

Moral Grounds for Forgiveness^{*}

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that forgiveness is a morally appropriate response only when it is grounded in the wrongdoer's demonstration of genuine remorse, their offer of a sincere apology, and, where appropriate, acts of recompense and behavioral change. I then respond to John Kleinig's suggestion (in his paper "Forgiveness and Unconditionality") that when an apology is not forthcoming, there are at least three additional grounds that, when motivated by virtues such as love and compassion, could nevertheless render "unconditional forgiveness" a morally laudable option. I argue that such grounds could indeed constitute or result in laudable responses to wrongdoing, but only if they are not conceived of or described in terms of forgiveness.

1. FORGIVENESS AS CONDITIONAL¹

1.1 Moral Breach

Forgiveness is a response to a situation in which our "moral equality" has not been recognized or acknowledged. But what is moral equality? It cannot mean that we are equivalent with respect to our moral behavior or character. No one is equal in that sense. Rather, we are moral equals insofar as we have the same inherent worth or intrinsic value as human beings. No human being has more inherent worth than any other. This kind of worth cannot, by definition, be removed, diminished, or increased—no matter what we do, or what is done to us.²

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¹ For a more extended account of conditional forgiveness, upon which this paper is largely based, see Derek R. Brookes, *Beyond Harm: Toward Justice, Healing and Peace* (Sydney, Australia: Relational Approaches, 2019).

² I do not have space here to defend this egalitarian view of human worth. But for those who are dubious, it may be worth considering the repercussions if it is rejected. This view underpins universally held principles of fairness and reciprocity. "[T]he equality of human worth [is the] justification, or ground, of equal human rights," writes Gregory Vlastos, "Human Worth, Merit, and Equality," in *Moral Concepts*, ed. Joel Feinberg (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 149. "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights," *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, 1948, Article 1.

While our moral equality is universal and impregnable, it can nevertheless be unrecognized, ignored, denied, or challenged. A useful term for capturing this range of attitudes and behaviors is “contempt.” Conversely, when we show respect for someone, we are acknowledging, honoring, or upholding their moral equality as a fellow human being. Likewise, when we speak of “self-respect,” “self-worth” or “dignity” in this context, we are referring to the way in which we recognize and uphold our own moral equality.³

How do we show contempt for someone? Suppose that I do something that causes you harm, deliberately, or at least negligently. However, I do not have adequate justification for my actions, such as I would if I had acted in self-defense. This may cause you physical or material harm, but it is also a moral wound. A flooded home, a crushed limb or even the death of a loved one can take place without anyone having been wronged. They could have occurred due to a genuine accident or an unforeseen natural disaster. What makes an action “morally wrong,” then, is not so much the surface outcome, but rather the underlying or implicit message that it conveys. If we steal from someone, or lie to them, or betray them, we are effectively communicating something about how we see them. We are saying: “You are inferior to me,” “I can use you for my purposes,” “You are an object, not a human being,” and so on. It is on account of these implicit messages that such actions fail to recognize or honor our moral equality.

This is not merely an abstract philosophical challenge. We are social creatures, and so we instinctively see ourselves through the eyes of those around us. When our self-respect is threatened in this way, we will almost invariably experience shame or humiliation. These are the most excruciating emotions it is possible for us to have. Moreover, the threat to our moral equality can be a matter of life or death. Someone who is not regarded as a moral equal is far more likely to be subjected to the horrors of genocide, murder, slavery, sexual abuse, racism, and so on. That is why being treated with contempt feels threatening in a way that is not dissimilar to suffering physical violence.⁴

³ To be clear, one can show contempt or respect for someone’s achievements, behavior, or other personal qualities they have acquired. But I will be using these terms here only in relation to how we respond to a person’s inherent worth.

⁴ “Most of us tend to care about what others (at least *some* others, some significant group whose good opinion we value) think about us—how much they think we matter. Our self-respect is *social* in at least this sense, and it is simply part of the human condition that we are weak and vulnerable in these ways. And thus when we are treated with contempt by others it attacks us in profound and deeply threatening ways.” Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment,” in Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 25.

Our moral equality thus creates the expectation that others will respect us, as we will respect them. When two or more people are meeting this expectation in how they treat each other, then we might say that they are maintaining their “moral relations.” When someone treats another person with contempt, they have thereby broken or ruptured these relations, and so we can call this a “moral breach.”

1.2 *Resentment*

When we have been wronged, there are two very different responses we can make. First, we can go on the “offensive.” This strategy can manifest itself in feelings of hatred, vindictiveness, vengefulness, and in acts of (or at least plans for) revenge. Why would this approach work for us? When we respond in hatred toward the person responsible, we are not merely re-asserting our own moral equality. Instead, we are denying the equality of the person responsible. We are not wanting the scales of worth to be re-balanced, we are wanting them to tip in our favor. But how does this eliminate the threat to our self-respect? If the person responsible doesn’t count, then neither does their threat. When an ant bites us, we do not feel disrespected. Likewise, if those who harm us are less than fully human—if they are mere “monsters,” “animals,” “evil,” “vermin,” “deranged,” or “filth”—then their opinion of our worth is not something we need to take seriously.

We do not need to go on the offensive, however. There is an alternative, which we might call a “defensive” response. This involves thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that serve as a buttress against the messages of contempt. The chief defensive emotion is resentment, otherwise known as “indignation,” “righteous anger,” and the like. But this emotion must be carefully distinguished from hatred or vindictiveness. Resentment falls into a radically different moral category. Unlike hatred, it does not affirm my humanity by denigrating yours. Instead, it enables me to resist your message of contempt by placing a “protective shield” around my own self-respect without needing to challenge or threaten yours.

There are many reasons to think that this approach is more effective, less damaging, and far more “laudable” than the offensive strategy.⁵ But it has its limitations. A defensive response cannot eliminate the threat that is posed by

⁵ I shall follow John Kleinig in using the term “laudable” to “cover a range of normative characterizations – from praiseworthy to obligatory to supererogatory to being the performance an imperfect duty”. John Kleinig, “Forgiveness and Unconditionality,” *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35 (1): 83-96 (2021) doi.org/10.5840/ijap2021127153: 6. [All page references to this paper refer to the online first version].

the person responsible. It only puts up a protective barrier. As long as the person responsible stands by their original message, the person harmed will need to continue defending themselves against it. Each time they remember the wrongdoing, their defensive thoughts and emotions will need to re-assert themselves in order to preserve their self-respect.

1.3 Apology

Suppose a person harmed has taken the defensive strategy. It can be exhausting and debilitating to maintain such a stance. And yet, their self-respect is at stake. So, what are their options? They could give in to the threat and accept that they are inferior to the person responsible. This strategy is not as uncommon as one might think, but the cost of doing so is extremely high. It can result in debilitating false guilt, self-harming behaviors, and being re-victimized. There is however one situation that will enable them to withdraw their defensive response in a way that will preserve their self-respect. That situation, however, is not entirely up to the person harmed. It requires a change of heart within the person responsible.

To explain: If I have committed a wrong against you, I cannot undo the past. What I have done cannot be undone. But what I can do is renounce the contempt that my action conveyed. I can tell you that I no longer stand by this message. I do not now hold you in contempt, but fully respect your moral equality as a fellow human being. I can say that I regret ever having made it, and that I am ashamed of the person who I was when I communicated it. I can let you know that I am no longer that person, and that, if appropriate, I will do my best to repair or compensate for any physical or material harm I have caused you. I can also promise not to engage in such behavior again, so far as that is within my power.

These are precisely the kind of messages that are conveyed when someone offers a sincere expression of remorse and a genuine apology. It is easy to see the effect that this could have on a person harmed. When a person responsible disavows their message of contempt in this way, then, if the person harmed is convinced they are sincere, they will no longer feel that their self-respect is under threat. The moral breach has been repaired. The shame and humiliation they were feeling no longer has a sustaining cause. As a consequence, they are likely to experience a surge of relief and a restored sense of safety. Since they do not need to continue protecting themselves, their resentment toward the wrongdoer will naturally fall away.

1.4 *Forgiveness*

This brings us to the nature of forgiveness. Here it is crucial that we make a distinction between the *experience* of forgiveness and the *offer* of forgiveness.⁶ I will take each in turn. We experience forgiveness when the threat to our self-respect has been withdrawn by the person responsible, and the resentment that was providing us with protection subsides as a consequence. In other words, the experience of forgiveness is not something we can just decide to undergo. It is an emotional response to a changed set of circumstances.⁷ We cannot stop ourselves from feeling resentment by sheer effort or willpower. Being emotionally susceptible to the contempt shown toward us by others is part of what makes us human. We cannot eradicate this feature without doing serious damage to ourselves. Unless we are psychopaths, we will always be vulnerable to the person who has wronged us. It is in this sense that those who refuse to apologize for their wrongs against us continue to harm us. The memory of what they did is likely to re-surface from time to time. And when it does, we will almost invariably find ourselves experiencing varying degrees of resentment or indignation.

Nor is this a morally questionable response. If someone failed to experience resentment or indignation at (or around) the time of the offense, we would have good reason to suspect that they lack self-respect. But why should the passage of time make a difference? If the messages of contempt conveyed in the original act have not been withdrawn by the wrongdoer, then they remain. Indeed, the failure of the person responsible to admit their fault and denounce what they have done only compounds and amplifies the original disrespect.⁸ Those who have been harmed will have even more reason to maintain their defensive emotions against the threat posed by the wrongdoer. It is therefore a mistake to censure or pathologize those who continue to ex-

⁶ There may not be a significant time gap between experiencing and offering forgiveness, which may be one reason why the two are often confused.

⁷ The following study, for instance, found that the wrongdoer's response was the single largest predictor of forgiveness, and their apology was highly correlated with forgiveness: Julie J. Exline, Ann M. Yali and Marci Lobel, *Correlates of Forgiveness*. Unpublished Data (Stony Brook: State University of New York, 1997).

⁸ Cf. "[W]ronging someone and continuing to relate to her exactly as before the offense . . . constitutes acting toward the victim as though it is acceptable to have wronged her," writes Jeffery S. Helmreich, "The Apologetic Stance," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 43, no.2 (2015): 89; "If a society pays no heed to brutalities and offenses suffered by many of its citizens, it further damages these vulnerable people" Trudy Govier and Wilhelm Verwoerd, "The Promise and Pitfalls of Apology," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33, no.1 (2002): 71.

perience resentment in cases where the person responsible has not yet apologized.⁹

The offer of forgiveness, by contrast, is a communicative act. What would we be attempting to convey by making such an offer to a person who has harmed us? It is not simply a matter of reporting to them that we no longer feel resentment toward them. That emotional change could, after all, be accomplished by condoning their message of contempt, or by denying their moral standing, or by taking medication. None of these involve forgiveness. Thus, an offer of forgiveness must align with what it was that brought about our experience of forgiveness. It must explain, in effect, that the reason we no longer feel resentment toward them is due to the fact that they have, in offering a sincere apology, renounced the message of contempt conveyed by their wrongdoing. It is as a consequence of this, that we no longer hold the wrongdoing against them. So far as we are concerned, the moral breach has been repaired, and our moral relations have now been restored.¹⁰

This communicative act is clearly within our power, and so it will require a separate moral justification. For instance, it is deceptive, or at least highly misleading, to offer something that we do not have to give. So, we need to have *experienced* forgiveness before we can offer it. But even then, the offer will not achieve its communicative intention unless it is done for the right reasons. Suppose that I have been persuaded that your apology is sincere. As a result, I have experienced the liberation of forgiveness, but I have not told you this. I know, from my own life experience, how painful it would be to offer an apology without receiving forgiveness in return. So, out of compassion, I decide to give you my assurance that I have forgiven you.¹¹

⁹ Cf. “[W]e should respect, not chastise the person who preserves resentment when moral repair fails to be achieved Resentment can . . . be the reflex expression of an honorable emotional response to inexcusable evil or wrongs and legitimate moral expectations that have not been properly dealt with,” writes Jeffrie G. Murphy, “Foreword,” in Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment’s Virtue: Jean Amery and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 16–17.

¹⁰ The words “I forgive you” can often betray an underlying attitude of self-congratulation or condescension. In such cases, it is a near certainty that these words are not conveying a genuine offer of forgiveness. Hence, explicit offers of forgiveness need to be treated with some degree of caution, and perhaps avoided altogether. It is, in any case, far more effective to offer forgiveness by means of nonverbal expressions—that is, in *how* we talk to and treat the person we have forgiven.

¹¹ Cf. “Each of us, if honest, . . . need and desire forgiveness and would not want to live in a world where the disposition to forgive was not present and regarded as a healing and restoring virtue,” writes Murphy (1988), 32. “Apologies motivate forgiveness through the feelings of empathy and compassion they evoke in a victim for the difficulty that an offender is thought to have at offering an apology” Richard G. Cowden, Everett L. Worthington, Catherine Jakins and Shaun Joynt, “Do Congruent Apologies Facilitate Forgiveness?” *South African Journal of Psychology* 49, no.3 (2018): 3.

But suppose instead that I become overly distressed by your desperation to hear that I have forgiven you. In such a case, I may not be able to focus on what *you* are feeling. So, I offer you forgiveness *merely* to relieve my own distress, rather than as a genuine attempt to reassure you. Any such offer is likely to come across as superficial, insincere, or even condescending (e.g., “I guess I should put you out of your misery and accept your apology.”) You will hear the lack of authenticity and remain unconvinced, if not wounded by the exchange.

Again, there may be prudential reasons to delay the offer of forgiveness, even if we have already experienced it. An apology is only a promissory note—a “down-payment,” as it were. So if we remain in contact with the person responsible, we are entitled to be “on guard” for as long as it takes them to demonstrate that they really have changed their attitudes and behavior. Thus, it might be that the offer of forgiveness is judiciously parceled out over time, in largely unspoken gestures of increasing trust, rather than all at once.

There is another important reason for not offering forgiveness prior to an apology, one that is more germane to the present discussion. Suppose that we have yet to hear a sincere apology from the person who has wronged us, and so we have not yet experienced forgiveness. Nevertheless, we go ahead and offer them “forgiveness.” What would this convey to the person responsible? It would surely communicate to them that we do not care about their *ongoing* contempt for us: it does not matter to us if they do not see us as their moral equal. And what would be the consequences of such a message? For one thing, it would open us up to being re-victimized. The person responsible would now have our permission to *continue* treating us as inferior, or as a mere means to their ends. But there is also a crucial moral issue at stake: If we were to offer forgiveness in the absence of a sincere apology, this would reflect a disregard for our own inherent worth. It would demonstrate a lack of self-respect.

2. A CRITIQUE OF UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

2.1 *Three Grounds for Unconditional Forgiveness*

We can now turn to Kleinig’s defense of unconditional forgiveness. First, he argues that it springs from or is an instance of several virtues, including “generosity, charity or love, gifting, and acts of personal grace”. However, an otherwise virtuous act, such as generosity, is only “morally laudable” under

certain conditions. If it is “arbitrary” or “indiscriminate”¹² or not otherwise “moderated by . . . morally-relevant constraints,” then it will lose its “laudability.” Examples include “money thrown haphazardly into a busy street” or “provid[ing] a benefit that it was not one’s to provide.”¹³ Hence, he offers three grounds that are each intended to provide sufficient moral justification for unconditional forgiveness, and thereby ensure that it is not arbitrary or indiscriminate.

Suffering

The first ground presented is a situation in which the person responsible has evidently “suffered enough.” Her wrongdoing did not work out to her “advantage – quite the opposite.” In such a scenario, it would, Kleinig argues, seem “heartless and excessive” to continue to feel resentment toward them. If the person harmed has a “generous and beneficent spirit,” then they will instead “choose to abort [their] resentment.”¹⁴

To assess this ground, we need to be clear about why the wrongdoer is suffering. There are two options. First, it might be that their wrongdoing has damaged their overall well-being. For instance, they might have become homeless or destitute; or they may have been given an especially cruel or disproportionate sentence, such as life imprisonment, years in solitary isolation, or the death penalty. There will be many victims for whom such an outcome would not be unwelcome, but it is hard to see how this could be a laudable response. What, then, is the alternative?

Kleinig’s suggestion is that we draw upon our reservoir of generosity and beneficence, forswear our resentment, and offer forgiveness to the one who has wronged us. But we need to remember that, in such a situation, the person responsible has not accepted that they have done anything wrong, let alone shown any remorse or made an apology. Hence, so far as they are concerned, they do not need our forgiveness. They might even find our gesture presumptuous, self-righteous, manipulative, or even condescending. But then it follows that, from their perspective, their suffering is not due to our lack of forgiveness, nor will it be alleviated by it. Moreover, given the nature of their suffering, they would be right. Our forgiveness will not give them a home or alter their sentence. Offering them forgiveness in this situation would be like giving a glass of water to someone who just needs some money to pay their

¹² Kleinig, “Forgiveness,” 7.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6, 7.

bills. The offer may spring from a generous spirit, but it would be “indiscriminate,” and so lacking in “laudability.”¹⁵

Suppose, then, that the suffering in question is related to how the person responsible feels about their wrongdoing. They may be consumed with piercing shame, self-recrimination, and a guilty conscience. The offer of forgiveness could potentially alleviate this kind of suffering. Yet a wrongdoer could not be suffering in *this* way unless they had accepted that they did something wrong and were remorseful for having done so. Indeed, their suffering just *is* the pains of remorse. But then, if forgiveness is offered to alleviate this kind of suffering, it shares the same moral ground as conditional forgiveness: it is offered on account of the demonstrative presence of remorse.

Moreover, one could argue that, if a wrongdoer feels no remorse for what they have done, then they are evidently not, in the morally relevant respect, “suffering enough.” To offer forgiveness to a wrongdoer in such a condition could well prevent them from going through the painful but necessary process of moral self-examination and empathetic reflection on the harm they have caused. They will have been pre-emptively let off the moral hook, and it is hard to see how that could be to their benefit. Hence, if the person harmed has a beneficent spirit, then, in such a circumstance, they would not offer forgiveness.

Moral solidarity

Suppose I put myself in the shoes of the person who has wronged me. I soon begin to realize that, if I had been in their circumstances—with their upbringing, education, financial resources, life-opportunities, and so on—I might well have become the kind of person who would have committed the same wrong that they have done to me. But in that case, it is largely a matter of “moral luck” that I am not in their current situation. Kleinig takes it that such considerations can provide adequate moral justification for offering forgiveness to a wrongdoer, even if they show no remorse. In light of our moral solidarity with those who have wronged us, continuing to resent them is, as Kleinig puts it, “likely to evidence a superiority and condescension to which we have no moral right.”¹⁶

¹⁵ As Kleinig says: “There is nothing particularly praiseworthy about the person who drives through the streets, throwing \$10 bills to any who desire to pick them up, an indiscriminate expression of bounty – without regard to need or benefit.” *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 8. Kleinig gives an important exception here: “Not that every wrong should be eligible for forgiveness or that our desire to forgive should always be overriding. Some wrongdoings may be too traumatizing,” *Ibid.*, 8.

However, there are additional insights afforded by a sense of moral solidarity. Suppose I put myself in the shoes of the person responsible for causing me harm. If I were them, I would want the opportunity to initiate the work of moral repair as a matter of my own dignity and self-respect. I would not want to be pre-empted by an offer of forgiveness before I had undertaken the necessary moral changes within myself. I would want the time and the opportunity needed to experience genuine remorse. I would also want the person I hurt to be open to hearing my remorse as genuine, rather than slam the door in my face. But then, what I am hoping for here is not forgiveness, but rather a willingness to forgive.¹⁷

I would also hope that the person I had harmed would eventually forgive me, but not merely out of moral solidarity. Otherwise, it would feel as if they were making an excuse for my behavior, rather than taking my choices seriously. By grounding their “forgiveness” in matters that I could have done nothing about or that are common to everyone, they would not be respecting my moral agency. I would want them to offer forgiveness because of my decision to take responsibility for my actions. I would want them to recognize the sincerity of my remorse, and for that to be the reason why they are able to let go of their resentment and offer their forgiveness. In sum, the insights of moral solidarity might encourage a person harmed to be more willing to forgive, but they are also likely to convince them not to offer unconditional forgiveness.

Relationships

The third ground offered for unconditional forgiveness consists of the “particularistic ties that we have with others.”¹⁸ To use the example that Kleinig gives, suppose that a young man has raped and murdered his girlfriend. In doing so, he has not only wronged his girlfriend, but also his parents. Their hopes for him have been betrayed, and this has brought about a “familial rupture.” One can imagine how, for some parents, their intense shame might drive them to disown or denigrate their son, perhaps even wishing he had never been born. But a more “laudable” option, it is argued,

¹⁷ Empirical studies tend to confirm that having a general willingness to forgive (“dispositional or trait forgiveness”) does not mean that we do not need a good reason to forgive in any particular instance (“state forgiveness”). “A recent meta-analysis found a moderate association between dispositional forgiveness and state forgiveness ($r = .30$), suggesting a person’s general tendency to forgive may not always correspond with forgiveness for a specific offence Specifically, outcomes of forgiveness are moderated by contextual factors (e.g., offence characteristics), including the provision or receipt of an apology . . . ,” Cowden, et al., “Do Congruent Apologies”, 3.

¹⁸ Kleinig, “Forgiveness,” 9.

would be to remind themselves that “he will always be their son.” So, in view of these “particularistic ties,” they “reach out in love,” “visit” him in prison, “do what they can to be responsive to his concerns,” with the intention of providing a “moral path to suturing the familial rupture his acts have brought about.”¹⁹

For this to work as an illustration of unconditional forgiveness, we need to assume that the son has not acknowledged the harm that he has caused his parents or shown any remorse over how he has betrayed their hopes. So far as he is concerned, he is not responsible for the pain they are feeling, or he simply doesn’t care. But in that case, the son has shown utter disrespect for his parents.²⁰ If they were to offer him “forgiveness” under these circumstances, then this would fall short of being laudable for the same reasons given above. The parents would not be taking their son’s disrespect for them with the moral seriousness that it deserves.

Moreover, the withholding of forgiveness could be rightly motivated by their parental love and concern for his moral character and long-term well-being. Indeed, the love and compassion shown by the parents may, in the end, enable their son to face his shame, acknowledge the harm he has caused them, and thus convey to them his sincere remorse. In other words, their “particularistic ties” would, in this scenario, lead the parents to refrain from offering unconditional forgiveness.

2.2 *An Alternative to Forgiveness*

I have argued that the only way that we can cease to feel resentment is if we are persuaded that the threat posed by the person responsible has been removed. I have also suggested that only a sincere apology can provide us with sufficient reason to be persuaded of this. However, could there be other considerations that might persuade me that the threat is not as potent as I had thought? If there were, then, by focusing on these considerations, I could presumably minimize or diminish the intensity of my resentment—even as the threat remains in place. In other words, if there were such considerations, this could be a way of making sure that my feelings of resentment no longer dominate my emotional life or darken my entire outlook. When an apology is

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁰ For this example to count as “unconditional forgiveness,” we also need to assume that the gestures of love and kindness shown by the parents will have, at some point, included an offer of forgiveness—and not that these gestures are merely laying the preparatory ground for some later offer of forgiveness that can be made in response to the son’s change of heart.

not forthcoming, and so forgiveness is not an option, this could be a viable alternative.

But what kind of considerations would achieve this end? And how could they be compatible with my self-respect? For instance, one way that I could downgrade the potency of the threat would be to accept that I deserved to be treated with contempt. Another option would be to deny the humanity or moral standing of the person responsible. But as we have seen, neither of these are laudable options. So, are there other considerations that would work?

As it happens, the three considerations put forward in Kleinig's paper can serve precisely this purpose. For instance, if we focus our attention on the (non-remorse-related) suffering of the person responsible and put ourselves in their shoes, we will tend to experience compassion. And it is virtually impossible to experience full-scale resentment against someone whilst we are, at the same time, feeling empathetic concern for their well-being. This is not yet forgiveness. Their threat remains in place. Nevertheless, in experiencing compassion for the person responsible, we are not thereby accepting their message of contempt or denying their moral equality—quite the opposite. A similar story can be told for the other two considerations that Kleinig provides.

Why would this strategy have been thought of or described as “forgiveness”? One explanation could be that the emotional effect is so similar. As we focus on the relevant considerations, the intensity of the resentment we were feeling toward the person responsible will, like the experience of forgiveness, tend to decrease significantly. But there is a difference. Reflecting on these considerations cannot remove the threat entirely. Only a sincere apology can produce that outcome. Hence, there will be moments when we lose our focus, or when, for whatever reason, we are not feeling quite so generous, or compassionate, or charitable. Then, when something reminds us of the threat, our feelings of resentment will flare up again to protect us. So, this strategy is clearly second best in comparison to forgiveness. But it can nevertheless provide us with significant emotional relief, it is largely within our control, and it is a laudable response that upholds our self-respect.

2.3 Declarations of Unconditional Forgiveness

I have argued that the strategy Kleinig is defending is a morally warranted and laudable response to unrepentant wrongdoers, so long as we refrain from conceiving of it or describing it as “forgiveness.” But how might this relate to the Roof case, which is the central example of unconditional forgiveness

employed in Kleinig's paper? Is it possible to explain the offer of "forgiveness" that was made to Roof in a way that is compatible with the forgoing account?

Rather than speculate about the actual motives or communicative intentions of those involved, what follows is purely hypothetical, and thus may or may not reflect what happened in this particular situation.

A public offer of forgiveness not only communicates something to the wrongdoer. It is also implicitly aimed at those who might overhear the offer. Those who presented the offer of "forgiveness" to Roof were members of a Christian-oriented racial minority that has suffered a long history of violence, discrimination, hatred, and persecution. They may have had good reason to believe that some members of their community would be inclined to react with violence in response to this especially cruel atrocity.²¹ Thus, we might assume that the offer was not dissimilar to Rodney King's plea: "Can we all just get along?" But the language of "forgiveness" suggests more than an appeal for calm. In this context, it could only have made sense from within a theological framework. For members of their community, the word "forgiveness" would have evoked a range of associated feelings and thoughts. These would have included compassion, grace, humility, courage, charity, a sense of moral solidarity, and, above all, the injunction to "love your enemies."

This is not to suggest that the church members who made this offer were only doing so with this public appeal in mind. They were not speaking at a protest march. The offer was deeply personal and directed toward Roof himself in the courtroom. It represented their own authentic journey and their decision to take a different moral path.

In sum, their offer of unconditional "forgiveness" need not be understood as making the claim that the moral breach with Roof had somehow been repaired, that his failure to acknowledge their humanity did not matter, or that his "moral slate had been wiped clean." It could instead have been intended as a way of communicating to Roof that they were going to stand up against his messages of contempt, not with hatred or violence but with the countervailing force of love and compassion. And because it was made in a public space, it could also have been intended as a plea for members of their community to respond in a similar way.²²

²¹ See, e.g.: "I have seen other cities explode under the weight of a single murder. Now we have nine dead bodies in a church. There's going to be a response." From "Emanuel (2019) | Official Trailer", accessed Nov 25, 2021, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBFSaiyl2bU&t=71s>.

²² This seems to have been the effect. Singleton, whose mother was murdered by Roof, was reported to have found "solace in the fact that the community reacted in a way opposite of what Roof was expecting but that brought them together." Rasha Ali, "Five years After Charleston

On this hypothetical reading, it would be hard not to see the public offer of unconditional “forgiveness” as an exceptionally laudable response. Nevertheless, there is a significant risk attached to the use of such language. Many will not hear the intended connotations, and so will take it literally. This danger is made particularly evident in Roxane Gay’s *New York Times* article. She took the church members’ response at face value: they really were offering forgiveness to a white supremacist who murdered nine African Americans, and then subsequently showed no sign of remorse. Understandably, she saw this to be yet another instance in which African Americans felt they had little option but to submit quietly to the unrepentant cruelty and disdain of the white majority:

Black people forgive because we need to survive. We have to forgive time and time again while racism or white silence in the face of racism continues to thrive. We have had to forgive slavery, segregation, Jim Crow laws, lynching, inequity in every realm, mass incarceration, voter disenfranchisement, inadequate representation in popular culture, microaggressions and more. We forgive and forgive and forgive and those who trespass against us continue to trespass against us. . . . [W]hite people . . . want to believe it is possible to heal from such profound and malingering trauma because to face the openness of the wounds racism has created in our society is too much. I, for one, am done forgiving.²³

3. CONCLUSION

There are ways in which those who have been wronged can diminish their resentment toward the person responsible, even though they have yet to hear a sincere apology. For such a response to be laudable, however, it must, as Kleinig suggests, be motivated by virtues such as compassion, generosity, love, and humility, and morally grounded in considerations such as compassion for the wrongdoer’s suffering, a sense of moral solidarity, or relational ties with them.

However, if we conceive of or describe this kind of response as “forgiveness,” then not only will it lose its laudability and moral justification, but there will also be a significant risk of misunderstanding its otherwise valuable role, with potentially dangerous or hurtful consequences.

Church Massacre: How ‘Emanuel’ Reveals the Power of Forgiveness,” *USA Today*, June 17, 2019, accessed Nov 25, 2021: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2019/06/17/emanuel-explores-power-forgiveness-after-charleston-church-massacre/1478473001>.

²³ Roxane Gay, “Why I Can’t Forgive Dylann Roof,” *New York Times*, June 23, 2015, accessed Nov 25, 2021: www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/opinion/why-i-cant-forgive-dylann-roof.html.