

Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness.*

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A HUMAN BEING Died That Night recounts a series of meetings between the author, a clinical psychologist; and Eugene de Kock (a.k.a. “Prime Evil”), the former head of “covert operations” in Apartheid South Africa, and a man responsible for numerous brutal murders, tortures, and “disappearances.” The account of these meetings open on to a series of reflections concerning the possibilities of, the conditions for, and the limits to forgiveness: “[L]essons from the TRC proceedings . . . can help us chart a path along which forgiveness may occur, as well as the conditions that make it difficult, or even morally inappropriate, to forgive” (125). They also raise the abyssal question of human evil, of whether there is an evil beyond forgiveness.

Early on in this book, Gobodo-Madikizela begins by reflecting on the “frightening fact” that “good and evil exist in our lives, and that evil, like good, is always a possibility” (34). This co-existence is not only external, but internal, as a permanent possibility: good *and* evil are always possibilities of every human being, including oneself:

Connecting on a human level with a monster therefore comes to be a profoundly frightening prospect, for ultimately, it forces us to confront the potential for evil within ourselves. Compassion towards and hence forgiveness of people who have left a

gruesome trail in their wake in effect brings “innocent” victims and wicked men together to share at a single common table of humanity, and that prospect is unpalatable. (123)¹

This uncomfortable moral proximity is made tangible and actual at one moment during an interview when Gobodo-Madikizela spontaneously reaches out her hand and touches the hand of de Kock. His pain in recounting his crimes is palpable to her, and she reaches instinctively. Later, he tells her that she touched his “trigger hand” – the hand that committed so many murders. In this book, forgiveness and the encounter with extreme evil are treated not only in the abstract; the extreme visceral response to touching this “trigger hand” is vital to the author’s reflection on these themes (she not only recoils, but the next day awakens with a temporarily paralyzed hand).

The specific encounter with de Kock, which makes the plethora of issues surrounding forgiveness palpably present, serves as an entryway for Gobodo-Madikizela’s broader reflections on forgiveness – reflections which, though philosophical at times, never lose their connection with their original source: “Philosophical questions can and should give way and be subsumed to *human* questions, for in the end we are a society of people and not ideas, a fragile web of interdependent humans, not stances” (125). Gobodo-Madikizela presents these reflections in her last chapter, as a kind of “apology” for forgiveness, a defense case against possible objections to the TRC project, or similar reconciliation projects. Straightaway she declares:

Although forgiveness is often regarded as an expression of weakness, the decision to forgive can paradoxically elevate a victim to a position of strength . . . In this sense, then, forgiveness is a kind of revenge, but revenge enacted at a rarified level. . . . [F]orgiveness does not overlook the deed: it rises above it. “This is what it means to be human,” it says. “I cannot and will not return the evil you inflicted upon me.” And that is the victim’s triumph. (117)

Gobodo-Madikizela argues (or demonstrates) that the full process of forgiveness is a multi-layered process of “rehumanization.” The victim has been dehumanized in the acts perpetrated against her, both objectively, and also in the mind of the perpetrator (so that he can

¹ There is here contained the meaning behind the saying, “There but for the grace of God, go I” what some Hegelian commentators call “logical forgiveness,” which extends forgiveness beyond the personal face-to-face into the communal. Cf. H. S. Harris, *Hegel’s Ladder* (2 vols.), Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997: “[W]e are dealing with a *logical* forgiveness, exchanged between the agent and the observer, for the inevitable one-sidedness of being agent and observer. . . . [I]t becomes more accurate to say . . . that one becomes ‘very indulgent,’ than that one ‘pardons.’ For one knows one is not in a position to pardon. ‘There but for the grace of God, go I’ is what one says at best; and often only, ‘I am glad it was not me who had to act.’” (Vol. 2: 503)

effectively carry out his acts). If the perpetrator confesses, apologizes, and demonstrates significant and genuine remorse and regret, he in a sense turns back time. This does *not* mean that he undoes the deed. It means that, retroactively, he acknowledges that his victim *was* a human being (and, if the victim is still alive, that the victim facing him *is* a human being). This is the first level of rehumanization. But the victim (or the victim's family) is also now faced with the pain of the apologizing perpetrator, the pain of his *remorse*. This, too, is humanizing: the perpetrator can no longer be held at the somehow comforting distance of "the monster." And, if the victims choose to forgive – empathizing (even against their will) with the pain of the perpetrators remorse² – this completes a second and quite profound level of rehumanization: the acknowledgement that *together*, we – victims and perpetrators, confessors and forgivers – are mutually and reciprocally human, finite, broken, and pained; yet potentially healed in this very recognition.³

It is important to emphasize that forgiveness *potentially* offers this healing, or contributes to it. Gobodo-Madikizela stresses that "even forgiveness does not necessarily bring finality because it does not erase the past. Closure is not always possible, . . . [b]ut through forgiveness a provisional vocabulary of reconciliation, if not friendship, is created" (132). Some, in spite of participating in this robust forgiveness, may never find closure; even for those who do, this act of forgiveness may serve as a *beginning* in a process of mourning which must nevertheless play itself out (the apology, coupled with forgiveness, can "restore" this potential to mourn what was previously un-mournable). Thus there is reason for a cautious but firm optimism with regard to the collective reconciliation process, as Gobodo-Madikizela affirms: "Societal groups *can* transcend cycles of violence and forgive, if not necessarily fully reconcile with, other groups. . . .

² "We cannot help it. We are induced to empathy because there is something in the other that is felt to be part of the self, and something in the self that is felt to be part of the other. Empathy feels *with* the other in a reciprocal emotional process in which one asks for it, or his very situation seems to ask for it, and the other responds by offering it. Empathy reaches out to the other and says: I can feel the pain you feel for having caused me pain" (127). (Compare with Hegel in the footnote below.)

³ Hegel has a very similar vision of forgiveness, which for him implies co-forgiveness – "a reciprocal recognition which is *absolute* Spirit." Hegel goes even further and speaks of this level of mutual forgiveness as, in a sense, reconciling the human and God: "The reconciling *Yea*, in which the two 'I's let go their antithetical *existence*, is the *existence* of an 'I' which has expanded itself into a duality, and therein remains identical with itself, and, in its complete externalization and opposite, possesses the certainty of itself: it is God manifested in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowledge" (G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977: 408, 409, paras. 670, 671).

The result may not be reconciliation in a full sense. But through the vicarious experience of stories of forgiveness, a society can begin to heal itself . . .” (133).

This cautious but firm affirmation of the reconciliation process should not obscure the fact that, for Gobodo-Madikizela (as opposed to many of the proponents of collective reconciliation), forgiveness has conditions for its possibility, as well as limits of evil beyond which it cannot go. To elucidate this, it is instructive to recall, as a point of contrast, the words of Desmond Tutu, the central character propounding what might be called the South African “doctrine” of forgiveness and reconciliation (which Tutu names “another kind of justice, restorative justice.”⁴) For Tutu, forgiveness is, beyond any politics, a religious command and even a “cosmic destiny,” a “part of the cosmic movement toward unity, toward reconciliation, that has existed from the beginning of time,” a destiny that includes the reconciliation of *all* evil and historical rupture under its encompass:

What each of us does can retard or promote, can hinder or advance, the process at the heart of the universe. Christians would say the outcome is not in question. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ puts the issue beyond doubt: ultimately goodness and laughter and peace and compassion and gentleness and forgiveness and reconciliation will have the last word and prevail over their ghastly counterparts. The victory over apartheid was proof positive of the truth of this seemingly utopian dream.⁵

⁴ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness*, New York: Doubleday, 1999: 54.

⁵ Tutu, *ibid.*, 267. This belief is taken to the extreme limit in an encounter between Tutu and the president of post-genocide Rwanda. The president responds to Tutu’s sermon that “even Jesus declared that the devil could not be forgiven.” Tutu replies, “I do not know where he found the basis for what he said, but he was expressing a view that found some resonance, that there were atrocities that were unforgivable. My own view was different . . .” (Tutu, *ibid.*, 260.)

We can note here, in passing, enormous parallels between Tutu’s deeply Christian vision, and the philosophical vision of Hegel, who held that in Christianity, as the final religion emerging out of the dialectic of history (subsuming all prior forms), everything is in principle reconciled in advance in the death of Christ; and that therefore all human evil is *known* in advance to be healable (as he declares in the section on “Evil and Forgiveness” in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, “The wounds of Spirit heal, and leave no scar behind” – p. 407, para. 669). Hegel most clearly articulated this in his 1827 *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, which I quote because of the deep resonance with Tutu’s vision:

[I]t is not a question of overcoming evil because evil has been overcome in and for itself. The child, inasmuch as it is born into the church, has been born in freedom and to freedom. For one who has been so born, there is no longer an absolute otherness; this otherness is posited as something overcome, as already conquered. The sole concern of such cultivation is to prevent evil from emerging, and the possibility of this does in general reside in humanity. But insofar as evil does emerge among human beings when they do evil, at the same time it is present as something implicitly null, over which spirit has

While Tutu is a religious minister – an Anglican archbishop – as well as a political and social figure, who draws his distinctive vision out of sources both Christian as well as those central to “the African *Weltsanschauung*”⁶; Gobodo-Madikizela is a psychologist, interested in the *psychological* requirements for forgiveness between human beings. While she concedes, at one point, a kind of “holiness” to extreme acts of forgiveness⁷, she never goes so far as to claim a cosmic destiny for a reconciliation, pre-accomplished in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ; instead her analysis and vision are on the whole secular ones. And, though she is willing to go very far down the path of extreme evil that can be forgiven, she nevertheless discovers distinctive preconditions for this forgiveness to take place, and hence limits beyond which forgiveness is neither applicable nor possible.

Gobodo-Madikizela identifies three essential and linked preconditions for the *possibility* of forgiveness (the satisfaction of these conditions does not *entail* that the victim forgive, but opens up a space where the victim is free to forgive if she chooses): the perpetrator’s apology, regret, and remorse. It is through the performative act of “apology that is sincere, unencumbered by explanation or justification,” addressed to the victims, that the genuine regret or remorse of the perpetrator can appear (the apology must be not only genuine, but without “disclaimers” or excuses) (98):

power: spirit has the power to undo evil. [G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (3 vols.), ed. Peter C. Hodgson, Berkeley: California UP, 1985: Vol. 3 (*The Consummate Religion*), 336]

As with Hegel, for Tutu there can be, and there is, in the history of human kind evil of a horrendous sort (Hegel speaks of the “slaughter bench of history”); but there is nothing within the scope of any historical human evil that *remains* irreconcilable: Christ dying on the cross signifies this implicit reconciliation of evil. There is no ultimate limit to forgiveness for Tutu, nor for Hegel, because at its limit forgiveness is an *infinite* power – the power of God, which nevertheless arises in the world in the fact that Christ is *also* a man, who *dies* but is *resurrected* as well, in what Hegel calls the “putting to death of death” (very close to Freud’s definition of the “work of mourning” as “killing death”) – reconciling all that is finite and human.

⁶ “*Ubuntu* is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. . . . It is to say, ‘My humanity is caught up, inextricably bound up, with yours.’ . . . ‘A person is a person through other persons.’ . . . ‘I am human because I belong. I participate, I share.’ . . . A person with *ubuntu* is open and available to others . . . he or she belongs to the greater whole . . . To forgive is not just to be altruistic. It is the best form of self-interest” (Tutu, *ibid.*, 31).

⁷ “It is hard to resist the conclusion that there must be something divine about forgiveness expressed in the context of tragedy. How else can we understand how such words can flow from the lips of one wronged so irreparably? Archbishop Tutu, whenever we were witnesses to such inexplicable human responses at a public hearing of the TRC, would be driven to call for silence ‘because we are on holy ground.’ There seems to be something spiritual, even sacramental about forgiveness – a sign that moves and touches those who are witnesses to its enactment” (95).

A sincere apology does not seek to erase what was done. No amount of words can undo past wrongs. Nothing can ever reverse injustices committed against others. But an apology pronounced in the context of horrible acts has the potential for transformation. (99)

The relation between apology, remorse, and regret, on the one hand; and the possibility of forgiveness, on the other, is laid out at length in *A Human Being Died That Night*. In an illuminating and succinct interview given after the publication of the book, Gobodo-Madikizela elucidates this complex connection:

You apologize unconditionally. . . . And the one way that makes an apology “speak” is remorse. Regret and remorse. When you demonstrate that you regret what you did – in other words, that you feel pain for the pain that you have caused this other person. That is where the gravity of the moment lies. That is the gravity of the apology. It is remorse. . . . The paradox of that moment is that it is the pain of the perpetrator, when the perpetrator lays himself bare – lays himself naked in front of the victim – and asks and begs to be forgiven. And it is that brokenness, that sense of being so pained and broken, that touches the victim to the core, and invites them to reach out with forgiveness. And that is really where the gravity of the moment lies. And what leads the victims to reach out with forgiveness; they are responding to the pain of remorse.⁸

Tutu, in contrast to Gobodo-Madikizela, understands apology, sincerity, regret, remorse, and even confession of the crime to “be a very great help to the one who wants to forgive, but . . . not absolutely indispensable.”⁹ For Gobodo-Madikizela, however, these are, from the point of view of psychological analysis, preconditions without which forgiveness – whatever greatness, holiness, or healing potential it may have – cannot proceed.

The limits to forgiveness that Gobodo-Madikizela demarcates are most clearly illustrated in several points of the book where she opposes absolutely the crimes of de Kock and, indeed, Apartheid itself with the crimes of Eichmann, and the Holocaust. For Gobodo-Madikizela, the crimes of Apartheid, and specifically the crimes of de Kock, are sickeningly horrendous, brutal acts of evil, but not outside the bounds of the human. They are human crimes against fellow humans; and the psychological distress felt by their perpetrators, during and after their committal, as well as the pain, remorse, and brokenness demonstrated by de Kock and others

⁸ Louise Steinman, “A Conversation with Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela,” *Brick Literary Journal*, Toronto: Issue 71, Summer 2003: 143, 144.

⁹ “Jesus did not wait until those who were nailing him to the cross had asked for forgiveness. He was ready, as they drove in the nails, to pray to his Father to forgive them and he even provided an excuse for what they were doing. If the victim could forgive only when the culprit confessed, then the victim would be locked into the culprit’s whim, locked into victimhood . . .” (Tutu, *ibid.*, 272).

testifies to this human limit. The Nazis, or at least Nazis such as Eichmann, suffered no doubts or stirrings of conscience, and neither could nor would express remorse for any of their deliberate actions – actions geared not (as was the case under Apartheid) to the unjust suppression of a people (and, when that people refused this oppression, the brutal attempt to “quash” this rebellion), but rather their utter eradication from the face of the earth and from history. For Gobodo-Madikizela, Eichmann’s crimes (and the crimes of many other Nazis) remain beyond the bounds of any possible forgiveness. She draws the distinction between de Kock and Eichmann, in particular, and the systems of Apartheid and the Holocaust, in general, in absolute terms:

Eichmann saw neither moral nor legal wrong in the genocidal killings that he summed up with this “explanation”: They were Jews. This underscores an element that was absent from Apartheid’s policy of murder, and perhaps points to different ways of understanding conscience in the Nazi and apartheid cases. The Nazi conscience was so warped that it had become a clear conscience. One might say without too much exaggeration that the apartheid conscience, by contrast, was so ridden with guilt that it had to be circumvented. Unlike hatred of the Jews, who were regarded by the Nazis as vermin, the “scum of the earth,” the hatred of blacks by the Afrikaners, at least at the policy level, did not reach the proportions that allowed the Nazis to formulate the Final Solution. (68-9)

Gobodo-Madikizela further nuances the distinction above with another distinction, one between someone like de Kock, wracked with guilt and pain over his actions, and offering no excuses; and those of his colleagues who lack “an inner stirring” and strive to “maintain some ‘dignity,’” while nevertheless recognizing the “moral implications of their actions,” evidenced in the “sense that they were struggling with their denial of truth” (23). This fundamental difference – essentially one between the “broken heart” and the “hard heart” – however, is still not the *absolute* gulf that separates both of these examples (for Gobodo-Madikizela, examples still on a human continuum, even if pushed to its limits – the “hard heart” always has the *possibility* of “breaking”) from an Eichmann (about whom speaking of any “heart” sounds almost nonsensical): “But with Eichmann, the evidence suggests, there was just blankness, a blank, impenetrable wall” (23):

[W]hat I had experienced firsthand . . . is the enormous distinction between Hitler – or those tried at Nuremberg, for that matter – and de Kock and others who appeared before the TRC: none of the Nazis gave any evidence of even a trace of remorse. Genuine remorse and regret over destroying lives and severing the relationships that were

connected to them make all the difference. These are emotions that, despite the evil committed, are not themselves evil. (121-2)

Again, drawing a point of contrast with Tutu is instructive. Tutu sees the experience of the TRC project in South Africa not only as having universal geopolitical significance, but indeed having beyond this a cosmic, timeless, religious universality as well. From that perspective, it is difficult to see how *anything*, any crime whatsoever, could ultimately be designated unforgivable. Tutu specifically addresses himself to those among the Jews who refuse forgiveness to the Nazis after the Holocaust. Acknowledging that this was “a shattering experience,” he adds “that the Lord whom I serve, who was himself a Jew, would have asked, ‘What about forgiveness?’”¹⁰ In another context, responding to the specific dilemma posed by Simon Wiesenthal concerning whether, as a prisoner in a concentration camp, he should have forgiven a dying Nazi soldier who participated in a terrible massacre (Wiesenthal did not), Tutu declares:

I could tell of others, both black and white and less well known, who if asked, “What would I have done?” would have done the same – they have forgiven amazingly, unbelievably. Many claim to be Christians. They say they follow the Jewish rabbi who, when he was crucified, said, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” . . . Without forgiveness, there is no future.¹¹

Gobodo-Madikizela draws a narrower conclusion concerning the limits of forgiveness: it takes place between human beings, if it all, in a context in which the perpetrator offers a sincere apology demonstrating genuine remorse and regret, even to the point of being *broken* by the “inner stirrings” of his “conscience.” An overall political context in which something like the TRC can be effective and healing demands a society in which the possibilities of these inner stirring have not been *completely* eclipsed - a society in which even those who do *not* repent nevertheless struggle internally and are not at ease with their consciences.¹²

¹⁰ Tutu, *ibid.*, 267.

¹¹ In: Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower: On the Possibilities and Limits of Forgiveness* (Revised and Expanded Edition), ed. Harry James Cargas and Bonny V. Fetterman, New York: Schocken Books, 1998: 267-8. Gobodo-Madikizela does question the predominance of “remembering,” as opposed to “dialogue,” in Holocaust discourse, especially with reference to subsequent generations, the “children of Holocaust survivors and descendants of Nazi perpetrators” (119).

¹² This context is a necessary, though not sufficient, social context in which an encompassing political project of healing and reconciliation can take place; also required are the fostering and creating of an *ethos* and institutions to facilitate this: “The question is no longer *whether* victims can forgive ‘evildoers’ but whether we – our symbols, language, and politics, our legal, media, and academic institutions – are creating the conditions that

There are perhaps other geo-political situations of extreme trauma in which the powerful resources of forgiveness and reconciliation can be helpfully and hopefully drawn upon. The post-Holocaust situation was *not* one of these.¹³ For some situations the South African model can be a useful and inspiring source and even template; for others (of which the Holocaust seems to represent the most extreme limit for Gobodo-Madikizela), it cannot.

In contrast to the all-encompassing, “cosmic” universality of Desmond Tutu’s faith in forgiveness, Gobodo-Madikizela offers another, more limited, but perhaps more realistic vision, in which, she says, “mercy should be granted cautiously”: a vision of an unprecedented and immensely successful effort at healing a nation through a project of forgiveness and reconciliation, a process with a *limited universality* perhaps applicable to quite a number of scenes of geopolitical evil and collective trauma – quite a number, but not all (139).

On the scale of horrible things that can happen to people, there are some for which the language of apology and forgiveness may be entirely inappropriate. To say, however, that some evil deeds are simply unforgivable does not capture the complexity and richness of all the social contexts with which gross evil is committed. In South Africa, for example, where the language of “reconciliation” has defined the way in which that society is beginning to deal with its traumatic past, many stories of forgiveness have indeed emerged. . . . [W]hile there may be value in recognizing and posting the limits of forgiveness, if such exist, some societies are finding it more constructive to focus on discovering and nurturing the conditions that make forgiveness first conceivable, then ultimately possible. (123-4)

encourage alternatives to revenge. . . . Societal groups *can* transcend cycles of violence and forgive, if not necessarily fully reconcile with other groups. But that uncertain process is made more likely, and less tentative, when it is supported by an ethos of acknowledgment and accommodation and underpinned by the nationally constructed language, cues, and symbols of collective reconciliation” (118, 133).

¹³ Though, arguably, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict today may hold such potential. If so, it will have to arise *internally* from within both of these societies, from the sources (religious and otherwise) proper to each. I preface this with a “may” because one immense question which I have not touched upon here is the specifically *Christian* structure of the successful TRC experience in South Africa. It will be *another* forgiveness that arises, if one does, in the Israeli-Palestinian issue, as the deep religious and secular sources undergirding this conflict are not Christian. But at least forgiveness is not *of necessity* precluded in this situation, as Gobodo-Madikizela believes it is in the case of the Holocaust. (The extrapolations in this footnote are my own, not those of Gobodo-Madikizela.)