Must We Forgive?: Exploring the Limits and Possibilities of Forgiveness and Resentment

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MUST WE FORGIVE?: EXPLORING THE LIMITS AND POSSIBILITIES OF FORGIVENESS AND RESENTMENT

by

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For Honors in Religious Studies

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Abstract

Conflict has marked civilization from Biblical times to the present day. Each of us, with our different and competing interests, and our desires to pursue those interests, have over time wronged another person. Not surprisingly then, forgiveness is a concern of individuals and groups—communities, countries, religious groups, races—yet it is a complex idea that philosophers, theologians, political scientists, and psychologists have grappled with. Some have argued that forgiveness is a therapeutic means for overcoming guilt, pain, and anger. Forgiveness is often portrayed as a coping mechanism—how often we hear the phrase, “forgive and forget,” as an arrangement to help two parties surmount the complications of disagreement. But forgiveness is not simply a *modus vivendi*; the ability to forgive and conversely to ask for forgiveness, is counted as an admirable trait and virtue.

This essay will explore the nature of forgiveness, which in Christian dogma is often posited as an unqualified virtue. The secular world has appropriated the Christian notion of forgiveness as such a virtue—but are there instances wherein offering forgiveness is morally inappropriate or dangerous? I will consider the situations in which forgiveness, understood in this essay as the overcoming of resentment, may not be a virtue—when perhaps maintaining resentment is as virtuous, if not more virtuous, than forgiving. I will explain the various ethical frameworks involved in understanding forgiveness as a virtue, and the relationship between them. I will argue that within Divine Command Theory forgiveness is a virtue—and thus morally right—because God commands it. This ethical system has established forgiveness as unconditional, an idea which has been adopted into popular culture. With virtue ethics in mind, which holds virtues to be those traits which benefit the person who possesses them, contributing
to the good life, I will argue unqualified forgiveness is not always a virtue, as it will not always benefit the victim.

Because there is no way to avoid wrongdoing, humans are confronted with the question of forgiveness with every indiscretion. Its limits, its possibilities, its relationship to one’s character—forgiveness is a concern of all people at some time if for no other reason than the plain fact that the past cannot be undone. I will be evaluating the idea of forgiveness as a virtue, in contrast to its counterpart, resentment. How can forgiveness be a response to evil, a way to renounce resentment, and a means of creating a positive self-narrative? And what happens when a sense of moral responsibility is impossible to reconcile with the Christian (and now, secularized imperative of) forgiveness? Is it ever not virtuous to forgive?

In an attempt to answer that question I will argue that there are indeed times when forgiveness is not a virtue, specifically: when forgiveness compromises one’s own self-respect; when it is not compatible with respect for the moral community; and when the offender is unapologetic. The kind of offense I have in mind is a dehumanizing one, one that intends to diminish another person’s worth or humanity. These are moral injuries, to which I will argue resentment is a better response than forgiveness when the three qualifications cannot be met.
Introduction

The short story “The Capital of the World” by Ernest Hemingway begins with the telling of a joke:

Madrid is full of boys named Paco, which is diminutive of the name Francisco, and there is a Madrid joke about a father who came to Madrid and inserted an advertisement in the personal columns of *El Liberal* which said: *PACO MEET ME AT HOTEL MANTANA NOON TUESDAY ALL IS FORGIVEN PAPA* and how a squadron of Guardia Civil had to be called to disperse the eight hundred young men who answered the advertisement.¹

The joke is about the popularity of the name “Paco,” but as the eminent theologian and public scholar Miroslav Volf has pointed out, it only makes sense because of the ubiquity of the human desire to be forgiven.² Eight hundred Pacos showed up at the Hotel that Tuesday afternoon, but more significantly, eight hundred young men were longing for forgiveness. The joke demonstrates the powerful desire to right our wrongs, and restore relationships. For Volf, Hemingway’s joke shows the value placed on forgiveness because it is the “uniquely important way we deal with wrongdoing.”³ The significance ascribed to forgiveness and those who dispense it can only be understood in conjunction with an explanation of forgiveness as a virtue, both theologically and in the secularly.

I have looked for and found, I think, a modest, but important function of religion that allows us to understand Paco’s story, in a world that needs to ameliorate conflicts over values, rituals, and interests—material, moral, economic, political, and personal. This function is forgiveness. There are no other social institutions or cultural sets of values that do more than religions to encourage, organize, ritualize, and facilitate the resolution of hatreds, and resentments caused by the perception of having been painfully wronged.

² Volf, *Free of Charge*, 127.
³ Ibid., 128.
While religions have much to say about forgiveness, so too do secular disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Theologically, forgiveness is related to doctrinal issues of original sin and human fallibility, at least in the Christian context, which will be the focus of my research, as it has been the focus of most of the existing research that explores that central relationship between Christianity and forgiveness. Further, in order to minimize the scope of my inquiry, I have chosen Christianity as it is the dominant religious tradition in Western culture—especially in the United States.

Because one major Christian belief is that all humans are born sinners who must be forgiven by God in order to attain ultimate salvation, the dynamic of repentance and forgiveness is fixed in Christian thought. Through a relationship with Jesus Christ and atonement for one’s inherited sin by way of a strong Christian faith, lifestyle, good works, or confession, forgiveness—what may be considered the greatest form of God’s love—will be bestowed. Christians find the strength to forgive others through the undying desire to be forgiven when they themselves stand before God. We might say that secular disciplines and scholars are concerned with the benefits of forgiveness, such as the ability to reconcile interpersonal relationships and alleviate crippling hate and tension within society. But perhaps forgiveness owes its invariable prominence and support in popular culture and secular society to its vitality in Christian doctrine.

But as every virtue taken to an extreme may become a vice, Christianity has not only encouraged forgiveness for harms done, but it also may be the case that Christian teachings not only encourage forgiveness but may enforce unconditional forgiveness. One way or the other, so important are theological functions regarding forgiveness that, for the purpose of this paper, I would like to cite religion as a manifestation and mechanism of and by which we atone for our wrong-doings, and by so doing resolve both our psychological and sociological feelings of guilt.
and shame, and by which we find ourselves able to live together with a variety of other and
different believers and non-believers in multicultural and diverse societies. The danger, I will
argue, is not in forgiveness itself, but in the way theological tenets of forgiveness are unqualified
and the adoption of these principles by society at-large.

Conflict has marked civilization from the earliest records of human history to the present
day. Most people would agree that all humans, with our different and competing interests, and
our desires to pursue those interests, have over time wronged another person. Not surprisingly
then, forgiveness is a concern of individuals and groups—communities, countries, religious
groups, races—yet it is a complex idea that philosophers, theologians, political scientists, and
psychologists have grappled with. Some have argued that forgiveness is a therapeutic means for
overcoming guilt, pain, and anger. Forgiveness is often portrayed as a coping mechanism—we
often hear the phrase, “forgive and forget,” as an arrangement to help two parties surmount the
complications of disagreement. But forgiveness is not simply a modus vivendi; most people
count the ability to forgive and conversely to ask for forgiveness, as an admirable trait and virtue.

Forgiveness is generally viewed as a positive counter-phenomenon to the inevitable
instances of wrong-doing that persist in all societies. In our culture, people often regard the
degree to which one is willing to accept another’s apology is indicative of his or her general
disposition. One who refuses to grant forgiveness may be called callous, bitter, and resentful. On
the other hand, the person who offers forgiveness quickly and indiscriminately may be called
spineless and cowardly.

Because most people regard wrongdoing as pervasive and perhaps inevitable, humans are
confronted with the question of forgiveness with every indiscretion. Its limits, its possibilities, its
relationship to one’s character—forgiveness is a concern of nearly all people at some time if for
no other reason than the plain fact that the past cannot be undone. Forgiveness is humanity’s response to this frustrating reality. Hannah Arendt commented on forgiveness as a response to the irreversibility of the past, “the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility—of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing—is the faculty of forgiving.”

Bishop Joseph Butler, an eighteenth-century English theologian and philosopher who wrote important treatises on resentment and forgiveness, gave two seminal sermons regarding forgiveness as a virtue. Butler began both sermons with an excerpt from Matthew:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy: But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you.

“Love thy enemy” is arguably one of the most difficult tasks set forth for Christians—perhaps this is the reason we exalt those with the ability to do this; we need only to look at the Holocaust, terrorism, war, and genocide to know that the command to love our enemies is often lost amongst rage and hatred. But Butler believed that to love those who have wronged us is in fact the “law of our nature.” In his sermon, he used a hypothetical situation a person appearing before God “naked and without disguise before the judge of all the earth, to give account of your behavior towards your fellow creatures.” Therefore, the reader is compelled to reflect on his or her ability to forgive—and according to Butler, there can be nothing more dreadful than the reflection that one had been implacable, without mercy. How can one ask for the forgiving spirit to be exercised in his or her favor? Then, Butler posits the opposite: a good person comes before God knowing he had been “meek, forgiving, and merciful; that he had in simplicity of heart been ready to pass over offenses against himself,” this person remembers the declaration that “if ye

5 Matthew 5:43-44
6 Butler, *Sermon IX. Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries*
forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will likewise forgive you” and is relieved. But Butler uses this scenario to demonstrate the necessity of forgiveness, pardon, reconciliation of our fellow persons, as we hope for the absolution of our own sins, for peace of mind in death, and for divine mercy.

Reconciliation is surely an artifact of evil—given that evil seems ubiquitous, how can we mitigate it? Forgiveness, as the contemporary philosopher Charles Griswold writes, “is a prime candidate in part because it does not reduce either to resigned acceptance or to deluded avoidance…how can one accept fully that moral evil has been done and yet see its perpetrator in a way that…in a sense…simultaneously forswears revenge, aspires to give up resentment, and incorporates the injury suffered into a narrative of self that allows the victim and even the narrator to flourish?” Griswold’s claim represents the popular view that the ability to forgive the injuries befallen to oneself might have redeeming qualities, while resentment and revenge are often conflated with a sentiment of something suspect, something used to inflict pain on another person.

In this paper, I will challenge popular notions of forgiveness as a virtue, in contrast to its counterpart, resentment. How can forgiveness be a response to evil, a way to renounce resentment, and a means of creating a positive self-narrative? Might we look at those who are, as Butler says, “meek, forgiving, and merciful…ready to pass over offenses against himself” as morally irresponsible? How can we forgive all evils unilaterally? Must not we discern what evils can and cannot be forgiven? What happens when a sense of moral responsibility is impossible to reconcile with Butler’s imperative of forgiveness? Is it ever not virtuous to forgive?

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7 Butler, Sermon IX. Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries
8 Griswold, Forgiveness, xxv.
I will begin with a broad introduction to the notions of forgiveness and resentment, focusing explicitly on the way the two share an arena and can be considered as the two possible responses to an injury against oneself. I will then clarify the different ethical theories and perspectives that will be relevant to this discussion. The next section will demonstrate the weightiness of my questions by way of a discussion of the irreversibility of time, and the ways in which the past is immutable. Following these introductory sections I will clarify the kind of transgressions that are at stake in my inquiry, namely those that violate the moral laws and result in moral injuries. From there, the paper will move into a discussion of forgiveness from social and psychological perspectives, from Christian perspectives, and briefly clarify what forgiveness is not, in order to paint as clear and comprehensive a picture of forgiveness as a virtue. I will argue that there are two types of forgiveness—conditional and unconditional which will be important to my own argument against unconditioned forgiveness. The next sections examine resentment from both social and psychological, and theological perspectives. I then present several defenses of resentment from the existing research on forgiveness, as they form the foundation of my own contributions to the existing dialogue.

Finally, as I construct my own argument, I will claim that there exists such a concept as an unforgiveable evil, which dehumanizes others and attempt to diminish their moral standing (and offer potential arguments to the contrary). Then I will develop my original contribution to the present discourse, an argument based on the limits of forgiveness in the face of dehumanizing, unforgiveable evil—specifically that there are three times in which it is not virtuous to forgive: when forgiveness is not compatible with self-respect; respect for others in the moral community; and when the offender is unapologetic. The paper will close with a
consideration of potential counter arguments to the three instances that I have put forth, and final concluding remarks.

**Introduction to the Concepts of Forgiveness and Resentment**

Many analysts of forgiveness introduce and define the concept in relation to resentment. Hannah Arendt described forgiveness as a way of escaping the cycle of resentment and revenge. To forgive, according to Arendt, is to renounce rage and bitterness and lay the foundation for an amended relationship with the wrongdoer; this makes it something unique and notable about human life.\(^9\) Arendt thought forgiveness did not receive enough attention as a secular matter as it was presumed to be primarily theologically oriented. To be sure, the questions of forgiveness, sin, evil, and divine clemency, are fundamental to most religions. But iniquities and transgressions are also human problems and transcend the bounds of religion, so they must be addressed by faithful and non-faithful alike as victims and as perpetrators. Thus the problem of forgiveness is not only a theological one (though one’s propensity to forgive is often driven by theology), but one that should concern all persons, regardless of faith.

Joseph Butler is thought by some to be the first person to analyze the attitudes of forgiveness and resentment in relation to each other. Butler was concerned with the passion of resentment, and how an omnipotent and loving God could allow us to express such an unloving attitude.\(^10\) For Butler, the excess of resentment—not the attitude itself—is problematic, and we need forgiveness to overcome resentment before it dominates us. Resentment, for Butler, does in fact express one’s commitment to morality, but one should not be dominated by any passion (such as resentment), and thus forgiveness is that virtue which checks resentment.

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\(^10\) Haber, *Forgiveness*, 16.
This paper draws upon Butler’s influential model of forgiveness. To be sure, other models of forgiveness exist. But forgiveness understood as the repression and rejection of resentment will be the best lens through which to examine the dichotomy between the virtuous and non-virtuous conceptions of both forgiveness and resentment. It should be noted that Butler’s model tells us something about the way in which resentment emerges as an attitude. To suggest that forgiveness must prevail over resentment suggests resentment is a natural—and according to Butler, not inherently wrong—response to injury. From this we might conclude that in order for forgiveness to take place, a victim must first feel resentment.

Moreover, the presence of the resentful attitude implies at the very minimum an acknowledgement of the injury as wrong—the transgression has been recognized as such. P.F. Strawson maintains that forgiveness is related to resentment in this way. He explains that asking for forgiveness is to know one is resented, because seeking forgiveness is to “partly acknowledge that the attitude displayed in our action was such as might properly be resented; partly to repudiate that attitude. To forgive is to accept the repudiation, to forswear the resentment.”

We see then that for both the offender and the victim (at least in cases where the offender is repentant, or asking for forgiveness), in order for forgiveness to transpire, first an acknowledgment of the injury and its immorality must occur, followed by the resentful attitude. Only after resentment has been established can forgiveness overcome it.

Many theorists have followed closely in Butler’s theoretical footsteps. For example, Kathleen Dean Moore has argued that “the attitude of forgiveness is characterized by…the lack of personal resentment for the injury.” Likewise, Martin Hughes echoes Butler in his description of forgiveness as the “cancellation of deserved hostilities and substitution of

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11 Haber, *Forgiveness*, 11.
friendlier attitudes.”

His use of the concepts of “cancellation,” and “substitution,” are directly related to Butler’s model of forgiveness as a replacement for resentment.

But not all cases where resentment is overcome counts as instances of forgiveness. Jeffrie Murphy has described forgiveness in accordance with Butler’s model as the “resolute overcoming of the anger and hatred that are naturally directed toward a person who has done one an unjustified and non-excused moral injury.” But Murphy expands on this idea by qualifying it with the stipulation that “ceasing to resent will not constitute forgiveness unless it is done for a moral reason. Forgiveness is not the overcoming of resentment simpliciter; it is rather this: forswearing resentment on moral grounds. Murphy has adopted Butler’s view and offered an addition to it by suggesting forgiveness is not just overcoming hatred, anger, and resentment because these passions can be dangerously excessive, but the act of forgiveness must also be on moral grounds.

The concept of forgiveness resists any one precise definition, but the following definition comes close to embodying it: “[forgiveness is] a reduction of negative responses and the production of positive one toward an event, person or group…change toward a perceived transgressor…a process often involving decreased motivation to retaliate against a (perceived) offender, decreasing motivation to maintain estrangement from the offender, and increasing motivation toward conciliation and goodwill for the offender.” Forgiveness in these contexts is seen as a virtue and “virtues are always thought to be praiseworthy motives for action…virtuous acts and motives are things that we want to encourage because we strive to be virtuous

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13 Hughes, Forgiveness, 113.
14 Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 15.
15 Ibid., 15
persons.”17 All of these components are at least in part related to resentment. Forgiveness, as a virtue, in the wake of Butler’s sermon, has come to be defined as that which overcomes and represses resentment, so that the two attitudes are juxtaposed.

Ethical Frameworks

Because I have suggested that forgiveness is a virtue, I should frame my argument in the context of different ethical systems which make it possible to think about the nature of what is virtuous. How do the various thinkers and theories that I will draw upon fit within the framework of meta-ethics? If forgiveness is a virtue, it would be useful to have a clear idea of the nature of this type of virtue and how it reflects on our moral character.

As Aurel Kolnai states in his paper, *Forgiveness*, “forgiveness is pre-eminently an ethical subject, and a paper written about it cannot help being a paper in ethics.”18 But others have argued forgiveness is a strictly religious concept, not an ethical one. Paul Lehmann claims forgiveness is comprehensible in the context of the relation between God and man, “marked by the awesome holiness of God, by man’s offense against this holiness, by man’s guilt, and by man’s need for assurance that his sin against God has been pardoned and that right relations between God and man have been restored.”19 So here are two competing frameworks from which we can consider forgiveness: one I will argue is closest to Divine Command theory, the other, the virtue ethics. Both are ethical systems—Kolnai is correct in arguing there is something ethical at stake. More specifically, the unconditional status of forgiveness in Christian thought operates from Divine Command theory, whereas my conception of conditioned forgiveness is situated within virtue ethics, and I will examine the nature of forgiveness as a virtue.

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18 Kolnai, *Forgiveness*, 91.
19 Lewis, *On Forgiveness*, 236.
I am critiquing unconditional forgiveness as understood through Divine Command Theory, a meta-ethical theory, which proposes that an action's status as morally good is dependent on whether it is commanded by God. What is moral is determined by what God commands, so to be moral is to follow God’s commands. In one reading of the notions of forgiveness, Divine Command seems to say that forgiveness is unconditional. So Divine Command theory has provided the foundation for the belief in unconditional forgiveness that I will argue has trickled out into popular culture. As Meirlys Lewis has claimed, there is a logical dimension to forgiveness where it is “not just an occasional requirement, but where it is an absolute requirement…structured and defined by certain beliefs about God, about the love of God, the mercy of God, divine grace and compassion.”

Kierkegaard presents a particular analysis of Christian love and likewise Christian forgiveness with secular love and forgiveness. The uniqueness of Christian forgiveness lies in its “unconditionality and in that it maintains a constant unchanging relation between the believer and the trespasser. Christian forgiveness does not require the repentance of the one who is to be forgiven. It does not require reference to mitigating circumstances, to the possible ill consequences of forgiveness. It does not require a moral justification of itself.” For believers, this makes forgiveness an eternal obligation, a religious demand. The process of forgiveness involves perceptions about the relationship between God and the world which color how one perceives relations with other humans. There is no consideration of the moral, conceptions about “sin, primordial evil, the distance between what is worthless, insignificant and what is infinitely good, perfect, are inseparable from the language of prayer and confession.”

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21 Ibid., 243
22 Ibid., 245
Another way of approaching forgiveness is through ethics, and this is the context in which my argument has been developed. Kolnai has talked about forgiveness not as a “strict obligation,” but a quasi-obligation which has its source in virtue, and reveals virtue. “It may be looked upon…as the epitome and culmination of morality.”23 And as Lewis argues, “the more virtuous I am, then, the more disposed I am to forgive.”24 Thus, forgiveness is not a duty, but it is a virtue. I am not arguing that forgiveness is always wrong, but I am arguing that from a certain ethical framework, virtue ethics, unconditional forgiveness subsumed under Divine Command theory, is flawed because it cannot account for circumstantial nuances, and is problematic when applied without qualifications.

Virtue ethics supposes that the possession of virtues, understood as deep and relatively permanent traits of character and intellect, is a criterion of moral and non-moral worth: the virtues are necessary if one is to be a good person.25 And, one of the features of ancient thought is that virtues benefit those who possess them. For Butler, an important benefit of forgiveness is the role that it plays in not letting our resentment towards wrongdoing go beyond appropriate limits. It is believed that if rightful resentment goes for too long unchecked, it will be so consuming that the person doing the resenting will suffer. An Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics adopts this principle, and defines the virtues in terms of their contribution to the person’s thriving; what makes a trait a virtue is because it is a constituent of the good life for human beings.26 With this conception of virtue in mind, I will argue against unqualified forgiveness as a virtue, as it will not always be good for the possessor, particularly in relation to the three qualifications I have in mind.

23 Kolnai, Forgiveness, 105.
24 Lewis, On Forgiveness, 240.
25 Brady, The Value of the Virtues, 86.
26 Ibid.
Of course, Divine Command theory and virtue ethics are not the only two ethical systems at work. The final consideration is of conditional forgiveness, which comes out of a deontological understanding of forgiveness. To say unconditional forgiveness is always wrong would be to overstate my argument. Rather, I will demonstrate three specific times when unconditional forgiveness is morally wrong. My criticism of unqualified forgiveness in these three instances is closely aligned with the deontological rhetoric of Kant. Kant’s categorical imperative is that on whatever maxim one has based his or her actions, one would also want that maxim be a universal law. In fact, in *Resurrection*, Lewis has argued that Leo Tolstoy comes close to admitting that if unconditional forgiveness were to be universal law, then the result would be complete anarchy. Forgiveness under the three circumstances I have described—when self-respect is compromised, when the moral community is threatened, and when the offender is unrepentant—cannot be universal law, perhaps only conditioned forgiveness could succeed as such a maxim.

Finally, the utilitarian ethic enters the conversation when we consider theories on the emotional benefits of forgiveness. A utilitarian view would regard forgiveness as a virtue if dispensing forgiveness will bring the greatest happiness to the greatest number. In *Utilitarianism*, John Stuart Mill stated, "In the golden rule of Jesus of Nazareth, we read the complete spirit of the ethics of utility. To do as one would be done by, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, constitute the ideal perfection of utilitarian morality." Our own desire to be forgiven then—religious injunctions aside—would constitute the foundation for the utilitarian view. Further utilitarian rhetoric purports that we learn to associate virtuous acts with pleasure. Thus, we learn to enjoy doing virtuous acts, which in turn will bring us pleasure. The positive associations with

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28 Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 64.
forgiveness that are understood as gaining peace of mind, closure, and letting go of resentment, categorize forgiveness as a virtue because it comes with a feeling of pleasure. I will refute these utilitarian-esque claims because they lack the ethical considerations that constitute a moral understanding and dispensation of forgiveness.

**Irreversibility of the Past**

Another important aspect in analyzing resentment and forgiveness is addressing how they relate to the resolution of evil and the irreversibility of time. In his book, *Mea Culpa*, Nicholas Tavuchis refers to the human ability to apologize as “paradoxical and talismanic,” which is an observation worth explicating. Tavuchis argues that if the primary task of an apology is to resolve discord and restore the moral order by eliminating the effects of past conflict or injury, then the system of apology and forgiveness cannot be successful. Why? Tavuchis, like Arendt, rightly and simply perceives that “because an apology, no matter how sincere or effective, does not and *cannot* undo what has been done. And yet, in a mysterious way and according to its own logic, this is precisely what it manages to do”\(^{29}\) Arendt posits that forgiveness “serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose ‘sins’ hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation.”\(^{30}\)

It is on an experiential level that we know the feeling of resentment and the process of forgiveness, as part of the weightiness of the human condition. When injury occurs, we tend to consider the virtues of forgiveness as a given, but the entire process is much more paradoxical. It is humanity’s attempt to emotionally, socially, psychologically, and religiously reverse what is *fait accompli*; this is of course, metaphysically impossible. And the task is more difficult when utterly disgraceful acts of evil are under consideration. Yet society constantly encourages us to

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\(^{29}\) Tavuchis, *Mea Culpa*, 5.

forgive: therapists prescribe it, and the Bible commands it. But for a person in the wake of unimaginable moral evil, is forgiveness too much to ask? The mere metaphysical truth that the past remains in the past, untouchable to us, creates a significant barrier for many when confronted with the pressure of forgiveness. Saint Augustine advised, *cum dilectione hominum et odio vitiorum*—“with love for mankind and hatred of sins,” or popularly, “hate the sin and not the sinner.” But is this a lofty, unattainable ideal? As a moral theory, Saint Augustine’s work underlies much of the discourse on forgiveness both religious and secular. But in practice, I will argue Tavuchis’ paradox more closely mirrors the basic human experience—we cannot reverse time but in offering forgiveness we attempt to erase the effects of past transgressions, and in a way, undo it. I hope this brief discussion of the irreversibility of time demonstrates the ongoing significance of my question, as all people must face this metaphysical reality.

**Moral Evil, Moral Order, Moral Injury**

The dynamics of forgiveness and resentment generally involve what many thinkers call *moral evil*. Moral evil, in the way that I will use it, refers to a transgression of the norms of the moral community. In his seminal essay, *Freedom and Resentment*, P.F. Strawson defines forgiveness and resentment as two “reactive attitudes,” towards others in the moral community. In order to have such a reactive attitude toward another moral agent, the wronged person must believe the perpetrator intentionally committed the act—his argument is that we can only express resentment and forgiveness toward those who we believe to be culpable moral agents. The forces of nature, for instance, cannot understand the moral value or integrity of its victims, but we do believe other humans are capable of doing so.

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An attitude of resentment is connected to morality. Resentment can be considered to be a response to a personal affront, some hurtful act committed against us. Because we believe we are entitled to treatment in accordance with our moral value (as sentient beings in the moral community), we are insulted when we believed someone who has wronged us has disregarded our status as such. Resentment then might be understood as a response to the “symbolic communications” of moral injury—“intentional wrongdoing insults us and attempts...to degrade us—and thus it involves a kind of injury that is not merely tangible and sensible. It is moral injury, and we care about such injuries.” Here it should be noted that this sort of injury, from an observer’s perspective, might seem completely subjective—the extent to which one feels insulted often is related to one’s own conception of his or her self-worth. Admittedly, the degree of the response to an injury can vary in each particular circumstance from indignation to devastation. But the belief that the injury was intentional—and that because we exist in the moral community, it has diminished our status—is important to the discussion of forgiveness and resentment.

The reaction to a moral injury often manifests itself in what some have called “moral anger.” Moral anger refers to the circumstances wherein the motivation behind resentment is the “desire for the moral order to be restored...moral commitment is not merely a matter of intellectual allegiance; it requires an emotional allegiance as well, for a moral person is not simply a person who holds an abstract belief that certain things are wrong. The moral person is also motivated to do something about the wrong.” Resentment then can be a type of response to moral anger, wherein the injured party remains angry due to an allegiance to the moral order.

32 Hampton and Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 44.
33 Griswold calls this morally motivated anger, “the relevant species of anger” (Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration, 212). Jean Hampton (Forgiveness and Mercy, 80) calls this “moral hatred” and I explore this concept as Hampton uses it in more depth on page 43 of this paper.
Forgiveness, as the opposite of resentment, is also deeply tied to the moral order. The ability to forgive a gratuitous personal injury or insult begins with the recognition of the perpetrator as a moral agent, as Strawson believed. Strawson has contrasted the reactive attitude with an objective attitude, which he argues should preclude reactive attitudes such as resentment. Objectivizing others—not engaging with the other as a moral agent—indicates one is “not relating to the other as a fellow human…Being susceptible to anger and resentment is inextricably tied to participation in the general framework of human life.” As in the attitude of resentment, we must consider this person accountable—at the very least we must consider the offender to be a person. Margaret Holmgren has described these conditions:

The cognitive component of an attitude of forgiveness includes an acute or salient awareness of the offender as a sentient being who is capable of experiencing happiness and misery…subject to various needs, pressures, confusions in life and is vulnerable to error…recognition that the offender is valuable human being with a moral status equal to our own…with the same basic capacity for growth, choice, and awareness that we have…in forgiveness we will have an experiential understanding of these salient features of the offender as a person and an appreciation of their overriding importance.

It is Holmgren’s argument that recognizing these features of the offender, which make the person an equal member of the moral community, should have “overriding importance,” that will become less clear and more contentious as I examine instances of potentially unforgivable instances of evil.

This discussion of the moral order is to elucidate that both possible responses to moral evil seem to require at least the recognition of the victim and the offender as morally responsible agents. Whether or not this understanding of moral agency indicates forgiveness is always virtuous and right, or whether it means resentment can be morally responsible is the complicated matter at hand.

35 Brudholm, Resentment’s Virtue, 11.
36 Holmgren, Forgiveness and Retribution, 35.
Forgiveness: Social and Psychological Understandings

The significance ascribed to forgiveness and those who dispense it, as seen in the introductory story about Paco and his father, can only be understood in conjunction with an explanation of forgiveness as a virtue, beginning with the social, psychological, and philosophical reasons why it is regarded as virtuous.

Robert C. Roberts is the first to have ascribed a human virtue to the concept of forgiveness. Forgivingness, as Roberts calls it, is a trait embodied by those who “tend not to retain anger, bitterness, or resentment after being wronged.” This person overcomes the anger felt in response to injury, while not forfeiting his or her conviction that what was done was wrong. Overcoming anger and resentfulness requires time and thought, and replacing it with a more constructive and positive attitude. Forgivingness is a virtue because what it replaces is not a virtue; according to Roberts, anger, resentment, and persistent grievance are so destructive that the ability to surmount these feelings by way of a forgiving attitude is virtuous. Virtue ethics supposes that the possession of virtues, understood as deep and relatively permanent traits of character and intellect is a sign of moral worth; forgivingness operates then within the context of virtue ethics. The forgiving person does not seek revenge and will likely regard estrangement and antagonism as unnatural and undesirable. Forgiveness in this way is attuned with morality, integrity, a sense of justice, and self-respect, and to possess the virtue, a person needs skills of self-awareness and self-management.

Roberts’ view represents the popular perception of forgiveness as not only a positive, constructive trait, but also as a virtue. There are virtue-laden traits and virtue-neutral ones, and the distinction between the two seems to have more to do with character and morality, and less to

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37 Govier, Forgiveness and Revenge, 45.
38 Govier, Forgiveness and Revenge, 44.
39 Ibid., 45
do with plain ability or proficiency. For instance, we would not say that the ability to parallel-park a car is a virtue. It takes skill, but conceivably every person who can drive could learn to parallel park. We cannot say that the capacity to parallel-park a car is virtuous because everyone could learn if they took the time to do so. Labeling something as a virtue tends to conflate the notions of morality and virtuosity with the notions of inherency and disposition. Margaret Holmgren describes this as the relationship between attitudes and character traits: “attitudes become ingrained and internalized such that they form a regular response to a recurring situation and from this we can best understand character traits.”

Virtues are types of traits that have moral weight. The way Roberts has imagined it, forgiveness cannot simply be learned, and it cannot be separated from one’s character—either one espouses good morals, has integrity, and respects justice, or one does not. Similarly, honesty is widely considered to be a virtue, and we consider some people “honest” and others “liars” and these features mark their character. But we tend not to say someone is a bad person if he or she cannot parallel park. Roberts has taken forgiveness from the category of traits that includes parallel parking to the category of traits associated with honesty and integrity. The ability to forgive is now categorized as a virtue—and therefore charged with all that we associate with virtuosity.

The social and psychological defenses of forgiveness typically assume one of the following positions: (a) that forgiveness is necessary for a society to progress and move forward, or (b) that forgiveness is therapeutic and thus desirable for both the victim and the aggressor. I will look at each of these cases for forgiveness in order to demonstrate how forgivingness has come to be accepted as a virtue.

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40 Holmgren, Forgiveness and Retribution, 26.
Forgiveness has been associated with maintaining social order and fostering healthy relationships to others. Because one’s own humanity is ultimately and inherently tied to another, and because people consistently commit wrongs against others and are themselves the victims of wrongdoing, forgiveness is seen as the means by which estranged persons or communities are re-united, peace is restored, and the basic way in which humanity resists its own self-destruction. Archbishop Desmond Tutu has gone so far as to argue that without forgiveness, there will be no future—forgiveness is absolutely necessary. This is what Hannah Arendt meant when she described forgiveness as the only possible means of breaking the cycle of trespassing. According to Arendt, trespassing, or injury, is an unavoidable occurrence. The “mutual release,” as she calls it, from the bonds of what we have done is the only way that “men remain free agents, only by constant willingness to change their minds and start again.” Thus, idea of willingness arises, and the significance of our willingness, at least for Tutu and Arendt, is that it is critical for our future. Thus, those who are willing to lead us in forgiveness are considered the exemplars of virtuosity, perhaps because they have been able to carry out utilitarian ideals. We stand in awe of people like Nelson Mandela who forgive when they may not even know the perpetrator’s name, who forgive those who have wronged them in atrocious ways, and their forgivingness seems saint-like. Tutu has written of Nelson Mandela, “his forgiveness still leaves the world gasping at the sheer wonder of it…the magnanimity.”

For some, forgiveness offers a way to break free of the captivity of the past. As mentioned above, the metaphysical fact that the past is irreversible makes it impossible to wipe the slate completely clean, tabula rasa. If forgiveness is not forgetfulness, and we cannot ever

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42 Tutu, foreword, xiii.
45 Tutu, foreword, xiii.
forget past transgressions, people like Tutu have claimed that to forgive will result in freedom from the burden of the unalterable past. Without forgiveness, they argue, there is no “progress, no linear history, only a return to conflict and cycles of conflict.”

The emphases on growth, moving forward, and letting go underlie the majority of non-theological perspectives on the benefits of forgiveness. According to Paul Coleman, “forgiveness is more than a moral imperative…it is the only means, given our humanness and imperfections, to overcome hate and condemnation and proceed with the business of growing and loving.”

This brings us back to Paco and his father and the notion that our very humanness and imperfections necessitate forgiveness because it might be the only way we can restore relationships. We cannot reverse the past; we know that time only moves forward. But more importantly, our “humanness,” as Coleman calls it, makes us culpable. Volf uses the metaphor of a shark to explain this nicely: if a shark sees a surfer and mistakes her for a seal and takes a bite and destroys her leg, there is nothing (no one) for the surfer to forgive; the shark did what it naturally does, and it cannot be blamed for its action. According to Volf, the shark in this story has injured the surfer, but has not wronged her. So what does it mean to wrong and how does this relate to our humanness? Put simply, we are not sharks. We can be faulted for our wrongdoings and negligence—the deliberate acts that are imputable to us—this is a fact of our humanness.

Coleman’s view represents the summation of what Arendt and Tutu are claiming. That is, forgiveness is not only morally commendable (and in Coleman’s eyes, required), but also there are practical forces at play. Because we all have the ability to forgive—we have cognition and rationality as moral agents—we need to be willing to forgive in order to maintain social order.

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46 Helmick, introduction, xxvii.
47 Helmick and Peterson, Forgiveness and Reconciliation, 387.
48 Volf, Free of Charge, 129.
and carry on with life. And because no person is perfect and we are burdened by our wrongdoings as they stick to us (unlike the shark), then we, along with the eight hundred Pacos, desire forgiveness in order for that burden to be lifted. Without forgiveness, so the argument goes, we will stall progress and threaten the stability of community. Recall the utilitarian argument that what is virtuous is what brings the greatest good to the greatest number, and we see how the notion of willingness is important. In order for society to flourish, we must give priority to the good that will come to the social order.

Forgiveness is also given serious consideration in terms of its therapeutic benefits. It is viewed as a goal in psychotherapy, marital counseling, and group interventions. The notion of “letting go” has been of interest to psychologists, who take forgiveness to be a means of healing. Letting go implies that the victim’s life is no longer dominated by thoughts, memories, and negative feelings, and this escape from the negative emotions that linger after the injury is central to the weight placed on forgiveness by psychological research. Popularly, we might also observe that forgiveness is the focus of numerous self-help books, and the internet is rife with websites that collect quotes about forgiveness. In fact, among the top Google searches associated with the term “forgiveness,” are “forgiveness verses,” “quotes about forgiveness,” “quotes forgiveness,” “forgiveness lyrics,” and “forgiveness is.” Interestingly, forgiveness queries via Google reached their highest number over the past decade in February 2014. All of this is to say that questions about how to forgive, what influential people have said about forgiveness, and Biblical references to forgiveness are at the forefront of people’s minds. I have no doubt that its popular status as an unconditional good is related to its integration into therapeutic discourse.

49 Cohen, et al., Religion and Unforgivable Offenses, 86.
50 Enright and North, Exploring Forgiveness, 40.
51 Google Zeitgeist 2013
Further, the “closure” assumed to come with forgiveness is attractive to many people. Resentment is assumed to be an immense emotional burden that traps the victim in the moment of injury. The release of negativity that is the primary aim of forgiveness (understood as the overcoming of resentment) is clearly a strong motivation for those “trapped” we might say, by resentment. In fact, Everett Worthington, a psychologist who has dedicated much of his research to forgiveness, argues that the potential benefits of forgiveness are the most frequently and extensively documented aspect of the topic. Offering forgiveness is acclaimed as a result of its potential benefits, which seem to outweigh the emotional costs of withholding it. This is a classic utilitarian justification for a virtue—forgiveness is virtuous because the emotional benefits will bring us pleasure.

Forgiveness and Christianity

Forgiveness has been encouraged for centuries by many world religions for its spiritual benefits and transformative power. Yet the theoretical models of forgiveness are relatively new—thus it seems critical to understand religious perspectives on forgiveness, as they are older than any sociological, psychological, or philosophical conceptualizations. Up until the mid-1980s, most people associated forgiveness with religion—even non-religious people thought this way, as common culture has appropriated the term “forgiveness” from its religious context. Several studies have found that religious strategies for forgiveness are most commonly cited, and that people who are more religious value forgiveness more than those who are less religious.

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52 Murphy, *Forgiveness, Self-Respect, and the Value of Resentment*, 37.
54 ——, *The Art and Science of Forgiving*, 2.
55 Pargament and Rye, *Religious Perspectives on Forgiveness*, 18. These results are from a dialogue among religious scholars, answering questions about forgiveness generated by the researchers. I primarily focused on the responses of the Christian scholar, James G. Williams.
There seems to be a clear link between forgiveness and major world religions, but most of the existing research explores the central relationship between Christianity and forgiveness, so I will devote my analysis of religion and forgiveness to the Christian tradition and its teachings.

Religious principles have included forgiveness in a number of ways. For one, forgiveness can be imbued with divine qualities, so that in theistic religions, to forgive is to imitate God, carry out God’s plan, or become closer to God. Christian parables provide figures that embody forgivingness (most notably, Jesus Christ), and provide the support of those who champion a worldview conducive to forgiveness, for injured parties processing an offense against them.

Another reason for focusing on Christianity is that it espouses a dominant (at least in American culture) set of principles that inform forgiveness. Daniel Escher has argued that there is a “socialization” by way of religious leaders, teachers, and community members, which facilitates the internalization of religious beliefs. These schemas of socialization “include a religious adherent’s internalization of certain moral directives about the necessity of forgiveness…reinforced in various religious rituals…or prayers.” As the dominant religious tradition in the West over the last two millennia, it seems important to understand the way the internalization of Christian beliefs has influenced popular perceptions of forgiveness.

In the introduction, I briefly explained that repentance and forgiveness are fundamentally tied to Christian doctrine because of humanity’s inherent sinfulness as a result of the fall of mankind in the Book of Genesis, and I would like to now revisit this claim. The doctrine of original sin is an attempt to extend the history of sin from its beginning to modern humankind, a kind of “inherited corruption.” Original sin has yet to gain traction in religious studies

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56 Ibid., 17
58 Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 86.
scholarship on forgiveness, but I want to suggest that this doctrine plays an important role in the centrality of Christian and biblical concerns for forgiveness.

The Judeo-Christian conception of sin is that while evil is not from God, God must be responsible in some way because nothing can be beyond God—this is the classic problem of theodicy. This tradition rejects the Gnostic suggestion of two Gods, and thus everything comes from one God, and nothing can be from another. Because the Christian understanding of God does not hold Him to be directly responsible for evil, we tend think of evil and sin as part of the received condition of humanity, inherited in the biblical fall from grace of Adam and Eve; we are at once guilty perpetrators and involuntary heirs of evil. What we are left with is a notion of sin and transgression as inexplicable, common, and unrelenting experiences, and with this, a syndrome of guilt. This has been the foundation for Christian themes of repentance and reliance on God for salvation.

One way of relating original sin to the greater discussion of forgiveness is that the fall of humankind has made humans dependent on God’s forgiveness and salvation. Adam’s disobedience demonstrates that humans are free to sin, so one implication may be that freedom leads to sinfulness. So we see a shift in conceiving freedom as just part of the human condition to viewing freedom as problematic to it. There is an increasing awareness of humanity’s corruption, and a reinforced notion of salvation as entirely dependent on God’s grace. Humanity views itself as Adam’s heirs, constantly being pulled down by the doomed heritage that Adam’s sin bequeathed to us—a situation from which only Christ can redeem us.\(^{59}\)

In an influential article on the topic, Hermann Häring has argued that original sin has been read less as an analogue to the present experience and challenge of evil, and more as the essential demise of human freedom. He explains, “the time of pernicious human freedom has

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\(^{59}\) Häring, *Disaster for the World and Human Disaster?*, 64.
now run its course and the time of an obedience bringing salvation has begun…in this way the ‘Christian’ story of the fall took on its specific contours.” Not only does the notion of inherent sin convey obedience (and demand repentance) but it also sets Christianity up to claim to have the solution to human guilt in ways that other traditions do not. The hopelessness of a constant sense of personal guilt (because no one is infallible) finally has a historical explanation, and at the same time, a response to it. The solution to the inevitable experience of sin has been “institutionalized and monopolized” by Christianity in this way.  

Christ’s grace led to salvation and redemption, and while humanity is certainly culpable for its sins in some ways—legally, morally, emotionally—it seems as if wrongdoings are assumed to be givens, and importantly, so is forgiveness. It in part, places the origin of sin historically, making it a prominent factor for the human condition yet one that remains out of our hands. In other words: sin will happen, people will hurt one another, but Christianity has figured out a solution for that history, which is having faith in Christ, the savior. As opposed to the history of sin enduring, Christianity at once holds humanity responsible (and mandates repentance) and promises forgiveness (through faith); God offers forgiveness in exchange for repentance. Thus it has been argued that transgression and forgiveness are linked by the disorder and imbalance that result from sin—humanity cannot tolerate the chaos of sin, so forgiveness is implemented as a way to restore balance and order.

According to the Christian scholar James G. Williams in a study conducted by Kenneth Pargament and Mark Rye on the how religion influences the psychological processes of forgiveness, the act of forgiveness is often understood as

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60 Ibid., My emphasis to demonstrate the importance of the idea that obedience, or submission, is critical for salvation. Perhaps this explains why certain doctrinal injunctions—such as forgiveness—become so embedded in Christian rhetoric such that they become unconditional.  
61 Härning, Disaster for the World and Human Disaster?, 64  
62 Carmichael, introduction, xxvii
An act of pardon or release from an injury, offense, or debt. On the part of the forgiving subject, it entails having compassion, releasing someone from any act or attitude that would impede the relationship of those involved. On the part of the forgiving subject, it usually entails showing signs of repentance for the wrong done and acts of contrition and love, in keeping with the graciousness shown by the forgiver.  

This definition does not seem very much different than some philosophical conceptualizations of forgiveness, except for two words: love and graciousness. These two words are what distinguish Christian understandings of forgiveness from psychological or philosophical or sociological understandings, because both “love” and “grace” are intimately tied to the Christian construction of God. The Christian God of love, who became human in the person of Jesus, enables the spirit and power of forgiveness in human beings through Jesus as the messiah. The Bible is rife with parables and lessons of forgiveness and serves as an important reference for Christians on the matter. From the cross, Jesus pleads for God’s mercy for his crucifiers in the ultimate Christian example of forgiveness: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” Other references include the Lord’s Prayer—“forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us”—and in Matthew—“Then Peter came to Jesus and asked: ‘how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?’ and Jesus answered, ‘I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.’” And the Paco story calls to mind the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke, when “His father saw him and had compassion.”  

Each of these passages refers the reader to the ideas of grace and love in order to inspire a forgiving spirit in those who strive to lead a Christ-like life. According to Williams, forgiving  

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64 Colossians 1:15  
65 Pargament and Rye, Religious Perspectives on Forgiveness, 25.  
66 Luke 23:34  
67 Matthew 12:21-22  
68 Like 15:20
is at the heart of Christianity, for it “represents the possibility and reality of change and transformation of the individual in relation to others and others in relation to the individual.”

The notion that God is omni-benevolent, loves every person, and has allowed Christ to be the ultimate figure of graciousness and forgivingness seems to give Christians a firmly rooted worldview through which they can approach questions of forgiveness. While the morality of forgiveness certainly is not diminished in Christian theology, it is supplanted by a doctrine of unconditional love and grace as one strives to emulate Christ, *imitatio Christi*.

The idea that we are created in the image of God has inspired Archbishop Tutu’s advocacy of forgiveness. He has expressed a long tradition of Christian thought when he argued, “Monstrous deeds do not turn the perpetrators into monsters. A human person does not ultimately lose his or her humanity which is characterized by the divine image in which every individual is created.” The common Christian phrase, “Love the sinner, hate the sin” echoes in Tutu’s claim. The theological framework for Tutu’s argument is clear: because we are created in God’s image, all human beings have the capacity for transformation and reconciliation—no person is reducible to his or her wrongdoings, and thus no person is beyond forgiveness. It is important to note that God does not just spare sinners the consequences of sin. Rather, the sin is separated from the sinner, and this is made possible by Christ’s unity with God and with humanity. Because Christ dies for humanity’s sins and is one with God and humanity, God can separate sinners from their sins.

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70 Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 110.
71 This phrase is not actually in the Bible, but we can look to Romans 5:8 where it reads, “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Many have interpreted this to mean, “love the sinner, and hate the sin” as Christ loved the sinner, while God condemns the sins.
72 Volf, *Free of Charge*, 145.
Another way in which Christianity influences the discourse of forgiveness addresses the problem posed by Coleman and Arendt, that our imperfections and weaknesses as human beings predispose us to an unavoidable cycle of wrongdoing. Recognizing each person’s own fallibility and inherent sinfulness, Christians are urged to forgive those who have injured them, because they will all need God’s forgiveness. Thus Christian rhetoric emphasizes humility and empathy: “we are going to need forgiveness, we are going to ask for it ourselves, and by these requests we are in effect recognizing that forgiveness is something good. Because we will seek God’s forgiveness we should be willing to grant forgiveness to those who seek it from us…[this is] a matter of felt, generalized, unconditional love.”73 The implication of this teaching is that Christians should forgive unilaterally. As a result, to resist forgiveness and be resentful is un-Christian, and if one refuses to forgive others, he or she cannot expect forgiveness from God.

The Christian rhetoric of forgiveness then seems to operate from within the framework of Divine Command theory as I have argued at the outset. As a Christian virtue, forgiveness can be justified by Christian conceptions. According to Robert Downie, the Christian justification is: “‘Since your Heavenly Father has forgiven you, you ought also to forgive others’. In other words, forgiveness is justified as being a response to injury fitting in creatures who are themselves liable to error.”74

This ethical context is also related to justice. The fifth petition in the Lord’s prayer— “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”—illuminates something about why forgiveness is a Christian virtue related to justice. The relationship between God’s forgiveness and our forgiveness of others is related to Divine Command theory in the following.

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73 Govier, Forgiveness and Revenge, 159.
74 Downie, Forgiveness, 134.
way: because God forgives the sins of humanity, and forgiveness is commanded by God\textsuperscript{75}, then forgiveness counts as a virtue. The relationship is described nicely by William Mattison as “that our forgiveness of our neighbors, or lack thereof, suggests a standard or rule that we think represents the order of justice…and as Christ himself reminds us, ‘the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.’”\textsuperscript{76}

One criticism employed by Trudy Govier in her discussion of religious traditions and forgiveness is that to ground an ethic and conceptualization of forgiveness on theological footing is difficult. She claims, “Although religious teachings offer rich resources for reflection, their variety and uncertainty mean that they cannot eliminate the need for secular reasoning, judgment, and reflection about the topic.”\textsuperscript{77} What she is arguing here is that theological doctrines and parables cannot provide adequate guidance in practical, human affairs—not least because of the variety of possible theories from different religious traditions. There are a few unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions within the Christian tradition that I wish to explore further.

The notion of God’s forgiveness again arises in thinking about the expulsion or persistence of guilt after one has been forgiven. Even after we forgive, is guilt removed, or just anger? One could argue that someone is still guilty before the wronged person and/or God because thinking about forgiveness through a theological lens does not (and perhaps cannot) address the \textit{practical} problem of guilt and blame. In other words, it is not clear that to forgive is necessarily to remove blame—at least not in the definition Butler and subsequent theorists in this paper have used. If to forgive, as Butler claimed, is to forgo revenge and resentment, then that

\textsuperscript{75} For example, the parable in Matthew: an unforgiving servant is tortured and Jesus says, “So will my heavenly Father do to you, unless each of you forgives his brother from his heart” (Matt 18:35).
\textsuperscript{76} Mattison, \textit{Introducing Moral Theology}, 403.
\textsuperscript{77} Govier, \textit{Forgiveness and Revenge}, 159.
does not seem to necessarily remove guilt. This could have several implications from within the Christian perspective.

We can imagine that an offender commits a wrong, and is punished, but the injured person is a devout Christian and, in the spirit of God-like forgiveness, forgives the offender. Yet, the offender remains guilty in the eyes of the law and perhaps the community and on official record, so the fact that he or she has been forgiven does not remove that type of guilt. And we can also imagine the inverse: a devout Christian offender is not punished by the law and faces no societal consequences like fines, imprisonment, or even public shame. The injured party (not a Christian, for the sake of argument) does not believe forgiveness is mandatory or appropriate and withholds forgiveness. In this case, the offender is not legally or socially guilty—he or she has not been punished—but does he or she remain guilty before God and in the eyes of the offender? Volf would argue that, indeed, the situation is complicated—for Christians, forgiving often takes place in a triangle of the offender, the wronged person, and God. “Take God away,” Volf argues, “and the foundations of forgiveness become unsteady and may even crumble.”\(^7\) Again, we are reminded of Divine Command Theory—the virtuosity of forgiveness is largely dependent on the fact that it is commanded by God. It has been argued that Jesus Christ, as God incarnate, “is far more than a great moral teacher. He was that, and his injunctions on forgiveness…are powerfully true rules for us in how to live our own lives.”\(^7\)

To be truly forgiven, sins are not just disregarded by God, but completely removed—the sin is separated from the sinner as Christian rhetoric has allowed for. Volf returns to this idea later when he writes, “As long as offenses stick to those who have committed them, the offenders

\(^7\) Volf, *Free of Charge*, 131.
\(^7\) Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology*, 281.
remain offenders, even if they are viewed as if they were not.”80 This notion is problematic if we keep in mind that humans are not sharks—we are accountable for our wrongs and remain guilty.

Is blotting out the sin from the sinner turning humans into sharks?

What forgiveness is not

If we can concede that unconditional forgiveness (and forgivingness as the propensity to forgive) is popularly held to be a virtue—that is, something to which we attribute moral worth and regard as being tied to one’s character, we have only done part of the work in defining forgiveness.81 Forgiveness is a way of addressing problems caused by the wrongdoings of others and moving forward, but there are similar attitudes with which it might be confused. It should not be conflated with condoning or forgetting the wrongdoing. When I will suggest later that forgiveness is not virtuous in some particular cases, it will not be because I have equated forgiveness with condonation or forgetting. I agree with the proponents of forgiveness who would say that there is a critical distinction between forgiving an injury and justifying an injury. The very act of forgiving requires recognition of the act as wrong. Further, my argument against unconditional forgiveness is not based on a belief that to forgive is always to condone.

My argument is against the idea that simply because one recognizes an injury as wrong, that in turn, forgiveness is unconditionally necessary or virtuous. On the contrary, it is not only unnecessary, but in some cases, dissolute and immoral. Yet in either case, the difference in the characteristics of what it means to forgive as opposed to what it means to forget or condone is worth explicating.

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80 Volf, Free of Charge, 146
81 See page 23 for more on this term.
What are the differences between forgiveness and related notions? Pardoning, overlooking, condoning, and absolving all look like forgiveness in some ways, but there is something distinct about forgiveness that makes it resistant to being integrated with these associated concepts. Condoning is to agree to overlook a wrong that has been done, not to deny it (as in the case of excusing).\(^8^2\) Pardoning is similar in that it does not require the offender to admit any wrong. Pardoning, moreover, implies that the retribution or punishment is taken away, not the accusation itself. Berel Lang has argued that absolution is most frequently associated with religious forgiving, because it implies a literal and metaphysical ‘erasure’ of the past—God’s absolution of humanity’s sins is unconditional.\(^8^3\) Absolution, then, has qualities of ultimate removal of sins, which cannot always be reconciled with interpersonal transgressions beyond the realm of Christian theology.

Certain instances of forgiveness may resemble condoning, particularly when the person being forgiven cannot or does not articulate what his or her transgression was. Just because the wronged person and the offender recognize and understand the injury between them does not mean forgiveness should necessarily follow. As Trudy Govier points out in her book *Forgiveness and Revenge*, “we can understand acts without fully [forgiving] them.”\(^8^4\) The danger, I think, is when we forgive acts *without* fully understanding them. The danger of pardoning, condoning, absolving, and excusing evils committed against us comes when forgiveness is approached as a necessary or compulsory act—not as a conditional one.

The familiar phrase “forgive and forget” may mislead us into thinking that forgivingness and forgetfulness somehow go hand-in-hand. Popular conceptions of forgiveness understand it as a means to freedom from the pressure of resentment on memory. Celebrity psychologist Dr. Phil

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\(^{8^2}\) Lang, *Forgiveness*, 114.

\(^{8^3}\) Ibid.

\(^{8^4}\) Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 55.
explains, forgiveness is “releasing yourself from anger, hatred and resentment…I’m not saying it is easy, only that it is necessary.” The person offering forgiveness does so in an attempt to free his or her mind from the negative emotions of the offense. One might argue that upon forgiveness, all is forgotten and thus overlooked, and the effects of condemnation are lifted from the offender as well—he or she no longer is burdened by the wrong. More importantly, the burdens of condemnation and the associated hurt, embarrassment, and indignation are lifted from the mind of the forgiver. On the contrary, even advocates of forgiveness have argued that forgiveness need not erase or disregard the wrong, at least in the offenses that go beyond ordinary transgressions. Condemnation is intertwined with forgiveness; condemnation is not forgotten when forgiveness is offered—rather, it is inseparable from the process. As Volf explains, “we accuse when we forgive,” and as I have argued above, the accusation does not disappear—that would be condonation, which forgiveness is not. In short, because condemnation runs inseparably through the act of forgiveness, the wrong need not (and perhaps cannot) be forgotten.

Murphy raises an interesting point about the problematic nature of forgiving and forgetting—he argues that there is a lack of agency involved in the case of forgetting. Forgetting—at least in the most literal sense—is non-voluntary. If Murphy is correct that there is no agency, be it moral or not, in forgetting, then to conflate forgetting with forgiving would not work. Forgiveness is a *choice*, but forgetfulness is not.

This is not to say that because forgiveness is not forgetting or condoning that it is unconditionally virtuous and morally acceptable. It is to demonstrate that because we may only forgive what was initially appropriate to resent then resentment and forgiveness can only co-

85 See Dr. Phil: *How to Learn to Forgive* on Oprah.com
86 Volf, Free of Charge, 168.
87 Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 23.
operate when the transgression remains integral. But, I will argue, even with the above understanding in mind, there are instances in which forgiveness is not appropriate.

**Unconditional forgiveness**

The type of forgiveness that I will argue is not and cannot be a virtue is that which diminishes our morality or the moral community. Forgiveness *eo ipso* might not yield this kind of result; only when it is unconditioned and unilaterally held to be a virtue is there a danger that it will compromise moral principles because there are no limits to its appropriateness. Unconditional forgiveness is understood here in the sense that it lacks limitations and stipulations about when it is the right moral choice. Very few virtues or traits can be understood categorically, or unconditionally; it is difficult to say anything is a “good” across all possible situations. Kant’s categorical imperative—that one could will his or her own maxims to be universalized—could be considered at this point. In order for unconditional forgiveness to be a virtue (under virtue ethics) it would be that which will always benefit the person who possesses forgivingness. I will argue this cannot be the case with unconditional forgiveness because in some cases, the forgiving attitude is morally wrong and not beneficial to the victim (or the moral community), and thus one should not will it to be a universal quality.

My argument against unconditional forgiveness is that despite the forgiving attitude’s virtuous reputation, it cannot count as a virtue if it is morally problematic. There are times when it is appropriate to forgive, and times when it is appropriate to withhold forgiveness, and I cannot account for all possible situations where the decision between resentment and forgiveness is relevant, these will vary immensely. Given its nature as a deeply emotional and personal process, scenarios involving forgiveness and resentment will be nuanced. Nevertheless, I want to argue

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88 Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 23.
that in any case, it is not moral to forgive if in the process we negate our own moral rights, or deny the moral rights of others. If forgiveness is unconditional and unquestioning—if it requires no consideration of principles of morality—then it cannot be said to be a virtue. What is in question for my evaluation is whether or not unconditional forgiveness is a virtue. In turn, I will show that it is conditional forgiveness which is commendable; only in its conditioned form could it be considered beneficial trait of the beholder.

**Conditional Forgiveness**

Fixed in my understanding of forgiveness is the notion that giving forgiveness is at the discretion of the person who has been wronged (or those affected by the injury), and its suitability is conditioned by the principles of morality: this is conditional forgiveness. When forgiveness can be aligned with self-respect, and respect of others and the integrity of the moral community, forgiveness is indeed a virtue. But the virtuosity of forgiveness is dependent on the conditions having been met. This is why unconditional forgiveness—which may or may not meet these conditions—cannot *always* ensure that forgiveness is a moral choice; forgivingness cannot be universally adopted as a positive, virtuous attribute. Because forgiveness always is put side by side with resentment—one can either adopt one attitude or the other—when the conditions for forgiveness cannot be met, then embracing resentment, rather than overcoming it, is a more virtuous response. It should now be clear that I am not suggesting that forgiveness should *never* be issued, or that it is *never* virtue. Rather, my position is that a more morally responsible approach to the subject would be to condition forgiveness upon certain principles, so that we can say only when these principles are met that forgiveness is moral or virtuous, and when they are not, the attitude is not a virtue.
Because I want to show the way in which forgiveness is held as a virtue, and resentment as a non-virtue, and eventually argue that in some cases, these connotations may be reversed, it will be useful to start by understanding forgiveness and resentment in terms of their attitudes, their attributes, potential advantages and disadvantages, and accompanying perspectives.

**Resentment: Social and Psychological Understandings**

According to Butler, “resentment towards any man hath plainly a tendency to beget the same passion in him who is the object of it; and this again increases it in the other,” and so goes the vicious cycle that Arendt was so weary of.\(^89\) It is in this manner that resentment is often viewed—an emotion that creates further problems rather than resolving the one in question. Resentment may be viewed as a sort of moral anger, the type of anger that is calculated and intentional rather than the result of a knee-jerk reaction. Butler characterized resentment as involving one’s cognitive faculties, more than just sensation, but “the effect of reason.”\(^90\)

Resentment often functions on two levels. We resent the actions taken against us: *this was morally wrong and should not have happened.* We also resent the fact that it happened to us in particular: *life is not fair.* In either case, resentment is deeply tied to morality. It stands as a “testimony to the moral order,” according to Murphy, and invokes the concept of knowing right from wrong.\(^91\) A resentful person is therefore bitter both about his or her fate and misfortune and toward the offender. Resentment may become engrained in one’s attitude about the nature of the world. Ongoing resentment may “support a sense of rage and envy, an embittered sense that fundamentally one has been unjustly selected to be a victim, a generalized unhappiness with the

\(^89\) Butler, *Sermon IX*  
\(^90\) Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 37.  
\(^91\) Hampton and Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 16.
world, and an inability to move ahead in life.”

For this reason, some psychologists have suggested that resentment is correlated with decreased satisfaction in life. Depression and anxiety have been listed among what we might call the “side effects” of bitterness. These claims about forgiveness reflect a utilitarian perspective: the process of forgiveness and its positive associations with happiness count toward forgiveness as a virtue because it brings pleasure to both the forgiver and the offender. Worthington claims, “It seems obvious that people who are unforgiving experience more anger and depression.”

A resentful attitude has also been associated with weakness, as Jean Hampton has argued. She suggests that resentment reflects insecurities: it is “an emotional defense against attacks on self-esteem,” but we only resent those who have the power to humiliate us. William Young expressed a similar point: resentment acknowledges that one feels that his or her worth depends on “how one is seen by others, a confession that one’s status can be successfully challenged by how one is perceived.” In other words, allowing oneself to become resentful implicitly affirms whatever the insult was. If it were not true, why not just laugh it off? Of course, one has to wonder how a theory like resentment is weakness would stand up in cases of great and pervasive evil, and later I will argue that a defense of forgiveness (and implicitly a rejection of resentment) on these grounds will fail.

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92 Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 51.
95 Hampton and Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 53.
96 Young, *Resentment and Impartiality*, 103.
Resentment and Christianity

Christian doctrine regarding resentment appears to be less focused on the origins and consequences of resentful anger and more concerned with where the anger is directed.\footnote{Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 247.} I will show that while the Christian tradition broadly rejects resentment and prizes forgiveness, it may be more sympathetic to anger than popular or psychological understandings of resentment.

“Righteous anger,” as it is sometimes called,\footnote{See Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 247 and Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 16, for a discussion on “righteousness.” Murphy claims that resentment ranges from “righteous anger to righteous hatred. Jones claims that Christians are enjoined to transform this “righteous anger” into the service of God.} is suggested in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians:

> Be angry, and don’t sin. Don’t let the sun go down on your wrath….Let him who stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, working with his hands the thing that is good, that he may have something to give to him who has need…. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, outcry, and slander, be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving each other, just as God also in Christ forgave you.\footnote{Ephesians 4:25-32}

Paul’s commands here acknowledge the inevitably of anger and perhaps even a suggestion that one should be angry about certain things. This righteous anger can have transformative power if directed in a God-like way, and we are charged to channel our anger into the service of God rather than as a ground for perpetuating sin.\footnote{Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 247} It seems, then, that anger can be justified if it is used for the improvement of society. Why then do hatred and resentment necessarily need to be overcome by forgiveness? Why is resentment not a theological virtue?

The Christian answer to this is two-fold. First, we have a view that mirrors Butler’s understanding of excessive resentment and its dangers. Further, there is a more doctrinally located conception of God’s wrath and ultimate judgment that eliminates the compulsion (and suitability) of humans to harbor resentment.
L. Gregory Jones makes an argument against resentment that resonates with Butler’s fear of excess. Recall that Butler feared gratuitous anger and hatred in the wake of injury—the superfluous tendency of resentment is what makes it problematic. For Jones, it is the frequency, not the amount, of resentment which is troubling. We do not need excuses, Jones argues, to hate or desire retribution; these urges are deeply sown within us. The effects of persistent anger can be debilitating, and Christians should look to the example of Christ, who does not return hate to his betrayers but instead reconciles with them.101

Resentment must also be examined in light of the Christian doctrine of salvation and God’s justice:

Leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay’ the lord says…Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.102

What does this tell us about the juxtaposition of human judgment to God’s judgment? The possibility of eternal justice takes the power to be wrathful out of human hands. The final justice meted out to our aggressors is in God’s hands, and the Christian injunction to love our enemies precludes us from using God’s eventual punishment of the offender as a justification for hatred in this life.103 There is a call to seek salvation of all persons, even those who have injured us—this is our only task, and the fate of our enemies is not up to human reason. The command to “hope that all will be saved, and to pray and love others accordingly,” suggests that even if God will punish our wrongdoers, it would be wrong for us to validate hatred, “moral or otherwise, as normatively good response to sin or wrongdoing.”104 Despite these clear warnings against vengeance, I will suggest that perhaps there is room in Biblical teachings for the kind of

101 Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 247.
102 Romans 12:17-20
103 Jones, Embodying Forgiveness, 260.
104 Ibid., 262.
resentment that I believe is morally responsible, and that the Christian understanding of “righteous anger” might be more compatible with resentment than it has been treated.

**Defenses of Resentment**

According to many thinkers like Young and Hampton, and even popularly, resentment is not regarded as enjoyable or constructive. I think even a defender of the resentful attitude could agree that resentment *prima facie* is not a pleasant experience—as an attitude it is surely not something many would choose, given other more pleasant attitudes to choose from. The other side of the coin, however, is that no one *chooses* to be wronged. I will now present some arguments by which we may see that in some cases resentment may be warranted.

Robert Solomon presents one such theory. Solomon has defended resentment by his understanding of it as a response to injury against the self. He has held the opposite view of those who understand resentment as weakness. In fact, Solomon regards resentment as “deeply philosophical;” it allows the resentful person to extract from his or her particular circumstances something about the wrongs of society in general, and in turn he or she will question those powers and institutions who have allowed such injustices to occur. Resentment is “the passion of justice denied,” used to “put the world in balance.”

Resentment as a passion has been a sticking point for those concerned with the tensions around it. Jeffrie Murphy defends resentment by a direct refutation of what Butler has to say about the passions. Before we explore Murphy’s argument, we should revisit Butler’s understanding of resentment. According to his sermons, forgiveness is the foreswearing of resentment, but it should be noted that forgiveness is not forgetfulness. That is, for Butler, forgiveness is a choice to not seek revenge and is thus a morally commanded, God-pleasing

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virtue. Forgetting is not a choice—it just happens. Butler reasoned that forgiveness is the virtuous choice, because resentment will result in undesirable consequences. Resentment, to Butler, when it extends beyond the useful form of reinforcing moral norms and rules, “as human weakness and vanity typically allow it to, it becomes counterproductive and even seriously harmful to the social fabric.”¹⁰⁶ These excesses of the passions of resentment are what Butler thinks we will avoid by adopting a forgiving attitude.

Using Butler’s argument as a backdrop, Murphy argues that resent is a response to a wrong against the self, and thus the chief value of resentment is preservation of self-respect. He links the notion of personhood to resentment in an interesting way: following his argument that a person who does not resent a moral wrong against oneself lacks self-respect, he claims resentment is a “good thing, for it is essentially tied to a non-controversially good thing—self-respect.”¹⁰⁷ Indeed, using self-respect as a lens through which the virtues and vices are viewed changes the picture. A person who is quick to forgive might lack self-respect. Having Strawson’s “reactive attitude” is indicative of a person’s cognizance of his or her own rights and worth. The consequences of disregarding self-respect in the name of making amends could have dire consequences—perhaps worse than Butler’s excess of passions. Murphy explains this well:

Forgiveness may indeed restore relationships, but to seek restoration at all cost—even at the cost of one’s human dignity—can hardly be a virtue. And, in intimate relationships, it can hardly be true love or friendship either—the kind of love and friendship that Aristotle claimed is an essential part of the virtuous life. When we are willing to be doormats for others, we have, not love, but rather…‘morbid dependency.’¹⁰⁸

I will ultimately follow Murphy in my understanding of resentment, in that it is justified when self-respect, and a respect for the rules of morality, are at stake.

¹⁰⁶ Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 15.
¹⁰⁷ Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 15.
¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 18.
Joram Graf Haber, in his book *Forgiveness*, also wrestles with the question of resentment and devotes almost half of book to the ethics of resentment. In building a defense of resentment as a virtuous concept, Haber believes we must first concede that resentment has a “bad reputation,” one that is undeserved. According to Haber, it is not resentment that is intrinsically immoral or wrong: it is “in excess, misplaced, or vindictive” circumstances.\(^\text{109}\) And, in order for resentment to count as something virtuous, Haber aptly argues that it must have beneficial effects on character. Echoing Murphy, Haber claims that an absence of resentment, when it is warranted, demonstrates a lack of self-respect. And thus, because “it is better to be self-respectful than it is to be servile, the possession of this quality is beneficial to its owner.”\(^\text{110}\) In other words, a disposition to resent when it is warranted is virtuous because the person is affirming respect for himself or herself.

It should be noted that Haber, Murphy, and eventually I defend resentment in cases when it is morally warranted—not to be confused with the popular understanding of resentment or the resentful personality. What typically comes to mind is the begrudging, stubborn person unwilling to forgive unilaterally and disposed to resent under all circumstances. It is commonly held that the resentful person will ultimately inflict self-harm, “like a scorpion stinging itself to death with its own tail.”\(^\text{111}\) We might all agree that resentment, in that way as it is commonly perceived, is not virtuous; but I will argue that when resentment is profoundly and truly necessitated by moral injury, we should not be so quick to abandon it in favor of forgiveness.

\(^\text{109}\) Haber, *Forgiveness*, 85.
\(^\text{110}\) Ibid., 86
\(^\text{111}\) Murphy, *Forgiveness, Self-Respect, and the Value of Resentment*, 37.
Unforgivable Evils

Given that I have provided a general picture of forgiveness and resentment, a question arises: is it morally appropriate to forgive the perpetrator of a certain type of evil? This kind of evil, which I will argue is unforgivable, is the kind that detracts from someone else’s personhood, that which attempts to devalue someone’s humanity and regard them as lesser. Jessica Wolfendale calls this kind of evil *dehumanizing*.\(^{112}\) Of course, not all evils and not all transgressions are categorically dehumanizing—typically interpersonal forgiveness deals with relatively minor injuries (or minor evils, even) that we would not consider to be dehumanizing. To be sure, all acts of wrongdoing convey a certain message about the victim’s value as we saw in my earlier discussion of moral injury; but according to Wolfendale, “acts of dehumanizing evil communicate a particularly abhorrent version of this message.”\(^{113}\) These evils say something about a person being inferior, usually because they are of a certain social, racial, ethnic, or religious group. The victims may be targeted because they are women, Jews, homosexuals, African Americans, etc. A complete abandon of respect is at play.

The issue of unforgivability arises with regard to instances of evil that prompt not only insult or humiliation, but also outrage. The scale of these acts can be large—inflicted on entire groups of people—a crime against humanity such as the atrocities of the Holocaust. But it may also be as small as having affected one person—the torture of one person. Some injuries, according to Griswold, “may be so profound that it seems humanly impossible…that resentment should be sent away.”\(^{114}\)

Others have thought about unforgivability in relation to the perpetrator. Cheyney Ryan has argued that unforgivable evils destroy hope, to the extent that we no longer believe anything

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\(^{112}\) Wolfendale, *The Hardened Heart*, 350.

\(^{113}\) Ibid., 346.

\(^{114}\) Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, 94.
positive could happen; because children and infants represent hope and promise, evils where young people are affected are especially offensive to us.\textsuperscript{115} In Ryan’s view, the crime is inseparable from the person—a perpetrator of such hope-crushing evil is also hopeless. We cannot believe this person is capable of good. Mark Goulden also draws a hardline of unforgivability, he has claimed the \textit{nature} of the crime marks the offending agent as unforgivable. The human mind, he says, is incapable of “comprehending the magnitude and mathematics” of cases such as sending children to Nazi gas chambers.\textsuperscript{116} For Goulden, some acts are just too evil to forgive the person who committed them.

Unforgiveable evils are directly related to moral injuries. There are moral injuries that are insulting, and then there are those that are \textit{intentionally degrading}. That is, in certain cases of degrading, dehumanizing moral injury, the evil is unforgivable because to forgive would be an indication that one lacks self-respect. Glen Pettigrove has argued that to forgive such a wrong “communicates to the wrongdoer and to the community that one is not deserving of respect.”\textsuperscript{117}

The question of unforgivability is especially complicated when we ask who has the power to forgive. Forgiveness unquestionably belongs to the injured (or so is the consensus of the literature on forgiveness), but what about cases when the injured are dead and thus incapable of doing so? Goulden attempts to answer this question by arguing that if the dead cannot forgive, then neither can the living.\textsuperscript{118} The only appropriate response in that case would be lack of forgiveness.

For Volf, the power to forgive is related to Christian theology—God has already forgiven humanity, and thus we have the power to forgive others. But \textit{power} and \textit{right} are distinct, at least

\textsuperscript{115} Govier, \textit{Forgiveness and Revenge}, 102.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 103.
\textsuperscript{117} Pettigrove, \textit{Forgiveness and Love}, 113.
\textsuperscript{118} Govier, \textit{Forgiveness and Revenge}, 103.
for Volf, and the issue of right is related to self-respect. Volf conceives of moral law as being greater than one’s own set of self-governing rules. Rather, moral law is what binds us and ties members of a community together.\textsuperscript{119} This is significant because if this is true, then the offender has not wronged just one person, but the moral law is broken and thus the entire community is affected. Nevertheless, power may be one of the greatest obstacles to forgiveness even if we have the right:

It’s the worry that, even if we had as much goodness and inner strength as Jesus did on the cross, and even if wrongdoers did their part eagerly, for us mere humans, forgiveness might still be both impossible and inappropriate.\textsuperscript{120}

**Arguments against the unforgivable**

Perhaps the greatest opposition to the notion that there are unforgivable evils is the notion that the wrongdoer is an individual, separate from his or her wrongdoings. Govier has articulated a clear objection to the basic notion of unforgivability:

“Grant that some acts are utterly inexcusable and profoundly wrong. Grant that such acts are monstrous, brutal, gross, horrifying, and atrocious. Grant that such acts should never be excused, justified, or condoned. Grant that we should forever decry their immorality and that their heinous nature should be recorded in human history never to be erased. Grant that victims should be honored in memory and survivors respected...Whatever they have done, and however much we may be tempted to refer to them as “monsters,” “madmen,” or “rotten,” the fundamental fact remains: perpetrators are human beings and our fellow creatures. They are persons with a capacity for moral reflection and transformation, and we should treat them accordingly.”\textsuperscript{121}

Govier’s argument reveals a popular criticism against unforgivability. Underlying her claim, of course, is the popular adage: *hate the sin, and love the sinner*. It is true that even though a person does not become his or her act—the agent is of course distinct from the action (metaphysically, at least)—but there is a sense in which the act becomes irremovable from how we evaluate the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{119} Volf, *Free of Charge*, 198.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 194.
\textsuperscript{121} Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 112.
\end{footnotesize}
perpetrator’s character. I will argue that a person’s moral capacity is diminished in accordance with the execution of some atrocious evils; the act is intrinsically related to the wrongdoer.

Jean Hampton has also considered the relationship of a perpetrator to his or her act, and argued that the call to love our enemies has definite religious undertones. Hampton, along with Govier, holds that it is possible to retain hatred of an agent’s deeds and still feel compassion for the individual. She imagines that Jesus, in his command to love our enemies, “is telling us that such compassion is always possible.”122 In response, however, I would argue that while compassion may be possible, that does not necessarily make it morally responsible or virtuous to exercise it.

Hampton makes what appears to be a compelling argument that God the “father,” demonstrates this kind of compassion for humanity, as any parent regards his or her child as inherently good.123 It is precisely the parental belief in unconditional goodness that I object to because this line of reasoning leads to unconditional forgiveness, which I will argue is not always a virtuous choice. To believe that the agent is distinct from the act does not seem inherently wrong, in fact it may even seem innately right, until we see that to separate the two will allow for unconditional forgiveness.

Wolfendale has warned against “freezing” the perpetrators character in this way we are reapplying the original dehumanizing attitude of the offender—the victim was reduced to his or her gender, skin color, or religion and now the perpetrator is reduced to his or her act.124 I want to argue, however, that there is a distinction between the first outlook of the perpetrator and the

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122 Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 151.
123 Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 151. Hampton argues that it is difficult for any parent to lose sight of his or her child’s inherent goodness; no matter how “wretched” the child appears—this is the way God sees humanity, according to Hampton.
124 Wolfendale, The Hardened Heart, 359. She explains: “If we think that believing that others are intrinsically morally inferior is both morally wrong and dangerous because of the kinds of wrongdoing it can lead to, then that provides a strong reason to attempt to eradicate such beliefs within ourselves.”
outlook of the unforgiving victim. In the first case the perpetrator does not have grounds for believing and acting upon the notion that the victim is inherently inferior—race, gender, religion, sexual identity—since these are (or should be) irrelevant to the assessment another person’s worth. Conversely, the perpetrator has acted in a way that has diminished his or her own character, and consequently there are grounds (based on the act) to judge this person accordingly.

Wolfendale and Govier would argue that to concede that the offender has the possibility for change, the “capacity for moral reflection and transformation,” is what is important. Wolfendale writes, “The object of the [unforgiving] attitude is dehumanized because they are denied recognition of and respect for the essentially human capacity for rational moral agency.”125 In other words, by not recognizing the perpetrator as a person with equal propensity to change and become better, we risk becoming bound to the cycle of dehumanization.

This line of reasoning presents an opportunity to go into more depth about the kind hatred associated with unforgivable evils, and the specific instances wherein I believe forgiveness is not virtuous, based on my understanding of virtuosity as related to that which will be part of the good life, and that which could be willed to be universally applied. Introducing these conditions will address further the above objections to the notion of unforgivability, as I offer an account of particular circumstances under which forgiveness and the moral hatred provoked by dehumanizing evil, are incompatible.

**When should we withhold forgiveness?**

In its simplest form, my argument is that when forgiveness does not align with principles of self-respect and respect for others, it should be withheld. This section will explore the times when forgiveness is not virtuous in order to show that in some cases, resentment is just as

virtuous if not more virtuous than forgiveness. Some evils obliterate the possibility for forgiveness without disregarding self-respect or respect for others. These acts typically (though not always) involve remote offenders or have rendered those whom they have directly affected as incapable of offering forgiveness.

Forgiveness of dehumanizing acts of evil is that which is least compatible with self-respect and respect for others. The kind of evil that reduces a person’s humanity produces what Jean Hampton calls “moral hatred” in the wronged person. Moral hatred expresses aversion to the (im)moral content of not just the immoral cause the action upholds, but also the person’s character who committed the wrong, as this person is taken to be identified with the cause.¹²⁶ In other words, the offender is associated with the evil cause, and the hatred from the victim is based on an inability to separate immoral cause from immoral person. To be clear, I do not see this inability as a fault of the injured person; rather it demonstrates a justified resistance to accepting the idea that a moral person could perpetrate a profoundly immoral wrong. The offender, by association with the evil imbedded in his or her wrong, is believed “to have ‘rotted’ or ‘gone bad’ so that his or her goodness has in some increment diminished.”¹²⁷

The type of hatred Hampton describes is directly related to the notion of dehumanizing evil. It might be what one feels toward Adolf Hitler, or to a lesser but similar degree toward Myra Hindley of the Moors Murders in England—someone whose “goodness” seems irredeemably tarnished. Is it possible to believe these people have any decency remaining in them? Can we separate agent from act as Wolfendale would have it? Of course, one might believe that a person has some decency left—perhaps the person has apologized and displayed remorse—but still one might not expect enough is left to make it possible to forgive. In a way,

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¹²⁶ Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Revenge, 80.
¹²⁷ Ibid.
we are continually left facing Arendt’s metaphysical problem, that the past simply cannot be undone. This sounds awfully bleak, so I wish to reiterate that this special kind of judgment and moral hatred is reserved for particularly extreme and atrocious evils.

It is, of course, difficult to determine someone else’s moral capacity. The eminent Christian injunction to “love thy enemy” suggests we should have faith in the inherent goodness of humanity, though that is the kind of unconditional forgiveness that I question. Hampton, otherwise a champion of forgiveness, in a moment of candidness it seems, has echoed my concern with the kind of unconditional forgiveness put forth in Christian doctrine:

Perhaps God can find enough good in certain highly immoral individuals I have known to forgive them and wash away their crimes, but I confess to finding it beyond me. This confession may place me outside the proper sphere of Christian faith and charity; if so, then [I] for moral reasons cannot sustain the charity this religion would require. (Hampton 153).

Hampton’s confession will be useful in expounding what could possibly be a tension between the Christian doctrine of forgiveness and the notion of unconditional forgiveness. Is it possible to love our enemies in such a God-like gesture of grace? Even if God can maintain hope in a person’s moral capacity after grave acts of evil (unconditionally), it may well be beyond our own aptitude to maintain faith in every person’s decency. Interestingly, my view may have support from within the tradition itself.

There seems to be ambiguity from within Christianity about the place of moral hatred. In Matthew, Christ utters the eminent order to “love your enemy and pray for your persecutors”¹²⁸. But what about the incident earlier in Matthew when Christ berates the scribes: “Woe unto you,” he cries, “For ye are like unto white-washed sepulchers, which outwardly appear beautiful, but

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¹²⁸ Matthew 5: 43-44
inwardly are full of dead men’s bones.”¹²⁹ It is unclear what Jesus meant by this, but there could be a relationship between being filled with “dead men’s bones,” and being morally dead.

Now that I have discussed moral hatred and its relationship to forgiveness, I will more closely examine the three instances where I believe forgiveness must necessarily be withheld: when it is incompatible with self-respect; when it is incompatible with respect for others; and, finally, when the offender is either unapologetic or inaccessible.

1. Self-respect

Murphy is particularly concerned with the relationship of the forgiving attitude to self-respect. “Proper self-respect,” according to Murphy, “is essentially tied to the passion of resentment.”¹³⁰ If proper self-respect is tied to resentment, it would seem that forgiveness would never be compatible with self-respect. Yet to understand that claim in this way is too superficial an understanding of his argument and would not serve to support my case. Murphy’s understands self-respect to be paramount when one considers the two options available after injury: resentment or forgiveness. Forgiveness, according to Murphy:

…heals and restores…what would be the consequences of never forgiving? Surely it would be the impossibility of ever having the kind of intimate relationships that are one of the crowning delights of human existence. The person who cannot forgive is the person who cannot have friends or lovers…[but] not to have resentment when our rights are violated is to convey—emotionally—either that we do not think we have rights or that we do not take our rights very seriously. Forgiveness may indeed restore relationships, but to seek restoration at all cost—even at the cost of one’s very human dignity—can hardly be a virtue.¹³¹

¹²⁹ Matthew 23:27
¹³⁰ Hampton and Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 16.
¹³¹ Ibid., 17.
We can take Murphy’s emphasis on the relationship between self-respect and dealing with moral injury as a means for understanding why forgiveness would be inappropriate if it abandons self-respect.

Conditional forgiveness, as I have argued, is the kind of forgiveness which does not compromise dignity in the process of restoring a relationship. Murphy has nicely summed up his argument that resentment protects self-respect. But I wish to take this further and discuss why self-respect and forgiveness of certain types of evil are incompatible, and why resentment is a more virtuous response when one’s self-worth has been compromised.

Murphy conceives of moral injury to be a direct violation of one’s rights, and again, Wolfendale imagines this to be “dehumanizing evil,” the injury which degrades one’s personhood. Both types of injury involving self-respect transcend mere indignation or embarrassment. The kind of evil to which I am referring is a severe affront to one’s self-worth, and I one that I argue renders forgiveness morally inappropriate. A suitable example might be the case of a female rape victim. This type of aggression goes beyond demeaning, and the offender has made a statement, through his actions, about the victim’s worth. The offender has robbed the victim of a fundamental part of her personhood, and this could lead her to internalize the injury and feel herself degraded. In addition to any physical harm done, the offender has also communicated something about his estimation of her worth, and this could have a significant impact on the victim’s psyche.

In the wake of the injury, the victim of rape will likely experience the kind of moral hatred explained above. That is, the offender—in the victim’s eyes—has also lost something about his personhood. His act is thoroughly tied to an immoral cause—that women, or others in

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132 Murphy (Forgiveness and Mercy, 17) explains, “not to have the ‘reactive attitude’ of resentment when our rights are violated is to convey…that we do not think we have rights or that we do not take our rights very seriously.”
133 Pettigrove, Forgiveness and Love, 113.
general, are mere sexual objects, less valuable, and can be treated as such—and because the offender and the immoral content of his offense are inseparable, forgiveness would be immoral.

Moreover, we might imagine the victim to be familiar with her aggressor—perhaps he is a friend, relative, or even a lover. As Murphy has argued, popular perceptions of forgiveness hold that it is the key to restoring relationships. But in cases like rape, we might ask: at what cost? Can we say that the benefit of having this relationship restored and healed outweighs the cost of accepting an injury that has attempted to diminish her personhood? It is also conceivable that the offender was a stranger. But even still, without the complications of restoring a personal relationship, forgiveness remains immoral. In this case, the attitude of resentment will demonstrate one’s position that this treatment is wrong and perhaps facilitate the victim’s process of reclaiming the dignity unjustly stripped from her.

In this way, we can see how unconditional forgiveness cannot capture the problematic nature of forgiveness in a case where one’s self-worth has been diminished. Forgiveness, unqualified, would hold the rapist to be worthy of forgiveness. But to attempt to separate the deed from the wrongdoer would be to ignore the immorality of the offender, and I cannot see the virtue in that. Unconditional forgiveness would say all persons are worthy of forgiveness—forgiveness should be a universal maxim—but it cannot account for the instances where forgiveness would not be beneficial for the person dispensing it. If it is not beneficial, according to virtue ethics, it is not a virtue. Of course, if there is a way to forgive the offender without compromising the victim’s self-worth, then forgiveness would be a virtuous attitude. However, I do not see how this is possible, and therefore resentment must be the proper response. Only resentment can defend self-respect.
2. Respect for others

Another case in which forgiveness would be immoral is to turn the other cheek in a way that will perpetuate and reaffirm the evil. I have argued that forgiveness is related to that which could initially be resented, and I have questioned what this means for those who are indirectly affected by the wrong. In this section I will argue that there are instances when forgiveness could be offered (and thus withheld) by a person or group not directly affected, but affected insofar as they have a desire for justice and punishment prevail.

I have in mind cases where the injury is in fact an injury to humanity—not just one particular person or family, but rather—the kind of evil that shakes the foundation of the moral community at large. The destruction of hope, as Cheyney saw it, causes suffering not only for the direct victim(s), but also for secondary and indirect victims as well. Moreover, the kind of act I regard as unforgiveable tends to be the kind of wide-spread or monumentally atrocious one that affects an entire nation, race, generation, or even all of society. It is difficult in these situations to “gain a sense of the wrongdoer as a person, hard to comprehend how anyone could do such things…thus it is much harder to feel empathy with, or compassion for, the offender.”

While it may be true that secondary and indirect victims—those not immediately affected by the wrongdoing—may not have the standing (or physical ability) to forgive the offender in the sense of saying I forgive you, I will argue it is necessary for them to take a moral position on the matter, manifest in the attitude of resentment. Because the act was so appalling that it can be counted as a societal injury, respect for others—respect for the integrity of the moral community—must be paramount when evaluating such acts. The Holocaust, and the internment and mass murders of six million Jews, is the uncontested example of this kind of evil. But I fear to expound an argument based on the monstrous deeds executed by the Nazis deserves more

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134 Govier, Forgiveness and the Unforgivable, 69.
complete treatment than I can possibly give it here. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will use a fictional example, but one that will, I hope, clearly demonstrate the importance of respect for others in the moral community as a condition for the morality of forgiveness. In the following example, to forgive—to overcome one’s hatred of the act and disregard the threat this would pose to the moral community—would be wicked, if not more wicked, than the original evil.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan Karamazov recalls a graphic and troubling story of the death of an innocent child:

One day a serf-boy, a little child of eight, threw a stone in play and hurt the paw of the General's favorite hound. ‘Why is my favorite dog lame?’ He is told that the boy threw a stone that hurt the dog's paw. ‘So you did it.’ The general looked the child up and down. ‘Take him.’ He was taken—taken from his mother and kept shut up all night. Early that morning the general comes out on horseback, with the hounds, his dependents, dog-boys, and huntsmen, all mounted around him in full hunting parade. The servants are summoned for their edification, and in front of them all stands the mother of the child. The child is brought from the lock-up. It's a gloomy, cold, foggy, autumn day, a capital day for hunting. The general orders the child to be undressed; the child is stripped naked. He shivers, numb with terror, not daring to cry… ‘Make him run,’ commands the general. 'Run! Run!’ shout the dog-boys. The boy runs…'At him!' yells the general, and he sets the whole pack of hounds on the child. The hounds catch him, and tear him to pieces before his mother's eyes…Well—what did he deserve? ‘Shoot him!’ Alyosha said.135

What can Alyosha’s response tell us about the nature of unforgivability? It is important to note that his desire to “shoot him” should be taken here to represent a general inability to overcome hatred and not a suggestion that resentment is the same thing as retribution. The General, by the fundamentally immoral nature of his act, is indelibly marked by it. And Alyosha is not in a position to go to the General and offer forgiveness (or claim to withhold it). His response represents a respect for the shared principles of basic morality that form the underpinnings of the moral community, and thus reluctance—perhaps even an inability—to overcome that hatred. Merilys Lewis has argued that this is a “powerful moral protest against

135 Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 288.
innocent suffering, against the irreducible and unjustifiable evil in human life…she has no right to forgive the torturer for that even if her child were to forgive him.”\textsuperscript{136} Proponents of resentment hold that there can be something villainous and despicable about someone who would deny the resentful response to certain crimes.\textsuperscript{137}

3. The Unapologetic

The final instance in which I believe it is necessary to withhold forgiveness is in the case of the unapologetic offender. It is easy to imagine that when the offender is unrepentant that offering forgiveness could be construed as condoning or overlooking the injury, reducing the whole process to “letting go.” And, because I have argued that inherent in forgiveness is the condemnation of a wrong, if the unapologetic offender refuses to satisfy the condition that the injury is acknowledged as wrong, then forgiveness should be off the table.

We might wonder what consequences this will have for the injured person. Has he or she been burdened further by the aggressor’s unwillingness to repent? Assuming for now that the offender is alive and able to offer repentance if only he or she was willing, it would be morally irresponsible to offer forgiveness. Consider again the rapist. If he refused to admit what he did was wrong, we can again take the evil nature of his deed to be a reflection of a defect or deficiency in his morality. I argued above that forgiveness and resentment both require that the transgression remains integral to forgiveness. Without an understanding that the act was wrong, and should not be repeated, we cannot expect the conditions of self-respect and respect for the moral community to be satisfied.

\textsuperscript{136} Lewis, \textit{On Forgiveness}, 240.
\textsuperscript{137} Hampton and Murphy, \textit{Forgiveness and Mercy}, 120.
The offender cannot be forgiven if the injured party bears in mind the principles of self-respect—there is a lack of evidence that the wrongdoer has the capacity, or willingness, to change. In a situation where the offender has experienced no “change of heart,” then to restore the “moral relationship that existed prior to the injury would be to accept the wrongdoer qua offender into a relationship of moral equality.”\(^{138}\)

To offer forgiveness where none has been asked for is to reduce forgiveness to a psychological need to “let go” of the burden of resentment.\(^ {139}\) This release may feel like forgiveness; the injured parties might believe they have done themselves a favor, but they have not forgiven—this could only be a pretense of forgiving, for there was no one to forgive!

The injunction to forgive an unapologetic person might be based on a fundamental belief that all people are good, or that the offer of forgiveness may inspire contrition, or that it will make us feel better. Religious notions of “faith” suggest faith allows the injured “to admit the behavioral evidence is against decency, but to ‘believe in’ the wrongdoer’s decency anyhow.”\(^ {140}\) But is this self-deception not a blatant form of self-disrespect? The forgiveness offered out of such faith is based more on hope than it is on fact, and because it sets aside self-respect in the name of “feeling better” or “letting go,” no matter how therapeutic it may be, how virtuous is this kind of forgiveness? It cannot be said that any hurdle has been overcome, that any work has been done in order to overcome hatred and resentment in a meaningful and lasting way. In this way, forgiveness seems no more virtuous than forgetfulness. The virtuosity of forgiveness hinges on the power of forgiveness to overcome transgressions, so long as it allows the forgiver to

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\(^{139}\) Jesse Couenhoven has an excellent point to this end: “Views that claim to speak of forgiveness but that speak of only emotional change…fail to live up to their aspirations; they are not really speaking of forgiveness…to major in that theme suggests a lack of appropriate confrontation with culpable evil” (Couenhoven, *Forgiveness and Restoration*, 155).

\(^{140}\) Hampton and Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 155.
maintain self-respect and respect for others. Otherwise, as I have shown, resentment should persist.

If an injured person forgives the unrepentant in order to avoid the problem or move on quickly, he or she is self-defeating. Not only is his or her change of heart not likely to last, but also the wrongdoer does not have a right to our forgiveness. Despite plenty of arguments to the contrary, forgiveness is not a gift, nor is it a right of the offender to receive forgiveness. The virtuosity of forgiveness is undermined when agency (or work) is removed in offering forgiveness; there was no obstacle of repentance or resentment for either party to overcome. There does not seem to be anything virtuous about forgiving someone who is not remorseful; at best, this is mere catharsis, and at worst, it is collusion with the wrong itself.

Counter arguments

It might be suggested that to withhold forgiveness when the act of forgiving would compromise the victim’s self-respect does not account for the ways in which forgiveness could be enacted without a return to the status quo. The argument claims that it is possible “to forgive and, at the same time, remove oneself from a relationship in which one expects to suffer future harms.” If forgiveness, as suggested by Glen Pettigrove, is not tied necessarily to reconciliation, then there must be room for forgiveness without restoring whatever relationships were damaged.

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141 Hampton (ibid) remains skeptical about “changes of heart” in the victim about the character of the offender. She claims moral hatred is likely to “resurface at some point, perhaps damaging any renewed relationship which the purported forgiveness made possible.

142 Volf (Free of Charge, 59) makes the argument that forgiveness is a gift, first from God to humanity, and as humans striving for a Christ-like existence, we should also give as God gave to us. “God has given to us so that we would share with others...we are not just the intended recipients of God’s gifts; we are also their channels.” I disagree with Volf that beyond a theological context forgiveness can be perceived as a gift—I do not think the victim of a dehumanizing, moral injury must bestow the gift of forgiveness upon an unrepentant offender.

143 Pettigrove, Forgiveness and Love, 122.
This argument returns us to the problem of “letting go,” or that the entire virtuous process of overcoming resentment can be reduced to the psychological desire to alleviate the burden of anger. This is undoubtedly primary in the motivations to forgive, and I would not dispute that there is truth to Pettigrove’s claim—particularly when the wrongdoer is remote (i.e., unreachable, imprisoned), when the offender was a stranger (i.e., rapist), or when a group committed the injury (i.e., Nazis).

But my argument is based on the virtue, not the therapeutic value, of forgiveness. Forgiving someone when reconciliation is not possible or desired may be of immense psychological value, but can we say that it is virtuous? The reasons one arrives at emotional relief are important. Jesse Couenhoven has argued that moral concerns—not the mere instrumental ones—give the proper context for forgiveness. In other words, if the reasons one forgives are merely instrumental (therapeutic), then the outcome may look like forgiveness, but it is in fact taking forgiveness to be less than what it really is. The virtuosity of forgiveness seems to stem from the moral and ethical effort put into overcoming resentment and demanding self-respect. Pettigrove’s argument addresses the kind of forgiveness that is “letting go” or “moving on,” and thus it is unable to account for virtuous nature of unconditional forgiveness.

Withholding forgiveness because it would be immoral to the moral community is not based on a misunderstanding of forgiving as condoning. Those who argue this have questioned the belief that being unforgiving is the only way to condemn the injury. However, I have already pointed out the possible confusion about what forgiveness is by explaining that it is not pardoning, excusing, or condoning, and that the transgression must remain central to the process.

I agree with Wolfendale that unforgiving is not the only way to condemn the wrong, but I

144 Couenhoven, Forgiveness and Restoration, 155.
145 Wolfendale, The Hardened Heart, 259
disagree that this somehow counts against the unforgivable attitude as a more virtuous response in some cases. The idea that it is immoral to forgive certain evils, particularly when the laws of the moral community are at stake, is not about showing condemnation; it is based on an inability to separate the (im)moral content of the act from the perpetrator.

In other words, to say the only purpose of withholding forgiveness is to condemn the act is to misunderstand why I think forgiveness should sometimes be withheld. It is not to make a statement about the wrongness of the act—that is inherent (or should be) to the process already—there is no purpose to the unforgiving attitude. It is a response, a reaction to a certain type of evil, and is a response in accordance to principles of self-respect and respect for others. Maintaining an unforgiving attitude under the conditions I have explicated has no purpose in the way Wolfendale might suggest and tries to make no statement. Rather, it is merely the most morally responsible approach under specific circumstances, so that condoning and condemning have little to do with it. Again, the fact that forgiveness and resentment are being considered already implies the act has been condemned and will remain condemned throughout the entire process.

Of course, the proponents of forgiveness might argue that my insistence that resentment can be a better response than forgiveness when the wrongdoer is unapologetic will perpetuate a cycle of anger and hate. Glen Pettigrove has written about “consequence-driven” objections to forgiveness—broadly, this is the idea that forgiving the unapologetic may lead to an undesirable consequence. Because Pettigrove’s discussion of this type of objection to forgiveness closely mirrors what I imagine an argument against my own claims would be, it will be useful to explicate what he finds troubling about objections these forgiveness.

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146 Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 122.
Pettigrove’s primary qualm with an argument, like mine, that advocates resentment, reflects Joseph Butler’s observation in his sermon. Butler wrote, “Resentment towards any man hath plainly a tendency to beget the same passion in him who is the object of it; and this again increases it in the other.” Resentment, when expressed to the wrongdoer by the victim, is likely to incite a reaction of resentment in the wrongdoer toward the victim, which will in turn provoke a bitter and endless cycle of anger. Pettigrove has argued that, by conditioning forgiveness such that the wrongdoer must be repentant (my third argument), one fails to recognize the potential positive consequences of forgiving the unapologetic suggested by Butler.

At this point, after I have addressed several counter arguments to my conditions for forgiveness, it would be useful to delineate the difference between resentment and revenge, because I can imagine general opposition to my account of the virtue of resentment being based on an understanding of resentment as synonymous with revenge.

Resentment, as with other attitudes, can of course be taken to excess or be misdirected. Butler’s fear was that resentment is an emotion that can be dangerous for its owner. Resentment can be painful and distressing; it can interfere with personal relationships, and can dominate a person’s life. But this kind of unconditional resentment is not the qualified kind to which I have been referring. Revenge, a potential consequence of excessive resentment, is not in question here. Revenge implies action and a calculated reactive response to an injury. Resentment understood in this paper has lacked the retributive quality associated with revenge. I

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147 Butler, *Sermon IX. Upon Resentment and Forgiveness of Injuries*
148 Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 123.
149 Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 70.
150 Haber, *Forgiveness*, 170.
have argued that forgiveness is the overcoming of resentment, and in turn, when forgiveness cannot be offered in congruency with moral principles, resentment should persist.

The persistence of resentment, then, is distinct from the cultivation and acting out of vengeance. Conceivably an objection could be lodged against my argument that is concerned with the possibility of violence and hostility when forgiveness is withheld. I would respond to this in two ways. First, I would maintain that there is a difference between revenge (which might include violence) and resentment. The former is an act; the latter is an attitude. I am not promoting the sort of excessive resentment that could lead to retributive action. Granted, there may be no way of controlling this, and long-term resentment may manifest itself in vengeful acts. Nevertheless, I would argue that resentment has its place, conditionally, just as forgiveness has its place, conditionally.

I would also clarify that this discussion has not centered on mere interpersonal indiscretions or everyday gaffes and insults. The idea that some acts are unforgiveable, and their effect on the offender is irreversible, pertains to extreme, horrific atrocities. Average conflicts, I would argue, are generally forgivable, since—they can be resolved without jeopardizing moral principles. Rather, the kind of evil with which I am concerned is the kind that threatens hope, ethics, social stability, and faith. The consequences are far from trivial—to forgive evil of this caliber may be equally as wicked as the act itself because it is a major affront to our humanity.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to look more closely at the relationship between forgiveness and resentment, and to question the popular theological and philosophical treatment of forgiveness as an unconditional virtue. I have argued that the way in which forgiveness can,
and should be, conditioned—by a certain constellation of circumstances—to be morally
acceptable. When one can offer forgiveness and still maintain self-respect, respect for others and
the moral community, and when the offender is repentant, then I believe forgiveness can be
considered virtuous. If one of more of these conditions is unmet, then I maintain forgiveness
cannot be rightly considered virtuous.

I have attempted to demonstrate that because no person is infallible, and because time is
irreversible, we are constantly faced with the problem of resolution. Of the two attitudinal
options available to us—forgivingness or resentfulness—forgivingness is often purported to be
the better option. It is, some have argued, more conducive to psychological peace, societal peace,
and congruent with the tenets of Christian doctrine. The forgiving attitude, embedded in an ethic
of Divine Command through Biblical injunctions to forgive our enemies, and confidence in the
ultimate goodness of all of humanity, has been adopted by philosophical, sociological, and
psychological rhetoric. A consequence of this, I have argued, is that forgiveness has been revered
as an unconditional virtue across theological and philosophical lines.

The challenge of this project was to demonstrate the ways in which this might not always
be true. To be sure, forgiveness has its merits. However, my argument has been that in certain
circumstances of grave, dehumanizing evil, forgiveness is not virtuous insofar as unconditional
forgiveness cannot always be beneficial for the forgiver, or willed to be a universal good.
Because forgiveness and resentment operate in tandem, when forgiveness is withheld because it
cannot be morally justified, then resentment is a more virtuous attitude. This is not to say that
resentment is easier, or more cathartic, or will lead to reconciliation—it is certainly a difficult
position to maintain. Nevertheless, unconditional forgiveness for the type of transgressions I
have in mind has its own dangers which I believe are more perilous for the moral community
than the consequences of resentment. At the outset, I asked what happens when a sense of moral responsibility is impossible to reconcile with forgiveness? Ultimately, I believe that this paper has presented a compelling argument that resentment can be the answer to this problem.
Bibliography


