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Is forgiveness openness to reconciliation?

Cathy Mason  and Matt Dougherty

University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK

ABSTRACT


In a recent paper, Strabbing (2020) argues that forgiveness is openness to reconciliation relative to a relationship level. In this paper, we argue that the openness-to-reconciliation account of forgiveness does not constitute an improvement on the forswearing-resentment account. We argue that it does not fit well with our ordinary practices of forgiving and cannot allow for plausible cases of forgiveness without reconciliation. We also argue that the features Strabbing identifies as distinct advantages of her account are features of the forswearing-resentment account as well.

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Peter Strawson's 'Freedom and Resentment' (1962) drew philosophical attention to the reactive attitudes, regarding them as being at the core of our moral practices concerning guilt, blame and responsibility. Alongside this larger project, he also suggested an account of forgiveness that has since become philosophical orthodoxy: that forgiveness is the forswearing of resentment.¹ Jada Strabbing (2020) situates her view of forgiveness in opposition to this orthodoxy. She argues that forgiveness is not merely a matter of forswearing resentment but, moreover, is 'openness to reconciliation' with the person forgiven.

Strabbing identifies two purported advantages of this view. First, she holds that it explains the close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation, since in the right circumstances openness to reconciliation leads to actual reconciliation. Second, she suggests that it is well-placed to explain how it is that cases of forgiveness within a relationship do

CONTACT Cathy Mason  cm865@cam.ac.uk

¹See, among others, McGary (1989), Hieronymi (2001) and Murphy (2003).

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not always result in a return to the prior relationship status, because reconciliation can occur on various 'relationship levels'. Forgiving someone at one relationship level (e.g. as a person), she suggests, is consistent with withholding forgiveness at another (e.g. as a friend), and thus is consistent with failing to reconcile on the level of the more intimate relationship.

In this paper, we argue that the openness-to-reconciliation account of forgiveness does not offer even a necessary condition for forgiveness. One can forgive completely without being open to reconciliation. Moreover, we will suggest that the orthodox view already accounts for the features of forgiveness that Strabbing identifies as advantages of her account and, thus, that the openness-to-reconciliation account does not constitute an improvement on the forswearing-resentment account in either of the respects Strabbing identifies.

Forgiveness as openness to reconciliation

One notable feature of forgiveness is that it often leads to reconciliation between two people previously at odds. When there has been a rift in a relationship caused by one party's wronging the other (or being perceived to have done so), forgiveness can repair the relationship and bring reconciliation. Strabbing takes this to be the key to forgiveness, which she understands as follows:

Openness-to-Reconciliation View: X's forgiving Y for W is X's being open to reconciliation with Y with respect to W. (Strabbing, 533)

In this view, forgiveness is openness to reconciliation, relative to a particular person ('Y') and a particular action ('W'). One could thus forgive someone and be open to reconciliation with them relative to one wrong while withholding forgiveness for another.

Strabbing correctly notes, however, that forgiveness does not always bring about restoration of a relationship, even when the right conditions are in place for reconciliation (e.g. even when the wrongdoer is repentant). If the wrongdoer has sufficiently gravely wronged the victim, then the victim might forgive the wrongdoer but not wish to resume a close or intimate relationship with them. Strabbing explains this by claiming that we forgive on different 'relationship levels': we forgive others, she claims, *as* friends or *as* partners or *as* colleagues, and so on. She thus suggests that it is possible to forgive and be open to reconciliation on one relationship level without being open to reconciliation on some

deeper level – and thus without forgiving on that deeper level. She illustrates this view with an example of a husband who has cheated on his wife:

When the unfaithful and remorseful husband asks for his wife's forgiveness, desiring to maintain their marriage, he seeks reconciliation as spouses. If the wife had replied 'I forgive you', she would have communicated to her husband that she forgives him as her husband and so would have communicated that they are reconciled as spouses. By instead saying 'I forgive you, but I want a divorce', the wife makes clear that she is not forgiving him as a husband but just as a person. In other words, she is open to restoring their relationship to one of good will but is not open to restoring their marriage. (Strabbing, 539)

In this case, the wife is willing to resume general relations of goodwill with her husband but unwilling to resume their spousal relationship. As Strabbing understands it, the wife is thus willing to forgive the husband *as a person*, but not *as her husband*. That is, she is willing to forgive at the shallower but not at the deeper relationship level.

The two distinguishing features of Strabbing's account are thus the claim that forgiveness is constituted by openness to reconciliation and the idea that this reconciliation, and hence forgiveness, can occur at various relationship levels.

Initial doubts about the openness-to-reconciliation view

An initial reason to be sceptical about this account of forgiveness is that it seems at odds with our ordinary ways of thinking and talking about forgiveness – indeed, with our ordinary ways of forgiving. We do not think of ourselves as forgiving merely relative to a relationship level, and we never say, 'I forgive you as a friend,' for example, nor 'I forgive you as my partner,' let alone 'I forgive you as an acquaintance but not as a friend.' Strabbing claims that context makes clear the relationship at issue so that typically we need not be explicit about the relationship level on which we forgive. However, these phrases are not just atypical but wholly unfamiliar and, in fact, seem obscure; without having read Strabbing's paper, we wouldn't know what to make of them. This seems like *prima facie* evidence against her account. If she were correct, it seems that there would be at least *some* occasions where context fails to make clear the relationship level on which forgiveness occurs, and where we would then need to be explicit about it. But we don't find that this happens.

Moreover, statements such as ‘I forgive you, but I want a divorce’ or ‘I forgive you, but our friendship has been ruined’ do not strike us as odd or as calling for further explanation. We can make perfect sense of forgiving someone but not continuing the relationship, so these statements do not seem strange. Yet in Strabbing’s view, there *is* something odd about these statements, since they suppress lots of important and relevant information. For example, the first claim, she suggests, should be read along the lines of ‘I forgive you [as a person], but [I don’t forgive you as my partner, therefore] I want a divorce’. This seems like a complex reading of a simple statement, a statement that does not intuitively stand in need of any further explanation.

Of course, our intuitive grasp of forgiveness may be incomplete or even misleading. Still, the fact that Strabbing’s view seems to fit badly with our ordinary practices does count against it. If an account of forgiveness can explain the features which Strabbing hopes to explain without entailing that our ordinary views of these things is awry, it should be preferred on those grounds. We’ll be suggesting that this is precisely the situation regarding the openness-to-reconciliation view.

Openness to reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness

As Strabbing notes, forgiveness often leads to reconciliation. On her account of forgiveness, this is unsurprising, since forgiveness is constituted by openness to reconciliation. Nonetheless, when one person has deeply wronged someone previously close to them, it may be that no resumption of the close relationship is desired or even possible. Perhaps the wrong has indicated that the relationship was not a positive one in the first place, or that one had misunderstood who the other person truly was, leading one to withdraw from the relationship. Alternatively, one’s hurt may simply be too great to resume an intimate relationship with the wrongdoer. Yet forgiveness does seem possible without the resumption of a close relationship. To explain how, Strabbing introduces the idea of ‘relationship levels’. On her account, such cases involve forgiving the wrongdoer on some general level, for example *as a person*, whilst not forgiving them *as a friend* or *spouse*.

One implication of Strabbing’s view here is that the person who forgives but is not open to resuming the relationship has not forgiven the wrongdoer in every possible respect; indeed, there are relationship levels on which the wrongdoer may not be forgiven at all. But this seems problematic since our ordinary intuition about these cases is *not*

that such forgiveness is necessarily incomplete. Forgiveness in such cases *may* be incomplete, but it seems implausible that it *must* be: complete forgiveness seems compatible with withdrawing from a relationship, even where the wrongdoer is repentant.

To begin to illustrate this, consider Strabbing's example of the forgiveness offered by bereaved family members of victims of the 2015 shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. In court, the family members explicitly forgave the perpetrator, expressing hope that he would repent and that God would have mercy on his soul. Imagine that the gunman did sincerely repent. Since Strabbing admits that the family members' forgiveness was sincere, she is committed to thinking that they must be open to engaging in a general relationship of goodwill with the gunman, the kind of relationship that we share with other strangers. But this does not seem intuitively correct. If afterwards the family members were unwilling to exchange even idle small talk with the gunman, for example, this would not seem to impugn their forgiveness or suggest that there are respects (or relationship levels) in which their forgiveness was lacking. The family members thus seem able to forgive the gunman without openness to reconciliation with him, even on the most basic relationship level of goodwill that we share with other strangers.

Our response assumes that relationships of goodwill are in part constituted by dispositions to engage in activities such as small talk which we usually expect of strangers. Strangers' refusal to participate in small talk would usually count as a kind of snub, a rejection of a general relationship of goodwill. Strabbing could of course deny this, but in that case, she needs to say more about what constitutes a *relationship* of goodwill.

Cases such as the above suggest that forgiveness can occur without openness to reconciliation. How, though, generally speaking, does it do so? Most generally, it seems to us that reasons *other* than a lack of forgiveness can stand in the way of openness to reconciliation. In the case just considered, for instance, it's plausible that resuming the prior relationship of general goodwill with the gunman may simply be too painful. It may be that the family members are haunted by the shooting and so are unwilling to interact with him for that reason, rather than for a lack of forgiveness. Another possibility is that the wrongdoing has brought about a changed view of the wrongdoer. Someone's wrongdoing may make one realise that they are a particular *kind* of person (callous or shallow, for example), a kind of person with whom one does not wish to be in relationship. These negative evaluations seem perfectly compatible with

forgiving them for their wrongdoing but incompatible with an openness to resuming a relationship with them.

Imagine, for instance, two friends who have known each other for a large proportion of their lives and who, over the years, have come to share a seemingly close and trusting relationship. Secure in this belief, one of them unburdens herself to the other, sharing intimate details of her life that she would never dream of sharing with strangers. Disappointingly, her friend betrays her, mockingly discussing her struggles with someone she barely knows. Even if the betrayed friend fully and completely forgives the other, we would not necessarily expect her to be open to resuming the relationship. The act of betrayal might reveal that the friend was a callous and cruel person, removing the impetus towards friendship that previously existed.

It seems, then, that forgiveness and openness to reconciliation can come apart. And they can do so because reasons other than a lack of forgiveness can stand in the way of a willingness to reconcile. Strabbing's openness-to-reconciliation view of forgiveness thus seems to go wrong in entailing that openness to reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness, and in ignoring barriers to reconciliation other than lack of forgiveness.

Her account thus faces two objections, one more serious than the other: first, the account does not fit well with our ordinary ways of thinking about and practicing forgiveness, and thus does not seem intuitively plausible. Second, it wrongly entails that openness to reconciliation is necessary for forgiveness. The case of the bereaved family members suggests that openness to reconciliation is unnecessary for forgiveness. And the examples we've considered jointly suggest that reasons *other* than lack of forgiveness can preclude openness to reconciliation.

Other theoretical advantages?

In setting forward her account, Strabbing identifies two features of it that she claims are advantages over the forswearing-resentment account of forgiveness. First, she holds that it explains the close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation, and second, she suggests that it is well placed to explain how it is that forgiveness can occur without effecting a return to the prior relationship. If she were correct that her account is better placed to explain these, we might consider the two accounts to be in a stalemate, with some considerations supporting and some detracting from each. However, we think that the explanatory

benefits of her account are also possessed by the forswearing-resentment account. The forswearing-resentment account thus has the same theoretical advantages as the openness-to-reconciliation account, whilst avoiding the objections faced by the latter.

Strabbing expresses her worry about the ability of the forswearing-resentment account to explain the close relationship between forgiveness and reconciliation as follows:

This view fails to account for forgiveness's power to reconcile relationships with repentant offenders. This is because letting go of a negative emotion, on whatever grounds, does not capture the emotional movement toward the offender necessary for forgiveness to effect reconciliation with a repentant offender. (Strabbing, 543)

That is, Strabbing thinks that whilst the forswearing-resentment account *allows* that forgiveness often leads to reconciliation, it does not *explain* the fact that it does.

However, one can explain the fact that forgiveness often leads to reconciliation without assuming that it is the forgiveness *itself* that causes the 'emotional movement' towards the other person. On the forswearing-resentment account of forgiveness, resentment plausibly constitutes a *barrier* to reconciliation. Forgiveness removes this barrier, and in its absence the positive emotions that usually draw the two participants together may well do so again, effecting their reconciliation. For example, in the spousal relationship mentioned above, once the wife has forgiven her husband, a barrier to reconciliation (resentment) is removed, and the love that the partners had for one another may draw them back towards one another, effecting reconciliation. The forswearing-resentment account thus can explain the close connection between forgiveness and reconciliation, as well as why the latter often accompanies the former. Importantly, this explanation suggests that forgiveness makes reconciliation *possible*, without entailing that forgiveness necessarily involves any emotional movement towards reconciliation. It, therefore, allows that even *complete* forgiveness can take place without reconciliation.

By virtue of this distance between forgiveness and reconciliation, the forswearing-resentment account also has the advantage that Strabbing identifies as the second advantage of her account: namely, that it explains how forgiveness can occur in the absence of a return to prior relationships. On the forswearing-resentment account, to forgive is (roughly) to forswear hostile attitudes and emotions such as resentment. But

forswearing hostile attitudes or emotions is compatible with the presence of other negative but non-hostile emotions such as hurt and disappointment. It is also compatible with a generally negative evaluation of a person (as potential acquaintance, or as friend, or as spouse, etc.). *Either* of these can stand in the way of a relationship. Forgiveness, on the forswearing-resentment account, is thus straightforwardly compatible with not wishing to resume a relationship.

On the forswearing-resentment account, forgiveness removes a formidable barrier to reconciliation. Forgiveness is thus necessary for genuine reconciliation, but it is sufficient neither for reconciliation nor for openness to reconciliation. In the absence of positive emotions (e.g. love, care, trust) to 'push' one towards the wrongdoer, forgiveness will not be able to effect reconciliation. The forswearing-resentment account thus seems well-placed to explain how forgiveness can occur without returning to prior relationships.

Conclusion

We have argued that the openness-to-reconciliation account of forgiveness does not constitute a step forward from the forswearing-resentment account. First, it does not seem to capture our ordinary practices and ways of thinking about forgiveness. Second, we have argued that openness to reconciliation is not even a necessary condition for forgiveness. And, finally, we have argued that the features of forgiveness that the openness-to-reconciliation account seeks to explain are already well explained by the forswearing-resentment account. As such, the openness-to-reconciliation account does not advance our understanding of forgiveness in either of the respects Strabbing identifies.

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ORCID

Cathy Mason  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-7272-1948>

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