysteries of a lifetime, shadowy deeds dimly suspected, have been clarified.” In any case, and to make a long story, Fraser goes on to recount her own response to this terrible revelation. “I suspect,” she writes, “he paid as dearly as I for the amnesia that was once his salvation. As in the child’s game of statues, we remained frozen at our darkest hour, with no possibility of forgiveness or compassion or redemption while he lived. I know that now.”

What she also knew, or came to believe, was that her father was not a monster. From her perspective, he was just another pitiful and tragic human being, shortchanged in his own way by the life he had come to live. He had often been tender to her when she was a child and had made her feel special, and even though this tenderness had become corrupted as time wore on, it had conferred upon at least a part of her the conviction that she was worthy of love. There could be some rationalization at work here, I would

venture; Fraser's father may well have acted more out of violence than she may have wanted to believe. But ultimately, she suggests, he was no different than the rest of us: "All of us are born into the second act of a tragedy-in-progress, then spend the rest of our lives trying to figure out what went wrong in the first act." Rationalization or not, Fraser's own way of processing and emplotting what had happened involves recognizing the foibles and weaknesses of human beings, of which her father was one. Even if he was less tender than she wanted to believe, then, he would have been no less tragic a character in her eyes and no less human.

The narrative Fraser elects to tell, of one human being affected by another, both of whom are engaged in the timelessly tragic pursuit of living their lives as best they can, is a function of the very beliefs she holds about what human beings ultimately are. Someone else, having undergone similar events, might have told a quite different story: of a man, for instance, who was the very incarnation of evil, and who, having ruined at least one person's life for good, could never be forgiven; he would be the albatross who remained around her neck until the end of time. Forgiveness, it could be argued, may be decidedly inappropriate in this context; it would serve to exonerate not only the perpetrator in question but all of those others who have elected to victimize innocent people on account of their own perversity or hate. Human beings are ultimately free, it might be argued here; they have the capacity to transcend their own pathetic problems by simply refusing to indulge themselves in patently immoral acts. There would thus be little reason, from this perspective, to say that this man was but another tragic player on the human stage. He was a criminal, plain and simple, and in the interest of being

responsible both to oneself and to other potential victims, the only appropriate decision would have been to get back at him in some way, if only he were still alive to pay.

Fraser does not pretend to completely understand her father and his ways. “Though I don't understand him,” she writes, “I can pity him and forgive him.” Remarkably enough, she can also love him, she insists, and live with that love rather than hate, which would only serve to hurt her more. But here we might ask: Could she really forgive him given the profound terror he'd inflicted upon her? Is it possible that there other meanings to be derived from her story than the ones Fraser herself has supplied? Looking back on her life from one vantage point, “I see nothing but devastation. A blasted childhood, an even worse adolescence, betrayal, divorce, craziness, professional stalemate, financial uncertainty and always, always a secret eating like dry rot at my psyche. That is the dark side, the story I have told in this book. Yet, like the moon, my life has another side, one with some luminosity.”

In line with Fraser's stance concerning her father, “Mine,” she writes, “turns out to be a story without villains.” Note the moral convictions fueling this story: “Children who were in some way abused,” she adds, “abuse others; victims become villains. Thus, not to forgive only perpetuates the crime, creates more victims.” This is not to say that no crime was committed or that what happened was acceptable. “That some people do survive, that emotional health often requires the abused to forgive the abuser does not make the crime more acceptable.” But forgiveness, she tells us – for the person, if not the crime – still remains the proper path.

I must confess to you that I've questioned Fraser's own narrative of forgiveness.

I don't mean to suggest that I don't believe her; that is a different matter altogether.

What I am suggesting is that I've come to wonder, seriously, about whether indeed, given the massiveness of the repeated assaults upon her, and the threats, and the betrayal, she could have forgiven him in the way she claims. It's exactly at this point that I would want to raise the distinction between *conscious* dimensions of forgiveness and *unconscious*. Her own very humane version of forgiveness notwithstanding, there are aspects of Fraser's reconstruction of the past – her proclamation of love, the notion of there being no villains, her insistence that it's better to forgive than not to, and so on – that may warrant questioning.

Now, on one level, I realize, one might ask: Who am I to question this woman's account? Who is anyone? A bit more substantively, one might also ask: Isn't it enough when one simply says, "*I forgive.*" Doesn't the saying make it so? Here, of course, it depends on what sort of vision of the human being one holds. If in fact the human being is able, through a declaration, a sovereign act of will, to enact "authentic" forgiveness (for lack of a better way of putting it), then her word – and anyone else's word – stands. If, on the other hand, the human being is prey to ideas, wishes, and impulses that are largely *outside* of will and consciousness, then one must retain some measure of suspicion about these matters. This is not merely a matter of getting to "the truth," in some abstract sense. It's a matter of being mindful of the fact that, even in the face of what appears to be authentic forgiveness and rapprochement, there can still remain destructive undercurrents of hostility and rage and, thus, further work to be done. Premature forgiveness, or forgiveness that is largely devoid of depth, can be a kind of self-betrayal. It can alienate people from the very passions that have yet to be named and

worked-through. What's more, it can harm the very relationship it seeks to mend. Along these lines, I would speak not only of conscious and unconscious dimensions of forgiveness but *true* and *false* forgiveness, one that binds and one that, on some level, at some point, cannot help but divide, both intra-personally and inter-personally.

In raising these issues, I'm referring essentially to the psychological *capacity* to forgive, whatever one's need or desire to forgive might be. As I suggested earlier, however, there's also the question – partly psychological, partly moral – about the *appropriateness* of forgiveness, at least in certain situations. Fraser, you'll recall, had said at one point that not to forgive only perpetuates the crime, creates more victims. This rings true on some level. There's enough hate in the world; to put more into it doesn't seem to make sense. And yet: there are issues of justice involved, in Fraser's case and well beyond. More to the point: there are situations, some might argue – this week's terrible events surely come to mind in this context – in which the sheer heinousness of the crimes seem, on the face of it, to *outstrip* any possibility of charity and forgiveness. I'm not just talking about the moral dimension here, important though it is. I'm talking about the psychological dimension, about the capacity to forgive.

This of course brings us to a very, very murky area. For what we're being forced to entertain here is a kind of scale of horror and evil. Some things, we might say, are very bad but the product of human foibles or ignorance of weakness and thus seem to be within the realm of the forgivable. Other things, though, seem to go over the line. But what is this line? Who's is it? And what is its ethical and moral foundation? Relevant though it surely is, magnitude of pain and suffering probably can't resolve the problem at hand either. Nor can the disclosure of the perpetrator's intentions. Finally, it really isn't

altogether clear how to establish this line of demarcation between the forgivable and the unforgivable.

Will there come a time when the people who lost loved ones this past week will be able, and ready, to forgive? Is it within their capacity, *our* capacity, to do this? There's also, again, the question of whether this even *ought* to happen, which brings matters of justice back into the picture; but for present purposes I want to remain within the psychological realm. Right now, it's hard for me, and probably many of you, to think about last week's events through the idiom of forgiveness. More than likely, forgiving the perpetrators, whoever they were, wasn't the first thing that came to mind – surely not yet, maybe not ever. It's also hard to imagine how people who have suffered enormous losses, as a function of sheer terror, will ever be able to forgive. And even if they do so consciously, based, for instance, on a deep and unshakable faith, there's still some question about whether unconscious realities can follow in tow. I therefore find myself exploring these issues with some measure of uncertainty.

Having said all this, let me hasten to add that I find myself on the horns of a dilemma, even a paradox of sorts. Although I'm quite convinced that there can be and often is unfinished psychological business, so to speak – indeed, maybe unfinishable psychological business – I also find myself convinced that, *somehow*, there does emerge the possibility of true forgiveness, among some, who have suffered absolutely horrific assaults. Just this week (in a story about forgiveness that the *Boston Globe* ran), I read of a father whose daughter had been raped and murdered and who, for years, had suffered depression and had experienced both rage and terrible guilt over the fact that he hadn't protected her. Therapy, focused on forgiveness, had effected a huge shift in his world,

for the better. Remarkably enough, he'd actually spoken to his daughter's killer and had begun volunteering in local prisons. I recently came across another such story as well. The parents of a woman murdered in South Africa – who had fought against apartheid but had been mistaken by her murderers as another white oppressor – eventually forgave their daughter's murderers – in the name of *her* beliefs, values, and moral ideals. *She* came before vengeance and retaliation. Hearing her parents speak, it was if her ideals, her own vision of the good, still alive, sucked away the rage in their hearts. I might also mention the story that Aaron Lazare referred to this morning, of Pham Thi Kim Phuc, the Vietnamese girl, who had been napalmed and who had run through the streets, naked and filled with terror. This girl, who came to be known as Kim, had eventually gone through some seventeen operations. Apparently, she also became a goodwill ambassador for UNESCO, and one day the pilot who'd dropped the bomb that had maimed her learned that Kim would be speaking at a Veterans Day observance in Washington, not far from his home.

“Kim's speech included the following (I'm borrowing this from Robert Karen's book on *The Forgiving Self*): 'If I could talk face to face with the pilot who dropped the bombs, I would tell him that we cannot change history, but we should try to do good things for the present. . . . ' Plummer, in the audience, wrote her a note: 'I am that man,' and asked an officer to take it to her. At the end of the speech, he pushed through the crowd to reach, and soon they were face-to-face.' She just opened her arms to me,' Plummer recounted. 'I fell into her arms sobbing. All I could say is, 'I'm sorry. I'm just so sorry.' ”

“‘It’s all right,’ Kim responded. ‘I forgive. I forgive.’” Five months later, still connected by their peculiar history,” Karen notes, “the two were shown in an AP wirephoto, their heads touching, almost cheek to cheek, his arm around her, both smiling with an incongruous delight, as if he had never order the raid that left her body scarred and in permanent pain and he did not live with recurrent nightmares.” When Karen called Plummer some four years later, Kim had just been by for a visit.

Now, it could of course be that the entire series of events recounted here bespeaks a flat-out denial of the realities of the past and their psychic continuation into the present. Perhaps the past has been rewritten here in such a way as to submerge or distort the unspeakable truth. For the time being, though, let us assume that the sentiments expressed in this story – both conscious and unconscious – are roughly as they appear. Let us assume, in other words, that Kim truly did forgive him and that Plummer, in turn, truly forgave himself for what he had done. What we’re assuming here, therefore, is that, somehow, it truly is possible to forgive even the most terrible assaults. But at this point, of course, a number of questions need to be raised: Does this possibility exist for *any* such assault, no matter what the magnitude? Is it fair to assume that, because Kim was able to forgive, the possibility to do so exists in all of us? Perhaps most importantly for present purposes: Assuming, again, that forgiveness in the face of horrific assaults does exist as a human possibility (at least for some), what is it that allows it to take place?

Let me try to be clearer about what the dilemma I mentioned earlier is about. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to assume that the “natural” (or at least “normal”) human response to such assaults is to be rageful, perhaps hateful, *un-forgiving*, especially at the outset. It’s possible, I suppose, that there are people who are forgive immediately,

or close to immediately. But these people are surely the exception rather than rule. It would be the rare person indeed who could truly *live* the priority of the Other right away; more often, the desire to “get back,” and in many cases to *annihilate* the perpetrator in question, will surface first. I would go one step farther in this context as well. You’re all familiar with the plea to “forgive and forget.” Well, the first thing I’d want to say about this idea is that it may not always be the best thing to try to do: even if forgiveness remains an ideal, forgetting may not be. The second thing I’d want to say is that, even though it may be possible to truly forgive, it’s probably quite *impossible* to truly forget. Along these lines – and Donald Shriver mentioned this idea as well – “forgive and remember” may a more suitable motto to adopt in the face of past assaults. In any case, the main point is that, psychologically speaking, it would seem impossible ever to be “fully done” with these assaults and their echoes in memory. If Freud (among others) is right, there simply is no full forgetting, surely not of highly significant events of the sort being considered. And since there is no full forgetting, it would that there would be no full forgiving either. It would seem, in other words, that there would always be traces left over, unconscious vestiges of the never-to-fully-be-worked-through experiences of the past.

Here, we should note that some people, in light of the suffering and horror they’ve been through, may in fact *not* be able to forgive. Whether or not they *ought* to be able to do so remains an important question, of course. Understanding, it’s sometimes said, leads to forgiveness; and, as some might maintain, it’s our human responsibility to try to understand. But of course there are some things that not only can’t be understood but, some have argued, *ought not to be* since the very act of comprehending them cannot help

but mitigate their enormity. So it is that some have spoken, in the context of the Holocaust especially, of the “obscenity” of explanation. In some instances, it would seem, there can *be* no explanation, no understanding, and certainly no “letting-go” or “getting-over.” And so it is that we find ourselves confronting, in yet another form, the *limits* of forgiveness.

On the other hand, though – and by way of returning to the earlier assumption – it does seem possible, for *some*, truly to forgive. Whatever it is that may remain, evermore, of the past, in other words, and however much people may resist, rightfully perhaps, the very act of understanding, it may nevertheless be possible for some people to somehow *move beyond* the poisonous hold of the past. That is, they somehow find themselves able to *refigure* the past, to *rewrite* it in such a way as to break the stronghold of hate and vengeance. The dilemma, or paradox, then, is this: “Human nature,” such as it is, often seems to lead us in the direction of the *limits* of forgiveness. Some instances, though, do seem to lead us in the direction of *possibility*. As for how this possibility is to be made actual, let me suggest two things in closing. The first is fairly straightforward: what’s often need to actualize the possibility of forgiveness is a *moral reason*, and a *moral commitment* – to the *good* – that trumps the crimes of the past. The parents of the woman murdered in South Africa had forgiven their daughter’s murderers, you’ll recall, in her name and in the name of her moral ideals and commitments. A similar thing seemed to be going on in Kim’s case too; she herself had been determined to serve good; and this very service seemed to allow some of her intense pain to dissipate and diminish. So one possible pathway to forgiveness has to do with fidelity to an ideal that is of transcendent significance, to a good that overcomes and renders impotent the bad that’s been done.

The second conclusion is a bit stranger but, I think, plausible. And that is that forgiveness, at times, may require of us that we somehow move *beyond* nature, beyond our “normal” human reactions to things. Or, to put the matter another way, forgiveness may at times be understood as an act of *self*-transcendence, of rising above one’s impulses and, on some level, one’s very self. In this sense, forgiveness may be a capacity not so much of *mind*, tied to understanding, or *will*, of some inward “act,” but of *spirit*, which draws one outward, toward the Other.

There’s an important implication that follows from this idea. To the extent that the meaning of forgiveness is tied to understanding, or to letting-go, or to getting-over, the act of forgiveness cannot help but come up against limits, possibly severe limits. Oftentimes, there *can be* neither understanding nor letting-go nor getting-over or beyond. What this implies, in turn, is that perhaps there is the need to *rethink* the meaning of forgiveness, to see it less as something “I” do than as something that calls me beyond myself somehow, in the name not only of this or that person but of humanity itself and of doing *justice* to it. It’s to recognize, finally, that love is better than hate.

Rethinking the meaning of forgiveness in this way leads to three corollary conclusions: First, forgiveness is only in tension with justice if we understand justice only in terms of *retribution* to the exclusion of *restoration*. *Both* of these are dimensions of justice, and often, both need to be brought to bear on the matters in question. Second, it may be, some have said, that what seems most unforgivable – what on one level may in fact *be* unforgivable – is precisely that which most requires our forgiveness. Finally, it may also be that the human capacity for forgiveness – in the broad sense of rising-above

and seeing, once more, the face of the Other – is decidedly larger than is sometimes assumed.

This brings me full circle. Perhaps, in the end, Levinas is right after all, at least in the sense of giving us an ideal vision, to try to realize when we can. The Other comes before me, he had told us; he or she is a *priority*. By realizing the priority of the Other, by placing the ethical realm first, over and above our “natural response” to things, there sometimes emerges the possibility of our being lifted beyond ourselves, truly forgiving others even as we continue to feel the deep suffering they’ve left behind.