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Anger and Reconciliation

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Abstract

Emotions are a much-neglected aspect of contemporary peace ethics, which is surprising if only because the concept of positive peace encompasses a certain emotional commitment. Moreover, some emotions explicitly promote separation, conflict, and even violence. Anger is an ambivalent emotion that, on the one hand, evokes conflict but, on the other hand, expresses a sense of justice. Anger can be soothed by forgiveness, and forgiveness can lead to reconciliation. However, in individual ethics, the conceptual and factual connections are easier to explain than in political contexts, where collectives must be considered as actors. Martha Nussbaum recently subjected both anger and forgiveness to a well-founded critique. In contrast to this, however, a qualified defense will be made in the following.

Keywords: *political emotions; anger; forgiveness; reconciliation; peace; ethics of peace; Martha Nussbaum; revisionist just war theory*

I.

In the German-speaking world it is frowned upon to speak of an “ethics of war,” even when ethical considerations are made about military operations or even wars. The politically correct term is “peace ethics” because one wants to free oneself from any suspicion of legitimising wars. In the peace ethics scene – and peace ethics is first and foremost a field to be dealt with in terms of the sociology of science – the expression “just war” is also unacceptable. There is talk of a “paradigm shift” (fol-

lowing Thomas S. Kuhn¹) away from the “just war theory” towards the “just peace theory.”² For the most part, these renamings are euphemisms. For “peace ethics” continues to reflect on violence and war – especially violence determined sociologically as “macro-violence” – and “just peace theory” also has criteriologies for the use of military force.³ What has changed, it is often said, is the perspective: instead of thinking in terms of the legitimacy of war, the starting point is now peace and its conditions. This peace, it is claimed, must be a “just” one – since peace and justice belong together⁴ – but surprisingly, more precise references to the theory of justice used in the development of this concept are missing.⁵ The concept of “just peace” also emphasises the prevention of violence and active peace-building, which may indeed go beyond what the thinkers in the just war tradition had in mind.⁶ But that they were not interested in peace and let alone a “just peace” does them a great injustice. (The criterion of “last resort” shows clearly that even in the so-called “just-war-tradition” peace had preference wherever possible.) Despite the diversity of approaches to just war, it is always a question of overcoming war and transforming it into peace.⁷ The difference between the concepts of “just peace” and “just war” lies in something else: Just war theories assume the general (*prima facie*) moral impermissibility of wars. In them, ethics is thought of from the side of duties, and in principle there is a duty to refrain from acts of war.⁸ Under certain conditions, however, there can be an exception to the general prohibition. The criteria of just war formulate these conditions; and for sure they can be abused for inappropriately justifying violence.

¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th anniversary edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

² Cf. Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Kein Ende der Gewalt? Friedensethik für eine globalisierte Welt* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2018), 578.

³ Cf. Eine Denkschrift des Rates der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland [Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany], *Aus Gottes Frieden leben – für gerechten Frieden sorgen* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2007), no. 102, 68f.

⁴ According to Psalm 85.11.

⁵ A good example of this is Ines-Jacqueline Werkner, *Gerechter Frieden. Das fortwährende Dilemma militärischer Gewalt* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

⁶ Cf. Ulrich Frey, “Von der ‘Komplementarität’ zum ‘gerechten Frieden.’ Zur Entwicklung kirchlicher Friedensethik,” *Wissenschaft & Frieden* 24, no. 4 (2006), <https://wissenschaft-und-frieden.de/artikel/von-der-komplementaritaet-zum-gerechten-frieden/>.

⁷ Which becomes particularly clear with Hugo Grotius, who stands on the borderline between duty-based and rights-based approach. Cf. Stephen C. Neff, ed., *Hugo Grotius on War and Peace* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁸ So, it comes as no surprise that in the Latin world at first Cicero deals with the issue of just war (*bellum iustum*) in his *De officiis* (*On duties*).

War can be waged, if these conditions are met, but it does not have to be.⁹ The renunciation of violence remains possible without being required, as in certain forms of pacifism. The “paradigm of just peace,” on the other hand, is based on rights – especially (basic) human rights. In this concept, rights (even if the concrete form they take often remains unclear) are seen to be the core of justice, which in turn is seen as a basic condition for peace. Subjective rights can be either liberty rights or claim rights. In both cases, however, conflicts between rights are possible. If peace means that no violence is used, then this peace must obviously consist of non-violent “conflict management,” which, however, never comes to an end.¹⁰ In this sense, there is probably also talk of “just peace” being a “target perspective.”¹¹ If a certain coming to rest is implied in the concept of peace (as is the case, for example, with the traditional concepts of peace in Thomas Aquinas¹² or Augustine¹³), “just peace” can never be fully achieved. Subjective rights are a driver of conflict as they protect human agency. Duties reduce conflict because they demand human restraint – even where they oblige action. Rights, on the other hand, conjure up conflicts, and so it is quite popular in German-language-peace-ethics to emphasise that conflicts are, after all, something good and “productive” or “constructive.”¹⁴

II.

Concepts of just war and concepts of just peace thus attempt to provide *normative* answers to the question of violence and war. However, what falls short in both “paradigms” (if we want to speak of them) is a look at the side of the emotions involved. This is surprising because both approaches lack a weighty moment here. Let us start with the concepts of just war. With them, the prohibition of violent action is the basic position, from which there are only certain exceptions that, however, rest on the prohibition. Where the exception does not exist, the prohibition applies. Now this may well come at great cost to an actor. Consider, for example, that a war of self-defence (*ius ad/contra bellum*) would leave a dispro-

⁹ This does not apply to all authors of the so-called “School of Salamanca.”

¹⁰ Therefore, Ines-Jacqueline Werkner speaks of “peace ethics” as a “process ethics” (“Prozess-ethik”). Ines-Jacqueline Werkner, “Einführung in das Handbuch,” in *Handbuch Friedensethik*, ed. Ines-Jacqueline Werkner and Klaus Ebeling, 1-8 (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 4.

¹¹ Die deutschen Bischöfe: Gerechter Friede. 27th September 2000, 4th ed. 2013, 47ff.

¹² Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, II, q. 29.

¹³ Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei*, trans. Marcus Dods (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads, 2015), XIX.

¹⁴ Both expressions are used in a recent statement by the German Catholic military bishop, Dr. Franz-Josef Overbeck, *Konstruktive Konfliktkultur* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 2019).

portionately high overall damage and is, therefore, not permissible. These costs must not only be borne but also endured emotionally. This becomes even clearer in the *ius in bello*. All approaches to just war agree that a distinction must be made between legitimate and illegitimate targets. The difference between the traditional approaches¹⁵ and the so-called “Revisionist Just War Theory”¹⁶ lies in the question of which group of people is liable to be attacked and which is not;¹⁷ but the distinction as such is made by both (traditionalists and revisionists). The restriction, however, can have its own costs in both theoretical approaches, even if one allows for non-intended harm to the protected persons, because then again, a principle of proportionality must be observed. Even the protection of (protected) cultural goods sometimes makes it necessary to take risks that would not be taken without the protection of these goods.¹⁸ Thus, although she or he may have a normative answer for the type and extent of violence that can be legitimised, a just-war theorist is faced with the unresolved motivational question: Why should one adhere to the norm that may cost one’s own life? The motivational problem thus unfolds its full force here. In emotivist internalism it would be solved because the norm itself would be based on an emotion, but in this way the universal validity of the norm is called into question in turn. Wars could then be understood as conflicts between “emotional communities” that can no longer be rationally resolved at all. In contrast, a rationalistic internalism gets into explanatory difficulties because it has to show “that the moral law directly determines the will.”¹⁹ An externalism could perhaps insist on divine observation including reward and punishment but would hardly find any credence in a secular society. When we want to explain how one can, nevertheless, observe potentially deadly norms (deadly to oneself), we will not be able to bypass the prob-

¹⁵ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

¹⁶ Jeff McMahan, *Killing in War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁷ On the distinction of “traditionalist accounts” and “revisionist accounts” of just war theory cf. Seth Lazar, “War,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/war/>; Bernhard Koch, “Diskussionen zum Kombattantenstatus in asymmetrischen Konflikten,” in *Handbuch Friedensethik*, eds. Ines-Jacqueline Werkner and Klaus Ebeling (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2017), 843-854; Bernhard Koch, “Reflexionen zur ethischen Debatte um das *ius in bello* in der Gegenwart,” in *Rechtserhaltende Gewalt – zur Kriteriologie*, eds. Ines-Jacqueline Werkner and Peter Rudolf (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 75-100.

¹⁸ Cf. Bernhard Koch, “Es geht nicht nur um Steine. Ist militärischer Schutz von Kulturgütern erlaubt oder gar geboten?” *Herder Korrespondenz* 11 (2016): 38-42.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Thomas Kingsmill Abbott (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 5: 71.

lem of cultivating emotions. The fear of losing one's life would have to be reduced and in return a sense of pride (or other positive emotions) for adhering to the norm would have to be cultivated. Without looking at emotions as motivational components, a just war theory remains incomplete.²⁰

We can take the peace-ethical relevance of emotions even deeper: If it is true that emotions have an epistemic function (as Aristotle seems to claim),²¹ then the picture we form of a conflict or cooperation would not be independent of how we experience the situation emotionally. Love as an emotion can (as Christian authors argue subsequent to 1st Korinthians 13.22²²) help us grasp a situation in such a way that it does not seem to require a violent reaction (e.g., defending violence). Hate probably has the opposite effect.

But concepts of just peace do not make the task any much easier. The above-mentioned "non-violent conflict management" also requires emotional training if the use of everything that should be covered by one's own rights does not in turn lead to violent conflict. It requires a willingness to exercise restraint – that is, an attitude that values (the virtue of) moderation and keeps excessive emotions in check. (In my view, it also means being able to do without certain goods because they are too trivial to justify violence if they are pursued.²³) Whichever way you look at it, the ethics of peace already has to deal with emotions because of the issue of motivation – and it has to each emotion in a way that is appropriate for it. But emotions – which can and should be conceptually distinguished from virtues and other attitudes²⁴ – do not only fulfil an important role in peace ethics in motivating compliance with norms. They are also constitutive for

²⁰ It is quite debatable whether emotions actually take on the motivational function attributed to them, and if they do, what it is that makes them take on this function. The subtleties of the debate must unfortunately be left out; cf. Sabine A. Döring, "Allgemeine Einleitung. Philosophie der Gefühle heute," in *Philosophie der Gefühle*, ed. Sabine A. Döring (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), 12-65. For our purposes, we can adopt a fairly simple model: Pleasure and pain are associated with emotions (such as anger). Pain drives to its overcoming, the prospect of pleasure drives to its attainment.

²¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, 2, 1378a21-24, trans. John Henry Freese (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1926).

²² Cf. Peter Heuer, "Das Verhältnis von Lieben und Erkennen bei Thomas von Aquin," in *Liebe – eine Tugend?*, ed. Winfried Rohr (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 185-208.

²³ Cf. Bernhard Koch, "Zu den Grenzen konstruktiver Konfliktkultur. Verzicht, Gewalt und Toleranz," in *Konfliktkulturen in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Erkundungen eines komplexen Phänomens*, ed. Markus Thureau (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2024) 251-272.

²⁴ We have to distinguish emotions from feelings, too: Although emotions contain a certain quality of feeling (*qualia*), they are essentially aimed at something in the world and have a representational content.

peace itself (the concept of “positive peace”²⁵ requires a certain kindness towards the other, which is also emotionally based), and their absence can torpedo the de-escalation of conflicts. Emotions, however, can certainly be conflict drivers, especially negative or retaliatory ones such as hatred and anger. Hate is basically always irrational and therefore to be rejected. But with anger, the matter is more complex. Anger is not an irrational emotion but contains a cognitive core (of a normative conviction) that is, however, affectively grounded and expanded. We now have to address this emotion in particular – not least because it occupies a very prominent place at the beginning of Western literary history: The events in Homer’s *Iliad* are – as the opening verses already show – characterized throughout by a motif of anger.

III.

Homer uses the word *μῆνις*.²⁶ Aristotle defines the terminologically more appropriate *ὀργή* in the second book of his *Rhetoric*: Anger

is a longing, accompanied by pain, for a real or apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved. Anger is always accompanied by a certain pleasure, due to the hope of revenge to come.²⁷

So, anger is not irrational. It is based on a (rationally accessible) judgement of the (in most cases harming) action of a person who does not have the right to hold ourselves in low esteem, or to hold another person in low esteem. The disrespect can take many forms, and a perceived disrespect does not have to correspond to a factual disrespect.

The term “slight” can contain many different attitudes. Here, only one important core area of disdain will be singled out, which is usually referred to as “injustice.” For its part, justice is multifaceted: one need only think of distributive, retributive or restorative justice. To (deliberately) deny other people’s legitimate claims to justice is to hold them in low esteem. Of course, disputes often arise about what justice actually requires to be

²⁵ On the distinction of positive and negative peace cf. Johan Galtung, “Peace, Positive and Negative,” in *The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology*, vol. 2, ed. Daniel J. Christie (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2012), 758-762.

²⁶ Alexander Pope translates “wrath.” <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/6130/pg6130-images.html>.

²⁷ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, 2, 1378a32-1378b2, trans. John Henry Freese (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1926).

done. But this dispute, too, can be carried out in such a way that the opponent is respected as such or in such a way that she or he is disdained. On the level of military ethics, we therefore distinguish the “*ius ad bellum*” from the “*ius in bello*.” Violations of the *ius ad bellum* or the *ius in bello* rightly trigger anger. But this distinction can also play a role in domestic conflicts. In Western states, there are – understandably – different views on many factual issues: Climate protection, pandemic control, homosexuality, gender theory, migration, policy towards Russia or China, Israel etc. Which measures and legal positions are right and just in each case is a matter of public dispute. But this dispute is partly carried out in such a way that the core is not argumentative discourse at eye level, but in such a way that one side discredits the other (especially morally). In the 1980s, the new “Green” parties were frequently the target of such discrediting, but in the meantime the picture has completely changed: critical positions are very easily dismissed as “racist” or “sexist” or “fascist,” especially by the “left.” In the German election campaign of 2022, the party “Die Grünen” used an election poster that read: “Racism must be excluded, no one else.” The sentence is correct in a trivial way, and yet also very dangerous, because it now shifts the ethical question of the right way to treat people to a question of authority: the one who gains the power of definition over the term “racism” can then exclude others without further justification – or as Aristotle would say – “disregard” them. This disdain, however, produces anger.

IV.

The ethical debate on just war has undergone significant normative clarification in the past two decades. What began with works by David Rodin²⁸ and Jeff McMahan²⁹ has led to a very extensive literature on the foundations of warlike violence – especially insofar as it is justifiably derived from self-defence.³⁰ But every theory of defensive force also needs a theory of the self, i.e., of what may be justifiably defended with violence in the first place.³¹ This question is easier to clarify when it comes to disputes between individuals than to disputes between states. We usually assume that our life belongs to us, that our body is inviolable and that we own external

²⁸ David Rodin, *War and Self-Defense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁹ Jeff McMahan, “The Ethics of Killing in War,” *Ethics* 114 (2004): 693-733.

³⁰ Cf. Seth Lazar, “War,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/war/>.

³¹ Cf. Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (London and New York: Verso, 2020).

property that is granted to us in social agreements.³² External property (e.g., money) is certainly where some dispute begins, which is why the debate about legitimate self-defence focuses primarily on life and limb. In any case, it is rarely conceded that a threatened loss of external property justifies an act of killing. However, defence against an attack on one's own life usually justifies a defensive act that endangers the life of the attacker,³³ and within limits that are difficult to determine ("wide proportionality") it may even justify damage to the body of third persons. In the case of political communities, what is permitted is more difficult to determine. Certainly, a political community can legitimately defend itself if its members are threatened in life and limb. But in most cases, this is only part of the reason for wars. Wars are mostly about political self-determination and state territory. Under international law, these are also defensible assets, which is why the state of Ukraine is currently defending itself against the Russian invasion legitimately under international law. But ethically, the question arises whether these goods – which in a certain sense are 'only' external goods – justify the killing of people and the risk of being killed.³⁴ However, one does not have to answer this question to understand that the mere fact of breaking international law can be understood as disrespect. Not only is the political community under attack held in low esteem, but also international law in its entirety and those who consider it valid and advocate for it. However, normative hypocrisy also constitutes disrespect, and after the NATO attack on Serbia in 1999, and the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, it is difficult for Western states to demonstrate righteous anger at the violation of international law in the case of the Ukraine war without giving the impression of hypocrisy (at least to some extent). Of course, there are other reasons to be angry about the attack on Ukraine, for example because trust has been betrayed. (However, precisely these things must then also be examined with regard to the other side as well).³⁵

³² Cf. John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, § 27.

³³ In Jeff McMahan's "Responsibility Account of Defensive Force" defensive acts are permitted against the person responsible for the unjust attack (who may not be identical with the attacker). Cf. Jeff McMahan, "Self-Defense Against Morally Innocent Threats," in *Criminal Law Conversations*, eds. Paul H. Robinson, Stephen Garvey, and Kimberly Kessler Ferzan, 385-394 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁴ Cf. David Rodin, "The Myth of National Self-Defense," in *The Morality of Defensive War*, eds. Cécile Fabre and Seth Lazar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 69-89; Uwe Steinhoff, "Rodin on Self-Defense and the 'Myth' of National Self-Defense: A Refutation," *Philosophia* 41, no. 4 (2013): 1017-1036.

³⁵ Real cases are always complicated and multifaceted. A more informed judgment of the war in Ukraine would require a very thorough study of all facets and layers. But perhaps one can at least say that the violations of the *ius in bello* (International Humanitarian Law) by rocket and drone attacks on civilian targets in Ukraine must in any case provoke great anger.

V.

The so-called “revisionist just war theory” has, not implausibly, argued that the asymmetry in the *ius ad bellum* must also come through as asymmetry in the *ius in bello*. Taking the individual right of self-defense as a starting point, it is obvious to understand the asymmetry also in the case of groups in such a way that only the members of the group that rightfully defends itself may use force at all. The members of the group that carries out an illegitimate attack would basically not be allowed to carry out any acts of violence at all, because their actions are illegitimate from the outset. This asymmetry corresponds to our moral self-experience – even that of former attackers. In the German armed forces, the concept of *Innere Führung* (“Internal Leadership”) was introduced shortly after the so-called rearmament in 1955, the core of which is that soldiers themselves must question their mission. They cannot retreat to orders and obedience alone but are obliged to resign if they are ordered to perform actions that are obviously unlawful. Behind this was the experience of the *Wehrmacht* in the Second World War, when it could be clear to any person endowed with a basic sense of morality that the German war of aggression represented a colossal injustice and that the refusal of German soldiers had been the appropriate option, but unfortunately only feasible at the greatest personal risk. The “moral equality of combatants” stated by Michael Walzer was probably only plausible in very few wars. Perhaps soldiers in the First World War saw themselves as “morally equal” vis-à-vis their opponents, but then this is more true in the sense that all parties involved were engaged in rogue activity.

Nevertheless, critics of the “revisionists” have raised important objections to the asymmetrisation of combatants. If, for example, through the effect of propaganda, soldiers on both sides believe that they are in the right and the opponents are in the wrong, so that the opponents are no longer to be respected as equals at all, this leads to the totalisation of the war. Both sides claim, metaphorically speaking, to be on the side of the light and to be fighting against the darkness. As a result, they will intensify the means of struggle more and more and try to create an ever-greater power asymmetry.³⁶ A certain reflex to this view of conflict can be seen, for example, in the use of armed drones in Afghanistan and Pakistan in the 2000s. The “just combatants” have no “liability” and can therefore – ac-

³⁶ Cf. Bernhard Koch, “Moral Integrity and Remote-Controlled Killing: A Missing Perspective,” in *Drones and Responsibility: Legal, Philosophical, and Sociotechnical Perspectives on Remotely Controlled Weapons*, eds. Ezio di Nucci and Filippo Santoni de Sio, 82-100 (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

according to this view – legitimately protect themselves (even at the expense of third parties). At the same time, the opponents are not recognised as opponents, but represent “world criminals” who must be “rendered harmless” at all costs. Because this is not the opponents’ perception of themselves, anger and aggression grow in them. This occurs to a certain extent on both sides, which can lead to an escalation dynamic.

Michael Walzer has sensibly demanded that wars, in their execution, should primarily be a business of the soldiers and that civilians should be spared from the effects of violence as much as possible.³⁷ In this way, war-like violence can be somewhat contained. Otherwise, the asymmetry will be pushed further and further, for example, into the question of medical care for the wounded (‘just combatants should be given preferential treatment’³⁸) or into the issue of prisoners of war. Moreover, it should – according to the Walzerian view – be avoided to distinguish between “just” and “unjust civilians.”³⁹ The practical problems would grow immeasurably. For all the consistency of the “revisionist” basic idea: at the end of the day, theoretical aporias remain, such as that of whether “unjust combatants” may defend unjustly attacked civilians and thereby become “just combatants” after all, and above all, great pragmatic difficulties remain. First and foremost, the concern for peace, which – as was said above – is also a concern of just war theories, is torpedoed by this. (Positive) peace between (previously) conflicting opponents can only exist if there has been reconciliation. But reconciliation is a two-way process for which the one-sidedness of perpetrator and victim, unjust and just combatant, is often rather a hindrance.

VI.

Reconciliation is a difficult subject for ethical reflection. Political reconciliation is even more difficult. We know the phenomenon of reconciliation from our individual experience. We are at odds with a person, but able to overcome the dispute, perhaps relate to something in common and get along again. The process itself could probably also be described and – tentatively – explained in the scientific disciplines of psychology and social

³⁷ Michael Walzer, *Arguing About War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

³⁸ Cf. Bernhard Koch, “Cicero and the Problem of Triage: Why There Is No Moral Algorithm in Distributing Scarce Resources,” in *Resource Scarcity in Austere Environments. An Ethical Examination of Triage and Medical Rules of Eligibility*, eds. Sheena M. Eagan and Daniel Messelken, 173-188 (Cham: Springer Nature, 2023).

³⁹ Cf. the debate on the Kasher-Yadlin-Paper; Bernhard Koch, *Der Gegner als Mitmensch: Michael Walzer, Jeff McMahan und die moralphilosophische Kritik am Humanitären Völkerrecht* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2023), 331-336.

science. But ethics is a philosophical discipline, and if we want to have an ethical concept of reconciliation, we also need a philosophical description.

I have tried elsewhere to derive reconciliation from the concepts of guilt and forgiveness.⁴⁰ This will certainly be contested, but perhaps there is a benefit in that: in such a recourse to terms of moral language, ethics comes into play from the outset and not vice versa, when a certain psychological reading is taken as an ethical one. Forgiveness is connected to the issue of guilt; however, one problem with the concept of guilt is that it creates figurative associations (at least in German) that are quite misleading: “guilt” is understood like a physical object, e.g., a rock or a boulder, and in this sense, someone is said to have “brought guilt upon himself.” Forgiveness, on the other hand, is then seen as the removal of this burden from the depressed person. Too little attention is paid to the fact that “guilt” actually refers to a relational structure: A person becomes guilty because she or he has wronged another person. He or she owes him or her a debt. The act of injustice is temporally past, but there is a “residue” that is, so to speak, extra-temporal, and that is called “guilt.” It may be forgotten (by both sides, that of the perpetrator and that of the victim), but this forgetting does not cancel it. Guilt is only lifted through the act of forgiveness, which is itself quite mysterious.⁴¹

Friedrich Nietzsche rejected the whole talk of “guilt” with good reasons. He sees in it the intrusion of an economic model designed to secure power advantages.⁴² In fact, the talk of guilt seems to be an economic talk, and in fact the concept of guilt is very frequently used to state an asymmetry of power: “You are guilty” is a devaluation, and the speaker can elevate himself – at least psychologically – above the blameworthy party. This self-exaltation through the apportioning of blame or guilt to others is morally dubious. It also makes forgiveness – especially unsolicited forgiveness – problematic and is sure to provoke anger in the person who is forgiven in this arrogant way. Those who expressively forgive someone for a deed without that person really asking for forgiveness can give the impression that their demonstrative act of forgiveness was primarily intended to establish that person’s guilt. Forgiveness is not the same as excusing.⁴³

⁴⁰ Bernhard Koch, “Guilt – Forgiveness – Reconciliation – and Recognition in Armed Conflict,” *Russian Journal of Philosophical Sciences* 64, no. 6 (2021): 74-91.

⁴¹ Cf. *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Forgiveness*, eds. Glen Pettigrove and Robert Enright (New York and London: Routledge, 2023).

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* II, 4/5, trans. Horace B. Samuel (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1887), 47ff.

⁴³ Cf. Susanne Boshammer, *Die zweite Chance. Warum wir (nicht alles) verzeihen sollten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2020), 43-56.

Externally wrong actions are excused, but they are based on mistakes on the part of the person acting for which he or she is not responsible, e.g., ignorance. An act that does not reach its goal due to certain external circumstances is also not an “object” of forgiveness, but of excuse. Morally wrong actions for which the person acting is responsible can be forgiven. Generally, it is probably less actions or attempted actions that are forgiven than persons who can act. If a morally bad deed does not reach its goal because it is prevented from doing so by unexpected external circumstances, then the actor has nevertheless failed morally. Again, forgiveness is possible, even if it then refers to the bad intention.

Now, in disputes between people, it is often the case that misguided actions are taken by both sides over the course of the dispute. For example, an unjustified attack may be followed by an excessive self-defensive action. This may lead to further wrong actions on the part of the attacker and further wrong actions on the part of the defender. It will probably be necessary for the original aggressor (if that can be clearly identified at all) to be the first to make a request for forgiveness, but it is often good and appropriate for the forgiving person to also ask for forgiveness for their mistakes in turn after a dispute. In this way, mutual forgiveness can lead to genuine reconciliation, which is a two-way process. Regarding the connection between anger and reconciliation, it can be stated: Anger is the result of disregard (or slight). Genuine forgiveness, however, tries to overcome this disregard and to bring equality between the two persons. Reconciliation, therefore, also represents the overcoming of anger. This seems to be a trivial observation.

VII.

When it comes to wars and other forms of “macro-violence” (political violence, e.g., war or terrorism), the question is how the parties to the conflict can come to peace with each other again. This means that here, too, it is a question of reconciliation. However, the concept of political reconciliation is even more difficult to grasp than reconciliation between individuals. Stipulations such as that reconciliation represents “an improvement in the relationship” between two parties who were previously “at odds” are philosophically unsatisfactory.⁴⁴ While one may appreciate the idea, that reconciliation is a process, not a state, in this provision, it remains helpless in the face of the vague expression of

⁴⁴ Cf. the definition of reconciliation in Linda Radzik and Colleen Murphy, “Reconciliation,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/reconciliation/>.

“improvement.” The answer to the question of whether a relationship improves or deteriorates depends on one’s understanding of what is good. Presumably, an affectionate and cooperative relationship will be understood as something good. In the case of political communities, merging into a single community would also be possible in principle. Would we still be talking about reconciliation here? Or would it be the pinnacle of reconciliation? This is not a purely theoretical thought. It arises, for example, with the European Union: Must the individual states remain separate states so that one can speak of a work of reconciliation? Or would reconciliation on the European continent only be complete in a single European state?

The expression “reconciliation,” if it is not to fall apart into two terms, should in essence retain something common in its use referring to individuals and referring to political groups. Since we have started from guilt and forgiveness among individuals, something like group guilt and collective forgiveness would then also have to be assumed. But this poses very serious problems, because in – especially large – groups, many people are often distanced from or even opposed to the actions that constituted the guilt. But perhaps one has to accept that even as an opponent of such actions one is dragged into the (collective) guilt. Collective forgiveness, however, is even more difficult. Often, the victims of the aggressor’s political violence are no longer alive. Can then the perpetrators be forgiven vicariously at all? The question has often been answered with “no.”⁴⁵ Moreover, even in the surviving collective of victims, not all will be ready to forgive. Anger at the injustice, even if it is justified, can raise a big hurdle here. So when can one speak of “(political) forgiveness” here at all? The question hardly seems to be answerable in abstract form,⁴⁶ but rather to obtain some approximate clarity in specific concrete cases.

Therefore, it seems obvious to keep the context of guilt and forgiveness out of the concept of political reconciliation altogether.⁴⁷ Then, the price is (as mentioned) that the concept of reconciliation breaks down into two terms – especially if one is not willing to adapt the concept of individual reconciliation in such a way that the problem of guilt and forgiveness is eliminated there as well. Perhaps, however,

⁴⁵ Cf. the very influential criticism by Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le Pardon* (Paris: Flammarion, 2019).

⁴⁶ For that reason, Svenja Flaßpöhler, for example, uses an autobiographical narrative for her philosophical book and conducts specific interviews. Svenja Flaßpöhler, *Verzeihen. Vom Umgang mit Schuld* (München: DVA, 2016).

⁴⁷ Cf., e. g., Cécile Fabre, *Cosmopolitan Peace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 246-280.

both concepts of reconciliation can be held together via the moral emotions and attitudes involved.

VIII.

In her somewhat neo-Stoic book “Anger and Forgiveness,” Martha Nussbaum argued that anger has a destructive effect on human relationships because of its retrospective character. Nussbaum sees a retributive thought at work at the core of anger: The angry person wants the harm that has happened to him/her (or possibly to another person) to be “atoned for” by the wrongdoer also experiencing some harm. An adequate order is then restored in a kind of cosmological harmony theory. Nussbaum herself places the view into the future in the foreground, since there is no cosmic compensation for injustice, but rather man himself must take the fate of his social coexistence into his own hands. She pleads for a ‘reformed’ anger; the affect of anger should only concentrate on a single moment: “The *entire* content of one’s emotion is, ‘How outrageous! Something must be done about this.’ Let us call this emotion *Transition-Anger*, since it is anger, or quasi-anger.”⁴⁸ Transition-anger is directed towards the future and motivates changes that will help prevent types of injustices of the past from happening in the future. Nussbaum has her personal heroes in the history of the 20th century – Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela – in whom she sees her concern realised in a political sense. Now, we can always disagree about historical examples, and in the end, it is the science of history and not philosophy that must judge the work and heritage of these people, but certainly the use of the concept of anger in relation to collective and political processes makes sense to us. We thus concede that there is also a collective “emotionality,” and good politicians – as Nussbaum wants to show with her historical heroes – shape precisely this collective emotionality.

Nussbaum thus speaks out against anger in the tradition of the Stoics and is basically opposed to forgiveness. Forgiveness, as she observes attentively and rightly, quickly becomes a means of moral self-exaltation – especially when forgiveness is conditional, forcing the guilty party into certain rituals of absolution. Even the alternative of unconditional forgiveness is unsatisfactory for Nussbaum because the asymmetry between the forgiving person and the one who is forgiven remains. The ‘perfect’ reaction to injustice suffered is unconditional

⁴⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 35 (Italics in the original).

love, which demands nothing and does not exalt itself. But Nussbaum seems to demand this unconditional love primarily for inter-individual relationships. Love is also important for justice in political life, but this love is nurtured, practiced and has grown.⁴⁹

IX.

To love so unconditionally that even as a victim of an act of injustice one no longer forgives the perpetrator of this act, but feels and shows unconditional love towards him, is undoubtedly a human ‘peak performance.’ But it is not even certain whether such unconditional love towards basically every other human being – despite some interpretations of the Christian ethos – would be entirely appropriate. For in being angry with a person, one also dignifies that person, because his or her wrongdoing is acknowledged and thus the person himself or herself is also recognised as one capable of responsibility and goodness. As is well known, Platonic moral anthropology offers two parts of the soul that lie outside reason – but are related to it: *ἔρως* and *θυμός*.⁵⁰ *Eros* is the striving dynamic that aims at union with the external (in sexuality, but also in the appropriation of goods or immaterial objects) and in doing so also dissolves, as it were, the subject from which it emanates. *Thymos*, on the other hand, attempts precisely to establish the initial subject against access and downfall, thus relying on self-status. Nussbaum calls – to exaggerate – for the demise of *thymos* in favour of *eros*. This often seems reasonable, because we have the impression that more mischief arises from *thymos* than from *eros*: nationalism, racism, sexism, and violence resulting from such attitudes can be based on excessive self-interest. Nevertheless, it is probably not reasonable to want to declare everything thymotic to be void without further ado and to allow only the erotic, e.g., the striving for equal distribution, to be valid. For these two aspects of our moral psychology cannot be strictly separated in practice anyway. If someone violates our claims to justice, he not only denies us a good to which we are entitled (violation of our *eros*, *ἐπιθυμητικόν*), but he also hits us as someone who can make claims (violation of the *thymos*).

It seems doubtful, then, whether Nussbaum’s idea that a victim of a wrongful act meets the wrongdoer in unconditional love is a practi-

⁴⁹ Cf. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Political Emotions: How Love Matters for Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2013), 378-397. Nussbaum’s point is that even in a liberal political order, personal and therein particularistic emotional attachments are possible and even desirable.

⁵⁰ Pol. IV. Cf. Hendrik Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2009/entries/ancient-soul/>.

cal option in the long run, or whether this victim does not expect some reciprocation of love sooner or later. Even as a victim who meets the perpetrator in love, one remains the subject of love and not simply a substance-free medium of love. But then one also wants to experience recognition in one's subjectivity (and probably even of one's love). This recognition is probably better served by the traditional model of anger and forgiveness. Reconciliation can grow out of forgiveness, which is especially facilitated when both sides are willing to recognise that they need forgiveness in a certain way after a conflict. It is possible and even probable that this 'need for forgiveness' is not equally distributed because the wrong on one side is clearly greater than on the other, but forgiveness is not a barter trade in which value is placed on the equivalence of the objects of exchange. This would – misleadingly – get us back to the erotic-economic field. Mutual forgiveness has to do with recognition of the other, i.e., the thymotic field.

X.

As already emphasised, these connections are easier to explain in the relationship between individuals than in the relationship between political communities. But we also transfer them to collectives. This is part of our moral talk about political relations. In the political world, what is one's own and what is foreign, as well as what is external and what is internal, are even more strongly mediated than they may be in the case of individuals. Where do the borders of a state begin? This is not only a territorial question. When has a state reconciled with another state? That is not only a question of state leaders. On the other hand, there will also be different views in each state about which borders are really worth defending – or how much reconciliation should be allowed towards former adversaries. Majorities matter, but they are probably not the only decisive factor. Wise and prudent assessments must always be made here by leading statesmen and women. It is certainly necessary, however, to keep an eye on a kind of 'collective thymos' as well. The Western world often focuses too much on the desire to have more goods and possessions. Immanuel Kant thought – and was probably wrong – that the world could be unified through economic interdependence, because everywhere people strive for goods that are easier to obtain through interdependence and exchange.⁵¹ Where there is a lack of existential goods – i.e.,

⁵¹ "The commercial spirit cannot co-exist with war, and sooner or later it takes possession of every nation. For, of all the forces which lie at the command of a state, the power of money is probably the most reliable. Hence states find themselves compelled—not, it is true, exactly from motives of morality – to further the noble end of peace and to avert war, by means of mediation, wherever it threatens to break out, just as if they had made a permanent league

goods that are necessary for survival – this assumption may have some truth to it. But when the existential goods are no longer directly at stake, people also accept fewer goods in order to avoid humiliation or (supposedly) being treated disparagingly (which leads to anger). Even money given away with a watering can does not ensure peace, because even the giving of gifts can humiliate. It seems to me that the mistakes Western states – especially Germany – have been making in terms of both domestic and foreign policy have a lot to do with the misguided assumption that it is enough to merely help others materially, but that it is precisely in this broadly distributed aid that others feel basically humiliated. The unambitious migration policy in some Western European countries, often misleadingly labelled as particularly ‘humanitarian,’ could also be an example of this. To impose something on people or groups does not necessarily mean to humiliate them, but in a realistic imposition, imposition also means trust. Western policy towards Eastern Europe has often been concerned only with the amount of economic exchange (and aid), but little thought has been given to how to treat the people and communities there with due respect. Certainly, sometimes there is also excessive self-respect and excessive need for respect among people and groups. One should not give in to excessive thymotic forces out of respect for people and groups. But the feeling of being the winners of the “Cold War” for instance has nevertheless led to treating others in (supposed) aid even more disparagingly. This alone probably cannot explain the enormous political and above all human disaster of the current war in Ukraine. Yes, perhaps this resulting anger is only a small aspect of an explanation that should be much more comprehensive, but this aspect must be considered, because self-insight improves the chances of forgiveness, and forgiveness is the prerequisite for reconciliation here.

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for this purpose. For great alliances with a view to war can, from the nature of things, only very rarely occur, and still more seldom succeed. In this way nature guarantees the coming of perpetual peace, through the natural course of human propensities: not indeed with sufficient certainty to enable us to prophesy the future of this ideal theoretically, but yet clearly enough for practical purposes. And thus this guarantee of nature makes it a duty that we should labour for this end, an end which is no mere chimera.” Immanuel Kant, *On Perpetual Peace*, trans. M. Campbell Smith (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1903), 8:360-368.

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