

## Forgiveness, Affect and Cognition

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### Abstract

This chapter explains how two seemingly unrelated theories in the fields of morality and emotion conspire to make the notion of forgiveness seem (doubly) impossible. The discussion of the paradoxical nature of forgiveness is followed by a proposal about the relation between affect and cognition which reconciles conflicting claims and vindicates the coherence of the notion of forgiveness.

**Key Words:** Forgiveness, moral terms, emotion.

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### 1. Introduction

I want to propose an answer to the fundamental question of whether forgiveness is possible. Some modern and contemporary authors find the notion problematic to the point of being almost logically incoherent. Problems can often be traced to these two ideas which together are commonly taken to be definitive of forgiveness. Firstly, forgiveness implies that some unjustified wrong has been committed. Secondly, forgiveness requires, at a minimum, overcoming resentment and other negative feelings caused by the wrong-doing.

Here is a sample of the questions which tend to problematize forgiveness. How can we make sense of 'ceasing to hold an action against someone while continuing to regard it as wrong and as attributed to the perpetrator in the way which is necessary for there to be something to forgive?'<sup>1</sup> 'How can you absolve someone from guilt and still remain committed to the idea that his actions were wrong and unacceptable?'<sup>2</sup>

I have no wish to problematize forgiveness further. I plan to dwell on what I take to be the root cause which makes forgiveness problematic: a perceived tension between judging that someone has done one wrong, and the imperative to end the negative feelings that are aroused by the wrong-doing.

### 2. Theorizing the Tension

There are two widely-discussed theories that stand to make good sense of the tension at the heart of the notion of forgiveness. They also seem to guarantee that the tension can never be resolved, so that one must either give up forgiveness as an internally incoherent notion, or else give up both of these widely-discussed and popular theories. These two theories are Expressivism and the Cognitive Theory of Emotion (CTE).

Expressivism is commonly understood as the doctrine that 'moral judgments function to express desires, emotions, or pro/con attitudes'.<sup>3</sup> On this account the

judgment that I have been wronged serves to express desires, emotions or con attitudes that I feel as a result of what happened to me. These could include a desire to retaliate, an emotion of anger or resentment, and other 'con' attitudes such as hatred, grudging, or contempt.

According to (CTE), emotions are not blind, dumb, non-cognitive feelings. On the contrary, they are judgments, appraisals of matters of value. According to Martha Nussbaum, one does not first believe that one has suffered a great loss and then, as a result, one feels sad. 'The real, complete recognition of [the terrible] event... *is* the upheaval.'<sup>4</sup> According to Solomon, emotions are judgments, so that 'my anger is my judgment that John has wronged me.'<sup>5</sup>

Taken together or separately, Expressivism and (CTE) pull asunder the two ideas that together purport to define forgiveness. Expressivism takes the first part of the definition and turns it into something that is incompatible with foregoing resentment and other negative feelings. As long as you judge that you have been wronged, you will continue to resent. (CTE) takes the second part of the definition of forgiveness and turns it into something that is incompatible with the judgment that one has been wronged. If you cease to resent, you cease to judge that you have been wronged. Hence we must either give up the notion of forgiveness, or else give up both of these two theories which seem to turn forgiveness into an impossible notion. None of this seems easy.

The solution that I want to suggest is that it is both possible and plausible to conceive of moral judgments and emotions in a way that saves the notion of forgiveness by preserving both the cognitive and affective components presupposed by this notion. These revisions will have consequences for Expressivism and (CTE) which we have no time to consider here.

### **3. Perceiving and Emoting: Analogies**

Because I believe that a resolution of the problem of forgiveness can be reached only within a broader framework that relates affectivity and cognition, I will start by exploring analogies between emoting and other states of mind, in particular perceiving, to which emoting has often been compared.

It is, of course, a familiar fact that we often express emotional states by using propositional attitude constructions similar to those we use in the case of sense perception. One says 'I am afraid that the dog is going to bite' and 'I see that the dog is approaching rapidly.' Direct object constructions are also possible in both cases. One sees the dog and fears it. In both cases something like the notion of illusion can be found. Just as one 'sees' the half-submerged stick as bent, one can feel afraid that one is going to fall, even though one does not believe one is in danger of falling.<sup>6</sup>

It is also not unusual to take emoting to be analogous to believing, judging, or appraising things as being thus and so. In fact, the whole point of certain versions of (CTE) is to say that emotions are just beliefs or judgments of this sort.

But what would provide a better model for emoting, judging or perceiving? I think the answer must be the latter. This is not just because emoting can take place (in infants and brutes) at a level where only perception is mainly operative, but also because 'content' in both emoting and perceiving is presented with a character (quality) that seems entirely lacking in the case of belief or judgment. In the case of perception, this is the phenomenological aspect, which distinguishes *seeing* that these cats are white, and merely judging (perhaps on the basis of trustworthy testimony) that these cats are white. In the case of emoting there are affective qualities which distinguish a state of being afraid from a state of being sad or angry, even though the content of these different states may be the same. No comparable affective or sensuous quality seems to inhere in cases of belief or judgment in general.

Undoubtedly, there is no perceptual aspect to be found in my experience of resentment. But while the feeling of resentment is not the same as the perceptual quality (the quale) we find in perception, I want to suggest that we posit what can be called affective qualia, in analogy to perceptual qualia, to correspond to the wide range of distinguishable feelings that we associate with the different emotions. I will have more to say about 'affective qualia' and the role which they stand to play in the resolution of the problem of forgiveness.

#### 4. Resolving the Paradox

In looking for a way to resolve the problem of forgiveness, I take my cue from an idea which McDowell advances in the course of explaining the relation between mind and the world:

In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes in is that things are thus and so. *That things are thus and so* is the content of the experience and it can also be the content of a judgment: it becomes the content of a judgment if the subject decides to take the experience at face value.... But *that things are thus and so* is also, if one is not misled, an aspect of the layout of the world; it is how things are.<sup>7</sup>

The examples which McDowell uses here relate to facts, perceptions, and judgments. According to McDowell, these can, on occasion, have the same content. But surely one can add to the list. *That things are thus and so* can also be the content of a fear, a hope, or a feeling of approbation or disapprobation (which brings moral judgment within view). In all of these cases there is an intelligible content which is entertained in different ways: on one occasion the content is *thought*, on another, it is *perceived*, or a third occasion it is *affectively felt*.

There is one major difference which sets belief apart. In the cases of emotion and perception one cannot discount the phenomenology. The feeling of resentment

strikes us as being distinct from the belief that we have been wronged. Peter Goldie thinks that the feeling adds content over and above what cold belief provides:

Imagine you are in a zoo, looking at a gorilla grimly loping from left to right in its cage. You are thinking of the gorilla as dangerous, but you do not feel fear, as it seems to be safely behind bars. Then you see that the door to the cage has been left wide open.... [S]uddenly... your way of thinking of the gorilla as dangerous is new; now it is dangerous in an emotionally relevant way for you. *The earlier thought, naturally expressed as 'That gorilla is dangerous', is different in content from the new thought, although this new thought, thought with emotional feeling, might also be naturally expressed in the same words.*<sup>8</sup>  
(Italics added)

Goldie does not make a good case for the idea that we have two thoughts, before and after realizing that the cage door is open. If all we can say is that both are naturally expressible by the words 'That gorilla is dangerous,' then what we have is one, not two thoughts. A thought which is thought with and without emotional feeling is still the same thought. Thinking it with feeling does not add to its content any more than writing something in red affects the meaning of what is written.

We have to find another way to recognize the place of affect in emotion without saying that feeling adds to, or supplements, or complements belief. I think this can be accomplished by extending the analogy between perceiving and emoting, but now in connection with the phenomenological aspects.

Following up on the idea that the content of a belief and the content of a perception can be the same, we ask: exactly how does perceiving get to express the content that the cat is on the mat? Belief employs concepts to say that the cat is on the mat. In the case of sense perception, the only things that are available to function in a cognitive capacity are sense impressions, the discredited sense data of old, or the currently fashionable qualia. If there is to be any cognitive dimension in perceiving, then these sense impressions cannot be devoid of cognitive meaning.

One way to make sense of their role is to take conventional words as their model, which is to model *perceiving* after *saying*. The idea is that in seeing, or seeming to see the cat on the mat, you are 'saying', in the non-verbal language of sense perception, that the cat is on the mat. The *quale*, or sense impression of red, is not an object of your knowledge; nor is it something that serves to lead you to the object which you are seeing. It is the 'natural word' which your sensibility *uses* to say that something is red.<sup>9</sup>

What we propose here is to have a similar understanding of 'affective qualia,' – e.g., the feeling of resentment. Needless to say, we have to keep in mind that there are important differences between sensory qualia of sense experience and the proposed affective qualia of emotional experience. For example, affective qualia do not reveal how things *appear* to be. Fearsome, hateful, or detestable objects do not look any different from other kinds of objects. Still, this does not mean that emotional experiences have no phenomenal character. There is something which is what it is like to feel happy or sad, even if it is very different from what it is like to be seeing red, or smelling roses.

The proposal which we have for resolving the problem of forgiveness begins to take shape now. The pivotal idea is that the feeling of resentment and the judgment that one has been wronged express the same content, pretty much as the feeling of fear affectively 'says' that you are in danger, or as the experience of seeming to see red perceptually 'says' that something is red. In feeling resentful I am 'saying' in the language of affectivity that I have been wronged. And when I judge 'I have been wronged' I use concepts (the language of the 'Understanding') to express the same content.

These two ways are similar and different. The shared content is one obvious similarity, but the interesting difference is the fact that these two ways of entertaining the same content are not necessarily connected. We can agree with Nussbaum that it is often the case the recognition (belief or appraisal) of loss *is* the emotional upheaval, but not in the sense of *identity*; it is just that they often happen together and embody the same content. You discover that your business partner has sold out the business and pocketed all the money. You conceptually judge that you have been wronged. But you also become angry or resentful. Which is to say that you entertain the very same content but now affectively.

It would not be right to identify emotion with belief or appraisal. Even though the content embodied in a feeling and present in a belief may be the same, beliefs are not the same as feelings. With the passage of time, feelings subside, whereas nothing of this kind need happen to beliefs. My belief that my childhood friend cheated me out of our stock of candy some 40 years ago is still present, as clearly as ever. But I have for quite some time now stopped feeling resentful about the whole affair. The recognition is there, but there is no upheaval.

This is how forgiveness is possible then. A culpable wrong is committed and you feel resentful. To forgive the offender is to cease entertaining the content 'You have wronged me' in an effective way, using the language of feelings, that is. But you can, and, to make sense of forgiveness at all, you must indeed retain the belief 'You have wronged me.' The content remains, but the matter of entertaining it becomes purely intellectual, or conceptual.

How does one cease to entertain the content 'You have wronged me' affectively? As many philosophers have said, one can forget the content all together, or one might undergo therapy to get rid of negative feelings for the sake

of psychic health. But there is something else with deserves mention. Human nature is such that feelings tend to decrease in their intensity with the passage of time. Upheavals, and other emotional states would definitely come at a terrible cost if, once they started, they continued unabated. Like bodily stimulations, psychological stimulations lose strength over time. Perhaps this is part of the wisdom to be found in the saying that time heals all wounds. But none of these answers the question of what forgiveness requires in the manner to ceasing to resent.

It is commonly agreed that forgetting and therapeutic overcoming of negative feelings are not compatible with genuine forgiveness. Forgetting has the effect of removing the very memory of the wrong from the mind, so that forgiveness is out of the question, because, subjectively speaking, there is nothing there to forgive. Therapy is like taking a pill in order to become a moral person, which is not convincing. But I am not so sure about the case of 'time heals all wounds'. One might think that the mere cessation of negative feelings does not count as forgiveness. But why is that? Is it because it is not accompanied by an official 'I forgive you'? Or because the wronged party does not struggle with his or her negative feelings in order to overcome them? It is not clear that forgiveness must involve struggle with feelings. If the feelings subside, or seldom recur; if, furthermore, relations are restored, then I see no reason for saying that forgiveness has not occurred, even if there has been no formal declaration of the fact.

Another answer would be to concede that forgiveness requires the cessation of affective judgment as a conscious, wilful effort that does not wait upon the passage of time to heal wounds. This can be insisted upon, but in reality I suspect that forgiveness most often happens the first way. The second way may be the norm for those with strong ethical motivations, or those with whom reasoning carries greater power or efficacy. Saints, or would-be saints, perhaps. But what matters in the end is the forgiveness can take place, that it is possible, after all.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lucy Allais, 'Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness,' *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36(2008): 33-68.

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Joyce, 'Expressivism and Motivation Internalism', *Analysis* 62 (2002): 336-337. Cf. Jeff Wisdom, 'A Defence of Descriptive Moral Content', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* XVII (2009): 285. 'Expressivists claim that moral judgments express propositional attitudes that do not represent or describe the external world'.

<sup>4</sup> Martha Nussbaum, 'Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance', *What is an Emotion?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 282.

<sup>5</sup> Robert C. Solomon, 'Emotion and Choice,' in *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 257.

<sup>6</sup> This is being 'in grip of an emotion' that a child, too little to be held responsible for a misdeed, is guilty. The child 'looks' guilty, but one does not believe that he is. See Robert C. Roberts, 'What an Emotion Is: A Sketch', *The Philosophical Review*, 97 (1988): 201.

<sup>7</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 61.

<sup>9</sup> For an early explanation and advocacy of this way of understanding the cognitive role of sense impressions, see Romane Clark, 'Sensuous Judgments', *Nous* 7 (1973): 45-56.

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