

Personal Impressions, Possibilities,
and
Future Visions

Arne Naess's Humanistic Ethic: Personal Impressions and Reflections

Espen Gamlund

Espen Gamlund is a Research Fellow in the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art and Ideas / The Ethics Program, at University of Oslo in Norway. He is working on a PhD in philosophy. The working title of his project is *A Change of Heart—The Morality and Psychology of Forgiveness*. His main interests are moral philosophy, environmental ethics, conflict resolution, Spinoza, and Buddhist ethics. His article "Who Has Moral Status in the Environment: A Spinozistic Answer," is forthcoming in the *Trumpeter*. He has studied the philosophy of Arne Naess for several years, and talked with him personally. Email: espen.gamlund@ifikk.uio.no

Introduction

Arne Naess is most readily recognized for his warm-hearted commitment to protecting nature from unnecessary human interference. Being a founder and continuing supporter of the deep ecology movement, Naess has shown himself to be a genuine friend of nature. As a supporter of the deep ecology movement, he can be considered nonanthropocentrist and a critic of anthropocentrism. Nonanthropocentrists claim that nature, taken broadly, has a value in itself independent of human aims and needs; while anthropocentrism claims that only humans have such an intrinsic or inherent value. Without doubt, in many societies the latter position represents the dominant view on nature today. When Arne Naess formulated his Ecosophy T, it was, among other things, in direct response to what he considered to be both an unreasonable and irresponsible use of natural resources for human purposes.¹

In 1984 Naess and George Sessions put forth "the deep ecology movement platform" with eight principles serving as common guidelines for the movement. Let us consider just one principle in that platform, point number four: "The flourishing of human life and

cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. The flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease.”² According to Naess, present human interference with nature is vast and destructive. Point number four emphasizes the importance of reducing human interference through decreasing the human population. The future flourishing of nonhuman life on earth requires such a decrease. This statement has provoked many people, especially those who favour a kind of anthropocentrism. In fact, Arne Naess and supporters of the deep ecology movement have been accused by some as being anti-human. Should we really decrease the human population for the sake of the flourishing of nonhuman life on Earth? Many have been and still are skeptical of this line of thought.

Although it is tempting, I will not answer this question here because it is not my main concern in this paper. The reason for bringing in the deep ecology platform, and the idea of decreasing the human population to protect nature, is to provide a background for my discussion of Arne Naess’s *humanism* and *humanistic ethics*. As I said, Naess is first and foremost known as an environmentalist, both in Norway and internationally.³ But as a philosopher and person he is far more complex than that. As the recent publication of *Selected Works of Arne Naess* reveals, he has been engaged in many different philosophical topics, such as empirical semantics, scepticism, philosophy of science, Gandhi, Spinoza, and much more. Still, what has not yet been explicitly identified is what may be interpreted as his humanistic ethics. Naess is not only a defender of nature’s worth, he is also a spokesman for human worth and the importance of having respect for all human beings. This may come as a surprise to those who have accused him of being anti-human. In what follows, I discuss this somewhat lesser known side of his philosophy.

I will argue that Arne Naess has formulated, if not explicitly, then at least implicitly, a humanistic ethic. I will explain what is meant by the term “humanistic ethic,” but I would like to underline that this is not, as far as I know, a term Naess himself uses to characterize his own ethical position. He regards himself “a supporter of the deep ecology movement,” “a skeptic,” “a possibilist,” “a Spinozist,” but, to my knowledge at least, not “a humanist.” This means that I will have to reconstruct a humanistic ethic from Naess’s philosophy. In doing so, I will make use of Gandhi, Spinoza, and others.⁴

Humanism and Humanistic Ethics

There is to my knowledge no single definition of “humanistic ethics” in the philosophical literature. The term occurs in a number of contexts, often in connection with “humanism,” “secularism,” “atheism,” “religion,” and so on. At least the link to humanism is apparent, and it might be useful to examine this term before we proceed to consider what is meant by a humanistic ethic.

The term “humanism” can be understood in several different ways, that is, as Christian humanism, secular humanism, scientific humanism, Renaissance humanism, Enlightenment humanism, and so on. One could also construe numerous other types of humanism in connection with different philosophers and philosophies, for example, Spinozistic humanism, Kantian humanism, Marxist humanism, and Heideggerian humanism. I will argue in this paper that it also makes sense to speak of a Naessian humanism or humanistic ethic. This, at least, is what I invite the reader to consider in the following. As far as a definition of humanism is concerned, it will necessarily differ according to context, both historically and philosophically. It seems that a definition might be quite arbitrary; hence, I will not attempt to define it here. Humanism is a component in a variety of specific philosophical systems, but it is also incorporated into some religious schools of thought. Nevertheless, I presume that a humanistic ethic would naturally spring from a certain kind of humanism.

At this point we can ask how Arne Naess’s humanistic ethic would look. Even though he does not employ this term in his own writing, he has written things that point in the direction of such an ethic. For example, consider the following line from a recently published paper. “Humility in confronting a human being, respect *for the status of being a human being*, whether that person is a torturer or a holy person, is essential.”⁵

What Naess says here is in harmony with ideals found in several humanistic traditions, both religious and philosophical. For instance, Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” This amounts to a universal and egalitarian concept of human dignity and value that has great moral force and enjoys more or less universal recognition of validity, both morally and legally. It is clear that terms such as “respect,” “status,”

and “dignity” are central components in any humanistic ethic. I will therefore employ the following definition of “humanistic ethic,” which is in agreement with Arne Naess’s basic intuitions quoted above:

A humanistic ethic is an ethic which emphasises the dignity and inherent value of all human beings.

In this statement I have added the term “inherent value,” which may be understood as a moral status value ascribed to all human beings. A humanistic ethic as understood here highlights the importance of recognizing the equal inherent value and dignity of *all* human beings, whether that person is a torturer or not, as Naess says. Next, I will look at the implications of this definition for Naess’s distinction between persons and actions.

Persons and Actions

I will now attempt to reconstruct from Naess’s philosophy a humanistic ethic along the lines just described. I will start with Naess’s own reconstruction of Gandhi’s non-violent resistance. One central tenet of Gandhian nonviolence is maintaining respect for one’s opponent in a situation of conflict. In *Gandhi and Group Conflict: An Exploration of Satyagraha—Theoretical Background*, Naess reconstructs the following norm from Gandhi’s theory of nonviolence: “N5: Fight antagonism, not antagonists.”⁶ N5 can be considered one of the fundamental norms in the Gandhian ethics of nonviolence. It also has an essential place in Naess’s own reconstruction of Gandhi’s nonviolence. Moreover, this norm will serve as the starting point for my discussion of Naess’s humanistic ethic. My assumption is that this norm, in Naess’s ethical thought, can be given a justification from within a non-reductive and interpersonally holistic framework. I will return to that later.

But first I will introduce a general framework from which Naess’s humanistic ethic can be developed. When one is faced with an aggressor or antagonist intentionally attempting harm, one faces the dilemma of how to respond. This dilemma might be reformulated in a normative ethical question: How should we respond to wrongdoing? Generally speaking, we can assume four answers to this question divided into two main types:

- A. Overcome evil with evil
 - i. Revenge. Seeking to revenge the evil received from others with at least as much evil or perhaps a bit more. We know this

response from the old traditions of blood revenge as well as from several of our present conflicts throughout the world.

- ii. Rectificatory justice. Claiming that the evil we receive is rectified by a just punishment or compensation where the evil received should be balanced by the reciprocal evil. This amounts to Aristotle's theory of rectificatory justice (*to diorthotikon dikaion*) found in Part V of *The Nicomachean Ethics*. The assumption underlying this theory is the ideal of rectifying balance between two parties in a conflict. When A inflicts an evil on B, there is an imbalance. But B may then rectify this imbalance by returning an evil.

B. Refusal to overcome evil with evil

- i. Pacifism. A refusal to use weapons or violence towards potential or actual aggressors (nonviolence in the weak sense).
- ii. Overcoming evil with good. Responding to anger with patience, hatred with love and forgiveness, or violence with nonviolence (nonviolence in the stronger sense of Gandhi's *ahimsā*).⁷

I do not claim that this list includes all possible responses to wrongdoing; however, I do think it summarizes the main types. What specifically can we draw from this list of responses with regard to Naess's humanistic ethic? For one thing, it seems natural to place Naess in the B.ii category. Two main reasons support this claim: first, he is a Gandhian; and second, he is a Spinozist.⁸ Rather than providing a detailed account of B.ii, I propose to look at some of the possible motivations for accepting B.ii.

Let us return to N5 outlined earlier. We may ask: Why should we fight antagonism and not antagonists? Following Augustine's famous saying "love the sinner and hate the sin,"⁹ we could put forward a similar question: Why should we hate the sin, but not the sinner? In more modern language: Why should we direct our negative thoughts and emotions towards the offence or wrong, and not towards the offender or wrongdoer? I believe this question has been, and continues to be, central to Naess's ethical thinking and practice. One answer he has given on several occasions, both in writing and in lectures, is that we should direct our anger and hatred towards wrongs and not wrongdoers on the grounds that there is no such thing as "wrongdoers."¹⁰ By the same token he would say that neither criminals nor sinners exist among us. Surely, there are people performing horrible and appalling actions, but that does not automatically make those responsible horrible and appalling people.

Hearing this, someone might respond: “This is nonsense. How can you make this distinction?” The question is certainly warranted. In ordinary language it makes perfect sense to say that wrongdoers do exist and that they commit wrongdoings. People who steal, rape, and murder are thieves, rapists, and murders. In short, they are wrongdoers. This is just a matter of stating facts about the world we live in. So why does Naess object to this line of thought? The picture here is complicated. First, Naess does not explicitly say very much about *why* he thinks there are no wrongdoers; he just makes the point on various occasions. Second, the answer as to why there are no wrongdoers is philosophically and ethically deep. What Naess says, however, seems to point in the direction of what I call a non-reductive and interpersonally holistic concept of the person. I will attempt *on behalf of* Naess, using premises from Spinoza and others, to say why there are no wrongdoers.

Wrongdoings, Not Wrongdoers

What if we made the assumption that we should not only fight antagonism and hate wrongs, but also fight antagonists and hate wrongdoers? What would be our reasons for maintaining this view? Several answers are possible; one could be that we don’t see the point of making a distinction between persons and actions along the lines suggested above. Insofar as we fight antagonism and wrongdoing, we are fighting antagonists and wrongdoers at the same time. To fight the first, we have to fight the latter.¹¹ One way of looking at this is to say that a person is identical to his actions, that is, that one is the sum of one’s actions. A man sexually abusing a child is, according to this argument, a pedophile, and it makes perfect sense to call him a pedophile. This is, as I said earlier, just a matter of stating a fact.¹² Let us call this the person-centred view. This position is reductive and individualistic. It is reductive in that it takes the pedophile to be nothing more than the sum of his wrongdoings. It is individualistic because it stresses the fundamental difference between self and other; in this case, between oneself and pedophiles.

Personally, I don’t think Naess is sympathetic with this line of thought. Certainly, he would agree on the importance of condemning pedophilia: it is morally wrong in the strongest sense. But he would not for that reason be condemning pedophiles as human beings. Why? The reason would be exactly the opposite of the person-centred view: he would be hesitant to regard the pedophile merely as a sum of these actions. He would say something like, “what NN has done to these children is

morally despicable, and he should be punished for it, but let us not forget that NN has a loving relationship with his mother, and his colleagues at work greatly approve of him.”¹³ This suggests that, as a human being, he is not reducible to a mere sum of his despicable actions. He is something more: a son to his loving mother, a colleague, a friend, and so on. This amounts to more than an action-centred view, and is more akin to a non-reductive and interpersonally holistic concept of the self.¹⁴

This perspective opens up to the assumption of the non-intrinsic evilness of human beings. Humans are not evil by nature. Naess has repeated this point several times, a point which (perhaps not surprisingly) is very much in agreement with both Gandhian and Spinozistic views on human nature. As far as Spinoza is concerned, I suggest Proposition 47 from Part II of the *Ethics* can be read as an assumption of the human capacity for understanding.

The human mind has an adequate cognition of the eternal and infinite essence of God.

Insofar as one has this kind of adequate cognition of God, one has active affects in accordance with the dictates of reason, such as generosity, modesty, kindness, friendliness, and so on.¹⁵ In short, adequate cognition and active affects is what make up a wise person.

But then, of course, one may ask: If all human beings possess adequate cognition, why is it that they so seldom act in accordance with it? If human nature is good, why do humans often do evil actions? The Spinozist response would be that every human has adequate cognition, but that some are more and some are less conscious of it. Unfortunately, many of us remain unconscious of it throughout our lives. We are, for the most part, what Spinoza calls “slaves under the bondage of the passions,” such as anger, hatred, and greed. I interpret Proposition 47 and Spinoza’s system as a whole as an assumption of the intrinsic goodness of human nature. Human wrongdoing, even the worst kind, has its source not in evilness, but in ignorance. Understood in this way, it comes close to the Buddhist assumption of the inherent Buddha nature in all beings. A Buddhist would agree with Spinoza that wrongful action is caused by ignorance, in the sense of the three poisons: greed, hatred, and ignorance (delusion). Out of ignorance one imagines oneself to be something that one is not, one then develops greed for all that promotes this illusion and confirms it, and finally one develops anger and hatred towards all that hinders it. Even though human nature is fundamentally good, it easily becomes distorted in this

way. By illustration, the sky is blue even though it does not look that way on a cloudy day.

I wonder whether Naess would accept my interpretation of Spinoza. Perhaps he would not. But even if he wouldn't, it seems clear that he would accept the assumption that human nature is not intrinsically evil.

Forgiveness

Let me extend this perspective a bit further than Naess himself has done. I want to look at the implications of his distinction between persons and actions for the ethics of forgiveness. To my knowledge Naess hasn't written on forgiveness. His research has focussed on nonviolence and nonviolent communication. Still, nonviolence and forgiveness are interrelated moral responses to wrongdoing. They are both mentioned in B.ii above. Although this might go beyond anything Naess himself has suggested, I assume he would be sympathetic to what I have to say.¹⁶

Why should we forgive those who wrong us? The question is no doubt difficult to answer. It depends on who you ask. According to one dominant trend within psychology, there is "therapeutic forgiveness." We should forgive primarily because it is conducive to our own well-being.¹⁷ Forgiveness is a way of "leaving the past behind," of "getting on with our lives" after being wronged. It is motivated by self-concern and might reasonably be called egoistic. Many are sceptical of this motivation for forgiveness, however, because it is not motivated by a concern for the wrongdoer. In general, our reasons for forgiveness must stem from a certain moral perspective on the wrongdoer. Our motivation must, at least in part, be altruistic.

One such perspective takes as its point of departure similar views on the wrongdoer as we have been exploring in connection with Arne Naess. Important here is the distinction between persons and actions. Before I develop this argument in detail let me emphasize one point. When we forgive, we forgive a *person* for performing wrongful actions; we do not forgive his or her *actions*. Forgiveness involves a triadic relation between a victim (B) who forgives or refuses to forgive a wrongdoer (A) for a wrongdoing (X). Hence, it only makes sense to say that B forgives or refuses to forgive A, and not X. In order to forgive A, B must overcome his resentment towards A after being wronged. When B forgives A, he distinguishes A as a person from the act or wrongdoing X, no matter how terrible that act might have been. B does not

relinquish the belief that what A did was morally wrong, that is, B holds A responsible for his actions, both in moral and legal senses. In fact, this is a necessary condition for forgiveness: if there is no wrong, there is no one to forgive. But B does not for that reason morally condemn A for his wrongful actions. Rather, when B forgives A, he comes to see A as a human being not reducible to those wrongful actions, *and* as somebody capable of something better.

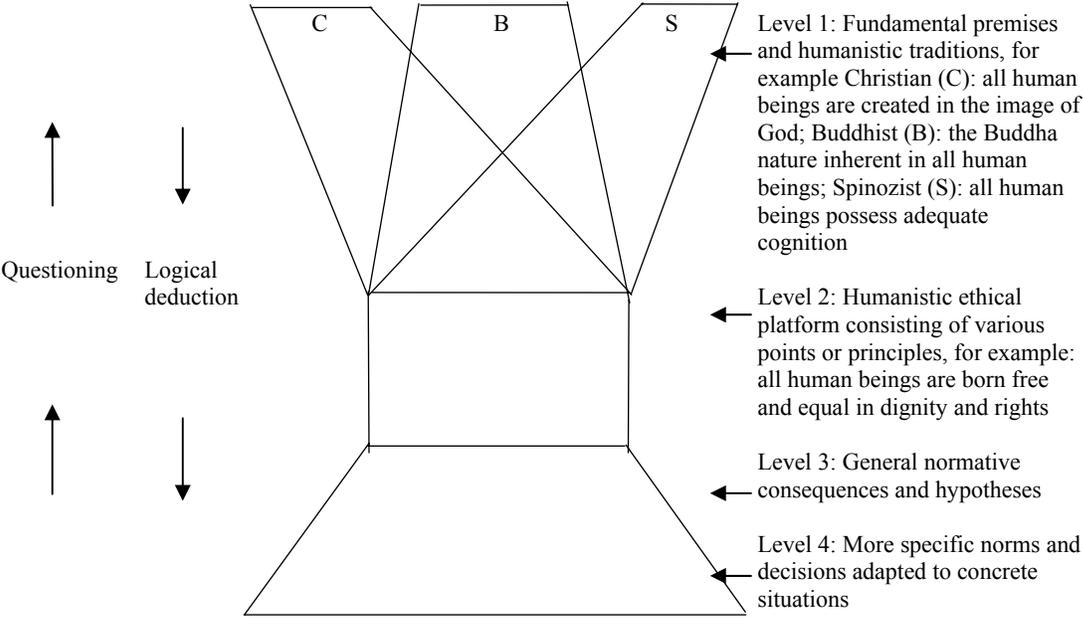
What this view of humans implies, more specifically, is the possibility of positive moral change even for the “worst” among us. However horrific someone’s actions might have been, a wrongdoer should never, according to this view, be regarded as entirely lacking a potential for positive moral improvement and change. It might be argued that this perspective is viable for the person who distances himself from his wrongdoings; whereas for someone who deeply identifies with his wrongful actions, the case is much more difficult. What is more, in such cases forgiveness is certainly more difficult, if not impossible. In response to this, one could argue that although this is the case, this person still remains a human being and retains his humanity despite his lack of remorse and repentance. This suggests that no human being is in principle unforgivable.¹⁸ Interestingly, a similar view was put forward by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the aftermath of the reconciliation process in South Africa:

There are people in South Africa who have committed the most unbelievable atrocities and I am willing for their deeds to be labelled with the harshest of epithets: monstrous, diabolical, even devilish. However, monstrous deeds do not turn the perpetrators into monsters. A human person does not ultimately lose his or her humanity, which is characterised by the divine image in which every individual is created . . . The premise underlying this . . . is that it is possible for people to change.¹⁹

No doubt this perspective on human beings played a central role in the work of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, led by Tutu himself. I think it can be interpreted along the lines of a humanistic ethic. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was appointed in 1996 to work toward the rehabilitation of the South African community after the apartheid regime. This commission was driven by the principle that, if wrongdoers wanted amnesty, amnesty was granted, but only on the condition that they publicly admitted their wrongs and stated in detail what had happened. At the time, this was thought to be a reconciliation process both for the victims and for the wrongdoers.

Returning to Arne Naess, I think he would agree with this kind of ethical outlook and process. He would be sympathetic to the view that

no human is unforgivable. Of course, Tutu bases his humanistic ethic on the Christian belief that every person is created in the image of God. Naess, however, would not use these theological premises. But being a pluralist, Naess would certainly respect this Christian justification for a humanistic ethic. In fact, one could imagine several more or less divergent justifications for a humanistic ethic. To follow this line of thought, one could perhaps make an “alternative version” of the apron diagram that emphasizes these points. On level 1 in that diagram, one would have different justifications (Christian, Spinozistic, Buddhist, etc.) for a humanistic ethical platform on level 2. Naess and Tutu, for instance, would agree on the importance of distinguishing between persons and actions, but they would provide different reasons for it, both metaphysically and ethically. Perhaps this apron diagram would look something like this:



The “humanistic ethical platform” on level 2 would have to be further developed to have real force, but it should be possible to formulate some common points or principles similar to those of the deep ecology platform. For my part, I assume the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* would be one possible source for this platform.

Now I would like to return to Spinoza to look at how his metaphysics can be used as the basis for a humanistic ethic. According to Spinoza, *substance* is that which is in itself and conceived through itself, whereas *modes* are that which is in something else through which it is also

conceived. Human beings are modes by which God expresses himself. Furthermore, adequate cognition implies that the more one understands oneself in relation to God, the more one understands oneself as internally related to all other modes through our common internal cause, which is God or the eternal and infinite substance.²⁰ Insofar as one comes to develop this kind of understanding, one will have a deeper notion of oneself as internally related to all other human beings, and this will imply indivisibility. Since God is absolutely infinite and indivisible, God must be equally present in all its effects, and equally present in the part as in the whole. In developing an interpersonal holism of this kind, one will come to form an internal relation to each human being; in our case, to both victims and wrongdoers. In so doing, people develop concepts of themselves through a process of identification with other human beings, and by means of this identification are able to incorporate other humans into their concept of self at a deeper level of self-understanding.²¹

The upshot of this kind of understanding is an ethic of respect for all humans, regardless of their moral track record. No one is considered to be a monster whose actions put them outside the moral pale; no one is beyond any possibility of pardon or forgiveness.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have tried to make explicit what I take to be implicit in the ethical thought of Arne Naess, namely a humanistic ethic of respect for persons. An essential feature of this humanistic ethic is the distinction between persons and actions. In cases of conflict, we should direct our negative thoughts and emotions towards the action, and not towards the person. In short, we should fight antagonism and not antagonists. This amounts to an action-centred view. Moreover, this distinction has great moral implications for how we conceive of those who perform wrongful actions. People certainly perform monstrous and atrocious acts, but these people are not for that reason monstrous and atrocious people. A person cannot be reduced to the sum of his actions. If Naess accepts my line of thought, he will probably also accept that no human being is in principle unforgivable. This has deep implications for the morality of forgiveness.

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Notes

¹ For Naess's comments on the deep ecology movement and ecosophy, see for instance Naess (1973); (1983); (1990); and Witoszek and Brennan (Eds) (1999).

² Naess and Session (1984).

³ It should be noted that Arne Naess, in recent years in Norway, has become known for his book *Life's Philosophy: Reason and Feeling in a Deeper World*. London: University of Georgia Press (2002) (*Livsfilosofi* in Norwegian).

⁴ I have taken the following works by Naess as points of reference in my discussion of his humanistic ethic: Naess (1974); (1975); (2002), and (2006). Also, I rely heavily on the numerous lectures I have attended, as well as the interviews I have read with Arne Naess over the years.

⁵ Naess (2006) p. 1.

⁶ Naess (1974) p. 152.

⁷ I am indebted to Jon Wetlesen and Thomas Kolåsæter for fruitful discussions on how to make the distinctions in this list of responses.

⁸ Spinoza actually developed an ethics of love similar to the Christian ethics of love (*The Sermon on the Mount*). See for instance *Ethics*, Part III, Propositions 41 and 43; Part IV, Proposition 46, and Scholium to Proposition 46; and Part V, Proposition 10, and Scholium to Proposition 10. From a Spinozistic point of view, one could perhaps also endorse A.ii, but I will leave that possibility to one side at present.

⁹ Usually attributed to Augustine as “cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum” (with love for mankind and hatred of sins).

¹⁰ I don't know where exactly in his writings he states this point, but he has done so on a number of occasions in various lectures and interviews.

¹¹ One way of fighting pedophiles would be to put them in prison for the rest of their lives. The question is, nonetheless, whether this alone will contribute to the fighting of paedophilia? I presume not.

¹² It has to be accepted of course, for pragmatic reasons at least, that someone who sexually abuses children is labelled a pedophile. But that is something different from taking that person to be nothing more than a pedophile in the ontological sense, which is my point, and I think Naess would agree with me here.

¹³ This picture even applies to somebody like Joseph Goebbels, who supposedly maintained a good relationship with his mother.

¹⁴ The term “interpersonally holistic” was borrowed from Jon Wetlesen (2002).

¹⁵ See for instance *Ethics*, Part III, Proposition 59 and Scholium.

¹⁶ I can only here sketch out some of the many issues raised in connection with forgiveness.

¹⁷ Simon & Simon (1990); Smedes (1996).

¹⁸ That no human being is unforgivable is of course a far cry from saying that every human being should be forgiven in the sense that a wrongdoer can claim a right to be forgiven, or that the victim has a moral duty or obligation to forgive. All this

perspective suggests is that no human being is *in principle* unforgivable. It is to be considered a norm, guideline, or principle. This does not deny the fact that the process of forgiveness in some cases may be a long and hard one.

¹⁹ Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "It is the deed that is devil, not the doer," *Cape Times*, April 17, 1997. Cited from Trudy Govier (2002), p. 110. See also Desmond Tutu 1999.

²⁰ See *Ethics* Part I, Definitions 1 and 3, Axioms 1 and 2, and Propositions 13 and 15. See Naess (1975) for a more detailed analysis of the dual distinction and the several equivalences in the *Ethics*.

²¹ I have developed this notion of interpersonal holism in more detail in my paper "Who Has a Moral Status in the Environment? A Spinozistic Answer," forthcoming in the *Trumpeter*.