

# A Philosophical Counselor's Approach to Forgiveness and Reconciliation

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## Biography

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## Abstract

This paper delineates aspects of forgiveness as approached through the framework of philosophical counseling. Basic questions regarding these issues are raised, including: "Are forgiveness and reconciliation possible?" "What are the necessary preconditions for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation?" "What values or anti-values do the concepts embody?" A philosophical counselor offers guidelines for the conceptualization of the practical issues involved in forgiveness and reconciliation, derived from experiences in counseling sessions and utilizing an amalgam of theoretical perspectives.

## Key Words

Philosophical counseling, forgiveness, reconciliation, phenomenology, existentialism, freedom, selfhood, guilt

## Key Authors

Alice Miller, Friedrich Nietzsche

FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION are issues which become increasingly complex upon critical reflection. What do we mean by “forgiveness”? “Reconciliation”? Are forgiveness and reconciliation possible? And, if so, what are necessary preconditions for the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation? What values or anti-values do these concepts embody? As a philosophical counselor, I offer only a framework for the conceptualization of the practical issues involved in forgiveness and reconciliation. These observations are drawn from experience in counseling sessions, in the main, and utilize an amalgam of theoretical frameworks. These points are in no way meant to be exhaustive and are offered here as a groundwork beyond which further development will be essential. It is requested that the reader proceed with the experimental attitude of the reflective observer, weighing each of the following points with reference to real concrete situations. Finally, it is important to note that the following ten points are elucidated in no specific temporal order. The focus of the points that follow is the phenomenological or “subjective” reality of the individual who has been violated and who is working through the process of seeking to explore possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## 1. The Issue of Forgiveness

One must come to the realization that the real issue is in fact a question of forgiveness. Recognizing that the issue is one of forgiveness does not mandate that forgiveness is possible, but only that the issue is one of forgiveness. Because of the pervasive and nearly universal blocking function of guilt feelings in the psychic life of the victim, the otherwise lucidly conscious victim may not be able to recognize the issue as one of forgiveness. The victim may therefore affectively interpret the victimization as an exercise in complicity and therefore, through the paralysis of guilt, be unable to recognize and assign clear responsibility to the perpetrator.

## 2. The Tragic Nature of Reality

Persons can be guilty of harming others without at any time having malevolent intent. Furthermore, persons with the best of intentions can harm others. One must come to the realization that forgiveness may be necessary even if the person or persons to be forgiven could not have acted otherwise (and at no time possessed malevolent intent). An example of such a paradoxical scenario would be the person who is unable to love (i.e. that a person is unable to recognize the true needs of another). Such a person may feign the characteristics he or she simply does not possess, but will still, in the end, be incapable of loving another. The tragic nature of such a condition may exonerate said individual from the charge of not choosing another course

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of action, but the insidious effects of any action chosen do not attenuate on this account. The recipient of the “love” of those incapable of loving is still harmful and for this reason produces a violation for which responsibility is assignable. Therefore, the situation is one in which an individual/group could not have done otherwise, nevertheless persons victimized by the same may recognize the need to forgive – for an inevitable situation that could not have been otherwise.

### 3. Mourning or Guilt?

Mourning is distinct from feeling guilt. Mourning and sorrow reactivate numbed feelings (Miller, *For Your Own Good* 250). If guilt precludes the possibility of real forgiveness, sorrow and mourning are necessary preconditions for the possibility of such forgiveness. Anger and/or aggression must be expressed before forgiveness becomes a possibility. To feel anger and sorrow within the context of the narrative structure of one’s own autobiography allows for the possibility of internal reconciliation with the cognized facts regarding one’s own life.

### 4. The Role of Authentic Selfhood

“We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge –and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves –how could it happen that we should ever find ourselves? (...) [W]e are not men of knowledge with respect to ourselves” (Nietzsche 15). Authentic selfhood is a prerequisite for forgiveness. Following clearly from the preceding points, we can see that forgiveness requires self-knowledge, without which we would not in fact be capable of either forgiveness or reconciliation. The question concerning the necessary conditions of selfhood is beyond the scope of this paper, but the consequences of such selfhood include but are not limited to the capacity to feel genuine non-abreacted emotions including anger, anxiety and sorrow. To come to the recognition that there is an issue of forgiveness, one must first be able to face one’s self to the extent that one develops an emotional landscape capable of the affective recognition of the need for forgiveness and reconciliation. This ability entails access to one’s true feelings, that is, one’s true self.

### 5. The Idealized Past

Idealization of the past must be acknowledged and dismantled. Theoretical constructs and idealizations serve many functions, but one of them, certainly, is to allow the warding-off of one’s own affective reality. Intellectual resistance in the form of idealization can blunt and impair

affect to the point that one cannot gain access to what s/he has experienced and so one's past functions only as a regulating mythology to keep anger, sorrow and grief at bay. As long as these feelings are held in abeyance, no real forgiveness or reconciliation are possible. Without the experience of anger and sorrow, there is no possible recognition of violation and therefore there is no question of a need for forgiveness. Idealization of the past, a condition that may remain constant over time—regardless of new information or experiences—, locks the door behind which one may gain access to the reality of violation and the hopeful possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

## 6. The Role of Freedom

Forgiveness involves both voluntary and involuntary components. The involuntary components, as follows, are necessary preconditions for the possibility of raising the question of forgiveness: a) the awakening of spontaneous feeling, e.g. anger, sorrow, grief; b) recognition and dissipation of false guilt (produced by introjects); c) realization of the need for forgiveness. The voluntary component, if one may exist at all, is consequent to the fulfillment of the involuntary components. Put differently, if the three above criteria are not met in a real existential way—opposed to a theoretical desire that they may be met—one cannot possibly be in a position to make any kind of decision regarding forgiveness and reconciliation.

## 7. The Duty to Forgive

To moralize regarding forgiveness itself precludes the possibility of forgiveness. This situation arises when one feels as if s/he “ought” to forgive without having met the necessary preconditions for the possibility of forgiving. That is, one feels that it is a moral imperative to forgive and therefore one seeks to forgive. The involuntary conditions cited in the previous point have not been met, therefore the individual is not capable of doing what s/he demands of the self as a moral imperative. Are you feeling your feelings, or are you “feeling” what you ought to feel? Since feelings cannot be produced via moral injunction, unless one has met the involuntary conditions previously cited, real forgiveness is not possible.

## 8. Premature Forgiveness

Premature forgiveness/reconciliation reinforces the false self. Following upon the preceding points, we can now conclude that if one forgives prematurely, the net result is

reinforcement of the false self, a condition that will now be defended by the available aspects of the true self. An individual may choose premature forgiveness because s/he desperately seeks to reestablish connections with other people (regardless of the actual intimacy of these connections), but the cost involves a sacrifice of the true self (Miller, *Aware* 216). Since the true self now has a stake in the continued production of the false self, real forgiveness is now increasingly remote.

## 9. The Role of Creative Expression

Creative expression may act as a catalyst in the production of the necessary preconditions for the possibility of forgiveness. Creative expression in almost endless forms (writing, painting, music, gardening, woodworking, photography, exercise) often allows one access to one's true feelings of anger, grief or sorrow when other attempts at access (bibliotherapies, talking therapies, attempts at understanding) often fail. This is an important mode of access and is especially important for intellectually gifted individuals who have, through long reflection, constructed a theoretical edifice to explain and distance themselves from their own psychic reality. The essential aspect of creative expression is play –to uncritically engage in an activity as an end in itself.

## 10. Forgiveness and Healing

Forgiveness is not a necessary condition for the healing of the victim. This final point is arguably the most controversial. As a consequence of the preceding points, I conclude that forgiveness is often presented to those victimized as a covertly moral demand and insofar as this is the case, the healing process itself, for those victimized, is damaged or subverted (Miller, *Banished Knowledge* 152-4). Demands for forgiveness may not serve the victim and may, under the guise of therapeutic intervention, serve to manipulate and undermine the very recovery

## 11. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to say a few words about the meaning or goal of forgiveness. Any attempt to elucidate a theory of forgiveness and its attendant practical applications implies a substrate regarding the telos of forgiveness. Is the goal the healing of those violated, or is it to heal the violator(s), or is the goal the healing of the relationship between the two? If forgiveness is desirable, why is this the case? Traditional theories on forgiveness (wherein forgiveness is a moral ideal) imply that to forgive is better than not to forgive, but I am suggesting in this paper

that this is often not the case. Furthermore, I would like to underscore that in many situations, forgiveness may not even be a possibility. In such situations, forgiveness would be either desirable and not possible or neither desirable nor possible. Reconciliation may be an intrapsychic phenomenon rather than an interpersonal one, and may not be the result of forgiving, but may be the result of not forgiving. Once again we raise the question concerning the meaning and value of the concepts of forgiveness and reconciliation. This important exploration I shall leave for another investigation.

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