

HYE YOUNG KIM

An Existentialist Analysis of Forgiveness and Gratitude

Gratitude and forgiveness are not the most frequently summoned topics in the context of existentialist emotions. One can find some literature on forgiveness and gratitude mostly in ethics, theological philosophy, or psychology, but not much from the existentialist perspective. Why? There are a couple of problems when dealing with these in the context of existential understanding. First, there is a question that relates to the definition and the categories of emotions, in other words, whether we can deal with gratitude and forgiveness under the auspices of emotions at all. Another question is whether the fundamental understanding of existence can be discussed in interpersonal dimensions.

To investigate these problems in detail, we should first clarify what we understand by existentialist philosophy. Briefly, it is a philosophy that tries to understand human existence. Therefore, the fact that there has not been much literature on forgiveness and gratitude in the existentialist context means that not much has been said about forgiveness and gratitude in the context of understanding our existence. Why is that?

We can infer one of the reasons from the reason why other emotions such as angst, anxiety, guilt, or fear (regardless of the question of whether they are emotions or not) frequently appear in the existentialist discourse. The core of human existence lies in the inevitable fate of human beings – death. It is not only a conventional truth, but it is also *the* existential truth: we all die at one point. One of the ways that we cope with this fate is to try to understand it. Reflecting on the end of existence is accompanied with different emotions from that of reflecting on logical consequences of complicated equations. For the most part, and for most of us, reflecting on death does not usually come with warm feelings such as comfort or joy. Thinking about death, either mine or that of others, usually arouses uncanny, un-homey, anxious, scary, uneasy, or sad feelings. In fact, extremely complicated equations might also cause you anxiety, fear, sadness, or all of these at the same time, in that you fear that you might not be able to solve them, or unsolvable equations might even make you feel like you are going to die, but the difference is that you can give up on the complicated equations or

solve them eventually and set yourself free, but you cannot give up nor solve your death. There is nothing you can do about it. This feeling of helplessness builds the roots of anxiety. In this context, the relation between existential understanding and the uncanny emotions is inevitable.

Another reason that forgiveness and gratitude do not appear in the context of existentialist emotions is because forgiveness and gratitude are interpersonal, while those uncanny emotions, along with the feeling of nothingness are rather grounded in a self-centric, isolated state of being. Emotions such as anxiety, fear, and guilt are felt by a solitary being in the face of their own nothingness. In this context, these emotions were dealt with as non-object-oriented feelings. Therefore, they were differentiated and renamed, for instance, as mood, because they are not involved with other people or things. Death is always only a possibility of my own not-being. The object of these feelings is, therefore, not-being, in other words, it *is* not there. The object is not there, and what is present is only the feelings themselves and my understanding.

But are they emotions? Or feelings? In this text, I have already referred to them as feelings or emotions. I did so because we become conscious of them in the way that they are felt. However, the question of whether they are emotions, or feelings, or both is not only not simple but also controversial. Scholars in the study of emotions do not agree on a unitary definition and categories of emotions and feelings due to their different methods and approaches. However, I am going to use these terms more freely in this essay, despite the fact that they are often strictly distinguished and applied to different situations. This doesn't mean, though, that I regard forgiveness and gratitude as merely feelings or emotions. They are more than emotions or feelings, which I will discuss further, but they are *felt*, or in other words, we feel them when we have them. They affect us *emotionally* and cause us to *feel* something or to situate ourselves in a certain *mood*.

I mentioned that the common character of forgiveness and gratitude is that they happen in an interpersonal context. Namely, it occurs between more than one person. In the ordinary sense, they are object-oriented-emotions. In that sense, gratitude and forgiveness could be considered as secondary emotions in terms of existentialist emotions compared to angst, anxiety, guilt, etc. which I would like to refer to as solitary existentialist emotions. The reason forgiveness and gratitude seem secondary in existential understanding is that the presence of the other is the necessary condition in the case of gratitude and forgiveness. For example, the way Sartre deals with gratitude in the context of "Concrete Relations with Others" in *Being and Nothingness* (1984) is a fragmentary mentioning with other feelings in his analysis of love and hate. I question, though, whether the solitary existentialist emotions are more primary than the interpersonal emotions in existential understanding. There are many different types of interpersonal emotions. Then why forgiveness and

gratitude? In other words, what makes them more significant than other interpersonal emotions in the context of existential understanding? Let's start with forgiveness.

I. FORGIVENESS

What does it mean to forgive? Or to be forgiven? First of all, grammatically it is a verb. It is an action. And it is a transitive verb which means that it takes an object. One forgives someone; this someone is an object of the action of forgiving. Forgiveness itself is not a feeling, but it causes the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven to *feel* to forgive or to be forgiven, i.e. to be in the state of mind to be able to forgive or to be forgiven. And this feeling is crucial for this action.

We all know what it means to forgive, but in fact we do not really understand what it means. In general, to forgive is understood as a synonym of pardon. It is defined as "to cease to feel resentment against an offender" as in "forgive the enemies," "to give up resentment" as in "forgive an insult," or "to grant relief from a debt."¹ To forgive does not mean to forget, even though we confuse them often in daily life. To forgive means to give up resentment and make room to free the offender and eventually myself, in other words, it is to treat the offender as not guilty. Here lies the core character of forgiveness as an existentialist emotion: making room.

Existentialist philosophy is an attempt to understand human existence. The emphasis is on 'to understand.' In effect, Heidegger's analysis of 'understanding' as human existence (see Heidegger 2006) reveals the quintessence of existentialist philosophy. This understanding as existential understanding (*existenziales Verstehen*) is, however, differentiated from an intellectual understanding, it is rather human existence itself, which means that we exist in the way we question and somehow understand our own being. Therefore, simply being there without existential understanding is not yet existence.

The task is clear: to understand existence. What do we understand by existence? If existence is a *Geschehen* (occurrence), which *geschieht* (occurs) between the beginning and the end (see Kim 2015), the end necessarily holds a special status in the structure of understanding, because a *Geschehen* as a whole can be understood only after it is ended, hence the end is the key to understand this *Geschehen*. In the case of human existence, however, the end is never there yet, because the subject of understanding has to be there to understand. This is a paradox of self-representation. The paradox arises from the situation in which the object of understanding is the existence of the subject of understanding.

¹ Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/forgive>

One of the ways to solve this paradox is to grasp this end before the actual end, which is possible through fore-grasping.

The *Vorlaufen* (fore-running) to a possible end is indeed a brilliant installation for resolving this paradox to gain the possibility of understanding (see Heidegger 2006). It is not a coincidence that the structure of *Vorlaufen* as *Sein-zum-Tode* (being to death) is situated (*sich befindet*) in angst, because the possible end is the possible end of my being. Envisioning my forthcoming death, the realization of which is induced from the death of others, does not exactly come with soothing feelings of comfort. In effect, that is why we usually don't – and probably shouldn't – think about the possibility of our own death ceaselessly day and night. Usually we live a life “normally” in the midst of the others, or as in the style of fundamental ontology, “*uneigentlich*” (inauthentically) (see Heidegger 2006). Either way, we live in the world thinking not only about our own existence. This is the point where existential guilt enters to achieve an *eigentliches Verstehen* (authentic understanding). Being guilty is the way of awakening the self to face existence as understanding of existence by fore-grasping the end. Now, the story can be understood with its end fore-grasped (see Kim 2015). However, where does this story begin?

The beginning of existence – there are actually two beginnings. One is ontical (*ontisch*) and the other is existential, and there is a temporal-existential difference between the ontical and the existential beginnings. The ontical beginning is the moment of birth, and the existential beginning is each moment, i.e. the present. Strictly speaking, if existence is existential understanding, the beginning of existence is now, the present where the understanding begins. However, the existential beginning is necessarily based on the ontical beginning, in the sense that the ontical beginning is the necessary condition for existence. Simply, at one point, we all have to be born to start existing. The existential is present, yet the ontical beginning has to be restored. The ontical beginning is the past that has to be re-grasped.

When and how did Sisyphus start to roll up the stone? Who or what placed him there? It is clear that one does not even have to wait for the end of this anxiously. This is the point where suicide becomes a serious philosophical question, possibly the only one (Camus 1984). Fore-grasping is not the only option. One can actually grasp the end of existence and end the cycle of absurdity. Ending the existential understanding by grasping the end – not only fore-grasping it – is an equally available option as fore-grasping it. However, the beginning is different. It cannot be grasped. It can only be re-grasped. It cannot be given up, because it has already happened – I am here.

Either accepting it by understanding it, or avoiding it by ending it, we somewhat know how to deal with helplessness in the face of death. But what about the beginning? This is where the ultimate helplessness stems from. I was delivered to the world regardless of my will, desire, awareness, or understanding. I

had no choice. This is another inevitable condition of being. I can either choose to be guilty to face the question of my being, in other words, to be *verantwortlich* for my being (see Heidegger 2006), or not. But, how can I deal with the beginning?

If it cannot be given up, it can either be forgotten or understood. Forgetting is an option, as it is for the end – we can, and actually do, live in the world as “jeder ist der Andere und Keiner ist er selbst” (Heidegger 2006, 128). There should be more though. Not only *either* oblivion *or* anxiety. What do we have for this another *or*?

This vulnerability and ignorance over the beginning is the ceaseless source of fragility of being. However, this beginning is not a one-time event. It lasts. To be thrown in the world is not a simple instant that one passes by once. We are not thrown in the world as a ball is thrown, as the ball that I throw in the air that leaves my hands immediately. We all are attached to and completely dependent on the others, the world, inevitably, *at least* for years. The completely vulnerable state of which I am not even fully aware is the beginning of my existence, which composes a large portion of my life. The reason this complete dependency on the world becomes problematic is because the world, that I cannot help but depend on completely, is so fragile itself, because it consists of each one of us: anxious, finite beings. Therefore, life is often unbearably hard, and at one point you realize that you are thrown here without having had any choice. Why am I here? “Why is there something rather than nothing, including myself?” – is the question.

In fact, we don’t even have to run towards to the possibility of death in order to face the ungraspable nothingness that only *self-nothing-izes* (*sich nichtigt*) and everything slips out of (see Heidegger 2007) to choose to dwell in the fundamental homeless state in angst. We are already placed in the endless void of vulnerability. After all, helplessness is how we all started. Now the question is: what can be done in the midst of this void? From this beginning, we need to leap to the existential beginning. The first thing to do to make this leap is probably not to run towards the end. What needs to be done is to have my place somehow in this void – to have *my now*. We need to create space. The space in which I can start understanding myself to realize that I am there. It is to *give room* to myself to dwell in and *see* my place. This is what I understand by “to forgive my own being.” Forgiving oneself means creating space of understanding by giving oneself room. It is a process of detaching from the world, and at the same time, finding my place in the world.

When I forgive myself for being there-here, I can treat myself as not guilty. This is to give room to land my feet on while standing out (ἔκ-στασις) in the middle of nothingness. The act of self-forgiving is still interpersonal in the sense that I treat myself as another person who is forgiven and separate: I as the for-giver. Self-observation is the beginning of awareness. This is a room-making

process. And self-forgiving is a process of giving this room for self-observation. This is, in fact, not the beginning of existential understanding, but rather is it the end for which the existential understanding aims. If angst is the state of being, forgiveness is *staring at* the being. The look at my othered self can give myself room to start existing. The way one can be responsible (*verantwortlich*) for one's own being is to be guilty by understanding my finiteness (death) and forgiving myself by understanding my vulnerability (birth).

There are, however, two paradoxes of forgiveness. First, forgiving myself is in fact forgiving the unforgivable. Second, forgiving myself for being there is also forgiving others. Let's have a look at the first paradox. Derrida discusses forgiveness in the socio-political context (see Derrida 2001) rather than in existential sense, but his statement on forgiveness, forgiving the unforgivable, penetrates the essence of forgiveness as a crucial moment of existential understanding. Forgiving my existence is forgiving the unforgivable, because it is, in fact, impossible to forgive my existence. It is impossible not because it is an unforgivably immoral sin or the worst crime. When it is said that the necessary condition of existential understanding is to be guilty of my own being, it is not like being guilty of trespassing. It is to forgive the impossible, because *it* is not an object, and neither a person, a thing, nor an action that can be forgiven. There is only an action of forgiveness – forgiving the forgiver itself. This is the first aporia of existential forgiveness.

The second paradox is that existential forgiveness is self-forgiveness, yet interpersonal. It is interpersonal not only between self and othered self but between self and others, because the vulnerability of the ontical beginning is based on my complete dependency on the others. Forgiving myself for being there means forgiving myself for being in the world, where I am with the others. Forgiving myself requires forgiving the others who share the responsibility for my being as well as for theirs. The anxiety of existing is chained with the anxieties of the others. Being with the other in the world makes me not only to be fallen, lost in the they, and forget about my own being, but often they are the ones who make me be aware of my being. If the others are a phenomenon, as Sartre states (see Sartre 1984), this phenomenon is profoundly related to my existence and reflects my existential understanding. Their eye is already – at least somewhat – implanted in my self-observation. Their influence is so overwhelmingly enormous that it takes much effort to separate and understand myself as my own. Forgiving is giving myself room between me and my othered self, and the others, and realize this space of mine. If being guilty existentially means calling myself to awaken my consciousness to observe my own being, forgiving is yielding room for this awareness.

II. GRATITUDE

So, forgiving is about forgiving myself, giving myself room to seize (or, to understand) my beginning. What's next? You give, then, you receive. That is gratitude.

Normally, being grateful means to appreciate what is given. We think of tears usually as physiological reaction to sadness or frustration. But we observe that people shed tears when they experience unconditional, or sometimes unexpected, generosity or benevolence from others, and feel deeply thankful. Strawson's (1974) account to regard gratitude as a reactive attitude with an essential connection to the practice of holding others to normative expectations (see Manela 2015) points out one crucial aspect of gratitude. The tears shed are a representation of the reaction to the others for their acts, physically realized. The other's presence and the interaction with them lies in the core of the ordinary understanding of gratitude. However, usually these tears come out before my ethical evaluation, moral judgement, or determination to express my feelings of thankfulness. This reactive attitude is rather a reflex response. Gratitude is not always what comes after my evaluation of the situation in accordance with my expectations from the others and my comprehension of the benefits.

In philosophy, gratitude is conceptualized also as emotion, virtue, relationship enhancement, or obligation (see Manela 2015). For example, gratitude has appeared in political philosophy as in the theory of political obligation, such as when Socrates claims his obligation to obey the laws of Athens is an obligation of gratitude for benefits received. In the philosophy of religion, gratitude is related to the moral argument for the existence of God. And there have been debates as to whether gratitude is compatible with a belief in determinism (Walker 1980). In general, gratitude features in a social, interpersonal context that functions to establish and strengthen the mutual bonds between individuals and the community (see Walker 1980). In this respect, however, it is still hard to spot a special place for gratitude in existential understanding.

Existential understanding is inevitably solitary in an idealistic way, for the others are the other subjects outside of my self-understanding. However, the fundamental vulnerability of my existence is essentially related to others, whether I am conscious of them fully as other subjects or as phenomena, as objects of my subject. Somehow, we have to accept this, that they are there as I am there, before running towards the future and fore-grasping my possibility of being. The separation process of myself from the world can, or should, come after my solid understanding of my now in the midst of the world with the others. I say 'after' and 'before,' but they do not indicate their temporal order; they happen simultaneously.

To be guilty is to understand where my now is headed, and to forgive is to understand where my now comes from. And to understand where my now is

between where it came from and where it goes toward, we need to understand how my now is there in the world. My now in the world is there always with the now's of the others.

Gratitude means being aware of this present state, i.e. being aware of being given. I gave myself room to observe my beginning so that I can pre-grasp my end. The moment of here now is given. If forgiveness was to create room, gratitude is to create meaning in the meaningless being-thrown. Gratitude is to gain *Sinn von meinem Sein* out of *Sinn von Sein* – grasping my present, not floating in the angst of nothingness. In this sense, gratitude is more than feeling grateful. It's my relation to the world as a being-in-the-world.

Gratitude, as *gratia* means grace, favor, goodwill, kindness, friendship and *gratus*: dear, beloved, pleasing, acceptable, agreeable. In this regard, gratitude relates to the state of being approved or held in regard. It is a recognition and agreement of the act that was done. To be grateful is to accept and agree with what is given. But it is not a passive moment: it is to approve my present.

Gratitude is interpersonal, yet the core of gratitude lies in self-acceptance. Here gratitude does not mean to be grateful for a specific thing or a person. It is to appreciate my being itself – now. Now is always there but never there. It was the past and will be the future. It is only an *Augenblick*, a constant flip between the past and the future, between constantly flipping moments. It is not really a stable moment. It is not there. But it is there as now when it is within in the network of now's of the others and things, all that there are in the world. It is spatial. Now has no temporal duration, but it has a spatial duration between my now and the now of the others. Gratitude is to become conscious of this now in the world – the awakening. There are multiple complex ways to relate to the others in the world. But gratitude, in this sense, is the primary way of connecting myself to the world and to see and be aware of this connection.

Forgiving and being grateful for my being means accepting existence. Not only understanding it but accepting it. It's not the victory over death, nor the denial of the vulnerability of being, but acceptance of existence as it is. It is a gaze at existence standing here and now, instead of running forwards and backwards trying to understand.

REFERENCES

- Camus, Albert 1984. *The Mythos of Sisyphus*. New York, Penguin Books.
- Derrida, Jacques 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. New York, Routledge.
- Heidegger, Martin 2006. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Heidegger, Martin 2007. *Was ist Metaphysik*. Frankfurt/M, Verlag Vittorio Klostermann.
- Kim, Hye Young 2015. *Sorge und Geschichte: Phänomenologische Untersuchung im Anschluss an Heidegger*. Berlin, Duncker und Humblot.
- Manela, Tony 2015. Gratitude. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<URL: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gratitude/#GraEmo>, last access 02.07.2020. >
Last access 31th March, 2020. >
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 1984. *Being and Nothingness*. New York, Washington Square Press.
- Strawson, Peter Frederick 1974. Freedom and Resentment. *Freedom and Resentment, and Other Essays*. London, Buttler and Tanner. 1–25.
- Walker, A. David M. 1980–1981. Gratefulness and Gratitude. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society. New Series*. Vol 81. 39–55.