

Forgiveness- giving up the desire and power to forgive

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ABSTRACT

The current research project is based on three separate narratives on the subject of 'What is your story of forgiving? What does it mean you forgave?'. Its design is strongly embedded in the qualitative research tradition that places in its centre an individual subject along with his unique, subjective perspective. It employs Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) as an interpretative tool and a systematic framework for analysis of the discourse underlying and emerging through the three anonymous narratives. Incorporated into the research design variability of volunteer participants being self-declared atheist, spiritual or religious (one in each category), was introduced to provide or exclude additional insights into the nature of forgiveness relevant over and beyond the differences in moral sets of beliefs they hold. The study involved participation of three male volunteers who met the initial criteria of being English native speakers of at least 25 years of age and previous long-term experiences of personal development in the systematic form. The analysis being a creative process of an analyst engaging with the text did not aspire to produce general and measurable findings. Nonetheless, based on the analysis successful forgiveness seems to embrace all the aspects of the self including the repressed, unconscious contents and it requires the self to renounce the desire and the power to forgive to extinguish the victim-transgressor relationship.

KEY WORDS:	QUALITATIVE RESEARCH	LDA	FORGIVENESS	COUNSELLING	PERSONAL MORAL BELIEFS
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Introduction

Rationale behind the study, its design, methodology and general reflections on the nature of forgiveness

The current research project is based on three separate narratives on the subject of 'What is your story of forgiving? What does it mean you forgave?'. The three stories of forgiveness, although unique, unrelated and very different from each other, interestingly reveal a number of common threads running through the narratives in the ways in which the meanings of forgiveness are conceived and attributed to it by their authors. The threads are detectable either explicitly based on memories of successful forgiving as told in one of the three stories, or implicitly through one's realisation of failing to forgive or, alternatively, through one's confession of a conscious choice not to engage in any attempts to forgive. The latter two reveal the nature of what is being understood by forgiveness by its negation, by failing to achieve the imagined goal or not even aspiring to achieve it while still holding a clear concept of what would achieving it meant and/or felt like. In the first instance the phenomenon of forgiveness is being explored by a direct question of '*what essentially forgiveness is?*' according to the narratives' authors, in the second, by exclusion of '*what forgiveness is not?*' (1). The two complement each other to a great extent and it was my hope to provoke both kinds of insights by the structure of the second part of the research question ('What does it mean you forgave?') which intentionally suggests accomplished character of one's forgiveness as an initial point of reference. It intended to encourage the authors of the narratives to turn towards themselves and their own experiences in the process of self-reflection rather than open a space for simply sharing their theoretical views and beliefs on forgiveness.

The reflective character of the narratives constitutes the main feature of this study. Its design is strongly embedded in the qualitative research tradition that places in its centre an individual subject along with his unique, subjective perspective. The goal of the research is not to horizontally generalise the findings but rather vertically deepen the understanding of the researched phenomena. This view is taken even further by interpretative rather than just descriptive in its nature psychoanalytical school of thought that expands the concept of a human psyche to embrace a whole of a human experience including what usually becomes silently ignored. Distant memories, fainting dreams, private fantasies or causing social embarrassment mistakes, not understood and not fitting in with what one expects from himself, nor what is expected from him, appear as highly problematic. In fact, so problematic they are not even acknowledged as such. Instead, treated as minor, irrelevant and silly by-products of imperfect rational cognitive functioning, they are pushed aside and rarely talked about. Repression is what Freud identified as the earliest and most common defense mechanism employed by human psyche whereas the actual truth of ourselves as the subject of this defense (1915). However, not surprisingly, despite of the mental mechanisms at work and constant, increasing expenditure of the energy the

defense requires, repression is a futile effort. Regardless of how difficult to accept, the truth at the core of a human nature seen both from idiographic and collectivist perspectives, simply cannot escape from itself.

According to Freud dreams, fantasies and parapraxis are manifestations of the underlying them unconscious structures which offer to reveal disproportionately more than constructed, conscious *ego* allows (1915). The unconsciousness even in a simple chronological sense (i.e. very long maturation period in humans whose neurobiological systems are not fully developed until 15-16 years after being born) is necessarily primary and precedes the emergence of consciousness. Moreover, it is knowledge commonly accepted by traditional Western science that prenatal encounters with the world to great extent affect later human development (Walker, Wachs, Grantham-McGregor, Black, Nelson, Huffman, Chang, Hamadani, Lozoff, Gardner, Powell, Rahman, Richter, 2011). Yet cognitive phenomena conventionally attributed to conscious functioning of a human mind such as decision making, inhibiting of impulses or ability to think in abstract ways performing mental operations on representations of objects rather than objects themselves (for example, crucial in how we present ourselves socially and how we perceive ourselves across different stages of life), cannot be rationally argued to mediate this relationship. Despite of the constant advances within the quantitative fields of Psychology cultivated conventionally in the empirical way, the general reluctance of the Western science to accept the concept of unconsciousness and all the consequences it entails is still the prevailing tendency. The reluctance may be partially explained by the concept jeopardising the alluring yet illusory sense of being in absolute control of one's own life that the mainstream psychology models usually assume by placing a human agency at the very centre of the human universe. Parker argues that the radical split between the psychoanalysis and psychology should be attributed exactly to the threat mainstream psychological senses in the unconsciousness challenging current meaning of the 'common sense' and consciousness as all-embracing domain (2015).

My intuitive and immediate association between forgiveness and a sense of liberation gained through it, served as an incentive to formulate two complementary aims of this research. Firstly, to explore whether subjectively evaluated costs of forgiving are necessarily outweighed by its gains, which the positive sense of relief and liberation would seem to suggest. Also, the ethically challenging aspect of this study which arose exactly from the nature of forgiveness as always referring to emotionally unpleasant and difficult experiences as a starting point, suggests that successful forgiving is always an improvement even if only a relative one. Therefore, the question being asked here is simply whether it is always beneficial to forgive (2). Additionally, regardless of the adopted definition of forgiveness, even if it is nothing else but a subjectively experienced quality, it necessarily involves a retroactive comparison of the starting point with a subsequent change. These conclusions mark another point of interest of this study: to investigate whether the subjective and relative

change brought about by forgiveness impacts one's relationship with others as well as with one's self (3). The assumption of the bidirectional nature of forgiveness pursues the logic present in the reports of inner healing experienced as a result of successful forgiving. Interestingly, regardless of forgiveness being earned and/or asked for by a wrongdoer, it is the person making effort to forgive that reports its self-healing effects. However, the self-healing occurs only as a by-product of the process which ultimately focuses on the wrongdoer.

Incorporated into the research design variability of volunteer participants being self-declared atheist, spiritual or religious (one in each category), was introduced to provide or exclude additional insights into the nature of forgiveness relevant over and beyond the differences in moral sets of beliefs they hold (4). And as it become visible through the analysis it is also very much ontological assumptions hiding behind those beliefs that influence one's motivations to attempt to forgive or not. Furthermore, because forgiveness may be argued to be intimately linked to the dynamics of power distribution within intrapersonal structures (inclusive of one's relationship with himself and with God/Other) and interpersonal relationships mediated by situation-specific boundaries, it is in fact an ontological choice of its own. For example, for one to decide to forgive, it is identical to renounce his claims to keep his position of a victim and remain in control of the power imbalance and punishment. The choice to forgive may be the less appealing, the more person's identity is based on the sense of being a victim in which case, the answer to the research question of personal costs and gains would not be as straight forward as the argument of self-liberating effects of forgiveness previously suggested. It is logical to hypothesise that identity constructed around being a victim sensing 'letting go' of the grudges depriving and thus undermining its own status, would have no interest in genuine forgiving at all. The example instantly brings to mind Hegelian master-slave dialectic which if applied to guide this reasoning further can present forgiveness as a sign of one's weakness and submission rather than morally and ontologically desirable act.

Another conspicuous aspect of the nature of forgiveness is the element of choice pointing at its intimate links with free will, agency and intentionality. This applies to both parties of the dyad – the one forgiving and the one being forgiven. Forgiveness upholds its meaning only in relation to assumption of moral responsibility of a transgressor, whether it is an act of self-forgiveness or forgiveness of other. Analogically, asking for forgiveness also assumes one's capability to forgive which, in turn, points towards the question of limitations of and conditions to successful forgiving. In other words, by its definition, no one can be forced to *for-give* or be *for-given*. Nonetheless willing to forgive even supported by honest psychological effort sometimes is simply not enough for the successful forgiveness to occur and the question of what sits between the two, the willingness to forgive and the actual liberation it brings about, takes us back to the question of what forgiveness essentially is. The intentionality and psychological work call attention also to the active character of one's investments

into forgiving which considered together with the unconsciousness is not simply a matter of *willing* to forgive any more.

Very much valuing the above premises, the design of this study is embedded in the psychoanalytic tradition and taps into the theoretical knowledge of the human unconsciousness that originated with Freud and was advanced by his followers. It employs Lacanian Discourse Analysis (LDA) as an interpretative tool and a systematic framework for analysis of the discourse underlying and emerging through the three anonymous narratives. It should be made clear, however, that a great bulk of Lacan's teachings, mainly in the form of seminars, expanding over a few decades and developing into three distinguishable periods (Miller, 2001), by no means can be embraced by one completely unified theory without compromising on the complexity of its nuanced and subtle insights. Therefore, it is not even my hope to try and employ Lacanian concepts for the purpose of this study at the level any more advanced than just an introductory one. Restrained by technical limitations of the analysis, I am also forced to select those elements of the LDA framework that are either crucial as building blocks for introducing more complex concepts or immediately stand out from the initial analysis of the data as the most relevant ones.

The study involved participation of three male volunteers who met the initial criteria of being English native speakers included to minimise the risk of a language barrier and/or cultural references having latent impact on the discourse emerging from their stories. The other two criteria of being at least 25 years of age and of previous long-term experiences of personal development in the systematic form (i.e. counseling, psychotherapy, meditation, mindfulness, art therapy, etc) were introduced to increase probability of the participants being able to reflect back on their own stories of forgiveness, on the one hand, while hopefully realising their limits to talk about personal experiences potentially causing distress on the other. Not every participant deemed his story of forgiveness as complete and successful, but all of them reported subjectively experienced personal progress towards increased self-awareness and understanding of the external circumstances. Each participant was asked to self-determine which category of beliefs they would ascribe themselves to, religious, spiritual (but not religious) or atheist, to allow exploration of forgiveness across and within the three sets of beliefs. The anonymous participants for the purpose of the study will be referred to as Arthur (an atheist), Mark (a Christian) and Robert (a Buddhist). Also, it is worth of emphasising that the following analysis does not aspire to produce general or measurable conclusions. The quite opposite, it is very much recognised by the framework in which it is embedded that the analysis as a creative process relies on subjective meanings attributed to the text by the analyst who can identify himself with the text under analysis only to the extent to which his own limits allow him to (Neill, 2011). Therefore as much as I tried to '*decentralise*' (Neill, 2011, p. 13) my insights into the text immediately appearing to me as 'right' or 'convincing' and keep engaging with it in the search

for new meanings, the scope of those meanings was limited by my own readiness to engage with it in only so many ways.

Analysis and conclusions

Discourse as the most basic structure of the social relationships reflected in a language appears as an important source of authentic insights into how certain meanings, and in the case of this research specifically meanings attributed to forgiveness, become constructed by individuals. The discourse as a product of a language thus relating merely to speech and text, is a product of laws and a logic that together tie the language up into a system which, by its definition, needs to remain consistent and predictable in order to serve its function of communication. In this sense, firstly, the linguistic system as an entity surpasses both each individual separately and a collection of individuals it unites as already existing; it *'precedes us and succeeds us'* (Neill, 2011, p.21). Secondly, based on its predictability principle, it allows certain interferences which by necessity are essentially nothing more than directly inaccessible yet socially functional assumptions. By simple probability statistics, the untestable character of communication opens up a space for endless possibilities of mis-communication, rather than a single act of accurate understanding of the intended meaning. Put it simply, we are all born into some kind of language that along with its inherent imperfections and limitations continuously shapes our subjective and inter-subjective existence. The intuitions of the challenges imposed by the nature of a language are acknowledged by all three narratives' authors in a twofold way. Firstly, there is present a realisation that their own perspective is not a commonly shared experience but the author's own subjective point of view which, in turn, indicates the sense of separateness and distinct boundaries to their *selves* (the sense absent, for example, in the psychotic disorders). Also, a sense of responsibility that emerges as a natural consequence of this realisation:

Arthur:

204. *However, it's also worth noting that perhaps these people aren't*

205. *consciously aware of having hurt me and aren't aware that there was ever an issue.*

Robert:

75. *A little*

76. *paradoxical, but this is how I feel, and feelings are often difficult to put into words.*

Mark:

118. *This question was the turning point for me. I was*

119. *asked how did all of the hurt, pain and anger I was bottling up affect my stepfather?*

120. *The answer was so simple but so key.*

121. *It didn't. He was living his life carefree and oblivious to the fact that I was walking*
 122. *this path.*

Secondly, the realisation leads the authors to a mentally higher level of taking on a perspective of a wrongdoer. The operation of 'taking on' is precisely *imagining* the perspective different to their own. The imagining then is based on the *self – non-self* opposition, however, only on the surface as it is not possible to imagine something as different and distant as 'unidentifiable'. Put it simply, one can imagine, only what he can actually imagine:

Arthur:

174. *I don't think I've forgiven the group of friends or the best friend. Ultimately, he has*
 175. *a long uphill struggle to gain any kind of self-awareness or self-contentedness, so I*
 176. *guess the best I could say is that while I don't forgive him, I can empathise with the*
 177. *difficulty of his situation.*

Mark:

137. *In the final sessions we explored the circumstances that changed both his behaviour*
 138. *and mine and was able to see that despite the pain and suffering I suffered he still*
 139. *loved me and cared for me and because of the pain that he was going through he was*
 140. *almost oblivious to the destructive nature of his behaviour.*

Robert:

34. *He has*
 35. *a very difficult personality, and acute alcoholism that makes life very hard, but I don't*
 36. *hate him because I see him as more of a victim than a bad person. His development*
 37. *pathway was not his choice, and in his heart he means well.*

The question that insists on being asked in this context is how important a role does imagining play in empathy and hence forgiving? If limits to one's own imaginations and identification are exactly the limits to one's capability to forgive, then as a consequence only those potentially capable of murdering, through understanding the motivation, emotions and behaviour accompanying that choice or impulse, would be capable of forgiving a murder. As we know from examples such as Pope John Paul II in his famous act of forgiveness towards his assassin Mehmet Ali Agca only four days after the attempt, the statement is very unlikely to be accurate. Such reasoning would also imply that for one to forgive it is

necessary to want to stretch his imagination to embrace the previously unthinkable, such as subjective perspective of an abuser hidden behind horrible acts of persistent violence towards his/hers victim which one may chose not to engage with. It is also not very clear to determine to what extent the empathy overlaps with rationalisation which as a mental operation (in psychoanalysis one of the *ego's* defense mechanisms) seems to target mainly intellectual rather than emotional aspects of 'taking on' a different perspective. The operation may be more reminiscent of a theory that becomes invented and employed to explain and predict laws governing the inter-subjective world, than actual forgiveness. A theory which if expanded to impose certain approach on one's decisiveness and responsibility may appear closer to, perhaps, excusing. In his narrative, Arthur talks about a '*theory*' that helped him to cope with past events:

164. *I basically decided that everybody was doing the best*
 165. *they could, all the time, and as such were not open for judgement by me or anyone*
 166. *else. If they could do any better (i.e. be nicer, kinder, more generous, caring, loving,*
 167. *etc.), then they would do it. But if they weren't "better", then that wasn't their fault*
 168. *because the circumstances in their lives at that exact moment in time were contrived*
 169. *such that they simply didn't have the capacity for greater "betterness". I decided that*
 170. *people were the product of their environments and as such were all victims and, I*
 171. *removed their responsibility for their actions from them.*

The intra-subjectivity of socially functional assumptions works only along an arbitrary and rigid skeleton of grammar, syntax and phonetics in a language. Together, they represent one of the three dimensions of experience Lacan points out as jointly constructive of a whole of human experience, the realm of *Symbolic* (Neill, 2013). A language as a system provides tools for communication, empty forms of grammar and syntax rules, which are determinant of communication, of being understandable or, simply, of '*making sense*'. However, the content put into these arbitrary forms requires an individual subject to intentionally and/or purposefully employ them as tools to express his/hers private, subjective meaning. The essential difference between the scope of the two may be illustrated by a following example: '*tomorrow I went*' is not a grammatically correct sentence and thus does not make sense; used, for example, in a poem, it may still carry considerable meaning to both its author who intentionally (naturally aware of the grammar rules) constructed a line of his poem to provoke certain emotional states in a reader, and a reader who believes he has understood the author's intentions. What is particularly worth emphasising here is the word '*believes*'. This active and subjective input injected by an individual subject into a language each time he means and *believes* in being understood or *believes* in

having understood, refers to the second of the realms of the *Imaginary* (Neill, 2013).

As already widely argued by linguistic relativists, a language known to influence culture to a great extent, can be observed to bond together large groups of people using the same language, not only by adhering to the same grammar rules but also by cross-culturally incompatible channeling of their thinking. For example, perception and thinking employs arbitrarily given distinct categories and abstract concepts. Breaking away from these creates a gap inexpressible within and by the means of the language from which they originate. Or, analogically, it makes them not accurately translatable into another language (not reaching far, Lacanian puns and terms such as *jouissance* may best serve to illustrate this argument). Therefore, it can be concluded that discourse exceeds speech and silently remains at work under and between acts of speaking by setting boundaries and paths for perception, for what is thinkable and hence primary to speech (Neill, 2013). This gap between what is experienced as authentic but impossible to transmit in the language, ineffable, refers to the third one of the Lacanian realms, the *Real* (Neill, 2013).

Paradoxically, in contracriticism conventionally issued against psychoanalysis, there is nothing more generalisable across time and space than the primacy of human encounters with a language which are almost as immediate and unreduceable as experiences of maternal and paternal bonds (or their lack which still asserts their position only by negation). The primacy of both, considered in terms of how quickly a child is faced by them but also how significant these experiences are for shaping his identity, goes beyond the question of their quality (i.e. the kind of a language child is surrounded by, the features of a child's relationships with parents or absence of one of them). Moreover, in its very literal sense that ignores other symbolic dimensions, the formative experiences of maternal and paternal bonds as a universal condition of human procreation may be reduced down to purely biological dependency. Analogically, the very early encounters with the language may be argued as equally fundamental conditions for being born into society and culture. Or more accurately, as consistently emphasised at the core of the Lacanian theory, of humans essentially being made into subjects (hence subjectivity and inter-subjectivity) by a culture that builds upon what otherwise would be a mere vegetation of an animalistic organism (Fink, 2004, p. 115-116). '*Lacan's subject is first and foremost the subject of language*' (Neill, 2014, p. 17), therefore, in Lacanian terms deliberately avoiding psychologisation, '*I*' is, first of all, what it actually is – a grammatically established subject signified by a graphic sign of a letter when written down or by a phonological sign of a sound when pronounced. Only from this place stems a number of far reaching epistemological and ontological consequences that analysed in depth appear to be formative and constitutive of psychoanalytical '*I*', a subject, *ego* or *self* in the senses and with connotations traditionally given to them by philosophical and psychological studies.

In its essence then, the '*I*' as a symbol is nothing more but a representation of whatever it attempts to represent. The two are distinct entities and even if argued to exist synchronically, they are entities of necessarily two different kinds. They belong to two ontologically different orders because they do exist in qualitatively different ways. Just as a video recording of a cat is neither the cat it is a video of, nor a cat at all, the linguistic symbol '*I*' representing a subject is not identical with the subject it represents. The cat analogy, although illustrative, does not entirely capture the potential for the misrecognition. Unlike the cat and the video of the cat readily available for perceptual scrutiny, the signified subject and the signifying system of the signs are purely mental entities facilitating illusory identification of what is represented with what represents it. As mental entities, the relationship between the '*I*' representing the subject and the represented subject resemble more a relationship between an abstract concept of an object (i.e. a chair) and an endless number of single objects it signifies (i.e. the chair my grandmother used to sit in, the chair in the second floor classroom or the chair at my desk). While it is impossible for any concept to point towards every existing or imagined object it signifies - individually inclusive of their unique attributes as they are remembered and imagined (i.e. colour, shape, size, material, etc) - the concept serves its function of communication by doing the opposite: by trying to capture the element common for all the individual objects and which removal of would be identical with not fitting into the signifying scope of their concept any more (i.e. not a chair any more but a stool or an armchair). This makes concepts as a form of signs, verbal and mental representations of what they intend to capture, a relative system built on exclusivity of adjacent concepts and their mutual negation. Put it simply, each sign "*can only be defined in terms of what it is not*" (Grosz, 1990, p. 93).

As Saussure's linguistics states, next to Freud's psychoanalysis the biggest inspiration for Lacan's theory (Roudinesco, 1997), the sign which constitutes the smallest unit of a language consists of two components, the signifier (S) and the signified (s). The signifier, in turn, consists of two co-existing elements: the material component (i.e. the capital letter I in the '*I*' representing a subject) and the conceptual component (the imagined and mentally grasped concept representing the subject) both synchronically pointing beyond themselves towards the signified (Grosz, 1990). However, in opposition to Saussure's theory, Lacan grants superiority to the signifier (S/s) as for him the signified is nothing else but another signifier in the entirely relative network of signs never grounded in any fixed anchoring point (Grosz, 1990). The simple example of the floating network of signifiers is a circular nature of normative definitions which, in order to explain meaning of one word, need to relay on a sequence of linked definitions eventually coming round to the initial one. In this sense they are all of the same status, relating one to another with no super- or meta- definition legitimating them all (Neill, 2011).

The two components of a sign constitute two parallel and mutually impenetrable orders (*I*) of chains of signifiers (S-S-S-S) and signified (s-s-s-s) (Grosz, 1990).

Instead, at the moment of the discourse emerging from the speech, they temporarily in intervals become '*button tied*' together to secure the meaning unfolding from the particular act of speech (Vanheule, 2011, p37). For instance, homophones at the start of conversation 'That *boy*' and 'That *buoy*' will become imagined retroactively as one or another by a speech receiver when followed, for example, by 'who then ran away' or 'which then floated away' to only jointly construct a meaning drawn from expected associations and situation-specific context that tie them together into a coherent message. Discourse composed of the whole linguistic signs (S+s), belongs to consciousness, whereas discourse of the signifiers (S) extracted from the sign and separated from the signified (s), defines discourse of the unconscious (Grosz, 1990). Therefore, the main task of an analyst is to decode the message of the analysand's unconsciousness that forms associations following the logic of the signifier (S) coded into the symptoms, dreams or parapraxes (Vanheule, 2011).

Therefore, the following questions arise: what is essentially being signified as a subject beyond the realms of the language emerging hand in hand with its imagined representation? Consequently, how is it accessible or, first of all, is it accessible at all? Probably the most explanatory answers given by Lacan can be found in his seminar "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the *I* Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience" (1949). In the spirit of his times, to illustrate the nature and structure of the psychoanalytic subject starting at its very beginnings, Lacan drew the analogy between the emergence of the subject, the '*I*', through its mirror reflection, hence The Mirror Stage. The seminar should be read at least in a twofold way inclusive of its symbolic value rather than just being over-simplified into a theory contributing to the advances in the developmental psychology. Indeed, read literally the seminar sketches a broad picture of a human condition shaped from a birth as an undeveloped individual and thus utterly dependent on the almost entirely independent environment (caregivers) that remains out of an infant's control (as a consequence, the observation led Lacan to the argument of '*veritable specific prematurity of birth*' in humans ((1949), p. 78)). Starting at the age of 6 up to 18 months, the infant experiences its own motor skills as insufficient exhibiting simultaneously growing interest in and attraction to its own mirror reflection. After eventually recognising the mirror image as the self followed by an exploration '*of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment*' (Lacan, (1949), p. 94), the child experiences the image as being in more control than its own still-clumsy, impotent body. When considered more carefully, by its definition, the Aha-moment of recognition can happen only once at the beginning of the developmental journey. Then, based on this new quality of an insight, the external image gradually becomes expected as occurring and internalised as something inner rather than acquired. Based on images (ideas, concepts, notions) and memories, being also a form of imagination (Neill, 2013), the essentially external image becomes internally fixated constituting a germ of a child's sense of self, '*an identification*' (Lacan, (1949), p. 76). The initiated identification of the image from then on duplicates the

dimensions in which reality is being experienced. The crucial point of the whole process is the illusory nature of the internalisation of the one-dimensional and secondary mirror image as something inherently inner to the sense of *self*. To refer back to the previous example, what really takes place at the mirror stage is the misrecognition of the video of a cat as the cat. Interestingly, already centuries ago Plato argued the illusionary nature of the ontological structure of the human world, turning to examples available to him and his contemporaries. He drew similar parallels using the relationship between tangible objects and their shadows mistaken by prisoners in the cave for the objects themselves: '*To them, I said, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images*' ('*The Republic*' written 380 BC). For Lacan the illusion as necessary and unavoidable is all we have access to.

No less coherent, and undoubtedly not less significant for acknowledging basic assumptions the psychoanalytical school of thought is founded on, is the way of understanding The Mirror Stage as a metaphor for the formative role social interactions play in the emergence of the *ego*. In almost direct opposition to Cartesian *cogito*, fundamental to Lacan's work, Freudian *ego* emerges from interactions with the environment. In other words, Freudian *self* comes to being only through encountering the world (Neill, 2014). This premise constitutes a departure from the monistic dead end originated in Descartes' tradition of purely rational reasoning assigned to entirely conscious '*I*'. Introduced in '*Meditations on First Philosophy*' (1641), despite the undisputable progress of human thought shifted from contemplating outer physical world to the inner *self*, Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* fails to overcome its inescapable theoretical limitations. Its atomistic nature leads the self-consciousness to suffering locked-in syndrome of being cut off from interactions with others and having no access to the external world. The body and mind dualism that came with it has never been successfully overcome since and can still be seen to linger in modern science and culture of the West. Cartesian legacy is evident in the unbalanced tendency towards almost solely empirical evidence-based research (i.e. high hopes invested in the biomedical models to explain mental phenomena) and arguments consistent with the normative linear logic, which has no appreciation for the retroactive character of memory found significant, for example, in childhood sexual trauma (Parker, 2015). Fink argues that it is the historically conditioned lack of autonomy from philosophy and psychology that imposes on psychoanalysis criteria simply not adequate to it (2004, p.67).

Nonetheless, Freud's concept of *ego* inspired by Hegelian dialectic, rises exactly from the point where Cartesian '*I*' inevitably reaches its conceptual limitations. In his '*Phenomenology of Spirit*' (1807) Hegel conceptualises self-consciousness as essentially empty in itself and arisen only from constant dialectic interactions between opposites along the circular trajectory of thesis → anti-thesis → synthesis (Homer, 2005, p. 22). Hegel's detailed illustration of the dynamic of the process focused on the mutual relationship between master and slave (hence a chapter of *Phenomenology* titled '*The Master and Slave Dialectic*') who both equally need

each other's recognition as a master and a slave to construct and maintain their identities as contrasting. In other words, there is no master without a slave and the other way round. They need each other to exist. Or, in the context of this study, there is no victim without a culprit and vice versa. However, as already mentioned, the dynamic is fluent and the process circular as there is a price to be paid by each of the parts in the dialectic transformations of the power imbalance. The recognition of the master as the master eventually forced upon the slave (logically if he also deeply identifies himself as a slave, he is not particularly resistant) suddenly loses its constitutive value coming from a submissive slave (Kamal, 2004). The inbuilt paradox lies in impossible strives of the master to be granted (and continuously re-granted) the higher position by a respectable partner, who, logically, by granting him the superiority cannot remain his partner at the same time. The slave, in turn, looks up to the master. He aspires to him through self-negation as in the slave's imagined ideal identity, the master's self-consciousness is exactly what the slave's is not (Kamal, 2004).

The stories of forgiving as told in all three narratives hold evident marks of the Hegelian dialectic. The slave-like idealisation of a master based on the opposition of the *self* and non-*self* fantasy is particularly apparent in the two narratives wherein authors talked about either partial forgiveness, failing to forgive or, simply, choosing not to forgive. In all those cases they still have clear concepts on what it must be and feel like:

Robert:

48. *I am realising that I do not forgive easily, because I think forgiveness should be*

49. *earned or asked for, not something to be handed out like nothing*

55. *To forgive someone you must really mean it.*

56. *You are essentially acknowledging that past wrongs no longer have an effect.*

Arthur:

211. *the person must recognise the wrong-doing and want forgiveness*

213. *I don't believe that forgiveness is or should be a situation where you allow people to*

214. *continue to re-offend*

What also becomes evident is that Arthur's and Robert's fantasies (idealised images) of forgiveness are very much of a conditional nature reflected in the expressions such as [forgiveness] '*should be earned*' or '*the person must recognise the wrong-doing*'. While it is probably easier to forgive when the transgressor realises his/hers fault, regrets it, apologises and looks for ways to compensate harm suffered in order to reconcile with the victim, perhaps, it is not absolutely crucial because it is not always possible. The fantasy itself, however, reveals something important about the *self* which fantasises it. There seems to

be a need of a victim to be recognised as a victim by the person she/he recognises as her/his transgressor (the one to whom the blame is subjectively attributed). The analogy between the Hegelian master and slave relationship becomes striking. What makes this image of being asked for forgiveness so attractive to the victim? Or, in other words, what is it that the victim hopes to gain through such recognition? Perhaps it is a desire of recognition of a right to subjectively experience the harm suffered as actual harm done to the *self* in order to restore boundaries of the *self*. This could happen through restoration of the power distribution between the victim and the transgressor when the transgressor asking for forgiveness gives away his previously held power over a victim to the victim in power to punish. Through this constant dialectic of power they both remain attached to their identities as one (a victim) or another (a transgressor) that continuously maintains their relationship.

This dialectic dynamic, however, should not be understood only literally as an equal distribution of power among two separated people embedded in a social context. On deeper levels, the master and the slave dialectic becomes interpreted as interactions occurring between parts of one's intra-psychic structures. The mirror stage, as already briefly explained, conceptualises exactly the bridging of the external, inter-personal interactions into the subject's intra-psychic structures. An excellent, and at the same time the most obvious, evidence of heterogeneous nature of the self-consciousness are symptoms. When the person (in the clinical setting of psychoanalysis called an analysand) repeatedly experiences intense and obstructive symptoms- '*a qualitative subjective sense of instinctual energy*' (Parker, 2015, p, 39)- against his/her will and efforts, it becomes clearly visible that the unity of an individual closed in the boundaries of his/her *self* cannot be automatically equated with the *self's* integrity. The non-integrity, in turn, implies a system of not totally- or perfectly-jointed parts. In strictly Freudian terms, these are the parts which as a result of the *ego's* instinctive reaction to a threat, were pushed away beyond the consciousness of the *ego*. Unsurprisingly, for the *ego* not able to escape from itself, repression provides the only possible way in which the *ego* can protect itself (1915). The uncontrollable symptom then serves as a sign (or, precisely, as seen before, as the signifier (S) extracted from the sign) of the repressed parts to manifest their continuous existence in the non-conscious structures (Parker, 2015). The conflict of interest between the threatened *ego* too weak at the time of repression and the disjointed, repressed parts which strive to be re-discovered seems to be unavoidable. Such tendency towards being re-discovered may occur in a twofold way- as repulsion or, on the contrary, an attraction (i.e. addictions or engaging in risky and/or destructive behaviours) towards anything with which the repressed content can make symbolic connections with (Freud, 1915). Indeed, all three authors reported experiencing negative symptoms that greatly affected the quality of their social and emotional lives:

41. *Growing up, I've discovered hurdles such as social anxiety and hypersensitivity to*

42. *alcoholic culture/behaviour, and also hypersensitivity to perceptions of danger.*

93. *I*

94. *began to have blackouts and panic attacks*

156. *To begin with I was furiously bitter*

The sense of lack of control over the symptoms is also visible in the narratives:

123. *The anger, the hurt and pain was such a destructive force for me and was turning me*

124. *into someone I hated and didn't want to be.*

42. *It*

43. *also took me a long time to 'come out of my shell', so I also have the feeling of lost*

44. *time, from being a recluse in my early twenties.*

The conclusions of multidimensional structure of the *self* may be evidenced also by argument led inversely. As Parker points out, because of the conflicting tendencies of the *ego* and unconsciousness, an analysand seeking help in a therapeutic work is in fact seeking a shallow relief from the suffering-causing symptoms rather than an actual resolution of the conflict (2015, p. 4). That is because the repressed content 'talking' through the symptom would have to be, first of all, brought into the consciousness despite of the threat it had previously imposed on it, and, second of all, it would then disturb *ego's* economy opening it up the even more threatening 'unknown' of the potential changes. This obviously raises the question of how much the person asking for therapeutic help is actually willing and is ready to change. The traces suggesting that succeeding or failing to resolve the conflict between the disintegrated parts of the *self* and the *ego* are crucial for either forgiving or not forgiving, are visible especially in the Mark's story. Surely, if Arthur and Robert did not manage to forgive, thus resolve the intra-psychic conflict, they will not be aware of it remaining under the reign of the *ego*:

Arthur:

190. *I think I am still quite bitter*

189. *actually, probably more bitter than is healthy. I suspect that true, fairy-tale*

190. *forgiveness is possibly not something that exists*

Robert:

56. *You are essentially acknowledging that past wrongs no longer have an effect. I find it*

57. *very difficult to move on so easily*

61. *The only way I could forgive, would be to hear my grandparents wish to turn back the*

62. *clock as much as I do, but they never did, and now never will, and I must move on.*

Mark, the only one out of the three authors to perceive his own journey as a story of complete and successful forgiving of his stepfather, recalls the beginnings of his counseling sessions as more difficult than previous 'dealing' with the symptoms:

114. *needless to say I wasn't getting any better but possibly worse as I was digging all the*

115. *hurtful past of a man who I put my faith and trust in only for him to emotionally*

116. *cripple me*

What is particularly interesting and counterintuitive is that the weakness of the ego that pushed away the contents being a threat to it in the first place is, in fact, caused by the strength of the ego boundaries and their rigidity (Parker 2015, Freud 1950). The conclusion to be drawn, then, would be that the more flexible the conscious structures, the less unhealthy tension should occur. Reflecting back on his progress eventually leading to the final stages of the therapeutic work, Mark states:

124. *So how to change? There was only one*

125. *way, I had to change my perspective on things, only with that could my outlook on*

126. *life change.*

127. *I looked at the positive things he had done for me as he had been involved in my life*

128. *since I was 7 years old.*

132. *As the sessions continued we continued to look at the positive moments he had in*

133. *my life and how he was there for me, again and again.[*

135. *] my heart softened and the negative feelings towards my*

136. *stepfather again reduced.*

The argument also shines a new light upon previous reflections on the essential differences between rationalisation, excusing and forgiving. Namely, the theory that helped Arthur to explain (and predict) causal links behind peoples' behaviours he subjectively found harmful, may serve as an example of a coping strategy that instead of resolving the conflict between conscious and repressed parts of the *self*, exclusively targets the consciously experienced symptoms, ignoring the underlying structures. Interestingly, a hint towards this kind of

differentiation between forgiveness and rationalisation or excusing can also be found in Arthur's narrative:

171. *This belief worked for a*

172. *time, altho just under the surface of consciousness I think I knew it was a flawed*

173. *concept.*

The Hegelian master-slave dialectic translated into an ordinary human experience can be brought down to a general self↔non-self antagonism. Logically, the concept of *self* makes symbolic sense only in a distinct separation from what boundaries of its scope do not embrace, the non-*self* (the argument takes us back to the Saussure's theory of signs and the '*exclusivity of adjacent concepts and their mutual negation*'). The dialectic establishing of the *self* starts in a child surrounded by what is experienced by him as external, in Lacanian terms, as being the Other to the child (Fink, 2005). Gradually, the child starts internalising the Other's attitudes and expectations expressed towards himself verbally and non-verbally as his own (permanent absence of a father, for example, although not verbally, still carries a certain message of rejection, abandonment of the child etc.). Not only does the child internalise the qualities and contents of those attitudes learning '*to see oneself as the Other sees one*' (Fink, 2005, p.108), but he also assimilates the Other's (external and higher) perspective on himself giving rise to a ladder-like structure of his emerging *self*-consciousness. In other words, at the mirror stage the initially external relationship between the child and the Other, (i.e. parent, language, figures of authority, God), becomes internalised by the child forming his *self*-consciousness hierarchically structured into the *ego-ideal* corresponding with the Other's higher, master-like position, and the *ego*, corresponding with the child as an object perceived by the Other from that position (Fink, 2005). The process is parallel to the child's emerging capability to imagine himself in the external world as an object (Neill, 2014). Arthur (at the moment of writing his story) reflecting back (constructing/imagining memories) on the way he used to perceive (imagine, identify) himself as a child may serve here as an example of these complex mental operations:

158. *I was also very bitter at the world for having treated me so badly –*

159. *malformed the precious, innocent, youthful Alex that I thought I used to be as a*

160. *child.*

What is also of great importance for understanding the Lacanian subject is its lack of agency characteristic especially for the *I think, therefore, I am* position occupied by Descartes. In terms of the constitutive function the language plays in relation to the subject (the internalisation of the Other's symbolic perceptions into the symbolic *self*-perceptions at the mirror stage), for Lacan it is the language that speaks the subject, not the other way round (Grosz, 1990). Moreover, the

Cartesian subject equating being and thinking is not only illusory but illusory in its egocentrism placing itself at the centre of the symbolic system (Neill, 2014, p. 23). Consistently with the logic of previous Lacanian concepts, thinking and being are, in fact, mutually exclusive. (Pure) being, potentially possible only in the pre-linguistic experience of the world, eliminates thinking and subjectivity constructed and facilitated exclusively in the realm of a language (Fink, 2005). Reversely, the subject once brought to life has no ways of unbecoming and thus has no access to the (pure) being. To be a part of the inter-subjective Other as a social human being, the subject is forever condemned to oscillate between lost (pure) being and necessarily imperfect meaning (thought) (Neill, 2014, p. 22-29). As described by Neill, the ever possible gain from attempting to choose one over another, is at most to lose less (2014).

Nonetheless, there is something significant in Mark's story distinguishing it from the two other narratives. Mark's readiness to forgive seems to be marked by his attention being directed towards what he perceived as being in control of and, perhaps, what he felt responsible for:

125. I had to change my perspective on things

and

144. I began to talk to my

145. stepfather, this grew into a basic relationship and ended up with me inviting him to

146. my wedding

but also

102. I had been utterly broken by this man who was supposed to be my father figure and

103. vowed never to let him hurt me again.

This sense of subjectively felt agency on the conscious level, even if far from being absolute and omnipotent, seems to be unique to Mark's testimony whenever he comes up with the initiative to alter the dynamic of the relationship with his stepfather by doing what he can do. There is, however, a subtle pointing towards a similar direction in Arthur's story when he talks about his best friend:

197. I've just realised this moment that perhaps I

198. don't make enough effort to forgive, and that if I had made or were to try to make

199. more effort, the relationships might be mended

But a similar sense of responsibility and active engagement does not apply to all relationships Arthur talks about in his narrative. When unexpectedly, out of the

flow of the main plot unfolding in the narrative focusing mainly on his adolescent friends, Arthur leaps onto his relationship with his father, he makes a very strong statement almost anticipating logical consequences of the previous realisation and explaining why his relationship with his father is an exception:

214. *For example, my dad is useless and always will be and I don't*

215. *forgive him for it, nor do I believe he's deserving of forgiveness.*

Given the limited level of details provided in Arthur's narrative and the sudden change of its dynamic, we may assume it is the particular kind of relationship between Arthur and his father that makes forgiving especially difficult and/or, perhaps, the suffered harm experienced by Arthur as particularly profound. And, indeed, we can see a certain pattern emerging in all three narratives. Despite the very open question on forgiveness which potentially could have resulted in any kind of a personal story of forgiving, the social relationships immediately emerging as most significant to their authors, are those between each of them and members of their closest families and among those, mostly, their father figures. The perception of the father figure consistently appears throughout the three stories as very intensely emotionally-charged and evoking negative associations by using strong, evaluative and at times almost accusatory language ('*ruthless narcissist*', '*controlling selfish man*', '*sociopathic*'):

Arthur about his biological father:

217. *He's a ruthless narcissist – completely oblivious to literally every single*

218. *thing around him and has no idea who I am, nor has any interest in me.*

Mark about his stepfather:

87. *My stepfather was a controlling selfish man and didn't consider anyone but himself*

88. *and if you disagreed with him you were belittled and made to feel dreadful, and if you*

89. *upset him you would feel the wrath of his temper, my mother and I were never*

90. *physically abused by him but mental and emotional abuse was a constant in our lives*

91. *from him, any chance to put us down and make us feel like we didn't matter was*

92. *taken.*

Robert about his biological grandfathers and a father:

5. *Both my grandfathers were quite similar; successful, wealthy and both abandoning*

6. *their children. On my mother's side, my Grandfather Joe survived WW2 and escaped*

7. *the Hungarian Revolution (a police officer at the time), with the trauma of this possibly*

8. *explaining his fragile state of lifelong mental health. Colin, my dad's father, had a*
 9. *strict upbringing by Scottish descendants, and always seemed rather sociopathic*
 10. *towards family*
22. *My father was emotionally destroyed before the age of adult*
 23. *maturity, with his mother's suicide traumatically compounding this*

Lacan's theory does offer a very coherent explanation of the above pattern. In fact, it occupies one of the central places in the Lacanian psychoanalysis emphasizing the importance of a father in the formation of psychic structures which previously were attributed almost entirely to the relationship between a mother and a child (Evans, 2006). The first immediate conclusion from the narratives is that a father figure that appears in them is much more than a mere physical presence of a biological father. Their authors talk about non-biological fathers and fathers of their parents which can all be reduced to a role of a father or rather, a function the father's role has with much less stress being put on which agent enacts the function (inclusive of a mother). Secondly, taking into consideration the choice of the topic and emotional intensity of the language all three authors use to express their past and present attitudes towards the father figures, undoubtedly reveals something about the significance of the role. And Lacan talks about three fathers (three functions) corresponding with the three realms of the *Imaginary*, *Symbolic* and *Real* (Evans, 2006). As already mentioned, both language and experiences of the maternal and paternal bonds are universal and the earliest human encounters with the world. One necessary for biological birth and physical survival, the other for becoming a socially functioning subject, are conventionally opposed in the nature vs. nurture, biology vs. culture dichotomies, practically, however, constituting a continuum of a human experience smoothly progressing from the *Imaginary* to the *Symbolic*. According to Lacan consistently revisiting Freudian concepts and also looking for credible anthropological explanations to substantiate them further (referring especially to Levi-Strauss's work) (Roudinesco, 1997), this naturally necessary transition from a pre-linguistic phase into the social world can be traced down in its metaphorical illustration of the Oedipus myth. The myth is a symbol of an introduction of the law prohibiting incest thus marking an ultimate symbolic boundary between the animalistic nature and human culture. The prohibiting but at the same time protective function belongs to the symbolic father, the name-of-the-father (Evans, 2006). It is also the father who breaks the initial pleasurable and comforting intimacy between the child and a mother (a process symbolically referred to by Lacan as castration) to gradually substitute this bond with socially acceptable equivalents (i.e. arts, sports, sense of humor, romantic relationships, etc). Therefore, it is the symbolic father's function to successfully guide a child into the social world of the *Symbolic*, the non-entry into which is tantamount to being psychotically trapped into the *Imaginary* (Vanheule, 2011). What is important and particularly visible in the Robert's narrative, is the patrilineality of

the symbolic order progressing from Robert's father's father, to his father and then Robert himself. He clearly conceptualises his own subjective position as an effect of something much bigger than himself that he and his relatives involuntarily find themselves to be a continuation of:

2. I feel as if I have grown

3. up in the middle of a giant mess, and have watched how the effects of neglect and

4. emotional abuse filter down through generations.

57. I am reminded of

58. the difficulties still experienced by my sister and cousins, who are the second

59. generation effected. I also take note of their own parenting styles and failed

60. relationships, and wonder if an effect might echo through to the third generation?

What is surprising, however, is the cessation point at the level of Robert's grandparents he places there, as if the loyalty of this transgenerational pattern would have not been imposed on them too but, on the contrary, as if it was generated and set in motion by them (hence they are the ones to be held responsible for it):

19. Needless to say, I do not think very much of my Grandfathers. These horrible

20. eventuations, on both sides, were products of their own doing. My dislike is not due

21. to the people they were, but for what they did, and their self-righteous and stubborn

22. attitude regarding it.

Perhaps the cut off point to the patrilineality placed by Robert upon the generation of his grandfathers (and specifically grandfathers rather than grandparents in general) may serve as a reference to previously considered boundaries of one's *Imaginary* marking boundaries to his forgiving capability. While access to some information is necessary to engage and identify with it (i.e. Robert's detailed and broad knowledge of his family history), it may also be subjectively too distant to be imagined and grasped as making sense (i.e. the social reality of the WW2 or The Hungarian Revolution considered together with Robert's grandfathers' upbringing). Both the limits to what one can identify with as well as blaming, the need to identify someone to blame, correspond with the second Lacanian function of a father, the imaginary father. In this sense the father is imagined as omnipotent and, as such, idealised into a figure of the protection but also the first cause of the incest prohibition law (Evans, 2006). The imaginary father has an archetypal status reflected in the numerous cultural representations and concepts, for example, as the prime mover, the evolution, the laws of the Physics, metaphysical Absolute, strict or merciful God or, in

Lacanian terms, the big Other. Unsurprisingly, as the omnipotent agent with the magnitude of all thinkable attributes, he is naturally responsible for all the limitations the *self* is restrained by: its non-*self*-sufficiency, impotence and impossibility of communication, inaccessibility of the truth, costs to every gain and only relative benefits of differentiation and diversity, all subjectively experienced as lacks and imperfections. It is also the imaginary father, along with all the transformations the concept went through in the course of Lacan's work, that is closest to the Freudian superego (Evans, 2006). The real father, in turn, the least precisely described by Lacan, refers to not necessarily the biological father, but the actual person who the child believes is the father or, in other words, '*the father in reality*' (Olynciw, 2006). It can be also understood as any agent that actually performs the symbolic acts of castration breaking the intimacy of the mother-child dyad by both desiring the mother (a rivalry competition to a child's desire of the mother) and being a subject of the mother's reciprocal desire (making the child realise his inadequacy and insufficiency to fully satisfy the mother). The symbolic castration is determines how the child will define and experience her/his femininity or masculinity in later life (Olynciw, 2006).

Keeping in mind the Lacanian concept of the father, it seems quite intuitive to look for insights into the nature and dynamic of forgiveness in the place occupied by the imaginary father. Internalised into the *self*, it constitutes a matrix for what potentially may or may not be facilitative of forgiveness and determinant of how it becomes subjectively constructed. Also, the initial criterion of the participants' self-confessed religiousness, spirituality or atheism seems to tap exactly into this dimension of the self that emerges as the effect of the imaginary father. In strictly common sensical terms, forgiving seems more difficult and problematic than simple non-forgiving. Actively taking revenge, fantasising of retaliation or passively ignoring whenever complete avoidance is not possible; all seem more natural and instinctually justified than struggles one puts oneself through in order to forgive. Therefore, is forgiveness simply a socially desirable act that serves to maintain social bonds by regulating relationships in a place of aggression to benefit society more than a victim or a transgressor themselves? Robert's confessed and never acted upon fantasy of taking revenge may be interpreted as a positive answer:

30. *In fact, part of my anger outwards is also directed inwards, for never*
31. *letting my grandfathers know my disapproval of them; as if a passive facilitator.*
32. *love the chance to challenge them and break them down, like they broke my parents.*
33. *But, I never did this.*

A loud echo of the above question is also audible in Freud's writings where he argues that the aggression of members of society opposing the society's interests becomes 'introjected' and 'internalised' against the *ego* it originates from (1979 (1930), p. 60). The bidirectional potential of a symptom can be

concluded, for example, from Arthur's narrative when the energy of the unaddressed emotions (unrealised and unexpressed) turns against the ego:

187. *I've transitioned from being a people-pleaser to*

188. *somebody who's more conservative of my energy. I think I am still quite bitter*

189. *actually, probably more bitter than is healthy*

and

197. *Perhaps I am too cynical and jaded!*

In line with the above argument, suicide ideations and attempts may be conceptualised as the ultimate act of aggression that unexpressed outwards turns against the ego as a self-destructive force. Together with the concept of the Lacanian imaginary father internalised into the subject's intra-psychic structures, all these considerations may be brought down to a question of potential motivation to forgive. Or in other words, what are the expectations imposed on the ego by the laws represented by the imaginary father who as a symbol of the omnipotent authority, on one hand protects the ego by guaranteeing its integrity (Fink, 2004) and on the other prohibits and demands? The truths/beliefs coming from the idealised image of the God/Other provide the ego with both ontological truths of the order of the world as the God's/Other's creation and result in moral guidelines or imperatives in the Kantian sense (Evans, 2009). For example, a fragment of the '*Lord's Prayer*' introduced in the New Testament of the Bible, a foundation of the Christianity, states: '*and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us*' contains a truth revealed by God of the laws of symmetry governing the human relationships. Therefore, if one identifies himself as a Christian, his motivation to forgive, most likely would be to be forgiven. Arthur, self-declared atheist provides an answer of a very pragmatic nature:

193. *I suspect as well that forgiveness is a selfish act in some (or most) regards.*

194. *You forgive someone because the opportunist in you still believes that the person*

195. *has something to offer you.*

The stance taken by Arthur almost entirely excludes possibility of forgiveness being a goal and a value of its own. It is also coherent with Arthur's earlier explanations of why his father is not worth of effort to be forgiven; clearly, if he '*is useless and always will be*', then he does not have anything '*to offer*' to Arthur. From further reading into his story it becomes also clear what is it that it makes forgiveness worthwhile of the effort or, in Arthur's words, what it is that the self may be offered through this '*selfish act*'. It is a continuation and maintenance of a relationship:

221. *I do believe that*

222. *forgiveness is tremendously liberating, and I have some experience of that, but in*

223. *my case the liberation came more from an acceptance of other people's flaws and a*

224. *recognition that I and the offending party are trying hard to get along.*

The recognition of the mutual hard efforts to 'get along' reveals something of a conditional nature of forgiveness the way Arthur understands it. It requires a good will and an active engagement of another person both estimated by Arthur as sufficient and promising enough:

197. *perhaps I*

198. *don't make enough effort to forgive, and that if I had made or were to try to make*

199. *more effort, the relationships might be mended. However, this is hypothetical as I*

200. *don't believe these particular relationships are worth mending.*

Moreover, in Arthur's story, there are no clear suggestions whether he considers forgiving of no longer living persons or anonymous people possible at all (i.e. collective forgiveness between communities or nations). It would necessarily fail to meet the previously defined criteria. In turn, he briefly talks about self-forgiveness and forgiveness of a situation. According to Arthur, however, the two mark almost extremely distinct categories resembling 'either/or' logic:

219. *Forgiving myself often depends on my mood at any given time. Sometimes I am*

220. *very hard on myself and sometimes I find it easier to blame my environment and*

221. *circumstances.*

The matter of motivation to forgive from Robert's perspective presents itself through his concept of an all-encompassing forgiveness built on clearly identified ontological assumptions Robert refers to as *new-age* and *Buddhist*:

68. *I also see myself as a bit of a new-age-er with Buddhist leanings and a love for*

69. *philosophy (which may put me in the category of 'spiritual, but not religious').*

70. *Perhaps this outlook helps counterbalance the weight of all this negativity. Martial*

71. *arts training in my youth taught me the power of relaxation and 'letting go'.*

What is immediately striking in Robert's use of words is the '*counterbalancing of the [...] negativity*' as if the negativity was the primary state of being. Counterbalancing indicates secondary means employed to cope in response to it (i.e. relaxation, martial arts training and the outlook) rather to reduce or remove it.

In this sense the counterbalancing brings to mind theory invented by Arthur, both addressing the symptoms entering the conscious ego rather than the unconscious structures underlying them. While Arthur's excusing or rationalisation of people's motives to hurt him in the past targets the intellectual aspects of the harm done to him and subsequent potential for forgiveness, Robert seems to be concerned with neutralizing of the negativity by not engaging into analysing it but by minimising and denying its significance:

71. *I came*

72. *to see all my troubles like waves in the ocean. Nobody can hold back the tide. You*

73. *have to roll with it, and I think this is how I found acceptance in life.*

74. *I do not see the need for many small acts of forgiveness, when you*

75. *have overall acceptance for the sometimes turbulent nature of life.*

Mark's inexplicit answer to his motives to forgive also points at his identity as Christian but emphasises almost the central or the core place occupied by that part of his *self*. Its subjective importance to Mark becomes demonstrated on two levels. First of all, he talks about his Christianity by drawing a vivid contrast between identity of a declared Christian, and other parts he had considered significant to him before being eventually deprived of all of them, one after another:

Status in the society and within work structures,

93. *I*

94. *began to have blackouts and panic attacks and had to take huge amounts of time off*

95. *work and eventually had to leave my job because of it.*

independence of a healthy, strong male,

95. *I saw the doctor and was put*

96. *on medication for depression and for my other ailments. This basically condemned*

97. *me to a life of doing nothing as had no energy and no motivation to get better due to*

98. *the strength of medication I was on*

a role of a son and a sibling within a family,

99. *Eventually I had enough and left home, was declared homeless and ending up living*

100. *in a homeless shelter for over a year. I was at rock bottom, depressed, alone, poor*

101. *and nothing to live for or so I thought.*

all juxtaposed with identity of a Christian as the only role that survived the adversities of that time:

104. *I did however still have one thing, my faith. I have been a Christian and attended*

105. *church from the age of 7 and during this period was still a regular church goer each*

106. *Sunday, (ironically to the same church as my stepfather).*

Second of all, Mark attributes the successful process of forgiving of his stepfather that resulted in his relationship being renewed to his Christian identity almost as if it was a source of greater strength than any other motivation he might have had (i.e. to renew the relationship). He finishes his narrative off summing it up:

148. *My faith brought me through a terrible time and forgiveness healed me.*

149. *This is my story.*

The above analysis, although never aspiring to produce general or clinically valid conclusions, suggests certain regularities occurring among all three personal stories of forgiveness. What can be concluded from Mark's, Robert's and Arthur's narratives is, first of all, that successful forgiveness seems to embrace all the aspects of the *self* including the repressed, unconscious contents. Symptoms that are emotionally challenging and threatening to the *ego* cannot be ignored, reduced or re-directed as a substitute for addressing their primary causes. Therefore, it is the *ego's* flexibility and readiness to allow them into the consciousness that facilitates forgiveness. The bidirectional nature of forgiveness experienced by the *self* through its liberating potential, is an effect of the liberation from the symptoms, therefore the subjectively experienced healing and relief occurs as a side-product not a goal of forgiving.

Secondly, successful forgiveness does not seem to be conditional. It involves a sense of agency on the level of conscious *ego* to break free the attachment of the *self* to the identity as a victim which maintains the bond with the transgressor. In other words, if forgiveness is a desire or power to punish, successful forgiveness requires the *self* to renounce this power and extinguish the victim-transgressor relationship.

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