Forgiveness: Origins, Dynamics, Psychopathology, and Technical Relevance

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This paper integrates a diverse and scattered literature to describe the psychodynamic underpinnings of granting and seeking forgiveness. The evolutionary foundations and the developmental substrate of these capacities are elucidated. An individual who fails to make certain intrapsychic achievements may be vulnerable to psychopathological development, as is evident in those who cannot forgive or forgive too readily, constantly or never seek others' forgiveness, cannot accept forgiveness, or show an imbalance between their capacities to forgive themselves and to forgive others. The relevance of various developmental and phenomenological concepts to psychoanalytic technique, including the patient's need to forgive and to be forgiven, is also discussed.

Introduction

Psychoanalysis has had little to say about forgiveness. The topic is listed neither in the index of the Standard Edition of Freud's works, nor in the Title, Key Word, and Author Index to Psychoanalytic Journals 1920-1990.
This omission is puzzling, since issues closely linked to forgiveness (e.g., trauma, mourning, guilt, the need for punishment) have been of utmost concern to psychoanalysis. Reasons for this neglect are unclear, though many possibilities exist.

First, the tradition among psychoanalysts to treat Freud's work as a touchstone before positing their own views creates the risk that topics not addressed by the master will be ignored. Forgiveness is one such phenomenon. The word itself appears a mere five times in the entire corpus of Freud's work (Guttman, Jones, and Parrish 1980), and then in a colloquial rather than scientific manner. Second, forgiveness is a hybrid psychological concept with unmistakable interpersonal and social referents. Thus, it borders on areas where analytic theory traditionally has been at its weakest and prone to heuristic omissions. Third, originating in clinical concerns, psychoanalysis has devoted greater attention to morbid psychic phenomena (e.g., anxiety, hate) at the expense of positive and life-enhancing emotions (e.g., courage, altruism). This bias, admittedly rectified to a certain extent by writings on wisdom (Kohut 1971), tact (Poland 1975), hope (Casement 1991), and love (Kernberg 1995), is also reflected in the literature's inattention to forgiveness. Finally, the benevolence implicit in forgiveness gives religious overtones to the concept (à la “to err is human, to forgive divine”). This link, strengthened in the mind if one regards sin as the fraternal twin of forgiveness, might also have given pause to analysts considering this topic.

Nonetheless, the phenomenon of forgiveness remains dynamically, technically, and socially important enough to warrant serious attention from the discipline. This paper aims to fill the lacuna. I will begin by highlighting the psychodynamics of giving and

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1 A computerized update extending to 1998 fared no better in this regard.
2 In contrast, punishment has 253 mentions. This speaks volumes not only to Freud's own “punishing” conscience (Gay 1988, p. 140), but also to a certain puritanical bent of classical psychoanalytic theory itself.
3 The term identity has had a checkered history in analytic theorizing for the same reason (Akhtar 1999a).
seeking forgiveness, and will then attempt to elucidate the evolutionary and
developmental correlates of these phenomena. Following this, I will discuss
the various psychopathological syndromes involving forgiveness. Finally, I
will address the technical significance of these conceptualizations and
conclude with some remarks about areas needing further investigation.

**Definition and Dynamics**

Like revenge, the fantasy of forgiveness often becomes a cruel
torture, because it remains outside of reach of most ordinary human
beings. Folk wisdom recognized that to forgive is divine. And even
divine forgiveness, in most religious systems, is not unconditional.
True forgiveness cannot be granted until the perpetrator has sought
and earned it through confession, repentance, and restitution.
[Herman 1992, p. 190]

The wish to exact revenge must be recognized, and responsibility
for the damage you have done to your objects has to be accepted.
This means that to be forgiven, bad elements in our nature have to
be accepted but sufficient good feeling must exist for us to feel
regret and the wish to make reparation. [Steiner 1993, p. 83]

Webster (1998) defines *forgiveness* as the “act of forgiving” and the root
word *forgive* in the following way: “1a: to give up resentment of or claim to
requital for (i.e., an insult). b: to grant relief from payment of (i.e., a debt). 2: to cease to feel resentment against (an offender)” (p. 458). These definitions
indicate that active intent (“to give up,” “to grant”) is involved in forgiving.
They also suggest that forgiveness comprises two mental operations, namely,
the resolution of an unpleasant angry emotion within oneself, and a changed
attitude toward an offending party, which is then allowed freedom from one's
claims over it. While this is not made explicit, the change in affect seems to
precede the change in object relationship.

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Another matter of note is that little mention is made of the association between forgiving and forgetting. The widespread colloquial counsel for one to “forgive and forget” notwithstanding, the fact is that the forgetting of a traumatic event, especially too early in the course of mourning and forgiveness, betrays defensive distortion of internal and external reality. To be sure, once forgiveness is granted, the injurious event no long preoccupies the conscious mind. However, with a diminished affective charge, the memory of it remains available at a preconscious level; this serves as a potential signal and informs the ego when a similarly traumatic situation is about to arise again. Yet another issue is the distinction between the dynamics of bestowing forgiveness and the dynamics of seeking forgiveness. The first is related to mourning a trauma and the second to the emergence of remorse over one's own hostility.

**Bestowing Forgiveness**

In dealing with forgiving, one is immediately faced with the psychology of someone who has something to forgive (in actual or psychic reality, or both) —i.e., some trauma, disenfranchisement, or injustice. One is also faced with a perpetrator who is to be forgiven. Thus, in order to understand forgiving, one has to take into account the victim, the perpetrator, and the trauma that has been inflicted upon the former. This applies equally whether the scenario of forgiving unfolds in a clinical or a sociopolitical situation (Akhtar 1999b; Volkan 1997).

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4 An alternative view was voiced by Hunter (1978), who stated that:

> Forgetting is an almost invariable accompaniment of forgiving, and forgiving leads to it, the process not being complete unless forgetting results. This is literally forgetting and not repressing, and is analogous to the letting go and forgetting that take place through mourning. [p. 267]

Interestingly, it was a Dutch novelist, Cees Nooteboom, who brought together the two views (i.e., what is forgiven should be forgotten *and* what is forgiven should be remembered) in a deliciously paradoxical manner. Nooteboom (1980) wrote that the injury that has been forgiven should be forgotten, but the fact that it has been forgotten should be remembered!
The Rabin-Arafat handshake at the 1995 peace accord between Israelis and Palestinians at the White House is emblematic of mutual forgiveness between fierce opponents, both of whom held themselves to be the victim and the other the perpetrator. Their reconciliation involved diminution of resentment toward each other, letting go of grudges, making compromises, renouncing omnipotent claims, and settling for less than ideal handouts from life. In Kleinian terms, this represents a move from the paranoid to the depressive position (Klein 1948). In the paranoid position, goodness is claimed for oneself while badness is totally externalized. The world is viewed in black-and-white terms. The self is regarded as a victim and the other as an oppressor. Mistrust, fear, rage, greed, and ruthlessness predominate. By contrast, in the depressive position, it is acknowledged that the self is not all good and the other not all bad. A capacity for empathy appears on the horizon. There also emerge feelings of gratitude for what one has received, guilt and sadness for having hurt others, and reparative longings to redress the damage done. Reality testing improves and the capacity for reciprocal relationships develops.

In clinical as well as social situations of adult life, three factors seem important in allowing the advance from traumatized victimhood to forgiveness: revenge, reparation, and reconsideration. Although typically viewed as politically incorrect, some revenge is actually good for the victim. It puts the victim's hitherto passive ego in an active position. This imparts a sense of mastery and enhances selfesteem. Revenge, in reality or fantasy, allowing the victim to taste the pleasure of sadism, also changes the libido-aggression balance in the selfobject relationship. The victim no longer remains innocent and the perpetrator is no longer the sole cruel party; now both seem to have been hurt and to have caused hurt. This shift lays the groundwork for empathy with the enemy and thereby reduces hatred. Forgiveness is the next step.

Note Nietzsche's (1905) remark that “a small revenge is humaner than no revenge at all” (p. 71), and Heine's witticism that “one must, it is true, forgive one's enemies—but not before they have been hanged” (Freud 1930, p. 110).
The second factor that facilitates forgiving is *reparation*. Acknowledgment by the perpetrator that he or she has indeed harmed the victim is important for the latter's recovery from trauma (Herman 1992; Madanes 1990). It undoes the deleterious effects of gaslighting (i.e., denying that something destructive has been done to someone). To harm a person and then question his or her perception of it is a double jeopardy, tantamount to soul murder (Shengold 1989). Note in this connection the pain caused to Jews by those who deny the Holocaust, as well as—in a clinical parallel—the anguish induced in a sexually abused child whose “nonabusive” parent refuses to believe in the reality of such events. Recognizing the Holocaust and acknowledging the occurrence of sexual abuse, in contrast, improve reality testing and facilitate mourning. Such a move is given further impetus if the perpetrator shows signs of remorse, apologizes, and offers emotional recompense, material reparation, or both. This testifies to the verity of the victim's grievance and functions as a graft over his or her psychic wound.

Receiving an apology (and reparation) thus adds to the perceptual clarity of the victim's ego (“I was right in perceiving what was going on to be wrong”). Alongside such cognitive vindication, being apologized to puts the victim in an active position with the choice to forgive or not forgive. The passive underdog of yesterday becomes the active bestower of pardon. This improves self-esteem, which in turn permits further mourning.6

Yet another manner in which an apology exerts a healing effect is by shifting the psychic locale of the representations of trauma.

6 Material reparation (e.g., gift giving following a dispute) alone, however, is far less effective in eliciting forgiveness than a sincere apology with no offer of tangible compensation (Sanders 1995).

7 Empirical research has demonstrated that apologies, when appropriately constructed, reduce the victim's motivation to blame, punish, or retaliate against the transgressor (Darby and Schlenker 1982, 1989; Ohbuchi, Kameda, and Agarie 1989). Apologies also improve the victim's perception of and empathy with the transgressor's character (McMillen and Helmreich 1969; O'Malley and Greenberg 1993; Scher and Darley 1997), increasing the victim's willingness to forgive the transgressor (McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal 1997; Sanders 1995).
ma from the actual to the transitional area of the mind. Without labeling it as such, Tavuchis (1991) hinted at such a shift when he wrote that “an apology, no matter how sincere or effective, does not and cannot undo what has been done. And yet, in a mysterious way and according to its own logic, this is precisely what it manages to do” (p. 5). The “mystery” here is that after an apology is made, the trauma begins to get recorded in both the real and the unreal registers of the mind—that is, it acquires a transitional quality. In this realm, it can be more easily played with, looked at from various perspectives, and finally let go.

The libido-aggression shift that occurs as a result of revenge taking and the rectified perceptual and narcissistic economy that stem from receiving reparation together result in the capacity for better reality testing. This makes a reconsideration of the memories of one's traumas possible. Kafka's (1992) view that we repeat not what we have repressed, but what we remember in a particular, rigid way, is pertinent in this context. Its implication for the clinical as well as the social situation is that to let go of grudges, we do not need to recall what has been forgotten, but rather to experience a mental amplification, elaboration, and revision of what indeed is remembered and reenacted over and over again.

In tandem, then, these three factors (revenge, reparation, and reconsideration) improve reality testing, facilitate mourning of earlier injustices, enhance ownership of one's own destructiveness (Steiner 1993), permit a capacity for concern for the opponent, and allow “mature forgiveness” (Gartner 1992) to emerge and consolidate.

**Seeking Forgiveness**

The wish to be forgiven implies that the subject has become cognizant of having done something hurtful—an act of omission or commission, in actual or psychic reality (or both)—toward another individual. It also implies that the latter is significant enough for the perpetrator to want to restore the preexisting relationship with him or her. Seeking forgiveness therefore emanates not only from a capacity for remorse, but also from a libidinal component in one's
feelings for one's victim. Freud (1913) underscored this by saying that “when one forgives a slight that one has received from someone of whom one is fond,” the underlying mechanism is “to subtract, as it were, the feeling with the lesser intensity [hostility] from that with the greater [affection] and to establish the remainder in consciousness” (p. 62).

Moses (1999) emphasized that in seeking forgiveness, the perpetrator must genuinely own the responsibility of the wrong done by him- or herself, and express this not only privately but in an explicit and public form: the apology should be highly specific, accompanied by remorse and a truly felt commitment to avoid doing the harmful act again. Seeking forgiveness thus involves the working through of narcissistic resistances to recognizing one's having been at fault, tolerance of humility (a “one-down” position being inherent in apologizing), and ego resources to offer reparation. This last point is clearly spelled out in various Judeo-Christian and Islamic scriptures. Mishne Torah (Maimonides 1200), for instance, declared that “someone who injures a colleague, curses a colleague, steals from him, or the like, will never be forgiven until he gives his colleague what he owes him and appeases him” (p. 42).

Like forgiving, seeking forgiveness is not easy and requires much intrapsychic work. Moreover, once forgiveness is received, the next step is acceptance. To assimilate such new knowledge about the self and the other requires letting go of the masochistic pleasure of guilt, renouncing a debased self-view, and acknowledging the kindness of the hitherto vilified victim of one's own destructiveness.

**Origins**

Relinquishing vengefulness means forfeiting pride or malice, and perhaps also letting go of an unhealthy attachment. In the psychological sense, forgiveness is not an act which takes place when anger or hurt or revenge are spent. Rather, it involves the introduction of a leavening agent, an amalgamation resulting in something new: a solution. [Durham 1990, p. 135]
Empirical research conducted by social psychologists provides insight about how specific kinds of behavior, particularly verbal apologies, induce conciliatory effects, forgiveness, and reconciliation. This body of work raises interesting questions about functional similarities between peaceful post-conflict behavior in monkeys, apes, and humans. [Silk 1998, p. 356]

**Evolutionary Foundations**

In nature, conflicts arise as self-interested individuals compete over limited supplies of food, space, mating partners, social status, refuge from enemies, and other scarce resources. Such conflicts are sharper within the same species, since the needs of individual members are similar. However, when the advantages of joint action outweigh the costs of social life, groups and families evolve. Occurrence of conflict between individual members in such settings hampers cooperation and threatens to damage social bonds.

To resolve such conflicts, behavioral strategies for conflict resolution have been evolved by a variety of species, ranging from prosimians to great apes. These strategies enable them to repair the damage caused by conflict, to restore peaceful contact, and to preserve social relationships (de Waal and Aureli 1986; Silk 1998). Chimpanzees kiss their opponents after a conflict (de Waal and van Roosmalen 1979), baboons grunt quietly to their victims minutes after an attack (Cherney, Seyfarth, and Silk 1995), and golden monkeys embrace or groom their former adversaries (Ren et al. 1991). Such “signals of benign intent” (Silk 1998, p. 346) serve a socially homeostatic function.

While there is risk here of confusing behavioral events with their postulated function, observational studies, both in experimental settings and in natural habitats, suggest that “peaceful postconflict signals” (Silk 1998, p. 347) have a calming effect upon former opponents by reducing uncertainty about whether aggression is over or will continue. Cords (1992) has conducted elegant experimental studies demonstrating that the post-conflict affiliative behaviors of perpetrator monkeys influence victimized monkeys.
to feed together with the former. Among baboons, vocalizations serve a similar conciliatory function (Silk, Cherney, and Seyfarth 1996). The facilitating effects of such behaviors upon resumption of cooperation after a dispute are more marked (Silk 1998) than those upon long-term social relationships, although there is some support for the latter as well (de Waal 1989). What remains clear is that, in nonhuman primates, perpetrators' attempts to make amends are responded to by their victims with resumption of contact and “forgiveness.”

**Individual Psychic Development**

In light of the ebb and flow of aggression within the mother-infant dyad, it is imperative that forgiveness exist on the part of both, if the loving and nurturing aspects of the relationship are to be safeguarded. The mother has to forgive her baby's aggressive assaults upon her, and the child has to forgive the mother's empathic shortcomings and actual limitations. This might seem self-evident, yet the fact is that few psychoanalytic investigators invoke the concept of forgiveness in discussing the metabolism of aggression within the mother-infant dyad.

Klein (1937) is an outstanding exception in this regard. She noted that the infant develops pleasant fantasies involving the mother in consequence to satisfaction and hostile fantasies in response to frustration. The latter are tantamount to death wishes. Moreover, in the baby's omnipotence, he or she feels that what the baby does in fantasy has really taken place; that is to say, the baby believes that he or she has actually destroyed the object. Initially, such destructive fantasies alternate with pleasant ones, each aroused in affectively charged circumstances of corresponding unpleasurable and pleasurable states. Gradually, however, the child can hold both views of the mother in mind together. Conflict between love and hate now develops, and guilt enters as a new element in the feeling of love. Klein (1937) noted that … even in the small child, one can observe a concern for the loved one which is not, as one might think, merely a
sign of dependence upon a friendly and helpful person. Side by side with the destructive impulses in the unconscious mind both of the child and of the adult, there exists a profound urge to make sacrifices, in order to help and to put right loved people who in phantasy have been harmed or destroyed. [p. 311]

Klein stated that generosity toward others arises from identification with the kindness of one's parents, but also from a desire to undo the injuries one has done to them in fantasy when they were frustrating one's desires. She termed this dually determined attitude “making reparation” (1937, p. 313). Implicit in her views is the idea that the one who has attacked in a hostile fashion (i.e., the child) now comes to recognize his or her hostility, to recover love for the objects, and to experience a wish to repair the damage done to them. The child forgives them (for their having frustrated him or her), while simultaneously seeking their forgiveness (for the child's aggression toward them). Klein traced the source of the child's aggression to both preoedipal—especially oral—and oedipal frustrations. She elucidated the mother's “drive to reparation” (p. 318), tracing it to her identifications with generative parents, as well as to her own feelings of guilt over aggression toward her parents and her child. She emphasized that the desire to make reparation diminishes the despair arising out of guilt, while enhancing hope and love. In this context, the value of forgiveness becomes paramount.

If we have become able, deep in our unconscious minds, to clear our feelings to some extent towards our parents of grievances, and have forgiven them for the frustrations we had to bear, then we can be at peace with ourselves and are able to love others in the true sense of the word. [Klein 1937, p. 343]

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8 Klein (1937) demonstrated the dynamics of reparation not only in mother–child relationships, but also in the father's relationship to his children, in childhood and adolescent peer relationships, in adult friendships, and in mate choice.
Besides Klein, Winnicott and Mahler have contributed, albeit indirectly, to an understanding of the ontogenetic origins of forgiveness. Winnicott's (1971) notion of the “survival of object” (p. 106) speaks to this. The “good enough mother” (Winnicott 1960, p. 145) allows herself to be used (and—even to be used up) by her essentially ruthless and cannibalistic infant. The baby's destructiveness comes from both the nature of his or her robust hunger, and from rage at the mother's inevitable failures. She nonetheless survives such rage and destruction, remaining available to be discovered again and again. Going through such use/destruction and refinding cycles of the object, the child begins to sense the forgiving attitude of the mother, and thus learns to accept forgiveness. In identification with her, the child begins to develop the ego capacity for containing and metabolizing aggression, a necessary preliminary step in forgiving her and, by extension, others.

Winnicott's (1963) views on the development of the capacity for concern further elaborate these issues. According to him, there are two sets of experiences that contribute to the development of concern, healthy amounts of guilt, and a desire for reparation. One is the survival of the object/mother in the face of the child's oral sadism. The second is the continued interest in the child's spontaneity on the part of the environment/mother.

Just as Winnicott's ideas illuminate forgiveness-related phenomena without actually using the term itself, Mahler's (1975) description of the maternal resilience during the child's rapprochement subphase touches upon this issue. The child's maddeningly contradictory demands for closeness and distance, protection and freedom, and intimacy and autonomy are met by the mother with a nonretaliatory stance. Her containment of the aggression mobilized within her allows the child to gradually see her as neither engulfing nor abandoning, and him- or herself as neither a passive lap baby nor an omnipotent conqueror of the world. A deeper, more realistic view of mother is now internalized. With this, external dependency upon her diminishes. The contradictory selfimages are also mended; growing object constancy is accompanied
by self-constancy. It is this capacity for object constancy that allows for accommodating (and forgiving) the aggression stirred up by frustrations at the hands of the object.

In essence, Klein, Winnicott, and Mahler all seem to have suggested that the metabolism of aggression in the crucible of the mother-infant dyad lies at the root of forgiveness versus vengeance. If the aggression is well metabolized and love predominates in the relationship, forgiveness can be experienced and identified with. If not, seeds of revenge-seeking tendencies are sowed.

However, such emphasis upon the oral foundations of the capacity for forgiveness should not be taken to mean that developments during later phases do not contribute to the ontogenesis of forgiveness as well. In the anal phase, the child is faced with the monumental discovery that something belonging to oneself, namely feces, is “not good” and has to be renounced. Passage through this developmental turmoil consolidates the capacity to “let go” in general. Later, in the oedipal phase, the child must sooner or later forgive the parents for their sexual betrayal of him or her, and they, in turn, have to forgive the child for the desire to intrude. The compensations received by each party (protection, love, and guidance for the child; narcissistic and generative pleasure in helping an offspring for the parents) are crucial in letting go of the pain caused to the child and parents by exclusion and rivalry, respectively.

The Relationship between Evolutionary and IndividualOrigins

There exist striking parallels between the “peaceful post-conflict signals” (Silk 1998) of nonhuman primates (e.g., grunting, grooming) and the conciliatory behaviors of children after having had a fight with peers. These behaviors, including verbal apologies, gift giving, and affectionate physical contacts (hugs, gentle touches),

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9 At first, of course, the child “does not forgive his mother for having granted the favor of sexual intercourse not to himself but to his father” (Freud 1910, p. 171). Such “forgiveness” arises only with the passage of time and with the above-mentioned compensations to the child.
enhance the probability that former opponents will reestablish contact following aggression, and might also contribute to preserving the long-term relationship between the opponents.

While the similarity between the conciliatory gestures of nonhuman primates and those of children is indeed significant, the heuristic path from this observation onward is fraught with difficulties. The risk of circular reasoning, reductionism, and tautological leaps is great. Unanswered questions abound. Is it reasonable, for instance, to equate the two behaviors on the basis of their superficial similarities? Could what the monkeys and apes demonstrate be labeled proto-forgiveness, an archaic prototype of human forgiveness? Since the complexity of peaceful post-conflict signals increases as monkeys approach anthropoid proximity—say, in the form of great apes—is it possible that human forgiveness is merely the next step in this evolutionary ladder? Or could the move from the paranoid to the depressive position, thought to underlie human infantile reparation, also exist in nonhuman primates? Since we are largely in the realm of speculation when we attribute such processes to human infants, could similar processes be hypothesized to exist in animals?

While such matters await exploration, one thing seems certain: the purpose of all forgiveness, mentalized (Fonagy and Target 1997) or not, is to assure cooperation. This was something that primitive man, with his relative weakness vis-à-vis the larger forces of nature, badly needed. In order to establish groups, and later families, he needed to overlook (forgive) minor conflicts with other members of his species. And in an ontogenetic repetition of phylogeny, the human infant, dependent as he or she is upon others' care, needs to be forgiving; holding grudges against mother would not get a child very far!

All in all, therefore, it seems that the attitude of forgiveness has survival value and might have acquired “hard-wired” status from this evolutionary imperative. The ritualization, complexity, and psychic elaboration of forgiveness, however, are greater in human beings than in nonhuman primates, though both show evidence of such a capacity. The evocation of this capacity seems to
have its own prerequisites—maternal love, for example, in the case of human beings. Without such prerequisites, the intrinsic capacity might atrophy or develop along pathological lines.

**Psychopathology**

At times the superego, which had its origin in the introjection of an external object, is reprojected onto external objects for the purpose of getting rid of guilt feelings. Compulsion neurotics often try to avoid a sense of guilt by appealing to others to forgive them. [Fenichel 1945, p. 165]

Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking, but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing. [Tutu 1999, pp. 270-271]

Psychopathological syndromes involving forgiveness include: (1) an inability to forgive, (2) premature forgiveness, (3) excessive forgiveness, (4) pseudoforgiveness, (5) a relentless seeking of forgiveness, (6) an inability to accept forgiveness, (7) an inability to seek forgiveness, and (8) an imbalance between capacities for self-forgiveness and forgiveness toward others.

**Inability to Forgive**

Some people just cannot forgive. They continue to harbor resentment toward offenders for months, years, and often an entire lifetime. They hold onto a grudge (Socarides 1966) and are given to chronic hatred (Akhtar 1999a; Blum 1997; Kernberg 1992), though they might not be overtly vindictive. Diagnostically, this
group includes individuals with severe personality disorders, especially paranoid personality, severe antisocial personality, and those with the syndrome of malignant narcissism (Kernberg 1989). When given to overt revenge seeking, such individuals disregard all limits in their destructive pursuit of the offender. Melville's (1851) Captain Ahab is an example par excellence of such unrelenting narcissistic rage (Kohut 1972), including its self-destructive consequences. Toward the end of his vengeful saga, Ahab puts his hatred into words:

Towards thee I roll, thou all destroying but unconquering whale; to the last I grapple with thee; from hell's heart I stab at thee; for hate's sake, I spit my last breath at thee. Sink all coffins and all hearses to one common pool! And since neither can be mine, let me then tow to pieces while still chasing thee, though tied to thee, thou damned whale! (Melville 1851, p. 575)

**Premature Forgiveness**

A second syndrome is characterized by individuals who seem too readily prepared to forgive and forget injuries inflicted upon them. Obsessional neurotics, with their characteristic reaction formation against aggression, tend to fall in this category. They quickly “forgive” others, since not doing so would force them to acknowledge that they feel hurt and angry. Such conflict-based premature forgiveness is a compromise formation (between aggressive impulses and superego prohibitions against them), and can be clinically analyzed as such.

A more severe form of premature forgiveness is defect based. Individuals with such a malady feel no entitlement, lack a “healthy capacity for indignation” (Howell 1996), and cannot hate (Galdston 1987). They do not adequately register that they have been wronged. Their object hunger is intense and their dependence upon others great; hence they are all too willing to let go of hurts and injustices. Diagnostically, this group includes weak, unentitled, schizoid, and “as-if” (Deutsch 1942) personalities with a childhood background of multiple and unreliable caretakers.
Excessive Forgiveness

Excessive forgiveness is seen in masochistic individuals. They repeatedly forgive traumas inflicted upon them by their tormentors and never seem to learn from experience. They live in a state of near addiction to those who are sadistic or can easily be manipulated into becoming sadistic (Berlin 1958; Kernberg 1992), repeatedly submitting to them for further humiliation and torture. States of co-dependency in the partners of addicts illustrate the masochistic dimension of excessive forgiveness. The addict continues to be self-destructive, hoping that the drug will somehow magically solve intrapsychic problems, and the co-dependent partner remains relentlessly optimistic that a terrible relationship will, through his or her own ever-forgiving attitude, become all right. The following work, entitled “The Second Poem,” portrays this dimension of masochistic pathology:

Undone
the psychic truth,
(Or, speaking from a second room
within the self?)
Something destructively large-hearted
took him by his hand,
led him to the balcony of forgiveness
Again and again. [Akhtar 1998, p. 51]

Pseudoforgiveness

Yet another psychopathological group is constituted of individuals who practice pseudoforgiveness. On the surface, they reconcile with their enemies, but inwardly they maintain ill will and do not mourn (Sohn 1999). Some of them are genuinely split into parts, wherein one part of the mind accepts reality and is able to let go of previous hurts and injuries, while the other, a pathological

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A parallel phenomenon is that of “caricatured modesty” (Jones 1913, p. 244), seen in conjunction with narcissistic personality.
part, holds onto omnipotent dreams of reversing history altogether (Bion 1957). In a further split within itself, this latter part on the one hand maintains that the glorious pre-trauma days can actually be brought back, and, on the other, ruthlessly carries out vengeful attacks on the (alleged) offender.

Alongside such individuals are those with pronounced antisocial trends, in whom pseudoforgiveness emanates from calculated lying and hiding of the true psychic reality for strategic advantages. Joseph Stalin's wry remark that “revenge is a dish that is best eaten cold,” as well as Joseph Kennedy, Sr.’s advice to his son John that he should “not get mad but get even,” are examples of such perversions of forgiveness.

Relentless Seeking of Forgiveness

Some individuals are relentlessly apologetic about ordinary errors of daily life. They betray a heavy burden of unconscious guilt. Apologizing for their actions does not relieve them of the prohibited and morally repugnant hostile and sexual intentions that lurk in their unconscious. However, the act of repeatedly seeking pardon itself can come to have hostile aims and a hidden sexual discharge value. One of Abraham's (1925) patients gave a very instructive example of this from his childhood.

His [the patient's] behaviour at that time, even when he seemed to be full of guilt-feelings and repentance, was a mixture of hostile and tormenting drives. These feelings were secretly closely linked with masturbation, whilst externally they appeared to be connected with other small misdeeds in the nursery. Any trivial wrong-doing was invariably followed by the same reaction. The boy would cling to his mother and say in endless repetition: “Forgive me, mother, forgive me, mother!” This behaviour did in fact express his contrition, but it also expressed far more strongly two other tendencies. In the first place, he continued

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11 In this regard, see also related descriptions of “someday” and “if-only” fantasies (Akhtar 1996).
in this way to torment his mother, whilst asking her forgiveness. Furthermore, it was apparent then, as also in later years, that instead of trying to reform himself, he always preferred to repeat his faults and to obtain forgiveness for them. This was also a disturbing factor during his psycho-analytical treatment. We found, moreover, that the rapid rattling-off of the formula of atonement had been devised in imitation of the rhythm of his masturbation. Thus the forbidden sexual wish contrived to break through in this concealed form. [Abraham 1925, pp. 323-324]

**Inability to Accept Forgiveness**

Closely akin to those who repeatedly apologize are individuals who remain tormented, often for months and years, despite having been forgiven by others. They seem unable to accept pardon and continue to suffer from remorse and its depressive and persecutory consequences. A striking example of this can be found in Chekhov's (1927) story, “The Death of a Government Clerk.” Vicissitudes of anally regressive hostility, as well as the defense of reaction formation against it, are illustrated therein via the tale of a Russian postal clerk who spends his life savings to obtain a highly expensive seat in the Bolshevik opera, only to sneeze and squirt his nasal secretions on the bald head of the man sitting in front of him. The protagonist apologizes and is forgiven. However, he cannot settle and remains remorseful, apologizing again and again. Each time he is forgiven by the bald man, although with ever-increasing annoyance. The clerk writes to him, visits him in the latter's workplace, in order to seek forgiveness just one more time. Finally, the bald man becomes enraged and throws him out of his office. That evening the clerk goes home, sits down on his living room sofa, and dies!

Unconscious guilt clearly plays a big role in the dynamics of such individuals. In discussing those involved in such endless self-condemnation, Cooper (quoted in Akhtar 1999a) pointedly described their “ferocious superegos and masochistic inclinations” (p. 222).
Inability to Seek Forgiveness

Individuals who lack empathy with others often do not seek forgiveness. They seem oblivious to the harm and injuries they have caused. Such oblivion is often the result of severe superego defects, lack of love for others, and the associated incapacity for remorse. At other times, it originates from a tenacious denial of blemishes in the self. Such denial is aimed at managing paranoid anxieties (e.g., the fear of being severely shamed by others upon apologizing to them) and keeping a shaky sense of self-esteem intact. Antisocial and narcissistic personalities are thus especially prone to such behavior (Akhtar 1992; Kernberg 1984).

Imbalances in Forgiving Others Versus Forgiving the Self

Psychopathology is also evident when there is a gross discrepancy in one's capacity to bestow forgiveness upon others and oneself. Narcissistic, paranoid, and antisocial individuals readily absolve themselves from the responsibility of having caused any harm. They either deny it totally or view their hostile actions as justifiable responses to another's unfairness toward them. They readily forgive themselves, but do not forgive others with the same ease.

Masochistic individuals are prone to do just the opposite. Repeatedly, they turn a blind eye to their (real or imagined) tormentors, remaining devoted to them. They forgive others, but continue to relentlessly punish themselves.

Technical Implications

Only when the super-ego becomes less cruel, less demanding as well of perfection, is the ego capable of accepting an internal object which is not perfectly repaired, can accept compromise, forgive and be forgiven, and experience hope and gratitude. [Rey 1986, p. 30]

The ability of the therapeutic relationship to endure hate and aggression serves as a living contradiction to the notion
that either the patient or the therapist is “all bad.” It is this living witness to the reality of ambivalence that makes the capacity for forgiveness possible. [Gartner 1992, p. 27]

Concerns around forgiveness surface in the course of psychoanalytic treatment in many ways. With severely traumatized individuals, forgiving or not forgiving those who have hurt them (and the transferential reactivations of such objects) sooner or later occupies the center stage of clinical dialogue. With individuals who suffer from remorse over real or imagined injuries caused to others, being forgiven by actual external figures (and in transference by the analyst) becomes a concern.12

Individuals who have suffered from severe trauma in childhood (such as sexual abuse, physical violence and cruelty, massive and sustained neglect) bring with them an internal world rife with split self and object representations, with a predominance of hate over love and of malice over concern for their objects. Internally, they cling to a retrospectively idealized, “all-good” mother representation of early infancy (Mahler, Pine, and Bergman 1975), while simultaneously holding a contradictory and aggressively charged image of her and of other early objects. The former substrate gives rise to idealizing transferences of varying forms and tenacities. The latter results in guiltless, destructive attacks against the analyst.

Patients of the latter group claim, often correctly, to have been hurt, abused, and deprived of what was an inalienable right in childhood—that is, experiencing love, an intact family, benevolent guidance, and so forth. Taking a victim stance, the patient feels justified in attacking the offending parties and the analyst, who inevitably

12 Such phenomenological division, reminiscent of Kohut's (1977) tragieman/guilty-man dichotomy, is admittedly simplistic. In the flow and flux of analytic clinical material, we are always in the world of “both/and.” Thus, traumabased revenge fantasies, which may gradually lead to forgiving the enemy, almost always coexist with guilt over one's own ruthlessness and the consequent need to be forgiven. Yet separating the two configurations does afford a didactic ease in elucidating the dynamics of respective events in the transference-countertransference axis.
comes to represent them. He or she displays an unconscious striving for totally undoing the effects of the childhood trauma, or even erasing its occurrence in the first place. Suffering from pathological hope and harboring a malignant “someday” fantasy (Akhtar 1991, 1996), the patient strives to obtain absolute satisfaction from the analyst without any concern for the latter. The patient demands that the analyst provide exquisite empathy, love, sex, treatment with reduced fees, access to his or her home, sessions on demand, and encounters at all kinds of hours. As the patient finds the analyst to be lacking in this regard, he or she berates the analyst as useless, unloving, and even cruel. The patient attacks not only the analyst's concern and devotion, but also those parts of his or her own personality that seem aligned with the analyst and can appreciate the inconsolable nature of the patient's own hunger. It is as if the patient has an intrapsychic terrorist organization (Akhtar 1999b) that seeks to assassinate his or her observing ego, because it is collaborating with the analyst and is willing to renounce the lost, dimly remembered, and retrospectively idealized “all-good” days of early infancy in favor of realistic satisfactions in the present day. This internal destructive agency also renders the patient enormously stoic. Recourse to infantile omnipotence makes any amount of waiting bearable (Potamianou 1992). For such individuals, the present has only secondary importance; they can tolerate any suffering in the hope that future rewards will make it all worthwhile.

What, under such circumstances, can move the patient toward forgiveness? As discussed earlier, the factors of revenge, reparation, and reconsideration, working in tandem, can facilitate mourning of trauma, permit acknowledgment of one's own destructiveness, release the capacity for concern for the opponent, and allow forgiveness to emerge. Revenge is taken by the patient in the form of relentless sadistic assaults on the analyst. Continued hostility toward those viewed as offenders (e.g., the patient's parents in actual adult life), even if the latter are trying to make amends, is another form of grudge holding and revenge. Reparation is available to the patient in the form of the analyst's lasting empathy and devotion that survives (Winnicott 1971), despite the patient's attacks. Reconsideration
results from recontextualization and revision of childhood memories (Kafka 1992); negative images of early caretakers now come to be supplanted with the recall of hitherto repressed positive interactions with them.

However, for such an advance to occur, resistances to the acknowledgment of love for the analyst's tolerance—as well as to the recognition of one's own contributions to the current suffering (and even, at times, the childhood suffering)—must be interpreted. Defenses against the awareness of sadomasochistic pleasure in ongoing hatred (Kernberg 1995), in addition to the defensive functions of the unforgiving attitude itself (Fairbairn 1940; Jones 1928; Searles 1956), need to be interpreted. The fact that giving up hatred and forgiving others opens up newer, less familiar (e.g., oedipal) psychic realms for exploration makes the patient anxious, and may cause him or her to regressively cling to a simplistic victimhood—which, in turn, fuels continuing warfare with the analyst along the lines mentioned above.13 While work in such a context usually occurs in a gradual, piecemeal fashion, a firm confrontation with an alternative way of being is occasionally necessary.

**Case I**

Ms. E, an unmarried, Catholic librarian in her mid-thirties, had felt immensely rejected by her mother as a child. Her sense was that she had been all but forgotten following the birth of a brother when she was nearly three years old. Over the course of a long analysis, she talked incessantly of her despair at this rejection. She wanted me to mother her (a desire she was able to reveal only after painstaking defense analysis), thus making up for all that she needed and had not received during her childhood. She wanted on-demand sessions, love, physical holding, special status, adoption, travel together—everything. Her despair

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13 Forgiving early offenders (and the analyst who embodies them in the transference) also mobilizes fears that the treatment might come to an end. See Grunert (1979) and Akhtar (1992) for negative therapeutic reactions emanating from this dynamic.
at not receiving all this was thick, and she slowly turned me into a highly desired but ungiving and rejecting figure. She began to hate me.

Condensed within such a split maternal transference was a powerful sexual component, emanating from Ms. E's childhood relationship to a deeply admired father who fluctuated between flirtatiously rescuing her and abruptly dropping her from attention. Not surprisingly, this led to an addictive bond with the father, in which idealization was tenaciously maintained, and all aggression was shifted to the mother. In this mental set, the patient wanted to have sex with me, to be my beloved, to marry me. Lacking any countertransference resonance and replete with a desperate, coercive quality, the situation became one of a malignant erotic transference (Akhtar 1994).

Analytic work with Ms. E fell apart again and again. Desperate longings for the pre-traumatic, “all-good” mother and the idealized father (and their substitute, the “all-giving” analyst) surfaced vehemently. At the same time, vicious attacks began upon the rejecting mother/oblivious father (and their recreation in the form of the “bad” analyst). In such hours, the patient often compared herself to Captain Ahab and me to Moby Dick, his nemesis. She felt her attacks were totally justified. After all, wasn't I depriving her of what she needed? “What would you do if someone was threatening to cut off your oxygen supply?” she demanded. Attempts to help her see that the wish to marry me was hardly akin to needing oxygen were perceived as further humiliations inflicted by me, fueling her hostility. Psychological-mindedness was repeatedly lost, and previously gained insights put aside. Reconstructions of an event that might have triggered the regression were sometimes helpful in dislodging the impasse, but sometimes not.

In one such session during the tenth year of the analysis, with Ms. E continuing to berate me, I said to her firmly, “Look, since you are so fond of metaphorically likening us to Captain Ahab and Moby Dick, permit me also to introduce a metaphor. Tell me, what do you think made it possible for Yitzahk Rabin and Yasser Arafat to shake hands with each other?”
The patient responded in a fashion typical for her in states of regression. “What does that have to do with anything? Besides, I'm not interested in politics anyway.” I then said, “No, I think what I said is of serious significance to us. Your metaphor has to do with revenge and mutual destruction. Mine has to do with letting go of grudges, however justified, and forgiveness.”

Of course, this intervention in of itself did not give rise to an immediate shift from hatred to forgiveness. It did, however, lay the groundwork for such an advance and became a landmark in Ms. E's analysis, one to which we would return again and again in subsequent months and years. Before deeper mourning of childhood trauma (and the built-in analytic deprivations that had become fused with them) became possible, there was a protracted transitional phase. In that phase, Ms. E developed a collaborative and mournful mutuality with me, “forgiving” me for not marrying her on the one hand, and retaining a hostile and unforgiving (if less vitriolic) stance toward me on the other. The latter often worked as an intrapsychic terrorist organization (mentioned previously; see Akhtar 1999b), seeking to destroy not only the external peacemakers (that is, the analyst), but also her own internal functions aligned with the former. It was only after a protracted transitional period of this sort that Ms. E became able to see her own destructiveness—and to recall her childhood hostile manipulativeness toward her mother. Remorse and forgiveness followed.

**Discussion.** Throughout such work, the analyst has to remain respectful of the patient's need for apology from those who have hurt him or her. The analyst must demonstrate to the patient the awareness that being apologized to for a wrongdoing improves reality testing, and that such perceptual clarity is useful for the patient, since often the original abuse was denied by the perpetrator or other family members. It also puts the recipient of the

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14 The family sexual abuse literature pays special attention to this issue, with some therapists (e.g., Madanes 1990) requiring that the perpetrator actually, even ritualistically, apologize to the victim in front of other family members.
apology in an active position, undoing the humiliation of passivity and a lack of control.

At the same time, the analyst has to remember that not all trauma may be forgivable. The hurt, pain, and rage felt, for instance, by a Holocaust survivor in encountering a Nazi camp guard is hardly subject to ordinary psychic metabolism. Other individual circumstances of torture, abuse, and humiliation may be less public, but nonetheless equally unforgivable. Upon encountering such scenarios in the clinical situation, the analyst must not uphold a manic ideal of kindness. Indeed, he or she might even help the patient feel not too guilty about lacking forgiveness.

Premature forgiveness should also draw the analyst's attention. Here the analytic task is to bring the patient's attention to it also, so that the roots of the patient's too readily forgiving others (including the analyst) may be explored. If the tendency is based upon splitting and denial, then the sequestered aggression needs to be brought into the treatment; this is what Kernberg (1992) means by attempting to change a schizoid or psychopathic transference into a paranoid transference (pp. 222-244). If, however, the tendency exists owing to a genuine lack of entitlement, then the roots of that should be explored. Similarly, pseudoforgiveness, based upon maintaining two mental registers and secretly holding onto grudges, needs to be exposed by confrontation and defense analysis.

The same holds true if the analyst notices gross discrepancies in the patient's capacity to forgive the self versus others. Underlying narcissistic-masochistic proclivities are what seem to deserve attention in such instances. Issues of unconscious guilt over real or imagined childhood "crimes" (including separating from a

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Some might question such an agenda-based approach to clinical work. After all, the aim in analytic listening includes “not directing one's notice to anything in particular” (Freud 1913, p. 111) and dealing with all material alike. At the same time, there is also a legacy of so-called strategy in analysis (Levy 1987) that dictates measured, deliberate tracks of interventions in certain circumstances. It is my impression that most clinicians strike an intuitive balance between a free-floating and strategic approach to clinical listening and interventions.
needy parent, surviving a deceased parent or sibling, and the more usual oedipal transgressions) need to be kept in mind when listening to those who are chronically apologetic and who cannot forgive themselves, despite others' having forgiven them.

Besides such patient-related scenarios, the analyst has to deal with forgiveness from his or her own side in two ways. One involves the controversial matter of apologizing to the patient and seeking forgiveness. The other, perhaps even more contested and heuristically elusive, is the analyst's providing the patient with an opportunity to apologize and seek forgiveness from the analyst. Here I would like to present a case I have discussed previously (Akhtar 2000), which serves as an example of the former situation.

Case 2

In the throes of a regressive transference, a patient entered my office, enraged and waving a finger. Approaching the couch, she said, “I have a lot on my mind today and I want to do all the talking. I don't want you to speak even a single word!” A bit taken aback, I mumbled, “Okay.” The patient shouted, “I said, ‘not one word,’ and you have already fucked up this session!” Now seated on my chair behind her, I was more rattled. Had I done wrong by speaking at all, I asked myself. As the patient lay on the couch, angry and stiff, I started to think. Perhaps she is so inconsolable today, so intent upon forcing me into the role of a depriving person, that she found a way to see even the gratification of her desire as its frustration. I was, however, not entirely satisfied with this explanation; I therefore decided to wait and think further. It then occurred to me that maybe she was justifiably angered by my saying “okay.” By agreeing to let her have omnipotent control over me, I had asserted my will and thus paradoxically deprived her of the omnipotence she seemed to need.

I was about to make an interpretation along these lines when it occurred to me that by sharing this understanding, I would be repeating my mistake: making my autonomous psychic functioning too obvious. As a result, I decided to
say only “I am sorry” and leave the remaining thoughts unspoken. The patient relaxed and the tension in the room began to lessen. After ten minutes of further silence, she said, “Well, this session has been messed up. I had so many things to say.” After a further pause, she added, “…among the various things on my mind …,” and thus the session gradually “started,” such that by the time we ended, things were going pretty smoothly.

Now I am aware that a novice, too, could have said, “I am sorry,” but I believe the underlying discernment of ego needs would be missing. By apologizing, I was acknowledging that I had failed her by not understanding that she needed to have no boundaries, as it were, between us at all … [pp. 278-279]

**Discussion.** In discussing the place of apology in psychoanalysis, Goldberg (1987) delineated two possible stances. One stance, exemplified in the clinical material above, emanates from the analytic perspective which suggests that via empathic immersion, the analyst may attain an ability to see the patient's world as he or she does, and that the major burden of achieving and sustaining such intersubjective agreement rests upon the analyst. In this view, a failure of intersubjectivity is largely the analyst's responsibility, thus necessitating an apology from the analyst.

The second stance mentioned by Goldberg holds the analyst to be more informed about “reality,” and thus views transference, however plausible its content might be, as a distortion of that reality. In this perspective, the differences in perception between the patient and the analyst never calls for an apology from the analyst. Defly and convincingly, Goldberg argued the untenability of either position in the extreme, concluding that while the wish to apologize may be countertransference based, it does have a legitimate place at certain times in certain treatments. Of course, the patient's experience of the analyst's apology needs to be then handled and explored in a relatively traditional way.

Next, as mentioned above, is the question of the analyst's providing the patient with an opportunity to apologize for his or her
erstwhile destructive attacks upon the analyst. Kernberg (1976) approached this point when he described the appearance of intense remorse in the later phases of analysis of narcissistic patients. They tend to become aware of how badly they have treated others, including the analyst, and to wish to seek forgiveness. In fact, it was Winnicott (1947) who most directly addressed this matter. He declared that a patient who has been hostile for a long time during treatment must, on becoming better integrated, be told how he or she has burdened the analyst throughout their work together. Winnicott wrote that this situation is

\[\text{... obviously a matter fraught with danger, and it needs the most careful timing. But I believe an analysis is incomplete if even towards the end it has not been possible for the analyst to tell the patient what he, the analyst, did unbeknown for the patient whilst he was ill, in the early stages. Until this interpretation is made the patient is kept to some extent in the position of infant—one who cannot understand what he owes to his mother. [1947, p. 202]}\]

Ideally, the patient should arrive at such an understanding by him- or herself, as a result of diminishing hate and growing empathy for others. However, the patient who is too narcissistically vulnerable to sincerely apologize to the analyst and seek forgiveness might actually benefit from the analyst's provision of an occasion to do so, through the analyst's acknowledgment of having felt burdened by the patient as the treatment was carried out. Such an intervention should not emmanate from hostile countertransference, but should come from a depressive working through of the

\[\text{16 In work with children, such attacks might be physical ones, involving the office setting or even the analyst's body.}\]

\[\text{17 Blum (1997) raised questions about Winnicott's recommendation. His critique, especially of the handling of the particular case on which Winnicott's views were based, was well reasoned. I believe that while the clinical example chosen by Winnicott might not have been the best for the purpose, the idea he proposed nevertheless has merit.}\]

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reality that the analyst has indeed felt put upon—at times even abused—by the patient during the course of their work.

**Concluding Remarks**

Remorse and its concomitant desire to make reparation (and elicit forgiveness) are fundamental strategies in the maintenance of cooperation—one accepts one's own responsibility while acknowledging the legitimacy of other's criticism, and thus declares oneself an acceptable, moral interlocutor, ready to resume cooperation. [Cairns 1999, p. 172]

The idea of a group or its leader asking for forgiveness from another group or its leader may be a potentially powerful gesture if the groundwork has truly been laid. Forgiveness is possible only when the group that suffered has done a significant amount of mourning. The focus should be on helping with the work of mourning and not on the single (seemingly magical) act of asking forgiveness. [Volkan 1997, p. 226]

Despite my having covered considerable ground, I am aware that many important areas pertaining to forgiveness remain unaddressed in this paper. The first such area relates to gender. Little is known about the qualitative or quantitative similarities and/or differences in the two sexes in this regard. Women's deeper capacities for commitment in love relations (Altman 1977) and for making context-based decisions in the moral sphere (Gilligan 1982) suggest that they might possess a greater capacity for forgiveness than do men. However, further clinical and empirical data is needed to confirm or refute this impression.

The second such area pertains to the sociopolitical realm. The importance of a perpetrator's apologizing and making reparation to the victim is emphatically clear in the following situations: the recent German apologies and reparations to victims of the Holocaust, the North American expression of remorse for the tyranny of slavery,
the offer of recompense by the United States Government to Japanese-Americans interred in camps during the Second World War, and the work of Bishop Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. At a less dramatic level is the prayer written by Archbishop Renbert Weakland of Milwaukee, which builds on Pope John Paul II's request that Catholics observe Ash Wednesday by reflecting upon the pain inflicted on Jews by Christians over the last millennium. To quote one of the eight stanzas of this prayer:

I ask for forgiveness for all the statements that implied that the Jewish people were no longer loved by God, that God had abandoned them, that they were guilty of deicide, that they were, as a people, being punished by God. Amen. [Weakland quoted in Gallagher 2000, p. 17]

Interdisciplinary studies, in which sociopolitical processes inform psychoanalysis and vice versa (see Volkan 1997 in this connection), are thus badly needed to enrich the understanding of phenomena related to mourning, apologizing, and seeking and receiving forgiveness.

The third area pertaining to forgiveness that needs closer examination is that of cross-cultural variations in patterns of remorse and reparation. Many questions arise in this context: Are all cultures equally forgiving? Are there transgressions and faults that are selectively more or less forgivable in a given culture? Do some cultures provide socially recognized forgiveness rituals, while others do not? Does forgiveness occur more quickly in the former?

Little data exists with which to answer such questions. It does seem, however, that cultural factors help to shape the use and formal characteristics of apologies. Barnland and Yoshioko (1990), for instance, have demonstrated that while Japanese and American subjects agree on the kinds of situations that require apologies, they differ to some extent on the kinds of apologies that they regard as appropriate in such situations.

Finally, the application of psychodynamic insights regarding forgiveness to the justice system at large, and to forensic psychiatry
in particular, merits further inquiry. In comparing the justice system in the United States to those of Japan and Korea, Harding (1999) found the former to be characteristically retributive, and the latter two to have a greater restorative bent. Not unaware of the limitations of restorative justice, Harding nonetheless noted the importance of providing opportunities to the offender to understand the significance of the victim's experience, and to make appropriate gestures of remorse and atonement. Chase (2000) reported upon the “victim-offender-conferencing” program (developed in the United States during the mid-1970s), in which the court brings offenders and their victims together with a neutral facilitator. During such a meeting, the offender is offered an opportunity to apologize to the victim. Overall, however, the American legal system remains somewhat ambivalent about the offender's expression of remorse. More work is needed in this realm.18

While these areas await further exploration, one thing appears certain from the material covered in this essay: forgiveness is an integral element of mourning, and is therefore necessary for psychic growth. Forgiving others for their hurtful actions and forgiving oneself for having caused pain to others are crucial to moving on in life and to opening oneself for new experiences. An inability or unwillingness to forgive keeps one tied to the past and impedes development. Nowhere is this fixating element of an unforgiving attitude (here regarding oneself) better described than in the following parable from the life of Buddha:

A man approached Buddha while he was sitting, eyes closed, under a banyan tree, meditating. Amidst sobs and tears, the man reported that his son was very ill and the local healers had given up on the child; the boy was about to die. The man pleaded for divine intervention from Buddha. He cried, wailed, touched Buddha's feet. Buddha, however, sat motionless, neither opening his eyes nor saying anything in response. The man eventually left,

18 The fact that Fordham University School of Law in New York City recently held a conference on “The Role of Forgiveness in the Law” is encouraging in this regard.
only to reappear the next day filled with rage. His son had died, and he held Buddha's inactivity responsible for this. He shouted obscenities, cursed Buddha, and still seeing no visible response, spat at him in disgust and left.

Time passed and a day came, a few years later, when the man returned to visit Buddha again. Now he was very remorseful. He said that, over time, he had gradually come to realize that by remaining silent, Buddha was conveying two important messages: that there was little he could do in a situation in which those who knew about physical ailments had given up, and that there were no words with which to offer solace to a man whose son was about to die. The man was guilt-ridden for having spat on Buddha. Crying and holding Buddha's feet, he begged forgiveness.

It was then that Buddha opened his eyes and spoke. He said, “You spat on a river and the water flowed away. The man I was then is gone with time. I am different. You did not spit on me and hence I have no authority to forgive you. But it makes me sad that while you have learnt many things, you are still standing on the same spot on the riverbank. You are being consumed by a moment that has long departed. It is not I, but you, and only you, who can release yourself from this bondage.”

References


