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## THE TRANSCENDENCE OF THE PERSON IN FORGIVENESS. THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

### Summary

The paper is focused on a very important aspect of building society and relationality, that is, forgiveness. This issue is quite often treated from the psychological, philosophical or theological perspectives, but it is still not sufficiently worked out in social sciences. Actually, it is also my point that no social theory should avoid this question, as it plays such an important role in social relations. As I will try to demonstrate, forgiveness has a special corrective character in human relationships as well as in building society and shaping human personality. The dynamics of forgiveness with its morphogenetic process, in a special way, transforms a person and his relations.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, transcendence of the person, social forgiveness, relational sociology, human relations

## TRANSCENDENCJA OSOBY W PRZEBACZENIU. PERSPEKTYWA SOCJOLOGII RELACYJNEJ

### Streszczenie

Podstawowe zagadnienie podjęte w tym opracowaniu, tj. przebaczenie, dotyczy kwestii bardzo ważnej dla rozwoju relacji międzyludzkich i budowania społeczeństwa. Problem przebaczenia jest dość często analizowany z perspektywy teologii, filozofii czy psychologii, ale nadal w niewielkim stopniu z perspektywy socjologii. Tymczasem, teorie społeczne nie powinny unikać tego zagadnienia, które odgrywa tak istotną rolę w relacjach społecznych. Przebaczenie ma specjalny charakter korekcyjny w budowaniu społeczeństwa, ludzkich relacji, jak również w kształtowaniu ludzkiej osobowości. Dynamika przebaczenia z zachodzącym w nim procesem morfogenetycznym w sposób szczególny przekształca osobę i jej relacje.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przebaczenie, transcendencja osoby, przebaczenie społeczne, socjologia relacyjna, relacje międzyosobowe

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## INTRODUCTION

The importance of forgiveness in rebuilding and strengthening human relationships in social life seems obvious. Nevertheless, this phenomenon is treated to a very limited extent in social sciences, especially in sociology. The question of forgiveness is so vast that this paper is to be confined mainly to interpersonal forgiveness, although it also touches on the so-called political or institutional forgiveness. Moreover, it deals only with the classical concept of forgiveness, leaving aside different aspects, such as conditions, stages, and others.

The act of forgiving is possible thanks to a special capacity of man which is transcendence, the concept elaborated especially by K. Wojtyła in his anthropology. Applying this to forgiveness, the text will consider it in the framework of relational sociology (P. Donati and M. Archer) and based on the critical realism paradigm (CR; of D. Porpora, A. Collier and others). It will also make some references to the sociology of free giving.

The text seeks to analyse the fundamental process of forgiveness from these perspectives and demonstrate its transcendental character, so as to show the interconnections with the human relationality of both the victim and the perpetrator, and the special correctional character of this act, which leads to the rise of something new in them and in the society.

After a brief description of the human reality marked by a variety of wrongdoings, the paper will discuss the concept of transcendence, particularly its vertical dimension in the relationships with the Other. Then, it applies the idea of transcendence to forgiveness, describing the morphogenetic process that affects both the context and agents. In this process, a person is subjected to a strong confrontation of values, which reveals the truth about his personal and relational constitution, and leads to the restoring of these relationships.

### 1. HUMAN REALITY

The reality we live in and experience in our everyday life, while marked by the goodness offered to us and from which we benefit, also contains things, actions, behaviours and attitudes that are marked by human wrongdoings (in religious terms – sins), faults, failures, negligence and so on. All this affects human relations and can destroy or at least restrain people's development, such as bonds of love, solidarity, and benevolence. Obviously, this assumes a specific vision of society and human relations: the prevailing principles, shared values, and goals. But the tendency to build good relations, particularly based on love and friendship, can be treated as the ultimate aim (concern) of the whole humanity irrespective of the assumed social ontology. It appears as something phenomenologically obvious.

Perturbations, disorders, and ruptures in social relations caused by inappropriate attitudes, behaviours, words and actions increase distance to the

envisaged goal or at least restrain any move in that direction. In order to make a correction and restore this, forgiveness is needed. It has, however, a peculiar character; it means that it not only restores relations to the previous state, i.e. before the wrong (evil) was done but also transforms these relations, deepening them thanks to special conscious and free involvement of a wronged person – victim, but also often of a perpetrator. The transformation of their relations transforms also the persons themselves: it occurs in a morphogenetic process that affects the context and the actors as well. In this process a new reality and new relations emerge. To achieve this the powers of human agency are needed.

Authors working on forgiveness generally agree that proper forgiveness can only take place between persons, even when we use sometimes the terms of political or institutional forgiveness (Hughes 2014). Consequently, in searching for the properties and powers that can transform the destroyed or ruptured relations, we need to focus first of all on the actors and their agency. There we turn to a special capacity of man, namely, the person's capacity of transcendence. For Karol Wojtyła transcendence is necessarily connected with the properties and powers of a person; for him man as a person naturally transcends himself: "Transcendence [...] is to a certain extent another name for a person" (Wojtyła 1994b, 385).

## 2. TRANSCENDENCE IN HUMAN LIFE

Transcendence has various meanings and dimensions. Originally, it signifies some latent reality that is beyond the human capacity to grasp or fully understand – beyond one's direct apprehension: a reality that is outside the world, its space and time, commonly named God, and that is why, this notion is not very popular among contemporary scientists in social sciences. The reinstatement of this dimension and reality, connected with individual and social life, to the scientific debate was the task of the book *Transcendence*, written by three authors linked with CR: Margaret S. Archer, David Porpora, and Andrew Collier (2004). Pierpaolo Donati, in developing the relational sociology, also mentioned that openness for this reality was the weak point of all important contemporary social theories (Donati 2007, 5).

Transcendental in realistic philosophy signifies something going "beyond the contingent and accidental in human experience, but not beyond all human knowledge" (*Transcendental* 2012). There are categories having a universal application such as being, one, true, good or beauty. Etymologically, transcendence "means to go over and beyond a threshold or a boundary (*trans-scendere*). It may also refer to the subject's stepping out of his limits toward an object" (Wojtyła 1994a, 164). And this is the meaning with its different dimensions specifically worked out by K. Wojtyła in his concept of the acting person. In this definition, however, one could also find references and links to other meanings of transcendence.

K. Wojtyła discerns, first of all, between the horizontal and vertical transcendence, showing the latter's special importance in the human life. In the

horizontal dimension man is directed to some external object, some objective reality, thus transgressing his individuality and subjectivity. The important moment of human efficacy (“I act-man acts”) (Wojtyła 1994a, 57-59, 115-116) is connected with self-consciousness and an intended act proper only to the person. It means, that the person experiences himself as the agent – subject of the action: “having the experience of ‘being the actor’” (Wojtyła 1994a 63-64, 116). The acting man can transform the surrounding world, but he also shapes himself as a person, thus he activates the process of self-determination. He is not only an observer of something happening in him, but conscious that he – as the subject of the action – causes a change in himself (alters himself). In this dynamics, the subject becomes an object for himself. The man is the end and the limit for himself. The limits of self-determination result from the constitution of the person, from the truth of his being (Wojtyła 1979, 206-207). The truth seen as a correspondence of “the belief or claim and the way the world is” was elaborated from CR’s view by D. Porpora in his book *Reconstructing Sociology* (2015, 65-95). In this realistic view the objective reality is the maker of truth: “world is the truth maker”.<sup>2</sup>

And then we move on to the question of the vertical transcendence. The important moment in transcending oneself (vertical transcendence) occurs in relation to his conscience, which is a special place of man’s inner conversation. The person is able to recognise in it the personal subjective value of his willing and choices and then acts in accordance with truth and good. There is a process of confrontation with the values of objective reality. Moving to this reality means transcending oneself in attainment of one’s true good. Thereby, the potentiality of man connected with his will is transformed into a specific action, determining the reality around him and shaping himself (self-determination) (Wojtyła 1994b, 389-390). This transcendence is connected with the ultimate concerns of the person determining man’s particular choices and harmonising his action (Archer 2003, 83-85, 230-246, 314-315). Following this way, the person not only self-determines, but also attains his self-fulfilment/self-realisation. In this process the person is shaping his self – “I”, affecting “Me” and also altering his future self – “You” (Archer 2015, 99-106).

The other dimension of the transcendence of man occurs in relation to the other person. As K. Wojtyła wrote: “the relation to persons is in some measure entangled with the relation to things, but possesses above all its own dimension in the existence and action of every man” (Wojtyła 1979, 210). The “Other” is the one in whom “I” can recognise itself. The need to live with others and to fulfil oneself in the relationships with others shows the necessity of appropriate coexistence with other people. It pertains to the ultimate concern of social order but, as it is largely

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<sup>2</sup> Finding the truth occurs in a dialogue between our interpretation, understanding and the reality itself (because of epistemic fallibility). In CR’s alethic account of truth the important role plays the distinction between *transitive* and *intransitive* dimensions of knowledge; it means between “the content of knowledge, which may change” and “the unchanging object of knowledge itself”. Cf. also the epistemic triangle of P. Donati (2007, 2-3).

explored in the relational sociology, this dimension is one of the constituents of personal selfhood – “I” (Donati and Archer 2015); it expresses the social nature of man. The most profound element in recognising “the Other” as our neighbour is the consciousness and acceptance of the participation in humanity (Wojtyła 1994a, 331-332; 1994c, 450-451). I need to accept and choose “the Other” in myself, in the shared humanity (“Love your neighbour as yourself”). I need to affirm his dignity, which is usually linked in human relations with friendship or love (Wojtyła 1994a, 333-335; 1994c, 453-455). Such relations grow in the logic of a gift, not in utility that reifies “the Other”. “If a man spontaneously ‘transcends’ himself toward another, toward others, toward the community (and in this ‘transcending’ occurs ‘the outgrowing of one’s self’), that is the proof that self-fulfilment, or in other words, self-teleology brings with itself an opening of the subject. Man fulfils himself ‘through others’ and realizes his own self by living ‘for others’” (Wojtyła 1979, 210). A pertinent formulation of this truth “that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere [gratuitous] gift of himself” can be found in the Pastoral Constitution of Vatican II. (Sobór Watykański II 1967, 24). This gratuitous gift is the “affirmation of the relation as such, of the relation as an expression of social life in and for itself”. It is “not so much an external and coercive rule that acts on individuals, but rather and above all it is a manifestation of their internal sociality, of their need to enter into, to be in and live in human relations” (Donati 2003, 256, 258).

Two important processes occur at the same time and intensify (strengthen) one another: personalisation and socialisation. In his time, K. Wojtyła tried to insist on the need to deepen the first one, saying: “it is most necessary to balance the process of socialisation by an effort of personalisation” (Wojtyła 1979, 210). If these two processes are not going together, man experiences alienation more and more (Wojtyła 1994b, 456; 1994c, 413) in relation to his ultimate concern of social order.

Transcendence towards others is connected with auto-transcendence, because the gift of oneself needs personal maturity (Wojtyła 1986, 87-92). Being a gift for the other, man transcends himself and fulfils himself at the same time. It is a great paradox and great truth concerning our realisation: the person is for himself when he is for others. This entails the emergence of new relational identity of man and a new web of relations in society. As was said by P. Donati, the enigma of free giving is rooted “in the fact that human beings cannot fully become themselves as such without entering into relationships and one doesn’t enter into relationships as human persons except through the door of free giving” (Donati 2003, 268).

### 3. TRANSCENDENCE IN FORGIVENESS

However, relations are also prone to faults and wrongdoings, committed especially when people tend to realise themselves in opposition to others, looking for realisation of some egoistic goals. The decision to do something wrong destroys

a relation, but also affects and shapes the subject of such an action. While he has a chance to change his attitude – transcending himself – by recognising the fault and trying to achieve his real relational good, at this moment he is tied by the decision of the wronged person to release him through forgiveness and enable the re-establishment of the ruptured relationship.

The classical concept of forgiveness describes a relation between two persons: a perpetrator and a victim. For the victim, the experienced wrong means not only the rupture of the relation but also affects his dignity and good as a person; thereby he has a natural tendency to look for justice, if not even for revenge. It creates an emotional attitude, which is tinged with a will (desire) to cease the relation. Thereby, the victim experiences two strong, inner “drives”: to break the relationships completely and discontinue its further development (“I do not know you!”) or to try to restore and build it further. The latter tendency is usually connected with his ultimate concern, having less emotional weight, but being well established in the identity of the person through his inner conversation. Thus, the person experiences strong, contradicting emotions. For Karol Wojtyła, who generally agrees with Max Scheler on that point, emotions are related to values (Wojtyła 1994a, 288-291; Mara 2011, 9). Emotions are “an indication [...] of values that exist [...] outside the subject having that emotional experience” and “the nucleus for crystallization of an experience of value” (Wojtyła 1994a, 289, 274). It means that we have here an opposition of some values. M. Archer defines emotions as specific “commentaries upon our concerns” (Archer 2002, 197-198).

The dynamism of negative emotions that pushes against the realisation of one’s ultimate concerns relates not only to the harm that the victim experiences, but also to the very fundamental values like justice, one’s own dignity, one’s individual and relational goods (health, career, social position, relationships with others). This is why, we can find so many different responses and solutions to this problem and observe in our reality such different reactions. Among the many thinkers who tried to address this question, we may mention Hegel, Butler, Kant, Nietzsche, Jankélévitch, Arendt, Derrida, Ricoeur, and others.

For example, Friedrich Nietzsche, opposing “slave” and “noble morality”, rejected the traditional Christian morality (especially in his *Antichrist* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* with the concept of “Übermensch”) as the morality of weaklings. For him forgivers are timid, shy people who have no power to fight for their rights and that is why they forgive: so they are weaklings who must forgive. Doing this, in his mind, they reject justice (Nietzsche 2007, 27-29).

Vladimir Jankélévitch and Jacques Derrida consider the problem of the unforgivable in reference to the extermination of Jews during the Second World War and other crimes against humanity, and they doubt the possibility of pure and full forgiveness, exploring different forms of false forgiveness.

Generally, forgiveness as a gratuitous gift does not harmonise with the model of societal relations and the model of man in such approaches. Most anti-

forgiveness concepts are built on the idea of justice as the fundamental principle ordering social relations and on a “damaging” effect of forgiveness for it (Wolf 2002, 36-38). They are closely connected with the notion of strict exchange in social relations.

Various anti-forgiveness theories, try to remove forgiveness from the social reality, because they recognise its detrimental or even devastating character for the wronged person and social order. On the other hand, we have an important cultural impact of the religious concept of forgiveness, which has already its place in the consciousness and attitudes of many people. I mean particularly the truth of Redemption in Christianity, concerning the forgiveness of our sins in Jesus Christ. This idea has created the whole “culture of forgiveness”, especially connected with the sacrament of reconciliation and the duty to forgive one another. Some researchers are convinced that forgiveness is and can be valid only for religious groups. Even if it is true, there is a great societal impact of these groups (esp. Christians) in our reality: a great number of people belong to it, so it is very important for the society. Besides, there are various concepts, close more or less to this one, especially connected with the functioning of civil society. They propose another model of relations and their restoration through forgiveness, such as, for example, those connected with the sociology of free giving, the virtue, and principle of love.

The key moment before taking the decision to forgive is related to the process of transvaluation (re-evaluation) and recognising the true good of a person. It is connected with the aforementioned problem of the confrontation of values. At that moment, the process of hierarchisation of values is required and initiated through the inner conversation: what are our ultimate concerns; what do we care about most; what are our goals? It is connected with the level of maturity (the process of personalisation) and our recognition of truth of the personal and relational constitution. It can be acquired in the process of socialisation, but at the moment of the confrontation of values – if it comes only from “Me” – it is often not sufficient to initiate the process of forgiveness: it requires more and more integration of these values in subjective “I” (Archer 2015, 99-103). It demands taking a decision against one’s own emotions connected with the values such as justice or one’s own dignity. This process of transvaluation should entail recognition of the priority of the wrongdoer’s dignity over his deeds and identification of the forgiving person with the dignity of the forgiven one.

The decision of the wronged person, when he decides to forgive the wrongdoer, is a starting point in re-establishing a relation. Through this, the person transcends himself in a special way. First of all, he must temper and overcome his negative emotions and restrain the will of revenge. Then, he must get out of his harm and open for the other, recognising him as a person, recognising his dignity. This is possible through the confrontation of values and concerns. The person discerns it in his conscience, taking into account also the whole cultural, mainly religious, conditioning (“Me”). In this process his agency (efficacy), self-possession, self-governance, and self-determination

find their expression. The forgiving person is acting against his spontaneity – his natural powers that he “reads” in himself as the experiencing subject.

In this process something new emerges, something new in the forgiver, in the forgiven, and in their relation as well as in the society. This is not a simple restoration: in a certain sense the authors opposing forgiveness are right in claiming that the previous situation cannot be retracted – the wrong is done. However, the forgiver shapes himself very effectively, which leads him much quicker to the maturity of his personality. In this opposition, there occurs a very strong clarification and reinforcement of a good hierarchy of his concerns. The person must also realise that a good relationship with the other is not only something external of him, but also internal, something constituting him. He realises that actually his “I” has the “relational character” which is amplified through this decision. Thereby, the person experiences his self-fulfilment, even if he needed to face some contradictions in himself: through his act, shaping himself, he experiences gradually the integration of his emotionality at the new level. Obviously, it is of great importance for the person, for his relationality and for the society. Here we can observe the proper expression of the theorems and claims of the relational sociology of P. Donati and M. Archer (2015).

Thanks to forgiveness, the victim affirms the forgiven one as a person, giving him a special place in his life and recognising his dignity. He releases him from the bonds of culpability, remorse, etc. Thereby, a new relationship between them may emerge. Amplifying his relational identity, the forgiver opens him up for experiencing “We”, for living in better solidarity with one another and building relational goods. It entails a further morphogenetic process. In this case, the person experiences fundamental solidarity connected with participation in the same nature, its greatness and weakness at the same time (Archer 2015, 107-111). In the case of full forgiveness, which is usually a process, the relationship could become even closer and stronger than before. It is marked by unconditional gratuitous love and becomes usually more resistant to another disruption. Here, we also deal with the realisation of the evangelic principle “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Mt 22: 39; Mk 12: 31). All this shows that our relationships and personal constitution are marked not only by our weakness and sinfulness but also by what we can call a corrective or redemptive dimension in human life.

The outcome of forgiveness is of fundamental importance for human relations and with all the morphogenetic dynamics it often brings the emergence of something new in relationships, something that was not aspired or even expected. But the generative powers of this corrective process are connected with human agency.

## CONCLUSION

The relational character of the “I” and his opening up for “we”, for solidarity with others in our actions is specifically demonstrated in some types of forgiveness



called third-party forgiveness. Political forgiveness may provide an example here. It takes place when someone pronounces forgiveness on behalf of someone else. It happens for different reasons: often when the victim simply cannot do it, i.e. because he died. We are not going to discuss if such a deed can be described as forgiveness. Anyway, the person who does it must feel special solidarity with the direct victim. It can be a close relative, but it may also be an “institutional” representative, who must identify with the direct victim or victims and their families and have special empowerment from them.

In every dimension, forgiveness, in order to be true and enable re-establishing human relationships, must be performed in accordance with the logic of the gift, a gratuitous gift. Following the analysis of P. Donati concerning different dimensions of free giving, we could state that the resolution of the controversy on the character of forgiveness outside the interpersonal relations is the fact that “free giving, even when it appears to be the same, does in fact differ according to the context in which it is located and according to the relations of distinction and combination of those contexts”. So it has a different character when it is performed in the family and in an informal network system, in the system of voluntary associations, in the political-administrative system, and in the market (Donati 2003, 252). Forgiveness as a gift has the power to transform human relationships and the person himself and, on the other hand, it needs these properties and powers implied to the person and his relationality. The fundamental property of the person – the other name of it – is the possibility to transcend himself, which finds a special expression in the act of forgiveness.

The correctional character of forgiveness implies the emergence of a new reality, which is the basis for rebuilding and strengthening human relationships. The importance of this for social life is all the more apparent as we can observe the destructive effects on interpersonal relationships and ties. This process requires transvaluation and going beyond even dominating feelings and fundamental concerns: transcending them through reflexivity and discerning the real good, which is entwined with the good of the Other. In the process, gains a better understanding of the relational character of one’s nature and experiences the emergence of the relationships already founded on one’s inner conscious conversation, which adds a more solid character to it. This, undoubtedly, is of importance for the whole society, and that is why, sociologists should work more on that reality.

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