**From Proto-Forgiveness to Minimal Forgiveness**

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In ‘Forgiveness, an Ordered Pluralism’, Fricker argues there are broadly two concepts of forgiveness deployed: *moral justice* forgiveness and *gifted* forgiveness. She then argues that the former is more conceptually fundamental than the latter.

We argue that Fricker’s contention there is a plurality of concepts of forgiveness is supported by recent research in experimental philosophy that probed the folk concept of forgiveness amongst U.S. residents. We also argue there is an even more “minimal” concept of forgiveness in the population: a concept on which *x* can forgive *y* for *z*, even if *x* was not wronged by *y*’s performing *z*, and hence even if *z* does not repent, and *x* does not believe that *z* repents. We will call this concept: *minimal forgiveness.* We then argue, contra Fricker, that this concept has a good claim to be considered the most fundamental; though in a somewhat different sense than the one she articulates.

**1. Evidence of Conceptual Pluralism**

Recently, Latham, Miller, Norton and Russell (ms) aimed to determine which of six forgiveness cues were taken by U.S. participants to be more, or less important, for forgiveness to have taken place. They tested participants’ use of the concept of forgiveness by presenting them with vignettes and asking them whether one party described in the vignette, forgave the other party. The forgiveness cues tested were: (a) the victim having, or not having, anger as a result of the perpetrator’s wrongdoing and (b) the victim directing, or not directing, resentment towards the perpetrator as a result of the perpetrator’s wrongdoing and (c) the victim working though, or not, the negative emotion and reactive attitudes and identifying their source and (d) the victim intending, or not, to punish the perpetrator and (d) the victim justifiably believing, or not, the perpetrator to be remorseful and (e) the perpetrator’s being, or not being, remorseful.

Latham et al’s results suggest that there is no shared, univocal, concept of forgiveness deployed amongst participants. They found that there was variability in the relative importance of forgiveness cues, not just in magnitude of importance, but also in direction: whether a cue counted *for* or *against* forgiveness having taken place. Overall, they found participants, by and large, held that giving up anger, resentment, and believing the perpetrator has repented, to be relatively important for determining whether a scenario was one in which forgiveness occurred. Since all three of these forgiveness cues are ones that many philosophers have thought to be important, this goes at least some way towards vindicating some of their intuitions.

Further, while intending not to punish was found overall to be weighted just as important as giving up anger and believing the perpetrator has repented, unlike other forgiveness cues it was weighted negatively. This suggests intending not to punish counts *against* forgiveness having taken place. Finally, the victim working through their negative emotion and reactive attitudes and identifying their source, and the perpetrator being remorseful, were weighted least important.

But what of the variability? Despite overall results, Latham et al found large variability between each participant in their weighting of the forgiveness cues. Only the forgiveness cue of giving up resentment was found to be important to the majority of participants (62.9%). Giving up anger (52.6%), believing the perpetrator has repented (49%), and intending not to punish (50.5% were important to only half of the participants. Finally, the victim working through their negative emotion and reactive attitudes and identifying their source (17.5%) and the perpetrator being remorseful (12.9%) were important to only a minority of participants.

Latham et al concluded that this is *prima facie* evidence in favour of the kind of conceptual pluralism defended by Fricker.

This study also provides some support for the specific claim that there are concepts of forgiveness that are something like what Fricker calls moral justice forgiveness and gifted forgiveness. For instance, only 12.9% of participants weight the remorse of the perpetrator to be important for forgiveness to have taken place. Hence most participants seem to deploy a concept of gifted forgiveness, while a minority seem to deploy something closer to a concept of moral justice forgiveness.

One limitation of this study is that it was not able to test the effects of interactions involving more than one forgiveness cue, something that future research could address.

**2. Minimal Forgiveness**

We argue that there is a minimal concept of forgiveness—*minimal forgiveness*—on which *x* can forgive *y* for *z*, even if *x* was not wronged by *y*’s performing *z*, and hence even if *z* does not repent, and *x* does not believe that *z* repents.

Most philosophers think that minimal forgiveness is *not* forgiveness at all. That’s because there is broad agreement that forgiveness is something that can *only* occur after a victim judges that she has been wronged. Indeed, according to many philosophers, what distinguishes forgiving from excusing, forgetting, and justifying, is that after she has forgiven the perpetrator, the victim still judges that the action was wrong and that the perpetrator was culpable. (Kolnai 1973, 1974; Murphy 1988; Hieronymi 2001; Griswold 2007; Allais 2008; Pettigrove 2012). The persistence of these judgments is almost universally agreed to be necessary for forgiveness (though see Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2002 for a rare conflicting view).

We will consider two sources of evidence that people deploy the concept of minimal forgiveness, and in doing so take themselves to be deploying a concept of *forgiveness*. We then argue that this concept has a good claim to be considered the most fundamental, along some dimension of fundamentality.

**2.1 Evidence from Evil**

Unfortunately, the study by Latham et al held fixed that the perpetrator had performed a moral wrong and was blameworthy for that wrong. So, their work does not shed any light on whether participants took the presence of culpability, on the part of the perpetrator, to be essential to forgiveness.

There is, however, other empirical research that suggests that people deploy a concept of minimal forgiveness. For instance, Latham, Miller and Norton (2019) investigated the folk concept of evil (amongst U.S. residents) and found only ~25% of participants held that it was necessary for an action to count as evil that the perpetrator was culpable. ~75% of participants responded that an action was evil even if the perpetrator’s action was accidental. If the existence (and persistence) of culpability judgments is necessary for forgiveness, then it is conceptually impossible for any of these latter participants to *forgive* any ‘accidental’ evil actions: at best they can be justified, or excused. For one can only forgive actions one believes to be culpably performed, and this class of evil action is not believed to be culpably performed. *Prima facie,* however, it seems plausible that if *any* action counts as one that can be forgiven, rather than justified or excused, it will be an evil action. So, while this is only weak evidence, it is evidence nonetheless, that at least some people deploy a minimal concept of forgiveness.

**2.2 Evidence from Ethology**

Another reason to suppose that people deploy a concept of minimal forgiveness comes from ethology research. This research also provides reason to think that this concept has a claim to be the most fundamental of the cluster of folk forgiveness concepts.

Seminally, Trivers (1971) suggested that *punishment* would be expected to evolve amongst social animals as a way to prevent cheating, and that *apology* would evolve as a way to prevent disruption to important social relationships. It was not until some years later that ethologists in fact observed punishment and apology, and saw conciliatory behaviours in the wake of inter-personal conflicts. These behaviours have become known as *reconciliation* behaviours. These behaviours have been observed in more than two dozen primate species (de Waal & van Roosmalen 1979; de Waal 1989; Clutton-Brock and Parker 1995; Cords 1997; Aureli and de Waal 2000). They have also been observed in feral sheep (Rowell & Rowell 1993) in domestic goats (Schino 1998) in spotted hyenas (Hofer & East 2000) and in bottle noted dolphins (Samuels and Flaherty 2000). It seems clear that these reconciliation behaviours bear some important connection to forgiveness, although exactly what that connection is, remains contested.

We argue that these behaviours are evidence of a *proto*-concept of minimal forgiveness (or perhaps even evidence of a concept of minimal forgiveness itself) among these species.

To see why this is, Triver’s suggestion that punishment evolved to decrease cheating has been expanded to a more general suggestion that it evolved to impose costs on a “harmdoer” by a victim (McCullough, Kurzban and Tabak 2013). This is in order to deter both the harmdoer, and other observers, from imposing similar downstream harms on the victim. In this sense, something counts as a *harm* just in case the victim incurs some cost so that the harmdoer can attain some benefit. Here, for simplicity, we suppose that a victim will conceive of the harm as involving a wrongdoing only if both (a) the harm is believed to be deliberate and (b) the harm is believed to contravene some social norm (such as a norm against stealing food, or a mate).

While many harms can be expected to be conceived, on the part of the victim, as involving wrongdoing, they need not all do so. It is the harms that are not conceived as involving wrongdoing that are of interest to us. For these harms will often be followed by punishment, apology, and reconciliation behaviours. We should expect them to be followed by punishment, since regardless of whether or not said harms were wrongdoings, there is evolutionary pressure for victims to impose costs to deter future such harms. Further, there is also reason to expect there to be reconciliation behaviours after interchanges. Reconciliation behaviours evolved both to facilitate short-term objectives that require co-operation, to enjoy the benefits of group living, and to preserve important social relationships (Aureli 1997; Silk 2002). In sum, then, we should expect there to sometimes be reconciliation behaviours after one party harms another, but not as a result of wrongdoing. If these reconciliation behaviours are evidence that the animals in question have a concept, or proto-concept, or forgiveness, then this gives us reason to think that they have a proto-concept (or concept) of *minimal* *forgiveness*.

**2.3 Reconciliation and Forgiveness**

Ethologists typically do not identify reconciliation with forgiveness. That is because, they reason, it is not possible to determine whether animals engaged in reconciliatory behaviours are merely acting *as though* they no longer harbour ill-feelings, as opposed to actually no longer harbouring those feelings (de Waal and Pokorny 2005). While we agree that the two ought not be identified, we think that the former provides us with very strong reason to think that these animals possess at least a proto-concept of forgiveness, and that the presence of such behaviours, on any particular occasion, is good, though defeasible, evidence that that concept has been deployed. First, there is good reason to think that in general, the presence of these reconciliatory behaviours is accompanied by the removal of ill-feeling. Evidence shows that reconciliatory behaviours are typically modulated by emotions and that these behaviours are likely associated with changes in emotion that correspond to the cessation of aggressive feelings (see Aureli 1997). So, in general, the presence of such behaviours is evidence regarding the underlying affective state of the animals involved.

That being so, it seems likely that reconciliation behaviours are frequently accompanied by affective states which, jointly, constitute at least *proto*-forgiveness. Indeed, while many ethologists have declined to talk about forgiveness amongst animals, focussing only on reconciliation, others have been happy to describe animal interactions in these terms. For instance, Bekoff (2002) argues that social play involves, *inter alia*, apologising and forgiving, while Wilson (2002) argues that forgiveness is a complex biological adaptation that “extends throughout the animal kingdom” (p 195).

If this is right, then given what we have argued so far about the conditions under which reconciliation behaviours occur, it follows that animals sometimes deploy a concept, or proto-concept of minimal forgiveness.

**2.4 Minimal Forgiveness as Fundamental**

It is very plausible that the concept, or proto-concept, of forgiveness found amongst many social animals is the evolutionary pre-cursor of the concept found amongst humans (de Waal and Pokorny 2005). Perhaps what is found amongst these animals is a proto-concept, which in humans becomes a full-blooded concept. It seems very likely that, given the sorts of pressures on early human populations and their ancestors, they can be expected to deploy a concept of minimal forgiveness that is very similar to the concept, or proto-concept, deployed by other social animals. Given that, it is plausible that the first concept of forgiveness deployed amongst humans was this minimal concept. It is this sense in which we think this concept has a claim to be the most fundamental. (Notice that this is not the same sense of conceptual fundamentality that Fricker has in mind, and the concept of minimal forgiveness being fundamental in this sense *might* be consistent with it not being conceptually fundamental in Fricker’s sense).

If that is right, then we should think of the various pluralistic concepts of forgiveness we now find in the population—including those articulated by Fricker—as the result of modifications to this more evolutionarily early concept. It is easy to see why it would be useful for very socially sophisticated animals, like humans, to deploy a range of forgiveness concepts that are sensitive to a range of different social factors. Hence it is easy to see why such concepts would arise (perhaps, in some cases, as the result of evolutionary pressures).

For instance, it is easy to see why it would be advantageous to have a concept which is sensitive not only to whether the action of the perpetrator was a wrongdoing, but also, to whether the perpetrator is repentant or not. For evidence regarding repentance can provide the victim with evidence regarding future probabilities of the perpetrator engaging in similar harmful actions towards the victim. This, then, provides reason to deploy a concept of moral justice forgiveness. It is also easy to see why a concept of gifted forgiveness would be useful in such societies. This is a concept which is sensitive to the wrongdoing of the perpetrator, but which allows there to be forgiveness on the part of the victim, absent any evidence of repentance. Such a concept will be advantageous for victims when the threat of losing important social relationships with the perpetrator outweighs any advantage of avoiding future harms, and makes it rational to engage in gifted forgiveness. In both cases, we can see how it might be that more fine-grained, complex, concepts of forgiveness could arise in early, more sophisticated, human societies, from a simpler concept of minimal forgiveness.

We think that gives us reason (albeit defeasible) to suppose that there is still a concept of minimal forgiveness amongst human populations, and that this concept is the evolutionarily more fundamental.

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