

Defending Elective Forgiveness

Forthcoming in *Ergo*

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1. Introduction

Imagine that you are wrestling with whether to forgive someone. You were seriously wronged, and you rightly blamed your wrongdoer. You felt the flush of anger and resentment, and your relationship with the wrongdoer changed. Now, time has passed, and you have begun to think about forgiveness. You mull things over: did the wrongdoer apologize, or did they deny culpability? Has the wrongdoer paid the due price for their wrongdoing, or have they avoided responsibility? Has the wrongdoer made amends, repairing the damage caused by their wrongdoing? Has the wrongdoer changed their ways, or do they continue with similar wrongdoings? It is easy to imagine questions like these looming in your mind as you try to decide whether to forgive.

In this paper, I argue that it can be a mistake to focus predominantly on the wrongdoer and the wrongdoing, as those questions might suggest. To fully consider whether to forgive, we need to expand our focus from the wrongdoer and their wrongdoing, and we need to consider who we are, what we care about, and what we want to care about. The difference between blame and forgiveness is, at bottom, a difference in priorities. When we blame, we prioritize the wrong, and when we forgive, we shift our priorities away from the wrong. Thus, whether to forgive has to do both with external matters such as whether the wrongdoer has apologized and with internal matters such as who we are and who we want to be.

Recognizing this essential role for priorities in forgiveness allows us to address a thorny puzzle in thinking about forgiveness: how is it that forgiveness can be both principled and elective? Forgiveness is principled in that we can forgive for reasons. For example, that someone has apologized can give me an intelligible reason to forgive. At the same time, forgiveness is elective in that whether to forgive is up to the forgiver in a robust sense. Many think of forgiveness as a gift, and many think that it would be out of place for a wrongdoer to demand forgiveness. But if there is sufficient reason to forgive, as will sometimes be the case because forgiveness is principled, how can it be reasonable to withhold forgiveness? Recognizing that forgiveness is a shift in our priorities dissolves this apparent tension between forgiveness being principled and forgiveness being elective.

Here is the plan: In section 2, I develop the tension between forgiveness being principled and forgiveness being elective, and I challenge a popular response to this tension which results in a deflated sense of election. In Section 3, I begin my competing response with accounts of blame and forgiveness grounded in the elements of the emotions, and I argue that these accounts show us that forgiveness is a shift in our priorities, i.e., that when we forgive, we shift how important the wrongdoing is to us. In Section 4, I use this lesson to show how forgiveness can be meaningfully both principled and elective, and I use that explanation of electivity to explore conditional forgiveness, unconditional forgiveness, and the limits on forgiveness. In Section 5, I conclude, urging that the resolution of this tension between principle and election is just the start of a broader set of new insights about forgiveness.

The arguments here bear on the ongoing debate regarding the reasons to forgive. These arguments are not of mere theoretical or dialectical importance. Many of us face real questions about whether to forgive, questions which are intensely personal and which often involve some of the most significant wrongs in our lives and some of the most significant relationships in our

lives. Wondering about whether to forgive can be a difficult and anxiety-inducing matter. On some of the leading accounts of whether to forgive, our thoughts in deciding whether to forgive should be focused in the main on the wrongdoer, their change of heart, and their addressing of the wrong. On my argument, however, whether to forgive is an immediately and intensely personal matter. Deciding between blame and forgiveness is to a great extent a decision about what is important to the victim and about what the victim wants to be important to them. In many cases, the choice is about what sorts of lives we want to live and what sorts of people we want to be. And even in those cases where withholding forgiveness seems vicious, we cannot fully appreciate why if we look only to facts about the wrongdoer and the wrongdoing. Thus, the ethics of blame and forgiveness can show us something about the ethics of our priorities.

2. The point of blame and skepticism about election

Two intuitive features of forgiveness might seem to be in tension. On the one hand, forgiveness seems principled.¹ We can forgive for reasons, and we can offer each other reasons to forgive. Imagine, for instance, that you have a colleague at work who has been rude to you on several occasions, failing to include you in office events and overlooking your contributions to collective projects.² This mistreatment bothers you, you rightfully resent your colleague, and you chastise your colleague for their misbehavior. That is, you blame your colleague. However, your colleague reacts appropriately to being chastised. They reflect on how they have acted, they apologize to you, and they change their office behavior, both showing that their apology was sincere and addressing the harm caused by their prior behavior. With your colleague's apology and changed ways in mind, you forgive them.

Your forgiveness in this case is principled, and your shift in stance toward your colleague is not arbitrary. Your colleague's apology and repair provide you with adequate reasons to forgive. However, that your forgiveness is principled might seem to entail that forgiveness was not fully elective in this case. Of course, as a causal matter, you might not have forgiven. Setting aside questions of free will and determinism, it does seem that whether you forgive might be influenced by your volition and choices. But, given that your forgiveness is principled and given that you have sufficient reason to forgive, would refusing or failing to forgive not have been acting against that sufficient reason?

Thinking about cases like this might give us reason to doubt that forgiveness is truly elective. According to Pamela Hieronymi (2001), Per-Erik Milam (2018; 2019), and Miranda Fricker (2019), an earnest, good-faith apology can at least sometimes mandate forgiveness. These election skeptics argue that whether blame or forgiveness is appropriate turns on the wrongdoer's response toward their own wrong (at least in paradigmatic cases). If the wrongdoer has not disavowed the wrong, then continued blame may be appropriate. If, however, the wrongdoer has had a change of heart, as evidenced perhaps by an earnest apology, then the wrongdoer should be forgiven. Accordingly, an earnest apology reflecting a change of heart provides both a reason explaining forgiveness and a reason requiring forgiveness.

This anti-election argument is grounded in an appeal to the function of blame. According to Fricker, "blame's basic point ... is to bring the wrongdoer and the blamer into an aligned moral understanding of what has gone on between them" (246, emphasis removed). On

¹ Pamela Hieronymi (2001) uses the term 'articulate' to capture what I am referencing by calling forgiveness 'principled.' Forgiveness is articulate in that we can describe the principled reasons why we do or should forgive.

² This example loosely developed from Per-Erik Milam (2018).

Hieronymi's account, "resentment protests a past action that persists as a threat" (546, emphasis removed). The function of the expression of blame is to get the wrongdoer to recognize that they have wronged you and that doing so was inappropriate. And, Fricker argues, the function of the blaming reactive attitudes is to spark and support the interpersonal element. Thus, the ultimate function of the blaming reactive attitudes is to get the wrongdoer to recognize their culpability.

If the function of the blaming reactive attitudes is to protest in this way, we can make sense of why an apology gives us reason to forgive. A good-faith apology provides significant evidence that the wrongdoer has recognized their culpability. Accordingly, in cases where there is an earnest, good-faith apology, blame has nothing left to do and so is pointless.³ However, that blame is pointless does not mean that the wrongdoer was not responsible for their wrongdoing. Accordingly, in cases where the wrongdoer apologizes, we should continue to take the wrongdoer to be blameworthy, but we should not blame them; it looks like we should forgive, and it looks like continuing to blame would be irrational and perhaps morally inappropriate.

The skeptics then often seek to capture the intuitions at stake by offering alternative notions of election. A first alternative points to control and responsibility. Insofar as we lack perfect control over our emotions, we may not always be able to forgive. Given that ought implies can, there might thus be voluntarist limits on our obligations to forgive. A second alternative focuses on what the wrongdoer is permitted to call for. Whatever reasons we have to forgive, it might be out of place for the wrongdoer to insist upon our forgiveness. Consider that it is often inappropriate to complain about not receiving a gift even in cases where gifts are socially expectable. This limitation is plausibly heightened in the case of blame, given that the wrongdoer created the situation by acting impermissibly. A third alternative stems from our epistemic limitations. Given our very limited access to each other's character, we might have significant leeway and discretion in coming to a judgment regarding whether the wrongdoer has recognized their own culpability. An apology gives us significant reason to think that the wrongdoer has recognized their culpability, but can we be sure that the words of the apology were uttered in good faith? The evidence might fit with a number of divergent interpretations. These diminished notions of election can make the skeptical argument more palatable by allowing it to account for the familiar intuition that forgiveness is elective.

However, there are two problems at the core of the argument for skepticism about robust forgiveness.⁴ First, this argument is too narrow regarding the function of blame. Hieronymi and Fricker are not wrong that the expression of blame's reactive attitudes can convey an objection to the wrongdoer about their wrongdoing.⁵ That is indeed a valuable role for blame. The objection can be valued for its own sake (people like to have their say), for the role that it plays in prompting apology, for the role that it plays in prompting a change in behavior, and for the role that it plays in prompting repair. But blame might have other functions. It can keep the blamer's mind on the wrong, helping the blamer to address the harms done to them by the wrongdoer, to protect themselves against future, similar wrongs, and to preserve their sense of self-worth. Blame can also be expressed to and received by third parties. Just as blaming the wrongdoer can

³ As the election skeptics make clear, that we cease having reason to blame does not mean that we cease having reasons to address the wrong or repair its harms.

⁴ These concerns lead to my own substantive account of the reasons for forgiving. There are other issues with tightly linking protest, blame, and forgiveness. For instance, it is unclear what a protest account should say about guilt, if we think of guilt as self-blame.

⁵ Fricker recognizes that blame and forgiveness can have many good effects (e.g., 2019, 257).

help restore our moral relationship with the wrongdoer, blaming the wrongdoer can create and buttress moral relationships with outsiders. You can make a quick friend in a sports bar by blaming a referee after a close loss.

Recognizing the diversity of potential benefits of blame undermines the basic argument from Hieronymi, Milam, and Fricker. The narrower the function of blame, the more likely that something like an apology can render blame functionally pointless. If we accept a narrow account of the function of blame, then we can infer from the fact of an earnest apology to continuing blame being pointless and then from blame's being pointless to there being sufficient reason to forgive. However, given the many potential benefits of blame and thus the potential for a broader account of the function of blame, we cannot quickly infer from an earnest apology to further blame being pointless. Even if the wrongdoer has apologized in good faith, blame might still help the victim protect themselves against similar wrongs in the future or help to preserve the victim's self-worth, for example. We should reject the narrow functional argument that forgiveness is not elective.

This might be out of the frying pan only to be into the fire. As Milam (2018) argues, that there are many potential consequences of blame and many potential consequences of forgiveness might do little more than complicate the accounting. On the basic functional argument, there is one potential benefit of blame, and either we get it or not. But if blame's potential goods are broad, we still just sift through the relevant particulars. Milam argues that we can add up the pros and cons, and we should expect to get an all-things-considered verdict one way or the other.⁶

Accordingly, I turn to the second, deeper problem with the Hieronymi, Milam, and Fricker argument: the appeal to the function of blame occludes the significance of the emotional aspects of blame. Many ordinary and appropriate emotional reactions may not have much functional point in the moment, and yet this does not mean that to experience those emotional reactions is ipso facto inappropriate. Consider familiar examples from sport. The athlete who wins experiences joy, and the athlete who loses experiences disappointment. Imagine asking an athlete who has just lost an important match whether they appreciated being disappointed because of the usefulness of their disappointment. It would be out of place to ask the athlete then about the function of their joy and disappointment, or at least to think that such questions are central in making sense of the joy or disappointment. A reference to the achievement or shortfall is sufficient, in most cases, to adequately justify and explain the joy or disappointment.

This is not to say that the functions of our reactions never enter our thinking about whether we should be joyous or disappointed. First, at a level of explanatory remove, we can point to the functional effects of being the sorts of beings who experience joy and disappointment. Joy and disappointment plausibly are parts of a complex but beneficial psychology of motivation. Perhaps if I experience joy when I do things that are in some sense good for me (or good for the species, or some such), and if joy motivates me, then being an animal who pursues joy might be good for me. That could help explain a certain sense of the

⁶ Here we see that there are two distinct anti-election camps: the narrow functionalists who think that blame is pointless where it cannot achieve some particular function and the broad pluralists who think that, while blame can produce a range of potential benefits, it is costly, and thus it is inappropriate where it provides no good. Although there are important theoretical differences between the camps, both agree that at least in some cases an apology can mandate forgiveness. I am suspicious of the narrow account of the function of blame. But I do not have to resolve this here, given the next argument I raise against both camps.

function of joy. However, that joy and disappointment might be essential parts of a valuable system does not entail that each instance of joy and disappointment are valuable in that way, and we can distinguish “Why should I feel joy now?” from “Why should I be the sort of being who is susceptible to joy generally?”. Second, particular instances of joy and disappointment can be costly or interfere with our other aims. The joy an athlete experiences after a fantastic midgame move might distract the athlete from the ongoing game, and an athlete might make use of an opponent’s joy for their own motivational purposes. This might explain why it is sometimes important to gain control over even fitting emotions. Nonetheless, that an emotion could interfere with our other concerns does not mean that fittingness is always second to even the slightest consequential value. Thus, in many ordinary cases, joy or disappointment can be appropriate even if there is no functional upshot of the reaction or even if the particular reaction is somewhat costly.

We have little reason to think the same things would not be true of the emotional reactions of blame. Like joy and disappointment, it is easy enough to imagine that the practice of blame has a welcome function in our collective lives, and perhaps it is the case that we are better off in general for being creatures who blame than we might be under at least some potential alternative ways of living.⁷ Still, our evaluations of whether blame is pointless in any particular instance should not be tightly beholden to blame’s function. And, therefore, the argument that we should forgive (or at least cease to blame) in cases where continuing to blame does not fit blame’s function or where there is much to be gained from forgiving are too revisionary, given the argument’s tacit commitment to constraining the evaluation of whether to blame or forgive to the function of blaming or forgiving.

What is the broader lesson here? I am skeptical that arguments like those from Hieronymi, Milam, and Fricker, arguments which point to the functional effects of blame, capture enough of the story. We need to think about the role of the emotional element of blame and about what we get from the blame beyond its functional consequences. Accordingly, I now turn to a closer look at blame to see how its particulars can help us make sense of forgiveness.

3. Blame and forgiveness as emotional phenomena

There are many distinct blame phenomena: we blame cognitively, psychologically, interpersonally, and via institutions. Plausibly, there are thus many distinct corresponding notions of forgiveness. Here, I am particularly concerned with the psychological sort of blame and the corresponding psychological sort of forgiveness. Thus, I endorse the reactive-attitude notion of blame familiar from P.F. Strawson ([1962] 2003) and R. Jay Wallace (1994). This Strawsonian account of blame is widely popular. For example, while Milam (2018; 2019) and Lucy Allais (2008; 2013) disagree as to the electivity of forgiveness, they both focus on the sorts of blame and forgiveness grounded in the reactive attitudes. In this section, I argue that we get a better grasp of this sense of blame and its corresponding sense of forgiveness when we better appreciate the emotional aspects of these phenomena and that, when we appreciate those aspects, we should recognize that blame and forgiveness are ways that we prioritize and deprioritize wrongdoings in our engagement with wrongdoers.

The reactive attitudes are the “non-detached attitudes and reactions of people directly involved in transactions with each other” (Strawson 2003, 75), and they reflect “the very great

⁷ See, for instance, R. Jay Wallace (2011) on the point of the system of blame. For similar arguments from a different perspective, see Phillipa Foot (2001), especially Ch. 7. For skeptical arguments, see Gregg Caruso (2021), Milam (2016; 2017), and Derk Pereboom (2014; 2021).

importance that we attach to the attitudes and intentions towards us of other human beings” (*ibid.*). In the case of blame for wrongdoing, we resent those who wrong us, we are indignant at those who wrong others, and we feel guilt for our own wrongs. These attitudinal instances of blame are more than mere “dispassionate opprobrium” (Wallace 2011), but they do not require expression, punishment, or other external behavior. Instead, “To count as blaming a person, you have to be *exercised* by what they have done, and to be exercised in the relevant way just is to be subject to one of the reactive sentiments” (*id.* at 358).

Four elements of blame as a reactive attitude are particularly important for my purposes, as it will turn out that we can understand forgiveness as requiring one element of blame while at the same time abandoning the others. First, blame has cognitive content. The reactive attitudes are a class of attitudes that respond to the quality of will expressed in an agent’s action. In the case of blame, our reactive attitudes include an assessment that the target of our blame is blameworthy, i.e., is responsible for having done wrong.⁸ Second, blame has characteristic conative implications.⁹ When we blame, we often find ourselves moved to chastise the wrongdoer, to distance ourselves from them or otherwise change our relationships with them, to punish the wrongdoer, to seek an apology, and the like. Third, we feel our blame. Indeed, a loose synonym for “emotion” is “feeling.” There is a somatic experience of blame. Blame often leaves us feeling tense, tight, or agitated. That blame has a feeling goes a significant way toward explaining Wallace’s claim that blame exercises us. Finally, blame frames our perception of the wrongdoer. In particular, we blame by perceiving the wrongdoer in the light of the wrongdoing.¹⁰ We become more attuned to evidence of the wrongdoer’s culpability for their

⁸ This assessment does not have to be accurate. It is possible to blame in mistake. This assessment does not have to be deliberate. It is possible to blame on impulse. And we do not have to be aware or conscious of this assessment. We may blame without reflecting on our blame. As Wallace explains, we can even blame wrongdoers whom we ostensibly believe to be innocent or excused, insofar our actions and responses may sometimes reveal commitments in tension with our reflective or conscious beliefs (1994, 18, 24).

⁹ Although I do not endorse George Sher’s (2007) belief-desire account of blame, I think it nicely captures that blame is associated with a range of behavioral responses. Likewise, see Wallace’s (1994, 24) discussion of the distinctive behavioral and linguistic dispositions of blame, citing John Rawls (1999 § 73).

¹⁰ For a sampling from the developing literature on the perceptual elements of blame, see David Zimmerman (2001), Allais (2008; 2013; 2019), Elisa Hurley and Colleen Macnamara (2010), Matt King (2020), Eugene Chislenko (2022), and my own prior work (2021). Valerie Hardcastle (2018) provides a neuroscience-grounded examination of the interaction between blame and perception, as taken up in Caruso (2021). There are discussions of this perceptual element across the Western philosophical canon. In *The Art of Rhetoric* (1926), Aristotle notes that when we are angry with someone, we are inclined not to trust them, and we are skeptical of the things they say. Accordingly, Aristotle recommends that the effective debater should find a way to make their audience angry with the opposing side. *Ad hominem* arguments are effective, even if not always sound. In Sermon 8 (1887), Augustine tells us that when we are angry, our attention is drawn to flaws in others, and we become insensitive to our own flaws, even where our flaws greatly exceed the flaws of others. And we see something similar in Bishop Butler’s classic sermon on forgiveness (1726). In explaining why revenge is so tempting, Butler writes: “in cases of offence and enmity, the whole character and behaviour is considered with an eye to that

wrongdoing and more inclined toward interpretations consistent with that culpability. We shift our attention to evidence of potential malicious motivations, consistent wrongdoings, and other exacerbating factors, and we shift our attention away from evidence of the wrongdoer's good behaviors, potential excuses or justifications, and the like. These various perceptual dispositions include dispositions of our external senses as well as dispositions of our internal attention and understanding. It is not just that we think of the wrongdoer and at the same time are aware that they have done wrong. Rather, when we blame them, we perceive them *as* the doer of that wrong.¹¹

This account of blame points us to a corresponding account of forgiveness. We forgive when we forswear or overcome warranted blame or resentment.¹² But not every occasion of ceasing to blame counts as forgiveness. Recognizing an excuse or justification, forgetting about the wrongdoer entirely, becoming wholly emotionally detached, condoning the wrong, letting go—none of these are forgiveness. Instead, here are three central elements of forgiveness: First, when we forgive we continue to take the wrongdoer to be blameworthy. In Hieronymi's (2001) terminology, forgiveness is uncompromising regarding the assessment of culpability. Second, the other three elements of our blaming reaction cease. We cease to experience blame's conative impulses, bodily sensations, and perceptual dispositions (or, if any of these persist, they are grounded in other concerns, such as concerns for repair or concerns for instruction).¹³ Without these, we are no longer exercised by the wrongdoing in Wallace's sense, and so we no longer blame. Third, we continue to occupy the participatory stance toward the wrongdoer and thus we remain susceptible to the reactive attitudes regarding the wrongdoer's other behaviors. We no longer react to this one wrong, but we are open to experiencing gratitude for the wrongdoer's good acts, we are open to blaming the wrongdoer for other wrongs, and the like. This third element of forgiveness accounts for the role that forgiveness plays in sustaining relationships.¹⁴

The notions of blame and forgiveness on offer here should be familiar. Imagine blaming someone for having wronged you. Presumably, you believe they have wronged you. Quite possibly your blame is associated with some desire: for them to suffer, perhaps, or more

particular part which has offended us, and the whole man appears monstrous, without any thing right or human in him.”

¹¹ Imagine the scene midway through a police procedural when the suspect, finally identified and caught, is interrogated. Think of the suspect at the bare metal table and of the solitary lamp harshly illuminating the suspect's face, casting the rest of the scene into the shadows. The director is using perceptual framing to push us to see the suspect as culpable, harsh, and vicious.

¹² As with blame, I am focused on the emotional experiences of forgiveness, recognizing that there are other, related aspects of forgiveness not discussed here.

¹³ For another discussion of the emotional changes involved in forgiveness, see Santiago Amaya (2019). Where I focus on the felt and framing elements of the emotional change involved in forgiveness, Amaya focuses on the motivational and social elements.

¹⁴ Could this third element help to explain the intuitive difference between forgiveness and letting go? Perhaps when we let go we occupy a stance toward the wrongdoer somewhere between the full-throated participatory stance and the completely objective stance. Perhaps we let go by slightly dulling our reactive sensitivity to the wrongdoer. I leave exploring the distinction between forgiving and letting go for another time. See Milam (2018; 2019) as well as Brunning and Milam (Forthcoming) for the importance of thinking about the contrast with letting go in theorizing forgiveness.

amicably, for them to apologize. You might imagine feeling the blame, being agitated and heated. And you might imagine that, when you think of the wrongdoer, you also think of the wrong. Likewise, suppose that you eventually come to forgive this wrongdoer. You still believe they wronged you, and you would say so if asked. But you are no longer moved by the wrong, you no longer feel upset, and you can and do think about the wrongdoer in other lights, focusing on other aspects of your continuing relationship with them. The reactive-attitudes account of forgiveness captures these familiar aspects of forgiveness.

I now turn to the connection between these accounts of blame and forgiveness and our priorities. Emotions are in the business of marking and making significance.¹⁵ Thus, I argue that when we blame, our blame both reflects and constitutes the importance with which we regard that wrongdoing by that wrongdoer. When we understand blame this way, we can understand forgiveness as reflecting a change in our priorities, viz., that the wrongdoing no longer has the same significance for our continuing relationship with the wrongdoer.

We can see the relationship between blame and priorities by looking at blame's constitutive elements. Blame marks the manifestation of the ill will in wrongdoing as both negatively valenced and particularly important. The negative valence is clear enough from the judgment involved. The judgment involves three aspects: that you acted in a certain way (or, perhaps, failed to act in a certain way), that you were responsible for how you acted (or failed to act), and that you should have acted otherwise. The should-have-acted-otherwise is the negative valence.¹⁶

How does blame mark the wrongdoing as distinctively important? We see this in blame's feeling and framing elements. Although the bodily feeling element is sometimes mentioned in discussions of blame only to be set aside, it is worth dwelling on. Our bodies demand our attentions. Pinch yourself hard as you try to read the next few sentences. You will almost certainly struggle to keep your mind from returning to the sharp pain of the pinch. Likewise, the bodily feeling element of blame elevates the objects of our blame in our mental priorities. Your somatic agitation will keep your mind on the wrongdoing, and it will keep you from comfortably thinking of other matters. The framing element similarly has a priority-setting mechanic. We pay attention to certain evidence rather than other evidence, and we favor certain interpretations rather than others. In both of these ways, matters related to the wrongdoer's culpability are

¹⁵ Wallace focuses on our emotions' expression of our values and priorities. He writes that the emotions have "a distinctively expressive significance" (2011, 357). Wallace gives us an example from friendship: the emotional element "transforms the meaning of the things that we do for our friends, turning them into actions that express the kind of care and concern that friends characteristically have for each other" (366). While I accept that our emotions do express our values and priorities, they need not be reduced to communicative phenomena, especially not in any particular instance. Still, I think that Wallace is correct that our emotions transform the meaning of things in our lives. Joy both reflects and makes significance.

¹⁶ This negative valence is especially clear in Sher's belief-desire account of blame. On that account, the desire is that the wrong not have occurred. Similarly, the conative element of blame also reveals the negative evaluation of the wrongdoing, in that we often are motivated to impose costs on wrongdoers to dissuade future wrongs or to repair the harms from wrongs.

prioritized by our blame. To highlight the relevance of this aspect of the feeling and framing elements of blame, I call this the priority setting of blame.¹⁷

Imagine someone who recognizes a wrongdoing but does not take it to be particularly significant. Imagine a bored traffic judge processing traffic tickets, certain that the offenders culpably violated the parking rules. The judge might move the tickets through the administrative process, without caring much about the matter. Although the judge takes the illegal parkers to have acted culpably, that the judge is unmoved shows that the judge does not blame the illegal parkers in the reactive-attitude sense. Or, think of some of the quotidian wrongs that you know happen constantly in your city. If you are not moved to anger, there is a sense in which you do not blame those wrongdoers. Of course, given the diverse forms of blame, there are other senses of 'blame' in which the judge blames the parkers and you blame your neighbors. There are dry evaluative senses of blame and perhaps behavioral senses of blame that can capture what goes on in these cases. But neither you nor the judge resents the wrongdoers, and neither of you is indignant at the wrongdoers. (Of course, going through this exercise might cause you to become indignant, but that changes what is going on.) You and the judge might recognize that these wrongs matter in some sense, but they just do not personally matter for you or for the judge.

By contrast, imagine that the judge, when walking home, finds an intersection dangerous to cross because someone has parked in a crosswalk. This is just the sort of wrong the judge confronts throughout the day. This time, however, the judge is upset. Their blood boils, and they might shout "Get moving!" at the driver. This is blame in the full-throated emotional sense. In this case, the wrongdoing and the wrongdoer's culpability are distinctively important for the judge.¹⁸ The judge's feelings and perceptions of blame mark the distinctive importance of this wrong for the judge, making aspects of the wrong vivid in the judge's mind and persistent in the judge's memory.

There are ready connections between the priority setting of blame and the functions of blame philosophers like to discuss. For instance, making something a priority is important for achieving other aims. If we want to repair the harms of a wrong, we are more likely to do that if we combine a desire to repair those wrongs with an elevation of that aim in our practical priorities. Or consider an interesting connection to the protest model. When we protest, we are not simply asking the audience of the protest to accept the truth of our claim. We are also asking them to take the claim seriously—to prioritize it. Thus, when we socially blame, our blame both reflects our own priorities and calls for others' priorities.

The priority setting of blame provides a nice explanation of forgiveness. Recall that I urged us to think of forgiveness as having three distinct elements: 1) we continue to think that the wrongdoer acted in culpable fashion, 2) we cease to react with resentment, indignation, or the

¹⁷ I am sympathetic to Ruth Chang's (2009; 2013) voluntarism, and so I think we can set our priorities by blaming. We change what we care about when we blame. A more moderate line would be that when we blame, our blame reflects what we already care about. In either case, our blame manifests our priorities.

¹⁸ We should distinguish between the things we reflectively take to be important, the things we reflectively think should be important, and the priorities we in fact enact and embody. The judge might reflectively recognize that there is no significant difference between the parking violations they process at work and the parking violation they confront on their walk. Nonetheless, we can make sense of the idea that the judge's actions reflect a set of priorities which can come apart from the judge's reflective commitments.

like, and 3) we remain open to reacting emotionally to the wrongdoer's other behavior, good or bad. The combination of these three elements marks a shift in priorities. A shift in priorities does not require us to change our judgment regarding the underlying culpability facts. Instead, neither the wrongdoing nor the wrongdoer's culpability loom as large in our lives as they had. More particularly, we forgive by reducing the significance the wrongdoer's culpability for this wrong has for us in our framing of the wrongdoer. This then frees up our attention and energies for other matters, centrally including other aspects of our relationship with the wrongdoer. Thus, when we forgive, we are no longer especially attuned to evidence of the wrongdoer's culpability, and therefore we might be more aware of other aspects of the wrongdoer's relationship with us, both positive and negative.¹⁹

On my account, forgiveness requires a shift in priorities, such that the wrongdoer's culpability is no longer prioritized as distinctively important in the forgiver's continuing engagement with the wrongdoer. However, this shift does not mean that the forgiver can no longer in any sense prioritize the wrongdoing, the harm caused, the wrongdoer's ill will, or the like. For instance, a forgiver might continue to prioritize repair of the harm resulting from the wrong even as they cease the particular prioritizing of blame. And it is often the case that the course of the process of coming to forgive is incredibly transformative for someone, such that the wrongdoing becomes a significant element of their self-understanding. Imagine two friends who are brought closer by the emotionally intense process of amends-making and forgiveness. In such cases, the underlying wrongs remain significant, as the occasion for the harm needing repair in the one case and as part of a longer narrative about emotional bonding in the other. However, the wrongs are not significant in the particular sense involved in blame: the forgivers no longer prioritize the wrongdoings in their engagements with the wrongdoer. The line between the prioritizing of blame and the prioritizing of these other concerns with wrongdoings might not be crisp, but we can distinguish these cases.

As was the case with blame, thinking about forgiveness in terms of attention and priority helps to illuminate other forms of forgiveness. Forgiveness is widely taken to have implications for how the forgiven person should act in light of their wrongdoing.²⁰ For instance, at least in some cases, forgiveness can reduce or extinguish a wrongdoer's obligation to continue to work to make things right. Recall that the protest account of blame works nicely with the priority account of blame: when we blame a wrongdoer, we thereby seek to have the wrongdoer pay special attention to the wrongdoing. Thus, when we express our forgiveness, we can thereby make it more acceptable for the wrongdoer to likewise deprioritize the wrongdoing and to deprioritize making amends. Certainly, this is no ironclad rule, and a wrongdoer who has received forgiveness is not thereby immediately relieved from all obligations to address their wrong. But, plausibly, one basis for addressing the wrong is attenuated, helping to capture the contours of our ordinary experience with forgiveness.

To step back: by being careful to think about the feeling and framing aspects central to emotions, and in particular by seeing how they help to reflect and set our priorities with regard to

¹⁹ The priorities account also helps us to distinguish between perfect forgiveness and imperfect and ambiguous forgiveness, phenomena discussed helpfully by Alice MacLachlan (2009). As those who have fallen short on a New Year's Resolution or read Harry Frankfurt's (1971) two-levels account of freedom know, our lived priorities often fall short of our announced or reflective priorities. We can see the same gap in imperfect and ambiguous forgiveness.

²⁰ For a nice discussion of this thought, see Brandon Warmke (2016).

a wrongdoing, we can make sense of blame as an emotion, we can make sense of a corresponding notion of forgiveness, and we can see how these emotional senses of blame and forgiveness might relate to other, more behavioral aspects of blame and forgiveness. In the next section, I show how recognizing how blame and forgiveness relate to our priorities enables us to better grasp the electivity of forgiveness.

4. The electivity of forgiveness

Now, let me return to the question of whether forgiveness is elective. First, I will give a theoretical account of the connection between priority setting and electivity in forgiveness, one offered by contrast with the skeptics' focus on the functional consequences of blame and forgiveness. Second, I will turn to the skeptics' central case, that of forgiveness in light of an apology, and I will argue that the priority-setting account better captures what goes on in those cases. Third, I will show how the priority-setting account can help us capture cases of unconditional forgiveness. Finally, I will consider the possibility of limits on permissible forgiveness.

At the core of my argument is a claim about the sorts of reasons that might justify phenomena like blame and forgiveness: that an attitude or emotion is fitting is often a sufficient justification for experiencing it. "I cried because the movie was sad" is not an explanation that leaves us wanting. It is important, however, to recognize the full import of the explanation. Tacit in that explanation is that the sad-making elements of the movie were significant to the viewer. Thus, I have good reason to blame for some wrongdoing if both the wrongdoing manifests culpability and that culpability is distinctively significant to me; blaming is a way of constituting and marking that significance. Forgiveness, therefore, is a way of changing the significance of the wrongdoing. We forgive when a wrongdoing no longer has the same significance for us that it once had. Thus, for example, if I care distinctively about your compliance with a certain norm (caring distinctively both about the norm and about your behavior), the stability of that care can explain why I blame you if you transgress the norm. I care about your compliance, and so I pay attention to your compliance, and my blame is the upshot of my stably caring about your compliance. Likewise, if I later find that either my concern with your culpability has diminished or other concerns have eclipsed it, I might forgive, shifting my lived priorities away from the transgression.

Recognizing that forgiveness has to do with our priorities complicates our thinking about the functional consequences of forgiveness. We can readily reject a naïve sense of cost-benefit accounting which attempts to tally up the various effects of our potential choices without considering the importance to us of those choices. Because the balancing of the various potential consequences of blame and of forgiveness depends upon the importance of those consequences, the balancing of the potential effects is not set in the absence of our priorities. But it is also not enough just to think about the effects of blaming, the effects of forgiving, and our concerns about both to determine whether to forgive. We care very much about what has happened to us already, and this is especially true in the case of wrongdoings. Because we often care greatly about what has already happened, our emotional reactions, as ways of manifesting our priorities, might reasonably be grounded in what has already happened. Accordingly, we should avoid the mistake of thinking that the upshots of blame and of forgiveness (whether narrow or broadly picked out) should take center stage in the question of whether to forgive. Even if the appropriateness of our emotions and attitudes should be in some sense sensitive to their functions

and upshots, the reasonableness of our responses is not determined entirely or even predominantly by their functional values.²¹

Thus, we get two reframings of the relationship between whether to forgive and the consequences of forgiving. First, insofar as we consider the consequences of forgiving, we must also be careful to include deliberation about whether and to what extent we care about the various consequences. Second, consequences should not be all of the story, because we should also be careful to include deliberation about whether and to what extent we care about what has already happened. In both of these ways, whether to forgive has intimately to do with our own priorities.

These two reframings show how blame and forgiveness are elective. Blame and forgiveness are elective in that they are not fixed by the external facts—what the relevant consequences would be, what is useful, and the like. Instead, whether or not to forgive has intimately to do with what we do care about and what we should care about.²² What we do care about and what we should care about have to do with who we are as distinct agents, and we have great freedom to be different sorts of agents and live different sorts of lives.²³ Thus, whether we have more reason to blame or more reason to forgive is, in many cases, largely about and up to us, and whether we are permitted to blame and permitted to forgive is also largely about and up to us. This is the electivity of forgiveness.

This is a much more robust notion of electivity than that offered by the skeptics. For instance, this version can capture how forgiveness is experienced from the first-person perspective. Recall that one of the alternative notions of election pointed out that wrongdoers cannot demand forgiveness. Even if that is true, it does not do much to explain what it would be like to deliberate about forgiveness. That you cannot demand forgiveness does not help me to figure out whether I should forgive. Or consider Allais's explanation of the electivity of forgiveness. While Allais and I agree that forgiveness is elective, we disagree as to why. Allais argues that forgiveness is elective because blame reflects our assessment of character and our assessments of character "are judgments that we are never perfectly placed to make, and that are always underdetermined by the evidence" (2008, 60; see also 2013, 271–72). Allais's story requires us to accept that blame is centrally about the assessment of the character of the

²¹ This is not to say that whether we should react with an emotion or attitude has only to do with whether our reactions are fitting; that too would be an impoverished view of these reactions. It makes sense to say "I am sad because the main character died" just as it makes sense to say "I detached myself from my sadness regarding my clients' lives because it was interfering with my work for them." I take no stand here regarding how to balance the two. All I want here is to establish that the first sort of justification, the fittingness justification, is very often sufficient and that it reflects the role that priorities and cares play in the good life.

²² As Christopher Cowley writes, "in making my decision, there is no implication that I am correctly discovering, out there, what ought to be done" (2010, 571). However, Cowley ultimately describes the electivity of forgiveness as "mysterious" (574), whereas I provide a principled reason grounded in priorities. Or consider Hieronymi (2019), who also argues that blame is about us. While she recognizes that it matters to our blaming who is wronged, she does not reach the further conclusion that it is up to us how much that matters.

²³ Here, as before, I am sympathetic with Chang's voluntarism, especially as to the sorts of lives we might lead.

wrongdoer, and it ignores the role of priorities in blame and forgiveness.²⁴ Here, instead, we see immediately why deliberation about forgiveness should include deliberation about what the blamer cares about, what the blamer wants to care about, and what the wrongdoer should care about, in addition to deliberating about the wrongdoer's behavior, the wrongdoer's character, and the potential consequences of the blamer's choice.

This is a deep electivity, having to do with the nature of blame and forgiveness. Election is omnipresent in our lives, because so many of our choices normatively turn on our discretionary priorities to a great degree. This is true from quotidian choices such as whether to have soup or salad for lunch to significant choices such as which career to pursue or whether to have a family. Blame and forgiveness certainly are marked by this sort of election. However, unlike eating soup or becoming a lawyer, blame and forgiveness are essentially prioritizing. As I discussed in Section 3, these reactions are constituted by prioritizing elements. It is not just that whether we should blame or forgive turns on our priorities, but also that when we blame or forgive we set or manifest our priorities. Thus, the electivity of blame and forgiveness has to do with the distinctive natures of these reactions, making the reactions not just ordinarily elective but also essentially elective.²⁵

I now consider conditional and unconditional forgiveness. The paradigmatic case of conditional forgiveness is forgiveness granted after a wrongdoer earnestly apologizes, where the apology is seen as the condition and explanation of forgiveness. One paradigm case of unconditional forgiveness is forgiving an unrepentant wrongdoer, as we see in the case of forgiving a long-dead relative who went to the grave unrepentant for some wrong or in the powerful case of the family members of some of the victims in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church shooting famously forgiving Dylan Roof. If we take forgiveness's being principled and forgiveness's being elective to be in tension, then conditional forgiveness might seem easier to explain for those who favor principle and unconditional forgiveness for those who favor election. Indeed, some of the election skeptics are likewise skeptics of unconditional forgiveness (or seek to reclaim those cases by identifying alternative conditions). However, my account of the electivity of forgiveness illuminates both types of case, as I now argue.

Let me begin with conditional forgiveness. Familiarly, an apology often provides an adequate reason to forgive someone. "Yes, he had no excuse for how he acted, and I was pretty angry with him, but he did apologize, and he seemed quite sincere, and so I have forgiven him"—this is an entirely natural thing to think. An apology can give us evidence that a person who has wronged us now recognizes that we deserve to be treated better, and that recognition is both intrinsically valuable and good evidence that we will be treated better in the future. An apology can also be evidence that the wrongdoer will take steps toward repairing any damage caused, including damage to our valuable relationships. Because an apology can change or

²⁴ For similar objections to Allais, see Stefan Riedener (2022).

²⁵ For more argument regarding the breadth of permission as to our cares and concerns as related to blame and forgiveness, see Riedener (2022). I am quite sympathetic to Riedener's account, although my own account is grounded more firmly in the distinctive nature of the reactions of blame and forgiveness. Riedener argues that we have great discretion generally and that our great discretion extends to blame and forgiveness, but his argument does not make particular reference to the nature of blame and forgiveness. While I agree with Riedener that we have great discretion as to our priorities, my argument then urges us to recognize a particular and intimate connection between blame, forgiveness, and our priorities.

reflect a change in so many things that can matter to us, an apology can give us reason to forgive. If I am angry in significant part because I believe your mistreatment of me shows that you do not respect me, then your apology to me addresses one of my concerns, giving me reason to abate my anger and perhaps also to forgive you.²⁶

However, as might now be clear, these reflections do not force us to conclude that an apology ordinarily mandates forgiveness, for two reasons. First, there is one important basis for anger which an apology does not affect: the significance of the original wrongdoing.²⁷ Even if the wrongdoer apologizes, they do not thereby change the fact of the original wrongdoing. If the victim cared about the wrongdoing itself, then something the victim was angry about remains the case. Second, the weighing of each of the potential aspects of the apology's relevance is largely up to the blamer. For example, even if the apology provides evidence that the wrongdoer rues the wrongdoing, the victim is not obligated to give that matter decisively high priority. Thus, to determine whether an apology gives adequate reason to forgive, the victim ought to think about the things which might matter and about how those things matter to the victim in particular. Because there will always be at least one remaining basis for resentment (the original wrongdoing), and because the weightings of the things that matter are largely (but not entirely) up to the individual, whether to blame will remain largely (but not entirely) up to the victim, even in the face of apology.

There is a second role that apology can play in our coming to forgive, one which is sometimes overlooked. Often enough, an apology changes the external facts bearing on forgiveness or gives us evidence of those changes, such as when an apology reveals to us that the wrongdoer has recognized the error of their ways. In these cases, an apology provides us something like a justificatory reason to forgive. But sometimes an apology is a causal antecedent to forgiveness. An apology can be an invitation to revisit our thinking about the wrongdoing. What we care about is not fixed, and so an apology can give us an occasion to revisit what we care about. This does not have to mean that the apology requires any particular rebalanced results. Rather, an apology can provide us a spark to reflect, and then it is up to us how our reflections turn out. Thus, an apology can lead us to rebalance the relevant stakes, and that rebalancing could lead to our recognizing that we have reason to forgive. We will overlook this ordinary-enough story if we think that the explanations of why we forgive should always be

²⁶ An earnest apology is a paradigmatic reason to forgive. What other conditions can be good grounds for forgiveness? For example, is it possible to forgive someone because it turns out that forgiving is good for the forgiver? Milam has argued that we can distinguish between forgiving and letting go by looking to the reasons why we cease blaming and that therefore some reasons to cease blaming cannot be reasons we forgive (e.g. 2019). I am here agnostic to those conclusions. However, the priorities argument I offer gives us additional resources to distinguish forgiveness from letting go and to identify other ways of moving past blame. We can distinguish these phenomena on their causal mechanisms and reasons (as Milam does) or on the resulting stances (as I suggested in note 14). I am inclined to the latter explanation, whereas Milam is inclined to the former, but I leave those arguments for another time.

²⁷ Of course, the nature of the significance of the original wrongdoing is a matter of philosophical disagreement. On some views, including perhaps Hieronymi's, the original wrongdoing loses much of its distinctive and disvaluable significance once the wrongdoer has apologized. I'm skeptical of those views, even if I suspect that a certain element of the wrongdoing's significance is countervailed by an apology.

explanations of the justifications of our forgiveness, but justifications are only part of the explanatory story.

Turn now to unconditional forgiveness. In paradigmatic cases of unconditional forgiveness, the victim forgives the wrongdoer despite the absence of any apology or amends-making by the wrongdoer. In some cases, there is no apology because there is no continuing interaction between the wrongdoer and the victim. For example, a child might forgive a deceased parent for some wrong committed while the parent was alive, a wrong never discussed by the family. But there are also cases where victims forgive an unrepentant but present wrongdoer, as in the case of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church family members. These cases are often especially powerful and moving.

That unconditional forgiveness could be praiseworthy or even reasonable can be difficult to explain for theorists who think blame and forgiveness are connected by the function of blame.²⁸ On such a function account, blame is normally reasonable where it effectively serves a valuable function, and in cases of apology, the apology shows us that blame is no longer useful in that way. Of course, in some cases, the functionalist might well claim that other changes render blame no longer useful.²⁹ For example, supposing that the wrongdoer has since died, blame has ceased being useful for specific deterrence. Or perhaps we blamed because we wanted to have our say, and having had our say, we are now satisfied. Once we recognize that blame (both emotional and expressed) can serve a wide range of aims, we can see that things might change other than the limited set sometimes considered when we think of forgiveness as conditional. Still, capturing all cases of putatively reasonable unconditional forgiveness in this fashion will be difficult, and as with the rest of the appeals to blame's function, capturing the cases will come at the expense of explaining why forgiveness is elective.

How might we more satisfyingly explain unconditional forgiveness? Our priorities need not remain fixed forever, and insofar as we change priorities, we might thereby change what we have reason to do. This might come from reflection on the sorts of lives we want to live and the sort of people we want to be. Perhaps the experience of blaming teaches us something about how we want to proceed.³⁰ As I noted, questions about our priorities are not entirely answered by matters of justification, and so causal prompts can lead us to revisit our priorities. Insofar as we can revisit our priorities, and insofar as whether to blame or forgive can turn on our priorities, we can explain why we might first have blamed and now forgive even in the absence of something like an apology. We can meaningfully forgive even if nothing of particular significance has changed in the world, other than us.³¹

²⁸ Fricker (2019) offers an account of putatively unconditional forgiveness, which she calls *gifted forgiveness*. This is a *proleptic* sort of forgiveness. According to Fricker, when we forgive the unapologetic, we do so in the hopes that our forgiveness will prompt a change of mind. Thus, her account of unconditional forgiveness still ties forgiveness to changes in the wrongdoer.

²⁹ See, for example, Richard Arneson (2021).

³⁰ This does not mean we have to regard our prior priorities as mistaken. Being the victim of wrongdoing and blaming can both be, in some cases, transformative experiences, in the sense described by L.A. Paul (2015).

³¹ There is a sense of principled forgiveness that does not require any change in priorities, viz. the sense of forgiveness often associated with Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi. We might understand King and Gandhi as being committed to principles that call for priorities other

The priorities account also helps us to understand some of the tension involved in cases of potential forgiveness. Our priorities are often conflicted. For instance, we might care about the particular norm, about our ongoing relationship with the wrongdoer, about being the sort of person who sees the good in people, and about standing up for victims of wrongdoing. When we reflect on whether we want to forgive the wrongdoer, heeding some of our priorities frustrates others of our priorities. If we blame, we pay heed to our concern about the norm and about standing up for victims of wrongdoing, but we might thereby deprioritize our ongoing relationship with the wrongdoer and seeing the good in people (here, the wrongdoer). I think it is a mistake to think that this reflects merely a difficult cost-benefit accounting. Rather, I think what our experience with cases like this shows is the difficulty of living with conflicted priorities.

Does this account go too far? I have argued that the reactive-attitude account of forgiveness can explain why forgiveness is elective. It might seem that this account thereby commits me to concluding that forgiveness is always elective, that we never do wrong in forgiving or in failing to forgive. But surely there are cases where it seems that failing to forgive would be vicious. Imagine that you negligently wrong a coworker, causing them a real but minor inconvenience. You should have paid more attention to what you were doing, and your failure to pay attention created more work for them, work of an annoying sort. Perhaps you forgot to email a delicate client a status update, leading the client to become predictably upset and requiring your coworker to interrupt their work to soothe the client's anxieties. After your coworker becomes rightly upset with you, you apologize, promise to do better, and perhaps even take on additional tasks to make amends. If, after several weeks, your coworker continues to resent you, aren't they doing wrong? Shouldn't they forgive you, given the minor degree of disruption and your earnest and substantive efforts to apologize and do better going forward?

Milam seizes on cases like this as part of his argument against electivity.³² He argues that forgiveness is just like anything else. We consider the reasons we have to forgive, we can consider the reasons we have against forgiving, and at least in some cases, the reasons to forgive can obligate us to forgive. I suspect that this is right; however, it is not explanatory. It does not tell us what sorts of reasons could obligate us to forgive, and it does not explain how forgiveness's election interacts with the possibility that it might be obligatory. Moreover, while it is easy enough to imagine reasons which would obligate us to treat someone in a certain fashion, it is less clear what sorts of reasons we would have to emotionally regard someone in a certain

than those of blame. If that is right, then King and Gandhi forgive by rejecting blame, not by overcoming it.

³² Milam (2018, 574–75) provides a number of rich cases of the apparent limits on appropriate blame and appropriate forgiveness. He also argues that these cases show that forgiveness is not essentially elective, assuming that essentially elective entails universally elective. Because I take the distinctive electiveness of blame and forgiveness to have to do with their essences and because it is possible for an essence to be masked or overcome, I reject that assumption. That said, we might profitably resolve this aspect of the disagreement between myself and Milam by recognizing both that forgiveness is not universally elective and that forgiveness's electivity has to do with the sort of thing that it is, avoiding any vocabulary confusion.

fashion (beyond the indirect reasons via the connections between our emotions and how we behave).³³

Here I sketch an argument for the limits on election which is consistent with the priorities account of forgiveness. There are limits on the priorities we can rightly have.³⁴ A friend owes concern to a friend, a parent to a child, and the like. Although these are not precise obligations, such that a friend owes some particular degree of concern to a friend, it is possible to run afoul of them. A friend who does not care any more about the thriving of their friend than the thriving of a stranger is, in that regard at least, failing to be a good friend. There is both flexibility and constraint on the degree of concern a friend can have for another friend. We should also expect limits on our priorities from sources other than our personal relationships. Our social and political context and history can plausibly give rise to normative constraints on the priorities we should have, for instance. If one group in society has long been mistreated or overlooked, that may give us reason to give the welfare of the members of that group special priority.

These obligations of priority can explain both obligatory and forbidden forgiveness. In the example case, insofar as the coworker continues to blame you, their blame reveals that they are much more concerned with having been victimized by the minor wrong than they are with your ongoing relationship, with the rest of your behavior as a coworker, and the like. That can be the basis of the call for forgiveness: “It is okay for you to care about having been wronged, and I am not entitled to an especially high degree of care, but your ongoing blame shows me that you have greatly deprioritized me as a continuing agent and our relationship—and that I object to. If you even cared minimally about those things, you would forgive me.” Given that there are limits on our priorities, failing to forgive can sometimes reflect such an inappropriate set of priorities, and thus there can be cases where failing to forgive is inappropriate. This nicely captures what we are upset about when we call for forgiveness. We want the other to care adequately about us as agents and about our continuing relationships.

These obligations of priority might also explain cases where it is inappropriate to forgive. Here, consider cases of third-party forgiveness as a central example, although there are surely other cases of inappropriate forgiveness.³⁵ Many philosophers have tried to figure out whether

³³ Moreover, an obligation to cease blaming may not entail an obligation to forgive. As Milam argues throughout his work, letting go and forgiving are distinct ways of ceasing to blame, and so perhaps there is only an obligation to cease to blame, with either forgiving or letting go filling that sufficient to satisfy that obligation. I set aside this possibility here.

³⁴ Here is where voluntarism looms. My sense is that we have great but not unlimited leeway as to our priorities. A strong voluntarist would presumably agree and might go further. But a skeptic of voluntarism might claim that our priorities are much more constrained. That would suggest that the set of truly elective cases is much smaller than I imagine. Either way, in explaining the limits of election, we should look at the limits of priority, and not just at whether the wrongdoer was unrepentant or the like.

This is also a second place where my argument for election diverges from Allais’s argument. Allais grounds election in the limits of epistemic constraint rather than in the freedom we have regarding our priorities. Allais then treats cases where refusing to forgive would be vicious as exceptions (2013, 649–50). Even if I agree that they are exceptional, I have a more straightforward argument, where the limits on election track the limits on our priorities.

³⁵ It might be especially profitable to investigate and challenge how social norms yield putative and real demands to forgive. Consider for example MacLachlan’s (2009) skepticism of the way

and why third parties might be obligated to heed the victim's prerogative to forgive.³⁶ I suspect that my arguments here can provide a promising explanation of our discomfort with forgiving as a third party if the victim has not forgiven, an explanation which is grounded in a wider argument regarding who is entitled to our attentions and concerns. I leave the full development of this argument for another time. For now, I contend that both the election of forgiveness and the limits of that election have essentially to do with how blame and forgiveness are grounded in our priorities.

5. Conclusion

Let me review: I have argued that forgiveness is elective such that in most cases, whether we forgive is a matter of our priorities and values and so is up to us. This conclusion was grounded in the nature of blame as a reactive attitude and in the nature of forgiveness as a distinctive way of ceasing to blame. I have challenged arguments regarding the permissibility of forgiveness focused on the function of blame. Those arguments are too narrow regarding the effects of blame, and they fail to appreciate the significance of emotional reactions more generally. Instead, when we blame, we are especially sensitive to the wrongdoing and the wrongdoer's culpability, and so those things are priorities for us, whereas when we forgive, we free up our energies and attentions for other matters, including potentially a happier view of the wrongdoer. Blaming and forgiving are both matters of priority. Thus, while I agree with most of my dialectical opponents that forgiveness is sometimes permissible and sometimes obligatory, my own diagnosis of the electiveness of forgiveness is distinctive and is grounded in the very nature of blame and forgiveness.

My arguments here have implications beyond the immediate discussion of the election of forgiveness. First, I hope to expand the focus in discussions of blame, blameworthiness, and forgiveness from culpability and the causal effects of blame to also include the values and priorities of the blamer. That the wrongdoer is culpable and that blame might be useful are at best parts of the story of why we should blame. We also should reflect on whether we do care and on whether we should care. That look inward is sometimes missing in arguments regarding blame, culpability, and forgiveness.

Second, thinking carefully about blame and forgiveness in terms of the priorities involved invites us to see a richer set of stances we could take. Perhaps the division between blame and forgiveness, or between blame, forgiveness, and letting go, is insufficiently fine to make proper sense of the full range of moral possibilities. Perhaps there is a distinctive version of forgiveness which focuses on resuming previously existing relationship, or perhaps there is a distinctive version of forgiveness that focuses on moving forward in one's own life, relieved of the emotional burdens of continuing to blame. I suspect that all instances of forgiveness share some basic features but also that we can identify different species within the genus by way of the different contours of resulting priorities. Thinking of forgiveness only as ceasing to blame has occluded these further inquiries, made visible by my arguments here.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

that women are often pressured to forgive. That pressure to forgive can be explained by noticing how women are pushed to have certain priorities—and noticing that push allows us to better determine whether that social arrangement is just or not.

³⁶ See, for example, Margaret Urban Walker (2013), MacLachlan (2017), and Rosalind Chaplin (2019).

I am deeply appreciative for the comments on this paper I received at meetings of the Canadian Society for the Study of Practical Ethics, the Canadian Philosophical Association, and the Southern Society for Philosophy & Psychology as well as for comments from the faculty and students of Denison University. I also thank Amy Berg, Brian Berkey, Justin Bernstein, Rosalind Chaplin, Marc Guagenti, Per-Erik Milam, Alex Sarch, Alec Walen, and two anonymous referees from this journal for helpful comments on prior drafts.

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