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The Power of Perspective

The question of forgiveness is a tricky one, especially in today's world. As I reflected on Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* and its exploration of forgiveness, I found myself drifting between the historical context of the Holocaust and the ways similar moral dilemmas echo into the present. The moments when harm feels so vast and personal that the idea of forgiveness almost seems beside the point. No matter how you approach it, Wiesenthal's story—his reasoning, his response, and the fact that he spent much of his life not only sitting with this question but actively seeking answers from people across different backgrounds—is a testament to how powerful this one little question really is.

What would you have done?

In his book, Wiesenthal recalls a moment from his time as a forced laborer in a concentration camp, in which he is summoned to the bedside of a dying Nazi soldier. The soldier confesses to crimes he committed against Jewish people and asks Wiesenthal, a Jewish man, to forgive him. It is a moment that feels almost impossible to process, both because of the scale of the violence and the intimacy of the request. Wiesenthal ultimately leaves without responding, carrying that silence and question with him long after the war ends. At the end of the narrative section, Wiesenthal acknowledges this himself, stating:

There are many kinds of silence. Indeed it can be more eloquent than words, and it can be interpreted in many ways. ... The crux of the matter is, of course, the question of

forgiveness. Forgetting is something that time alone takes care of, but forgiveness is an act of volition, and only the sufferer is qualified to make the decision. (97-8)

And I think that is the real challenge. Forgiveness is not linear; it is complex and reliant on an individual's beliefs, experience, and sense of self. There will never be a correct universal answer to Wiesenthal's question. It is precisely because of this variability that I now consider *The Sunflower* such a pivotal literary work. It does not offer resolution—it demands engagement. In my own life, I have noticed that my willingness to forgive depends on far more than the apology itself. I once lost a close friendship because of a misunderstanding that left us both believing the other no longer cared. Learning what had actually happened completely changed how I viewed the situation and reminded me that forgiveness often depends as much on understanding another person's perspective as it does on the offense itself. Sometimes understanding why someone acted the way they did makes forgiveness come more easily, while other times the hurt outweighs any explanation. Those smaller experiences helped me realize how impossible it is to imagine one universal answer to Wiesenthal's question.

Before reading the second part of the book, "The Symposium," I was quick to think that if I were in Wiesenthal's place, I would've done the same thing—walked away, said nothing. That response felt immediate, almost instinctual, like a moral reflex. But this is where the craft of the book becomes so striking. Wiesenthal gives us his story first, without interruption or commentary, allowing readers to sit in that moment and confront their own gut reactions. There is something deliberate about this structure: it creates a space where we are forced to answer the question before we are given any guidance on how to think about it.

Then comes "The Symposium," and everything becomes more complicated than I originally thought possible. Reading the response from so many different voices made me realize

that I had never truly thought of forgiveness beyond something relatively simple—something that follows an apology in everyday life. My own experiences with forgiveness have been shaped by situations that are minor in comparison, where stakes are low and harm is easily repaired. Because of that, I hadn't fully considered how forgiveness operates when the damage is irreversible, when the person asking for it cannot undo what they have done, and when the person being asked may not even have the authority to grant it.

The multiplicity of perspectives in “The Symposium” is what transforms the book from a personal narrative into an ongoing ethical conversation. Each contributor approaches the question differently—some emphasizing justice, others compassion, and a few that argue the limits of individual authority. What struck me most is not that no one answer felt definitively correct, but that each response revealed something about the values and assumptions behind it. In that way, the second half of the book does not just challenge Wiesenthal's silence, it challenges the reader's initial certainty. Now, when I think about forgiveness, I find myself asking more questions than offering answers. Why did they do it? What was their situation before? What kind of person are they? What kind of person am *I*? Is my forgiveness for them or for me? What does it say about me if I choose to forgive, or if I choose not to?

Obviously, the answers to these questions change based on the situation, so why shouldn't the idea of forgiveness be able to do the same thing?

Forgiveness depends on so much more than simply saying “I'm sorry.” Was the harm intentional or accidental? Is the person genuinely remorseful, or are they simply seeking relief from their own guilt? Was this a single mistake or part of a pattern of repeated harm? Is the person asking for forgiveness while the victim is still suffering from the consequences? If our

answers shift with each of these situations, why shouldn't our understanding of forgiveness be just as flexible?

The structure of Wiesenthal's book is what makes this kind of reflection possible. By allowing readers to form an initial, instinctive response and then confronting them with a range of conflicting perspectives, he exposes the limits of gut reactions. It begins as a seemingly simple question: What would you have done if you were in Wiesenthal's position? Then it evolves into something far more complex: *why* would you respond that way, and what does that reveal about *you*? In that sense, *The Sunflower* is not just a story about one man's silence. It is an invitation to sit with discomfort, to reconsider certainty, and to recognize that some questions are not meant to have one answer, but rather be returned to again and again. I don't think I could answer Wiesenthal's question any more confidently today than I could before reading the book, but I do know that I ask different questions now. Instead of searching for the "right" answer, I find myself trying to better understand the people involved, the circumstances surrounding them, and what my own response says about the kind of person I hope to be.