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Introduction

Evil and forgiveness share a short history in contemporary philosophy. Although one can find philosophical works in any era in which each is occasionally addressed, the past 25 years offer more literature on either topic than do many centuries combined. A happy consequence of increased attention to both moral phenomena is a rich literature, and, inevitably, another consequence is a variety of interpretations of evil and of forgiveness. A cluster of related questions recur in philosophical discussions of forgiving evils. In this essay, I start with discussion, and the eventual rejection, of the conception of evil as that which is unforgivable. Once that definitional stop is out of the way, it is easier to consider related issues at the intersection of evil and forgiveness. My treatment of contentious issues is influenced by my interest in empirically informed approaches to moral theory, the better to take seriously the experiences of survivors of evils. I draw upon nonideal and feminist theorists as I argue that the material actualities of occasions *for* forgiveness of evil should direct and constrain our theorizing *about* forgiveness.

In what follows, I take up (1) the question whether evils are, by definition, unforgivable; if this were settled in the affirmative, then no other issues need be entertained. I identify a *nonideal* approach to ethical theory as a main reason for my rejection of (1). After outlining objections to (1), I move on to related issues: (2) the contention that evils may be forgivable but that forgiveness cannot entail reconciliation with one's evildoer, (3) the concern that only direct victims of evils are in a position to decide if forgiveness is appropriate, (4) the conceptual worry that forgiveness of evil may not be genuine or complete if forgiveness is only complete when the last drop of hard feeling is overcome, (5) the interest of many in holding that forgiveness is never required and always a nonobligatory gift, in tension with Christian traditions that recommend or require forgiveness, and (6) the concern that analyses of evil ought to

prioritize the suffering and credit the perspectives of *victims* of evils, in tension with the possibility that forgiveness concerns the well-being of *offenders*. I raise more issues than I resolve, in the interests of providing the reader with an overview of the complexity of literature on forgiveness and evils.

In what follows, I limit my discussion to forgiveness of *moral* evils: as Bernard Dauenhauer says, “those that human beings knowingly and willingly commit” (2007: 207). I omit discussion of natural disasters and accidents resulting from excusable human error. I rely on Claudia Card’s description of evils as “foreseeable, intolerable harms produced by culpable wrongdoing” (2002: 3). I proceed from the position that humans contribute themselves to a great deal of moral activity including moral responses to the (at least partly) chosen actions of others, and forgiveness is of interest as one moral response.

1. Evil as the unforgivable

The position that evils are just those things which are unforgivable may be an ontological position regarding the impossibility of forgiveness as constitutive of the nature of evil, an ethical position that forgiveness is wrong even if possible, a descriptive claim that forgiveness of evils is psychologically difficult even if possible and right, or a combination of the three. It is not always possible or necessary to disentangle the motives in all writings which further this view. For example, consider the responses to a narrative by Holocaust survivor Simon Wiesenthal (1998), who asks participants in a symposium at the end of his book what he should have done when a dying Nazi soldier asked him for forgiveness. Several participants held that unforgivable evils are to be maintained whether it is for psychological or ethical reasons. (Some argue conceptual objections.) Matthew Fox (9), a priest, and Wole Soyinka (172), a playwright and poet, both argue that evils violate conditions of forgiveness because intolerable harms cannot be atoned for adequately; since the conditions enabling a coherent account of forgiveness do not obtain, forgiveness is conceptually impossible. Henry James Cargas, a Catholic, responded that God may forgive, but “Simon Wiesenthal could not, I cannot” (125), implying it is psychologically too much to ask. Human rights scholar Joshua Rubenstein (240) objected that the request for forgiveness was morally callous, and Nechama Tec, a Holocaust survivor, indicates similarly ethical objections that the soldier didn’t deserve

it, saying, “Even on his deathbed he seems to be denying to the Jews their humanity” (258). Philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch, a Jew who lived in France through the occupation, argues relatedly that forgiveness “died in the death camps,” and that crimes against humanity are “inexpiable,” impossible to punish (1996: 567). “Get ahead of one’s victim, that was the thing; ask for a pardon,” Jankélévitch adds, emphasizing the callousness of the expectation that victims forgive (567).

As Marguerite La Caze (2005) explains, philosophers who hold that evils are the set of unforgivable things tend to proceed on the assumption that forgiveness is only apt for that which can be sufficiently punished. She (with others) cites Hannah Arendt’s ([1958] 1998) formulation of the seeming impossibility to forgive, given the inadequacy of any punishment or revenge for the worst of evils:

The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable. This is the true hallmark of those offences which, since Kant, we call “radical evil” and about whose nature so little is known, even to those of us who have been exposed to one of their rare outbursts on the public scene.

(Arendt [1958] 1998: 241)

The above passage is widely quoted in support of positions that the worst of evils cannot be forgiven, because there is no moral response adequate to the task of appropriately responding to the wrong. Evil “transcends all moral categories,” as she writes elsewhere, and forgiveness is a merely moral response to something so heinous it defies morals (2003: 23).

Yet, in the chapter in which this passage appears, Arendt also commends forgiveness; as Glen Pettigrove points out (2006: 487), “Forgiveness, unlike revenge, is not merely a reaction to the misdeed.” One could argue that, because “so little is known” about the nature of radical evil, we may not know what turns out to be unforgivable prior to our actions, including our creative and unconditioned responses.

Arendt describes forgiveness as an alternative to punishment because it is active and creative, less automatic than would be cycles of revenge:

[T]he act of forgiving ... is the only reaction that acts in an unexpected way and thus retains, though being a reaction, something of the original character of action. Forgiving, in other words, is the only reaction which does not merely react but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.

(*Human Condition*, 241)

Arguably, forgiveness is not simply defined as a reaction to another's atonement for *atonable* wrongs. As an active and creative process that exceeds what can be predicted, forgiveness is not even limited to occasions that allow for punishment. Arendt suggests that *revenge* is appropriately seen as predictable, as a reaction that perpetuates cycles of violence in a way that forgiveness does not.

Arendt's comment as to what men are unable to *do* moves me to shift attention away from definitions of evils and unforgivable things, to what it is that different victims report *being able to do* in the aftermath of evils, and, as it turns out, victims differ, with some reporting forgiving, and some not. The study of forgiveness is the study of a set of emotions, expressions, choices, and interactions so complex that the quest for a definition is doomed to inexactitude and counterexamples. It is instructive to "shift the focus from the definition of the term to its value within our lives," as Nick Smith does in his exploration of apology (2008: 21). Margaret Walker says, similarly, that it may be more productive to go beyond justifications of definitions; instead, "let's ask what it *means* for individuals, or for a group or society collectively, to declare an act unforgivable. What is the moral power of that declaration?" (2006: 187).

Philosophers like Smith and Walker theorize about ethics with sensitivity to the actualities of contexts that (just do) include evils and the morally compromised agents who must carry on in the presence of conditions that are not of their making. High attention to the actualities of living with evils is a hallmark of a *nonideal* approach to ethical theory, because we want ethics to be "[relevant] to actual agents in actual conditions and [applicable] to the problems created by" evils (Tessman 2010: 806),

including the problems faced by those living with evildoers and complicit agents in the aftermath. As Eduardo Rivera-López (2013) says, “the best or most appropriate actions, rules, and institutions in this nonideal world are *different from what they would be* in an ideal one” (3626). The rules are different partly because of the feasibility conditions that constrain agents, regarding what is possible or desirable in context. I find nonideal theoretical approaches appealing because they are empirically informed; taking seriously the actualities of agents in a position to forgive or refuse forgiveness after evils has helped my own understanding of the limits of what H.L.A. Hart (1959) called definitional stops, such as ending inquiries about forgiving evils with the statement that evils are unforgivable. Some victims report forgiving evils and some report refusing to forgive; the latter only makes sense if forgiveness is an option, a moral power that they can sensibly claim. I proceed on the assumption that the moral powers of individuals and groups to assert the meaningfulness of forgiving or refusing forgiveness should be the starting point for any theorizing about forgiveness. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2011) argues, regarding her work in South African communities:

On the scale of horrible things that can happen to people, there are some for which the language of apology and forgiveness may be entirely inappropriate. To say, however, that horrific deeds committed in the context of systematic human rights abuses by states are simply unforgivable does not capture the complexity and richness of all the social contexts within which gross human rights abuses are committed.

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2. Evils as possibly forgivable but never entailing reconciliation

Nonideal theory tends to avoid hard and fast rules in the absence of reported actualities, but a context-sensitive ethic can offer normative recommendations in the interests of remaining sensitive to agents’ different needs. One consistent recommendation regarding forgiveness of evils is that forgiveness must not be confused with reconciliation. The intention behind philosophers’ repetition of this point is well meant; when one has suffered serious harm at the hands of another, we are reluctant to add to their suffering with any suggestion that victims must reconcile with offenders. Cautions that forgiveness does not entail reconciling increased in frequency after the activities of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Committee gained attention. To some, like the

brother of an antiapartheid lawyer killed under apartheid orders, calls for reconciliation and forgiveness amount to a betrayal: “Unless justice is done it’s difficult for any person to think of forgiving” (quoted in Minow 1999: 81).

The stance that forgiveness does not entail reconciliation often relies on seeing forgiveness as an internal, emotional state, while reconciliation is external and relational. If forgiveness is a wholly interior state of mind, then it may be unilateral and chosen by a victim without regard to the actions or repentance of the wrongdoer. Reconciliation, on the other hand, connotes bilateral engagement, activities of living with each other that demand cooperative acknowledgment. On this view, if forgiveness is morally optional, reconciliation is almost invisible; arguments for reconciliation-free forgiveness are primarily concerned with “self-regarding duties,” including a victim’s sense of her own self-respect, her interest in overcoming her resentment, and her disposition to have a change of heart toward an offender (Norlock 2009: 20, 48). Not coincidentally, philosophers who divorce forgiveness from reconciliation also tend to point out that forgiveness need not even be communicated to a wrongdoer (Emerick 2017). As Jeffrie Murphy (1988) says in distinguishing forgiveness from mercy, “Forgiveness is primarily a matter of how I *feel* about you (not how I treat you)” (22).

Yet, studies indicate that subjects who are asked, “Is reconciliation a necessary part of forgiveness?” were more likely to answer *Maybe* or *Yes* than *No* (Belicki et al. 2008: 179). And depending on what evils are in question, it is difficult to discuss engaging in forgiveness for political or systemic evils without discussing what comes next. As Jeremy Watkins (2015) observes, “One of the familiar challenges facing post-conflict societies is to find an effective means of promoting peace and reconciliation” (19), that is, not just promoting feeling better but living together sufficiently well. I have argued elsewhere that forgiveness for evils includes self-forgiveness for serious self-harm, but self-forgiveness usually entails reconciliation so that one may go on living, or living well (2009: 151). I have come to agree with psychologist Marjorie Baker that “one must, of necessity, reconcile with oneself if one is to forgive oneself” (2008: 64). Taking into account the sense of some victims of evils that forgiveness and reconciliation are intertwined, I recommend that nonideal approaches to ethical theorizing should resist the neat division between forgiveness as interior and reconciliation as exterior. Watkins notes that forgiveness and reconciliation are both

“complex and contested concepts” (21) and adds that “there *are attitudinal*—as well as institutional—dimensions of reconciliation” (22). How one feels about another may not be so easily separated from how one treats another. Unilateral forgiveness, according to Watkins, “can sometimes be an effective route to reconciliation” (33), especially when the repentance of wrongdoers is not forthcoming, and when wide agreement as to “the moral complexion of the conflict” (39) is unattainable.

3. Evils as only forgivable by direct victims

Whether or not all survivors of conflict can agree on the moral complexion of a conflict, the sad reality is that, in the aftermath of evils, the direct victims are often dead. Scholars of forgiveness differ with respect to whether anyone can forgive evils on behalf of a victim or as a second-best sort of forgiveness when the victim is dead, or alive but unwilling, or absent. The early stages of the proliferation in forgiveness literature seemed to settle this question in favor of direct victims having the only standing to forgive, and precluding all others from forgiving a victim’s evildoers. Some of the interest in seeing direct victims accorded the only standing to forgive is due to the influence of two major early theorists, Joram Haber (1991) and Jeffrie Murphy (1988), whose accounts of forgiveness are primarily concerned with “the passion of self-respect” (Murphy 1988: 16). Understandably, if forgiveness overcomes resentment produced by protective self-respect, then only the victim can report overcoming self-respect’s demand for resentment. A consequence of this view is that Murphy and Haber both must then reach for explanation when they each consider the example of a mother forgiving injuries to her son. Murphy argues, “Sometimes, of course, I will psychologically identify with some persons and will see injuries to them as in some sense injuries to me”; he later adds, “Parents can resent harms done to their children, but this is the kind of exception that proves the rule. ... Resentment only seems possible for the parents because they regard their children as somehow an extension of themselves” (Murphy 1988: 21n9, 56n16). Haber similarly notes, “This is because the relationship between mother and son is such that an injury to the son is an injury to the mother, so that the mother’s forgiveness is really for her own injury” (1991: 49).

Authors who adhere to this view tend to argue that survivors of the direct victim are secondary victims, and that caring but more distant others are tertiary victims (Govier 2002). Describing victims as secondary sufferers may be apt but an idealization of

identifiable victims of evils as direct or indirect in their suffering. People are embedded in relationships which affect their senses of identification with others. As relational beings, harms to us from evils are not reducible to matters of self-respect; we needn't see our hurt loved ones as "extensions of ourselves" in order to reflect on our attitudes toward their wrongdoers. Therefore, I resist describing the injury to the son as identical to the injury to the mother who identifies with her son, if only because "identifying with" another is not the same as identifying *as* another.

More recent accounts of forgiveness have de-emphasized the notion of direct victims, and offered more multidimensional models of forgiveness. As Glen Pettigrove (2012) argues:

the attempt to tie the friend's, parent's, or compassionate observers' feelings to their standing as secondary or tertiary victims misconstrues their emotional response. [Even] if one takes forgiveness to be the overcoming or forswearing of resentment, this need not commit one to the claim that only the victim has the standing to forgive.

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Emotions have objects, Pettigrove emphasizes, and, as beings with multiple relationships, our emotions may have other-centered objects, or relational objects, that vary qualitatively and quantitatively. Evils are characterized by intolerable harm, and what is tolerable for survivors of evils depends on the relationships they have with other victims and with evildoers. The sort of social death involved in surviving genocide, for example, may be intolerable and severe on dimensions that transcend whether one forgives or refuses to forgive for one's own injury or that of another. Indeed, surviving an evil inflicted on a group yields harms that one suffers precisely because of one's relationships.

4. Forgiveness of evils as inevitably incomplete or untrue (especially when unilateral)

For some, forgiveness is only complete or genuine when one has overcome the last drop of resentment, and negative feelings do not recur (Horsbrugh 1974). Epistemological problems surround paradigms of genuine forgiveness as complete. If anger recurs, if agents later regret what they felt or extended, one may wonder if the agent *really*

forgave in the first place. It is also not clear how we know when forgiveness is complete. On accounts like this, as Pamela Hieronymi (2001) says, “anger and forgiveness are not compatible” (539–40). Howard McGary (1989) stresses the cessation of resentment; David Novitz (1998) describes anger and forgiveness as banished and dispelled once one forgives.

Yet the requirement of completeness seems problematic. If forgiveness involves ridding oneself of all negative feelings, and never rebuking one’s wrongdoer in the future for wrongs one forgave in the past, then its completeness seems at best that which is eternally assumed, rather than guaranteed. Even the most sanguine person cannot know that memories, regrets, and new interpretations of old wrongs won’t intrude. Further, completeness is most easily achieved with minor wrongs, which are hardly instructive of forgiveness on the occasions when it’s needed more urgently, that is, after evils, at those times when the wrong in question is severe, has lingering consequences, or occurs in relationships one cannot or will not leave. The literature on trauma is instructive in the ways in which memories are unpredictable, and perceptions of danger, harm, regret, and guilt recur. Not all these perceptions are equally irrational. Claudia Card (2002) argues for the role of “certain emotional residues” as “moral remainders,” “rectificatory feelings regarding what otherwise proves unrectifiable by our actions. ... These emotional residues ... reveal our appreciation that all has not been made right, or that not all is as it should be (or would be, ideally) between us” (169). I add that persons are not unchanging. Our appreciation of wrongs done to us is also subject to change; our feelings do not admit of permanence.

More accommodating treatments of forgiveness allow for the ongoing presence of negative feelings. Charles Griswold (2007) argues that forgiveness aims for overcoming resentment, with “commitment to its continued abatement,” but “foreswearing resentment does not require giving up *every* negative feeling” (43, 41). Joram Haber (1991) argues that performative expressions of forgiveness do not necessarily turn out to be infelicitous if we have angry feelings when thinking about wrong acts at later dates. This speech act only misfires if the agent delivers it while resentment “was festering in her,” (Haber 1991: 49–50). His insight is valuable; seeing forgiveness as a performative speech act explains, without dismissing, our forgiving at an earlier time even if we feel anger when reflecting on the harm done at a later date.

Pettigrove (2012) wisely observes that forgiveness is in the class of commissive illocutions, in other words, a commitment both related to and distinct from promising, committing oneself “to a course of action” that is “compatible with the speaker still feeling angry” (12, 13). Importantly, Griswold, Haber, and Pettigrove all attend more to behavioral and interpersonal aspects of forgiveness than sheer intrapersonal aspects; commitments to certain practices and behaviors, and performance of certain illocutions, do not require the completion of solitary and internal emotional work.

In short, the concern that forgiveness is only perfect, complete, or genuine when one has overcome all negative feelings seems an idealized picture that does not take into account the actualities of memory, trauma, and emotional cognition. An approach informed by nonideal theory starts reasoning about forgiveness from the material realities that include the unpredictability of future human experience and future thoughts. I hope the picture I draw of a nonideal account of forgiveness is now coming into sharper focus; the multidimensional aspects of forgiveness include forgiveness as a speech act, a commitment, and a set of practices and behaviors, as well as an emotion or brain state. One may engage with some aspects of forgiveness before others. One may extend it before permanently sanguine feelings have taken over one’s soul. Accounts of forgiveness that are determined to exclude all but the “complete” variety are prioritizing an idealized version of perfect forgiveness in less trying contexts over the experiences of victims of evil who forgive.

5. Forgiveness of evils as an elective gift and never required

Theorists on either side of the above debates generally maintain that forgiveness is an elective gift that can never be required of victims. To demand of those who suffer from intolerable harms that they owe anything to their evildoers seems morally wrong, burdening the already-burdened with caring for others when they need so much care themselves. Some of the arguments for forgiveness as an elective gift are consequentialist; philosophers and psychologists in postconflict areas point out that evils are so difficult to rectify that it is possible their victims will never recover, and requiring their care for others detracts from victims’ slow recovery (Lamb 2002; Schott 2004). Some of the arguments are conceptual; philosophers including Pettigrove (2012) and psychologists including Robert Enright (2012, 2015) argue for the centrality of *love* to forgiveness, and point out that, as love cannot be commanded, forgiveness must be

a gift. Still other arguments are pragmatically sociopolitical; philosopher Renée Jeffery, with others, notes that forgiveness is often seen as imposed upon victims from sectarian, usually Christian, traditions, and observes that some find this unacceptable in the secular worlds of international politics or the pluralist communities that must rally after evils (2008: 180).

The earnest assurance of scholars that forgiveness is not required, even as some urge victims to consider forgiveness, is so ubiquitous in philosophical literature that one may wonder why it is a worry; if almost everyone insists that forgiveness is elective, then why does electivity continue to receive so much attention? Alice MacLachlan's (2009) articulation of forgiveness as "a moral power" suggests one answer: she describes moral powers as "individual capacities for morally meaningful responses to others," adding, "in exercising a moral power, we effect some morally significant consequence" (152). Seeing forgiveness as the exercise of individual's moral responses, she argues, "draws us away from valuing *forgiveness* itself, and toward the value of our *capacity* to choose forgiveness (or not)" (152, emphasis in original). The abstract idealization of forgiveness, unconnected from the choices of individuals in a position to forgive or refuse forgiveness, ought to be avoided in the course of attending to the actualities of victims' experiences. MacLachlan adds that "thinking about forgiveness as a moral power ... appropriately recognizes the discretionary nature of forgiveness" and "frees us to value *refusals* to forgive along with forgiveness itself, in ways that a duty-based or virtue-based approach does not" (152). MacLachlan concludes that seeing forgiveness as an elective gift and an exertion of a moral power even obviates the initial question as to whether some evils are unforgivable. An appreciation of what different victims do leads one to the view that forgiveness "has characteristic features, but ... individual occasions of forgiveness may present one, two, or all of these features, depending on the situation, the individuals involved, and the relationship between them" (MacLachlan 2009: 152).

However, I agree with Per-Erik Milam that a deep tension exists between the belief that we forgive for good reasons and the belief that forgiveness is always elective (Milam 2018). Some relationships, especially between caregivers and those cared for, are (among other things) fiduciary relationships, "marked by the expectation that one party will use his or her judgment to act in the best interests of the other" (MacLachlan

2016: 366), and other relationships between more equal parties (e.g., married adults) are structured in part by their explicit, expressed commitments. Not all relationships are entirely chosen, and not all relationships leave trust-building and wellness-maintaining activities to chance, so essentially elective forgiveness is in error, because it is insufficiently responsive to the contexts that endow forgiveness with its appropriate moral import.

My aim throughout this chapter has been to connect contentious aspects of forgiveness with nonideal theory, and to emphasize sensitivity to the actualities of human experience. I ought to note that idealizing conceptions of forgiveness as, if not required, at least incumbent upon us, are often advocated by ethical and sensitive authors. Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999) has argued that, “without forgiveness, there really is no future” (255), but it would be difficult to show that Tutu was insensitive to the suffering of his people. Margaret Holmgren (2012) argues for the unconditional forgiveness of unrepentant evildoers (ix), but it is indisputable that she demonstrates profound appreciation for the serious harms that shake victims’ senses of safety and self-worth. Holmgren attends to the endangered well-being of offenders, especially those convicted in the criminal justice system of the United States, and her compassion for those offenders made worse by punitive prison systems cannot be disregarded as failing to appreciate actualities. Trudy Govier (2002) urges us never to give up on a human being, but she relates concrete examples of particular South African participants in the TRC process who resisted the sense that forgiveness was a requirement, deferring often to “South African voices” (72).

My concern is not that advocates of idealized forgiveness like the above authors ignore *all* actualities. Scholars of forgiveness who disagree with each other are all appreciative of suffering. My concern is the approach to the topic that directs scholars’ attentions *to* that suffering. Advocates of forgiveness tend to take, as their starting point of inquiry, an idealized picture of what forgiveness ought to look like, and then consider whether or not the reports of victims of evils line up with the picture. This is demonstrated by Charles Griswold’s (2007) argument for a paradigm of forgiveness, “the model case” of “forgiveness at its best,” which does not have the “special problems” that arise from what he considers legitimate, morally important, yet nonparadigmatic examples of forgiveness (such as self-forgiveness or third-party

forgiveness) (38). Pettigrove (2012) similarly advocates a view of forgiveness that reflects the “higher manifestation,” the forgiveness that we hope for (18), complete with absolute emotional transformation and benevolent commitment to another, although he grants the need for a minimal “lowest common denominator” view of forgiveness (19). Clear cases and central features are appealing, allowing us to feel we have arrived at some consensus about the nature of forgiveness. But, in concrete contexts, it is possible that the most we hope for is something other than that which is maximally manifested in all possible ways by a hypothetical agent. I would go so far as to say that it is even *preferable* to hope for less than maximal forgiveness when it is reflective of situations to which we should be sensitive.

6. *Who benefits? Prioritizing the victims of evils*

Given the predominance of Kantian and retributivist models in the literature on forgiveness, it is not surprising that many philosophers attach suspicion of authenticity to the prioritization of the good consequences of forgiving. Consequentialist arguments are more often reflected in the attention of psychologists to beneficial outcomes of forgiveness processes, which resonate with lay understandings of the uses of forgiveness as part of a healing or recovery process. Indeed, the affirmative reactions of survey subjects, when asked about forgiveness as primarily for the purposes of feeling good or maintaining relationships, is a striking contrast to the cautionary approaches of philosophers.

Psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated, and advocated, the benefits of forgiving to personal health, relationships, and communities. I appreciate that resentment of calls for forgiveness can likewise be detrimental to victims and communities. However, it is remarkable to review philosophers’ arguments *against* feeling better alongside psychologists’ reports that victims’ own well-being is the most often-cited reason to begin the pursuit of forgiveness (Belicki, Rourke, & McCarthy, 2008). Joram Haber and Jeffrie Murphy argue forcefully against accounts of outcomes like the health of oneself or community as instructive of the moral appropriateness of forgiveness. Murphy (2002) cautions against feeling better about oneself or one’s situation if one’s assessments of one’s own improved well-being are inaccurate: “In my view slavery, oppression, and victimization are made worse, not better, when people are rendered content in their victimization” (46). Haber (1991) goes further, saying the

beneficial results to forgivers “are largely irrelevant from a moral point of view” (108). Rather than argue that positive results do not occur (although he suggests that they sometimes don’t), Haber objects that “consequentialist reasons ... are essentially practical, rather than moral” (108); like Murphy, Haber appeals to the priorities of justice. For Haber, forgiveness rests on the repentance of the wrongdoer; therapeutic concerns that don’t address the repentance of the wrongdoer are then morally and philosophically uninteresting and such “consequentialist reasons ought not to be countenanced” (108).

What a contrast is then provided by the responses of those victims who actually participate in forgiveness research. Therapeutic considerations are not nearly so irrelevant to the men and, more often, women so integrally involved in providing the testimonies that generate the data. Subjects in repeated studies exhibit interest in such outcomes as a thriving life, improved close relationships, and improved adjustment to changed circumstances. The interests of participants in improved well-being for all affected offers a noticeable departure from scholarly conceptions of forgiveness; as one research team wrote:

Scholars have been very clear on the notion that forgiveness is not done just to feel better, but this is exactly what so many of our participants said. In fact, some were adamant about wanting to feel better as their main (and, for some, the only) reason for forgiving.

(DeCourville et al. 2008: 10)

This is not to say that good consequences of forgiveness for relationships entail that forgiveness is to be recommended. Measurable outcomes are useful evidence to weigh in moral decision-making between options, which may also include securing other personal and social goods, including the physical safety that at times only distance can secure, or the motivation to act on one’s own behalf or others’, which righteous anger may better inform. Although potential benefits are only part of one’s deliberations, they certainly seem to have moral relevance to some.

Philosophers may reasonably respond that what one wants to *feel* is not necessarily connected to what one ought to *do*, and could suggest we distinguish between genuine, that is, *moral* forgiveness, and something else, such as prudential or practical

forgiveness. Yet, the same respondents who assert the importance of the good outcomes of forgiveness also perceive the same forgiveness as important to their moral lives. Here deontological-retributivists and their critics may have to simply agree to disagree, but I wish to suggest that relational conceptions of the self may better account for the moral significance of good outcomes of forgiveness. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2011) reminds us:

Philosophical questions such as the moral inappropriateness of forgiveness can and should give way and be subsumed to human questions, for in the end we are a society of people and not of ideas, a fragile web of interdependent human beings, not of stances

(545)

Conclusion

In *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*, Claudia Card (2002) offers the valuable insight that philosophy is often written from the perspective of an administrator (35). When conceptual analysis of forgiveness proceeds from the deontological-retributive moral vision, we find a preference for holding wrongdoers responsible, rather than letting them off of hooks, a well-intentioned concern for fairness yet one that demonstrates a widely held perspective of executors of punishment (Card 2002: 49). Prioritizing retribution, however, is compatible with forgiveness; as Arendt says, forgiveness is an alternative to punishment but “by no means its opposite” ([1958] 1998: 241). Further, deontological arguments that genuine forgiveness consists in rational, internal transformations centrally involving self-respect put an undue burden of proof on victims of wrongdoing that their moral responses are authentic, and such arguments have the odd, unintended consequence that the more isolated we are in the course of this transformation, and the less chance that our thinking is potentially influenced by others, the more morally worthy it is.

By taking a nonideal approach, philosophers may better guide attempts at definition of forgiveness by crediting the importance and value of practical acts of forgiveness, as described by the victims of evils who exercise their moral powers to respond. Attending to the wealth of information that victims of varieties of harm provide, we find, not insincere or inauthentic agents but agents who forgive (or not) for multiple reasons,

citing differing goals, priorities, and understandings of the term. In the aftermath of evils, that information is provided more often by women. It is no longer news, or should not be, that women are overrepresented in forgiveness research, and far more likely to take part in studies and interviews.¹ Their narratives and self-reports provide a great deal of variety, and one can find transgression of every condition of genuine forgiveness, in narratives describing forgiving before elimination of all anger, prioritizing family or group harmony over other considerations, and forgiving to end or avoid a conflict, or to make oneself or others feel better. Taking the predominant approach of applying preconceived definitions of genuine forgiveness to nonphilosophers' narratives and self-reports, one may conclude that most people, earnest as they seem, are not genuinely forgiving. There is something disturbing in the mismatch between nonscholarly and philosophical understandings of forgiveness, especially when it implies that women, in particular, are disproportionately wrong. Feminist philosophers who argue for the moral importance of relationality and experience provide us with other ways to interpret the seemingly problematic results.

Of course, accounts of persons as relational have been articulated by both feminists and nonfeminists. Since women are disproportionately the sources of forgiveness testimonies, we ought to rely on feminist accounts that prioritize the experiences of women in the course of their conceptual analyses of relationality. Although feminists do not have a monopoly on the insight that selves are relational and embodied, a feminist perspective on forgiveness motivates attention to the ways our relationality is central to seeing whom we can forgive, and why; centering attention on gender reminds us that all relationships are gendered. Relations are the connections between embodied individuals whose experiences and positions of power inform our understanding and our conduct.

At a minimum, the self-in-relation includes the idea that "relationships to others are intrinsic to identity," as Marilyn Friedman (1991) notes; "indeed, the social conception of the self tends to blur the distinction between self and other" (165). Blurred distinctions are not typically integrated into dyadic accounts of forgiveness. This is evident when philosophers refer to direct victims of clearly identifiable wrongdoers. On such occasions, the interest so many of us share in being able to write easily about clear cases of offense and recompense seems to dictate both an overvaluing of the moral

independence of the agents involved and a presumption of their ontological boundedness that evils do not always permit. If we take seriously the experiences and narratives of others as guides to the values and social functions of forgiveness for most people, while keeping relationality clearly in view, then transgressive accounts of forgiveness become not just graduates to the class of the genuine but new paradigms of forgiveness that instruct our subsequent theorizing.

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Notes

¹ Of the Stanford Forgiveness Project, Frederic Luskin says, “One interesting thing we learned ... was that more women than men sign up for forgiveness experiments. This gender difference has been corroborated by other forgiveness studies”; see Luskin (2002: 89). Worthington, more bluntly, says simply that “women seem more likely to forgive and certainly are more likely to participate in forgiveness research”; see Worthington et al. (2000: 241). Also see Malcolm et al. (2008).