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Strandberg, Hugo

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6.

Forgiveness and the Dead

Hugo Strandberg

Åbo Akademi University, Finland

Abstract: One of Patočka's central examples in "The phenomenology of afterlife" is how to understand one's relation to one's dead father. Since relations of fathers and sons are not seldom difficult, also after the father's death, a need for forgiveness might arise here, the need for the son to forgive and be forgiven by his father. This would be an interesting instance of the problems brought about by the loss of reciprocity that is a central theme of Patočka's text. Pointing to the need to forgive and be forgiven is one way of showing why Patočka is right when he writes: "[I]t is only in relation to another [...] that we become what we are, and yet other and otherwise than we were before." This then raises the question whether the son's relationship to his dead father will remain forever as difficult as it was at the time of the father's death, whether its possible transformation is the result of a move on the son's side only, or whether some form of reciprocity is still possible.

Keywords: Forgiveness, death, reciprocity, relationality, God, miracle, conscience, Jan Patočka

In "The phenomenology of afterlife", Jan Patočka writes (this volume, /137/):¹

afterlife has much greater importance and intensity where life with the other had the utmost positive character, where it brought fulfilment; on the other hand, where it took a negative shape and obstructed our fulfilment, where it was a life of hardship and hatred, coming to terms with the dead is easy and it does not have the character of retaining, but rather leaving easily and fading away – unless we are enjoying the feeling of revenge etc.

¹ The numbers within slashes refer to the page numbers of the printed Czech text, included within slashes in the above English translation.

Although I believe I understand what Patočka is referring to here, there are also experiences very different from these. For example, and staying with one of Patočka's central examples, relationships between fathers and sons are not seldom difficult, also after the death of the father. These difficulties need not involve hatred specifically; the son might even understand that the difficulties were not (only) his father's fault. But precisely because of the strained nature of the relationship, coming to terms with the dead will not be easy and it will have the character of retaining; the son's grief over the death of his father might be more intense, precisely because the grief is also for a hope that now seems definitely extinguished, the hope of their coming together in, say, a father/son friendship.

Thus far, I have set up the theme of this essay in contrast to Patočka. However, thinking in greater depth about the case I have sketched above will, I believe, make it possible for us to work out some of the suggestions in his text in more detail. Specifically, reflecting on the need for forgiveness that might arise here, the need for the son to forgive and be forgiven by his father, is one way of showing why Patočka is right when he writes (this volume, /140/): "[I]t is only in relation to another [...] that we become what we are, and yet other and otherwise than we were before." The need to forgive and be forgiven would also be an interesting instance of the problems brought about by the loss of reciprocity that is a central theme of Patočka's text. The question that arises here is thus whether the son's relationship to his dead father will remain forever as difficult as it was at the time of the father's death, whether its possible transformation is the result of a move on the son's side only, or whether some (though obviously not any) form of reciprocity would still be possible. As Kierkegaard puts it (1963, 341 (SKS 9:351)): "If [...] a change sets in in the relation of one living and one dead, it is however clear, isn't it, that it must be the one living who has changed." Kierkegaard's "isn't it" is rhetorical, but in the context of this essay I take it as a genuine question.

The relationality of forgiveness

Problems brought about by death are seldom discussed by philosophers who write on forgiveness. This might be surprising, but it is a result of their largely psychological conception of forgiveness.² If forgiveness is about the waning of certain feelings, feelings of

² To this can be added that philosophers writing on forgiveness most often picture themselves as victims, not as perpetrators. As a result of this, the difficulty of asking one's dead father's forgiveness will not be taken up for discussion, at most only the difficulty of forgiving him. For this and the above description of contemporary

resentment say, death does not make much of a difference. Such feelings of resentment might wane no matter whether the one they are directed to is alive or dead. Likewise, a dead person does not have such feelings anyway, so the issue of forgiveness would disappear with her death; one might even say that with such a psychological conception of forgiveness, one would automatically forgive all survivors at the point of one's death. This take on forgiveness thus disregards its relationality, the fact that I turn to the one I have hurt and ask her forgiveness, hoping for a positive answer, and that I tell, and long to tell, the one I have forgiven that I have done so. Conversely, the difficulties of forgiveness, if I, say, find certain topics very hard to approach when talking with the person I have hurt, are obviously difficulties our relation will then be marred by. However, "asking", "answer" and "tell" should here be understood in a wide sense, for words need not be involved (and are in most cases not involved, in my experience).³ For example, forgiveness often takes place in the meeting of eyes and in friendly smiles. The relationality of forgiveness thus means that forgiveness does not only involve me but just as much the one whom my difficulties concern. It is precisely for this reason that death is a problem: I need to address and be addressed by someone who is not there.

Why is there such a need? In his text, Patočka writes (this volume, /140/): "[I]t is only in relation to another [...] that we become what we are, and yet other and otherwise than we were before." For my purposes, the general bearing of this claim is not important. Instead, I will discuss it in relation to forgiveness specifically. I will do so by discussing an imagined case, the complicated relationship between a son and his father. It is the relationship that is complicated, which means that each one is responsible for the problems, at the same time as the problems would not exist were it not for the other one. The need to forgive and the need to be forgiven are therefore not to be sharply distinguished here, but nonetheless I will mostly focus on one of these, the need to be forgiven, because in this way the questions I want to ask are easier to bring into view but also more difficult to answer.

philosophy of forgiveness, see Strandberg 2021, esp. ch. 1 and 7. (In order not to repeat myself, in this essay I approach the issue of forgiveness in a different, but hopefully not incompatible, way than I do in Strandberg 2021. Still, the discussions in that book are helpful to anyone who wants a deeper understanding of the questions I explore in this essay and who wants a critical discussion of the contemporary philosophy of forgiveness; references to Strandberg 2021 could have been added frequently here, and I have therefore abstained from doing so.)

³ Cf. Kierkegaard 1963, 328 (SKS 9:338).

So, being the son who mourns my dead father, with whom I had a complicated relationship,⁴ the forgiveness that I now feel I need can be understood in correlation to my bad conscience. If this bad conscience is understood solely psychologically, no relationality is involved (at least not on the face of it).⁵ According to such a psychological interpretation, what I need would thus be, say, to be cheered up, and my father is not needed for that; I could just as well meet some friends or watch a feel-good film. What is disregarded here is the way in which my bad conscience involves my father, that he is its intentional object, as it were: I have a bad conscience *for* what I have done to *him*. The forgiveness I need corresponds to the bad conscience: I need to be forgiven *for* what I have done, I need to be forgiven by *him*. Conscience can be understood as a matter of vision or attention,⁶ as seeing the one I have wronged, in his absence seeing him in front of me; correspondingly, forgiveness can be understood as really coming together with him. The content of the need to be forgiven is thus of a moral nature, and the same consequently also goes for myself, for it is I who suffer privation until I have been given what I need. Or, as Patočka puts it (this volume, /140/): “[I]t is only in relation to another [...] that we become what we are, and yet other and otherwise than we were before.” Forgiveness can be understood fruitfully in Patočka’s terms: in the relation to the one who forgives me, I am brought back to myself, but, on the other hand, this relationship, as a living relationship, is never a mere recuperation.⁷

If we leave it at that, the full relationality of forgiveness would be overlooked, however. Above, I have only mentioned that I cannot create what I need on my own and that my father is the one, the only one, who is able to give me what I need; this is the relationality of forgiveness as described so far. If this were all there was to it, asking his forgiveness would be something I did for my own sake, and the need itself would thus still be understood in individual terms. However, in order to understand the need to be forgiven in all its dimensions, we have to pay attention to the fact that asking his forgiveness is also a way of telling him something that I would like him to hear, such as that I am sorry, in this way showing him, among other things, that my previous hostile attitude towards him is one that I have turned my back on. What I need is to give *him* something, one could say. It is

⁴ In order to bring the real import of the experiences I am discussing into view, it is necessary to write and think in first-person terms. However, in case someone worries: my father is alive and my relation to him far from a bad one. In other words, my discussion is not autobiographical.

⁵ Cf. Buber 1958, 8–10, 31. As Buber points out, a proper understanding of human psychology is not to be had by abstracting from moral relationality. A “solely psychological” account is hence only on the face of it solely psychological.

⁶ Cf. Weil 2008, 154; Weil 1997, 426; Nykänen 2002, 224ff.

⁷ Cf. Levinas 2004, 160–161.

consequently misleading to understand the need to be forgiven in individual terms, for I want to ask his forgiveness as much for his sake as for mine, or, rather, there are not two sakes here but one. Or, perhaps better expressed, forgiveness is not the means to an external end but is as such its end, two people coming together, ultimately wholeheartedly. This coming together is not something either of us could have accomplished on his own; our being together is not the coincidence of two individual states or processes but is, in this sense, *sui generis*.

An objection to this analysis could be to claim that the question is one thing, its answer another: if I tell him something by asking his forgiveness, I do so regardless of whether he actually forgives me or not. In other words, the question only conveys something to him the first time it is asked; thereafter, asking his forgiveness is something I do for my sake only. This objection conceives of my desire to tell my father that I am sorry, say, as a desire to utter certain words in his presence. But “tell” is ambiguous, and the sense that is intended here is not this one; what I need is not to utter the words “I am sorry” in his presence but for him to understand that I am sorry. When would I have taken him to understand this? There are certainly several possibilities here. It is significant, however, that one possibility is seeing his understanding that I am sorry as identical to his forgiving me; understanding can only in special cases be exhausted in cognitive terms but is instead often about, say, taking something to heart. Saying “I understand that you are sorry, but I cannot forgive you nonetheless” is indeed possible, but I, hearing him say this, might take what he says to mean that he does not trust me. In trust, understanding and forgiveness thus come together. The above objection hence overlooks the possibility that as long as he has not forgiven me, there is still something I would like to convey to him. Correspondingly, the same problem of trust might surface when he says that he has forgiven me, for I might take this as just an outward show, believing that deep down he still bears me a grudge. Through the course of our interaction, my understanding hence changes too, for good or for bad, in this respect of trust, but also in other ways: my understanding of what I am asking him, of what I have done, of his situation. The process of forgiveness could therefore be conceived of as a process towards an understanding in togetherness, which does not mean, however, that we ultimately have to describe things in the same way or that we have to work on such descriptions, only that in the end we are no longer divided by such differences, that we come together in trust. Consequently, the question of whether I want this understanding for my sake or for his does not make much sense, for it introduces a distinction that is alien to what the issue concerns. For instance, if my sake were distinct from his, I could try to force a change on his part, but success in this regard would not mean that he has forgiven me. On the contrary, using (physical or psychological) force here

would make our relation even more damaged. Thus, there is a sense in which the question and its answer are not two different things but two sides of the same process of understanding. What I want to give my father and what I want from him are at bottom the same thing. What annihilates *my* bad conscience is *his* joy at *our* getting together.

My father and me

The death of my father thus means that I cannot be given what I need, his forgiveness, for no coming together is possible. The need will then always be there, unfulfilled. (Or is this so? The loss acknowledged in mourning would only be undone if it turns out that he is not dead, but whether this means that *no* form of forgiveness and coming together is possible is the question we will come to.) Of course, I might take the psychological route, as mentioned above, which is not only a theoretical option but just as much a live one, but the need would then still be unfulfilled, for I would only obtain psychological alleviation. In its most radical form, this problem is the problem of the murderer, and thus one dimension of the horrible nature of murder. In other cases, the death of the one whose forgiveness I need is only externally related to what I have done to him, and in this respect a coincidence, but in the case of murder, this is not so. Furthermore, the murder victim will be defined by what has been done to him in a way that is not otherwise the case: the one I have murdered is always dead, but the one I have, say, let down is not marked by this on all occasions. For instance, I might see from a distance the one I have let down, now happy in the company of others. This is not identical to forgiveness, but the alleviation I feel is still not merely an inner, mental state or anything like it, for the meaning of what I have done to her is often, in various, intricate ways, shaped by the consequences of what I have done to her.

What we are discussing here is not murder, however, but the much more indefinite problems that often exist in the relations between fathers and sons. Particular incidents might sometimes stand out, but even they cannot properly be understood without taking into account the background of the innumerable, indistinct events that make up our life. From my father's perspective I might be ungrateful, rude, arrogant, and distant, though not in ways that would clearly show on particular occasions or be apparent to anyone else but him. Furthermore, he might also say that although these terms fit me, they do not capture the full extent of my badness as a son but that he does not know what to add. From my perspective, I could say the same thing of him, except that the terms I would use would be domineering, full of himself, boastful, and patronising.

However, there are two different ways in which such a background will shape the understanding of someone's death. If I once had a troubled relationship with someone but have not seen him for many years – it might be a former colleague or a friend the relation to whom gradually degenerated – his death puts an end to the possibility of our getting together again. Still, it would be false to say that our falling-out colours his death. He might not have thought of me for a very long time, nor I of him until I heard of his death. The difficulties between us might still have effects, but nonetheless he is not in them as the focus of my attention; even if an encounter would have been painful for both of us, the fact that we did no longer actively avoid one another is not insignificant. In the case of my father, however, one could very well imagine that our troubled relationship would colour his death, by my presence, or by my striking absence, at his deathbed. For example, he might die in bitterness, and the dying itself thus raises questions of forgiveness: on my part, because I know, say, that I am the cause of his bitterness; on his part, because he knows, say, that his bitterness towards me is unfair. The distinction I made in the previous paragraph, between an external and an internal way in which the death of the one whose forgiveness I need is related to what I have done to him, is therefore not really applicable here: his dying is not the result of our troubled relationship, but they are still not two distinct things.⁸

These difficulties, however, have different forms for my father, on the one hand, and for me, on the other hand. On his deathbed, he might reflect on his life, and this life, and thus his reflections, include the people who have been important for him – for good and for bad. Our troubled relation will therefore be a significant part of the closure of his life. For me, however, the present situation is different: in surviving him, I will have him as part of my life also after his death.

But what does “he” mean here? As long as he was alive, he was part of my life not as a memory but as a living being, someone I could address and be addressed by, someone I could get in touch with and someone who could get in touch with me, against my will or just as I wanted, someone I could challenge and be challenged by, someone who could surprise me, disappoint me, or exceed my most sanguine expectations. After his death, all these possibilities shape my memories of him, by their absence. Even so, it is to him that I direct myself in my memories.⁹ “Memories” are in rare cases the object of my attention; in most cases, *he* is the object of my attention and memory its *form*. “He” still means my father and he

⁸ For many interesting examples of this, see O'Connor 1961.

⁹ Cf. Winch 1989, 150.

is still part of my life, with all that this involves, though no longer as a living being. In other words, this is one example of what “afterlife” means, as Patočka uses the word.

After his death, all these possibilities shape my memories of him – by their absence, as I said. However, not *all* possibilities of interaction are lacking. For there is a kind of challenge still possible after his death. If I, upon reflection, come to realise that I have been, say, unfair to him, and that this realisation must have consequences for my thoughts, words, and actions, the one whom I see in my bad conscience, the one I feel responsible to, the one I feel that I wronged when I was unfair and that I will wrong if I now fail to live up to my realisation, is him. There are certainly cases where this is not so, cases where I feel responsible to, say, his friends or myself, but this does not change the fact that the possibility I just pointed to exists. In other words, there is a way in which he, though dead, still exists for me and challenges me.¹⁰

This challenge and this form of existence are not reducible to memory. For I miss him, not only the time when he was alive. Furthermore, I may feel that I have wronged my father because my memories of him fade. This realisation will therefore not be the result of an act of remembering; to the contrary, it is the result of failing to carry out such an act. In addition, the case in which the memory of him is that towards which I am responsible is a special one, a case of honouring or desecrating his memory, not the general one. To understand the horrible nature of desecrating the memory of someone, we must also in such a case pay attention to the fact that the act concerns someone, the one of whom the memory is; I feel responsible to her, to her remains because they are remains of her, and to her family and friends because they stand in a relation of responsibility and love to her. “But in order for you to be able to realise that you have wronged your father, you must obviously remember him!” Such an objection takes for granted that there is no other way in which my dead father can be present to me than in memory, and thus begs the question (or flattens the concept of memory). Furthermore, it might be the realisation that I have wronged him that triggers memories of him rather than the other way around. Above all, memory as a condition is one thing, memory as the category to which it belongs is another: in the case of living people, the senses of sight, hearing, and so on could be said to be conditions for the possibility of getting to know them, but this does not

¹⁰ In a sense, Aristotle points this out, when he claims that the fortunes of their descendants will affect the happiness of the dead; see *EN* 1101a22–1101b9. A similar idea is to be found in Hebrew wisdom literature; see Sir 11.28 (LXX).

mean that sense impressions are that towards which I am responsible. In short, in bad conscience I am challenged by him, because it is him that I have wronged.¹¹

In order to clarify this, it should be pointed out that having wronged someone is not the same as going against what she says or (says that she) wants. She might say that she deserves to be treated in the way I treat her, but this does not preclude my seeing her in my conscience and thus that I am wronging her. Also when dead, I might certainly hear my father speak to me; my bad conscience might have the form of a question to me: “Why are you doing this to me? Why am I being hurt?”¹² (Being heard does not mean being possible to record, of course.) However, hearing, in whatever sense, is not essential to conscience. In my conscience, it might be her pleading eyes that I see, or her unconscious body after I have beaten her up.

At the end of his text, Patočka warns of “false, illusory reciprocity” and “pseudo-presence” (this volume, /141/). Is what I have been discussing here a possible instance of such a fault? What we are trying to understand is the experience I might have of my father, though dead, as still existing for me and challenging me. The possibility that people who do not have such an experience, perhaps because they are not related to my father in any way, think that it is false and illusory is therefore only of interest if that makes me understand that it is false. A change in my relation to the experience can of course come about through some kind of external pressure: they tell me that I am being silly, and because I do not want to appear silly in their eyes, I try to stop thinking about my father. But such a change is not a deepened form of understanding, and is thus of no interest to us. In a more subtle manner, the same goes for rejecting the experience as false and illusory because of the challenge inherent to it, a challenge not easy to take on board. If this is the reason for my rejection, then it is the rejection that is false and illusory, not what is rejected. In order for the rejection to be of interest to us, it must provide a better (and negative, of course) understanding of the experience than the experience itself provides. In specific cases, this will be possible (when someone forms her self-deception after the model of such an interaction), but I have a hard time seeing what the basis would be for claiming that this will always be possible. Unless, of course, one begs the question by already having decided that everything that appears to one as, say, odd and strange should be discarded.

Being forgiven by the dead

¹¹ Cf. Gaita 2000, 32.

¹² Cf. Weil 2019, 214.

But what does all this mean with respect to forgiveness? In the case of forgiving my dead father, the relevance of the above discussion is obvious: it is him I forgive, not his memory; my forgiving him is a response to him, to the reality of him; he is the one I feel that I have deserted by failing to stay true to my forgiving of him. In other words, there is a way in which he, though dead, still exists for me. This is indeed a form of interaction, for the way in which he exists for me is not to be identified with my will. For my will is here potentially questioned and should furthermore be understood in relation to the reality it is a response to, as we have just seen.

In the case of asking his forgiveness, however, a real form of interaction seems not to be possible, or, at most, possible in the experience of not being forgiven, for in the experience of being forgiven, by contrast, there seems to be no reality independent of my will. If so, no possible distinction to forms of imaginary, self-induced, cheap forgiveness would be possible to make, and Patočka's warning against "false, illusory reciprocity" and "pseudo-presence" would consequently be apt here. Or is this really so?

In order to come to a better understanding of this, let us for a moment leave the main example of my father and me and instead discuss one I touched upon only briefly, the example of the murderer. Stories about murderers who in prison find God and God's forgiveness are stereotypical, but this does not make it less important to try to come to a philosophical understanding of them. That the risk of self-deception is immense here is obvious. Pointing that out does not require much thought, however; the more thought-provoking and difficult question, by contrast, is whether such forgiveness is necessarily self-deceptive, and, more fundamentally, how to understand what we are talking about here at all.

If the murderer claims that all problems are solved because God has forgiven him, I would not take this seriously.¹³ Or rather, since "would" is too weak and does not capture the moral stakes involved: I could not take this seriously. The relations between the murderer and other people, say the relatives of the victim, might change if they hear him speak about his religious experience, but in what way is indeterminate. All problems are not solved, consequently, but still I think that it would be a mistake to insist that the experience of being forgiven by God must leave everything else as it is, as if God's forgiveness were on a par with the forgiveness of any bystander. God's forgiveness is indeed understood to address the problem of murder, which would mean that to be forgiven by God is to be forgiven by the victim as well, and the victim would hence in some way be included in God. If we understand this experience on its

¹³ Cf. Jaspers 1962, 366.

own terms, we thus have an example in which the transformation of the surviving perpetrator's relationship to the dead victim is not brought about by the perpetrator himself. This, then, would be an example of being forgiven, somehow, by the dead.

However, what kind of conclusion is this? Can the above experience ever be an object of theoretical description? Clearly, someone who questions its possibility would answer the latter question in the negative; of more interest is that taking the experience seriously will also lead to a negative answer. For one of the characteristics of such an experience is its miraculousness, that it is something the possibility and nature of which is not comprehended in advance. Or not even after the fact: this is not the experience of having made a mistake, as if what has happened to me showed that it is indeed possible, but its impossibility is part of its nature.¹⁴ Anyhow, only from the standpoint of someone actually sharing the experience of the miraculous forgiving – not a mere bystander but someone who from the inside sees what the murderer sees – is it real. From the external (including the theoretical) standpoint it will be seen as if not illusory then at any rate not existent. A theological account would not solve this conundrum: if the theological account does not amount to a denial of the miraculousness of being forgiven by God, it can merely indicate something the nature of which will remain at most indistinct until it is experienced as actual.

One reason this is so is because being forgiven is also an inner transformation. Hearing someone say to me that she has forgiven me does not mean that I trust her not to bear me a grudge, as I pointed out earlier. This lack of trust may very well be unwanted: I am not able to trust her, however much I would want to. Likewise, believing that she is sincere does not mean that I am able to overcome the reserve her presence causes. The miraculousness of being forgiven consists in, among other things, a liberation from distrust and inhibition, the force and intensity of which exceed my expectations. (In the religious context, this would be the point of speaking of grace.) This means, furthermore, that the difficulty of forgiveness is not only the difficulty of forgiving or of asking someone's forgiveness; living the life of one truly forgiven is indeed difficult, not a matter of course. Some might say that forgiveness is rewarded to the one who is able to change his ways, but without the experience of being forgiven, without really understanding oneself as truly forgiven, a new life will not be possible.

The question of whether the understanding of oneself as forgiven by God is necessarily self-deceptive is therefore a complex one. On the one hand, one could point to the above

¹⁴ Cf. Holland 1980, 183–184. As Holland points out, this amounts to a rejection of the principle *ab esse ad posse valet consequentia*. Cf. also Marcel 1958, 54; Winch 1972, 185–186; Winch 1989, 155.

issues concerning its miraculousness, and say that there is no independent position from which this question can be answered. On the other hand, one could bypass this question and say that the only thing that matters, as far as self-deception goes, is what happens afterwards, how the alleged forgiveness manifests itself in the life of the one forgiven, specifically the inner transformation I referred to above.¹⁵ In the religious context particularly, these two approaches are not to be sharply distinguished. For the believer may say that God's forgiving is not a quality distinct from all other qualities of God. Instead, God's forgiving is an aspect of the same goodness that manifests itself in the call to change one's life, most evident in the "go, and do thou likewise" inherent also in the experience of being forgiven. To see oneself as forgiven is to have the possibility of forgiveness, and the possibility of the love that forgiveness is an aspect of, always before one's eyes; as long as I live my life in the light of this forgiveness, I live my life in the presence of God. Consequently, the believer may say that sin, turning away from God, is therefore just as much turning away from God's forgiveness. In the particular situation of sin, I hence no longer see myself as forgiven for what I have done in the past, but rather turn my back on the forgiveness shown me. That being forgiven by God does not solve all problems is consequently not a fact that reduces its significance but is precisely what its significance consists in.

To this discussion of being forgiven by God could be added that other people can sometimes be of a similar, though less radical, importance. Thus far, I have rarely mentioned anyone other than me and the one whom I want to forgive or be forgiven by. But what other people do and say to me, and what we do and say together, will, in various ways, change my relationship to the one, say, whose forgiveness I need. Obviously, it might change how I think about her, but of more interest for my discussion is that I may hear her in what other people say, and so she may speak to me through them. Their forgiveness might consequently be her forgiveness, but I might also hear her forgiveness through the seemingly unrelated words of others.

Let us now return to my father and me. Previously, I said that not all possibilities of interaction are lacking, because there is a kind of challenge still possible after my father's death. But I then asked the question of whether this is relevant when it comes to being forgiven, because here no challenge is involved. If this is so, there is no possible distinction to forms of imaginary, self-induced, cheap forgiveness here, and Patočka's warning against "false, illusory reciprocity" and "pseudo-presence" is therefore apt. What we now have come

¹⁵ Jaspers himself seems to suggest something like this, although in a very different context. See Jaspers 2012, 92–93.

to see is that there are reasons for questioning this objection. The experience of being forgiven is the experience of an address. Referring to “false, illusory reciprocity” and “pseudo-presence” would therefore be to reject the experience as an experience of being forgiven. But, as I tried to show, referring to the miraculousness of being forgiven, there is no independent position from which the question of its reality can be answered. In other words, if sense sometimes is the result of experience and does not precede it, questions of possibility cannot always be asked and answered in advance. Which does not mean that such questions have clear answers even after the fact; that what has happened to me is impossible and does not make sense is not necessarily a defective description of it.

Another way of approaching the question of the possible illusoriness of the experience of being forgiven by my dead father is to ask what the criteria for what should be counted as false and illusory are here. If one’s criteria are of a moral kind, there is no general reason for discarding the experience, as the meaning of being forgiven cannot be captured by referring to a specific moment of time but shows itself in the life of the one allegedly forgiven. The experience of being forgiven is indeed an experience of liberation, but not for someone who wishes to free himself from all moral relations to other people, as the life in which the meaning of forgiveness shows itself is a life of such relations. Being forgiven by my dead father is certainly in many respects different from being forgiven by God, but it would be a mistake not to see my dead father’s forgiveness as being a light in which the rest of my life could be seen. Furthermore, the problem with claiming that the possibility of being forgiven by my dead father would reduce its urgency, because I could then postpone it indefinitely, is not only that this objection makes use of the concept of possibility, the applicability of which I have questioned, but most of all that postponement would always run counter to the fundamental need of being forgiven, which is as such urgent, on account of what would get lost right now.¹⁶

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Kierkegaard (1963, 341 (SKS 9:351)): “If [...] a change sets in in the relation of one living and one dead, it is however clear, isn’t it, that it must be the one living who has changed.” What is to be said in response to his “isn’t it”, in the light of my discussion of the possibility of being forgiven by my dead father? Is it my father who has changed? One might be inclined to answer this question in the negative: it is above all I who have changed, I have gone through the transformation of being forgiven. This transformation, however, is just the other side of the transformation of the way in which my

¹⁶ Pace Hägglund 2019, e.g. 12–13, 191–192.

father appears to me. In other words, my father might have died in bitterness, as I discussed earlier, but to me he is not bitter any longer.

Still, of course, my father is dead, so there are many forms of forgiveness and coming together that will not be there. The question I have discussed is whether *no* form of forgiveness and coming together is possible, that is, whether a possible transformation of my relationship to him is the result of a move on my side only or whether some (though obviously not any) form of reciprocity would still be possible.

Conclusion

In “The phenomenology of afterlife”, Jan Patočka writes (this volume, /137/):

afterlife has much greater importance and intensity where life with the other had the utmost positive character, where it brought fulfilment; on the other hand, where it took a negative shape and obstructed our fulfilment, where it was a life of hardship and hatred, coming to terms with the dead is easy and it does not have the character of retaining, but rather leaving easily and fading away – unless we are enjoying the feeling of revenge etc.

I set up the theme of this essay in contrast to Patočka, and throughout the discussion I have pointed to experiences different from those he refers to. Even so, they are not unrelated. For the experiences I have discussed, although they have a negative character and involve if not hardship and hatred then bitterness, are still not without a positive character. The need to forgive and be forgiven could be said to point to this positive character, and not as a mere possibility, as if what I hope and long for has no real point of contact with my father at all. One way of concluding this essay is therefore to agree with Patočka: the importance and intensity of afterlife has to do with something positive. In fact, this is why some form of reciprocity is still possible.¹⁷

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