

Religion, Forgiveness and Humanity

CHRISTOPHER HAMILTON

1. There are many ways of doing philosophy of religion. No doubt all of them have need of abstract concepts and passages where reflection is more technical than it usually is, say in everyday thought and reflection. But it is well known that, in this area of philosophy, and not only in this area of philosophy, abstract reflection can run the risk of losing contact with the ins and outs, the finer-grained details, of the lived experience of reality. One way to seek to reduce this risk is to approach abstract or general reflection through philosophical reflection on specific cases. This is what I intend to do in this paper. My aim is to explore in detail a specific and, in my view, extraordinarily striking example, in this case, an example of forgiveness in a religious, indeed, Christian context, drawing out where possible general or abstract conclusions, but seeking always to root reflection in the specific case in order to understand better from a philosophical point of view what is at stake, what is important, when thinking about the issue in question. Of course, I shall be seeking primarily to elucidate philosophically the example I shall discuss, but, by implication, I hope that the kinds of questions, worries and concerns I discuss might raise consciousness – philosophical consciousness – of the kinds of questions that we might explore in other examples, specifically those which involve forgiveness in a religious context.

2. Maïti Girtanner, as she tells us in autobiography *Même les bourreaux ont une âme* [*Even Torturers Have a Soul*],¹ was born in March 1922, the second child and only daughter of a relatively wealthy, cultivated Franco-Swiss family. Her grandfather was Paul Rougnon, a professor of music theory at the Conservatoire in Paris. The family had already moved to France by the time Maïti's father died: she was only four years old. They lived first in rue des Martyrs and then set up home in Saint-Gemain-en-Laye. Maïti, who spoke both French and German as her mother tongue, was immensely musically gifted and grew up with the certitude that, as she puts it,

¹ *Même les Bourreaux ont une âme*, Girtanner, Maïti avec Guillaume Tabard (Tours: Éditions CLD, 2010). All translations from this text are mine.

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music would be her life: she gave her first public piano recitals from a very early age, when she was only about nine years old, including one with the Philadelphia Orchestra when she replaced the soloist, who was taken ill at the last moment.

Each summer the family would go to their house in Bonnes, a village about 20 kilometres to the east of Poitiers. The village lies on the river Vienne. Indeed, it lies on both sides of the river and is cut in two by it. By late June 1940, France was occupied by the Germans and the family did not return to Paris. Their large house, the Vieux-Logis, was in part requisitioned by German soldiers, with whom the family had to share it. Moreover, the river Vienne was chosen as the line of demarcation between occupied France and the so-called 'free zone', which effectively cut the village of Bonnes in two, since only those with a permit were allowed to cross the bridge to the side of the village in the free zone.

From the moment of the occupation, Girtanner showed herself to be extremely brave and resourceful. She ingratiated herself with the Germans, partly because she could speak to them in their tongue, partly because she played music for them, and partly because she adopted the role of the naïve adolescent who had nothing whatsoever to do with the war as she was Swiss, and thus from a neutral country, and given to music in such a way as to leave no room for thought about, or concern for, political matters.

In fact, things were more complicated. She obtained a permit to cross the bridge over the Vienne separating the two sides of the village on the grounds that she could, in this way, do the shopping for those who were not themselves allowed to cross. Gradually, she started to carry over letters and other sensitive material, having constructed a false bottom to the trailer that she attached to the bicycle which she used to get around all the time. Eventually, she was helping soldiers and others cross the river to (relative) freedom and, in time, was working for the resistance in Paris, travelling back and forth between the capital and Bonnes.

In October 1943 Girtanner was arrested in Paris and taken to the south of France where she was tortured by the Gestapo. She was beaten repeatedly, two interrogators, under the direction of young German doctor, hardly older than Girtanner herself, and whose name she gives as 'Léo', damaging permanently the central nervous system with blows to the base of the spinal cord.

Girtanner was liberated in February 1944. But her life had been, to all intents and purposes, destroyed. She was never able to play the piano again, was in permanent and often agonizing pain – she says that every day since she has had to lie down in silence for several

hours to bear the suffering – and was in no physical state to have children, as she had always dreamt of doing.

In 1984, over forty years later, she received a telephone call. Léo, her torturer, was in Paris and wanted to see her. He came to her house. He had, he explained, been diagnosed with cancer and had only a few weeks to live. He was afraid of death. He had remembered overhearing her speaking with her fellow prisoners of death and of Jesus' promise of eternal life. He wanted to hear more about this. Girtanner says that she had wondered her whole life long whether she had been able, thanks to her faith, to forgive this man for what he had done to her. Moreover, she had always been, as she puts it, haunted by the thought that he would die with his heart filled with hatred.² She says that she felt responsible for him:³ 'I was tormented by the idea that this man could die imprisoned in the evil of which he had made himself the instrument and the accomplice'.⁴ There had to be some way, she says, to give him a word that would 'help him to detach himself from evil and free himself from it. And I was mad enough to believe [*j'avais la folie de croire*] that a special responsibility weighed upon me, me who had passed through his murderous hands [*ses mains mortifières*]'.⁵ She says that she had '[a] mad desire [*un désir fou*], almost obsessive' to forgive him, a desire that was '[a]ll the more crazy [*fou*] in that I believed it impossible to realize it'.⁶

She asked him how he had become a war criminal. 'You call it that?' 'Yes, I call it that'.⁷ He spoke of his studies as a medical student, his entry into the *Hitlerjugend*, his desire to serve his country, the brain-washing, and so on. All the usual things.

She had the impression that he was sincerely repentant for what he had done – for what he had done to her. He eventually asked her directly: 'Forgiveness. I ask for your forgiveness'.⁸ 'Instinctively, I took his face in my two hands and kissed him on his forehead. At that moment, I knew that I had truly forgiven him'.⁹

He asked her what he should do: he was married, had a family who knew nothing about his past, and was a well-respected doctor in his town. She told him that he had to put himself into God's hands

² Ibid., 14

³ Ibid., 176

⁴ Ibid., 176

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 178

⁷ Ibid., 18

⁸ Ibid., 19

⁹ Ibid., 20

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and that God would give him the strength to face the last few months of his life. She said that, after his death, he would be face to face with God. 'Do you think that you have anything more important to do than to prepare yourself for this decisive meeting?'¹⁰

Girtanner says:

Léo kept his word. After returning to his village in the Rhineland he had gathered around him, first of all his family and then, for a second evening, his friends and acquaintances. He had confessed his past to them and made clear his desire to do everything in his power to help them. His last months were, indeed, offered to others. I had prayed for him all the time. I have no doubt that he is now sharing in the joy of the sons of God. In Léo, the mystery of redemption was completed.¹¹

3. It hardly needs to be said that Girtanner's story raises an almost seemingly limitless number of questions and lines of reflection for anyone interested in the nature of religious belief and its embeddedness in, or relation to, the fabric of a human life. I am interested here in the fact that one's initial reaction is likely to be that her moral position has a kind of powerful authority or provides a kind of exemplary testimony. Indeed, before reading Girtanner's book, I had watched a televised interview with her, to which my reaction had been overwhelmingly positive. It was for this reason that I read the book. However, when I did so, I began to feel uncomfortable, to have the nagging sense that somehow there was something here that was amiss. I felt that my initial response was one about which one *ought* to be sceptical, that one *ought* to put into question, in part because, in general, very powerful moral and religious reactions do not carry their justification on their face, and in part because I felt – and feel – the power of George Orwell's thought that there is a profound opposition between humanity and sainthood and that 'sainthood is...a thing that human beings must avoid'. As he puts it, the otherworldly and humanistic ideals are 'incompatible': '[o]ne must choose between God and Man'. Saints, he also remarks, should be considered guilty until proven innocent.¹² I also had in my mind a comment by James Wood (in an essay on Thomas More, as it happens): '[N]o man can ever be a saint in God's eyes, and no man

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 21

¹² Orwell, George, 'Reflections on Gandhi' in *The Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984): 469; 465

should be one in ours'.¹³ Certainly, Girtanner is not a saint, but there is no doubt that many, indeed, so far as I can tell, everyone, who heard her story, including me, reacted so positively to her on account of a sense of the impressiveness of her otherworldly moral and spiritual power and authority. I wondered about what things would look like if one took seriously Orwell's comments, and the spirit of his comments, in the context of an exploration of Girtanner's story. This paper seeks to delineate what the results of such thinking might look like. I say at the outset that I feel uncomfortable with the results of my reflections, as I came to feel uncomfortable with my initial reaction to Girtanner's story. Perhaps, in the end, that is as it should be, and that this helps in the task I mentioned of seeking to make sense of the embeddedness of religion in the individual life.

4. One of the things that troubled me, when I first began to try to reflect seriously on Girtanner's book about her experiences was, I think, that she displays a strange combination of fierce, worldly pride even as she insists on her own insignificance, seeing herself as a mere means by which God carries out his plans. Thus she says, referring to herself, that 'the Lord made use of one of his useless servants in order to reveal the power of his mercy'.¹⁴ Again, she insists:

My story [*histoire*] is...simply that of a young girl wanting to be of service to those around her. The rest, what followed, that is to say, the taking on of this personal story [*histoire*] in History itself [*dans la grande Histoire*], the strength to go from service to testimony, is nothing more than the chain of circumstances, the work of that Providence which uses fragile intermediaries in order to act.¹⁵

And she speaks of one of the Germans who was staying in the house in Bonnes who seemed to suspect that she was involved in clandestine activity and told her to be careful. 'This German could have condemned me', she says. But

he saved me. His tone was benevolent because firm. I never found out what he knew, but it seems that he had some serious doubts about my movements. I never found out either why his anger was transformed into gentleness [*clémence*]. My hour had without doubt not yet come. Someone wanted me to continue

¹³ Wood, James, 'Sir Thomas More: a man for one season' in *The Broken Estate* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999): 1

¹⁴ Op. cit., note 1, 22

¹⁵ Ibid., 60

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to be of use and had used this indirect and unexpected route to encourage me.¹⁶

At same time, as I say, there is no doubt from reading her book that Girtanner was a deeply worldly person: she was clearly proud of her intelligence, of her cultivated family, of her musical ability and her ability to speak both French and German perfectly, and of her capacity to fool the Germans into letting her pass over the bridge at Bonnes ('The *naïveté* of the Germans was much greater than one imagined'¹⁷ she remarks at one point). She played on the fact that she was clearly a nice-looking, blonde, blue-eyed girl to get what she wanted from the Germans, and often spoke to them with a mixture of simpering tones (her words¹⁸) and extreme bravado.¹⁹ From her book one gets the sense that she was far too sexually naïve actually to flirt with the Germans, but she may well have done so without really knowing that this was what she was doing and, in any case, I am quite certain that the Germans in question often took her to be flirting with them and that she got what she wanted – permits, the release of friends from detention and so on – partly because they saw things this way. Moreover, she clearly enjoyed the sense that her house at Bonnes was seen as the centre of the village, and she certainly relished the role of leader wherever she went – 'at school, in my family, with my friends, in the resistance'²⁰ as she proudly puts it.

None of that is meant as a criticism, of course, but it seems to me clear that it expresses, as I have said, a sense of her own worldly importance and position that stands in sharp contrast to her humble sense of being made use of by God for his purposes.

What is odd is not so much that there seems to be some kind of conflict here between Girtanner's sense of her own insignificance in God's hands and her worldliness as her seemingly complete incapacity to see that contradiction. In reading her book, the reader, far from sensing in Girtanner, as one might imagine, a sense of anguished horror at what human beings can do to each other, gets rather the peculiar sense that, at root, all is well with the world, a sense of her being fully at home in the world and comfortable in a condition of worldly success, prestige and the like. Girtanner's vision of the world wholly lacks what might call a tragic dimension. Certainly, terrible things happen, people can be cruel and so on.

¹⁶ Ibid., 138

¹⁷ Ibid., 79

¹⁸ Ibid., 138

¹⁹ Ibid., 77

²⁰ Ibid., 164

But there is no sense here of something fundamentally amiss, or of something broken in human beings. That is, there is no sense that there is something amiss with human beings' worldliness. And, in particular, there is no sense that there is anything amiss with her own worldliness, with her own human, all too human traits of pride, ambition, desire to dominate and so on.

Perhaps we can see better what I have in mind by comparing Girtanner for a moment with someone who is in many ways strikingly similar to her and yet in many ways unlike her – the particular combination of similarities and differences make the comparison instructive – namely, Simone Weil. For Weil, like Girtanner, had an intensely powerful sense of her own unimportance and in her case this made her deeply hostile to some of her perfectly normal human characteristics – pride and vanity being the two most significant. For example, Weil shared with Girtanner the same sense that to be a Christian is to seek to follow Christ's injunction concerning forgiveness, which Girtanner quotes in her book: 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you' (Matthew 5:44). But Weil could never, as Girtanner does, have quoted what follows those words in the next verse but one: 'For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?' (Matthew 5:46). And there is no doubt that Girtanner understood this reward in literal terms as something given by God after death. For Weil, that would have been simply an expression of the worldliness that it was the whole point of Christ's injunction on forgiveness to oppose – even if he too, no doubt for strategic reasons, also appealed to his listeners' self-interested motives in telling them what they should do. But for Girtanner, there is no conflict. She sees reward as crucial to her capacity to forgive Léo, and from this point of view accepts a movement of the human soul that the otherworldliness of her stringent forgiveness must, as Weil indicates, put into question, because it puts into question all those features of the soul that seek to uphold the miserable round of the self in its self-protective stratagems.

Are we just dealing with a case of *naïveté* on Girtanner's part? Well, in part she does come across as naïve, there is no doubt about that. But I think that the issue is deeper than that. For her worldliness is one of the conditions that allowed her to do what she did. It was because she was proud, ambitious, somewhat vain, and brimming over with a kind of worldly self-confidence that she was able to work as she did for the resistance and, indeed, have the strength to confront her torture so admirably. Yet all the while she insists on her own

nothingness. And I think that reveals something deeply interesting: the conditions of her capacity to do what she did are implicitly rejected by what she does. Her forgiveness depends upon the thought that, as she puts it, 'From God's point of view, no one is worth very much. Or, rather, we all have an infinite worth in his eyes...[W]e are not worth what our achievements are worth, but we are worth the weight of love put into us by God'.²¹ It is evident that she thinks that forgiveness is enjoined upon her not simply on account of Jesus' specific injunctions in this regard, but also because human beings are to be loved not for what they do or achieve or for their looks, intelligence, abilities and talents and so on, but *simply because they are*. And I am not claiming that Girtanner does not seriously aim to live out this belief. She says: 'My Christian faith asked of me to view each human being not with the eye of others but from God's point of view. That was not always easy...but it is always what is demanded'.²² I do think that she seriously sought to see others as God does, to live out her beliefs, as I put it. But I am suggesting that one of the conditions that enabled her to do this was something that that life rejects.

5. Why is this important? It is important, I think, because it helps us see that a certain kind of moral ideal – call it the Christian ideal – cannot fully know itself. That ideal involves an idea of the repudiation of the importance of aspects of the self which it actually needs in order to achieve its ends. It rejects, in thought, worldliness, only to recruit that worldliness to its work of achieving itself. And this is not simply, I think, a peculiar fact about Girtanner. It lies deep, I think, in the Christian ideal. Christianity presents an ideal of purity, a kind of emptying of the self, a goodness which does not know itself because to know itself is to know itself as good, and that immediately introduces a piece of knowledge which distinguishes the self from others and generates comparisons of relative worth – that is, precisely, sources of pride or vanity and the like – which, from God's point of view, are irrelevant. Of course, that raises deep theological and philosophical problems about God's judging of individuals, but Jesus, as we know, enjoined us never to judge, which is simply another expression of the notion of purity and the ideal of love of others simply because they are that we are exploring. But a self which was really pure in the relevant kind of way would have lost, I think, all that makes it possible for the self to act: it needs something that its

²¹ Ibid., 177

²² Ibid., 37

purity cannot contain and cannot approve of. This was something that Simone Weil came up against again and again, but Girtanner is less knowing about herself than is Weil and fails to see that there might be a spiritual and intellectual problem. Weil knew that the Christian aspiration to purity was, in part, blind to itself and could not bear this knowledge because she herself was not blind to that fact. This is one of the roots of the deeply self-punishing, intensely severe attitude she had to herself. But in Girtanner, the ideal did not know that it could not know, and consequently Girtanner accepted her worldliness as if it were unproblematic, without recognizing that that very acceptance was a kind of lack of self-knowledge.

6. I think we can push things further here. We are, of course, impressed by the way in which Girtanner managed to reconstruct her life after the horrors she suffered. ‘As we are invited to do by Saint Paul’, she says, reflecting on her condition after her liberation, ‘it was in my weaknesses and not in my strength, that I had to place my pride [*orgueil*]’.²³ She invokes God’s grace here, saying that ‘from a human point of view’²⁴ it would not otherwise have been possible to come to terms with her enforced renunciation of the piano. She gave piano lessons, nonetheless, as well as lessons in philosophy – she had passed her *bac* in her late teens with a dissertation in philosophy on, of all things, the subject of suffering.²⁵ Moreover, at the beginning of the 1960s, she and her mother took in the daughter of a neighbour who died – the father had already left the family – thus leaving the child an orphan. And she insists that she had to accept what she was, and not long for being what she had been before the torture,²⁶ in order to find some peace of mind. It is clear that her life of faith was crucial in this acceptance of reality.

Nonetheless, I wish once again to introduce a somewhat sceptical note into this vision of her life after her liberation. Girtanner says, as I reported earlier, that she was almost obsessed by the idea of forgiving Léo. She also says, as I mentioned, that she felt she had a special responsibility for this man, a responsibility to help him detach himself from evil. How are we to understand that?

To forgive, especially in the conditions in which she forgave, seems an unqualifiedly good thing. But we should ask: for whom is it good? I think that there can be no doubt that Girtanner wanted to forgive Léo in large part for her own sake. One of the chapters in her book

²³ Ibid., 164

²⁴ Ibid., 170

²⁵ Ibid., 173

²⁶ Ibid., 165–171

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is entitled '*Seul le pardon guérit*' ['Only Forgiveness Heals'], but it is clear that the person in question healed was, in the first instance, Girtanner herself. There is, in a sense, of course, nothing wrong with that: it is well known that forgiveness releases the forgiver from feelings of resentment, and that this is experienced as salutary, so in Girtanner's case there is no reason to expect anything else – though, of course, it somewhat detracts from the sense that forgiveness is, as one so often fantasizes it might be, wholly selfless, wholly giving. The problem lies not there, but in the fact that she was obsessed, as she says, by the need to forgive him. For forty years, she says, she prayed for him. What kind of strange complicity bound her to him? When she was tortured, it was not, in fact, as I mentioned earlier, he who inflicted the pain: he simply oversaw the process, giving orders to two soldiers of the Gestapo who carried out the physical torture itself. Why did she not feel the need to forgive these two as well? Was it because she did not see them as responsible, since they were simply following orders? That seems most unlikely: she knew perfectly well that Léo too was just following orders. Here is how she describes the scene:

Two men [the Gestapo soldiers] were seated behind a simple table, conducting the police interrogations. The prisoner was either seated on a wooden chair or asked to remain standing.

There was a third man there. A tall, young blond man, who had not reached thirty years of age, slim, always immaculately dressed. He remained standing, often propped up in the corner of the room, one leg bent and with his heel pressed on the wall. This was their superior. The two others called him *Doktor*. Later on I found out that his first name was Léo, but I did not know that his destiny and mine would become so deeply intertwined [*que nos destins auraient à ce point partie liée*]. He seemed nobler than the two others, and less common.

I remember looking at him at length. Without arrogance. Calmly, but for a long time. I did not seek to challenge him, but to scrutinize him. I saw this handsome young man and I wanted to understand: what is he doing here? what is going on in his head? what might awaken [*inspirer*] his conscience?²⁷

What one recognizes immediately is that the complicity between Girtanner and Léo grows from this: *they come from the same world*.

²⁷ Ibid., 149–50

She sees in him her world, a world of elegance, where nobility, culture and refinement matter, a world where that which is vulgar and common is rejected. This is, evidently enough, why she describes so precisely his appearance and why she is so disturbed by his involvement in the interrogations. And it is also why she overlooks completely the two Gestapo soldiers.

Girtanner carries her worldliness into the very heart of forgiveness. What made her overlook completely the two Gestapo soldiers was that she could find no connection with them, whereas the puzzle with Léo was precisely how a cultivated and gifted man could do what he did. In her book she does not say he was brilliant, or that she spoke directly with him, but in the televised interview I mentioned earlier she makes it clear that they spoke on occasion and that she asked him directly how it was that he had got mixed up in the whole affair. He made no secret of his brilliant medical career and, she says, expressed his pride at having been chosen for his work by Himmler.

I am suggesting, then, that here again we see that the Christian ideal recruits something to its cause that it officially repudiates. But my point goes further than that. I asked earlier what kind of complicity bound Girtanner and Léo. Now, it is well known that the relation between victim and torturer can be very easily invested on both sides with an immense emotional and intellectual energy. It seems extraordinary, when one thinks about it, that Léo came to see Girtanner because he was so fearful of death but *not*, she insists, because he was seeking God or forgiveness. I find such a claim hardly credible: here we have a man who has lived a respectable, successful life after the war – he was even his town's mayor – but has never spoken to anyone about what he did during the war. Then he discovers he has only months to live. Surely, given that he thought of going to see Girtanner, it seems incredible to suppose that he did not think of a need to be forgiven before he died. I find it hard to believe that Girtanner is not suppressing something she knows or senses about this man's need of her. Indeed, she herself seems to have some doubts on the matter, because her account of Léo's motives in coming to see her is contradictory: in less guarded moments, that is, when not asked directly about this by the interviewer, she acknowledges that Léo was seeking both God and forgiveness. Be that as it may, her insistence, at times, that he was seeking neither, dramatizes the situation, allowing her to present him, as she does, as someone who, in the space of 15 minutes during their conversation, is suddenly redeemed. That allows her to suppress her knowledge of his need of her whilst stylizing, probably unconsciously, her need of him as being

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nothing more than a unique redemptive pathway to God. And because her need for him is expressed as her being merely a conduit for his redemption attention is drawn away from it. In any case, there is no doubt that she needed him – she is quite explicit about this in speaking, as we have seen, of her mad desire, almost obsessive, to forgive him. And I want to suggest that there are at least three aspects to the need she has of him.

The first is that she needs to re-establish him as someone in and of her world, that is, as someone who, by being forgiven, remains, at the end, true to her sense of what someone from his cultural milieu, and someone with his intelligence, really is and should have been. In a sense, it is clear that her whole scheme of values is threatened by Léo precisely because he, in one sense, shares that scheme with her and yet becomes a torturer. Her complicity with him consists in part in the need to reintegrate him into her world of values.

The second aspect of her need for him concerns the fact that her desire to forgive him helps her reconstruct the narrative of her life, so decisively shattered by the torture. In terms of the narrative of one's life, Arthur Frank²⁸ has distinguished three ways in which one might respond to a crisis: the restitution narrative, the chaos narrative and the quest narrative. It is clear that, for Girtanner, the main narrative of her life after the war was one of quest, of turning her experiences to account, and the longing to forgive Léo was, I think it is clear, central to that.

We can see the third aspect of her need for him if we return, for a moment, to Simone Weil. For one aspect of Weil's conception of affliction [*malheur*] is that the victim feels himself or herself to be responsible for the suffering, even as this is not so. Part of the reason for this is surely – though Weil does not say this – that this makes sense of otherwise senseless suffering. Girtanner certainly experienced affliction in Weil's sense, and it seems to me that her sense of the meaning of the suffering becomes inflected towards the idea that she is in part responsible for it, or, more exactly – these two thoughts 'flourish in the same hedgerow' – that, in her spiritual condition, she is no different, fundamentally, from Léo. This goes well beyond her admission that there was a kind of 'logic' in her being tortured in that she was fighting an enemy who could hardly have been expected to offer her any presents in response to her activity. This logic is well captured by Alice Vansteenberghé who was tortured by Klaus Barbie for her part in the resistance – her back was broken

²⁸ Frank, Arthur, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997)

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and she was left confined to a wheelchair. In her testimony during Barbie's trial in 1987 she said:

We in the resistance knew the risks that we took and I accept everything I suffered. But there were other people in the cell into which I was thrown. I saw a Jewish woman with her child, well-groomed, blonde, with a clip in her hair. Well, one day Barbie came in and he did so to take this mother from her child. That's not war, that's something unspeakable [*quelque chose d'immonde*].²⁹

For Weil, affliction is something unspeakable, beyond logic, so to speak, and certainly beyond the logic of war. And what I want to say is that Girtanner's sense of her suffering, in her search for meaning in it, becomes inflected towards something that lies beyond that logic and invites comprehension as a form of suffering which expresses the idea that there is, as I said, fundamentally, no difference between her and Léo. This is captured, for example, by her picking up on the strand of Christian thought concerned with the rejection of judgement and writing: '[T]here are no good and evil people, victims and persecutors, saints and sinners. There are only human beings...'.³⁰ Or again, later she says that all human beings are 'sinners, poor limited beings'.³¹ Someone else who mediated on these themes with great moral power was Primo Levi, and the contrast between Girtanner's position and his is striking. Commenting on a claim made by Liliana Cavani, who was speaking about her film *The Night Porter* and had said: 'We are all victims or murderers and we accept these roles freely', Levi wrote:

I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether deep in me there is lurking a murderer, but I know that I was an innocent victim and not a murderer; I know that there have been murderers, not only in Germany, and that there still are murderers, retired or on active service, and that to confuse them with their victims is a moral disease or an aesthetic affectation, a sinister sign of complicity.³²

²⁹ Quoted in Alain Finkielkraut, *La mémoire vaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989): 44–5

³⁰ Op. cit., note 1, 177

³¹ Ibid., 178

³² Levi, Primo, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Torino: Einaudi, 2009): 34–5, my translation. Levi's text had been translated into English by Raymond Rosenthal under the title *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Abacus, 1989).

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Part of what is at issue here is the difference between justice and mercy. Levi's insistence is on justice, indeed, on a specific conception of justice according to which we can make judgements about what individuals deserve based on what they have done. What Girtanner has in mind is a conception of Christian mercy which erases such concerns in a general sense of human unworthiness, of the kind we have already encountered in her text. Anyone sufficiently Nietzschean would suspect here the presence of a kind of, what Nietzsche calls, 'voluptuousness of suffering' and what others have called 'Christian masochism'. Be that as it may, Levi speaks for the world; Girtanner speaks for God. It is clear, for example, that it simply never occurred to her that, while it might have been in place for her to forgive Léo for what he did to her, she had no business ignoring the claims of judicial justice on him *for the sake of his other victims*. Of course, he had, when he contacted her, only a few months to live, and because of this there was no doubt no sense in which he might have been tried for his crimes, but it is obvious that not for one moment did Girtanner suppose that, in the name of justice, he might have been subjected to such a trial.

7. There is, I want to say, a kind of madness in Girtanner. She is mad in the way that, according to Weil, Antigone is mad – she calls her a little fool (*petite niaise*). Weil thinks of Antigone this way because what she does in burying her brother Polyneices is, from a worldly point of view, absurd, foolish, mad: Creon was right, from the perspective of human institutions and their protection, and from the point of view of what Polyneices deserved, to forbid burial rites for him. But, says Weil, there is a kind of pure love in Antigone. Weil dramatizes a conflict between the worldly and the otherworldly in the conflict between Creon and Antigone, and, while it is obvious that she is on the side of the latter, she recognizes the absurdity of Antigone's position. Girtanner is, in her own way, a little fool.

I said that her foolishness consists in the fact that it did not occur to her that, given that others suffered at his hands, there could be any doubt about the appropriateness of her forgiving Léo. Indeed, she seems to have sensed this in saying that she was mad to feel a special responsibility for Léo, and that her desire to forgive him was mad. After all, from the perspective of the working of the institutions of the world, Léo should have been held to account, and the fact that this did not occur to Girtanner is an expression of the foolishness of her approach. As Hannah Arendt remarked, goodness is destructive of the world and can found no political life. But Girtanner's foolishness is also and relatedly present in the fact that the appropriate

response to him might have been to resent and despise him. This, of course, was Jean Améry's response to his torture, who held fast to his resentment, believing it to be, amongst other things, a fitting way of bearing witness to the horrors he had suffered. He certainly paid for his attitude, insofar as his was a life without peace, but this hardly shows him to have been wrong. It is not at all obvious why it is that we seemingly automatically suppose that forgiveness is better than resentment, though it no doubt has something to do with the fact that the former seems to look in the direction of or even to carry us, as it does in the case of Girtanner, to a realm beyond the human. But, of course, there is, after all, something deeply human, even if not humane, about Améry's response.

Améry possessed, indeed, what Levi called a 'morality of *Zurückschlagen*', of 'returning the blow'. Levi continues, recounting Améry's story and quoting him:

A gigantic Polish common criminal punches him in the face over some trifle; he [Améry], not from some animal instinct but from a reasoned revolt against the distorted world of the Lager, hits back as well as he can. 'My dignity,' he says, 'was wholly in that punch directed to his jaw. That in the end it was I who, physically much weaker, succumbed to a merciless beating was no longer of any importance at all. In pain from the blows, I was pleased with myself.'³³

Levi goes on to say that he admires Améry for his response, but knows that this kind of reaction was beyond him (he speaks of his 'intrinsic incapacity' to react as Améry did). Moreover, he adds, Améry's

choice [to trade blows], extended to his post-Auschwitz life, led him to positions of such severity and intransigence as to make him incapable of finding joy in life, indeed, of living. Whoever 'trades blows' with the whole world finds his dignity but pays a very high price, because he is sure to be defeated.³⁴

Levi admires Améry because he knows that there are situations in which the right response is the violent one, however much we might

³³ Levi, Primo, *I sommersi e i salvati*: 109, quoting Améry, *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008): 141–2, my translation. Améry's text has been translated into English by Stella P. Rosenfeld and Stanley Rosenfeld under the title *At the Mind's Limits* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998)

³⁴ Levi, Primo, *I sommersi e i salvati*: 110, my translation

wish to avoid this fact. I am not saying, of course, that Girtanner should or could have replied with blows to her torture, or that she should have done so when Léo contacted her 40 years later. But I am saying that her response of forgiveness when he reappeared in her life was, even if one judges it as right from some particular perspective, only one of a number of possible right responses, from different perspectives, amongst which might have been resentment and anger.

8. I said there was something human in Améry's response and I have spoken of Girtanner's otherworldly scheme of values. Part of what I have had in mind in speaking in this way is that human beings have a natural tendency towards self-preservation and self-protection such that, if one is aggressed against, a quite normal or natural reaction is a hostile response, which may, of course, be expressed by flight. Girtanner's response of forgiveness seems to go clean against these natural impulses of the human soul (or gut) and to involve her making herself extraordinarily vulnerable. But, of course, things are, in fact, more complicated than that. For, as I have been arguing, her gesture of forgiveness worked in the service of, and expressed, a need she had of Léo and was, in a way, part of a self-defensive, self-preservative project. And, on the other side, Améry's resentment made him, as we have seen, deeply vulnerable. The line between a worldly and an otherworldly set of values starts to become elusive, even if we can say that there *are* such different sets of values – which we can.

Another way to make this point would be to point out that we cannot, after all, say that Girtanner is not human in her response. That is, it is not as if Améry reveals his humanity with his human values whilst Girtanner conceals hers with her otherworldly scheme of values. Things are less straightforward than that, and they are so, if we wish to put it somewhat programmatically, because we do not know what our humanity is. By this I mean that human beings are anxious in the face of their own humanity, and confused about what it involves. One way to express this confusion is to say that, as many thinkers in many different ways have stressed, it is part of the nature of human beings to seek to escape their humanity. And that means that, accepting our humanity means seeking to escape it, and not accepting our humanity involves the same thing. My own view, indeed, is that human beings are ontological misfits. The religious desire to escape our condition through a set of otherworldly values, some aspects of which I have been tracing in this paper, is thus as much a part of our nature as is the desire to accept our condition without the consolations of religion. When Girtanner says: 'All my life long I have kept my faith. Or rather, my faith has kept me.

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Preserved me from despair',³⁵ she expresses the deep human need to find meaning in things and keep going in the face of the blank indifference of the world. She thus expresses her humanity by seeing it as permeated by an otherworldly set of values. Améry's despair is not *more human* than is Girtanner's faith, even if one rejects that faith. It might be truer to our condition, but that is another matter – though Girtanner would disagree, of course. From this point of view, truth and humanity sit uncomfortably with each other, which is why Nietzsche, who claimed that human beings necessarily live in illusions, got into such a mess about Christianity. After all, if we can never escape from illusion, and if Christianity is, as Nietzsche supposed, an illusion, then how are we to say that some of them are better than others? Are there some illusions that are, so to speak, more honest than others? And if there are, how are we supposed to find out which they are? I do not hold out much hope for anyone's being able to answer those questions.

Nonetheless, that claim about illusion and those questions are pitched at a very general level. There can, after all, be religious views that seem to deny our humanity in striking ways.

One such example is to be found in a well known passage in Levi's *If this is a Man*. He describes one of the selections of October 1944. When they have all returned to their hut, Levi sees Kuhn in his bunk, rocking back and forth and thanking God because he has not been selected. Levi writes:

Kuhn is out of his mind [*insensato*]. Can he not see, in the bunk next to his, Beppo the Greek who is 20 years old and the day after tomorrow will go to the gas chamber, and knows it, Beppo who is lying looking at the bulb without saying anything, without thinking anything? Does Kuhn not know that the next time it will be his turn? Does Kuhn not grasp that what has happened today is an abomination that no propitiatory prayer, no forgiveness, no expiation of the guilt, in short, nothing in the power of man to do will ever be able to clean?

If I were God, I would spit on Kuhn's prayer.³⁶

One thing that is important about this passage is Levi's sense of the complete impossibility of forgiveness, of how forgiveness would be

³⁵ Op. cit., note 1, 176

³⁶ Levi, Primo, *Se questo è un uomo* (Torino: Einaudi, 2013): 116, my translation. A more literal translation of Levi's words would be: 'I would spit Kuhn's prayer to the ground'.

wholly inappropriate in such circumstances. For Levi, it seems, there are some things that cannot be forgiven. And that, to my mind, registers his humanity, his insistence that, were someone to forgive in such circumstances, this would involve a betrayal of his humanity. But beyond that, there is the blatant inhumanity of Kuhn's conception of God. In what does that consist? Central here, no doubt, is that Kuhn has a certain kind of utilitarian conception of God which attributes to him certain personal preferences. But if this is so, we might wonder whether Christian belief can ever escape such a condition. What would it be to have a Christian faith that wholly escaped from the idea that God has personal preferences? How could a Christian who thinks that God looks after him, or who thanks him for anything, *not* be attributing to him certain personal preferences, given that the most cursory look around the world will show him that there are, in all likelihood, millions, possibly billions of people who suffer innocently in any number of countless ways? Girtanner, for example, is obviously quite sure that God has always been with her, even in moments of despair, but what of her fellow prisoners who all died? Whilst she was in captivity with them she sought, as I mentioned earlier, to share with them her faith. 'Some', she remarks, 'were already believers, others rediscovered a faith they had left behind at childhood'.³⁷ What are we to make of this? No doubt Girtanner would say that God was, anyway, with those who were murdered – indeed, she does say this, for in the television interview she says that God helped them in their death. And I am sure that, in her view, if she had died in prison, it would have been God who helped her to die, just as she was in fact convinced that God was with her throughout her life, and helped her during her work in the resistance as in everything else. But one might wonder whether, after all, Girtanner does not express something rather similar to that which Kuhn expresses. Speaking to Léo of Jesus, she said: 'With his last breath it is of you personally, of me personally, that he was thinking'.³⁸ How could one think that, one might wonder, in a world bursting with sin and sorrow, as Samuel Johnson put it? The issue here is *not* that of the problem of evil, as we as philosophers and theologians are familiar with it. The question is not: how can God allow so much pain and suffering? The issue is rather: given that God allows so much pain and suffering, why did he accompany me and not the others? To respond by saying that God did, in fact, accompany the others, might seem to be, in the end, a failure to

³⁷ Op. cit., note 1, 154

³⁸ Ibid., 19

grasp the nature of their pain and suffering, a refusal or inability to see that, in an effort to avoid a conception of God with personal preferences, one falls into a largely rhetorically complacent view of others' suffering. This would almost certainly have seemed to Levi a denial of one's humanity. I say this not only on account of what he says about Kuhn, but also because, when he was visited by a religious friend after the war who claimed that he, Levi, had survived through the work of Providence so that he might bear witness, Levi felt that this attitude was 'monstrous',³⁹ precisely on account of all the others about him in the camps who were murdered. Levi's conception of a God who might spit on someone's prayer is, no doubt, not very theologically respectable, yet there seems something right in his rejection of Kuhn's God, and in a God who might have worked for his survival even as millions of others perished, for he rejects God in the name of humanity. However, oddly enough, given that Levi was a non-believer, his comments do nothing to make belief in God look ridiculous. Quite to the contrary: it is Kuhn's prayer that makes belief in God seem impossible. Levi seeks to remain faithful to human ways of seeing suffering, and that is something of which Kuhn loses sight in his thanking of God.

In denying humanity to God, Kuhn denies his own humanity, in the sense in which we think of such humanity as involving an understanding of one's common lot with others. Does Girtanner do the same thing? I do not think so, but the difference does not lie, I think, at the level of explicit belief or of what she might say in response to any questions about God's particular concern for her. Here, as so often in religious and moral matters, what is crucial is less what one believes and more the manner in which one believes it, the spirit that animates and informs the belief. My own view is that Girtanner, even if she says things that look quite like that which Kuhn says, is in fact saying something quite different, and precisely because of the spirit in which she says it. She may have thanked God for saving her, but there seems, so far as I can judge, not a trace of complacency or incapacity to grasp the nature of the situation in general terms in her response – unlike the case of Kuhn, who seems simply to have no sense, or to have lost his sense, of his common fate with his fellow prisoners.

9. I wish to end by drawing attention to a lacuna in Girtanner's book, to what one might call the need for a necessary corrective. This is not meant as a criticism: all books say only so much, but

³⁹ Levi, Primo, *I sommersi e i salvati*: 63, my translation.

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there is something implicit in her text which needs, I think, to be brought out and requires completion by being brought into contact with, once again, the writings of Simone Weil.

One of the most impressive and troubling aspects of Weil's work is to be found in her notion of gravity. 'Gravity' is Weil's term for our subjection to blind, mechanical forces that operate on us physically, psychologically and socially. We exist like machines, mistaking our subjection to mechanics for freedom, when freedom, as we normally understand it, is, in fact, nothing more than the fact (as Nietzsche too pointed out) of our enjoying a certain feeling of power: like Pascal, like Nietzsche, and like many others in different ways, Weil claims that human beings by nature seek to dominate, and when they manage to do so they mistake their feeling of pleasure at doing so for the experience of freedom.

One aspect of this is, of course, to emphasize the pure necessity of human beings as animal bodies: Weil is deeply sceptical about humanist conceptions of ourselves as minded, ensouled creatures, so far, at any rate, as what she calls the *natural* movements of human soul are concerned. Our bodies are, indeed, animal bodies, and, within the natural realm, we are subject to gravity, to necessity, as are the animals.

It is only through grace, in Weil's special sense of the term, that we achieve freedom: grace is given to the soul when we pay proper *attention* to something, be it a task, a human being, or whatever. Attention is not a straining of the will but rather a kind of motiveless openness to the object of attention, a suspending of the relentless turning of the self's greedy self-concern. Indeed, attention is, in fact, a form of acceptance of necessity: we are bound to necessity, says Weil, and we obey whether we like it or not. But if we consent to obeying then some things are possible to us that otherwise would not have been.

Now, whatever we make of these claims as an account of the human condition as such, it is clear that the experience of torture is the *non plus ultra* of such a state: even if it is not true that we are subject to necessity all the time as Weil claims, it is clear that the torture victim is, for it is clear that it is part of the purpose and special barbarity of torture not only to make sure that the victim is so, but also that he or she is fully aware of this.

In her account, Girtanner is reluctant to talk in detail of the physical sufferings she endured, but we can be sure that they were dreadful. However, because she is silent about this, we do not get a sense, when reading her book, of her reduction to a material creature abandoned to necessity and to the impact of matter, as Weil would put it.

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Rather – and this is one of the immensely impressive things about her – what we sense is that she is somehow able to *pay attention* or to *consent* in Weil's sense. This is remarkable, and can be inspiring, no doubt, but the missing term is clearly the background of necessity. That is the lacuna of which I spoke. And if I were asked to say where we might see the reality of necessity in torture I would point to the writings of Améry. I say this primarily because of his sense that there is, as he puts it, nothing worse than torture and that the person who has been tortured loses forever his faith in existence. It is not, I think, that Girtanner's capacity to consent is more impressive than Améry's refusal to do so, for they both testify in different ways to distinctive human possibilities, human possibilities that make us aware, amongst other things, how little we understand our own humanity and how both consent and refusal are involved in, feed from, each other: Girtanner's consent is a refusal to accept the despair that, according to Améry, anyone tortured must feel if he or she is to remain faithful to the reality of that suffering, whilst Améry's refusal involves, as Levi points out, and as Girtanner implicitly shows, a consent to his despair that poisoned his life. Girtanner and Améry need to be read together to help us see this, and they thus allow us to see that the distance that separates the believer from the unbeliever is, whilst from one perspective enormous, from another quite narrow because both, in their different ways, are seeking to make sense of their bafflement in the face of their humanity.

King's College London
christopher.hamilton@kcl.ac.uk