

## Preliminary Ideas of a Marcelian Bearing Towards the World as Disclosed Through Forgiveness

Frank Fenyő

### *Forum Post 06 (Initial Proposal)*

Of the topics we have slated for discussion in the coming weeks, it is questions of forgiveness that most entice me. I was very taken in by Strawson's initial discussion of the reactive attitudes, particularly in how they construe moral responsibility as something you can hold someone to or, through the objective attitude, choose not to hold someone to. Prior to this class and this reading, I had often encountered – in everyday parlance – moral responsibility as something with necessity, as if filling out all the requisite 'attributability' and 'accountability' forms would necessarily result in your being held morally responsible. It was upon deaf ears this economic conception of moral responsibility fell. Where was the agency, not of the agent, but of the holder-to of responsibility?

Strawson opened the door to participation in moral responsibility practices to those doing the holding-to through explicating their power to hold and withhold sanction and blame, and later writers like Watson and Shoemaker have expanded on his work in interesting and meaningful ways. Moral responsibility practices – encompassing blame yet extending beyond it – are neither necessary, universal, nor automatic, even when they are thoroughly justified. We, whether as the affected party or as vicarious lookers-on, have within us the power to choose whether or not to hold the agent responsible; whether we hold them to their duty, angrily blame them and deploy sanctions against them, or if we choose to excuse the act or the agent, temporarily or permanently, for some reason or deficiency we identify.

Yet, the choices that present themselves as ready-to-hand go beyond sanction and excuse – we might also forgive. Forgiving is not excusing. Excusing takes moral responsibility away

from the agent on account of some deficiency or extenuating circumstance, it holds that ‘they were not responsible’ for this or that reason. Forgiveness does not do this. Forgiveness applies to those who are well and truly responsible, with no internal deficiency or external circumstance to appeal to, those with no recourse, no appeal. They have transgressed and they stand thusly accused. But – and this is quite extraordinary, even if the practice is common enough in our everyday lives – we relinquish our claim to blame, we unclasp our hand from the scruff of their neck we so rightly held them by, and we let them go in peace, without sanction. This astounding mercy is available to us, and we sometimes choose it, but never as often as we might.

For my research project, I would investigate questions of commitment, holding responsible – with a focus on the anthropomorphized holding in our moral practices – and forgiveness, primarily through the framework of the reactive attitudes. Strawson’s work is a solid grounding in the reactive attitudes, naturally, but I also want to bring in further perspectives on responsibility and on forgiveness. It occurs to me that the most economical choice for these two desires would be the Catholic Existentialist, Gabriel Marcel (I also simply want an excuse to read Gabriel Marcel). His oeuvre is not very well known, especially in comparison to his fellows, but I get the sense from a skimming of *Stanford-Plato* and his brief mentioning in Sarah Bakewell’s *At The Existentialist Café* that Marcel would have interesting and relevant thoughts on forgiveness, as a explicitly Catholic thinker, without sliding too egregiously from philosophy to theology like his coreligionists might, on account of his existentialist strain.

The strain in Marcel’s thought I wish to accommodate to Strawson’s is Marcel’s notion of the *Homo Viator*, the conceptualization of the human person as one who is, fundamentally, ‘on the road,’ in a permanent state of pilgrimage, of nomadism, how we might always find

ourselves as 'he who comes in from outside,' and the effect this does, or should, or maybe does not, have on our choosing whether to forgive. Is the empathy – or perhaps better put, solidarity – that inheres in Marcel's thought an impetus to extend forgiveness radically? If we are inclined, then, to offer a universal or nearly universal grace to those we encounter 'on the road,' being, of course, our fellow travelers, do our normal practices of holding responsible founder, or become irrelevant? My first darkling notion is that generous forgiveness and our normal practices of moral responsibility can be accommodated, but this of course remains to be born out in the scholarship, and perhaps I will arrive at the view that the two are incompatible in any form we might recognize them as. But I do not foresee this to be the case. My foggy notions swirl into an oasis, in which I see a revolution of sorts, in which forgiveness remains a choice to be made, but assumes the default position now held by blame, and blame becomes a road one might take only upon consideration and the choosing-not to pursue forgiveness. But as of yet, the oasis is too far afield to discern clearly, and the work of reconciling Marcel and Strawson looms.

*Email From Pancake 2 October*

Mon chère ami,

I want to push back on your choice to incorporate Marcel into this project (which is, overall, a worthy one). Beyond an excuse to read him -- which I deeply sympathize with -- I don't see how his explicit Catholicism can benefit an existentialist investigation of forgiveness. Thinking of Sartre's comments on "Christian existentialism" (see the copy of *existentialisme est une humanisme*), I see the incorporation of theology into an existentialist discussion as muddling the water to a certain extent. Isn't the point of true forgiveness that it is a freely made choice independent of the consequences on our souls? Marcel might have some answers which would make reading him a worthwhile endeavor but I am unconvinced of the premise.

Beyond that criticism, the topic is noble and timely. Revolutionary compassion needs to be in the air and forgiveness is a critical piece of that puzzle. Please keep me posted on this project, perhaps we can publish it on the blog should you so wish.

Avec notre amitié révolutionnaire,

André-Philippe (2 Oct)

*Email From Erik 2 Octobre*

Szervusz újra et rebonjour,

I am currently in a philosophy of religion class and, previous to taking it, I shared your antipathy to explicitly religious philosophy, because I viewed it as basically warmed-over theology. This, however, is not the case! Philosophy, including religious philosophy, is concerned with human wisdom, while theology is concerned with divine wisdom. I will certainly incorporate Sartre's critique from *EEuH*, but there is no theology to speak of. Frankly, you are letting your *laïcité* get the best of you. Furthermore, my project is not necessarily an existentialist investigation of forgiveness beyond the background noise that existentialist theory provides to my thought. It asks different sorts of questions, and freewill is not really relevant to this project. I foresee Marcel as having a stronger impetus towards fraternity and a humanistic solidarity, thus centering forgiveness in discussions of MorResp., compared to secular or Marxist thinkers. This might turn out to be the case, and it might also turn out to be the case that I hate Marcel and think he is a big snail-sucking oaf, causing me to argue against his positions. This all remains to be seen, but I do not believe you are looking upon the work with the clearest of eyes. Human forgiveness is not a matter of the salvation of souls -- that is the province of divine grace. A longstanding concern of mine with our fellow *gauchiste* sons of '89 and '48 is that we seem to have forsaken a full third of our revolutionary heritage -- boldly do we strive for liberty, for

equality, but fraternity has been allowed to fall by the wayside. To rescue fraternity requires genuine bonds of brotherhood, of humanistic solidarity between all universal citizens, and forgiveness is a cornerstone practice in developing this. People are people and we transgress our duties and expectations in our interpersonal relationships, this is simply descriptive of all lives lived. But forgiveness, as I intoned earlier, can amount to the putting-ahead of solidarity over personal grievance. Forgiveness is the welcoming back in of the prodigal son, of the Thermidorian, back into the fold of the brotherhood of man, relinquishing valid claims to blaming and becoming republican brothers anew. This practice requires a level of sentimentality, maybe you will find it mawkish, but the staid *laïcité* of most of our fellow-brothers is incapable of accommodating this, even if it is woowoo enchantment. This is why Marcel appeals to me so. Yes, religion may be the opium of the masses, but opium has its palliative effect, its place, and its goodness. The end we seek is a society of universal brotherhood. One way to get there is, admittedly, in 'bad faith,' by giving an opiate justification to bring us to radical forgiveness and brotherhood through the emulation of Christ. The philosophically preferable route would, of course, be a society in which all citizens choose to come to radical forgiveness and brotherhood of their own volition, without the explicit outside justification donated by some institution or the other, but this is an end to pursue, and not one within our power in this facticity. This project is inherently revolutionary in character and seeks to contribute to the revival of the third aspect of our triune revolutionary heritage. I would indeed like to publish this work on the blog, though I think that, perhaps, it might better suit the medium if it were broken up into several condensed sections rather than the unabridged work. It is a blog, after all.

Avec notre amitié révolutionnaire,

Frank Fenyő

*Response From Pancake 3 October*

Mon chère ami,

As a project to revive the revolutionary heritage of fraternity I find this a noble project, however, -- and this addresses your criticisms of my affinity of *laïcité* -- the revolutionary projects of 89 (really 91) and 48 did not seek solidarity in the tired and reactionary structures of the so-called "opiod" (called such not as an insult but as an honest realization of the church's social function) but in the creation of new bonds of revolutionary friendship (for which I will point you towards Linden's *Choosing Terror: Virtue, Friendship, and Authenticity in the French Revolution*).

Because this is a course on religious theology I will excuse my criticisms of Marcel (but also suggest a deeper investigation of Kierkegaard is in order, although that is a purely personal preference) but I want to suggest that the search for solidarity in structures that are already-at-hand is not a revolutionary project, rather it is the creation of those new structures that defines the revolutionary project.

I contend -- and this is a 'hot take' -- that the Third Republic's bourgeoisie remained revolutionary (hence the names) and we can see this not only in their struggle against the church but -- equally -- in their struggles against the Parisian working class. The fact that they are a revolutionary body does not make them the "good guys" so to speak, but it describes their role in the revolutionary dialectic (it is at this point you will roll your eyes). The destruction of the solidarity created by the Catholic church and feudal bonds needs to be replaced by something else: modernism, postmodernism, but what comes next? Post-postmodernism! Something must be constructed and that is what I adore about your proposal.

My criticism remains its foundation in the old order. The revolutionaries of 89 sought to create what they imagined Roman friendship to be, we must build something else, a solidarity that is based in forgiveness -- on this front, I am in deep appreciation of your work. But it is important to create something new, rather than retreat to the remaining bastions of what is already-at-hand. I suggested, although poorly, something like this in the blog. Nationalism without borders is the ideal of solidarity. Proletarian internationalism.

Avec notre amitié révolutionnaire,

André Philippe

*Response from Erik 6 October*

Elvtársam,

Ami, my course to which you refer to is not one of religious theology, but of philosophy of religion. The difference is meaningful and clear. Philosophy is the wisdom of man, while theology is the wisdom of the Divine. My investigation concerns only the former.

I am very fond of Kierkegaard, but his positionality is simply irreconcilable with my project. Kierkegaard stressed personal relationships with Faith and to God, and was otherwise staunchly individualistic. What I seek is a mediator of social being. Catholicism, by which I mean philosophers in the Catholic tradition, has a leg up on their Protestant fellows on account of the more social nature of their faith. Personal relationships to the divine do not a social faith make. Perhaps the Presbyterian tradition might have something positive to contribute, or one of the various Baptist denominations, but the fact of the matter is that the Catholic philosophical tradition is simply the most richly developed among its peers and offers the greatest likelihood of possessing a notion that is useful to me. This is not a value judgement but merely a descriptive statement.

It is not consonant with actuality to call the Church (which is not, as such, that for which I offer an apology) nor religiousness itself “the old order.” The temporal power of The Church is as dead in our time as Ancient Rome was to the Jacobins. Does the existence in 1789 of the Holy Roman Empire’s shambolic corpse mean that the Roman civilization to which the French Revolutionaries harkened back still existed in anything thicker than bare semiotics, a reference to a long since dead referent? Cathedrals still stand; Roman ruins still stood in 1789, too. The Revolutionaries of ’89 were obsessed with what we would today call “trad posting” about the Roman Republic. It is in this same mode that I seek to reclaim the positive aspects of the Christian way of being.

What I seek is to light anew the snuffed-out spirit of fraternity Marcel might speak to. Fraternity can be come by through other means, certainly, and I know that you would find these indefinite “other means” preferable to performing necromancy upon St. Peter’s rock, but the fact of the matter is that fraternity *inheres* in a Christian way of being. Not all good brothers need be Christian in bearing, but all good Christians must be good brothers. There are a lot of people in this world who go to Mass in Cathedrals or Reverend Timtom’s Mega Super Churchstravaganza in suburban stripmalls, but there are very, very few Christian people, people who do their being Christian-ly (adverbs are the key to liberation), in this world. I know I would not qualify. But the thing is, I *could*, and you could, too. I am not telling people to go to Mass. What I seek instead is an Ethic, a Spirit, a way-of-being, and a sense of how to live one’s life well.

The Christian bearing towards the world is a mediator ready-to-hand. I do not ascribe any special significance to it over any other such mediator of being besides it being ready-to-hand. Indefinite superior systems have great rhetorical appeal, and are saved from all criticism by their nonexistence. As good materialists, we must privilege existing things over not-existing things.



Should your “True and Revolutionary Secular Way-of-Being That Inheres Authentic and Durable Fraternity and Forgivingness” come into actual existence, I will delink from the Christian way of being as secular modes more truly reflect my intellectual commitments and values. But until that day, actual fraternity is superior to imaginary fraternity, and the ready-to-hand remains superior to the indefinite.

It is nice to doddle about things, to tilt at windmills, and to trace constellations amongst the stars. I myself enjoy doing these things. But if you really want to bring something into actual being, which I know you do, you have to shape the clay that is in your hands. The Christian way of being inheres good things, and it is ready-to-hand. Other ways of being might have good things, but not inhere them. Still other ways of being might inhere good things, but are not ready to hand. Genuine and actual fraternal bonds are more important than the names we call them by.

This project seeks not to pay tithes to bishops and gawp at medieval cathedrals, but to live and work and love with the bonds of fraternity that bind together Jesuit brothers in their far-flung missions, the deep kind of brotherhood that bound together Oscar Romero and the Nicaraguan proletariat, that only his murder by the Contras could sever. The Christian way of being is a way of being that transcends the particular economic conditions that give rise to proletarians and bourgeois, but is one that always takes the side of the slave over the master, of the serf over the lord, of the downtrodden over the jackbooted thug. It is a durable way of being that does the same work as proletarian internationalism without being beholden to a particular set of structural economic conditions to be valid. Brotherly love was needed and could be had under feudalism; brotherly love is needed and can be had under capitalism; brotherly love will be needed and can be had under socialism. Why subordinate this transcendent good to a narrow set of historical conditions?

*Totus tuus,*

Frank Fenyő

*p.s.* I find it amusing that I seem to be “more Hegelian” than you in my use of “revolutionary.” Is not the revolutionary he who does for *Geist* the good work of disclosing ever-greater freedom in the world? To the revolutionary, and to the revolutionary-Hegelian, he is surely the “good guy” of history, if one can imagine such a thing. There exists a word for those who conspire against *Geist* and its liberatory mission through history, and the word is not “revolutionary.” It is “reactionary!”

*Approval Email Breyer 4 Nov*

Dear Dr. Breyer,

The topic I wish to explore with Pamela Hieronymi’s article “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness” is, naturally, forgiveness. Specifically, the topic of both Hieronymi’s article and my presentation will be on the possibility of reorienting forgiveness from a focus on the transgressor to a focus on the forgiver, because forgiveness, being elective in its nature, is a matter solely within the power of the forgiver. One cannot be compelled to forgive by the contrition of the transgressor alone. Even in such cases, the decision to forgive still resides within the forgiver themselves. I am interested in this topic as part of a broader discussion of forgiveness practices and how they might currently be confused, with the aim of integrating Hieronymi’s work into a Marcelian manner of bearing towards the world and being with others that centers our habitual condition as outsiders, vagrants, and pilgrims rather than static and natural in-members of communities moral or otherwise. This intellectual project finds its importance greater now than it would have in years past as, in ways great and small, formal and

informal, our social relations appear to be growing more cutthroat and less gracious, even as our dying world's polycrisis begs for the opposite.

I chose this article in particular on the strength of its place in the historiography, having been cited extensively in a number of the assigned class readings thus far. What cemented my decision to analyze this article, however, was Hieronymi's effective response to David Novitz' conceptualization of forgiveness as consisting of a stable form of pity for he who has transgressed. Hieronymi finds, and I follow her, that the Novitzite view has as its axis a change in the transgressor's point of view, rather than that of the putative giver of forgiveness. It is this I find to be convincing.

Best,  
Erik Lynch  
PHI 330

Hieronymi, Pamela. "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62 no. 3 (May 2001), pp 529-555.

*"We are outsiders first" Ramblings*

a long winded and tragic example of the Jews of Hungary, 1900-1944. it can all change so fast. the most intimately settled member of the in-group can be vomited out, expelled and despised, at a speed that would break the sound barrier. Tragedy.

we are all foreigners somewhere and outsiders sometimes

one cannot envy the refugee for being assumed as outsiders yet one can acknowledge that this assumption frees the refugee, the nomadic proletarian, the sans-papiers from the lies we native sons tell about ourselves

the startling realization that we are all teetering near the precipice of the social, some nudged closer than others by structural factors but none far enough back to escape vertigo, can engender doomerism for oneself or solidarity with one's fellow homos viator. it is this latter possibility that i wish to explore, and that i believe shall reveal itself to be manifestly superior to the former. none of us will never be on the road, caught in a slashing rain, pounding desperately at locked doors to soften their hearts and see us as their fellowman, to forgive what they rightly hold against us, just as we have or would relinquish that which we hold against them, and let us back in. to let us back in to the social, to moral peerage, and to offer us a respite from the dusty road, so that we might be in a position to, in our turn, let back in a weary traveller who begs our forgiveness. we have been him, and we will be him again. we know that our being-in is more ephemeral and less natural than our being-out. as doors were opened for you, and as they will be opened for you again, open the door, open your heart in forgiveness, and welcome back the wayward traveller into the social.

edgy and controversial — earned forgiveness through ordeal, self criticism, great proletarian cultural revolution? political rehabilitation, yes, but forgiveness is an inextricably personal matter. the mass line might be this or it might be that, but neither it nor anything else can compel you to extend forgiveness if you do not wish it. you can be compelled by circumstances, by real and public contrition, by their or your guilt, by even in circumstances such as these the decision to forgive is yours and only yours, as ever it could be.

we travel, sometimes alone, sometimes with others; sometimes towards some glimmer on the horizon, sometimes merely away from that which grows hazier in the rear view mirror. we spend more time being swept along in the heraclitean stream of Becoming than we do in stable Being, pit stops that are mere catches of breath, ephemera that we delude ourselves into thinking

are natural or lasting, before the current picks up again and we are washed ashore upon a new beach, being gawked at by new eyes observing us and judging us friend of foe, potential insider or dangerous threat to be kept away. we are travelers always and outsiders often. we break strange customs we do not comprehend just as strange people break the most obvious, natural, and sacred of our ways. that the ways we fail to understand are just as obvious, natural, and sacred to those we transgress against is clear upon reflection but not often realized in our everyday lives. but not all transgressions are accidental. sometimes we transgress against rules we know and understand intimately, whether out of desperation or malice, boredom or mistake. where gracious forgiveness might be easily extended to the foolish foreigner who knows no better, hearts often harden when regarding those that do know better, even as all men sin and all men are sinners. as their fellow sinner, or at least fellow transgressors, ought not we be moved by a common spirit, a shared being as the one plucked out from the in group and cast out, spat upon and despised? it is only a matter of time, of circumstance, and of luck that he stands accuse and we point our finger. that it is not he leveling accusations and us bearing them is a matter of the same sort of nearly arbitrary conditions. there but for fortune go you or i. the social extends beyond the societal(?)

blood pours no less freely from our wounds upon the revelation that their inflictor had meant well.

what forgiveness-power is, because forgiveness is power. in cases of structural marginalization, people and groups are excluded from the social by factors outside of our individual power to control. this is not so in cases of forgiveness. when we hold something against someone — really, when we hold something over someone — we alone possess the power to exclude them from the social and to welcome them back in. this is an immense power,

and careful through ought to be given to how it is exercised. hieronymi for what forgiveness-power is; marcel for how and when to use forgiveness-power.