

Bishop Butler on Forgiveness and Resentment

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*Forgiveness, Bishop Butler teaches, is the forswearing of resentment — the resolute overcoming of the anger and hatred that are naturally directed toward a person who has done one an unjustified and non-excused moral injury.*¹

I. Introduction

Most contemporary accounts of forgiveness acknowledge their debt to Bishop Butler. On the traditional reading of Butler, forgiveness demands that we forswear or overcome negative feelings of resentment towards our wrongdoers.² Butlerian forgiveness has been described as a long emotional process that is not completed “until the negative feelings engendered by the injury have been eliminated” (Horsbrugh 1974:271); as “giving up all or part of an accompanying feeling or attitude toward the action while retaining the belief that it was wrong” (Minas 1975:144); and as overcoming “anger that is to some extent brooding and defensive” and only “reluctantly abandoned” (Roberts 1995:291). In addition, many recent analyses of forgiveness follow Butler’s alleged lead on this matter, arguing that forgiveness must be marked by “the presence of good will or by the lack of personal resentment for the injury” (Moore 1989:184); by “cancellation of deserved hostilities and the substitution of friendlier attitudes” (Hughes 1975:113); or simply by the fact that “I have undergone a change of heart — have forsworn resentment, anger, or other hard feelings” (Calhoun 1992:77).³

In this paper, I argue that this standard view is mistaken. On the traditional interpretation of Butler, he defends what I call the *Renunciation*

1. Hampton and Murphy 1988:15.
2. Beside Hampton and Murphy 1988, for discussions that explicitly defend this traditional account of Butler on forgiveness, see, for example, O’Shaughnessy 1967, Strawson 1968, Minas 1975, Hughes 1975, Horsbrugh 1974, Murphy 1982, Moore 1989, Calhoun 1992, Roberts 1995, and Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2002.
3. For an interesting discussion that endorses this traditional Butlerian view, while not directly attributing it to Butler, see Novitz 1998, who argues that the traditional Judeo-Christian notion of forgiveness is best understood as “the dissolution of one’s negative feelings, of the resentment and the anger that one feels on account of the wrong one has suffered” (303).

Model of Forgiveness. This commits Butler to two theses: first, that resentment is a negative vindictive response to wrongdoing which is incompatible with goodwill; and second, that it is only insofar as we forswear or renounce our negative feelings of resentment towards our wrongdoers that we can be truly said to forgive them. By contrast, on an interpretation that I call the *Virtue Model of Forgiveness*, Butler rejects both these claims. First, he argues that resentment of wrongdoing can be a blameless response that is fully consistent with goodwill. Second and most important, forgiveness for Butler does not require that we entirely forswear resentment at all. Rather, it just demands that we be resentful in the right kind of way. At the end of the day, I argue that Butlerian forgiveness is best understood as a kind of *virtuous resentment* in which we steer clear of two extremes: not being resentful enough, insofar as we have insufficient concern for our own well-being, and being too resentful, as exhibited by the vices of malice and revenge.

This paper has two parts. First, in Sections II and III, I offer a new interpretation of Butler's views about forgiveness and resentment. Second, in Sections IV and V, I highlight the contemporary relevance of what I am calling the *Virtue Model of Forgiveness*. In Section IV, I argue that Butler provides us with a highly attractive analysis of forgiveness as a virtue largely missing from the recent literature, contrasting his view with a position influentially defended by Robert Roberts. Finally, in Section V, I show how this new approach helps to address several standard worries about forgiveness raised by Jean Hampton, Jeffrie Murphy, Aurel Kolnai, David Novitz, Norvin Richards, and others. Against the widely held view that forgiveness can often be a morally inappropriate or even reckless response to wrongdoing, I defend the controversial Butlerian claim that we are *always* in some sense obligated to forgive our wrongdoers — that is, that a steadfast refusal to forgive others constitutes a morally blameworthy attitude.

II. Butler's Account of Resentment

In Sermons VIII ("Upon Resentment") and IX ("Upon Forgiveness of Injuries") of his *Fifteen Sermons*, Bishop Butler discusses the nature of

resentment and the need for forgiveness in everyday life.⁴ In this section, I examine his views about resentment. In the next section, I take up his views about forgiveness, focusing on the question of when, if ever, we are obligated to give up such resentment and to extend forgiveness to our wrongdoers.

Generally speaking, Butler has mixed feelings about resentment. On the one hand, he sees resentment as a "non-ideal" passion that we have because of our fallen human state.⁵ For Butler, resentment is "harsh and turbulent" and unique insofar as "[n]o other principle, or

4. All citations from Butler's *Fifteen Sermons* will refer to the individual sermon, followed by the particular section number as indicated in the 1897 Gladstone edition.
5. See Sermon VIII.1 where Butler writes: "This I mention to distinguish the matter now before us from disquisitions of quite another kind, namely, *Why are we not made more perfect creatures, or placed in better circumstances?*, these being questions which we have not, that I know of, any thing at all to do with. God Almighty undoubtedly foresaw the disorders, both natural and moral, which would happen in this state of things." For Butler, God foreknew all the evils that would befall human beings. Because of this, God endowed us with the passion of resentment to help protect us against our wrongdoers. Nonetheless, Butler sees resentment as a "necessary evil", or, in his own words, an "encumbrance" we are "obliged to carry around with us through this various journey of life" (IX.1), which we presumably would not need if we had more perfect natures or lived in better circumstances. I wish to thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point. As this same referee helpfully observes, Butler expresses less than sanguine views about resentment when discussing its role in the administration of justice, writing: "but is it that cool reflection in the injured person, which, for the most part, brings the offender to justice? Or is it not resentment and indignation against the injury and the author of it? I am afraid there is no doubt, which is commonly the case. *This however is to be considered as a good effect, notwithstanding it were much to be wished that men would act from a better principle, reason and cool reflection*" (VIII.17, emphasis added). For Butler, resentment is a good thing insofar as it helps bring about beneficial consequences. Notwithstanding, because of its unreliable guidance in such matters, he thinks we would be better off if we were moved by "cool reflection" and "reason" in carrying out justice against our wrongdoers rather than by the passion of resentment itself.

As we will see below, this relates to another reason why Butler has mixed feelings about resentment, namely, that in its original or natural form, it constitutes a virtuous response to wrongdoing, but that it can become easily abused and turn into the wrongful vices of malice and hatred and revenge. Understood this way, resentment is "non-ideal" for Butler in at least two senses: first, that we only have it because of our fallen human condition, and

passion, hath for its end the misery of our fellow-creatures" (VIII.2 and IX.8). He insists that we would not need resentment if we were "more perfect creatures" or "placed in better circumstances" (VIII.1). On the other hand, given our actual condition, resentment constitutes a beneficial response to wrongful treatment whose main end is "to protect us against future injury" (VIII.11). What is important to recognize is that Butler distinguishes among three types of resentment here. By explaining their differences, we will not only be able to better understand when this non-ideal passion of resentment is virtuous but also why exactly the traditional reading of Butler goes astray.

At the start of Sermon VIII, Butler identifies two types of resentment: (1) "hasty and sudden" resentment and (2) "settled and deliberate" resentment. He describes (1) as a brute instinctive reaction evinced by "opposition, sudden hurt, and violence" (VIII.6). Such resentment is best understood as a kind of immediate non-moral reaction to physical pain or suffering that we human adults share in common with both infants and lower animals.⁶ By contrast, (2) is a reflective moral response against wrongdoers for the mistreatment of others, in which case we might call it "indignation"; and the mistreatment of ourselves,

second, that resentment itself can lead us morally astray when we feel it excessively towards our wrongdoers.

6. Cf. J.S. Mill's discussion of resentment in *Utilitarianism*: "It is natural to resent, and to repel or retaliate, any harm done or attempted against ourselves, or against those with whom we sympathize. The origin of this sentiment it is not necessary to discuss. Whether it be an instinct or a result of intelligence, it is, we know, common to all animal nature; for every animal tries to hurt those who have hurt, or who it thinks are about to hurt, itself or its young" (1991:186). Like Butler, Mill also distinguishes between (1) a more "animal-like" type of resentment (or what Hampton helpfully refers to as a "bite-back response" commonly witnessed in, say, dogs, although she notably remarks that we do not typically think of dogs as resentful [1998:54]); and (2) a more "reflective" human form of resentment. One important way Mill differs from Butler, however, is that for Mill, (2) arises out of, and is simply a more complex version of, (1). By contrast, Butler sees a more fundamental break between these two types of resentment, insofar as humans are specially endowed — in stark contrast to "brutes" or animals — with the faculty of "moral reflection" or "conscience".

or what we might call "personal resentment" (VIII.8).⁷ Butler argues that (2) yields two main benefits. First, on a personal level, it protects individuals insofar as it keeps the injured party on guard against "the violent assaults of others" and thus helps to preserve a basic sense of self-worth (IX.1–2). Second, on a public level, it furthers the "administration of justice" by demanding the punishment of wrongdoers and regulates our own conduct by discouraging us from wrongfully injuring others out of fear of their future resentment toward us (VIII.7–8, 16–17). In this way, Butler defends what we might call a general theodicy of resentment. He contends that our natural passion of resentment, far from being intrinsically evil, is "not only innocent" but in fact "a generous movement of mind" implanted in us by our creator (VIII.19). As he strikingly observes, resentment is "a weapon put into our hands by nature, against injury, injustice and cruelty" (VIII.11).

It is only what Butler sees as a third type of resentment — or perhaps better, a defective mode of (2), realized in terms of (3) the vices of 'malice' and 'revenge' — which he ever explicitly condemns.⁸ He writes:

[H]atred, malice, and revenge are directly contrary to the religion we profess and to the nature and reason of the thing itself. *Therefore, since no passion God hath endued us with can be in itself evil; and yet since men frequently indulge a passion in such ways and degrees that at length it becomes quite another thing from what it was originally in our*

7. Butler himself does not use these terms in a uniform fashion. As he writes in IX.2: "Let this be called anger, indignation, resentment, or by whatever name any one shall choose; the thing itself is understood, and is plainly natural." Later in the same section, however, he appears to distinguish clearly between what we might call "general indignation" and what we might call "private" or "personal" indignation — or what we are simply referring to here as "indignation" versus "personal resentment" — writing: "Therefore the precepts to *forgive* and to *love our enemies*, do not relate to that general indignation against injury and the authors of it, but to this feeling, or resentment when raised by private or personal injury."

8. I wish to thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that, instead of regarding this as a third entirely distinct type or species of resentment, it is better viewed as simply an illegitimate manifestation of (2).

nature; and those vices of malice and revenge in particular take their occasion from resentment: it will be needful to trace this up to its original, that we may see what it is in itself, as placed in our nature by its author. [VIII.3–4, emphasis added]

Notice that Butler draws a sharp distinction here between resentment in its “original” form, as a natural and innocent passion implanted in us by our creator, and its abuse or wrongful indulgence when it becomes “evil” and “quite another thing” from what it was, transformed into the unnatural vices of malice and revenge.⁹

Butler repeatedly insists in Sermon IX that it is not resentment *per se* but only its excessive or illegitimate gratification that is evil. He writes about resentment in general: “[B]ut when this resentment entirely destroys our natural benevolence towards him, *it is excessive and becomes malice or revenge*”; it is a “painful remedy” that “ought never to be made use of, *but only in order to produce some greater good*”; “it implies producing misery, and consequently *must never be indulged or gratified for itself*, by any one who considers mankind as a community or family”; and “the gratification of resentment, *if it be not conducive to the end for which it was given us*, must necessarily contradict, not only the general obligation to benevolence, but likewise that particular end itself.”¹⁰ As these passages make clear, resentment for Butler is beneficial only insofar as it furthers its “natural end” either “to prevent or to remedy injury” or “to produce a greater good” (IX.8). It is when we wrongly seek to gratify resentment solely for its own sake — without proper regard for its natural end — that it becomes excessive and turns into what Butler sees as the vices of “malice” and “revenge”.

9. As an anonymous referee nicely puts this idea: “Butler thought that all the aspects of our psychology were good so long as they retained their original form and bad only to the extent that they were distorted by abuse or indulgence” — a point, as the referee observes, also made by Penelhum and applied to resentment in particular (see 1985:27).

10. For these quotes, see, respectively, IX.10; IX.6, IX.7, and IX.8 (emphases added).

There are three main cases where this happens. First, we might be overcome by some irrational impulse, either a strong passion like “rage” or “fury” or a weak one like “peevishness” where we seek to “discharge” our anger upon everything — and unfortunately everyone — that comes our way (VIII.13). Second, our personal biases may lead us to form various false judgments such as imagining an injury when none occurred; misperceiving the injury as greater than it was; or feeling indignation out of proportion to the wrong done (VIII.14). Third and lastly, we might be blinded by intolerant dogmatism that makes us deaf to all “reasonable justification” that should otherwise mitigate our judgments (VIII.15). To summarize, on Butler’s view, our natural passion of resentment can become “vicious” or “unnatural” in three basic ways — due to some “distemper of mind”, bad reflection, or the refusal to reflect at all — all of which lead us to wrongful and/or excessive anger against our alleged wrongdoers.

III. Butler’s Account of Forgiveness

Let us turn now to Butler’s seminal account of forgiveness. Contrary to the traditional Renunciation Model of Forgiveness, I argue here that Butler never claims that forgiveness involves forswearing resentment. Rather, he claims only that it involves forswearing the vices of malice and revenge. Put differently, forgiveness for Butler just amounts to being *virtuously resentful* by avoiding both excessive and deficient feelings of resentment towards our wrongdoers. In the end, I contend that this revisionary reading of Butler offers us a much more attractive and plausible account of forgiveness than the view traditionally attributed to him.

In Sermon IX, “Upon Forgiveness of Injuries”, Butler characterizes “forgiveness” in a number of ways, including the biblical precept to “love our enemies” and fulfilling the general obligation of “benevolence” or “goodwill” in light of mistreatment by our wrongdoers (IX.9). The main question here is: Does such forgiveness demand that we forswear or altogether give up negative feelings of resentment towards our wrongdoers? Or can we forgive others even while maintaining

resentment against them? I think the textual evidence clearly favors the latter view. Listed below are some key passages from Butler's *Fifteen Sermons* that support this reading:

- A. But the proof, that [forgiveness] is really an obligation, what our nature and condition require, seems very obvious, were it only from the consideration, *that revenge is doing harm merely for harm's sake. And as to the love of our enemies: resentment cannot supersede the obligation to universal benevolence, unless they are in the nature of the thing inconsistent, which they plainly are not.* [Preface, §28, emphasis added]
- B. And when we know what the passion is in itself, and the ends of it, we shall easily see, *what are the abuses of it, in which malice and revenge consist; and which are so strongly forbidden in the text, by the direct contrary being commanded.* [VIII.4, emphasis added]
- C. Therefore the precepts to *forgive* and to *love our enemies* do not relate to that general indignation against injury and the authors of it, but to this feeling, or resentment when raised by private or personal injury. But no man could be thought in earnest, who should assert that, though indignation against injury, when others are the sufferers, is innocent and just; yet the same indignation against it, when we ourselves are the sufferers, becomes faulty and blameable. *These precepts therefore cannot be understood to forbid this in the latter case, more than in the former... . Therefore the precepts in the text, and others of the like import with them, must be understood to forbid only the excess and abuse of this natural feeling, in cases of personal and private injury.* [IX.2, last emphasis added]
- D. But since custom and false honor are on the side of retaliation and revenge, when the resentment is natural and just; and reasons are sometimes offered in justification of

revenge in these cases; and since love of our enemies is thought *too hard a saying* to be obeyed: I will show *the absolute unlawfulness of the former [and] the obligations we are under to the latter.* [IX.3, emphasis in original]

- E. *Resentment is not inconsistent with good-will; for we often see both together in very high degrees; not only in parents towards their children, but in cases of friendship and dependence, where there is no natural relation. These contrary passions, though they may lessen, do not necessarily destroy one another. We may therefore love our enemy, and yet have resentment against him for his injurious behavior towards us. But when this resentment entirely destroys our natural benevolence towards him, it is excessive and becomes malice or revenge. The command to prevent its having this effect, i. e., to forgive injuries, is the same as to love our enemies; because that love is always supposed, unless destroyed by resentment.*¹¹ [IX.10, emphasis added]

Contra the traditional Renunciation Model, Butler in these passages (i) identifies only “malice”, “retaliation”, and “revenge” (or “harm for harm’s sake”) as “unlawful” (A–E); (ii) argues that resentment is in fact an “innocent” and “just” reaction to wrongdoing which is fully compatible with “universal benevolence” or “goodwill” (A, C, E); and most importantly, (iii) argues that the moral precept “to forgive others” or “to love our enemy” does *not* forbid us from still having genuine resentment against our wrongdoers, even though it does forbid us from engaging in the “excesses” mentioned in (i) above (C, E).¹²

- 11. Novitz 1998 badly misreads this passage and attributes to Butler a view exactly opposite to the one he endorses. He writes: “For one thing, as Bishop Butler observes, goodwill — and certainly the sort of kindness that the wronged wife manifests in this case towards her husband — is compatible with a large degree of resentment, *so that to act in this way is not to forgive*” (307, emphasis added). What he overlooks is that Butler explicitly identifies “goodwill” with both “forgiveness” and “love of our enemies”.
- 12. For an interesting Wittgensteinian analysis of how forgiveness can be

Why would Butler endorse such a view? One explanation has been recently offered by Paul Newberry, one of the few commentators to recognize the key distinction being drawn here between “forbearing resentment” and “forbearing the vices of malice and revenge”.¹³ Newberry argues that Butler insists upon the latter only because he presupposes a “feeling” theory of emotion. That is, in contrast to currently dominant cognitivist theories of emotion, Butler sees emotions as brute psychological events that just happen to us and over which we have no direct control (Newberry 2001:238ff.). Given this view, Newberry argues, Butler can only justifiably demand — in light of the general principle “ought implies can” — that forgiveness entail (1) a *change in behavior* consisting in refraining from acts of malice and revenge rather than (2) a *change of heart* in which we somehow forswear or let go of our negative feelings of resentment. Butler cannot demand (2) precisely because we do not have it in our power to accomplish it (2001:241–243).

In the next section, I argue that Newberry is deeply mistaken about Butler’s theory of emotions. For present purposes, what is important to see is that he seems to be equally mistaken about Butler’s analysis of forgiveness itself. Newberry errs by claiming that Butlerian forgiveness is strictly speaking “not about how we feel but how we treat one another” (2001:242).¹⁴ This ignores Butler’s explicit identification

consistent with the fact that not all resentment and ill-will have been wiped away, see Neblett 1974, who does not, however, claim that Butler himself holds this view.

13. For another commentator besides Newberry who accepts this distinction, though for very different reasons from Newberry — indeed, ones that very closely parallel the general approach taken here — see Griswold 2007. Griswold also endorses the claim that Butler defends a kind of “moderated” (or what I am calling “virtuous”) resentment (36) and insightfully explains the distinction between forbearing resentment versus forbearing revenge as follows: “Indeed, Butler is misquoted as defining forgiveness as the ‘forbearing of resentment.’ Butler actually claims that forgiveness is the forbearing of *revenge* (not that resentment is always left just where it was)” (20).
14. Interestingly, *contra* Newberry, Murphy defends the opposite reading of Butler. He writes: “Forgiveness, if it is a virtue at all, is primarily concerned with overcoming resentment, *i. e.*, primarily concerned with *how one feels* instead of

of “forgiveness” with having “goodwill” or “benevolence” toward our wrongdoer, which he describes in Sermon I as “affection in human nature, the object and end of which is the good of another” (I.4). As he later writes in Sermon IX:

But suppose the person injured to have a due natural sense of the injury, and no more; *he ought to be affected towards the injurious person in the same way any good man, uninterested in the case, would be*; if they had the same just sense, which we have supposed the injured person to have, of the fault; after which there will yet remain real good-will towards the offender ... *we should not be affected towards persons differently from what their nature and character requires*. [IX.13–14, emphasis added]

On Butler’s view, forgiveness is not just a matter of “how we treat one another” but also “how we feel”. That is, we must develop what Butler calls a “right temper of mind” and be “affected” towards our wrongdoers in the same way any disinterested third party would be in the sense of having basic “goodwill” or “benevolence”.¹⁵

how one acts” (1982:504). On my view, both readings are equally one-sided and misinterpret Butler, insofar as he defends the much more intuitive view that forgiveness necessarily involves *both* how we act and how we feel towards our wrongdoers.

15. Cf. Minas 1975, who helpfully clarifies Butler’s view on this matter, writing: “To forgive is just to cease to have any personal interest in the injury. It is to regard it as if it had happened to someone else in whom we have no special interest, other than the general interest we have in all human beings” (145). On my reading, Butlerian forgiveness does not require us to strive to adopt any special positive feelings of goodwill or benevolence. Instead, it just demands that we forswear our excessive negative feelings of malice and hatred. But in doing so, the inevitable consequence of this act will be the re-emergence of our natural feelings of goodwill or benevolence towards our wrongdoers, since what previously suppressed them — namely, our malice and hatred — have now been eliminated. Cf. IX.9, where Butler writes: “and this being supposed, that precept is no more than to forgive injuries; *that is, to keep clear of those abuses before mentioned: because that we have the habitual temper of benevolence is taken for granted*” (emphasis added). I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to clarify this point.

If Newberry's explanation is mistaken, then why else might Butler defend the idea that forgiving our wrongdoers is consistent with still maintaining genuine feelings of resentment towards them? I believe the answer is straightforward. For Butler, this is the only view that can make sense of the biblical injunction to "love one's enemies", which, as noted above, he identifies with the moral precept to forgive, and which he strikingly uses as the epigram for both Sermons VIII and IX. As this famous dictum makes clear, despite our love for our enemies, they are still in some sense *our enemies*. This is precisely why forgiving them is so difficult! Put differently, Butler defends a highly realistic or non-utopian account of forgiveness. As he remarks about the biblical command to forgive others in the sense of "loving our enemies":

Now what is there in all this, which should be thought impracticable? I am sure that there is nothing in it unreasonable. It is indeed no more than that we should not indulge in a passion, which, if generally indulged, would propagate itself so as almost to lay waste of the world; that we should suppress that partial, that false self-love, which is the weakness of our nature: that uneasiness and misery should not be produced, without any good purpose to be served by it: and that we should not be affected towards persons differently from what their nature and character require. [IX.14]¹⁶

Forgiveness should not make us completely vulnerable to our wrongdoers. On Butler's view, we should still be allowed to retain resentment

16. Butler's insistence that forgiveness in the sense of loving our enemies is not "impracticable" or "unreasonable" relates to an earlier discussion in IX.3, where he addresses the general worry that "love of our enemies is thought *too hard a saying* to be obeyed." On the present reading, this is why Butler goes to great length to explain both how resentment is a morally legitimate response to wrongdoing (Sermon VIII) and how forgiveness and resentment can be seen as consistent with one another (Sermon IX), namely, in order to address the worry that the biblical precept "to forgive" or "to love our enemies" is somehow too demanding or too idealistic to be taken seriously.

against our wrongdoers, which he equates with both "reasonable concern for our own safety", including our physical and emotional well-being (I.5), and with "the indignation raised by cruelty and injustice, and the desire of having it punished, which persons unconcerned would feel" (VIII.8). We display such resentment in three ways. First, we condemn the wrongful actions themselves. Second, on a private level, we both act and feel in a more guarded manner that protects us against future similar injuries. Third, on a public level, we seek for just punishment of the wrongdoer out of disinterested concern for the administration of justice.¹⁷

Nevertheless, we cannot allow our feelings of resentment to become so excessive that they altogether extinguish natural feelings of disinterested benevolence that we should have towards all people, even our hated enemies. Nor can we allow resentment to result in unjust behavior against our wrongdoers in terms of personal retaliation and revenge. In the final analysis, forgiveness is a virtue for Butler precisely because it must balance between the demands of both *self-love*, which requires us to avoid deficient resentment by acting both privately and publicly in ways that protect us against future injury; and *benevolence*, which commands us to avoid excessive resentment by refraining from engaging in either feelings (malice/hatred/excessive

17. It is important to distinguish here, as many contemporary authors do, between "forgiveness" on the one hand and "mercy" or "pardoning" on the other hand. For one instructive discussion, see Murphy 1982, who argues that while mercy leads us "to treat a person less harshly than, given certain rules, one has a right to treat that person", forgiveness by contrast is fully compatible with still punishing that person. As he writes: "My forgiving you for embezzling my funds is not, for example, inconsistent with a demand that you return my funds to me or even with a demand that you suffer just legal punishment for what you have done" (506–7). North 1998 concurs on this same point, writing: "What we must remember is that a correct conception of forgiveness does not require that we forgo punishment altogether or that we should, in forgiving, attempt to annul the existence of the wrong done" (17).

anger)¹⁸ or actions (revenge/personal retaliation) that violate what Butler sees as our general obligation of goodwill.¹⁹

This revisionist reading helps to correct many traditional misconceptions about Butler in the literature. First of all, it is wrong to claim *à la* Newberry that resentment as a “natural passion” for Butler is “neither unqualifiedly good nor unqualifiedly bad” (2001:235). This ignores, as we have already seen, Butler’s careful distinction between our *natural* reaction of resentment, which is a wholly innocent provision implanted in us by our maker to protect us against moral disorders, and the *unnatural* excess or abuse of resentment found in the vices of malice and revenge, which Butler always categorically rejects (cf. XI.1). Second and closely related, Pamela Hieronymi seems to err insofar as she claims that Butler’s account of resentment, “which started as a means for defense and justice in Sermon VIII, becomes indistinguishable from and interchanged with ‘malice’ and ‘revenge’ in Sermon IX” (2001:545–6). This overlooks, however, the many passages from Sermon IX in which Butler marks a clear contrast between malice and revenge, which he sees as excessive abuses that are “absolutely unlawful” and “forbidden”, and personal resentment against

18. Notice that Butler himself only condemns excessive anger rather than anger *per se*, where he includes under the latter both “sudden anger” (VIII.6) and “deliberate anger” (VIII.8), or what we have identified as the first and second forms of Butlerian resentment respectively (cf. fn. 6). He presumably does this in order to accommodate the famous biblical precept from Ephesians 4:26 (“Be ye angry and sin not”), which he discusses at length in VIII.5. Seen this way, Butler would also reject the claim that forgiveness involves the overcoming of anger (as opposed to resentment), as defended by both Roberts 1995 and Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2002.

19. On Butler’s general view, our human nature is comprised of various “parts” or “internal principles”, all of which contribute towards the well functioning of the “system” as a whole. More specifically, he identifies four main “internal principles”: (1) particular passions, appetites, and affections (including resentment); (2) the general principle of benevolence; (3) the general principle of self-love; and lastly, (4) the principle of “reflection” or “moral conscience”, by which we approve or disapprove of actions, where this last principle constitutes the “chief part” or has “authority” over the rest of the system (cf. Preface and Sermon I). For very helpful discussions of this Butlerian framework and the overall relationship between these various principles, see Broad 1959, Penelhum 1985, and Darwall 1995.

injury, which should instead be regarded, just like indignation for the wrongful mistreatment of others, as “innocent” and “just” (cf. IX.2–3).

Third and lastly, we are now in a position to see why the Renunciation Model fundamentally distorts Butler’s account of forgiveness. In fact, Butler never claims that forgiveness involves forswearing resentment. Rather, it just consists in being virtuously resentful by keeping our resentment in proper check, avoiding both too little resentment, in which we fail to display “reasonable concern for our own safety”, and too much resentment in which we do not exhibit, in either our actions or feelings, that minimal disinterested benevolence towards our wrongdoers which is owed to all people as such. In doing so, this reading addresses one of the most important objections raised against Butler regarding the overall coherence of his views. As Jeffrie Murphy argues, on the one hand, Butler claims that forgiveness is a moral virtue that consists in forswearing or overcoming resentment (2003:13). On the other hand, Butler sees resentment itself as something beneficial and good insofar as it promotes three main values: self-respect, self-defense, and respect for the moral order (2003:19). But if this is so, then the question arises: Why is forgiveness as a moral virtue for Butler primarily concerned with overcoming resentment, when resentment itself, as Murphy writes, is something that we should “give two cheers about” and is so closely associated with such positive values?²⁰ Jean Hampton raises a similar challenge, writing about Butlerian forgiveness: “How can forgiveness be a duty when it seems to involve overcoming a useful, even therapeutic emotion [*i. e.*, resentment] in a way that can do harm to the forgiver?” (1988:35–6). Such observations

20. Cf. Murphy 1982:504 and 2003:17ff. Notably, Murphy himself does not see any tension between these two Butlerian views. Instead, he just concludes that forgiveness is not virtuous in all cases, since we should sometimes be permitted to maintain resentment and withhold forgiveness from our wrongdoers. This sidesteps the main worry of why Butler even thinks that forgiveness requires the forswearing of resentment in the first place when it seems to be such a morally beneficial response (cf. Hampton 1998). Such considerations, I think, lend support to the present reading that Butler only ever requires us to forswear or give up excessive resentment rather than resentment *per se*.

lead to a broader worry. If the traditional Renunciation Model is correct, then we are faced with a deep interpretive puzzle: Why would Butler spend the majority of his time defending the moral value of resentment in Sermon VIII by showing how it benefits both ourselves and society at large, only to insist in Sermon IX that it must be entirely abandoned when forgiving our wrongdoers?

These worries pose a difficulty only if we interpret Butler in light of the Renunciation Model of Forgiveness. By contrast, on the Virtue Model of Forgiveness, no such conflict exists at all. On this reading, Butler argues both that we forgive our wrongdoers, by avoiding excessive resentment and displaying disinterested goodwill towards them, and still maintain a healthy degree of resentment which is needed to promote our own safety and well-being. Interestingly, Hampton herself ultimately endorses a theory of forgiveness strikingly similar to Butler's.²¹ She defends an account that she calls "biblical forgiveness", in which the injured party forgives somebody by "not let[ting] the wrongdoing continue to intrude into his dealings with the wrongdoer in order that they can reestablish some kind of relationship — at the very least, the 'civil' relationship that prevails between strangers in a human community" (1988:37, emphasis added). This idea of maintaining a minimal "civil relationship" with our wrongdoers — or, in Butlerian terms, of exhibiting a universal "disinterested goodwill" — is exactly the view of forgiveness that Butler himself defends.

IV. Butlerian Forgiveness as a Virtue

So far, against the traditional Renunciation Model of Forgiveness, I have argued that Butlerian forgiveness never demands that we forswear or renounce resentment but only that we display virtuous resentment by avoiding both deficient and excessive resentment against our wrongdoers. In this section, I develop this Virtue Model

21. It should be noted that Hampton endorses biblical forgiveness only in a qualified sense, insofar as she wants to make room for the genuine possibility of "moral hatred" in certain extreme cases, that is, the view that we should withhold all forgiveness towards our wrongdoers based upon the fact that too much in the person is "morally dead". For further discussion, see §V below.

of Forgiveness in more detail by contrasting it with one of the most influential recent accounts of forgiveness as a virtue put forward by Robert Roberts. Before taking up these issues, however, it will be helpful to lay down four basic criteria which, *à la* Aristotle, it seems that any adequate account of forgiveness as a virtue should meet: (1) it should maintain that forgiveness is a mean between two extremes; (2) it should recognize the need for good practical judgment in determining what specific response is called for in each situation; (3) it should see forgiveness as an enduring character trait; and (4) it should offer a plausible account of how to inculcate such virtue both in ourselves and others. With these tasks in hand, let us now take up Roberts' account of forgiveness as a virtue.

In his article "Forgivingness", Roberts insightfully remarks that most recent accounts of forgiveness focus exclusively upon individual acts of forgiveness rather than the character trait of being a forgiving person itself, or what he terms "forgivingness".²² For Roberts, forgivingness involves having an appropriate type of emotional response to wrongdoing. Given his broadly cognitivist account of emotions, this entails having proper "emotional perceptual awareness" or making "correct judgments" about the situation at hand. As he writes: "Forgiveness is virtuous because one's anger is given up without abandoning correct judgment about the severity of the offense and the culpability of the offender" (1995:289). That is, forgiveness is a virtue which must steer between two extremes: on the one hand, anger, which consists in a harsh perceptual construal of the offender as necessarily tied to her offense such that she seems "offensive", "alien", "unwelcome", and "decidedly does not have the look of a friend, and in extreme cases, even has the look of an enemy"; on the other hand, condonation, where we make too weak of a moral judgment, failing to appreciate the sever-

22. Among the few writers who discuss forgiveness as a virtue, Roberts (1995:304, fn. 2) singles out Downie 1965 and Murphy 1988. Surprisingly, he overlooks Kolnai 1973–4 and North 1987, who both offer extended discussions about the character trait of forgiveness and the moral benefits which come from being a forgiving person. (For one important account of forgiveness as a virtue published after Roberts's view, see Novitz 1998.)

ity of the offense involved insofar as we give up our anger out of “an aversion to getting ‘upset,’ by a fear of the consequences of angry behavior [towards our wrongdoers], or by a distaste for effort or trouble” (1995:295). As Roberts describes the nature of forgiveness in general:

When the victim succeeds in forgiving his offender, he does not see her, in that specially vivid and concern-based way that constitutes anger, in terms of his beliefs about her offense against him; instead, he sees her in other, more benevolent terms that derive from his reasons for forgiving her. The victim’s forgiveness consists in his “overcoming” the retributive emotion, not by ceasing to make the retributive judgment, but by becoming undisposed to the alien retributive construal. [1995:293]

For Roberts, forgiveness is a complex process involving three main features: overcoming our anger by no longer construing our wrongdoers as “enemies” or as “alienated” from us; retaining the moral judgment that the person who harmed us is in the wrong; and replacing our negative feelings of anger with positive benevolent feelings that seek to restore some kind of harmonious relationship with our offenders. In extreme cases, however, we should recognize that another option is called for, namely, the demand to withhold forgiveness altogether. As Roberts insists, “forgiving people do not always forgive, any more than the courageous always take action in the face of danger, or the generous always give lavishly, or the compassionate always help” (302).

What is so striking about Roberts’s account of forgiveness is how significantly it seems to depart from traditional Aristotelian accounts of virtue in two respects. First of all, perhaps the most notable difference rests with his account of the basic structure of forgiveness. Like many contemporary writers, Roberts construes forgiveness primarily in terms of a traditional Judeo-Christian “conversion experience”, according to which the forgiver experiences a fundamental change of heart towards her wrongdoer and substitutes negative feelings of

anger with positive feelings of benevolence.²³ Butler instead defends a more traditional model of virtue. He sees forgiveness more in terms of moderating our natural feeling of resentment by avoiding both its excess (malice and revenge) and its deficiency (insufficient regard for our well-being) in the same way that, say, the Aristotelian virtue of courage avoids both the excess of rashness and the deficiency of cowardice.²⁴

Second and closely related, when Roberts does spell out forgiveness as a mean between two extremes, he does so in an overly cognitivist manner. He argues that forgiveness must steer between two extreme judgments: (1) in the case of anger, a construal of the person as inseparably connected to her moral offense; or (2) in the case of condonation, a construal of the person as not really guilty at all, or one that overlooks the guilt for the sake of convenience, etc. By contrast, the virtuous mean for Butler consists not merely in *evaluating rightly* by making correct moral judgments about the wrongdoer but also in *acting and feeling rightly*. That is, unlike Roberts, one of Butler’s primary concerns is about our practical response to the wrongdoing itself: that we be affectively disposed and behave in ways that take into account the demands of self-love for our own well-being and benevolence for our wrongdoer. Seen this way, Butler’s approach remedies certain shortcomings in Roberts’s analysis and offers a highly satisfying

23. For one particularly clear-cut example of this general approach to forgiveness, see, for example, North 1987, who writes: “Forgiveness is a matter of a *willed* change of heart, the successful result of an active endeavor to replace bad thoughts with good, bitterness and anger with compassion and affection” (506). Some other authors speak of forgiveness as involving a kind of “conversion experience” or “change of heart” in which we must substitute or replace negative feelings with more positive ones. See, for example, Kolnai 1973–4, Hughes 1975, North 1987, Murphy 1998, Richards 1988, and especially Calhoun 1992.

24. This argument against Roberts’s view should be qualified. As one anonymous referee helpfully points out, it is far from clear that all the virtues fit naturally into this kind of standard Aristotelian structure, or that we should try to make them do so. Nonetheless, insofar as Roberts himself adopts an analysis of virtue as involving a “mean” with regard to forgiveness, Butler’s approach is arguably superior to his on this count.

answer to the first desideratum of a theory of forgiveness as a virtue, as discussed above.

Second, Butler offers us a more detailed account of the many complex factors involved in good practical judgment. As Aristotle famously declares in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, anybody can get angry, but to do so “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, *that is not for everyone, nor is it easy*” (1109a27–30). *À la* Aristotle, Butler also recognizes that forgiveness as a virtue is a highly context-sensitive affair. It must be extended (1) to the right persons, which means only those who have done us genuine wrong in contrast to people we mistakenly believe have harmed us, or people that we resent for baseless reasons, as when we say, for example, “I resent her for her good looks” (IX.15).²⁵ It must be done (2) to the right extent, where we must show the proper amounts of both goodwill and resentment towards our enemies, neither displaying excessive “affection” or “compassion” (VIII.16) nor what Butler sees as a kind of harsh “implacability” which prevents or hinders any feelings of benevolence towards our wrongdoers (IX.20). It must be done (3) at the right time, which, given that resentment consists in “reasonable concern for our own safety”, presumably means that we should feel resentment for just as long as the threat persists, though

25. Cf. Novitz 1998, who writes: “Thus, for instance, an older sister may be said never to have forgiven her brother for being the favorite of her parents, for being good-looking, graceful, or athletic — even those these are not actions that he has performed... . All that these examples establish is that we sometimes use the verb ‘to forgive’ non-literally” (303). Horsbrugh 1974:269 describes such uses of “resentment” and “forgiveness”, which more closely resemble envy or even Nietzschean *ressentiment*, as “irregular” and “anomalous”.

We should note that in the *Dissertation*, Butler identifies an additional way in which good practical judgment is needed in order to forgive the “right persons”, namely, that we must distinguish between those who are fully morally competent and those who are not. As he writes: “For, everyone has a different sense of harm done by an idiot, madman, or child, and by one of mature and common understanding, though the action of both, including the intention, which is part of the action, be the same... . Now this difference must arise from somewhat discerned in the nature or capacities of one, which renders the action vicious” (1849:335). For a more extended discussion of this point in the context of Strawsonian worries, see §V below.

we should eventually let go of it after we recognize that it is safe to open ourselves up again. It must be done (4) with the right motive, always keeping in mind that resentment is only justified if it aims to bring about its natural end of preventing and remedying injury and of producing a greater good rather than merely being gratified for its own sake. And forgiveness must be done (5) in the right way, which for Butler means avoiding both the total abandonment of resentment, which leaves us wide open to being hurt again, as well as a refusal to extend even minimal goodwill or civility towards our wrongdoers as manifested by the vices of malice and revenge.²⁶

Lastly, with regard to the remaining two criteria, Butler offers an interesting account both of forgiveness as an enduring character trait and of how best to cultivate it in ourselves and others. Like Roberts, Butler distinguishes between particular acts of forgiveness and the general character trait of being a forgiving person. In any particular instance, we are morally obligated to forgive our wrongdoers (IX.2–3). In addition, we should also strive to develop within ourselves the disposition of being a forgiving person. One of Butler’s main aims in the *Sermons* is to provide “some reflections which may have a more direct and immediate tendency to beget in us a right temper of mind towards those who have offended us” (IX.3). As he later writes, Butler wants to provide “some reflections which may have a more direct tendency to subdue those vices in the heart, to beget in us this right temper, and lead us to a right behavior towards those who have offended us” (IX.14).

These passages highlight another important defect of Newberry’s interpretation. In contrast to his central thesis that Butler presupposes a “feeling” as opposed to “cognitivist” theory of emotion, Butler seems to explicitly endorse the view here that our emotional responses *are* in some sense cognitive and thus amenable to rational criticism. He urges that we “look at things as they are” and recognize the reasons

26. Among the five Aristotelian factors listed above, the only one which Butler himself never explicitly discusses is the issue of the right time to be resentful, which I attempt to develop here in an intuitively plausible way based on Butler’s own analysis of resentment as “reasonable concern for our own safety”.

for why people are entitled to forgiveness: because their wrongdoings do not originally spring from pure ill-will but from some legitimate concern of self-love gone awry; because the injustice and baseness done by the wrongdoer are their own punishment and will continue to bring harm to the wrongdoer until they repent; and out of humble recognition of the fact that we are all wrongdoers and need the forgiveness of others ourselves (IX.17–21). He insists that if we rightly consider these facts, such “reflections” will have a “direct and immediate tendency” to “beget” in us a “right temper of mind”. In this way, Butler anticipates recent insightful claims about forgiveness defended by Roberts, Hieronymi, Murphy, and many others, who contend that our feelings of resentment should be in some sense “responsive” or “sensitive to” changes in our cognitive judgments. For example, as Hieronymi argues, a sincere apology offered by our wrongdoer brings about a revision in our cognitive judgments that can serve to mitigate or even altogether undermine feelings of resentment.²⁷ Indeed, *contra* Newberry, Butler’s endorsement of a broadly cognitivist theory of the emotions is presumably one of the main reasons why he wrote his sermons on forgiveness and resentment in the first place. In the end, Butler wanted to force his intended audience to reflect properly upon the right course of action in order to thereby “beget” or cultivate in them the “right temper” or virtuous character trait of being a forgiving person.²⁸

V. Forgiveness as an Unconditional Moral Duty

In this final section, I address the moral status of forgiveness itself. In

27. Cf. Hieronymi 2001:548ff, who in general defends a broadly cognitivist approach of emotions, arguing that emotions should be seen as more akin to “judgment sensitive attitudes” than mere “forces” (2001:539).

28. For another discussion that criticizes Newberry on this point, see Griswold 2007, who cites a number of other important passages supporting this interpretation as well. As he insightfully observes: “An emotion such as resentment is quasi-cognitive; we do not credit it to pre-linguistic humans, which suggests that it includes beliefs (whose content can be stated propositionally). But it is also an affective, bodily state” (37).

the *Fifteen Sermons*, Butler observes: “Forgiveness of injuries is one of the very few moral obligations which has been disputed” (§28). This claim holds true today. Some philosophers argue that forgiveness is not a moral duty at all but only a supererogatory or elective act that we are free to do or not to do (Kolnai, Calhoun). Others argue that forgiveness is a moral duty, but merely a conditional one dependent upon various circumstances obtaining (*e.g.*, prior repentance of the wrongdoer, the moral injury not being too severe or too recent, etc). If such conditions are not realized, then forgiveness is not only *not* a moral obligation but in fact a morally blameworthy and even reckless action insofar as it displays a fundamental lack of self-respect (Murphy, Hampton, Roberts, Novitz, Richards).

Against these widely held positions, Butler defends the view that we are *always* morally obligated to forgive our wrongdoers. As he writes in Sermon IX:

Thus love to our enemies, and those who have been injurious to us, is so far from being a *rant*, as it has been profanely called, *that it is in truth the law of our nature, and what every one must see and own, who is not quite blinded with self-love.* [IX.12, emphasis added]

For Butler, forgiveness constitutes a “law” insofar as it represents the dictates of conscience in relation to two general principles of our human nature itself: namely, (1) self-love, which requires us to maintain reasonable concern for our own safety and (2) benevolence, which requires us to show disinterested goodwill even towards our wrongdoers. Indeed, Butler concludes Sermon IX by asserting that, from a strictly biblical standpoint, “a forgiving spirit is therefore absolutely necessary” (IX.21).

Which view is correct? Is forgiveness an unconditional moral duty? Or is it instead a purely supererogatory act or else a merely conditional duty that can be morally inappropriate in certain cases? In what follows, I defend a broadly Butlerian theory of forgiveness. I begin

by examining each of the views discussed above. I then propose a modified Butlerian view of forgiveness that can take into account all these legitimate concerns while still making room for the claim that forgiving our wrongdoers should be regarded as in some sense always morally obligatory.²⁹

Aurel Kolnai presents one of the best-known challenges to the idea that forgiveness is a moral duty. On his view, forgiveness confronts us with a paradox. On the one hand, it seems morally objectionable to forgive without good reason to do so where, for Kolnai, the best reason to forgive consists in the wrongdoer's displaying a genuine change of heart or repentance (*metánoia*). On the other hand, if the wrongdoer does repent, then forgiveness becomes morally superfluous. In such cases, we only need to accept certain general moral principles — such as “Respond to value wholeheartedly, condemn and shun disvalue; be grateful for kindness done to you and reciprocate it, retaliate (within the appropriate limits, without overstepping your rights and lapsing into vindictiveness, without disproportionate hostility) for malicious wrong suffered” — without needing to engage in forgiveness at all (1973–4: 98). In the end, he resolves this paradox by insisting that forgiveness involves more than a mere registering of the fact that, for example, the wrongdoer has sincerely repented. Rather, it is a “generous venture of trust” on the part of the victim towards her wrongdoer. So understood, forgiveness involves what he sees as “an exquisite act of charity or benevolence” insofar as we decide to reaccept the moral offender back into our lives in a purely “supererogatory” or “elective” way (1973–4: 104). This closely resembles a puzzle about forgiveness raised by Cheshire Calhoun. She identifies a tension between two concerns. On the one hand, we want to forgive only people who deserve it. On the other hand, this threatens to make forgiveness too “minimalist” insofar as it becomes something we are simply obligated or required

29. Among the few contemporary writers who agree with Butler's view that forgiveness is always morally virtuous, see Downie 1965 and Horsbrugh 1974. Hieronymi 2001:522 acknowledges “that much ink has been spilt over [the] issue” of whether one can be obligated to forgive or not, although she herself does not take a particular side on this question.

to do. In the end, Calhoun argues that forgiveness must remain “aspirational”. That is, it should be seen as a wholly elective action that we generously extend to others, even those who are “unexcused” and “unrepentant” and thus not in any sense entitled to it (1992: 80–1).

By contrast, other writers view forgiveness as morally obligatory, although in a merely conditional way.³⁰ Hampton, Murphy, and Roberts all argue that forgiveness should be seen as a kind of moral virtue, where this implies that in some cases forgiveness is morally appropriate while in other cases it is morally inappropriate and blameworthy when performed. Murphy argues that forgiveness is best understood as a kind of Kantian “imperfect duty”. That is, he thinks that forgiveness is not “totally optional” although it does admit of “some latitude in the time and place of its fulfillment” (1982: 510–11). Other writers reinforce this idea by explaining how forgiveness can be a serious moral defect in some cases. As Norvin Richards declares: “It is sometimes wrong to forgive, sometimes wrong not to forgive, and sometimes admirable to forgive but acceptable not to do so” (1988: 82). For Richards, cases falling under the first category include a too-eager willingness to forgive. He contends that depending upon how badly or recently somebody has injured us, it might reveal a deep character flaw if we forgave too quickly. Instead, we should maintain our “hard feelings” in cases where, for example, it is unclear that there is any real repentance in the wrongdoer or when the harm involved was somehow too serious or significant.

30. Cf. Calhoun 1992:81ff., who interestingly accuses writers like Kolnai 1973–4, Murphy 1982, and Richards 1988 of having “double vision” because they simultaneously maintain that “forgiving the repentant is owed, rationally required, minimal... [and] also elective, generous, aspirational” (82). That is, these authors argue that forgiveness is both obligatory for us and yet at the same time an elective and generous action. One striking example of such “double vision” is Murphy 1982. He claims that, in the end, his view is not that “forgiveness is obligatory (*no one has a right to be forgiven*)” (510) and that “*simply because forgiveness is not obligatory in this strong sense (i.e., it is not a perfect duty) it does not follow that forgiveness is totally optional -- any more than the imperfect duty of benevolence is totally optional*”. For our purposes, I take his latter statement -- that forgiveness is obligatory insofar as it is an imperfect duty -- to represent his considered view on the matter.

In a similar vein, David Novitz insists that forgiveness requires a prior apology from the wrongdoer. This must go beyond mere verbal declaration and show evidence of a genuine change of heart such as, for example, the wrongdoer's ceasing to behave in ways that caused wrongful injury in the past. If despite their apology, the wrongdoer persists in such offensive behavior, he argues that it would not only be difficult to forgive them but remiss to do so. He writes: "Forgiveness, in this case, seems to overlook and thereby condone the strong potential for further wrongful action" (1998: 305–6). As Novitz concludes his article:

Nor, I have argued, ought one even to attempt to forgive a person, and so become reconciled, if there are no relevant reasons for doing so. If the person will clearly re-offend, does not regret what has been done, or continues to behave in similar ways, attempts to forgive are inappropriate and a violation of one's own sense of self — of the importance that one should attach to one's own projects and aspirations. [1998:314]

In the end, forgiveness for these writers is not morally required in all circumstances. Indeed, in many cases, it can be morally blameworthy and reflect an inappropriate lack of self-respect and regard for one's own well-being.

How should we respond to such worries? The fundamental problem with these accounts is that they all overlook the basic fact that forgiveness *can take place on many different levels*. Following Kolnai, I suggest that we understand the essence of forgiveness as involving the "reacceptance" or "readmittance" of the wrongdoer back into our lives.³¹ The main question then becomes: What type of reacceptance of our wrongdoers, if any, does morality require of us? As Butler writes in Sermon IX:

31. See Kolnai 1973–4:104. For another helpful discussion of forgiveness as a kind of "reacceptance" or "readmittance", see North 1987:503, 506.

From hence it is easy to see, what is the degree in which we are commanded to love our enemies or those who have been injurious to us... *It cannot be imagined that we are required to love them with any peculiar kind of affection*. But suppose the person injured to have a due natural sense of the injury, and no more; *he ought to be affected towards the injurious person in the same way as any good men, uninterested in the case, would be ... after which there will yet remain real goodwill towards the offender*. [IX.13, emphasis added]

In this passage, Butler identifies different types of relationships we can have with other people. He denies that forgiveness ever requires us to have any "peculiar kind of affection" towards them, such as what is typically found in more partial relationships such as friendships, familial ties, marriage, etc. He does require, however, that we must display towards them a kind of universal disinterested good will that is owed to everyone in general, akin to what Hampton calls "biblical forgiveness". In line with the Virtue Model of Forgiveness, I propose we depart from Butler's official view and instead see forgiveness as a more context-sensitive matter. On this approach, there can be different types of forgiveness corresponding to different types of relationships we can occupy vis-à-vis our wrongdoers. So while we may not be obligated to forgive our wrongdoers in terms of readmitting them back into our lives in terms of any prior partial relationship we may have had, we may nonetheless still be obligated to forgive them in terms of readmitting them back into a more disinterested moral relationship with us as discussed below.

Take a concrete example. Imagine that my best friend maliciously slanders me. Do I have any obligation to forgive her *qua* friend for her painful betrayal of trust? With regard to many partial relationships like friendships, partnerships, marriages, etc., I believe the various worries about forgiveness raised by the authors above are entirely justified. Choosing to be somebody's friend *is* an elective matter. So if I decide to forgive her *qua* friend, this should likewise be elective. I am not

obligated to be her friend any longer.³² And indeed, I should clearly think twice about forgiving her and readmitting her back into my life as my friend if, say, she does not sincerely repent of her wrongdoings, or continues to perform the same hurtful actions, or seems indifferent to the injury she has caused me, or has committed such a grievous offense that our former friendship seems to be irreparably damaged. In such cases, forgiveness may represent, as Kolnai puts it, an “exquisite act of charity or benevolence”. Or else, if it is deemed inappropriate to reaccept her *qua* friend for the reasons outlined above, then such forgiveness may be a morally blameworthy and even reckless action.

But at a more fundamental level, we are always still morally obligated to forgive our friend who has done us such grievous wrongs, or even our despised enemies. While my friend may have decisively forfeited her rights upon me *qua* friend, she can still make a claim upon me *qua* fellow human being. Hampton argues that all immoral acts create a temporary moral “breach” between the wrongdoer and the moral community at large, especially the injured party. As Roberts puts the same point, we always experience a “rupture” in our relationship with the wrongdoer — even if she is a total stranger to us with whom we have no deep and lasting relations — insofar as we can view all persons as “members of a kingdoms of ends, brothers and sisters, children of God, [or] fellow sojourners upon this earth”.³³ What Butlerian

32. This claim may need qualification depending upon one’s views about the type of moral obligations, if any, that are involved in partial relationships, a large topic which I leave aside for the present. For one interesting suggestion that we might indeed have obligations to forgive even our friends, see Francis Bacon’s amusing observation in “Of Revenge”, where he writes: “Cosmus, duke of Florence, had a desperate saying against perfidious or neglecting friends, as if those wrongs were unpardonable; ‘You shall read’ (saith he) ‘that we are commanded to forgive our enemies; but you never read that we are commanded to forgive our friends.’ But yet the spirit of Job was in a better tune: ‘Shall we’ (saith he) ‘take good at God’s hands, and not be content to take evil also?’ And so of friends in a proportion” (1998:348).

33. In Roberts 1995:294, he defends this claim in reply to a deep worry raised by Richards 1988, who writes: “A broader difficulty with seeing forgiveness as re-acceptance is that some wrongdoers were not ‘accepted’ to begin with: there is no relationship to reestablish. Consider the stranger whose car drenches you with mud. Having seen this in her mirror, she stops to apologize, insists

forgiveness demands is that we reaccept or readmit such wrongdoers — whether they be close friends, total strangers, or even hated enemies — back into minimal normalized moral relationships with us by exhibiting basic moral consideration and disinterested benevolence towards them despite their morally offensive wrongdoing against us. To deny that we are obligated to forgive them in this way amounts to refusing to treat them as fellow moral agents.

We can view this attitude in two ways. First, following P.F. Strawson, we might think that it is appropriate to refuse to forgive wrongdoers in this sense, since we regard them as so beyond the pale that we suspend normal “reactive attitudes” towards them in general. This may happen, for example, if they have committed such a horrific act that we deem them simply inhuman. That is, we think that they are so deeply incapacitated or deranged that the only option available for us is to adopt an “objective” viewpoint that treats them like something to be controlled or constrained rather than as full-fledged moral agents like ourselves. But notice that in this case, it is not so much that we are now justified in our refusal to forgive them as that the very idea of forgiveness no longer makes sense or applies in such cases, insofar as the wrongdoers are not even qualified to stand in mutually accountable moral relationships with us in the first place.³⁴

Second, we might regard them as full-fledged moral agents like ourselves but still believe that, due to the horrific nature of their wrongdoing, they are somehow fundamentally unforgivable and therefore not

on paying your cleaning bill, and so on. Surely it is possible to forgive this woman... But to call this ‘reaccepting’ her or ‘reestablishing our relationship’ is rather strained: there was no relationship, and there is none after she drives away” (79). *Contra* Richards, I agree with Roberts that we can have relations even with total strangers in the sense of being in basic moral community with them — a view endorsed by Butler himself in IX.7, where he speaks of humankind as a kind of “community” or “family” of which we are all “members”.

34. For an interesting parallel discussion of such cases, see Holmgren 1993, who writes about people who have lost, in Kantian terms, their capacity for a “good will”: “Since the offender has lost the capacity to choose, she is not responsible for her violation. However, she remains a sentient being ... the appropriate attitude to extend towards such an offender is simply an attitude of compassion” (350).

deserving of the basic disinterested goodwill and civility which ought to be extended to all people. Among persons we might regard this way are war criminals, serial killers, rapists, and child molesters.³⁵ In these cases, we often feel what Hampton calls “moral hatred” for the wrongdoers in question. She describes such hatred as a refusal to forgive even in a minimal “biblical” sense, insofar as “the indignant person who opposes the message in the [wrongdoer’s] message is expressing aversion for the immoral cause her action promotes, and feels aversion to the insulter herself — her character, her habits, her disposition, or the whole of her — if he takes her, or at least certain components of her, to be thoroughly identified with that cause” (1998:80).³⁶ For Hampton, such moral hatred is based upon our judgment that “too much of the person is morally dead” (1998:153). Although she thinks that this stance is justified in some extreme cases, she also believes that we should try to resist it as long as possible, since it can not only totally blind us “to the humane and decent elements” in others but can also threaten to make us morally hate ourselves, insofar as we must all recognize that we are just as “capable of becoming as morally sick and rotted as other human beings” (1988:156–7).

On Butler’s uncompromising view, no individual — not even the criminal, the rapist, or the serial killer — is ever “unforgivable” in this sense. Instead, he endorses what Laurence Thomas astutely calls “humanitarian forgiveness”. As Thomas describes such forgiveness: “Without ignoring the human capacity for wrongdoing, *forgiveness keeps*

35. These examples are borrowed from Laurence Thomas’s discussion of “unforgivable” persons in Thomas 2003.

36. In her first account of “moral hatred”, Hampton 1998 writes: “it is an aversion to someone who has identified himself with an immoral cause or practice, prompted by moral indignation and accompanied by the wish to triumph over him and his cause or practice in the name of some fundamental moral principle or objective, most notably justice” (61). She acknowledges that this formulation might sound too impersonal. Thus, she adds that such hatred can be directly extended to the person herself insofar as these immoral principles “can get tangled up with [the wrongdoer’s] character and beliefs” such that “hating them can come to mean hating him” (61) — a view which is in striking contrast to Augustine’s famous dictum to love the sinner but hate the sin.

in place a vision of the human capacity for doing what is good” (2003:206, emphasis added). To recall Butler’s own view, we ought to display towards even the worst moral offenders a general disinterested benevolence or goodwill — “the object and end of which is the good of another” (I.4) — based on the fact that even they have, as Thomas puts it, a “capacity for doing what is good”, insofar as they are moral agents who are able to recognize and conform to the universal demands of moral conscience.³⁷ The issue remains: Are some people, such as war criminals, rapists, and serial killers so morally abhorrent, either because of what they have done or what they are like, that they are truly “unforgivable” even in this sense?³⁸ Our moral intuitions here clearly diverge. Without pretending to resolve this debate, let me suggest two responses on Butler’s behalf that might mitigate this belief.³⁹

The first response is that our typical description of such “unforgivable” people — such as, for example, Hampton’s account of “moral hatred” which is based on the fact that “too much in the person is morally

37. Cf. Butler I.11 and IX.18. Besides Hampton 1998 and Thomas 2003, another helpful parallel with Butlerian forgiveness is a view defended by Downie 1965, who characterizes the type of behavior appropriate for forgiveness as “*agape*” or a kind of Kantian “respect for persons” that is displayed by “loving concern for the dignity of persons conceived as ends in themselves ... the treatment of other people not just as sentient beings but as beings who are rational and able to obey moral rules and pursue moral values just as the forgiver himself can” (133).

38. To allay any concerns, it is important to recall that Butlerian forgiveness is still fully consistent with seeking punishment of the wrongdoer out of disinterested concern for the administration of justice (cf. fn. 13, above), just not with the type of extreme “moral hatred” defended by Hampton.

39. I leave aside Golding’s defense of the view that certain moral offenses, *e.g.*, the moral horrors involved in the Holocaust, are somehow “unforgivable”, insofar as he argues that “wrongs having this degree of culpability and enormity may put one permanently in debt to the victim such that the moral amends are unending and resentment is forever justified” (1984–5: 135). On Butler’s view, as we have already seen, forgiveness never confronts us with such a stark “either/or”. That is, we can both affirm, *à la* Golding, that resentment may be permanently justified and that moral amends in the sense of just punishment may be somehow required indefinitely while still believing, *à la* Butler, that reacceptance of the wrongdoer in terms of so-called “biblical” (Hampton) or “humanitarian” (Thomas) forgiveness is still morally required of us.

dead” — seem to land us right back to Strawsonian worries that these wrongdoers are so beyond the moral pale that they are simply not appropriate subjects of normal reactive attitudes in the first place, including forgiveness or resentment.⁴⁰ But even if we carefully describe such cases to avoid such problems, this refusal to forgive still remains open to a second and more fundamental Butlerian response. As Butler argues, when we claim that somebody is so utterly morally abhorrent or repugnant that they do not deserve forgiveness in the sense of being entitled to even basic disinterested goodwill from us, what we are doing in such cases is focusing solely on “that particular part which has offended us” and seeing the whole person now as “monstrous”, “without anything right or human in him” (IX.16). In Sermon VIII, he identifies as one main character flaw related to excessive resentment “a certain determination, and resolute bent of mind, not to be convinced or set right” (VIII.15). On Butler’s view, denying forgiveness to morally horrific wrongdoers even in a minimal “biblical” (Hampton) or “humanitarian” (Thomas) sense amounts to a kind of sheer dogmatic intolerance. We refuse to see the person in terms of her full humanity. Instead, we reduce her to a one-dimensional trait, perceiving her solely in terms of the wrongful deeds that morally offend us. Taken this way, our steadfast refusal to forgive such wrongdoers can be just as dehumanizing a perspective as the one accompanying the original wrongful injury. For Butler, this is a dogmatic attitude which, if carried to an extreme, threatens to rob us of our own humanity insofar as our faculty of moral reflection — which always leads us to see the potential for *both* the good and bad in others — itself becomes fundamentally distorted [IX.17].⁴¹

40. For one particularly clear-cut example of this tendency, see Hampton’s description of our deep “moral hatred” towards a Nazi like, say, Goebbels who, as she strikingly writes, “seems irredeemably ‘rotten’ like a piece of meat that has been allowed to become full of maggots and decay” (!) (1988:80).

41. For one insightful recent defense of this point, see Govier 2002. Interestingly, though she uses language strikingly similar to Butler’s, she does not acknowledge or seem to be aware that he held nearly identical views. Govier writes: “Whatever they have done, and however much we may be tempted to refer

Summary

In this article, I have argued against the traditional Renunciation Model of Butlerian forgiveness. As we have seen, Butler never claims that we must forswear resentment *per se* but rather only the vices of malice and revenge. In the final analysis, on the Virtue Model, Butlerian forgiveness simply amounts to being virtuously resentful by avoiding both excessive and deficient resentment against our wrongdoers. This revisionary reading has three important results. First, it helps correct many traditional misunderstandings of Butler’s views about both resentment and forgiveness. Second, it arguably offers a more attractive and systematic account of forgiveness as a virtue than what is found in the contemporary literature. Third and lastly, it helps us to better understand the moral status of forgiveness itself. We must distinguish between two different levels of forgiveness here. In terms of our partial relationships with others, those philosophers who raise deep worries about forgiveness as an unconditional moral duty are absolutely right. In such cases, forgiveness should sometimes be seen as a merely supererogatory or elective act (Kolnai, Calhoun) or else as a conditional duty that we should extend only in some circumstances and not others (Murphy, Hampton, Roberts, Novitz, Richards). At a more fundamental level, however, we are morally obligated to forgive all our wrongdoers. We do so by overcoming the breach in moral community caused by their injury and reaccepting them back into normalized moral relationships with us with all the accompanying impartial goodwill and civility owed them as fellow human beings despite their wrongdoings.

Lastly, I have tried to address the controversial issue of people who commit such morally abhorrent actions — *e.g.*, war criminals, serial

to them as ‘monsters,’ ‘madmen,’ or ‘rotten,’ the fundamental fact remains: perpetrators are human beings and our fellow creatures. They are persons with a capacity for moral reflection and transformation, and we should treat them accordingly... . To claim that because he has committed terrible deeds a moral agent is reducible to those deeds and thus absolutely unforgivable is to ignore the human capacity for remorse, choice, and moral transformation (112).”

killers, rapists, child molesters, etc. — that we regard them as simply “unforgivable”. I argue that our refusal to forgive in these cases should be understood in one of two ways. Either we regard such individuals as so beyond the pale and “morally dead” that all normal reactive attitudes towards them should be suspended, such that it no longer makes sense to even have any reactive attitudes such as forgiveness or even resentment towards them in the first place. Or else our refusal to forgive represents a deeply morally problematic attitude in which we one-dimensionally reduce the wrongdoer to her moral offense and thereby refuse to extend her “biblical” (Hampton) or “humanitarian” (Thomas) forgiveness — or what Butler would call universal “disinterested goodwill”. In the end, the main worry about this latter response is that by refusing to recognize the full humanity of the wrongdoers themselves — including any capacity for goodness in them which for Butler properly helps to keep our own “moral hatred” of them in check — we can adopt as dehumanizing an attitude as the one accompanying the original wrongful injury itself.

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