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How to Forgive an Innocent:

Taylor, Kanye, and the Ethics of Forgiveness

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“Yo, Taylor, I’m really happy for you, I’mma let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time! One of the best videos of all time!”

—Kanye West, 2009 MTV Video Music Awards.

“It’s okay, life is a tough crowd/ 32 and still growin’ up now/ Who you are is not what you did/ You’re still an innocent.”

—Taylor Swift, “Innocent”

The infamous incident at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards is one of those iconic moments in pop culture history that people still remember vividly. The 19-year-old Taylor Swift had just won the award for Best Female Video, when her acceptance speech was suddenly interrupted by Kanye West who jumped on stage, took the microphone from her, and declared that “Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time!” What followed was widespread public outrage against West. At the same award ceremony the following year, Taylor performed her previously unreleased song “Innocent” for the first time, which was widely interpreted as a

response to the incident. In the song, the protagonist shows sympathy towards a wrongdoer and expresses the belief that he is “still an innocent.” The song received mixed feedback. While some saw it as a moment of forgiveness and sympathy towards Kanye, others saw it as “slams disguised as forgiveness,” as a “patronizing, condescending sermon,” or as “petty.”¹ Criticisms like these were especially provoked by the childhood imagery included in the lyrics.

Are the critics right to say that “Innocent” is not an instance of forgiveness, but rather a petty condescending slam? Or do these critics misunderstand Taylor’s intention to forgive Kanye for stealing her VMA moment? When considering these questions, a puzzle arises. It doesn’t make sense to forgive someone if we think they are innocent. If they are innocent, then there would be nothing to forgive. Forgiveness presupposes that there is someone to forgive for some wrongdoing. An innocent person who hasn’t committed any wrong or who is not responsible for his actions is not blameworthy. Our anger or resentment towards someone would be misplaced if there is nobody or nothing to be angry at in the first place.

By focussing on the VMA incident and its direct aftermath, we will see how Taylor’s song “Innocent” could be seen as an instance of forgiveness, even though innocence normally precludes the possibility of forgiveness.

Why Snatching Microphones is Wrong

Forgiveness is a potential response to personally having been wronged, and being innocent means either having done nothing wrong or not being responsible for one’s action. To determine whether “Innocent” is an expression of forgiveness, we need to first look at the action in question and ask whether Kanye in fact wronged Taylor, or whether he was, in this sense, innocent. Did Kanye wrong Taylor? Intuitively we might think that it’s problematic for Kanye to take the microphone from Taylor in the middle of her speech, and pronounce that Beyoncé should have won the award instead. But maybe we are mistaken. We could also see

Kanye's action not as aiming to demean Taylor, but as standing up for justice. Maybe he was truly convinced that Beyoncé should have won, and saw it as a great injustice that she did not receive the award. Not respecting Taylor's interests and feelings were then only a side-effect of the more important aim of putting things right.

Even if that were the case, Kanye's action could still be seen as wrong. It was presumptuous that he assumed to have the authority to jump on stage and interrupt Taylor, and it was presumptuous to think that Beyoncé needed to be defended by him. After all, Beyoncé did go on to win another award later that evening, for best Video of the Year—a more prestigious award than the one Taylor won. So, Beyoncé did not need Kanye's help to stand up for an injustice.

Additionally, it is difficult to say whether Beyoncé not receiving the award could have been an injustice, since art has a subjective aspect. If two artworks have a similar aesthetic value, we have some discretion in our attitudes towards the artworks.² Some people might prefer Beyoncé's video, others might prefer Taylor's, still others might find both equally good. Because the value and quality of art is partly a matter of subjective taste and discretion, it is not appropriate to consider someone as objectively wrong for having a different view about who should have won the award. We might disagree based on our taste, but this is not a reason to stop an award ceremony, as there could be no real injustice occurring when one person is given the award over the other. However, Kanye had the hubris to take his opinion as the authoritative one, thereby also disrespecting the decision of the judges, as well as the procedural norms of the event. Regardless of how great one finds Beyoncé's video, it is plausible to see Taylor as being entitled to finish her speech without interruption. So, Kanye wronged Taylor by interrupting and disrupting her speech.

What exactly is the nature of Kanye's wrongdoing? The contemporary philosopher Jeffrie Murphy claims that intentional wrongdoings can be insulting because they involve a lack of respect for the victim's "equal moral worth." That is, the wrongdoer treats the victim

as if they are less of a person, and worth less respect. The wrongdoer might convey a message like “I count, but you do not” or “I am here up high, and you are there down below.”³ Even though not every wrongdoing involves an attempted lowering of the victim’s moral status, this one seems to. Kanye presumed to have the authority to interrupt Taylor and snatch the microphone from her. This act did seem insulting to Taylor, and treated her with less moral worth.

Innocence and Childhood

Taylor doesn’t explicitly discuss the nature of the wrongdoing in “Innocent.” Rather she addresses the wrongdoer. While she does not mention names and does not directly refer to the VMA incident, it is hard to doubt that she intended the song as a response to Kanye. Some lyrics clearly allude to the incident, referencing Kanye’s age at the time (“32 and still growin’ up now”) and referring to the month the VMAs took place (“You’ll have new Septembers”). That Taylor’s first live performance of “Innocent” was at the same award show the year later, and started with a video clip in the background showing the incident, made it more obvious to whom the song is addressed.

The discussion so far has shown that Kanye’s action was wrong, in that it treated Taylor with less respect and moral worth, and Taylor’s song “Innocent” is a response to this wrongdoing. The next question is whether “Innocent” can be considered an instance of forgiveness. To answer that we need to consider whether the wrongdoer in the song is responsible. This is what some critics deny—they claim that the wrongdoer in the song is perceived as an innocent, and so does not need to be forgiven. Let’s look more closely at why the critics might have a point here.

There are two possible ways that “Innocent” could *not* be an instance of forgiveness. The first possibility is that the protagonist does not regard the wrongdoer as responsible; the wrongdoer is as “an innocent,” someone who is not an appropriate target for blame and

forgiveness. This interpretation seems to work, since the lyrics of the song describe the wrongdoer as “still an innocent.” It’s clear that the wrongdoer in the song cannot be an innocent in the sense that he did nothing wrong, as the lyrics make it clear that there were some wrongs committed: “Left yourself in your warpath,” and, “Did some things you can’t speak of / But at night you live it all again.” Nonetheless the song’s imagery of childhood suggests that the wrongdoer is not mature enough to be responsible for his actions. For example, Swift writes, “Wasn't it easier in your lunchbox days? / Always a bigger bed to crawl into,” and “Wasn't it easier in your firefly-catchin' days? / And everything out of reach.”

Taylor seems to compare Kanye to a child, telling him that he is still growing up, and so the critics seem justified in their concern that the song is condescending or patronizing. Regarding someone as a child means not regarding him as a (fully) responsible person. Children are not yet full members of the moral community. They cannot yet sufficiently control their behavior and they lack sufficient understanding of what morality demands and how others ought to be treated. Thus, comparing someone to a child is condescending and disrespectful when, in fact, the person is an adult with normal capacities for moral action.

As the philosopher Peter Strawson (1919-2006) has claimed, seeing someone as responsible means taking them seriously as a person capable of adhering to moral values, and reacting to his wrongdoings with blaming attitudes like resentment.⁴ This would mean that in “Innocent” the protagonist does not see any reason for resentment, and so no need for forgiveness, since the wrongdoer’s actions do not carry enough moral significance. If the wrongdoer does not understand the moral norms he violated, and the wrong cannot be demeaning, then there is no need for resentment. In this way, the protagonist of the song would dismiss the wrongdoing, just like you would dismiss the wrongdoings of a child. You would let it slide, because they were not responsible for what they did.

Is this really what Taylor means when telling the wrongdoer that he is “still an innocent”? Does she consider Kanye as childlike, as if he doesn’t understand what he was doing, as if he is not a responsible person? If so, then Taylor would be unrealistic and unkind in her understanding of the situation. But if Taylor does not regard Kanye as a child, then perhaps she is deliberately condescending. This, however, does not seem to fit the character of who she was at the time. In the *Miss Americana* documentary, Swift speaks of her desperate need to be liked, and says that her “entire moral code as a kid and now is a need to be thought of as good.”⁵ Even though we cannot fully exclude the possibility, it seems implausible that the same girl who claims she needs to be thought of as good, would intentionally write a song with condescending lyrics. So, to be charitable, let’s see if we can find other interpretations of what is going on in this song.

Moving on Without Forgiveness

Here is another, more charitable way to interpret the song as not an instance of forgiveness: perhaps the protagonist acknowledges the wrongdoer’s responsibility, but chooses not to forgive him, by distancing herself from the wrongdoer and his action. There are ways in which we might overcome resentment, or not feel resentment in the first place, without forgiving. Not every instance of overcoming resentment is also an instance of forgiveness. Your resentment might wither away over time, or you might forget what happened to you, without any decision involved. Or you might decide to let go of the resentment because it is just too exhausting to hold on to it. If the resentment is a risk to your mental health, you might relinquish it for your own benefit, while also fully accepting that you have not forgiven the other person, and that they were responsible for the wrongdoing.

Taylor seems to understand this pretty well, at least by now. In an interview in 2019—ten years after the VMA incident—when asked about her habit of addressing the haters in her songs, she said: “People go on and on about you have to forgive and forget to move past

something. No, you don't. [...] You just become indifferent and then you move on."⁶ A paradigmatic example of this in her discography is "I Forgot That You Existed." There she describes that, after a wrongdoer was living "rent-free" in her mind for a long time, one magical night she just became indifferent towards him, moving on without forgiving.

Sometimes we can take on a detached perspective from which we don't experience resentment. In his essay "Freedom and Resentment," the philosopher Strawson describes different conditions that may lead us to modify or suspend our resentment and other reactive attitudes.⁷ One condition might be that the wrongdoer is an innocent—a child or anyone else who does not yet understand fully the moral norms that govern our social world. In that case, we adopt an "objective attitude" toward the person—holding back our emotional involvement, and seeing them from a detached point of view.

Sometimes, though, we shift our attitude even in the case of mature adults. We have this "resource," as Strawson calls it, and sometimes use it as a refuge "from the strains of involvement."⁸ As the contemporary philosopher Pamela Hieronymi explains in her analysis of Strawson's essay, sometimes the emotional effort of engaging with certain people is too much, or we are too exhausted to respond with resentment, so we disengage for our own self-protection.⁹ Even though we notice that someone is a responsible adult, we might still take on an objective attitude for our own sake. This kind of attitude is reflected in "I Forgot That You Existed," when Taylor sings, "it was so nice / So peaceful and quiet / I forgot that you existed / It isn't love, it isn't hate, it's just indifference."

This is not, however, what seems to be going on in "Innocent." There is no sign of indifference or disengagement. And the two songs also couldn't be more different musically. While the indifference described in "I Forgot That You Existed" is accompanied by cheerful and fun sounds, "Innocent" is a gentle pop ballad, which Taylor delivers in a tender voice sounding full of sympathy. What's reflected in the music as well as the lyrics, is not a

detached attitude, but rather a protagonist who deeply cares about the wrongdoer, and wants to comfort him: “It’s alright, just wait and see / Your string of lights is still bright to me / Oh, who you are is not where you’ve been / You’re still an innocent.”

From the analysis so far, then, the critical claim that “Innocent” merely contains “slams disguised as forgiveness” does not fit well with what is going on in the lyrics and music of the song. There is no sign of Taylor as detached and moving on without forgiveness. It also does not seem that Taylor intended to condescendingly compare Kanye to a child who cannot be held responsible. We cannot, of course, be sure about this. It is still possible that Taylor was condescending, even if maybe not intentionally. However, it’s possible that “Innocent” can also be seen as a plausible instance of forgiveness.

“Today Is Never Too Late to Be Brand New”

If “Innocent” involves forgiveness, then we need to be clearer about what happens when someone forgives. What is the process the victim goes through? Forgiveness must happen without giving up the judgment that the action was wrong—nothing about forgiving should signal to the wrongdoer that his action was right or permissible after all. What must change, however, is the victim’s view of the wrongdoer. The philosopher Jean Hampton (1954-1996) claimed that the forgiver must have a “change of heart” towards the wrongdoer.¹⁰ According to Hampton, the forgiver changes her judgment about the person and stops seeing him as a “rotten” human being. This does not mean that she condones his action or his bad character traits. But, overall, she sees him as someone who is still capable of acting morally, with the wrong act not defining who he is. Through the decision to see the wrongdoer in a new, more favorable light, the victim rids herself of feelings like resentment, hatred, or indignation.¹¹

This should sound familiar. It’s almost as if the forgiver would tell the wrongdoer, as Taylor does, that “Your string of lights is still bright to me,” or, “Who you are is not what you did,” and, “Today is never too late to be brand new.” Throughout “Innocent,” the protagonist

still sees the wrongdoer as a decent person, who is not defined by his past wrongs. Thus, when Taylor apparently tells Kanye that he is still growing up, or an innocent, we probably shouldn't understand it literally. Instead we should see it as her telling him that, despite what he did, she thinks that he is still sufficiently decent and his character is not determined by his past mistakes.

So, in order to forgive, we need to remove the wrong act as evidence of the person's character—we need to separate the person from his wrong action. How and why do we do this?

Repentance and Our Common Human Nature

The most obvious reason for separating our assessment of a person's character from the wrong act that they have performed is that the wrongdoer repents his action. When the wrongdoer distances himself from the action and condemns it too, he signals that he now respects the moral value that he violated, and we can reasonably let go of our resentment. By apologizing or making-up for the wrong action, the wrongdoer lets us know that he also does not consider the action to be representative of who he is.

It's not clear if this applies to "Innocent" and the Kanye incident. At least the wrongdoer in "Innocent" seems to show some feelings of regret: "Did some things you can't speak of / But at night you live it all again." As outsiders to the situation, we cannot know if Kanye repented his action. He apologized publicly to Taylor on his blog, and on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* shortly after the incident. However, apologizing (the communicative act of admitting to having violated a norm) does not necessarily mean that the wrongdoer also repents. The apology could be insincere, and it's not clear if Kanye's apology was—Kanye took back his apology in 2013 saying that he "didn't have one regret," and apologized merely because he had "fallen to peer pressure."¹² Of course, Taylor couldn't foresee this at the time

of writing “Innocent” and could have taken his apology as sincere (which maybe it was in 2009, who knows?)

What if we are not sure if the wrongdoer repents? Should we still forgive them? It’s important to clarify something about the nature of forgiveness. The possibility or legitimacy of forgiveness does not depend on the wrongdoer but on the person who has been wronged. Forgiveness is possible and even admirable whether or not the wrongdoer repents. Forgiveness cannot be demanded, but is a deliberate choice made by the victim—something like a gift. In “Innocent” Taylor sings, “You’ll have new Septembers / Everyone of us has messed up too [...] / I hope you remember / Today is never too late to be brand new.” Here the protagonist empathizes with the wrongdoer by acknowledging that we all have made mistakes in the past. Contemporary philosophers Eve Garrard and David McNaughton explain the underlying thought that might be behind these lyrics. They argue that the reason for forgiving even an unrepentant wrongdoer is our common human nature, “and hence our shared human frailty and fallibility.”¹³ The recognition that we also have acted wrongly in the past, and will probably be wrongdoers in the future too who will be in need of forgiveness, gives us a reason of reciprocity to forgive others. Having this in mind, it is plausible to see “Innocent” as an instance of forgiveness.

However, we could still doubt how sincere forgiveness is when it is publicly announced by performing a song. Someone could suspect that “Innocent” was all about self-promotion and showcasing moral superiority, instead of genuine forgiveness. However, in the Taylor-Kanye case, public forgiveness makes sense. The wrongdoing happened publicly, Kanye was blamed by the public, and he publicly apologized. So, it was also important for Taylor to communicate the forgiveness publicly, so that not just the two parties but also the emotionally invested fans could move on. (And, given that Taylor is known for channeling her personal experiences into her music, people expected her to do this through song.)

When we decide to forgive a wrongdoer, we don't change our judgment that he was responsible for the wrong, but we change our perception of the person, and this change of perception can be transformative. By ceasing to see the past as significant, we no longer see the person as someone who has wronged us, and we also no longer see ourselves as victims. This enables us as well as the wrongdoer (along with everyone else involved) to move forward and, as Taylor reminds us, to "be brand new."

¹ See: Leslie Gornstein, "Preach it! Taylor Swift fools (almost) everyone," *Los Angeles Times*, September 13, 2010, at <https://www.latimes.com/archives/blogs/ministry-of-gossip/story/2010-09-13/preach-it-taylor-swift-fools-almost-everyone>; Jonathan Keefe, "Taylor Swift: Speak Now," *Slant Magazine*, October 25, 2010, at <https://www.slantmagazine.com/music/taylor-swift-speak-now/>; Jon Caramanica, "At MTV Awards, Taylor vs. Kanye Part 2," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2010, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/13/arts/music/13mtv.html>.

² On the challenge of combining subjectivity and objectivity in aesthetic theory, see Alex King, "Response-Dependence and Aesthetic Theory," in Christopher Howard and R. A. Rowland eds., *Fittingness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2022), 309-326.

³ Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 25.

⁴ Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962), reprinted in Pamela Hieronymi, *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 107-133.

⁵ Lana Wilson, "Miss Americana," (United States: Tremolo Productions, 2020).

⁶ Taylor Swift, "Taylor Swift on 'Lover' and haters," interview by Tracy Smith, *CBS News*, August 25, 2019, at <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/taylor-swift-on-lover-and-haters/>.

⁷ Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 107-133.

⁸ Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 116.

⁹ Pamela Hieronymi, *Freedom, Resentment, and the Metaphysics of Morals*, 11.

¹⁰ Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 83.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 83-87.

¹² John Caramanica, "Behind Kanye's Mask," *The New York Times*, June 11, 2013, at https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/16/arts/music/kanye-west-talks-about-his-career-and-album-yeezus.html?pagewanted=2&_r=0.

¹³ Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "Conditional Unconditional Forgiveness," in Christel Fricke ed., *The Ethics of Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 103.