

Forgiveness as a Volitional Commitment, by Kathryn J. Norlock

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**Abstract:**

This chapter discusses forgiveness conceived as primarily a volitional commitment, rather than an emotional transformation. As a commitment, forgiveness is distal, involving moral agency over time, and can take the form of a speech act or a chosen attitude. The purpose can be a commitment to repair or restore relationships with wrongdoers for their sake or the sake of the relationship, usually by forswearing one's hostile attitudes toward a particular wrongdoing; the commitment may also be to oneself for one's own sake, to be a person with a virtue of forgivingness. It can be incident-specific, that is, a response to a particular occasion of harm, or a forward-looking disposition, an aim to cultivate the habit of being a forgiving person in advance. The enabling conditions of forgivingness as a virtue may be more basic master virtues including integrity and humility, motivations that also underpin commitments to be unforgiving, so this chapter concludes with some careful consideration of the ethics of unforgivingness to others, and the commitment to be unforgiving of oneself.

In this chapter, I develop a view of forgiveness as primarily a commitment. The position that forgiveness is a commitment presumes, or takes as an important focus, a view of forgiveness as *volitional* and *distal*. To see forgiveness as volitional is to see it as neither involuntary nor merely a grim duty one has little choice to observe (Enright et al 1998: 47; Warmke 2015). Therefore, accounts of forgiveness as a commitment tend not to focus on extents to which it is identified with emotions or edicts. Instead, forgiveness is usually characterized as an expression, practice, or cultivated attitude in commitment-centered accounts, and delivered or maintained by forgiving agents with intention and purpose. Forgiveness in this sense is also distal; that is, a commitment to be forgiving takes the nature of forgiveness to involve not just reaction in response to an occasion but moral agency over time, a hopeful view of one's control over one's future forgiving behaviors and attitudes to be in part up to the agent (Alfano 2016).

The form and content of that commitment depends on several aspects, which I outline in Part One below. The commitment of forgiveness can take the form of an expression to others or an inward pledge. It can be a commitment to repair or restore relationships with wrongdoers for their sake or the sake of the relationship, usually by forswearing one's hostile attitudes toward a particular wrongdoing (Lauritzen 1987; Balázs 2000; Norlock 2009). For my purposes, the conception of forgiveness as release, repair, or relief advanced by Alice MacLachlan works best; she holds a multidimensional view of forgiveness, and summarizes them with the observation that the different phenomena described as forgiveness have in common "their intended function(s). They all intend a certain transformation in relation to the wrong and wrongdoer: to *release* the wrongdoer from his or her wrong in some way, to *repair* some of the damage done to all parties by the wrong...or simply to offer some *relief* from the subjective experience of guilt" (MacLachlan 2017: 139).

The commitment may also be to oneself for one's own sake, to be a more forgiving person for self-regarding as well as relational reasons. Forgiveness as a commitment can be incident-specific, that is, a response to a particular occasion of harm, or a forward-looking disposition, an aim to cultivate the habit of being a forgiving person in advance. As a commitment that must be revisited and renewed over time, forgiveness can also be seen as a process. As a disposition in advance, forgiveness in the sense of a commitment resembles accounts of forgiveness as a virtue, that is, *forgivingness*. The enabling conditions of *forgivingness* as a virtue (or at least a skill of virtuous people) may be more basic master virtues including integrity and humility, which I discuss in more detail in Part Two. Those same motivations underpin commitments to be unforgiving, so I conclude this chapter with some careful consideration of the ethics of unforgivingness.

### **Part One: What, when, and to whom are these commitments to forgive?**

The literature on forgiveness today offers various accounts of forgiveness, but most do not take the view that forgiveness is primarily a commitment. Many argue instead that forgiveness is primarily a transformation in one's feelings with respect to a wrongdoer (Murphy & Hampton 1988; Calhoun 1992); in stricter versions of these accounts, forgiveness does not occur absent a change in one's affective disposition to a wrongdoer (Allais, 2008; Garrard & McNaughton, 2010, Milam 2018). As an emotional transformation, forgiveness may be seen as incompatible with continuing to have hostile feelings towards the perpetrator with respect to the wrongdoing (although Lucy Allais notes that such feelings may admit of degrees; see Allais 2008, 37). From these perspectives, a commitment to forgive would then be *part* of a process of one's self-transformation, perhaps the reason motivating a decision to try to feel differently, or an expression to another of what has occurred in one's heart, but not its chief characteristic. The appropriate change of heart, based on reasons that it is morally justified, serves for some of these theorists as the central function of forgiveness (Murphy & Hampton 1988: 23).

Like many theorists of forgiveness, I am a descriptive pluralist with respect to what forgiveness is, and I am a moral pluralist with respect to what makes forgiveness right or good, because actual moral practices of forgiving serve diverse moral functions, and agents' conceptions of forgiveness are so dependent upon differences including embodiment, culture, religion, and location (Norlock 2017a; see also Card 2002; Neblett 1974). In what follows, therefore, I do not believe that I offer an account that covers all forms of forgiveness. However, while forgiveness may have a multiplicity of functions and manifestations, the commitments that forgiveness yields are arguably common to varieties of moral experiences. For example,

accounts of forgiveness that focus on emotion may describe forgiveness as the achievement of overcoming or eliminating hostile feelings (Horsbrugh 1974; McGary 1989; Govier and Verwoerd 2002; McNaughton and Garrard 2017), and accounts of forgiveness as a speech act may focus on a declaration, such as “I forgive you” (Haber 1991; Scarre 2016). These are very different forms of forgiveness, and yet authors of both sorts of accounts have raised, as a matter of concern, what it might mean that the forgiver feels a renewed spike of anger or pain at a later date; some of these philosophers speculate that perhaps the forgiver experienced a backslide in emotional progress, or perhaps later anger reveals she spoke hastily or insincerely. Understood primarily as a commitment, however, forgiveness just *is* the practice of committing oneself to a different future, including renewing or redoubling one’s efforts to uphold a previous decision to commit to forgiving.

According to theorists of commitment-based accounts, later negative feelings are not necessarily either forms of backsliding or evidence of previous insincerity, so much as simply foreseeable aspects of the challenges of living up to a commitment. For example, Glen Pettigrove (2012) agrees that forgiveness can be a commitment in some of its forms, and expression of a commitment to forgive that is followed by later resentment or anger “does not display confusion” (15). He adds that when forgiveness is expressed to an offender, “the articulation of the forgiving commitment creates a reasonable set of expectations on the part of the one to whom it has been voiced” (17). I would add that whether it is voiced or not, the activities and practices of one who forgives have this effect on others; most enactments of forgiveness can create expectations that the future will resemble the new present on the part of perceptive wrongdoers in interpersonal contexts. Relationships are defined in part by their existence over time, and forgiving in

relationships would seem highly likely to yield expectations that forgivers will continue to forgive over time.

This is important to understanding forgiveness as a commitment, because moral agents are not static things. Persons are subject to change over time, and subject to the recurrence of memories that can be both uncontrolled and as vivid as they were when one was first wronged. Even accounts of forgiveness as an act or decision that “fixes” a wrong in the past only provide a snapshot of what forgiveness may be at a particular time (Walker 2006: 169-70). It is a reasonable expectation on the part of someone who is aware that they are forgiven that one does not just forgive at the time of a harm, but will remain forgiving, because forgiveness in many forms can alter the norms of interaction for the forgiven and the forgiver (Scarre 2016; Warmke 2016). It is also realistic and understandable that a forgiver will not remain settled in their attitudes over time, and so the understandable expectations of forgiven wrongdoers may conflict with the foreseeable changes in the dispositions of a forgiver. As Marilyn McCord Adams says, “forgiveness involves a series of re-evaluations of the situation.... Things may be better than they seem and/or worse than they seem, but they will always be more complicated than at first they seem” (Adams 1991: 293). The distinctive challenge of forgiveness as a commitment is that one is faced with indefinite future moral decisions as to whether and how to uphold the commitment, even if a wrongdoing may be forgiven “at first” for good reasons.

How that first commitment is made or conveyed is a separate matter. Forgiveness can be a commitment in the sense of being expressed to a wrongdoer in one form of a speech act, specifically, a *commissive*. By a commissive, I mean J.L. Austin’s (1962) category of illocutions by dint of which speakers commit themselves to future conduct in the course of saying so; Austin’s most well-known example of commissives is betting. In saying that I bet you five

dollars (say, that my team will beat your team), I just do commit myself to paying you in the course of saying that I bet you. Austin never cites “I forgive” as an example of a performative utterance, although he suggests such close relatives as “I accept your apology” (1962: 7). I extend Austin’s insights to forgiveness because, in some contexts, saying “I forgive you” or “all is forgiven” commits me to a course of future forgiving conduct.

Against objections that a forgiver may be in error about the nature of a wrong, or unable to maintain a commitment, or insincere, defenders of commissive accounts grant that as with betting, commissive forgiving can misfire, be abused, or given in bad faith, and this no more undermines commissive forgiveness than it does such commissives as betting and promising (Haber 1991; Norlock 2009; Pettigrove 2012). If I made a monetary bet that I knew I could not pay, that I won did not mean I would not have been reasonably held to normative expectations to live up to my commitment if I’d lost. So too with forgiveness. One could communicate it hastily with a clear sense that one is not ready to live up to the expectations it engenders, yet to do so commits one “to some future course of action” in the minds of listeners (Searle 1976: 11). For this reason, expressions of forgiveness take important moral risks; indeed, all such normatively forceful expressions are morally risky, since we are pledging ourselves to pursue future forms of relationship without knowing what unexpected future developments will change our priorities and practices (Kading 1960: 61).

Accounts of forgiveness as a commissive tend to focus on expressions of forgiveness after particular incidents (Londey 1986; Pettigrove 2004, 2012; Warmke 2016; Jorgensen 2017). Not all accounts of forgiveness as a spoken commitment require that the wrongdoing *precede* forgiveness, however; Nicolas Cornell, for example, develops an account of expressions of “preemptive forgiving” that commit speakers to taking a forgiving stance toward specific injuries

in the event that they arise in the future (Cornell 2017: 242). This is complex, in part because Cornell is neutral regarding how to understand what has happened if the event does not ultimately take place. For example, I have had the experience of telling a student of mine, with a bit of reluctance, “Well, it’ll mean grading on my holiday, but I forgive you if you send the paper late,” and finding to my delight that the student did not send the paper late, but rather got it in a bit early. According to Cornell, did I pre-emptively forgive my student? He suggests two possibilities: either no forgiving occurred, or I “forgave something nonactual, interpreting it as ‘I forgive [you if you f],’” and Cornell clarifies forgiving the nonactual with the example, “consider forgiving a transgression that one mistakenly believes to have been committed” (2017: 253). One could argue that no forgiving occurred, since my student did nothing to be forgiven for. Yet on a commissive account, I did establish expectations within our relationship that I would orient myself toward a possible future harm in a way my student could trust to be reparative. In other words, communicating preemptive forgiveness established normative expectations in my student with respect to the course of our future relationship; this is clearer if one considers whether my student’s expectations would be the same had I said, “If you send this paper to me on a holiday, *I will never forgive you.*”

Seeing forgiveness as at times a commissive is compatible with allowing for the possibility that at other times the same expression does not function that way. One may say it as a report of how one currently feels, one may intend it as a declarative expression intended to set another free in an urgent moment, and one may lie, intending it as a manipulation of the recipient. As Austin observes, the same propositional sentence can serve in more than one functional context; for example, “I shall be there” may be a prediction or it may be a promise (33). As with some other speech acts, a commissive is subject to felicity conditions including the

circumstances, the appropriate speaker and listener, the speaker's intention to carry out the commitment and their appropriate states of mind, including believing that one can live up to a commitment. In conveying the commissive in interpersonal relationships, one who says "I forgive you" or a relevantly similar commissive implies that they will forswear their negative feelings about the wrongdoing or the wrongdoer (Warmke 2020), and that they intend to restore the relationship that obtains or to repair the damage that the memory of the relationship would otherwise bear. Repair of a relationship is consistent with ceasing to interact, so the commissive to forgive is not necessarily a promise of reconciliation.

Forgiveness can also be a commitment in the sense of being a chosen set of attitudes and practices that reflect the forgiver's ongoing adherence to the view that he or she forgives a wrongful incident. That is, forgiveness as a commitment may not be expressed aloud in so many words, but may motivate a forgiver to come to important moral decisions to conduct "inner work" (Emerick 2017: 120, 121; see also Enright 2001). One may decide to cultivate improved attitudes toward a wrongdoer, and to revisit whether to maintain those forgiving attitudes over time. Such an inner commitment to forgive is fundamentally unilateral (Emerick 2017: 117). This form of commitment to forgiveness can occur without the wrongdoer's knowing that they are forgiven, and can include forgiving absent wrongdoers and even the dead. One could object that forgiveness of the absent and the dead is not a commitment that is obviously motivated by relational repair, because where there is no interactive reciprocity, there is no relationship. However, I resist the latter clause; as I argue elsewhere, relationships are meaningful even when they are no longer reciprocal, because most real relationships exist primarily in the imaginative and interpretive contents of the mind, and in behaviors and conduct influenced by one's attitude toward one's own mental contents (Norlock 2017c: 351). As Diana Meyers says, "relationships

are sources of moral identity” (2004: 292). If one’s relationships include past harms and one’s own internally valued commitments to forgive that harm, then forgiveness is likewise a source of one’s moral identity.

Not all agents will find they need to revisit the commitment if a forgiving attitude toward a past harm is easily maintained and therefore even forgotten, but the possibilities of some easy forgiveness or subsequent forgetting are compatible with forgiveness being a commitment. Indeed, the ease with which some commitments to forgive are upheld seems to me to be confirmation that one made a highly appropriate commitment, one suited to the relationship and perhaps accommodated by understanding how a wrong but forgiven act fits into a wider narrative about the forgiven person (Calhoun 1992). Easily upheld commitments can co-exist with other offers of forgiveness that require reconsideration, especially on more difficult occasions. When a forgiver’s perspective on a wrongdoer or a past wrongdoing is one that was committed to forgiving, but becomes dominated by negative feelings upon remembering or reflecting on the harm, then forgiveness may require recommitting to a change in one’s feelings, a renewal of one’s aims to repair this aspect of a relationship. In saying this, I do not intend to indicate that all relationships *require* a recommitment; many of us find it possible to continue in relationships in which incidents are unforgiven, or relationships in which forgiving commitments were made and not maintained. The reconsideration of one’s previous commitment to forgive may also be resolved by concluding that it is proper to cease recommitting, that forgiveness is no longer appropriate not only because of what a wrongdoer did but because of the person that wrongdoer is. As Pettigrove (2012) argues, we forgive or decline to forgive persons for their characters as well as for their acts.

Whether forgiveness is a commitment to be recommended depends upon one's moral aims with respect to a relationship or to one's own character. When one's moral aims with respect to one's own character include cultivating virtues and skills of sociality, then a commitment to forgiveness can be a cultivated disposition in advance of any wrong acts. Robin Dillon refers to such a disposition as "preservative," and describes preservative forgiveness as a forward-looking attitude that persons are "basically decent and aiming to be good, capable of moral self-improvement...and, on the other hand, as inherently fallible and liable to get even far off track" (Dillon 2001: 58), therefore likely worthy of forgiveness and demanding of us to be prepared to forgive. Dillon uses the analogy of a forgiving surface that allows one to drop a glass without its shattering; the idea is that a person will make errors, which can be accommodated rather than felt to be irreversibly damaging (2001: 59). Dispositions to forgive in advance can be commitments to oneself or commitments to others. Dillon (2001) focuses on self-forgiveness as a form of preservative forgiveness; this is a form of a commitment to oneself that makes sense if we grant that we can have relationships with our past, present, and future selves (Norlock 2009: 153). Forward-looking dispositions to be forgiving resemble the accounts of philosophers who describe forgiveness as permitting an openness to reconciliation (Emerick 2017; Strabbing 2020). One may see a commitment to be self-forgiving as a commitment to living with oneself without (or with fewer) regrets. Those of us who have written about self-forgiveness regularly observe that self-forgiveness entails reconciliation in a way that a disposition to forgive others does not.

Arguably, a commitment to forgiveness of oneself or others, when cultivated as a disposition in advance of harm, is simply a virtue of forgivingness (Roberts 1995; Neu 2011; Griswold 2007). Virtues are deliberately cultivated moral practices that agents take to be central

to a good life, and committing to being a forgiving person implies that over time, one aims to avoid the extremes of vice, “servility on the one side, and an unyielding hard-heartedness and vengefulness on the other” (Neu 2011: 135-6). Commitment to being a forgiving person is not like a propositional commitment to a specific future act or set of acts; instead, it is “a commitment to some value, as a general guide to action” (Nguyen 2019: 976). In Kantian terms, one may see forgivingness as an imperfect duty, a practice to be committed to exercising over time, even if not required on every possible occasion (Kant 1775-1780; Blöser 2019; Satne 2018; Moran 2013; Sussman 2005).

## **Part Two: What motivates committing to forgive, and committing to unforgivingness?**

In the remainder of this essay, I take up discussion of some of the motivating attitudes that inform commitments to forgive another or to be a forgiving person in advance of harms. I then proceed to consider the possible motivations of those who commit to being unforgiving, such as survivors of atrocities who say that what happened should never be forgiven, and those who commit in advance of harm to being the sorts of persons who are prepared to be unforgiving if harms they already hold to be unforgivable come about. Let us start with some possible grounding conditions for the commitment to forgive.

### *2.1. Motivating attitudes of commitments to forgive*

One may take seriously a commitment to be forgiving for moral reasons that include humility and integrity.<sup>1</sup> I see integrity as fundamental to being a person who lives up to

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<sup>1</sup> In personal correspondence regarding an early draft of this essay, Lucy Allais adds, “I think generosity in our interpretation of others is also key.” I completely concur, although I hold that generosity is a consequence of (at

commitments generally; in interpersonal relationships, I see integrity as the basic disposition of one who can be trusted to carry out one's expressions, especially expressions of forgiveness when these carry the implicit message that forgiveness will enable the repair of the relationship after a harm. As Cheshire Calhoun argues, integrity is a "master virtue" that presses into service "a host of other virtues" (Calhoun 2016: 153), and I suggest that those virtues could include a preparation to be forgiving. Integrity, as Calhoun develops it, is "the social virtue of acting on one's own judgment" – on her view, "one's best judgment" – and "calls us simultaneously to stand behind our convictions and to take seriously others' doubts about them" (2016: 151, 150). When those convictions include a commitment to forgivingness, then one's judgment is that one ought to remain open to repairing relationships with future offenders, or be consistent and trustworthy in following through on commitments to past offenders to renew forgiveness upon future occasions to forgive.

I add to Calhoun's account that integrity can be, and at its best ought to be, compatible with great epistemological humility regarding whether one thinks one either knows "best" or has arrived at one's best judgment. To commit to forgive in incident-specific senses includes the judgment that one is right to forgive a wrongdoer; to commit to being a forgiving person in advance of harms includes the judgment that forgivingness is the appropriate disposition to cultivate. I agree with Calhoun that integrity involves reflecting on one's commitment to forgive and authentically owning it as "one's own judgment," but I disagree that one must hold the view that it is one's optimal or "best" judgment. As decisions to commit to a course of ethics, neither of these judgments need be optimal. Forgiveness demands a form of accounting, to oneself and

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least some) humility, which I take to be a preparation to be abidingly accepting of one's own errors and, perforce, a preparation to see others as flawed like oneself and thereby meriting some compassionate exercise of the principle of charity, as I make clearer in what follows; some humility begets generosity, in other words.

others, in shared moral terms, for what it is that flawed and erring agents do, and so one's accounting must be connected to considering real possibilities that one chooses to forgive wrongly, else one is not taking the accounting project sufficiently seriously. Because an agent with integrity aims to be trustworthy and to stand for convictions that one is receptive to discuss and defend, then self-scrutiny and the criticisms of others are part of the project of integrity; that is, integrity demands the humble recognition that commitments to forgive or to cultivate forgivingness must be renewed, revisited, and revised if reflection reveals a better alternative.

If one can have integrity and simultaneously embrace humble uncertainty as to whether one has the most appropriate commitments with respect to (past or future) wrongdoers, then forgiveness in actual practice will often turn out to be continually open-ended, as the moral agent with integrity commits to be prepared to revise their own stance as to the appropriate response to a wrong. Because commitments to forgive will be open-ended and subject to failures and revisions, for the person with humility and integrity, I do not believe dispositional commitments to forgive are virtues. *Virtue* in strong senses of the term may refer to a character trait or a success term, suggesting that one not only aims for but achieves virtue over time, whereas a view of forgiveness as a commitment is more open-ended and admits of failure or revision.

In the case of self-forgiveness, humility may again be an integral part of such a disposition to forgive. Humility would seem to be an eminently necessary skill for moral agents, if one is to move beyond penitence for what one has done to readiness to accept facts about ourselves, and to take responsibility for the person we rightly apprehend ourselves to be. I do not intend to suggest that this is the sole purpose of humility, but among its many moral functions, humility may be a precondition for self-forgiveness of past harms. In advance of particular future errors, a self-forgiving disposition would entail the humble person's awareness of their own

vulnerability to future error; self-acceptance of one's moral imperfection is a start, but a self-forgiving person is prepared to do the further work of reaccepting oneself, or recommitting to living with one's bad self, when one's own errors seem so profound that self-acceptance is off the table.

Judith Andre (2015) describes the humble person as one who characteristically accepts and integrates bad news, and I add that the humble person continues to expect bad news about oneself. Akin to a sense of "self-lowering" (M. Austin 2014), humble forgivingness could be characterized as the understanding that one is actually likely to err, that one will continue to disappoint oneself, that one is not on a steadily upward path in every possible way, and therefore one requires from oneself a commitment, in advance, to continue to live with oneself, not just a shrug of acceptance but a forward-looking dedication to repair one's most negative attitudes toward one's own wrongdoings. Not only is such news, as Andre says, frequent, I would go so far as to say it is in our future; I advocate for an openness to pessimism with respect to personal progress and change. In saying this, I grant that my view is at odds with accounts that claim forgiveness involves a belief that the wrongdoer will not act a similar way in the future. At the least, I am arguing for an acceptance of one's vulnerability to that which one knows one cannot control. On this view, self-forgiveness can be a disposition to not give up on oneself or lower one's moral principles in advance of one's actual wrongdoing, a humble forgivingness that is in part a commitment to a continual relation with oneself, in which one cultivates a disposition to expect one's future, unfolding relationship with oneself not to be linear and progressive, but instead to involve predictably falling short of one's own standards. Dillon's earlier metaphor of "getting off track" is helpful, reminding us that linear time is no guarantee of improvement in our flaws or frequency of falling short.

That a disposition to self-forgive requires humility seems obvious. It may be less obvious that humility would inform a commitment to forgive others. Mark Button's (2005) account of humility emphasizes a generous and relational view which extends one's view of one's flawed self to a sympathetic view of others; to refer back to my language about our own liability to do wrong, the certainty that we will actually err, ourselves, is naturally informative of our fellows' fallibilities.<sup>2</sup> Button draws on the influence of St. Bernard de Clairvaux, noting, "Bernard sees humility as a quality whose cultivation and practice is essential for relationships," not just intimate relationships, but one's place in a wider "relational network between self and other that humility helps both to open up and to shape, slowing drives toward condemnation and rejection..., and fostering conditions for critical attentiveness, mutual understanding, and generosity" (2005: 850-51). This last stands as a good candidate for one view of the commitment to be forgiving in advance of particular harms. Forgiveness can be a commitment to slow down when one feels oneself driven to condemn or reject an offender, and do the work of attending to what is understandable and what capacities one may have for a generous, if undeserved, response.

Of course, St. Bernard was an adherent to a religion that holds forgiveness is morally required. Theorists today differ as to whether a commitment to forgive can be supererogatory or morally required. During the initial proliferation of contemporary research in forgiveness in the 1980s and 1990s, the predominant view was that forgiveness is always elective, a gift and not an obligation (Enright et al 1998; Calhoun 1992; McGary 1989). However, as Per Milam argues, that forgiveness is typically elective does not mean it is *essentially* elective. Forgiveness may be

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<sup>2</sup> In light of my previous footnote, I add here that it is Mark Button's views which inform my own view that humility is the master virtue of generosity, because humility gives rise to sympathy for flawed others; sympathy is the generous response to everyone's fallibility.

optional at some times and a duty at other times, depending on the reasons one forgives: “In order to forgive one must have the right kind of reasons. One can have reasons for or against forgiving, or both. And these reasons can add up, giving one more or less reason to forgive, all things considered. But, if reasons for and against forgiving can add up, then sometimes the weight of one’s reasons can generate a requirement either to forgive or not” (2018: 575).

Therefore, “whether and when forgiveness is elective depends on contingent facts about the offence, the offender, and potential forgiver” (2018: 583).

I add that those contingent facts include facts about the nature of the relationship at hand, especially when one is in a position to care for vulnerable others. Some relationships are those in which it is not sheerly optional to maintain or repair the relationship, and instead, come with requirements to make commitments to each other. And this is a preferable world; it would be bizarre if all relationships were as optional as relationships of adults and nigh-strangers in a large workplace, who could casually decide whether to interact or not (Wilson 1988). The weight of one’s reasons to forgive may at times amount to a duty to commit to forgiving particular incidents, or to commit in advance to being forgiving of each other for future wrongs. I realize that some philosophers may hold that one cannot be required to make a promise or a commitment. But the position that commitments cannot be required seems, like necessarily elective forgiveness, an acontextual and non-relational treatment of the nature of forgiveness. As Linda Ross Meyer suggests with her example of saying to her child, “I am still angry, but I forgive you anyway” (2000:1523). As children, we need to believe our parents won’t eternally resent us for our minor offenses and even for culpably wronging them, in order to develop basic senses of trust. Especially in response to more trivial harms, then, parents may bear special obligations to their children to express a declarative act of forgiveness, which will, as one carries

forward the relationship, further entail commissive acts to remain repaired and uphold a forgiving attitude.

## 2.2. *Motivating attitudes of commitments to be unforgiving*

Grudge-holders may be described as members of the set of those with a commitment to unforgivingness, which I turn to for the remainder of this essay. If forgiveness can be a commitment in response to particular harms or as a disposition in advance, then certainly unforgivingness can be a commitment as well; for example, one can declare a commitment to a view that a particular instance of wrongdoing is unforgivable in perpetuity, or take the view that it would be wrong to be a person that is prepared to forgive some types of possible, future wrong.

This enjoys some controversy in the literature. For example, Trudy Govier argues, against commitments to unforgivingness, that it is objectionable to adopt an attitude that any individual wrongdoer is “completely and finally irredeemable” or “evil through and through and could never change,” because such an attitude “anticipates and communicates the worst” (2002: 137; see also Wolfendale 2005; Holmgren 2012). Govier prescribes an attitude toward even unrepentant wrongdoers that cultivates hope for their moral transformation, implying that giving up hope amounts to a failure to respect them as human moral agents. As I argue elsewhere, this may be too high of a normative standard for victims of atrocity to meet when their perpetrators are expressly unrepentant (Norlock 2017b: 176). In such cases, Govier’s description of *conditional* unforgivability may be more apt; she says that when there “are indeed enormous psychological and moral obstacles to the forgiveness of very serious wrongs,” then “we may rightly regard a perpetrator as conditionally unforgivable if that perpetrator has not acknowledged, and does not morally regret, the wrongdoing... Failure to forgive perpetrators in

these circumstances expresses our conviction that those acts, and any person still identified with them, are profoundly evil” (2002: 117-18). Govier’s conditional unforgivability seems to function as an interim commitment, a decision to uphold a particular view of a wrongdoer as an unforgivable person that is subject to revision in the face of new information.

The most profound evils are often the object of commitments to be unforgiving. Crimes against humanity, atrocities, and the evils that make a life indecent are the subject of both incident-specific expressions and attitudes in advance of particular harm. The commitment to a view 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 (and will continue to be) 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 (1969), 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 commitments to upholding evils as unforgivable ought 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 they are disposed to the commitment, in advance, that intolerable harms cannot be atoned for adequately. Since the conditions enabling a coherent account of forgiveness do not obtain, forgiveness is conceptually impossible and on this view, it is only rational to commit to holding that some types of wrongs are unforgivable by definition.

In the same symposium, Henry James Cargas, a Catholic, responded that God may forgive, but “Simon Wiesenthal could not, I cannot” (125), implying both that it was psychologically too much to ask at the time, and a further commitment to continuing to exempt a forgiver on the basis of the difficulty involved. Commitments to unforgiveness for ethical, principled reasons are expressed by human rights scholar Joshua Rubenstein (240), who objected that the request for forgiveness was morally callous; 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 as a *reason* to commit to withholding undeserved forgiveness (567).

As Marguerite La Caze (2005) explains, some 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. With others, she 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:

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 or should not be forgiven, because there is no moral response adequate to the task of appropriately responding to the wrong. Evil “transcends all moral categories,” as Arendt writes elsewhere, and forgiveness is a merely moral response to something so heinous it defies morals (2003: 23).

But why would the impossible require asserting or cultivating of commitments? 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 focus on the ethical motivations in particular, and what it is that commitments to being unforgiving aim to accomplish. As Margaret Walker says, it may be more productive to go beyond justifications of definitions; instead, we should “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? To what moral positions do we want to recruit each other?” (2006: 187; see also MacLachlan 2009). Expressions in social space can recruit others to a view, or try to; reactive attitudes “issue an RSVP, an implicit bid for the other’s acknowledgement” of one’s authority to hold others or themselves accountable, as Stephen Darwall says (2016: 267; see also Fricker 2020).

One answer Walker offers is that a commitment to be unforgiving functions similarly to atrocity victims’ saying “never again,” that is, “as a warning and an invitation...Join us in insisting that there is real evil in the world, and that not all human beings are willing to be, or capable of being, a part of anything recognizable as a human moral community based on reciprocal trust” (2006: 188-189). The preparation to be unforgiving of evils cannot prevent evildoers from acting, but “the perpetrators must be kept resolutely outside the community of

morally decent, if fallible, ...folk. Holding wrongs 'unforgivable' is a way to mark the enormity of injury and the malignancy of wrongdoing as exceeding anything that could be made to fit back into a reliable framework of moral relations" (189-190).

As I said at the outset, holding wrongs unforgivable is distal in character. Whether one is holding a particular past wrong to be unforgivable, or cultivating a preparation to be unforgiving of future types of wrongs, one is making a volitional decision to carry the attitude of unforgivingness forward in time. But like the commitment to be forgiving, the commitment to be unforgiving may also admit of open-endedness and an end, depending on its motivation and the form it takes. For example, philosophers who defend third-party refusals to forgive often point to respect for a wrongdoer's victims or concern for their recovery from harm as a reason for third parties to communicate unforgivingness (MacLachlan 2017; Radzik 2010; Garrard 2002). This seems a more hopeful warning-invitation than Walker describes above; the expression of concern that victims are not yet sufficiently respected by wrongdoers is one that enjoins a wrongdoer to improve, manifest respect, and rectify harms or compensate victims for their losses. In other words, rather than being a statement that no one could absorb the magnitude of some types of harm, an expression of unforgivingness may function proleptically to convey that wrongdoers have not done as much as they could. This is a moral invitation to wrongdoers that may express both anger and hope, indicating that unforgiving agents expect better and believe wrongdoers to be capable of better.

Even the thought that one cannot forgive oneself may admit of hope that one can change, a conditional commitment to a view that one can and should do more than one has done to rectify past wrongs. The attitude that one did something unforgivable may be a principled commitment to be a certain sort of person, one who neither ceases to make reparations to the past nor does

similar types of harms again in the future. As with commitments to forgive, a commitment to be unforgiving of one's past wrongs may be motivated by virtues of humility and integrity, as one commits to keeping one's errors in full view so as not to make the mistake of assuming one's unlikelihood of future error (Norlock 2009; Govier 1999). Continued self-reproach does not require self-forgiveness (Lippitt 2019) but the attitude that one should not or should "never" forgive oneself is worth appreciating as possibly motivating of critical self-reflection, a hallmark of decency (Hagberg 2011; Griswold 2007).

A commitment to unforgivingness may sound lamentable if forgiveness is always preferable to its converse, but I hope I have outlined reasons for readers to agree that in the actual, nonideal world, unforgivingness can be a principled position motivated by justice and at times encouraging of good efforts. 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 governing principled commitments to be forgiving or unforgiving 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 commit to forgive or to 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 deciding to forgive and some report a dedication to refusing to forgive; the latter only makes sense if forgiveness is an option, and its refusal a moral power that they can sensibly claim. And victims and bystanders have extended forgivingness as well as unforgivingness even after the worst of harms. As Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela (2011) argues, regarding her work in South

African communities, “To say... 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” (544). The reasons to be forgiving or unforgiving can be remarkably similar, and I conclude as I began with some healthy moral pluralism with respect to which we ought to convey and when. In a perpetually unjust world, the best we can hope for is a commitment to do what we can to make the future better than the past, to make decent lives possible, to return our attention to moral efforts repeatedly, to reconsider the commitments we’ve made when we fail, and to appreciate achievements of forgivingness and unforgivingness as markers on a path of moral experience that will include change.

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Brief description for inclusion under **Notes on Contributors:**

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