Assuming Responsibility in the Hope of Reconciliation

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Agamben insists that the concept of responsibility is 'irremediably contaminated by law', arguing instead for an ethical conception of non-responsibility that entails 'a confrontation with a responsibility that is infinitely greater than we could ever assume'. Against Agamben, I argue that the assumption of responsibility should be understood primarily neither in legal or ethical but political terms. Drawing on Ricoeur and Arendt, I suggest a political conception of responsibility as a responsiveness to the fragility of polity. As a political undertaking, assuming responsibility in the hope of reconciliation would mean not taking for granted the possibility of reconciliation. Rather, it would be predicated on an awareness of the political nature of the terms on which reconciliation might be realised and of the contingency of the reconciled community that is hoped for. Rather than seeking to "settle accounts" in order to 'restore' community, assuming responsibility would mean committing to an open-ended and agonistic interaction in the hope of realising a community that is not so much always to come as a fragile possibility of the present political moment.

1. In a society divided by a history of violence, what might it mean for "ordinary citizens" to assume responsibility for state wrongs in the hope of reconciliation? In such circumstances, the assumption of responsibility might entail an undertaking or a taking for granted. As an undertaking, the assumption of responsibility suggests acting with others to overcome injustice. As a taking for granted, the assumption of responsibility suggests presupposing that acknowledgment of collective wrongdoing will lead (and should lead) to reconciliation. However, in taking for granted the terms of reconciliation in this way, "former oppressors" risk perpetuating a history of injustice against the "formerly oppressed". For if "we did not know" then what wrongs were being perpetrated by the state in "our name", how can we be sure now that the project of reconciliation does not further assimilate those who have been wronged (i.e. by forcing them to (mis)represent their own interests and values in terms commensurate with our own)?

2. Against such presumptuousness, I will argue that the assumption of responsibility ought to be understood in terms of a political undertaking. Such an undertaking would require that citizens keep before them an awareness of the political nature of the terms on which reconciliation might be realised and, hence, a sense of the fragility and contingency of the reconciled community they hope to bring about. Rather than seeking to "settle accounts", an assumption of responsibility would mean committing to an open-ended political engagement.

3. In Remnants of Auschwitz, Giorgio Agamben (1999: 21) gestures toward an ethical responsibility that is "infinitely greater than any we could ever assume. At the most, we could be faithful to it...assert its unassumability". Agamben rightly questions the assumption that our ethical responsibility could ever be adequately appreciated when conceived exclusively in juridical terms. But Agamben leaves us with a stark choice between evading ethical responsibility by reducing it to juridical categories or remaining speechless and inert (the German word for this is betroffen – see Buruma 1995: 21-22) before an unlimited responsibility. Resisting this choice, I will argue that the enlarged ethical responsibility Agamben gestures towards must be assumed but that, in being assumed, responsibility becomes political. Following Hannah Arendt, our ethical responsibility to others can only be testified to where there is a space for politics and this...
space depends on law for its delimitation. Instead of being faithful to an unassumable responsibility, then, the political challenge is to assume responsibility in an unassuming way.

**The terms of reconciliation**

4. In *The State and Revolution*, Lenin (1999: 16) writes that the state "arises where, when and insofar as class antagonisms objectively cannot be reconciled". Indeed, the existence of the state "proves that the class antagonisms are irreconcilable". He quotes Engels: as the "product of a society at a certain state of development" the state is "the admission that this society has become entangled in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has split into irreconcilable antagonisms which it is powerless to dispel. But in order that these antagonisms…might not consume themselves in fruitless struggle, it became necessary to have a power, seemingly standing above society, that would alleviate the conflict and keep it within the bounds of 'order'" (in Lenin 1999: 16). Far from being an organ for the reconciliation of conflict, the state is "the creation of 'order', which legalises and perpetuates" oppression by 'moderating the conflict' between rulers and ruled (Lenin 1999: 16).

5. The central question with which modern political philosophy has been preoccupied is: how can citizens peacefully coexist in a society within which individuals and groups have competing interests and divergent values? Rather than seeking to reconcile these conflicting values and interests, liberal philosophers justify the state by appealing to a reciprocity of interests among citizens in primary social goods (such as life, liberty and property) that are necessary for pursuing their plural conceptions of the good life. These primary social goods are public in the sense that they can only be collectively secured. But they are common only in the thin sense that every individual can be supposed to have a private interest in them as a means for pursuing his/her particular conception of the good. In distributing these basic goods to its citizens, the liberal state is supposed to function as an impartial mediator, ensuring fairness in citizens’ dealings with one another by upholding the rule of law.

6. Marxists and liberals are in agreement, then, about the irreconcilability of social conflict. However, whereas liberals take the conflict of values and interests to be inevitable, Marxists view the conflict to be the product of the organisation of society in the interests of some against others. On this account, the liberal state upholds the values and interests of the ruling class, in fact, despite its legitimation, in law, as impartial mediator. The Marxist solution to the irreconcilability of class conflict is, of course, revolution: the seizure of power by the oppressed in order to create a classless society. In such a society there would no longer be a need for the state (or, indeed, for politics or justice) since there would be a true harmony of interests among citizens. This is a reconciliation of sorts but one that most people are likely to find discomforting, given the history of 'actually existing' socialism in the twentieth century.

7. The debate between Marxists and liberals concerning the role of the state in mediating of political conflict has new relevance given the emergence of reconciliation as a central term of political discourse within "divided societies" since the 1990s. In countries as diverse as Australia, Chile and South Africa, states have promoted reconciliation as a form of nation-building in the wake of wrongs perpetrated by former regimes (e.g. see Norval 1998; Trumper 1999; Veitch 1999; Humphrey 2000; Muldoon 2003; Short 2003). The discourse of reconciliation is supposed to provide citizens divided by the violence of the past with a vocabulary in terms of which they can work out the terms of their political association.

8. Following what might be called the restorative account of reconciliation, the possibility of political reconciliation depends upon a "perpetrator-class" assuming responsibility for past wrongs. All of those who find themselves implicated in state wrongs as supporters or beneficiaries of the previous regime should acknowledge their share of collective responsibility for those wrongs (see Schaap 2001). Assuming responsibility – by establishing the truth about the past, acknowledging the wrong, apologising and making reparations – opens the way for forgiveness, restoration and social healing. Forgiveness restores the wrongdoers to community with those wronged by releasing them from the moral debt incurred through their transgression (see Schaap 2003). In this way, social
harmony comes to replace that alienation between groups that was brought about by an original wrong. The sceptical temperament of liberals means that they are likely to criticise advocates of the restorative conception of reconciliation for aspiring for too much in politics: better to settle for the more pragmatic and modest goals of peaceful coexistence, mutual toleration and the restoration of the rule of law as a basis for reconciliation (e.g. see Garton-Ash 1997: 37).

9. However, the liberal appeal to citizens’ reciprocal interest in stability, security or fair terms of social cooperation will not do in societies divided by a history of state violence. For, although we might reasonably suppose that every individual has an interest in securing her/his life, liberty and property, we cannot expect that every individual will look to the same institutions to provide for this. This is so because many citizens must live with the memory that state-sanctioned violence against some was justified for the security of all. If reconciliation is to take place they must come to terms not only with the violence of the past but with its ideological justification (see van Roermund 2001: 187f). Liberalism is supposed to make peaceful co-existence possible by setting aside from politics controversial questions about identity and belonging and deriving the legitimacy of the state from a thin conception of the good. However, the idea of a reciprocity of interests actually takes for granted a commonality among citizens that would lead them to want to share the same public institutions in the first place. In presupposing a reciprocity of interests among citizens, liberalism actually takes for granted what it purports to explain.

10. The Marxist critique of the liberal state is important because it draws attention to the politics of reconciliation. Reconciliation is an inherently political project because it depends on the invocation of a "we" in terms of which the divergent interests and aspirations of conflicting groups within a society might be articulated. As Gillian Rose (1996: 4) writes, "Politics begins not when you organise to defend an individual or particular or local interest, but when you organise to further the 'general' interest within which your particular interest may be represented." Every aspiration to reconcile unavoidably presupposes an order in terms of which conflict (past, present and future) may be represented. The challenge is to keep in view the political nature of that order.

11. To understand reconciliation politically we cannot take for granted a social harmony to be restored or a reciprocity of interests to be secured. Rather, commonality must be understood as the fragile and contingent achievement of politics. To assume responsibility while presupposing commonality is to take it for granted that the conflict of the past can be brought to a close if only our present remorse is sincere enough. Hence, clichés about ‘closing chapters’ and ‘turning pages’ abound in reconciliation-talk. However, taking for granted the terms of reconciliation in this way risks perpetuating the injustice that the assumption of responsibility is supposed to ameliorate.

12. For what is at stake in the politics of reconciliation is the negotiation of the terms of association between former enemies, not the restoration of harmony between alienated members of a moral community. Insofar as reconciliation is a political issue, the issue does not turn on the wrongdoers assuming responsibility in order that they might be restored to the moral community by exchanging apologies and reparation for forgiveness. Rather, the problem is how to found a political community in the first place. This means that the terms on which reconciliation might be enacted cannot be assumed in advance but must be contested, negotiated, challenged, worked out through political interaction.

13. As a political undertaking, then, the assumption of responsibility means acknowledging the risk that social conflict may turn out to be irreconcilable. It is not about soliciting forgiveness in the hope of a final settlement. Rather, it entails a willingness to engage in an agonistic struggle to realise commonality within the historical circumstances that continue to divide citizens who share the same political institutions. This is not to say that apology and reparation are unimportant in politics. On the contrary, they are fundamental for sustaining political society. However, in order to be morally meaningful they must be predicated on an awareness of the political situation in which they are practised. This is to say that they should be offered unassumingly.

**Responsibility: juridical and ethical**

identifies two conceptions of responsibility: juridical and ethical. The juridical conception of responsibility refers to an obligation to compensate or suffer punishment when one is at fault. The idea of fault means that “an infraction has been committed, that the author knows the rule, and...that he is in control of his acts to the point of having been able to have acted differently” (Ricoeur 2000: 24).

15. The juridical conception of responsibility thus entails imputation from which follows retribution. To impute is to attribute to an agent an action which dishonours an obligation or breaks a prohibition. To be a responsible moral agent, in this sense, is to be one who is accountable for his actions (as their ‘actual author’) insofar as he is free to act in conformity with or in violation of the law. Without law there is no responsibility since there is nothing to which we can be held to account or in terms of which an account might be rendered. Central to the juridical conception of responsibility, then, is the metaphor of an account, which suggests "a kind of moral bookkeeping of merits and demerits, as in a double-entry ledger: receipts and expenses, credits and debits, with an eye to a sort of positive or negative balance" (Ricoeur 2000: 14). The metaphor of a balance book, Ricoeur notes, “seems to underlie the apparently banal idea of being accountable for, and the (apparently even more banal) idea of giving an account, in the sense of reporting, recounting, at the end a kind of reading of this strange summary dossier” (Ricoeur 2000: 14).

16. The wider ethical conception of responsibility, by contrast, refers to an obligation "to respond" in the sense not only of being accountable for but of being responsive to. As such the concept extends well beyond the framework of compensation and punishment. Whereas the juridical conception of responsibility moralises imputation in relation to legal prohibition, an ethical conception of responsibility requires that the "root of imputation’ be "demoralise[d]" in order to "remoralise the exercise of responsibility" in ways other than "in terms of obligation, in the sense of a moral or internalised social constraint“ (Ricoeur 2000: 20).

17. By "demoralising imputation" Ricoeur seems to mean ascribing responsibility to an agent independently of legal fault. Responsibility is not ascribed in terms of the individual's freedom to conform with or to violate law. Rather, the ascription of an act to an agent is conceived in relation to the "phenomena of initiative and intervention whereby we catch sight of the interference of the agent on the course of the world, an interference that effectively causes changes in the world" (Ricoeur 2000: 23 – emphasis in original). As such, responsibility is understood in relation to freedom as free spontaneity or what Arendt calls natality (see Arendt 1998: 177f.). This freedom to begin is independent of those legitimate expectations institutionalised through the law; it is the freedom to do what is wholly unexpected. It is because we always act into a world that is constituted through the inter-action of a plurality of agents who are similarly capable of initiatory action that our own actions rarely achieve their purpose and the effects of our action on the world are unpredictable.

18. On this wider ethical conception, one is primarily responsible not for the effects of one's actions but for those in one's care:

The idea of a person for whom one has responsibility joined with that of the thing one has under one's control, leads in this way to a quite remarkable broadening that makes the direct object of one's responsibility vulnerable and fragile insofar as it is something handed over to the care of an agent. Responsible for what, one may ask? For what is fragile, one is henceforth inclined to answer...one becomes responsible for harm because, first of all, one is responsible for others. (Ricoeur 2000: 29)

We are "rendered responsible by the fragile" since by an "appeal" or "injunction" another "declares us responsible" or "calls us to responsibility" (Ricoeur 1996: 16, 17).

19. In his discussion of the concept, Agamben distinguishes even more sharply than Ricoeur between the juridical and ethical senses of responsibility. Rather than seeking to reclaim the concept of responsibility for ethics by re-conceiving it in terms of care for the fragile, Agamben insists that the concept of responsibility is "irremediably contaminated by law” (Agamben 1999: 20). Why contaminated? Because, unlike ethics, "law is solely directed toward judgement, independent of truth and justice" (Agamben 1999: 18). As Emilios Christodoulidis (2000) argues, law is an institution of closure: it demands certainty
for the sake of securing expectations. Consequently, to conceive responsibility in juridical
terms is necessarily to presuppose that our obligations are finite and calculable (see
Murphy 2003).

20. Nevertheless, Agamben (1999: 20-21) insists, "ethics, politics and religion have been
able to define themselves only by seizing terrain from juridical responsibility – not in order
to assume another kind of responsibility, but to articulate zones of non-responsibility".
What Agamben means by "zones of non-responsibility" appears similar to the
"demoralisation of imputation" referred to by Ricoeur. For this non-responsibility is not
equivalent to impunity. "Rather, it signifies – at least for ethics – a confrontation with a
responsibility that is infinitely greater than we could ever assume. At the most we can be
faithful to it, that is, assert, its unassumability" (Agamben 1999: 20-21).

21. By insisting that responsibility is a fundamentally juridical concept, Agamben identifies
the assumption of responsibility with taking for granted the possibility of settling accounts.
Assuming responsibility is not an ethical gesture since it means only that one becomes the
guarantor of a debt: "To assume guilt and responsibility – which can, at times be
necessary – is to leave the territory of ethics and enter that of law" (Agamben 1999: 22).
The concept of responsibility may be necessary but it is a mistake to make it the
cornerstone of a moral theory. For the only genuine ethical response to the kind of
responsibility that arises in relation to the grave wrongs perpetrated in the death camps is
to acknowledge its unassumability.

**Politicising responsibility: Arendt’s Athens contra Agamben’s Jerusalem**

22. The ethical responsibility Agamben gestures towards is one that is before the law in
the sense that it exists "prior to any contract that would isolate or prescribe a moment of
reciprocity" (Murphy 2003). Insofar as he reveals the ethical inadequacy of construing
responsibility exclusively in legal-contractarian terms, Agamben identifies something
important with the idea of an unassumable responsibility. However, as Catherine Mills
(2003) observes, Agamben bases his rejection of the concept of responsibility on a
selective etymology that neglects the ethical conception of responsibility as
responsiveness to others. Closely related to this is Agamben’s "theoretical neglect of the
intersubjective foundation of ethics" (Mills 2003).

23. Both of these problems ultimately derive from the messianic politics that informs
Agamben’s work (see Mills forthcoming). This is the hope, as Gillian Rose (1996: 16) puts
it, for the New Jerusalem: "a collective life without inner or outer boundaries, without
obstacles or occlusions, within and between souls and within and between cities, without
the perennial work which constantly legitimates and delegitimates the transformation of
power into authority of different kinds". Against Agamben, we should turn to Hannah
Arendt to understand how we might acknowledge ethical responsibility while assuming it
politically.

24. Agamben departs fundamentally from Arendt in his assessment of the significance of
the Holocaust and the ethical-political response it demands. For Agamben (1999: 69),
"Auschwitz marks the end and the ruin of every ethics of dignity and conformity to a norm"
and this recognition founds the call for "a new ethics, an ethics of a form of life that begins
where dignity ends." This ethics requires us to bear witness to something to which it is
impossible to bear witness: the desubjectification of the other exemplified in the figure of
the Muselmann. The death camps made evident the ruin of modern reason and the
inadequacy of modern political categories. Against Arendt, there can be "no return from the
camps to classical politics" since "in the camps, city and house became indistinguishable,
and the possibility of differentiating between our biological body and our political body –
between what is communicable and sayable – was taken away form us forever" (Agamben

25. By contrast, Arendt turns to politics to recover meaning and value in human affairs
following their radical negation in the death camps. To resist the legacy of the death
 camps, Arendt appropriates for modernity the classical conception of politics. This leads
her to understand politics as the activity through which we constitute and experience a
world in common with others. By conceiving political freedom in terms of ‘natality’ and the
public realm in terms of a ‘space of appearances’, Arendt provides "a compelling counter-
memory to the persistent spectre of the Holocaust" (Dietz 2000: 102). Against the reduction of the person to a bundle of reliable reactions in the death camps, Arendt reasserts an ethics of dignity, but one which identifies dignity not with autonomy and conformity to a norm but the human capacity for initiatory action.

26. Arendt thus provides a basis for understanding how ethical responsibility might be assumed politically. Indeed, for Arendt, the political is ethical insofar as it is concerned with the constitution of a plural subject of collective action - the appearance of a plural "we" in the public realm. [Arendt (1987) certainly differentiates the political from the moral. However, because she wants to avoid a juridical political morality, her moral/political distinction tends to mirror the juridical/ethical distinction. See Hutchings 1996: 94f.]. Agamben (1998: 85) understands the "originary 'political' relation" to be that between 'bare life' and 'sovereign power', that is, between solitary individuals whose biological life is threatened by a system that sets them beyond its protection (politics as a vertical relation of domination). By contrast, for Arendt the originary political relation is plurality: the constitution of an intersubjective common world through collective action (politics as a horizontal relation of "power-to").

27. Consequently, whereas Agamben gestures toward a responsibility that is unassumable because conceived in terms of an ethics that is uncontaminated by worldly institutions, Arendt conceives responsibility in terms of care for the fragile polity that is constituted through action. The ethical responsibility Agamben gestures towards is unrepresentable because conceived outside the representational structure of worldly institutions. To quote Rose (1996: 37) again:

"The hope of evading the risks of political community explains the appeal of one widespread vision of the new ethics – the ethics of the other...The self, according to this new ethics, cannot experience truly transforming loss, but plunders the world for the booty of its self-seeking interest. To become ethical, this self is to be devastated, traumatised, unthroned, by the commandment to substitute the other for itself. Responsibility is defined in this new ethics as 'passivity beyond passivity', which is inconceivable and not representable because it takes place beyond any city.

28. By contrast, for Arendt, responsibility arises only where there is a space for politics, which is constituted through collective action but nonetheless depends on law for its delimitation. Indeed, we are rendered responsible by the fragility of polity. The concept of 'polity' is intended here to encapsulate both the 'space of appearances' and the intersubjective 'world' that is constituted through our public interaction. The common world that is disclosed through politics is fragile because its realisation depends upon the "unreliable and only temporary agreement of many wills and intentions" (Arendt 1998: 21). Because the fragile in-between is disclosed only so long as people act and speak together, it can vanish as suddenly as it springs up.

29. The possibility of making present a "we" through political interaction depends on maintaining a space for politics in which citizens can appear before each other. While the preservation of a space of appearances depends partly on its formal constitution, it ultimately relies upon its ongoing actualisation through public action and speech. Yet the space of appearances is also threatened by politics itself. The fragility of polity, in this sense, arises from agents' capacity for initiatory action, which not only generates new relationships but transgresses those existing boundaries that delimit the terms of association. The laws and institutions that define the space of appearances are thus susceptible to the "onslaught with which each new generation must insert itself" into the world (Arendt 1998: 191).

30. Whereas the juridical conception of responsibility is concerned with the integrity of the self, political responsibility is associated with care for the fragile in-between that is constituted through acting in concert with others. The juridical conception of responsibility is primarily negative. It enjoins us to avoid wrongdoing and establishes our accountability for consequences of actions that may be imputed to us as intending subjects. We aim to live in conformity with the law that we give to ourselves as rational moral agents and seek to repair harms that we knowingly bring about when we fail to uphold this law.

31. Political responsibility, by contrast, requires us not only to avoid wrongdoing but to preserve and look after the world we share in common with others (Arendt 1987). It enjoins us to prevent wrongdoing and to assume responsibility not only for actions of
which we may be said to be the authors but for the unintended consequences or side-effects that result from our interaction with others, the processes in which we become entangled not just as doers but as sufferers. This “vicarious responsibility” is the unavoidable consequence of “the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellowmen, and that the faculty of action…can be actualised only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community” (Arendt 1987: 50).

32. Conceiving responsibility in terms of care for a fragile polity opens the way for understanding how responsibility might be assumed politically while remaining attentive to the enlarged ethical responsibility that Agamben insists is unassumable. The central problem with Agamben’s messianic politics – his opposition of a pure ethical conception of politics (the New Jerusalem) to the violence of sovereign power (the old Athens and its ‘burning cousin’ Auschwitz) – is that it has a disabling effect on political action in the present (Rose 1996: 15-39; see also Dallmayr 2001: 64f.). If the only ethical response we are left with is to assert the unassumability of an enlarged ethical responsibility, then we are deprived of the rough ground (i.e. the delimitation of a space for politics) that enables action in the present. In short, Agamben’s messianic sensibility threatens to lead to “frustration and withdrawal from sustained engagements in building commonality” (White 2001: 180).

33. An Arendtian politics also aims to move beyond predicating commonality on a micro-subject (reciprocity of interests) or macro-subject (social harmony). Instead, self and community are conceived in performative terms: both the agent who acts and the “we” in terms of which our interests and values might be represented are “disclosed” through interaction. The self does not precede and determine action but actor and act coincide. Similarly, polity is uncertain and fragile because it is a potentiality of action. But so long as a space for politics is maintained, the disclosure of a “we” is an ever-present possibility in the present. While the delimitation of a space for politics necessarily entails reduction, politicising commonality by recognising its performative quality keeps the terms of political association in view for being contingent and revisable. Awareness of the fragility of polity thus provides a basis for understanding how responsibility might be assumed in an unassuming way.

**Assuming responsibility in an unassuming way**

34. In contrast to the economy of rights and duties according to which we are morally accountable, then, political responsibility makes a claim on the individual for “an on-going responsiveness to the world, including a need to respond for what has been done” (Williams 1998: 946). It would be unpolitical to assume responsibility only in terms of the juridical conception. For to limit political responsibility to those actions of which we may be said to be author is to neglect the extent to which “who” we are as agents in the world is beyond our control because it emerges from our inter-action with others. If conceived exclusively in juridical terms, assuming responsibility would be, as Zenon Bankowski (2002) puts it, about “repairing my timeless ahistorical self…we would be saved as long as we purify our interior self and our intentions are right”. As political undertaking, by contrast, the assumption of responsibility is predicated on an acknowledgement of the extent to which who we are depends on our historical relation to others, the way we are enmeshed in the stories enacted in the world, irrespective of our particular motives and intentions.

35. Yet, as Ricoeur (2000: 29) observes, with this displacement of the object of responsibility from the effects of one’s action to the fragility of polity comes an “unlimited extension of the scope of responsibility”. Conceiving political responsibility in terms of care for an intersubjective world seems to implicate us in every injustice since it extends our responsibility indefinitely in both time and space, according to the boundlessness of action. An apparently unassumable responsibility thus threatens to overwhelm us. As Ricoeur (2000: 33-34) observes, “human action is possible only on the condition of a concrete arbitration between the short-term vision of a responsibility limited to the foreseeable and controllable effects of an action and the long-term vision of an unlimited responsibility. Simply neglecting the side effects of an action would render it dishonest, but an unlimited responsibility would make action impossible”. Political responsibility thus requires us to act in the “broken middle” between love and law that is the space of politics (Rose 1996), to find the just measure between fleeing responsibility for actions of which we are not the authors and the paralysis that ensues from recognition of an infinite responsibility.
36. Conceiving political responsibility in relation to the attempt to establish a new beginning conditions an awareness of the contingency and frailty of community. For it is only in retrospect that we are able to judge an event as the beginning of something new. Indeed, as Rob Sparrow (2000: 348) argues, the attempt to enact a new beginning sensitises us to the fact that “the distinction between our past and our present is not necessarily a historically significant one”. From the perspective of an anticipated future, what we take to be the ‘present’ extends both forward and backward in time. Consequently, “what we see as the temporal distance between our actions and those of our predecessors, which distinguishes our actions from theirs, may not be apparent to those looking back on us from the future. Instead they may see us as sharing the same moment, characterised by a continuing dynamic of extermination, dispossession or forced assimilation” (Sparrow 2000: 354). From the perspective of an anticipated future, our present failure to assume responsibility for past wrongs (or to do so presumptuously) is likely to appear as a further and continuing act of injustice toward the ancestors of those against whom an original wrong was perpetrated.

37. When combined with the knowledge that the significance of events emerges most clearly when retrospectively incorporated into an historical narrative, our political concern that future generations should judge us favourably leads to a greater awareness of our ethical predicament. For it encourages us to see the time of reconciliation not only as the ‘now’ between our own past and future but as “a historical moment that extends to encompass the entire history of those relations” (Sparrow 2000: 354). And it makes us aware of the risks of action, the fact that “we may be judged harshly in hindsight” and that “good intentions may not be enough to preserve us from condemnation” (Sparrow 2000: 357). If we fail to establish a new beginning in the present, the distinction we would like to draw between our good intentions now and the wrongs perpetrated back then will not become historically significant.

38. This requires that we assume responsibility both in its juridical and ethical senses. Assuming responsibility politically, as Perrin and Veitch (1998: 228) argue, would mean not only acknowledging a debt but also acknowledging that this debt can never be repaid. Reparations are required to acknowledge the debt in the first place. But there is an injustice discernable in the presumption of a moral account that could be settled. For an awareness of an enlarged ethical responsibility means that acknowledgment of our implication in past wrongs is likely to remain unsettling (see also Schaap 2004, forthcoming). Agamben’s idea of being faithful to responsibility by asserting its unassumability is important here insofar as it warns against attempts at “cheap reconciliation”. Agamben (1999: 22-23) notes that throughout history assuming juridical responsibility while knowing oneself to be innocent has been considered noble while assuming political or moral responsibility without accepting the corresponding legal consequences has been the arrogant prerogative of the powerful. Yet, in contemporary politics the “contrite assumption of moral responsibilities is invoked at every occasion as an exemption from the responsibilities demanded by law” (Agamben 1999: 24).

39. Assuming responsibility politically means acknowledging the risk of politics while putting one’s faith in the possibility of reconciliation. The assumption of responsibility is then not so much oriented to soliciting forgiveness from those wronged as inviting them to a potentially agonistic struggle to understand the significance of past wrongs for our political association. Because our understanding of historical injustice depends on how we remember the past, this seems to open the way for interminable dispute about the meaning of historical events. Yet lack of agreement over what happened is not fatal for reconciliation so long as the invocation of the “we” that is still to come serves to delimit a space for a reconciliatory politics in the present. Indeed, the struggle to understand the significance of past wrongs in relation to the community to come is the always-unfinished business of a reconciliatory politics in the present.

40. In this context, to assume political responsibility in an unassuming way is to recognise the end of reconciliation as a political impossibility (see Norval 1998). For although the aspiration to reconcile enables a reconciliatory politics in the present, its realisation would undermine those conditions that constitute its possibility in the first place. The ideal of reconciliation is self-negating to the extent that it would overcome the plurality that enables a potentially world-disclosing interaction in the first place. Reconciliation necessarily presupposes a community that is not yet. However, if reconciliation is to be conceived
politically, this end must be recognised as "a good that exists as good only as long as it
cannot be reached" (Mouffe 2000: 137).

41. As such, the anticipation of community does not furnish a regulative ideal in terms of
which a juridical order is founded and according to which our responsibility may be
calculated. Rather, conceiving responsibility in terms of the fragility of polity establishes a
context in which it is possible to confront one's former enemy as political adversary.
Against taking for granted the terms on which reconciliation might be enacted by
hypostatising community as a regulative ideal, as a political undertaking the assumption of
responsibility would be predicated on the acknowledgement that we have only politics to
fall back on. We cannot rely on the institution of a legal order to sustain reconciliation
since community is ultimately enabled only by "the will to live together with others in the
mode of acting and speaking" (Arendt 1998: 246).

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