Forgiveness as New Creation: Christ and the Moral Life Revisited

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5. Forgiveness as New Creation: Christ and the Moral Life Revisited

*Lois Malcolm*

**Introduction**

As Hannah Arendt has observed, forgiveness is Christianity's unique contribution to the Western world.¹ The Greeks did not have a concept of forgiveness, and although it may have had a role in Roman law, it was for the most part not a major category of human action in the ancient world. Jesus of Nazareth brought forgiveness to the forefront. Not only did he create controversy by forgiving other people's sins — taking on the power that God alone had to forgive sins² — but he also enjoined his followers to forgive one another, and even made God's forgiveness of them contingent on their forgiving others.³ The Lord's Prayer enjoins God to forgive us as we forgive our debtors.⁴ At the Last Supper, Jesus invites his followers to eat bread, "my body," and drink wine, "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."⁵ After his resurrection, Jesus grants his disciples the Holy Spirit who will enable them to forgive and retain sins.⁶ After his ascen-

3. See Matthew 6:14-15; see also 18:35 and Mark 11:25. See also Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 239.

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sion, Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who propels the disciples with a message — from Judea to Samaria to the ends of the earth — that calls people to repent and be baptized so their sins may be forgiven and they too may receive the Holy Spirit.\(^7\)

While forgiveness has been at the heart of Christian faith and practice over the centuries, it is interesting to note that it has also become a central theme in contemporary scholarly and popular literature. Given the reality of conflict throughout the world, forgiveness and reconciliation are increasingly becoming topics of interest in philosophy and politics.\(^8\) Moreover, forgiveness is also becoming a major theme in psychological literature and its self-help variants, literature that attends to its import not only for interpersonal relationships at home or at work but also for one's individual growth and sanity.\(^9\)

In this paper, I examine the relationship between Christ and ethics by arguing, from a reading of Paul's Christology, that Christian forgiveness cannot be divorced from the new age the crucified and raised Christ has ushered in, a "new creation" that Christians believe we have a foretaste of even on this side of the eschaton.\(^10\) In my interpretation of

\(^7\) See Acts 1:8 and 2:38, where the response to Christian proclamation includes repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins, and reception of the Holy Spirit (see also 8:16; 10:44-48; 19:1-6).


\(^11\) See Galatians 5:6; 6:15. Paul's use of "new creation" echoes Isaiah 65:17-25. Paul understands salvation as God's re-creation of the world (see Rom. 8:19-23; 2 Cor. 5:17-19; see also Rev. 21:3). For an earlier treatment of this relationship, see Jürgen Moltmann,
this Christology, I also draw on two secular appropriations of Christian notions of forgiveness that have creativity at the heart of their understanding of forgiveness. I develop this argument in four sections. First, I locate my argument in relation to contemporary debates in Christian ethics and in political thought. Second, I examine two major secular appropriations of Christian understandings of forgiveness — as a form of psychological creativity (in Julia Kristeva) and as a form of political creativity (in Hannah Arendt). Third, I examine Paul Ricoeur’s complex and detailed account of the “Adamic myth” in Paul’s theology, an account that explicitly demonstrates by way of close readings of biblical traditions how the forgiveness and justification identified with Jesus’ death and resurrection cannot be divorced from an eschatological context. Finally, I discuss the ethical implications of the profound link within Christian faith between forgiveness of sins and new creation.

A Context for My Argument

I situate my argument by way of a contrast with two conceptions of Christian ethics. Several decades ago, in a book called Christ and the Moral Life, James Gustafson analyzed different ways theologians have related Christology to ethics. In that book, he developed a typology


based on three central ethical concerns: the sources of the moral good, the self's agency, and criteria for moral judgment and action. Christologies that depict Christ as "creator and redeemer" focus on how Christ is the source of the good in Christian ethics. Those that focus on Christ as "justifier" and "sanctifier" focus on how Christ is the source of the self's moral agency. Those that focus on Christ as "pattern" and "teacher" focus on how Christ is the criterion of judgment and action in the Christian life.

In this essay, I take one of these themes, "Christ as justifier," as the answer to the three main questions, but in doing so I argue for a somewhat different construal of "Christ as justifier" than the one Gustafson outlined. Drawing primarily on Martin Luther and Reinhold Niebuhr, Gustafson defines justification as freedom. Defined negatively, this freedom is a freedom from legalism. Defined positively, this freedom enables one to love the neighbor, to be open to the present and the future, and to be realistic and pragmatic. I agree that justification entails these things; nonetheless, I stress something Gustafson does not. Following the apostle Paul, I argue that justification cannot be divorced from the new eschatological age he identifies with Christ's cross and resurrection. This new age, or new creation, has an embodied and corporate character that includes not only Christ's work as justifier and sanctifier, but also enacts Christ's creative and redemptive power and provides, albeit in a fashion that continually seeks to discern what is most fitting in each situation, a concrete criterion for judgment and action — Christ's cross and resurrection.

I make this case in response to a recent trend in Christian ethics in North America, a trend exemplified in the work of Stanley Hauerwas, which stresses the distinctive character of the biblical narrative and the centrality of the Christian community especially in shaping the virtues required of the Christian life. Although I have no disagreement with any of these emphases — they clearly are central components of any thoroughgoing conception of Christian ethics and

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offer an important corrective to the more abstract and formal conception of “justification” presented in Gustafson’s book — I nonetheless argue that they are incomplete. Paul’s eschatology, with its focus on God’s creative righteousness, is not simply about the distinctive narratives and virtues of particular Christian communities, although it encompasses them. It is about the universal activity of the “one” that later Christian theology would affirm is a triune God.  

Although deeply embodied within human communities, this activity justifies and sanctifies by creating a “righteousness” (Rom. 3:21-26) that is radically distinct from any law or communitarian grammar that sustains particular groups of people — whether they be, in Paul’s words, “Jew or Greek,” “slave or free,” or “male and female” (Gal. 3:28).

The second context in which I would like to situate my argument is a broader discussion about the role of religion in public life. For this, I turn to Mark Lilla’s historical analysis in The Stillborn God of the political and theological ideas that have shaped our understanding of the role of religion in public life within Western thought. With the Thirty Years’ War after the Reformation (1618-1648), a particular political argument emerged, in particular with Thomas Hobbes but also with David Hume and John Locke, that called for a “Great Separation” between religion and politics. Another strand of thought, exemplified by Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, argued for a liberal conception of theology that could serve as the ethical substance for public life. In Lilla’s view, this liberal faith — with its “stillborn God” — was so desiccated of religious passion that it created a vacuum after the First World War. Messianic theologies in Judaism and Christianity emerged to fill this vacuum — theologies that, at their best, were suspicious of modern democracies and, at their worst, were tolerant of some of the worst excesses of either Nazi socialism or communism.

In response to Lilla’s concerns about messianic theology, I hope to make the case that Paul’s conception of it, like that of the Gospels, is not of a political theology for governing the state. The crucified Messiah Christians worship was a failed political leader. The power of the

19. “God is one” (Gal. 3:20; Rom. 3:30), an allusion to Deuteronomy 6:4.
new age he ushers in is the power of the Suffering Servant, whose weakness and death are the source of power and life for others. Any Christian uses of messianic theology that fail to meet the criterion of the cross are false. Although I will need to develop the case more fully elsewhere, I do hope, at least in a small way, to intimate some sense of how Christian ideas of forgiveness and justification might be relevant to public life even though — or precisely because — they do not involve the coercive use of political force.

Two Secular Accounts of Forgiveness and Creativity

Kristeva on Forgiveness and Agency

In order to understand better the relationship between forgiveness and creativity, I turn first to Julia Kristeva’s work. A linguist and a psychoanalyst, Kristeva has throughout her work sought to understand how speaking subjects are always creating new meanings within old psychic and linguistic patterns, meanings that enact the “semiotic” (unconscious drives within us) by the “symbolic” (the structures and patterns of language, culture, and art we use to express ourselves). Her work on forgiveness, which explicitly draws on Christian themes, exemplifies this process.

Drawing on Ricoeur’s Symbolism of Evil, Kristeva gleans three central themes in Christian conceptions of forgiveness for her work as a psychoanalyst, themes I will explore in more depth in my discussion of Ricoeur’s work.22 First, Christianity has a complex understanding of fault that encompasses not only a movement from communal sin to individual guilt but also retains more archaic conceptions of defilement by an external contagion from which one must be purified. Second, Christianity presupposes that Christ, as the innocent “Suffering Servant,” undergoes an “absurd” and “scandalous” suffering. Not a punishment (as effect) for his sin (as cause), this suffering is, rather, a voluntary suffering (a gift) that becomes, by way of the transfer of others’ sin onto him, a means by which these others receive pardon and healing.

Third, Christianity affirms that the “justification” or forgiveness

22. See Kristeva, Intimate Revolt, especially the essays “Can Forgiveness Heal?” pp. 14-25 and “The Scandal of the Timeless,” pp. 25-42. Page numbers given parenthetically in this section will refer to this text.
this pardon and healing enact actually has efficacious power to bring about not only remission of sins but also rebirth or new life. Christ’s forgiveness enacts a new subjective and intersubjective configuration whereby “guilt is extracted from judgment and time in order to be reversed in rebirth” (p. 16). In other words, Christ enters human misery not merely to receive its punishment or share in its pain, but rather also to “reverse” it by way of an “efficacy” that creates “meaning” where there is “lack.” By faith, the Christian biblical and theological tradition interprets the apparently “scandalous” death of the innocent Jesus of Nazareth in terms of the bond of love between Father, Son, and Spirit. Within this bond of love, not only are human guilt and its time of judgment and punishment suspended, but something new is created and effected.

Interpretation is the concept Kristeva uses to relate a Christian understanding of forgiveness to what happens in psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis also works with guilt and love. It seeks to reinterpret guilt—which, within a psychoanalytic framework, is defined as the ill-being linked with anxiety, trauma, depression, and more generally, a sense of lack—in relation to the bond of love enacted in the “transference” between the psychoanalyst and the analysand. By reinterpreting the guilt of ill-being, psychoanalysis seeks to undo the psychological apparatus that generated it. This interpretation enacts a secular forgiveness that accepts the semiotic drives that emerge out of the unconscious even as it seeks to sublimate those drives into new, healthier “symbolic” expressions. Forgiveness occurs within the transfer of love—the transference and counter-transference that occur between the psychoanalyst and analysand—a love that enables preverbal instincts and affects to be brought out into the open so that they can be given meaning. Such interpretation does not absolve the savage desires of the unconscious—for example, its desire to either reject or “abject” the self or murder others. Rather, it seeks a “third way between dejection and murder.” In psychoanalysis, we experience the forgiveness that enables us to confess our desire to kill instead of killing. Within the context of the relationship with the analyst, the analysand experiences an unconditional acceptance that enables her to “make sense” of “troubling senselessness.”

24. See also Kelly Oliver’s discussion of Kristeva in The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Theory of Oppression (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), pp. 185-94.
The communication between the analyst and the analysand is not merely verbal or intellectual. It takes place in a transfer of affects and instincts that are given meaning in the process of communication. The way analytic interpretation gives meaning through this transfer of affects is a form of pardon (par meaning “through”; don meaning “gift”) that “has nothing to do with ‘explication’ and ‘communication’ between two consciousnesses. On the contrary, this par-don draws its efficacy from reuniting with affect through metaphorical and metonymical rifts in discourse” (p. 26). Forgiveness supports the transfer of affects and drives — the unconscious — into signification. It happens between two communicating bodies, what psychoanalysts call the “third.” Agency in the forgiving process lies in this “third”; it lies neither solely in the analyst nor solely in the analysand. It is an effect of meaning experienced between two people. In this transfer, the meaninglessness of life, especially the meaninglessness of trauma, is “forgiven” by being given signification or meaning. It is, in Kristeva’s words, the “coming of the unconscious to consciousness in transfer-ence” (p. 19). The suspension of judgment required for forgiveness — the suspension of the harsh, judging superego — facilitates the “sublimation” of the semiotic drive of the unconscious into language.

The pardon that enables this sublimation occurs within what Kristeva calls a “luminous phase” of “conscious atemporality,” a “strange atemporal space” that reconfigures the cause-and-effect relationship of crime and punishment (pp. 25-42). Not the “strange space” of the savage, desiring unconscious, this “strange space” is a space that welcomes and accepts the savage unconscious so that it can give it meaning and thereby transform and heal it. In a fashion similar to the way in which the unconscious stops time in our lives by continually repeating patterns that enact desire and death — patterns deeply engrained in our bodies — so pardon stops time, but now in a way that seeks to reconstruct through love a new way of being with one’s self and others (pp. 29-31).

Because this pardon is essentially about interpretation, it creates new forms. It has the effect of an action — a deed or a poiesis (new creation) — that expresses what “humiliated and offended individuals” have experienced in their “bruised emotions and bodies” (p. 20). This new form integrates sense and nonsense in a fashion, like Hegel’s Aufhebung, that arises as “a positive jolt integrating a possible nothingness” (p. 20). By bearing the erosion of meaning, what Kristeva calls
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“abjection,” pardon displaces the erosion of meaning even as it affirms and inscribes new meaning. When the analyst affirms “there is meaning,” which for Kristeva is the “eminently transferential gesture,” she helps create a “third” that exists for and through another (p. 20). In sum, forgiveness, and the “remission” it offers, results in “new birth” (pp. 19-20).

Arendt on Forgiveness and Action

Unlike Kristeva, Hannah Arendt has never put much stock in psychoanalysis. Nonetheless, her work on forgiveness has informed Kristeva’s work and serves as an interesting point of comparison.²⁵ Arendt appropriates Christian forgiveness within the context of her understanding of what is distinctly human about “human action,” what is distinctly creative and free about human action and not merely a response to predetermined patterns of cause and effect. In this regard, both Kristeva and Arendt link forgiveness with the creation of new “meaning.” Kristeva links this creativity with psychological health and interiority; Arendt links it to public action and speech. For both, love sustains the possibility of a forgiveness that gives expression to new forms of life.

Arendt identifies two activities that explicitly enact such “human action”: forgiving and promising.²⁶ Both activities directly break and move beyond cause-and-effect patterns. Forgiving enables us to deal with irreversibility, that is, the inevitable consequences of past actions. Promising enables us to deal with unpredictability, that is, the fact that we cannot foresee what will occur in the future. Further, both forgiving and promising take place within a context that is very different from a Platonic grounding for ethics, what justifies and limits our exercise of power in relation to others. Platonic ethics, Arendt observes, revolves around one’s own individual capacity for self-control; it relates political action, and our relation to others in general, to the soul’s right ordering of itself. By contrast, an ethics that involves forgiving and promising presupposes the presence of others and the synergy that takes

²⁶ See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition. Page numbers given parenthetically in this section will refer to this text.
place between oneself and others. It is intrinsically social, locating individual action within the context of pre-existing relationships.

If Kristeva draws on a Pauline conception of Christian justification, then Arendt explicitly draws on the teachings of Jesus. What she finds most helpful in Jesus’ conception of forgiveness is that he links forgiveness to the creation of something new and not simply to penance, guilt, and the like. She makes this point drawing on three words in Luke 17:3-4,27 words found throughout the New Testament. “Forgive” (aphienai) has to do with dismissing and releasing; “repent” (metanoein) has to do with changing one’s mind, rendering the Hebrew shuw as return, tracing back one’s steps; and finally, “sin” (hamartanein) has to do with trespass, missing the mark, failing, going away. Arendt also points out that Jesus arrogates the power of forgiveness to himself — the power to create anew, to bring about a new state of affairs. This threatens the “scribes and Pharisees” because Jesus arrogates to himself what only God has the power to do — forgive sins.28

Moreover, she notes, Jesus tells his disciples to forgive others in the same way because “if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:14-15). Further still, she observes that Jesus tells his disciples to forgive others unconditionally, regardless of the extremity of the crime. One is to forgive “seventy times seven” (Matt. 18:22; cf. Luke 17:4), even though Jesus also acknowledges the inevitability and seriousness of what Kant called “radical evil,” unforgivable “offenses” or “occasions for stumbling” (skandalon): “woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone was hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea” (Luke 17:1-4).

Why, in Arendt’s view, is such forgiveness so important to human action? Because trespassing is an everyday occurrence and we continually need forgiveness — the persistent “mutual release” from what we have done — to enable us to continue. As fresh release, forgiveness is the exact opposite of vengeance, our natural and automatic response to transgression. Vengeance involves both the agent and the sufferer of a

27. “Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance, you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (Luke 17:3-4, emphasis added).

misdeed in a “relentless automatism,” an irreversibility that perpetuates a chain reaction that, far from putting to an end the consequences of the first misdeed, keeps everyone bound to a process of chain reactions that are both calculated and expected. By contrast, forgiving is an action that does not “merely re-act” but “acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provokes it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven” (p. 241).

In addition, forgiveness and punishment both differ from vengeance in that they “put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly” (p. 241). Still, they stand in a structural relation to each other since we are “unable” to “forgive” what we cannot “punish” and we are “unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable” (p. 241). In this context, Arendt comments on how “radical evil” is something we as human beings can neither forgive nor punish precisely because it dispossesses us of all power. Those who commit such crimes deserve to be cast into the sea, as Jesus said, with a “millstone” around their necks (p. 241). Only the Last Judgment can take care of such crimes, which, as Arendt notes, the New Testament defines not only in terms of forgiveness but also in terms of just retribution.29

Forgiveness is always an “eminently personal” affair. The sin, what was done, is forgiven for the sake of the sinner, the person who did it. Only love can forgive because only love fully accepts who one is. In the story of the sinful woman whom Jesus forgives, Jesus states, “her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little” (Luke 7:47). Love possesses a clarity of vision that discloses who a person is and could be, and overlooks what she has been or done in the past (his or her qualities, shortcomings, achievements, failings, and transgressions). Nonetheless, such love appears to be “unworldly” and in fact “impossible” — indeed “not only apolitical but anti-political” (p. 242). Thus, drawing on Aristotle’s conception of political friendship, Arendt suggests that “respect,” a friendship without intimacy and closeness, plays a role in the political sphere similar to the role “love” plays in the interpersonal sphere. Operating from a standpoint not of intimacy but of distance,

29. See Matthew 16:27: “For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what he has done.” See also 5:17-20; 7:15-20. See also Romans 2:6; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10.
respect enables us to have esteem for others simply because they are human beings and not because of their achievements or qualities (p. 243).

Finally, Arendt connects forgiving and promising with “natality,” new life. Both activities, which arise directly out of our acting and speaking with one another, function like “control mechanisms” that enable us “to start new and unending processes” (p. 246). Without the capacity “to undo what we have done and to control at least partially the processes we have let loose,” we would be the victims of “automatic necessity,” of “inexorable” natural laws. The “law of mortality” may be the most certain and the only reliable law of lives spent between birth and death. Nonetheless, there is another law that interferes with this law — our “faculty of action,” with its ever-present reminder that even though human beings must die, they are not born “in order to die but in order to begin” (p. 246, my emphasis).

From the standpoint of automatic processes, of natural cause-and-effect relations, this capacity to create something new appears to be a “miracle,” albeit an “infinite improbability which occurs regularly” (p. 246). In this regard, Arendt compares the originality of Jesus’ teaching on forgiveness to Socrates’ insights into the possibilities of thought. When Jesus related the power to forgive to the power of performing miracles, he put both forgiveness and miracles on the same level and within the reach of human beings (p. 247). The same faith enables us both to forgive and to move mountains. The one is no less a miracle than the other. Thus, the disciples can only say in response to Jesus’ command to forgive seventy times seven: “Lord, increase our faith” (p. 247). For Arendt, the miracle that can save the world of human affairs from its normal, “natural” ruin is the “fact of natality.” New human beings, and with them new actions and new beginnings, are continually born. This faculty of birth — of action that continually creates anew — is what bestows “faith” and “hope,” two virtues absent in Greek antiquity, on human affairs. The most succinct expression of this faith and hope is the gospel’s announcement of “glad tidings”: “A child has been born unto us” (p. 247).

Justification and New Creation in the “Adamic Myth”

Arendt and Kristeva appropriate Christian concepts of forgiveness in secular terms. Kristeva’s forgiven speaking subject is innocent and responsi-
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able, but not a sinner; the love that forgives in the "third" of transference and counter-transference is strictly a human love; and the forgiveness it confers enables a creativity that is primarily aesthetic, not moral. In turn, Arendt conceives of forgiving and promising as strictly human and not divine activities. Although forgiving and promise enable us to grapple in creative ways with the irreversible consequences of wrongdoing and the unpredictability of life, we, as human beings, nonetheless remain powerless in the face of "radical evil." We are incapable of either punishing or forgiving it. These points of difference between these secular appropriations of Christian forgiveness and a classically Christian understanding of forgiveness will become salient in the following discussion of Ricoeur's detailed analysis of the biblical traditions that inform Paul's Christology, which Ricoeur depicts as the "Adamic myth."  

Defilement, Sin, and Guilt

Kristeva has already introduced us to Ricoeur's complex threefold conception of human evil as a movement from defilement to sin and guilt.  

Defilement links evil not with moral fault but with misfortune, disease, death, and failure. Like a stain, defilement infects us with something outside of us that makes us "unclean" (as in Isa. 6:5). Purification of some sort, which "washes," "cleanses," and "purges" us, rids us of what defiles us (as in Ps. 51:2, 7).

By contrast, sin links evil with violating a covenant "before God." Sin, therefore, violates a personal bond. The diverse range of biblical genres (from narratives to hymns, oracles, sayings, and laments) depict sin in the same way. They all make clear that sin violates an imperative, an imperative always set within the context of a word that summons, calls, or elects a people to a unique relationship with their God.

Objectively, this imperative within a summons takes the form of an infinite demand that is also a finite or limited imperative. The conjoining of infinite demand with a finite imperative has its most precise form in the Decalogue of Exodus 20:1-17. The utterances of the proph-

30. The classical locus for the "Adamic myth" in the New Testament is Romans 5:12-21 (see also 1 Cor. 15:21-26, 45-49).

31. See Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil. Page numbers given parenthetically in this section will refer to this text.
ets also take this form -- from Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah to Jeremiah and Ezekiel to the later reforms of Josiah and the codes of Deuteronomy, which are what Jesus quotes when he summarizes the law as two great commandments (Deut. 6:4-6). Beyond any expression in history or finite observance, God's infinite demand is a form of political nihilism: it brings all history and politics under judgment; it allows no room for self-justification, personal or corporate.

Subjectively, this imperative within a summons takes the form of divine wrath. Human beings cannot see God. Those who do encounter God in palpable ways experience great terror -- for example, Moses at Horeb (Exod. 3), Isaiah at the temple (Isa. 6), and Ezekiel face to face with God's glory (Ezek. 1-3). Divine wrath does not vindicate ancient taboos; it is not the resurgence of primary chaos. Rather, the "wrath of God," the "day of Yahweh," is the countenance of God's holiness for sinful human beings, a holiness that is as just and righteous as it is powerful. This countenance -- God's seeing us -- causes us to perceive our lives and our actions from the standpoint of God's holiness. Nonetheless, because God's summons or election of a people always encompasses God's infinite demand, an announcement of promise always accompanies the announcement of imminent threat. The prophets present human choice with judgment and promise, destruction and salvation: "Seek the Lord and live" (Amos 5:6); and, "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut. 30:19). Divine wrath reminds the people of the "truth" necessary for any reconciliation with God and others (Ps. 51:6).

Sin is the violation of the covenant, a quasi-personal bond. Thus, in a fashion analogous to the way purification rites cleanse us of what "defiles" us, so the pardon that restores this bond takes the form of a "return" (shuw) to the covenant. The Hebrew root words for sin have to do with "missing the mark" (chatta'it), "deviation from the straight road" ('awon), and "rebellion," "revolt," or "stiff-neckedness" (pesha') (p. 72). These images have to do with relations of orientation in space, not with infection from a harmful substance. Pardon follows a return to a right orientation. "Repentance" (teshubah) leads to restoration, the renewing of the primitive bond: "in returning and rest you shall be saved" (Isa. 30:15; see also Jeremiah and Hosea). Such "return" is a human choice, but the prophets also implore God to make the people return and, in many instances, emphasize God's side alone, depicting the "return" as the "effect of a love, of a hesed beyond all reasons (Deut 7:5ff.)" (p. 80). In
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Jeremiah and Ezekiel, for example, “pardon” and “return” coincide with receiving a “heart of flesh” instead of a “heart of stone,” and Second Isaiah articulates a “most acute sense” of the “gratuitousness of grace” in contrast to the “nothingness of creatures” (e.g., in Isa. 40:1ff.).

The prophets describe sinners’ going away from God as a kind of “nothingness” — not a nothingness worked out in relation to a concept of being, but a nothingness linked with failure, deviation, rebellion, or going astray. The vanity of idols is like the “breath of air” that passes. It is light, empty, insubstantial, and futile — like dust or an exhalation (see, e.g., Isa. 41:24). Nonetheless, biblical traditions also depict sin as having a positive quality. Drawing on archaic images of defilement to describe the hold sin has on people, they depict sin not only as the violation of a personal and communal covenant, but also as a sickness and as something brought on by demons or evil spirits. In these instances, sin is a power that binds sinners, holding them in social and intersubjective captivity to a fascinating, frenetic, and evil force that not only hardens their intent to sin but also defiles them, making them impotent to change their situation.

In the face of this aspect of sin, we are not free to make a radical choice between good and evil. Rather, we need to be liberated from the captivity that holds us. Instead, then, of linking pardon only with return, biblical traditions also link pardon to the way slaves are liberated or “bought back” from slavery by way of a “ransom” given in “exchange” for their lives (p. 91). Three Hebrew root words each develop an aspect of this “exchange.” Ga’al furnishes a chain of images, from avenging and protecting to covering or hiding, buying back, and delivering (p. 91). Padah alludes to the custom of “buying back the offering of the first born or slaves by ransom” (p. 91). And kapar, drawing on images of covering and effacing, connotes a ransom that releases one from a severe penalty or that saves one’s life, images that also furnish the basic image of “expiation” (p. 92). Exodus, the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, furnishes the primary event in Israel’s history of “buying back” (Exod. 14; Deut. 26:5-10). Later traditions relate this image of liberation from slavery to images of God’s theogonic victory over the waters of chaos (Ps. 106:9; 114:3). 32 Second Isaiah makes

32 In Psalm 106:9, God, in mighty power, “rebuked the Red Sea,” an allusion that links the liberation from slavery in Egypt with depictions of the victory of God over the primeval waters of chaos.
the most explicit connection between God’s creative power and the “exchange” God makes to “ransom” God’s people in a new exodus out of Babylonian captivity (Isa. 43, 44), an “exchange” that is tied as well to the “return” of “the ransomed of the Lord” (Isa. 51:9-10).

Not only does God liberate us from the power of sin, but God also cleanses us from its defiling effects — the “punishment” we “bear” for it (Ezek. 14:10), its “subjective weight” and “objective maleficence” we experience in our bodies (p. 95). The priestly cycle of texts tends to link sin with “dread” and the “threat of death” — a “blow” or a “wound” (e.g., Lev. 10:6; Num. 1:53; 17:12; 18:3). Various rites of sacrifice in Leviticus deal with these “realistic” and “dangerous” aspects of sin (p. 95). As an “expiation” (kipper) for sin, sacrifice enacts the pardon that “buys back” and “ransoms” one from sin (Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13). Not a magical rite, biblical sacrificial expiation focuses on how, “as life, it is the blood that makes atonement” (Lev. 17:11, my emphasis) or “ransoms” (cf. Exod. 30:12, 15, 16).

Blood is what relates the “rite of expiation” to “faith in the pardon” that confession of sins and repentance presuppose (p. 97). As a gift “given” by God, blood is what restores the one confessing and repenting to a right relationship with God, a theme echoed in psalms that invoke God as the subject of expiation (78:38; 65:3; 79:9). Indeed, the very ritual of the “day of expiation” (Lev. 16) relates the “confession of sins” not only to “expiation,” with its “multiple sprinklings,” but also to the “rite of the goat driven into the desert to carry away the sins of Israel” (p. 98). In sum, the “ceremonial expiation” of priestly texts cannot be divorced from the prophetic linkage of pardon with themes of return and ransom.

Finally, as an awareness of sin and its defilement, guilt expresses the paradox in a Christian understanding of human fault; we are responsible for and yet captive to the sin that binds us. In spite of being created in God’s image and therefore free, we find, as Luther would observe, that our will remains servile and bound. In Paul’s words, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Rom. 7:19). Long before the trajectory of philosophers who would reflect on existential alienation (from Hegel to Marx, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Freud), Paul understood how the law, when severed from the dialogical relation of the covenant, sets before us an accusation that, when atomized into an indefinite number of demands (what Hegel would call the “evil infinite”), alienates from ourselves. The “curse of the law,” according to
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Paul, comes upon “everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law” (Gal. 3:10-14). The law even leads us to sin, not because it is evil — the law in itself is good — but because we are impotent in the face of its demands. “Justification” is Paul’s response to this dilemma, and it comes only from the “righteousness of God” disclosed “apart from the law” (Rom. 3:21) (pp. 139-50).

The Adamic Myth

“Justification” and the “righteousness of God” that enacts it must be set within the eschatological context of Paul’s theology. The forensic declaration that one stands justified and righteous before God has to do with a future that has relevance for the present — an outward reality that has import for one’s internal struggle with sin. Thus, Ricoeur relates justification to the broader context of what he calls the “Adamic myth” (Rom. 5:12-21; cf. 1 Cor. 15:21-26). Adam’s “trespass,” his grasping for what was God’s alone (Gen. 3:3), brought death which “spread” and became an unavoidable condition for all (Rom. 5:12-13). By contrast, Jesus Christ, the “Second Adam,” who “emptied” himself in spite of sharing equality with God (Phil. 2:7), enacts a “free gift” that leads to “justification and life for all” (Rom. 5:15-17).

Of course, Adam is not a central figure in the Old Testament. The narratives in Genesis place more emphasis on Noah and Abraham, and the prophets completely ignore him. Even Jesus does not refer to Adam — the Synoptic Gospels link evil to an evil heart or the work of an Adversary. Nonetheless, the twofold Jewish confession of sin — that God is good and human beings are responsible and not innocent — prepares the way for the Christian Adamic myth. Near Eastern theogonic myths depict the creation of the world as the liberating act of gods who struggle with chaos; evil as chaos is part of the origin of things and salvation or liberation from chaos occurs with the same act that creates the world. By contrast, in the Adamic myth, which draws on the Genesis stories of creation, God is good and creation is good; evil is not part of the origin of things. Wickedness emerges in human history — with human sin — and not in a theogonic struggle with chaos. Salvation, then, in its view presupposes a future eschatology that is distinct from the end of creation; it preserves a tension between a creation that exists now and a salvation that is yet to come (pp. 161-74).
The second Adam, Christ, enacts this future eschatology. He is the “perfect human being,” the figure who will redeem “sinful human beings” who are responsible for their sin yet held captive by it. How does he emerge as an eschatological figure? For Paul, Abraham’s call is an initial answer to the first Adam. He believes in God, who “reckoned” this belief “as righteousness” (Rom. 4:3; cf. Gen. 15:6). Even before the emergence of eschatology in biblical history, Abraham is involved in a covenant that integrates the disparate stories of his descendants— from Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph on to the trajectory of Israel’s history— into a larger story of promise and fulfillment. Noah’s covenant with God is yet another answer to the first Adam, although it brings to the fore what is universal in the covenant with Abraham—that all people are under the promise given to Noah. Later Christian baptismal imagery, with its enactment of burial and resurrection, will draw on the imagery of Noah’s flood to signify not only God’s wrath but also God’s power to bring about a new creation (pp. 238ff.).

Postponed in the epochs of Israel’s history—from Exodus, Sinai, and the wandering in the desert to the conquest and establishment of Zion with its Davidic monarchy—the promise to Abraham takes on a new form when Israel ceases to exist as an independent nation. The figure of a king, in an idealization of the Davidic monarchy, becomes “eschatologized” into a messianic figure (pp. 264ff.). The kingdom “founded in those times” transforms into “the kingdom to come” (p. 264). The earthly and political hopes identified with the Davidic monarchy become the expectation of a new age identified with the Son of David. Biblical traditions sanction the royalty of this future messiah with God’s creative power to bring about a new creation, appropriating strands of Near Eastern creation combat myths, which sanctioned the royalty of ancient kings by linking the king’s power with the creative and liberating act of the gods that banished chaos at the origins of time.  

In addition to this eschatologized messianic figure, two other biblical figures become prominent in later New Testament exegesis (pp. 265ff.). The first is the “Servant of Yahweh” of the “Suffering Servant

33. In their depictions of God’s unique creative and redemptive power, biblical traditions echo ancient Near Eastern theogonic myths that sanctioned kingly power with their depictions of the defeat of the powers of chaos represented by floods and waters (see, e.g., Ps. 74:12-17; 93:3-4; 104:7-9; Job 38:8-11; Isa. 27:1; 51:9-10).
Songs,”34 who will restore Israel’s survivors. Although enigmatic (the “Suffering Servant” could refer to an individual or a nation), this figure exchanges his suffering for the sins of others: he “was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). Neither merely the transfer of defilement onto a scapegoat nor simply the destiny of a misunderstood prophet, what occurs through the suffering of this figure is a voluntary gift, an expiation that enacts their pardon. The second historical figure is the “Son of Man” identified with the apocalyptic figure of Daniel 7. Also enigmatic (this figure could refer to an individual or a personified collective), the Son of Man is not the “first man” but the “Man of the end.” Although a “replica of the first Man,” created in God’s image, he is nonetheless “new in relation to him” (p. 268). As judge and king, he will come at the Last Judgment “with the clouds of heaven” to establish “an everlasting dominion” over “all peoples, nations, and languages” (Dan. 7:13-14).

The Gospels bring these figures together in two affirmations. Not only does Jesus refer to himself as the Son of Man (Mark 13:26-27), but he also unites the idea of the “Son of Man” with the idea of “suffering and death,” which had been a central theme for the Servant of Yahweh (pp. 269ff.). By bringing these two figures together, Jesus redefines a “theology of glory” by way of a “theology of the cross,” linking the roles of “king” and “judge” to that of “pardon” and “healer” (pp. 269ff.). Paul’s Christology also appears to relate the themes identified with these two figures. Even the hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 appears to identify characteristics of the Son of Man (“he was in the form of God”) with characteristics of the Servant of Yahweh (he “emptied himself... to the point of death”).

Moreover, although Paul’s Christology draws a parallel between the first and the second Adam (the fault of one brings judgment on all; the justice of one brings justice for all), he also makes clear that this parallel is not parallel at all. The “free gift” is very different from the “trespass” (Rom. 5:15). It enacts a “much more” that not only restores what existed before the first trespass but also “much more surely” brings about an “abundance of grace” (v. 17).

In sum, Paul’s understanding of justification cannot be divorced

34. Scholars have identified the following texts as “servant songs”: Isaiah 49:1-9; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12.
Lois Malcolm

from eschatological imagery. Justification by faith, with its “experience of pardon,” is “so to speak, the psychological trace” of what happens in reality — the incorporation of believers into the “new Adam” as they are “transformed [μεταμορφοῦσθαι — metamorphosed] into the same image [ἐικόνι]” (2 Cor. 3:18) and “conformed [σύμμορφος] to the image [ἐικόνι]” of the Son (Rom. 8:29). Having “borne the image of the man of dust,” we will also “bear the image of the man of heaven” (1 Cor. 15:49) (p. 275). Justification deals not only with juridical imputation, which echoes aspects of the contractual character of the covenant, but also with a messianic expiation that links the remission of sins with images of unbinding and purifying. Further, the image of cosmic judgment over all only amplifies these themes: the “one is for “all” (Gal. 3:20). Although deeply personal, this eschatological judgment is also communal. It incorporates the prophets’ call to “return” into a picture of eschatological judgment and acquittal. Baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, believers now belong to Christ’s “body” (1 Cor. 12); they now share the “mind” of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5). Finally, justification involves the redemption of bodies and the entire cosmos — the resurrection of the “body” (1 Cor. 15:35-58) and a “new creation” (Gal. 6:15).

However, as Ricoeur points out, the Adamic myth needs to be complemented by two recessive myths in biblical theology — the theogonic and the tragic — if it is to do justice to life’s complexity. We have already alluded to the way the eschatologizing of the Davidic reign into hopes for a future messiah incorporates theogonic themes from Near Eastern creation myths. Nonetheless, the tragic also exists as a recessive theme in biblical theology. In Greek tragedies, tragic heroes suffer innocently and therefore question whether a simple theory of retribution — that supposes that if you do evil, you will die — can account for innocent suffering. Job, the Bible’s epitome of a tragic figure, receives no answer for why he, a just man, has suffered so much. All he receives in response to his queries are the sea monsters, Behemoth and Leviathan, who as figures associated with a primordial chaos are tamed, and the experience of “seeing” the God whom he had only previously “heard of . . . by the hearing of the ear” (Job 42:5). Job’s innocent suffering questions any facile theory of retribution. As Ricoeur points out, Job and Adam stand in sharp contrast. Adam’s sin leads to just banishment. Job’s innocence leads to unjust suffering. As a third figure, the Servant of Yahweh causes us to rethink both the theory of retribution identified with Adam and the conception of tragedy identified with Job. The
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Suffering Servant's voluntary suffering — a senseless, scandalous suffering — is the expiation whereby both sin and suffering are replaced with pardon and healing.

In addition, as Job's own encounter with the sea monsters suggests, the tragic also hints at theogonic themes, which persist even today long after the naïve theogonies of the biblical Near East have died. Philosophers and worldviews continue to identify evil and tragedy with existence itself or, in philosophical terms, with a negativity that coincides with the very logic of being. By including in God's life the figure of the Servant of Yahweh, Christology incorporates suffering as a moment in divinity. This moment of abasement and annihilation in God's life completes and suppresses tragedy because God takes on the evil of the world. Christ becomes the "curse for us" (Gal. 3:13); the Son of Man is the one delivered up and subjected to futility. Yet, in this moment, the fate of tragedy is suppressed by being inverted. In theogonic myths, the child often murders the parents in order to overcome chaos. In the Adamic myth, Christ offers himself to God for others; as victim, he is thereby glorified. Fate is inverted by voluntary gift.

Christ and the Moral Life Revisited

How do we relate this Christology to ethics? Further, how might its similarities and differences with Kristeva's and Arendt's secular appropriations of Christian forgiveness shed light on who we are and how we should live?35

Creation, Sin, and Redemption

This Christology presupposes a particular understanding of God and the world. On the one hand, it presupposes not only that God is good, but that creation is good as well. Evil is not part of the origin of things. Moreover, it presupposes that, as those created in God's image, we can perceive and respond to the world God has created with discernment

35. See also Shults and Sandage, Faces of Forgiveness, which also seeks to integrate psychological and theological accounts around the virtues of "faith," "hope," and "love."
and judgment. Not only can we use language to generate insight into this created world — we can imagine and create new possibilities (artistic, technical, theoretical, and practical) — but we can also deliberate and decide how best to respond to it. We can encounter this world “responsibly,” that is, not through “compulsion” but with “deliberation” and “decision.”

On the other hand, when we interpret and respond to what happens around us, we do so out of the concrete totality of all that constitutes who we are. This includes who we are as those shaped by nature, history, and even by ourselves (our past perceptions and responses to life). It includes the structure of our bodies, our psychic strivings, our spiritual character, the communities to which we belong, our past remembered and forgotten — in general the environment and world that have shaped and had an impact on us. Hence, our freedom always has a given character. It always responds to what exists already.

This makes it difficult for us to ascertain precisely where personal responsibility for our lives actually begins. Kristeva’s psychoanalytic insights into the “ill-being” we carry in our bodies speak profoundly of how the complex of defilement, sin, and guilt affects us. Defiled not only by what we have done but also by what others have done to us, we find ourselves enmeshed in a residue of personal and corporate guilt that contaminates us in deep, often unconscious ways. As her work as a psychoanalyst attests, our bodily and psychic instincts often drive our motives and actions at a level much deeper than our conscious awareness. This is why ancient notions of defilement are still relevant to our contemporary notions of sin and guilt. Moreover, as Paul and the Old Testament prophets asserted, our interests, whether they are social, cultural, political, or economic, affect what we think and do often at a level much deeper than our stated intentions. Even the natural world that surrounds us is infected to some extent by human defilement, a theme that echoes the “curse” found on the earth (of Gen. 3:17-19) or the “bondage to futility” about which Paul speaks (in Rom. 8:20). As the biblical imagery we have surveyed suggests, sin involves not only straying and wandering from our relationship to God and others but

being held in captivity as well. In line with prophetic and apocalyptic judgments, structures of evil govern this estranged world; demonic powers rule not only individuals, but also nations and nature. 38

Christians believe that Jesus, as the crucified Messiah, liberates not only all people, but also all of nature, from these powers. Christ's crucified and raised body is the place in God's life where God's forgiveness is given — is transferred — to us. This body takes on the "curse" of sin that separates us from the one Jesus called Father. In a fashion similar to the way forgiveness is enacted in the transference that takes place between the analyst and the analysand, our forgiveness is enacted in the transference — the "exchange" — whereby Christ takes on our sin and gives us his life in its stead. 39 All of this, in trinitarian theology, takes place through the power of the Spirit who unites the will of the Son with the Father even when Jesus cries out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34). The Spirit creates the "space" not only for this greatest difference and yet unity within trinitarian life, but also for our participation in Christ's crucified and raised body through baptism (Rom. 6:1-14). In this participation, we die to our sinful self and are raised by the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead. We now are a "new creation" in Christ. We find ourselves in the "space" of God's reign of justice and mercy, a "space" created and permeated by the Spirit, which makes our forgiveness of one another — as both victims and perpetrators — possible.

**Ethical Implications**

What, then, does this mean for ethics? We return to Gustafson's three questions about Christ and the moral life. What does this mean for our understanding of the nature and locus of moral goodness? In this Christology, the nature and locus of moral goodness lies in Christ's crucified and raised body. By way of our participation in this "third," Christ's body and the new creation or reign of God it enacts among us, we are not only reconciled to God but also reconciled to one another, as both

victims and perpetrators. In the space of this “third,” the tangible locus in which we participate bodily through baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and our daily dying and rising in Christ within the complexity of our everyday lives, we are freed from what holds us back from relating to one another as truly responsible and free subjects. Christ’s body sustains the ongoing “natality” of which Arendt speaks. It sustains our “mutual release,” our capacity to forgive and be forgiven in an unpredictable world with the promise of God’s unconditional love (Rom. 8:38-39). Within it, what appears irreversible — the seemingly endless patterns of vengeance and punishment that capture us in cycles of cause and effect — is reversed.

Christ’s crucified and raised body, which, in the Spirit’s power, is the basis for our being able to have true community with one another, provides an even more substantial transfer of love than one finds in a psychoanalyst’s office. It is the location, which we can see and tangibly ingest in bread and wine, where, in Kristeva’s words, our “ill-being,” the defilement and guilt of our sin, both personal and corporate, is released and re-created into new life. We now can respond creatively to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Christ’s body sustains our capacity to make conscious the fears and desires we dare not face — the fears and desires that propel us into sin — so that we can truly think, speak, and act as free ethical agents who are capable of valuing others as much as we value ourselves (Rom. 13:8-10).

Even though it justifies both victims and perpetrators, it also, as the Gospels make evident, clearly distinguishes between them, often by unveiling our distortions regarding who is truly righteous and who is truly sinful, who is inside the law and who is outside of it. Christ’s death and resurrection clearly demarcate the distinction between the “old age” and the “new age,” the first Adam and the second Adam, the “flesh” and the “Spirit.” This contrast is not based on the law. Here “circumcision” and “uncircumcision” no longer count, only “faith working out in love” (Gal. 5:6). Even though this God’s creative righteousness is enacted “apart from the law” (Rom. 3:21), it nonetheless enables us to fulfill the just requirement of the law (Rom. 8:4). Freed from the law, sin, and death, we now can use that freedom in service of others rather than simply for our own interests. Incorporated into Christ’s body, we are given a very different “mind” for perceiving and responding to the world. Incorporated into a very different kind of power and wisdom, God’s infinite power and infinite wisdom, we now are able to
perceive and respond to one another from the standpoint of its infinite excess and not from the standpoint of our finite fears and desires.

We no longer need to see one another — or the leaders, slogans, and groups with which we align ourselves — as competitors for finite goods (1 Cor. 1-3). "All is yours," Paul avers, "past, present, and future, life and death" (3:23). The implications of this are great. Our participation in Christ's justification is a participation in God's creative righteousness. This divine righteousness endows us with a "moral creativity" that also gives us the power to forgive — to release and heal (at least to some extent on this side of the eschaton) — the evil residue in our own bodies as individuals, as families, as communities, and even as participants in the natural world.

Second, what does this mean for the character of the moral self, our capacity for ethical agency? In this Christology, participation in Christ's crucified and raised body is what constitutes the moral self. Kristeva's depiction of how the love transferred between the psychoanalyst and analyst "forgives" the ill-being that hinders speaking subjects and releases their creative capacities provides a helpful analogue for what happens when sinners are justified by Christ's death and resurrection and thereby set onto new and more creative ways of being in the Spirit. Participation in Christ's body frees us to become responsible agents capable of deliberating how best to exercise our individual capacities in the service of the "common good" (1 Cor. 12:7). William Schweiker describes Christian responsibility as a "radical interpretation" of our circumstances in order to discern how best to use the power we have at our disposal in the service of the good; such radical interpretation discerns how best to integrate the finite goods we have at our disposal in the service of "respecting and enhancing finite life." Participation in Christ's crucified and raised body carries us into an even deeper discernment of where God's creative righteousness is unleashing moral creativity within and among us, enabling us to forgive and heal the evil residue in our psyche and patterns of interaction.

Thus, Paul's ethical creativity differs from Kristeva's aesthetic creativity. For Kristeva, we are responsible and innocent. For Paul we are

responsible and guilty; what is forgiven is not merely psychological ill-being but radical evil — the fact that “in my flesh, I can will what is right, but I cannot do it” (Rom. 7:18). For Paul, we are not merely victims of the powers that keep us from doing what we know is right, but perpetrators whose very acquiescence to these powers hardens not only our captivity but others’ captivity as well. For Paul, faith is never merely about individual salvation. It is about being incorporated into a body that consists of others as well. Justification may be “transmoral” in that it surpasses the law, but it does not do away with the law, in particular, its twofold summary in the commands to love God and one’s neighbor as one’s self; rather, it gives us the power to fulfill the law. Justification enacts a righteous self-identity that is always also an identity with others. It enables one not only to individuate as fully as one can and ought as a finite creature capable of free thought and action, but also to participate as fully as one can and ought in the lives of other finite agents, who are also capable of fully individuating and participating in relation with others. God’s love is always universal in its scope, working “all things for good” not only for individuals but also for all people and even the cosmos (Rom. 8:28).

Third, what does this mean for the criteria, norms, and values that we turn to for guiding our judgments and actions? The criterion that guides our judgments and actions is, again, Christ’s crucified and raised body, a body that opens up a new space — a new construal of the “in-between” among us — that allows for the continual creative undoing of dysfunctional patterns and unleashing of new life. This body sustains the most radical interpretation we can make of our lives: it enables us to discern how Christ’s Spirit is resurrecting new life out of the defilement and guilt of our sin. As we appropriate and integrate the goods we have at our disposal, we are impelled to go even deeper in discerning how we can participate in the concrete ways God’s forgiving and healing power actually transforms ill-being in our midst. As we daily die and rise in Christ, as we daily put to death the “sin” in our “bodies” so that “we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:1-12), our bodies become the location where, as Paul states, “death is at work in us” in order to bring about “life in you” (2 Cor. 4:12).

Relevant here is Arendt’s understanding of how forgiving and promising give us the “miracle” of natality. Still, Christ’s crucified and raised body undergirds the forgiving and promising Arendt speaks of with an eschatological hope in God’s ultimate power to redeem all of
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life. Its creativity has the power to redeem what often appears to be our tragic vulnerability not only in the face of life’s sheer capriciousness, but also in the face of radical evil itself. The New Testament interpreted Christ’s suffering in terms of the suffering of the Servant of Yahweh and not in terms of the suffering of Job. Christ’s suffering and death entails the “natality” of new creation. The wisdom and power of the cross is not merely “foolish” but also paradoxically “wise,” not merely “weak” but also paradoxically “strong” (1 Cor. 1:18-25).

Thus, Paul commends us to value hardships as much as we do the honors and pleasures of life: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Indeed, we are those who are “always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies” (v. 10). Thus, we must put to death any messianic pretensions to impose our will on others, and in so doing negate their freedom to act and think as those who are also created in God’s image. Justification and the creative righteousness it enacts also judge — put to death — any creative use of power that fails to recognize its own potential for radical evil. Christ’s messianic reign brings together both the Son of Man’s judgment and power and the Servant of Yahweh’s suffering and pardon.

Later work will need to spell out in much more detail the ethical implications of this Christology for ecclesial and political life. In this reading of Paul’s theology of justification alongside two contemporary accounts of forgiveness, my intent has simply been to argue that (in Paul’s theology at least) the pivot relating Christ and ethics centers on our participation in Christ’s death and resurrection, a pivot that always links our justification to the new creation Christ’s Spirit is enacting in our midst. Early Christians like Paul interpreted not only the scandal of Christ’s death, the scandal of a crucified Messiah who died a political and religious failure, but also their own sin and sufferings in terms that fused messianic images of a future Davidic reign with images of the Son of Man and the Servant of Yahweh. By faith they confessed that, far from being tragic, Christ’s suffering and death ushered in a new age in which the sufferings we now experience are the birth pangs of a new reign of God being enacted in our midst. By faith we too can radically interpret, that is, perceive and respond to, the seeming “futility” of our circumstances in this created world the way a mother experiences the pangs of giving birth to a child (Rom. 8:12-24).
As our source of the good, capacity for agency, and criterion for judgment, Christ's crucified and raised body not only forgives and cleanses us of all defilement, sin, and guilt, but also incorporates us into a new crucified and raised body. This gives us hope. Not a hope in utopian illusions, this hope is realistic — something we actually experience in our bodies — enabling us to affirm confidently that we can enact new ways of being, in spite of and in the midst of the ill-being we find within and around us. We can not only promise to respect and care for others and ourselves, but we can also forgive and be forgiven by one another when we fail, confident that whether or not we achieve success in human terms, “all things” do indeed “work for good” according to God’s “purpose” for them (Rom. 8:28).