Forgiveness as Change

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1. Introduction

Forgiveness requires a change in one’s attitude toward an offender. It’s not enough simply to speak the words, “I forgive you.” Such a statement—or an equivalent gesture, performance, or other behaviour—is consistent with a completely unforgiving attitude. One might say the words in order to manipulate others’ perception of you. While such a subterfuge may be rare, its possibility shows that forgiveness requires an internal change.

An adequate account of the nature of forgiveness must explain two things: what kind of changes are required to forgive and what it is in response to which the forgiver changes their attitude. In other words, an adequate account of forgiveness requires a change condition. A plausible account must, in addition, capture our everyday practice of forgiving sufficiently well and also illuminate its role in our broader responsibility practices (e.g. blame, apology, reconciliation).

2. The Standard View

The standard view is that, when a victim forgives their offender, she forswears blame but must continue to view the offender as blameworthy (Murphy 1988, Hieronymi 2001, Griswold 2007, Allais 2008). To view a person as blameworthy is to appraise them as responsible for some misconduct, while blaming requires that, in addition, one hold this fact against the person in some way. What it means to hold an offence against the offender can be cashed out in different ways—e.g., in terms of a hard feeling (Allais 2008), a reactive emotion (Wallace 1994), a desire or disposition (Sher 2006), a demand or protest (Smith 2013), or a behaviour (Scanlon 2008)—but the core idea is that how one views the offender has changed (Hampton 1988), even if that change is entirely private. Dana Nelkin (2017) describes this basic change as holding the offence against the offender.

Forgiveness, then, is typically held to be the overcoming of some blaming attitude like resentment, contempt, or indignation (Murphy 1988, Griswold 2007, Allais 2008). This view also fits nicely with the claim that blame and forgiveness typically have a communicative function (McKenna 2012, Fricker 2016). If blame is typically meant to protest mistreatment or demand that an offender account for their wrongdoing, then, having recognised that one’s protest has been validated or one’s demand met, the withdrawal of blame through forgiveness seems appropriate (Hieronymi 2001).

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1 While this is the standard view, others identify the change required for forgiveness as the withdrawal of a special obligation or release from a debt created by the offence (Nelkin 2013, Warmke 2016, Bennett 2018).
The two elements of the standard view—that one must continue to view the offender as blameworthy but cease to hold their offence against them—appear plausible and fit with key features of our practice. In this paper, however, I will argue that the standard view is implausible and inadequate. In particular, I will argue that forgiving is consistent with, and may even require, a more significant change than merely ceasing to blame.

3. The Change Condition

The standard view is an account of how or in what way the forgiver must change in order to forgive, but it does not explain what prompts that change. The source of the change matters because one can cease to blame without forgiving, for example, by excusing or justifying the offence (Murphy 1982, Hieronymi 2001). One can even cease to blame someone one takes to be culpable for their wrongdoing without thereby forgiving them. For example, I might try to manage my blame in various ways—e.g., going for a long run or drinking a lot (Rankine 2015, 79). But neither drinking nor exercising my way out of blame intuitively counts as forgiving. We can call this other way of overcoming blame ‘letting go’.

The standard view thus appears inadequate. A solution is available, though. We can capture the distinction between forgiving and letting go and explain what prompts the forgiver to cease blaming by giving an account of the reasons to forgive. We forgive for reasons and, while we needn’t be aware of these reasons, we must be responding to reasons of some sort. To see why having a normative reason to forgive is necessary, try to imagine arbitrary forgiveness. Suppose Zora isn’t sure whether to forgive Toni and decides on the basis of a dice roll—1-10 she forgives, 11-20 she continues blaming Toni. This should strike us as odd. Even if Zora does cease to blame Toni in this way, it seems wrong to describe what she’s done as forgiving because she did not decide in virtue of some fact about Toni or the offence. The deciding factor—in this case the number on the cast die—didn’t bear on the question of whether to forgive.

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2 Most forgiveness theorists accept this claim. Forgiveness is held to be distinct from ceasing to blame in order to “mak[e] the most of my life” (Morris 1988, 18), “for the sake of preserving harmony in the family” (Hampton 1988, 39), and for “purely selfish” reasons (McGary 1989, 345); as well as from “mental hygiene” (Richards 1988, 79); “taking a specially designed pill” (Hieronymi 2001, 530); “merely prudential…self-interest” (Bennett 2003, 140); “closure” or “putting [the issue] away” (Griswold 2007, 70); “therapeutic dispelling of retributive emotions” (Allais 2008, 43-44); and “merely getting over” blame (Pettigrove 2012, 97).

3 Some offences call for more than one kind of response. For example, Zora may realise that Toni’s behaviour was not as bad as she thought (justification), that she was not entirely responsible for what happened (excuse), but that there is nonetheless something to forgive (or let go).

4 Consider also that, in order to forgive, one must believe oneself to have been culpably mistreated. This is a reason not to forgive, so a positive reason to do otherwise seems necessary.
Moreover, not just any reason will do. Suppose Alice is upset with Audre for her recklessness. Alice can blame and forgive Audre for being reckless, but she cannot blame her because she was reckless and also forgive her because she was reckless. Alice needs some other reason to forgive. Nor is this the only restriction. If Alice ceases to blame her merely because she dislikes being upset—where this reason has nothing at all to do with Audre—this is not forgiveness. Likewise, if she ceases to blame her just because she learns that Audre too loves *The Princess Bride*, then she has not forgiven because these are the wrong kinds of reasons. Imagine that Alice reads about the cardiovascular benefits of forgiveness and ceases to blame Audre solely for this reason. This too seems odd. Cardiovascular health might be a reason to exercise more or become a vegetarian, but not to forgive. If Alice tells Audre that’s she’s forgiven her for the sake of her heart, Audre might reasonably think that Alice doesn’t understand what it means to forgive. Cardiovascular health isn’t the right kind of reason. Forgiveness, like blame, is a response to the offender’s attitudes and actions, but Alice isn’t responding to Audre at all. She’s responding to the harmfulness of her own anger. Her reason to cease blaming would be the same regardless of how Audre had hurt her or how she acted after the offence. This same kind of case can be made against other reasons.

So what are the right kinds of reasons to forgive? I suggest that, in order to forgive, one must perceive a change of heart in the offender. This perception needn’t be accurate or conscious—though the forgiver must be responsive to reasons—but one must respond to some indication that the offender no longer endorses her objectionable attitude or behaviour. Lucy Allais argues that to forgive is to see an offender differently than their action warrants (2008, 59). I agree, but would add that to forgive is to see the person differently because that is what her apparent change of heart warrants. The evidence of a change of heart can take a number of forms none of which is individually necessary. It might be an apology, an expression of remorse, or an attempt to atone or make amends. What forgiveness requires is recognition of some such evidence, however small.

This is not to say that particular actions are never necessary. A simple apology or expression of remorse might be sufficient for a relatively minor offence, while a particularly heinous crime might require a powerful act of atonement in order to demonstrate a sincere change of heart. However, even in such cases, atonement is only necessary because this particular forgiver requires this particular evidence to forgive this particular offence.

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5 I take forgiveness to be similar to trust insofar as both require that one have particular kinds of reasons in order to count as doing so (Hieronymi 2008).

6 I argue for this claim at length elsewhere. The argument of the present paper can be taken as conditional on a successful defense of this claim. In brief, the argument goes like this: 1) in order to forgive one need reasons of the right kind, 2) many purported reasons to forgive are the wrong kind of reason (e.g., having had good intentions), 3) all the reasons of the right kind are instances of the same kind of reason (i.e., that the offender appears to have had a change of heart).
4. Change in Blameworthiness

Now, if something like this is right—that forgiving must be a response to a perceived change of heart in the offender—then we have reason to reconsider the standard view of the change condition on forgiveness. For if forgiving requires that one judge that the offender has had a change of heart, then it is no longer clear that one should (or can) continue to view her as blameworthy. Moreover, even if forgiveness need not be a response to a perceived change of heart, it usually is. This would support a similar, albeit weaker, conclusion, namely, that a forgiver usually does not continue to view the offender as blameworthy.

Of course, we can’t deny that she was blameworthy at the time of the offence. That would be to excuse her. If the offender acted wrongly by accident, or due to (non-culpable) ignorance, or because she was drugged, then she was not responsible for the action at the time she did it. But a perceived change of heart does give us reason to deny that she is presently blameworthy. Let me explain.

One views an offender as presently blameworthy if one views her as blameworthy now. One views her as having been blameworthy if one views her now as blameworthy at the time of the offence (and until she had the relevant change of heart). If Maya views Djuna as blameworthy for her callous treatment of Claudia, then (minimally) Maya views Djuna as connected to her behaviour in some way over and above having been the agent causally responsible for its occurrence (or absence in the case of omissions). Different theories of responsibility identify this extra factor differently—e.g., inadequate quality of will (McKenna 2012), deep self (Wolf 1987), evaluative commitments (Smith 2005), or some combination. The different theories agree, however, that, whatever the factor is, it is necessary for blameworthiness. This feature of blameworthiness has implications for our understanding of forgiveness because it seems to be precisely the difference between a repentant and a non-repentant offender. A repentant offender is one whose offence did reflect her quality of will (or deep self, or evaluative commitments), but whose quality of will (or deep self, or evaluative commitments) has changed, whether in response to self-blame or blame by others.

Consider two cases. Bart vandalises school property with malicious ill will, while Lisa vandalises school property with no ill will at all—she does not act with malice or even objectionable disregard for relevant moral considerations. It’s plausible to say that Bart is blameworthy, but not that Lisa is. It’s difficult to imagine a person being blameworthy despite having an unimpeachable quality of will, whatever else is true of her. But Lisa the vandal has the same psychological profile that Bart would have if he regretted his vandalism, apologised, and tried to make amends. Parity of reasoning suggests, then, that repentant Bart cannot be presently blameworthy.

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7 For a discussion of how repentance—or making amends or atoning—affects the normative status of the wrongdoer and/or wrongdoing that is not about responsibility, see Radzik (2009).
either. Lisa the vandal and repentant Bart are similar in all the ways relevant to present blameworthiness.

One might object to this characterisation, though. One might argue that it is no longer appropriate to blame repentant Bart, but that he remains presently blameworthy. This is a plausible description of some cases. It’s sometimes inappropriate to blame even a blameworthy wrongdoer—e.g., if further blame would be disproportionate to the offence or if the would-be blamer lacks the standing to blame (Wallace 2010, Nelkin 2017). However, this is not the best explanation of what’s going on with repentant Bart and similar cases. Even if it’s inappropriate to blame him independently of his blameworthiness, it may also be true that he is no longer blameworthy. We might have two independently sufficient reasons not to blame him. But we can imagine a case in which it is still appropriate to blame him—perhaps for purely deterrent reasons—but in which, because he’s repented, he no longer meets one of the necessary conditions on blameworthiness (e.g., some manner of ill will, self-expression, or evaluative commitment). Whatever else is true, it still seems that there is no relevant difference between repentant Bart and initially non-blameworthy Lisa.

But if a repentant wrongdoer is not blameworthy for the act she repents having done, then we have to reconsider what changes when a person forgives. It seems that the forgiver need not continue to view the offender as presently blameworthy, though she must continue to view her as having been blameworthy at the time of the offence. Further, though, it seems that a forgiver must cease to view the offender as presently blameworthy. Suppose that Bell drives recklessly with Octavia’s child in the car. It makes sense to say either that Bell has an unobjectionable quality of will (e.g., insufficient care) or that she is blameworthy. But if Octavia views Bell as presently blameworthy, then she cannot view her as having an unobjectionable quality of will; and vice versa. My suggestion is that the same is true diachronically. If Octavia views Bell as no longer having an objectionable quality of will, then she views her as no longer presently blameworthy because this is an essential part of what it is to view someone as blameworthy. (A similar argument could be made if we take the relevant factor to be the offender’s evaluative commitment rather than his quality of will.)

One might object that there are different conditions on synchronic and diachronic blameworthiness, on becoming blameworthy and remaining blameworthy. If so, then there is a relevant difference between initially non-blameworthy Lisa and repentant Bart, namely, that Bart did wrong with ill will.

However, this position doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. It’s implausible to claim that the fact that Bart had a bad quality of will and Lisa did not, can determine their status as presently blameworthy or not. Consider what this claim amounts to. First, it implies that causal responsibility—having committed the offence—is sufficient for remaining blameworthy, even though bad quality of will is necessary for becoming

8 One could say that blame is impermissible, but still fitting.
blameworthy. Second, it implies that, when assessing present blameworthiness, the relevant connection between an agent and her act is her past quality of will rather than any present fact about her.

This view seems implausible as an account of the metaphysics of responsibility, unfair as an account of the ethics of responsibility, and mistaken as a description of important practices in our society. Consider the metaphysical dimension of the claim. On this view, blameworthiness tracks the connection between the agent’s act and her past quality of will. While this makes sense for blameworthiness at the time of the act, it doesn’t make sense for present blameworthiness. To say that the no longer existing quality of will connection between an agent and her action makes her still blameworthy is like saying that the no longer existing gravitational connection between a body and the sun makes it still a planet even after it has escaped its orbit and drifted off into space. Such a view fails to provide a useful picture of the world as it is now.

Nor does it help us navigate our current moral landscape. It seems inconsistent with important moral and legal commitments and practices. Consider the practice of sentencing and releasing convicted criminals. Criminal sentences explicitly reflect the degree of perceived blameworthiness, usually assessed in terms of the perceived badness of their quality of will at the time of the offence (e.g., level of malice, recklessness, negligence, etc). But we release prisoners who show a change of heart—expressed in various ways—even before they have completed their sentence. We do so even when we continue to believe that the original sentence was proportional to the crime. Perhaps we do this in order to make prisons more efficient or to incentivise other prisoners to reform, but the practice also appears to reflect the judgment, based on a perceived change of heart, that offenders are no longer (or are less) blameworthy than they were. Indeed, even in the absence of other practical benefits, early release of reformed offenders seems appropriate.

Finally, something like the view I’ve articulated seems to be reflected in the language of cleansing with which we describe redemptive rituals like adult baptism, atonement, penance, and absolution. These rituals do not erase the wrong itself, but practitioners do treat them as removing the moral taint of wrongdoing.

5. Objections

One could object to my argument in two ways. Some will object that it is too permissive because it counts as forgivers those who cease to view a repentant offender as presently blameworthy. I would contend that this is as it should be. There is not another practice that includes such actions and it doesn’t seem like a distinct practice of its own. One who ceases to view an offender as presently blameworthy engages in a practice that has the same logic, performs the same functions, and gives rise to the same normative constraints as forgiveness.

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9 They also reflect the badness of the action and its negative consequences.
Others will object that my account is too restrictive. Supposing that my view inherits this defect from the standard view, one might reject it entirely and argue instead that the change required for forgiveness is simply a decision to forgive in response to a desire to forgive. However, this simply pushes the problem back. Such an account may be minimally adequate, but it is not plausible. After all, one might desire to forgive and decide to forgive, but fail to do so. We sometimes find ourselves unable to forgive, even thought we want to. This is because the change required for forgiveness—whatever we think it is—is not always under our control. Other times we believe we’ve forgiven but are mistaken, either because we’ve misunderstood what forgiveness is or because we have not made the change we think we have. For example, one might take oneself to have forgiven but actually excused. Or one might think she has forgiven even as it is clear to others that nothing in her attitude toward the offender has changed. This alternative to the standard view is incomplete. In order to capture the fact that these recognisable experiences are not forgiveness, it must tell a more developed story about the kind of change required for forgiveness and what reasons we have to forgive.

6. Conclusion

I’ve argued for an alternative formulation of the change condition on forgiveness. The standard view holds that, in order to forgive, one must continue to view the offender as blameworthy. I’ve argued that, insofar as it’s a response to a perceived change of heart on the part of the offender, forgiveness actually requires that one cease to view the offender as presently blameworthy. My view still allows us to distinguish forgiveness from excuse because excuse requires that one cease view the offender as having been blameworthy at the time of the offence, while forgiveness is incompatible with such a change. However, because having a bad quality of will is necessary for blameworthiness, and a repentant offender no longer has a bad quality of will, a repentant offender cannot be presently blameworthy. Forgiveness thus requires that the would-be forgiver cease to view the offender as blameworthy—at least in cases where one forgives in response to a perceived change of heart.

References


