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## It isn't just about you: A dialogic approach to forgiveness

**Kurzfassung:** Wie funktioniert Vergebung? Die Wissenschaft begann sich erst vor ca. zehn Jahren damit zu beschäftigen. Dabei lassen sich zwei Herangehensweisen unterscheiden: Vergebung wird entweder als individuelle Reaktion oder als interpersoneller Prozess betrachtet. Noch gibt es nicht viele Untersuchungen darüber, wie Menschen einander vergeben können (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, 2008). Der vorliegende Aufsatz ist von Martin Bubers dialogischer Theorie inspiriert und versteht Vergebung als einen interpersonellen Prozess, bei dem sowohl der Vergebende als auch der, dem vergeben wird ins Zentrum der Aufmerksamkeit rückt. Er argumentiert, dass die Möglichkeit, Schritte in Richtung auf eine Beziehungsreparatur zu unternehmen, vom Willen beider Parteien abhängt, offen für einen Dialog und authentisch und ehrlich in ihrer Kommunikation zu sein.

**Abstract:** 'How do I forgive thee? Let me count the ways'. In general, scholars began to study the phenomenon of forgiveness only about a decade ago and differ in their approaches – forgiveness as an individual response or as an interpersonal process. Moreover, there is only a limited amount of research on how people *can* forgive (Waldron & Kelley, 2005, 2008). This paper, conceptually informed by Martin Buber's dialogic theory, treats forgiveness as an interpersonal process that shifts the focus of attention for both the forgiver *and* the forgiven. It shows that successful relationship repair depends on the openness of *both* parties for dialogue, and for authenticity and honesty in their communication.

### Introduction

'How do I forgive thee? Let me count the ways'. The available literature on forgiveness, particularly in the fields of psychology, philosophy, religion and communication, focuses above all on *why* or *what* motivates people to forgive and on the effects of forgiveness on their relationships (Merolla, 2008). There is only a limited amount of research on how people forgive (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). In general, scholars only began to study the phenomenon of forgiveness a decade ago and differ in their approaches – forgiveness as an individual response or as an interpersonal process (Waldron & Kelley, 2008). This paper focuses on how people can forgive non-abusive transgressions in interpersonal relationships. Conceptually, the focus of this discussion, informed by Martin Buber's dialogic theory, treats forgiveness as an interpersonal process involving a shift of attention and sustained effort by *both* the forgiver and the forgiven. It holds that successful relationship repair depends on the willingness of both parties to engage in dialogue, invest their time, accept the risk of failure and be authentic and honest in their communication.

If we treat interpersonal transgressions more like a dance, adopting the perspective that both the transgressed and the transgressor may have contributed to the transgression, forgiveness becomes more a relational rather than an instrumental process, one that people are able to either engage in or refrain from. In terms of the dance metaphor, neither party is solely to blame, but rather both can influence the contexts, communications and understandings that lead to a transgression. A person can commit transgressions or hurtful acts in many different ways, ranging from more grievous ones, such as infidelity, to less hurtful ones, such as not supporting the other person or making hurtful comments. Most people in long-term relationships understand how easy it can be to do or say something hurtful, whereby most incidents of unsupportive, negative communication are not intentional. The offending person may not even be aware that his or her actions or communications have hurt the other. In some cases it is better to take a transgression in stride, especially when one knows that it was not intentional or resulted from thoughtlessness. However, if not dealt with even a minor transgression can have negative effects and can be detrimental to a relationship. Some people avoid talking about their hurt feelings for fear of conflict or of destroying a relationship. Ironically, however, concealing that one is hurt can detract from a relationship, because people cannot continue to refrain from communicating, either verbally or nonverbally, their hurt feelings.

A dialogic perspective treats forgiveness as an act of forgiving both the other *and* oneself. Forgiveness, for both oneself and the other, is a dynamic process of replacing negative emotions and relationship-destructive responses with positive, constructive ones and does not mean that people should ignore, condone or forget transgressions (Hall & Fincham, 2005, 2008). Obviously, those who have been the victims of violent crimes and suffered traumatic losses would object to this proposition. This discussion, however, looks at forgiveness in a relational context where communications, actions, expectations, behaviors and emotional reactions can damage a relationship and in no way attempts to address grievous physically or mentally harmful acts.

Conceptualizing the act of forgiveness as a dance implies that both parties in some way contribute to an act of transgression and that both parties contribute significantly to forgiveness. Thus, it frames forgiveness as inter-subjective, jointly produced by both persons involved in the transgression. Rather than framing the process of forgiveness as a unidirectional action – the transgressed granting the transgressor forgiveness, I propose that a dialogic approach, as conceived by Martin Buber, is fundamental to the process of forgiveness, which involves forgiving both oneself and the other. Dialogue, unlike a con-

ventional rhetorical process in which one person is persuaded to adopt another's beliefs, ideas or point of view, focuses on meeting the other without giving up one's own ground, thoughts and beliefs, and involves jointly discovering new meanings and ideas on how to forgive. Starting from the assumption that both parties should be open to talking about their situation and willing to begin the forgiveness process, the next section asks *how* we can forgive.

## Review of forgiveness scholarship

Forgiveness, conceptualized as interpersonal forgiveness and/or self-forgiveness (intra-personal), has been described as a response that restores positive feelings, thoughts and behaviors after one has experienced unfair treatment or a transgression (Enright & Fitzgibbons, 2000), or as a process of freeing oneself from resentment (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Scholars consider forgiveness necessary for relationship repair (Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Sidelinger, Frisby and McMullen (2009) examined the effects of gender on the likelihood to forgive and found that men took into account how a relationship had developed and how much they had invested in it. They were more inclined to forgive in a developed relationship than in one they had only recently started. On the other hand, according to Sidelinger et al. (2009), women are more cognizant of standards in relationship types and tend to view romantic relationships, either new or well-established ones, through the same lens. They are more likely to perceive forgiveness as a constructive alternative. Exline and Zell (2009) argue that forgiveness functions as a way to reestablish relationship equity or to cancel a debt in a relationship.

In addition, forgiveness has personal health benefits. Scholars find that forgiveness and self-forgiveness promote psychological health and well-being (Martin, 2008; Toussaint & Friedman, 2009). Letting go of anger and hostility also promotes better sleep quality (Stoia-Caraballo et al., 2008). The transgressed person also experiences health benefits when he or she replaces negative emotions with more positive ones and/or decides to change his or her behavior or reactions to the transgressor (Worthington, Witvliet, Pietrini, & Miller, 2007).

In the workplace, forgiveness depends on how parties individually perceive a transgression and how effectively they can communicate with each other. Whether or not one can forgive at work depends on the interpersonal relationship between two people, the quality of their communication and the culture of the organization, as reflected in its moral values, climate of trust, and methods for restoring harmony (Madsen, Gygi, Hammond, & Plowman, 2009). Letting go of a transgression and choosing not to retaliate, even if the transgressed person would feel justified in doing so, is important for maintaining and renegotiating workplace relationships (Madsen, et al., 2009; Paul, 2009).

Factors that promote forgiveness include the length and quality of the relationship – the more one values a relationship, the more one is motivated to preserve it (McCullough, Bono, & Root, 2007). Forgiveness, a complex process of letting go of a transgression and reconciling with the transgressor, doesn't always repair a relationship, but it does influence how the forgiver will perceive the transgressor in the future (Metts & Cupach, 2007). The possibility of forgiving is also influenced by the nature and severity of the transgression (Waldron & Kelley, 2005) and by the ability of both partners to communicate effectively (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006). Furthermore, Bachman and Guerrero (2006) conclude that the possibility of forgiveness depends on the credibility and sincerity of the apology and caution that the likelihood of forgiveness decreases or will be short-lived in the face of repeated transgressions.

Communication scholars also study forgiveness as a constructive communicative act and a fundamental component of interpersonal relationships (Kelley, 1998; Merolla, 2008; Paul, 2009; Sidelinger, Frisby, & McMullen, 2009; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Communicating forgiveness is integral to the process of forgiveness (Kelley, 1998; Merolla, 2008). As a communication act, Kelly (1998) identified three different types of forgiveness – direct, indirect, and conditional – related to the relationship type and the seriousness of the transgression. The most common communication strategy in forgiveness is direct and explicit forgiveness (Kelley, 1998; Waldron & Kelley, 2005). Merolla (2008) finds that the more severe the transgression, the greater the chances are of lasting negative effects (ONA), even after communicating forgiveness.

Most often forgiveness is examined from the standpoint of the victim's ability or motivation to forgive, rather than as an interpersonal process, because the power of negative feelings such as anger, hostile emotions, self-doubt and perhaps even a desire for revenge, are very hard to overcome. So how does one start a dialogue in which the other feels free to say what he or she needs to say and not just what one wants to hear? How does one speak in such a way that the other will want to listen, and listen so that the other will feel free to talk?

## Dialogue as relational

In 1923, Buber wrote *I and Thou*, a text that has inspired scholarship for almost a century. His dialogic theory starts from the premise that man's humanity consists in peoples' relationships to each other and proposes that man's inalterable essence consists in his meeting the other as wholly himself, with respect, responsiveness, openness and alterity (Arnett, 2001; Buber, 1923/1970; Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Czubaroff, 2000). This relation is unmediated, has no telos or aim, and is an

authentic response to the other's presence. Buber (1923/1970) concluded that in order to be whole in life one needs to be engaged in an encounter with the other (I/you) with one's whole being, without preconceived ideas or imagined knowledge of the other. He explained that:

"The relation to the You is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination: and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness. No purpose intervenes between I and You, no greed and no anticipation; and longing itself is changed as it plunges from the dream into appearance." (pp. 62-63)

When one stands on the I's ground, separate and whole, one can listen to what the other has to say without interpreting it from the perspective of one's own beliefs, ideas, wants, and desires. Friedman (1955), a leading Buber scholar, explained that Buber's 'narrow ridge' metaphor is akin to walking a tightrope between excessive concern for oneself and excessive concern for the other. Both parties in a relationship need to be fully present in the encounter, each focusing on the encounter or on imagining the other's reality, thus experiencing the other without trying to control him or to employ techniques that manipulate the encounter in favor of one's own ideas. Respecting oneself and the other fosters trust, and this is essential for a true dialogue.

Buber (1947/1955) cautioned that one needs the courage to open oneself to conflict and disagreement. One needs courage to strive to be present in the moment and in the conflict. It takes courage to open oneself to the other – to make oneself vulnerable and trust another person, while at the same time one also needs the courage to remain standing on one's own ground. Friedman (1981) addressed the importance of Buber's concept of freeing oneself from one's ego:

"Not withholding means directness; it means between-ness; it means awakening in the other the need of help and in yourself the capacity to help; it means coming forth from behind the fortress of your spirit in which you have enclosed yourself and from which you exchange signs with fellow conspirators in the secret alliance." (p. 243)

Trust is essential for creating new ideas and interpretations in the here and now of the conflict or the difficult interpersonal situation. Buber (1923/1970) identified this metaphorical position as 'the between', which is not just the place or property of the I or the Thou, but is rather the joint discovery of unfolding, emerging ideas.

An encounter in 'the between' requires that a person be ethically committed to respond to the other authentically in the present moment—to respond to what the present calls for rather than to what was called for in the past (Lipari, 2004). Buber (1923/1970) clarified 'the between' with the word *Gegenwart*, a German word that means both presence and the present (as opposed to the past or future). One's phenomenological focus determines what one attends to, as Buber clarifies using an autobiographical example:

"When I was eleven years of age, spending the summer on my grandparents' estate, I used, as often as I could do it unobserved, to steal into the stable and gently stroke the neck of my darling, a broad dapple-gray horse ...The horse, even when I had not begun by pouring oats for him into the manger, very gently raised his massive head, ears flicking, then snorted quietly, as a conspirator gives a signal meant to be recognizable only by his fellow-conspirator; and I was approved. But once – I do not know what came over the child at any rate it was childlike enough – it struck me about the stroking, what fun it gave me, and suddenly I became conscious of my hand. The game went on as before, but something had changed, it was no longer the same thing. And the next day, after giving him a rich feed, when I stroked my friend's head he did not raise his head." (as cited in Arnett & Arneson, 1999, p.127)

This anecdote metaphorically identifies the initial experience of petting and feeding the horse as an act of being fully present and imagining his darling as his own being. Fully connecting with the dapple-gray horse meant letting go of his ego involvement (his experience of experiencing) and connecting to the horse without imagining what he thought, but instead connecting to or being cognizant of the horse's essence. As the conclusion of the story indicates, as soon as the experience turned back to Buber as an experience of himself (I) rather than of the horse's essence (Thou), he ceased to experience the horse as his own being, as situated in the moment. Besides illustrating how fleeting moments of truly connecting with another can be, this story encourages us to reflect on how fragile experience can be and on how hard it is, even if it seems simple, to be mindful of the moment as an act of respect and care for another. The focus of one's concern and attention is critical for dialogue and likewise critical for the act of self- and interpersonal forgiveness.

## Discussion

First, it is important to stress that forgiving another does not require us to condone or accept the other's transgression or even to continue a relationship. Sometimes letting a relationship go is the best course. In the case of self-forgiveness, either as the transgressor or the transgressed, this does not mean absolution. Being fully present in a dialogic sense means that one should assume responsibility for the act or for contributing to the situation.

While Buber does not discuss forgiveness *per se*, he does talk about existential guilt. Existential guilt, a product of one's own conscience, arises when someone harms another person or being in the world (Buber, 1957/1965b). Moving away from blame, either blaming another person or oneself, and focusing on accountability is an ontological use of existential guilt. Accountability and responsibility mean that we should acknowledge or seek to understand how we have contributed

to a situation. This helps us to understand how to act as a co-creator in facilitating another's understanding of new ways to approach a situation or a relationship. Guilt, in this sense, is a motivator for doing things differently in the future. Rather than merely sweeping a transgression or hurt under the proverbial carpet, forgiving is here an act of acknowledging the past and seeking ways to move forward in an ongoing dialogue.

When one conceptualizes forgiveness as a dance, the first image that arises is of two people, partners in a joint action, coordinating their steps with each other and the dance music, which requires orientation and presence with regard to the other and to the historical moment. This is metaphorically akin to the process of dialogue as conceived by Buber and Buber scholars. But how can partners dance together when they feel hurt, anger, shame and resentment? How can either partner let go of the emotional baggage of transgressions in their relationship?

Fishbane (1998) advocated a dialogic approach to couple therapy, particularly because couples most often begin therapy feeling polarized and disconnected. Couples can also become disenchanted when they are no longer in the 'honeymoon period' where 'love is blind' and flaws are obscured, or idealized images prevail. Often, according to Fishbane (1988), couples may disconnect from one another due to a transgression, such as infidelity, deception or hurtful acts or remarks, and by the time they begin therapy, the most they can see is usually their own pain. This paper suggests that the same thing can happen to people in friendships where harmful acts and miscommunication cause them to withdraw from each other. Turning away from the other for whatever reason further entrenches a person in focusing on the "I," steeped in emotions connected with feeling wronged by the other. It is only when the victims of transgression are able to go beyond a focus on how they were hurt or betrayed that they can truly perceive others and begin to relate to them in a relationship.

Buber (1923/1970) held that: "Relation is reciprocity. My You acts on me as I act on it. ... – As long as love is 'blind' – that is, as long as it does not see a *whole* [italics in original] being – it does not yet truly stand under the basic word of relation" (pp.67-68). In other words, if one focuses solely on the personal hurt caused by a transgression, the possibility is remote of engaging in dialogue and authentically working toward forgiveness based on agreeing to do things differently.

In a dialogic sense, moving beyond a transgression, whether it was committed by oneself or another, requires acknowledging not just the other's, but also one's own contribution to the transgression, while at the same time focusing on the 'between' in order to achieve new insights. This 'between', in the Buberian sense, requires intentionality in focus – moving one's focus away from the I to the other. This is very difficult to do, as more often than not when one feels transgressed against, one also experiences very strong emotions. For the transgressed person, the sense of entitlement to compensation and of having grounds for retaliation and/or rejection is a common and appealing response and works like a maelstrom or undercurrent, as these feelings can pull a person under, locking them inside for a long time. It may also be similar for the transgressor, who may feel a sense of helplessness, shame and guilt. Moving the focus changes the meaning, as Arnett and Arneson (1999) explained:

"What one is actually 'conscious of' frames the focus and the meaningfulness of the communication. If someone is ill, we send flowers: but if our focus of attention is on how good we are acting in having sent the flowers, the communication is much different than being 'conscious of' the other's needs in a time of crisis." (p.133)

Only when this "conscious of" or intentionality and phenomenological focus, which gives us a meaning that guides both our actions and communications, shifts beyond one's own ego or desire to manipulate or influence a situation or person to how one would like it to be – is it possible to enter into a dialogic space with the other. In a dialogic sense, shifting one's phenomenological focus is the starting point for forgiving. One must look beyond the transgression and move away from focusing solely on what has happened. Turning one's focus from the transgression or hurtful act or communication to the other is the starting point.

Arnett and Arneson (1999) proposed that there are links in intersubjectivity between intentionality and Buber's 'between'. Intersubjectivity is an ontological understanding of a relationship in which both parties seek to find a reality beyond everyday or conventional explanations or reactions. This paper further holds that 'between' is the place where both the transgressed and the transgressor acknowledge those involved, the particular act or historical moment, the depth and quality of the relationship and the affected community. Acknowledging the context of the transgression, along with the intentions involved and the background, is part of jointly creating a way to transcend the hurtful situation or to see the relationship in a new light.

Often conflicts or arguments between partners in a relationship can be repetitive and may even be routine. Repeated verbal and nonverbal cues or utterances can trigger circular disputes, like a skipping phonograph needle, whereby people continually rehearse the same arguments. In this case, neither party listens to or considers the other's position, so that it is necessary to acknowledge the repetitive communications and either to resolve or reframe the arguments or transgressions. Reframing, in a dialogic sense, is an interpersonal discovery process in which neither party owns or enforces the meanings or interpretations. By engaging in dialogue, both parties can discover new meanings.

Forgiveness arising from this dialogic orientation requires *both* the transgressor and the transgressed to distance themselves from their own interpretation, blame, and sense of entitlement. Turning towards each other requires both parties to

be open to the discovery of new meanings. Buber (1957/1965b) posited that each person in a dialogic relationship engages in "imagining the reality" of the other, concretely imagining what the other is thinking, perceiving and feeling, which is an act of empathizing with the other. He explains: "In its essential being this gift is not a looking at the other, but a bold giving – demanding the most intensive stirring of one's being into the life of another" (p. 81). This most intensive stirring into the life of another requires one to be fully present and respect the presence of the other, along with being fully present and respecting one's own self. This necessitates that one stand on one's own ground, separated from the other, not losing one's self through the force of the other's ideas, interpretations, or personality. "This one person, without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his [or her] activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other" (Buber, 1957/1965b, p. 97). Mutual understanding facilitates trust that, in turn, encourages openness, which is fundamental for true dialogue.

In the dialogic approach to forgiveness, both persons in a relationship talk about the conflict, hurt, blame, what is happening in the relationship, and how each person may have contributed to the transgression or harmful acts and communications. Discovering new meanings goes beyond just accepting an apology or letting go of negative feelings. Instead, forgiveness, both interpersonal and self-forgiveness, involves both persons reframing and creating new meanings. However, this does not mean that they must forget or condone transgressions or harmful behaviors and communications.

Waldron and Kelley's (2008) new communicative theory of forgiveness, negotiated morality theory, aligns forgiveness with morality. The moral dimension of forgiveness pushes to the fore questions of fairness, right and wrong, relational justice and dignity. Both persons in a relationship are morally responsible for their own actions, communications and contributions to the situation. Moral action is responsive action (Arnett, Arneson, & Bell, 2006; Friedman, 1994).

The challenge of interpersonal conflict is how to cope with diverse ways of thinking and, with a dialogic orientation, to stay open to facing, learning from and negotiating differences. The two persons can only find new ways of approaching their relationship when both are grounded in an ethical dialogue as a postmodern approach that does not presuppose that each will accept the same story or way of looking at the world.

Benhabib (1992) has argued that when engaging in a dialogue with another who has substantially different viewpoints, each partner must be encouraged to develop her or his own moral imagination in order to be cognizant of differences. Developing "enlarged thinking" enables one to challenge previously held assumptions, facilitates moral insights and has ethical ramifications, as it encourages us to consider the other's standpoint, and in the process of this reconsideration, acknowledges the other's humanity and affective-emotional makeup (Benhabib, 1992, p. 159).

The limitation of this approach, which conceives of forgiveness as an interpersonal process, is that one or both persons in the relationship may not be willing to risk communicating hurt or may not be open to new interpretations or ideas about how to start moving beyond the transgression. Working on interpersonal conflict involves personal risk for both parties, as each should be open to the possibility of rejection. Obviously, the more grievous the transgression, the longer and more arduous the process can be in terms of both invested time and emotional capital. Faced with these challenges, one person or even both persons in the relationship may assess the depth and quality of their relationship and decide against working towards creating a stronger bond.

In sum, the dialogic approach views forgiveness as an interpersonal process in which the phenomenological focus is placed on the 'between' and not on one partner's position or subjective meaning. Forgiving communication is about authentically communicating one's intentions and interpretations and listening to the other, even though it may be hurtful or troubling. Without a dialogic and moral orientation focusing on openness to the other person and to oneself, the act of forgiving can be more a rhetorical act in the classical sense, where one adopts another's meanings. Admittedly, letting go of negative feelings, hurtful interpretations and vengeful thoughts, giving up one's ideas for the sake of keeping the peace or preserving a relationship is a step in the right direction. In the end, however, it does little to create a new reality or to facilitate a dialogue in which both partners jointly discover new meanings and different ways to approach their relationship.

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