**From Proto-Forgiveness to Minimal Forgiveness**

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**1. Introduction**

In ‘Forgiveness, an Ordered Pluralism’, Fricker distinguishes two concepts of forgiveness, both of which are deployed in our forgiveness practices: *moral justice* forgiveness and *gifted* forgiveness. She then argues that the former is more explanatorily basic than the latter. We think Fricker is right about this. We will argue, however, that contra Fricker, it is a third more minimal concept that is most basic. Like Fricker, we will focus on the function of our practices, but in a way that is informed by research in ethology (research which seeks to explain the function of animal behaviour and determine how these behaviours evolved).

We follow Fricker in pursuing a sort of genealogical cum functionalist methodology for determining which concept is most basic. However, rather than appealing only to a genealogical and functionalist story that emerges when we begin by considering humans in relatively complex social settings, instead we develop a functionalist story that, we argue, emerges if we take a wider view of the phenomena of forgiveness: if we focus on the role that concept plays not only in very early human societies, but in our closest ancestors. In this regard, we take an ethological approach to the origin of human concepts and practices, in which we attempt to determine what function a concept has, by appealing to the function of that concept (or proto-concept) as it is deployed by both early humans and other social animals. The more basic concept we identify is then the one that humans share with other social animals, with more derivative concepts being concepts that develop later, in response to evolutionary pressures that arise in more socially sophisticated societies.

We argue that the moral justice concept is derivative on this more basic concept. Then, following Fricker, we hold that the concept of gifted forgiveness is derivative on the concept of moral justice (and ergo derivative on the concept of minimal forgiveness). Hence, we defend an ordered pluralism, but one on which there are (at least) three concepts of forgiveness, including a minimal concept which is basic and shared with other social animals.

**2. Minimal Forgiveness**

In what follows we make some assumptions. First, we assume that there are multiple concepts of forgiveness that are deployed in the population (though we won’t take a stand on how many, or their content). Then, like Fricker, we take our task to be adjudicating which of these concepts is explanatorily most basic (henceforth, just most basic). We take there to be evidence for the assumption of conceptual pluralism arising from Kearns and Fincham (2004); Friesen and Fletcher (2007), and Latham, Miller, Norton and Russell (ms). Indeed, jointly these studies suggest that there are *at least* the two concepts Fricker articulates: gifted forgiveness and moral justice forgiveness.

Like Fricker, we will suppose that a set of practices, and an associated concept, is explanatorily more basic if in some good sense it is the paradigm case, and other practices and their associated concepts can be explained as derivative on those practices. As Fricker puts it “we present a hypothesis about what the paradigm practice of X is like—i.e. the form of the practice that we hypothesise as displaying its most basic point and purpose—and we then test out the hypothesis by seeing if we can plausibly represent other, non-paradigm forms of the practice as derivative. They may, for instance, display the same distinctive point and purpose—play the same basic role in moral life—but in a dependent, and perhaps deceptively obscured form.”

We will assume that human psychology is continuous with that of closely related (and in some cases not so closely related) animals, and look at the role analogous practices play for these animals. Our contention is that if there is some shared set of practices across closely related species then it is plausible that *these* practices are paradigm, and other practices are derivative.

In what follows we argue that research from ethology, which looks at the role that certain practices play amongst social animals, suggests that amongst such animals there is what we call a minimal concept of forgiveness. That is 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 then argue that if we follow Fricker’s methodology and hypothesise that early humans deployed this concept, and that it remains part of our conceptual repertoire, we can explain more sophisticated concepts of forgiveness as derivative on this concept. In particular, we can explain how the moral justice concept is derivative on this concept. Since Fricker has already argued that the gifted forgiveness concept is derivative on the moral justice concept, if we accept her arguments we get a new ordered pluralism that looks like Fricker’s, except at the bottom lies an even more basic concept.

**3. Evidence from Ethology**

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 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), domestic goats (Schino 1998), spotted hyenas (Hofer & East 2000), and bottle noted dolphins (Samuels and Flaherty 2000). This list is far from exhaustive. It seems plausible that these reconciliation behaviours bear some important connection to forgiveness, although exactly what that connection is, remains contested.

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).

What is the content of this concept? That is difficult to say; but we can focus on the practices that accompany the deployment of the concept.

Recently, 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). Punishment deters both the harmdoer, and other observers, from imposing similar downstream harms on the victim. Apology signals that the harm-doer does not intend to continue to bring about some harm, and reconciliation behaviours facilitate short-term objectives that require co-operation, facilitate the benefits of group living, and preserve important social relationships (Aureli 1997; Silk 2002). So these practices, jointly, have at their core a three-way function: they aim to minimise downstream harms (punishment); to signal that further harms will not be forthcoming (apology); and to restore social relationships either for short-term or longer-term benefit (reconciliation). We will call the concept, or proto-concept, that accompanies these practices *minimal forgiveness.*

Importantly, we see no reason to suppose that minimal forgiveness requires that the victim (or social group) view these harms as wrongdoings (where we assume that wrongdoing involves, at least, contravening some social norm). While no doubt sometimes harms are wrongdoings, one party can harm another and benefit themselves without this counting as a wrongdoing. Punishment of the perpetrator by the victim need not be conceived of as a response to wrongdoing, but rather, as a tool to deter further harm. Similarly, apology on the part of the ‘perpetrator’ can amount to no more than a signal that such harms will not be perpetrated again, rather than repentance for some wrongdoing. So, while this minimal concept of forgiveness is a concept that accompanies social practices surrounding harms, apologies, and reconciliations, it need not involve more heavy-weight practices or concepts involving wrongdoings and repentances.

**4. Minimal Forgiveness as Basic**

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). That is because the evolutionary pressures that resulted in emergence of the concept, or proto-concept, of forgiveness are shared by social animals including early human populations and their ancestors. Thus, early human populations and their ancestors can be expected to deploy a concept of minimal forgiveness that is similar to the concept, or proto-concept, deployed by other social animals (Bekoff, 2002; Wilson 2003). As David Sloan Wilson notes about forgiveness, “Our big brains might allow us to play the social game better than other creatures, but we are playing the same game. The days of thinking of our species as categorically different from the rest of the animal kingdom, at least in these respects, are over.” (p 192). Given that, it is plausible that the first concept of forgiveness deployed amongst early humans was this minimal concept.

Following Fricker’s suggestion, let’s hypothesise that this is so, and see whether we can explain the rest of our practices as derivative on the set of practices that accompany that minimal concept. We think we can sketch the beginnings of an account on which moral justice forgiveness, and associated practices, are derivative on such a concept.

The natural place to start is to suppose that more sophisticated practices associated with moral justice forgiveness are departures from the simpler practices associated with minimal forgiveness. The crucial departure seems to lie in the role of repentance. As social groups become more complex, and as their conceptual repertoire grows, it comes to matter whether an apology signal is merely a signal that subsequent harms will not be perpetrated, or a signal that the perpetrator takes him/herself to have engaged in wrongdoing, and to have repented. Evidence regarding repentance can be better evidence regarding future probabilities of the perpetrator engaging in similar harmful actions since it can provide the victim with evidence about the character of the perpetrator. Character information provides better predictive resources regarding the behaviour of the perpetrator across a wider range of contexts (Ohtsubo and Watanabe 2009).

In addition, as societies become more complex they inevitably develop more, and more complex, norms surrounding behaviour. The concepts of wrongdoing and repentance, and associated practices, become important in order to police these norms. Social norms are much more effective at regulating behaviour when members of a society internalise those norms and self-regulate. Recently, Whitehouse et al. (2019; though see also Atkinson, Latham & Watts 2015) found, using coded records from 414 societies over the past 10 000 years from 30 world regions, that standardized ritual practices are associated with the emergence of large complex societies, and large complex societies are associated with the emergence of beliefs about moralizing gods: supernatural agents that care about cooperation between strangers. These beliefs are considered important as they are thought by some theorists to have been necessary for sustaining cooperation between large numbers of unrelated individuals before the emergence of secular institutions (Norenzayan et al. 2016). Norm-breaking in the context of moralised beliefs can be expected to induce states like guilt, remorse, and repentance, which more effectively police behaviour.

Hence we agree with Fricker that moral justice forgiveness is important because of the role that it plays in society. It is just that we think that the practices surrounding that role are more sophisticated departures from simpler practices, and that those more complex practices emerge as social groups become larger and more complex.

We also think Fricker makes a good case that gifted forgiveness is derivative on moral justice forgiveness. If gifted forgiveness is forgiveness in which the victim is sensitive to the *wrongdoing* of the perpetrator, but chooses to forgive the perpetrator whilst *representing* that the perpetrator is not repentant, this is an even more sophisticated concept than moral justice forgiveness. Unlike minimal forgiveness, gifted forgiveness involves conceiving of the perpetrator’s harms in a particular way—as wrongdoings—and conceiving of the perpetrator as not being repentant (rather than conceiving of the perpetrator as signalling, through apology, a lack of intention to perpetrate similar harms).

As Fricker notes, this kind of gifted forgiveness clearly plays important roles in our society. Like Fricker, we are inclined to think that this concept, and the suite of accompanying practices, is derivative on the concept of moral justice forgiveness. Indeed, to have the concept of gifted forgiveness, as we’ve articulated it here, requires having the concept of moral justice forgiveness.

Our contention is that Fricker is right that there is an ordered pluralism of concepts of forgiveness: there is a most basic concept, the minimal concept, and the moral justice concept is derivative on that concept, with the gifted forgiveness concept being derivative on that concept. Having said that, we are not suggesting that all concepts of forgiveness can be put into a total ordering in this way. We suspect there may be more concepts than just these three, and it is possible that although they are all derivative on the most basic concept, some might be ‘equally basic’, that is, they might not be derived from the moral justice concept or from one another. So, we don’t take ourselves to have said enough to defend an ordered pluralism, though we do think there is reason to embrace a *partially ordered pluralism.*

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