**Inarticulate Forgiveness**

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**Abstract:**  Influentially, Pamela Hieronymi has argued that any account of forgiveness must be both articulate and uncompromising. It must articulate the change in judgement that results in the forgiver’s loss of resentment without excusing or justifying the misdeed, and without comprising a commitment to the transgressors responsibility, the wrongness of the action, and the transgressed persons self-worth. Non-articulate accounts of forgiveness, which rely on indirect strategies for reducing resentment (for example, reflecting on the transgressor’s bad childhood) are said to fail to explain forgiveness. I argue that the articulateness condition is not a necessary condition for forgiveness. I respond to numerous objections advanced against non-articulate accounts, including the claim that the resentment-mitigating practices they involve amount to excusing. Appealing to P.F. Strawsons distinction between objective and participant attitudes, I argue that forgivers can take transgressors to be detrimentally causally shaped by their past while holding him them to be morally responsible.

**Keywords:** forgiveness, excuse, justification, moral responsibility, Strawson, resentment

In an influential paper Pamela Hieronymi argues that any account of forgiveness must meet the challenge of being both *articulate* and *uncompromising* (Hieronymi 2001). The account must be *articulate* in order to pick out genuine acts of forgiveness from related but different phenomena such as excusing and justifying. Excusing is like forgiving in that the transgressed persons resentful attitude toward the offender is abandoned through a particular change of judgement, specifically that the offender is not responsible. But in forgiving one maintains the judgement that the offender is responsible. Justifying is like forgiving in that an initially resentful attitude toward an apparent wrongdoer is abandoned through a change in judgement, specifically the judgement that the act was wrong or unjustified. To explain genuine forgiveness, Hieronymi argues, we need to articulate this distinct change in judgement. Hieronymi presents this as a challenge because the change in judgement cannot compromise the forgivers commitment to the wrongness of the act being forgiven, the wrongdoers status as morally responsible, or the victims self-worth. Hence it must be *uncompromising*.

Articulate accounts of forgiveness seem promising because they precisely delimit the scope of forgiveness. Even those who object to the account of forgiveness Hieronymi advances, such as Zaragoza (2012) and Warmke (2015), still defend the claim that accounts of forgiveness must be articulate. Other prominent writers on forgiveness, such as Pettigrove (2012) and Holmgren (2012), make a point of acknowledging that their analyses meet, or fail to meet, Hieronymis articulateness condition.[[1]](#footnote-1) So it is fair to say that the articulateness condition has been influential and widely endorsed. Given its influence it is important to reconsider its merit. In this paper I will challenge the alleged superiority of articulate accounts of forgiveness by rebutting some of the objections advanced against non-articulate accounts, by questioning some of the assumptions made about the respective roles of participant and objective stances in the activity of holding others responsible, and by raising some concerns about over-intellectualization in the analysis of forgiveness. I will argue that non-articulate accounts offer a more realistic portrayal of how forgiveness operates in our moral lives, and that it is false that all accounts of forgiveness must be both articulate and uncompromising. If the forgiveness practices we typically engage in are not best understood by way of a contrast with excuse and justification, then we will arrive at an artificially narrow account of forgiveness.

In Section One I will explain the motivation for the articulateness condition. In Section Two I will take up the objection that non-articulate accounts of forgiveness fail to respect the rationality of the emotions. In Section Three I will take up the objection that non-articulate accounts result in either an implausible or ethically troubling account of forgiveness. In Section Four I will take up the claim that non-articulate accounts at best describe something like forgiveness, but not forgiveness itself. In Section Five I argue that articulate accounts have difficult drawing a compelling distinction between readiness to forgive and forgiveness, and suggest that articulate accounts are guilty of over-intellectualizing forgiveness. Finally, I conclude that it has not been demonstrated that all accounts of forgiveness must be articulate and uncompromising, and suggest that non-articulate accounts may well offer a more realistic portrayal of how forgiveness operates in our lives.

**1. The Rationale for Articulateness**

One of the reasons Hieronymi cites in support of the articulateness condition arises out of frustration with discussions of forgiveness which take it to be a kind of self-manipulation aimed at overcoming resentment.[[2]](#footnote-2) If forgiveness can be done for good reasons then these reasons should feature in our understanding of it; simply forgetting a resentment over time, or taking an anti-resentment pill should not be considered acts of forgiveness. Hieronymi (2001, 530) concludes: Genuine forgiveness must involve some revision in judgement or change in view. An account of genuine forgiveness must therefore *articulate* that revision in judgment or change in view. It must be an articulate account.

According to Hieronymi, the challenge for articulate accounts lies in the fact that the resentment that is overcome via forgiveness must be overcome while holding fast to three judgments: first, that the act was significantly morally wrong; second, that the wrongdoer is a legitimate member of the moral community and thus responsible; and third, that the person transgressed by the offense, ought not to be so wronged. To give up the first judgment is to hold the act was justified, not forgiven. For example, when my anger at your casually breezing in for our important meeting thirty minutes late is dissipated by my coming to understand your role in a medical emergency, I have not forgiven you because I have judged that your late arrival was not morally culpable. If the act is no longer deemed to be morally wrong, then the relevant change in judgement is not forgiveness. We cannot forgive actions that signal no moral offense. To give up the second judgment is to excuse the apparent offender, not to forgive. For example, when my anger at a friends complete disregard for my feelings is dissipated by my recognition that she is clinically depressed I have not forgiven, but excused her. In such a case the friend is excused for behavior that is out of character and so, in some sense, not appropriately attributable to her. It is excusable because, given her condition, it does not signal ill will on her part. Forgiveness, by contrast, requires that the transgressor be held to a higher standard of responsibility, or an unwillingness to make allowances for certain behaviors and certain circumstances. To give up the third judgment is to hold that the offended party is not worthy of moral consideration; neither is this forgiveness. To deny one’s self-worth, for example, as a way of moving past resentment at one’s ill treatment is not an act of forgiveness but a failure of self-respect.

Part of the appeal of articulate accounts is that they promise a precise explanation of this revision in judgement. Another strength of articulate views is said to lie in their capacity to acknowledge the voluntariness of forgiving; it is something we *do*, not something that just happens to us. Warmke (2015), for example, defends articulate accounts as advancing an appropriately voluntary account of forgiveness. If paradigmatic cases of forgiveness are under our voluntary control, then an account of forgiveness will need to explain forgiveness as a voluntary act. Articulate accounts, because they focus on changes in agents judgment and not on indirect strategies for overcoming hostile attitudes, will be better placed to do this than non-articulate accounts.

**2. Non-articulate Accounts and the Rationality of the Emotions**

Non-articulate accounts of forgiving allow for, and appeal to, indirect strategies to transform resentment. By contrast with articulate accounts, they will be messy and may describe a process followed rather than a single event. Zaragoza (2012, 609) describes them as involving steps: any nonarticulate account would involve eliminating resentment by indirect or nonrational manipulations, such as imaginatively identifying with the wrongdoers point of view, thinking about the positive aspects of ones past history with the wrongdoer, etc. Hieronymi doesnt argue directly against non-articulate accounts, but advances a number of concerns intended to undercut their plausibility. She argues (2012, 535) that it is a mistake to assume that resentment and anger are states to be destabilized, banished, conquered, or otherwise manipulated out of existence, claiming that to do so is to fail to acknowledge that such emotions are attitude-sensitive judgments and subject to rational revision: We typically have them because we think we have reason to. In a well-functioning character, the revision in judgement from his X-ing was a wrong against me, to his X-ing was justified, given the circumstances will cause the anger to disappear. She claims that it is only in rare and non-ideal cases of recalcitrant emotions that the agent must resort to emotional manipulations to rid herself of the anger (for example, I shouldnt forget all of the times he has shown me kindness). Hieronymi suggests that while articulate accounts understand emotions as subject to rational revision, non-articulate accounts, which focus on ways to destabilize and manipulate emotions over time, fail to appreciate emotions as the judgement-sensitive attitudes they are.

Hieronymi is right to emphasize the judgment-sensitivity of emotions, but defenders of non-articulate accounts of forgiveness can also allow and emphasize their judgment-sensitivity. A focus on indirect strategies does not itself imply the denial of the judgment-sensitivity of the emotions. It does imply, perhaps, a healthy skepticism about the capacity of reason to fully coordinate ones considered judgments with ones affective states. After all, even after we believe ourselves to have forgiven someone, we can find ourselves beset by an inappropriate sense of grievance against that person and struggle against it. Hieronymi supposes that the use of indirect strategies implies a retreat to non-cognitivism about the emotions, but emotions like resentment can be judgment-sensitive and also seriously in need of destabilization. This is because typically, emotions like anger do not carefully target a moral wrong (or a moral wrongdoer) leaving the rest of ones mental landscape clear. As a friend once suggested to me, anger is more like a grenade than a rifle. It is unpredictable and does not pick out a discreet object. Just consider how quickly, when one is morally offended (even by a friend) ones thoughts can turn away from the relevant incident to a list of the offenders character flaws. In such a case, a destabilization strategy, such as reminding oneself of ones history of friendship, is a highly rational strategy. It is not forgiveness, of course. My point is simply that a focus on destabilization doesnt preclude recognition of the cognitive dimension of our emotions. Rather, it seems to acknowledge that their judgment-sensitivity is not only perceptive, it is projective.

Resentment and anger can colour ones experience in such a way that opportunities for further resentment and anger are multiplied. So when Hieronymi writes of emotions like anger and resentment that: We typically have them because we think we have reason to, she overstates their cognitive authority. Resentment can indicate a perceived moral wrong. But it can also persist as a state of the agent that, even when she is not attending to its object (the moral wrong or wrongdoer), can colour ones interactions with ill will leading to more resentment. A little bit of resentment can go a long way.

Hieronymi contrasts her judgment-sensitivity view with the view that emotions are forces to be managed. But there is considerable room for intermediate positions which acknowledge both their connection to reason (judgement-sensitivity) and their non-rational causal powers (their reactiveness), which need on occasion to be managed. So granting the cognitivity of the emotions is not *per se* a reason to prefer articulate accounts to non-articulate accounts.

**3. Non-articulate Accounts Face a Dilemma**

A second reason non-articulate accounts are said to fail is that they are forced to accept an implausible or morally troubling account of forgiveness. Zaragoza advances his objections in the form of a dilemma: either the non-articulate theorist holds that forgiveness is the taking of the steps that tend to lead to forgiveness, or holds that forgiveness is the taking of the steps that tend to lead to forgiveness along with the loss of resentment that typically issues from those steps. On the first horn of the dilemma, the non-articulate theorist must grant that a person can take the steps that typically lead to forgiveness, without arriving at the loss of resentment, and must therefore grant that there can be cases of forgiveness without a loss of resentment. This seems unacceptable.

On the second horn of the dilemma, the non-articulate theorist must grant that a person can take the steps to forgiveness, remain hopeful of the possible loss of resentment, but cannot directly bring it about. According to Zaragoza, this is unacceptable because on this view forgiveness is not something we do, but something we hope will happen as a result of our emotional and cognitive manipulations. He finds this both counter intuitive and ethically troubling, because if we grant that we dont have direct control over the actual loss of resentment, then it seems that moral praise and blame should be allotted according to whether and how a person utilizes indirect strategies for forgiveness. Zaragoza concludes: On this horn of the dilemma, then, a nonarticulate account would displace forgiveness from the important place we think it occupies in our ethical lives (2012, 611).

However, it isnt obvious that opting for the second horn produces either counterintuitive or ethically troubling results. It is not counter intuitive because we have plenty of evidence that forgiveness is not under our direct control; we can put a great deal of time and energy into the steps to forgiveness precisely because there is no direct alternative that we can find available at that time. A person who after months or years of trying to forgive, now notices her loss of resentment will be pleased at its absence, and may well take that to indicate (some) success in having forgiven. Such a person will not likely be able to articulate a single reason, or even a set of rational steps traversed, that changed her judgments such that resentment was overcome.[[3]](#footnote-3) But it is not implausible to hold that forgiveness is the product of the steps taken to loss of resentment, and the loss of resentment. So the non-articulate account should not be abandoned as counter-intuitive.

Nor should it be abandoned because it is ethically troubling. Zaragoza claims that non-articulate accounts will have to hold that praise and blame be allotted on the basis of a persons attempts at the indirect strategies for forgiveness, and that this doesnt square with the significance of forgiveness in our moral lives. But neither claim poses a problem for non-articulate accounts. First, it can simply be granted that praise and blame should be so allotted. We might well blame a friend that we know to be refusing any attempts to manipulate and overcome his resentment in a particular case. We might hold him responsible when he restates yet again just how angry his is at X, for Y, allowing bitterness to grow, and remind him that X has also shown great kindness in the past, or that he himself has done Y in the past and been forgiven. And we might well praise a friend for the steadfastness of her attempts to forgive her parents the abuse she suffered as a child. Suppose that she goes through the steps for forgiveness and overcomes her resentment, which she announces to us with some pride: I find I just cant be angry anymore, Ive moved on. When we praise this moral feat we are praising the moral work that went into the forgiving steps as well as the resulting change of heart. Second, it is simply not clear how understanding forgiveness in this way leads to a displacement of the moral value of forgiveness in our lives. It can still be valued as a moral good, and its nature as a virtue can be made more obvious. Those who have developed the virtue of being forgiving have, no doubt, shaped their emotional responses over time using precisely such indirect strategies. So the purported dilemma does not give us a reason to prefer articulate accounts to non-articulate accounts.

**4. Indirect Strategies Lead to Something Like Forgiveness, but not Forgiveness**

Another reason advanced in opposition to non-articulate accounts is that they are actually describing *something like forgiveness*, but not forgiveness. Hieronymi argues, for example, that indirect strategies, such as reflection on a transgressors bad childhood, are merely attempts at destabilizing anger that do not lead to forgiveness because they encourage a shift away from holding responsible; they are more like excuse. The concern seems to be that understanding the transgressor’s point of view risks giving up the point of view of the transgressed. This destabilization involves a kind of double-vision, like trying to be two people at once, and without a unified perspective the resentment returns. Similarly, Glen Pettigrove argues that while attempts to understand a moral wrongdoer that focus on the explanation of his behavior by external forces such as a bad childhood can result in the reduction of hostile attitudes, they lead to something other than forgiveness because a causal explanation forgoes normative evaluation: In explaining, one steps outside the moral frame altogether (2012, 64).

Let us suppose momentarily that a nonarticulate view explains forgiveness as the steps to forgive, plus the loss of resentment (as discussed above). If so it seems that a nonarticulate view could allow that forgiveness had taken place at the end of the implementation of destabilization strategies that brought about the loss of resentment. Critics of nonarticulate accounts will reject the suggestion that forgiveness could have taken place on the grounds that destabilizing strategies involve adopting a non-moral, explanatory stance toward the offender. Hieronymi suggests that when we consider the transgressors bad childhood we no longer relate to him as straightforwardly morally responsible. To be responsible for the offense, the offender must be taken to be a legitimate member of the moral community who can be expected not to do such things (2001, 530). I will argue that some attempts to understand a transgressor through an explanatory, or causal, means can play a role in forgiveness strategies without violating the responsibility condition.

To do this I will show that being a legitimate member of the moral community who can be held responsible is rather more nuanced than is often supposed. Because P.F. Strawsons account of resentment as a reactive attitude often features in these discussions, I will begin by briefly revisiting his view (2013). In making a case that determinism does not undermine interpersonal moral attitudes such as resentment, anger, gratitude and so on, Strawson distinguishes between two sorts of stances we can take toward others. Roughly, to take another person to be a member of the class of persons to whom morally responsibility applies is to have a set of reactive attitudes toward them; it is to identify them as participants in the moral life. Strawson writes: the participant reactive attitudes are essentially natural human reactions to the good or ill will or indifference of others towards us, as displayed in *their* attitudes and actions (2013, 70). Reactive attitudes roughly track the quality of will expressed by the action, and include gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings. For Strawsons purposes, recognizing these reactive attitudes as deeply inherent in our nature cuts against deterministic arguments against moral responsibility.

While the objective and participant attitudes are clearly in tension with each other, they are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes initial reactive attitudes will be modified, as when we excuse a person who acts out of character, or simply fails to realize what he is doing. But sometimes ordinary reactive attitudes toward persons are suspended, and instead of responding to them as participants, we take up an objective attitude: To adopt the objective attitude to another human being is to see him, perhaps, as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something...to be managed or handled or cured or trained (2013, 69). In such cases, persons are, in an important sense, excluded from ordinary adult human relationships; Strawson includes children and those who have serious psychological defects in this class. When we take an objective attitude toward another, we relate to them and to their actions with a measure of detachment that precludes reactive attitudes such as resentment and anger. We might, for example, look with an objective eye on the tiresome behaviour of a very young child, thinking in terms of treatment or training, but we might also intermittently look with an objective eye at the behaviour of a normal, mature adult, as doing so can sometimes serve as a refuge...from the strains of involvement, or as an aid to policy (2013, 70). Strawson describes the objective eye as a resource when taken up in this manner.

The distinction between participant and objective attitudes is important to an assessment of the responsibility condition. If destabilizing strategies amount to the adoption of a wholly objective attitude toward the offender, then it seems they will violate the responsibility condition because they withhold reactive attitudes indicative of a moral stance. If attempts at understanding an offenders behaviour by way of causal history (reflecting on a bad childhood, for example) required a wholly objective attitude then they would fail to allow for moral responsibility. However, we can see someone with an objective eye while allowing that she is a legitimate member of the moral community, and responsible. Hieronymi supposes that forgiveness requires a participant stance because her conception of resentment, as requiring an active protest against moral injury, obviates a detached or objective stance.[[4]](#footnote-4) Put in these terms, Hieronymis concern about an unstable, double vision can be understood as an attempt to adopt objective and participant stances at the same time. If the objective and participant attitudes were opposing perspectives that could not coherently overlap, then causal explanations would fail to allow for moral responsibility.

However, it is not obvious that the stance adopted when one reflects on the wrongdoers bad childhood, for example, is a purely objective attitude that precludes a moral framework. It is easy to overstate the opposition between participant and objective attitudes; we do this when we exaggerate the extent to which our perspective is unified and stable. Consider the example of small children as meriting the objective stance. It is true that we dont resent a toddlers mistreatment of the family pet, because the toddler doesnt know any better. But neither do we respond to the toddler as we respond to the family pet. As the toddler ages, the objective attitude taken toward her will be increasingly infused with the participant attitude; she will not simply be perceived as a person to be managed, handled, cured, or trained because she is being nurtured as a participant in the moral life. In standard cases, the child has a kind of categorial status as would-be participant in the moral life, and the objective stance taken toward her will make room for that. Objective and participant attitudes are more fluid than is often supposed.

In making the participant/objective attitude distinction, Strawson himself admits that he is forced to deal in crude dichotomies, ignoring varieties of case (2013, 69). He stresses that having a wholly objective attitude toward another precludes reactive attitudes like resentment, gratitude, anger, forgiveness and love, however it seems clear that attending to varieties of case complicates matters. Consider, for example, the status of a person with dementia.[[5]](#footnote-5) As the disease progresses we will take a more objective attitude toward the person, but a loved one with dementia can certainly remain the target of love, gratitude, and even anger. While still capable of doing things together with others, the person with dementia will remain a participant in the moral life, in a qualified sense. A detached, objective stance can be a resource when navigating the inevitable changes in the relationship over time. For my purposes it is sufficient to note that attending to some of the complexities involved in interpersonal relations suggests that objective and participant attitudes allow for more overlap, and are less opposed than is typically supposed.

Moreover, it should not be assumed that holding a participant attitude toward a person (granting them status as a participant in the moral life) will necessarily result in all of the reactive attitudes including resentment. An accomplished Stoic or a Buddhist might lack the resentment that Hieronymi seems to admire on the grounds that they have a different view of the role of anger and resentment in the moral life. In Buddhist thought, anger, hatred, or ill will is conceived of as poisoning the mind, making ones perceptions and judgements less reliable. So while Western philosophers sometimes assume that if a person is inclined to forgive for the good of her own mental health, she is not engaged in *moral* action, Buddhist philosophers will not.

But even if we grant that resentment is a moral protest, non-articulate accounts of forgiveness, which utilize the objective eye need not violate the responsibility condition. On the assumption that we can, to some extent, take up participant and objective attitudes toward ourselves, their capacity for overlap can be clearly demonstrated as part of first person experience. For example, when a woman who experienced a bad childhood correctly comes to understand her own fear of intimacy as a result of the abuse she suffered as a child, and attempts to navigate it with a kind of detached objectivity, she is (reasonably) treating part of herself as a causal mechanism, and is attempting to find freedom and stability in a controlled manipulation of that mechanism over time. She might well view that part of her character as in need of treatment, or cure, and rely on professional help to develop an understanding of how her fear is sometimes triggered and how it tends to manifest. She will still hold herself responsible for how she responds to others when dealing with this fear; but to some extent, she is taking herself to be an object that requires management, handling or cure. Furthermore, her long term commitment to overcoming her fear of intimacy is itself evidence that she is holding herself responsible. It is just that in this case holding herself responsible wisely requires that, to an extent, she objectify herself.

Just as this happens intrapersonally, it happens interpersonally. Consider the case of a person who is attempting to forgive her brother who has stolen something from her, so that he can sell it and use the cash for a night out with his friends. She is hurt and angry. She takes him to be responsible for the theft, takes the theft to be significantly morally wrong, and holds that she ought not to be treated in such a disrespectful way. She might, with irritation, think to herself that he was like this even as a teenager, he couldnt be trusted because he was willing to harm his siblings if it would improve his social life. She might recall other incidents like this one that demonstrate a clear lack of moral consideration for her. This might fuel her resentment. She might also find herself thinking that he, of all the children, seemed most deeply harmed by their Dads alcoholism and abuse. Weve all had our struggles, she might think, but he has traveled the rockiest road. Bearing in mind the external forces that have shaped his character over time, she might ask herself, Given his childhood, can I really expect him to be any different?

It strikes me that such a series of reflections supports a resentment-mitigating explanation of the behavior but does not violate the responsibility condition. (Nor would it if she committed to engaging in it each time she found herself resenting her brother and the theft). It grants that he has been shaped by his unfortunate past, but does not excuse him. Granted, these reflections dont amount to a complete causal explanation of his behaviour, but then interpersonal relations rarely seek such explanations. This is the sort of causal or explanatory understanding we often utilize when trying to forgive. We dont attempt a complete and reductive account of the offenders behaviour, asking whether or not the theft was a necessitated by prior conditions. Treating persons as partially the products of causal events allows for a form of understanding that can feature in non-articulate views, but it does not force us to step outside of the moral framework altogether.

What strikes Hieronymi as a compromised double vision, distinctive of non-ideal cases of forgiveness, strikes me as typical of the ambiguity of moral life. We are often torn between competing descriptions of our own experience and complicated interests in maintaining relationships. Only very rarely do we get the apology that, in Hieronymis view, undercuts the moral threat expressed by the offense, thereby providing a good reason to forgive. The change in judgment that articulate accounts prize is often the result of personal struggle. It may be that *that* change in judgment is significant in forgiveness but it is not necessary. It thus seems arbitrary to insist that *that* change in judgment picks out what forgiveness is. We seldom get sincere apologies, and we often have to make an effort to forgive. Non-articulateness accounts more accurately depict moral life. I have argued against the claim that when they appeal to external forces such as a bad childhood to mitigate resentment, non-articulate views at best arrive at something like forgiveness, but not forgiveness itself. If the argument of this section is correct, non-articulate accounts should not be abandoned for this reason.

**Section 5. Two Problems Facing Articulate Accounts**

In this section I will raise two objections against articulate accounts of forgiveness which should lead us to reevaluate their prominence. First, articulate views provide an uncompelling distinction between readiness to forgive and forgiveness. This is worth noting because defenders of articulate views like Hieronymi and Zaragoza assume that the distinction only poses a problem for non-articulate views. Readiness to forgive is said to describe a state of the would-be forgiver that involves goodwill or compassion for the offender but may also include resentment; the person is nearing forgiveness but hasnt yet accomplished it. By contrast, forgiveness is said to be absent resentment. Zaragoza argues that non-articulate accounts, given their step-wise method, will only be able to distinguish between an agents readiness to forgive and actual forgiveness in an arbitrary manner (2012, 610). This is because it would be difficult to distinguish between the steps that promote readiness to forgive, and those that promote forgiveness including the loss of resentment. This may be. But a similar problem arises for articulate views. It is not implausible that the resentment a person thought she had foresworn years ago (perhaps decades) returns when a similar offense is, say, perpetrated against her sister. It seems that on an articulate account, the sudden, surprising return of resentment must indicate that forgiveness had never actually been achieved, in which case she falsely believed (for decades) that she had forgiven, but had merely achieved a readiness to forgive. Distinguishing the cases in this way may not be arbitrary, but neither is it compelling. Indeed, at the extreme it seems to require that we couldnt know until a person was dead, whether or not she had actually forgiven.

Secondly, articulate accounts seem to be guilty of an over-intellectualization of the facts of forgiveness. Strawsons account of the reactive attitudes is advanced, in part, by claiming that his opponents have over-intellectualized the matter. He proposes that we try to keep before our minds something it is easy to forget when we are engaged in philosophy...what it is actually like to be involved in ordinary interpersonal relationships, ranging from the most intimate to the most casual (2013, 67). Articulate accounts trade realism for precisionism. Consider that on an account like Hieronymis the forgiver herself does not need to be aware of the content of the change in judgement that is definitive of the act of forgiveness, she just needs to know that it has happened. While I agree that forgiveness can have occurred without the forgiver being able to articulate the way she revised her judgment such that it happened, I disagree that the forgiveness necessarily resides in the change in judgment. Consider the case of a person who, for decades, attempts to truly forgive her parents for the abuse she suffered as a child. After many years of serious moral effort and therapy, she no longer has resents them, even though she holds them responsible. Has she forgiven or simply excused, perhaps after learning more about her parents mistreatment at the hands of her grandparents?

If making a sharp distinction between excuse and forgiveness is of signal importance, then we will, with those who suppose that theories of forgiveness must be articulate, insist that the case be decided by reference to whether or not the change in judgment she has had over the years is articulate and uncompromising. Quite possibly this cannot be known. Perhaps she will tell us that she knows it has happened, but cant explain the change in content. Fair enough. But notice that, functionally speaking, articulate and non-articulate accounts fair equally well (or badly) in such cases. To the extent that the articulate view insists on the narrow, possibly unknowable condition, based on the assumption that forgiveness must be sharply distinguished from excuse, it can be said to be overly-intellectualized. It may well be that in such cases excuse and forgiveness are, as a matter of fact, less distinct that we suppose.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Section 6. Conclusion**

I have argued against several objections to non-articulate accounts, and several presumptions about responsibility which inform them. If my defense of non-articulate accounts is plausible, they have not been shown to be conceptually inadequate as accounts of forgiveness. It is true that a non-articulate account will produce a relatively speaking *inarticulate* account of forgiveness in that it wont identify a single change in judgment as the forgiving act, and it will allow for a certain overlap between forgiving and excusing. But non-articulate accounts may well offer a more realistic portrayal of how forgiveness operates in our moral lives. While some acts of forgiveness may meet Hieronymis challenge, not all instances of forgiveness must. Hence, it is false that all of accounts of forgiveness must be both articulate and uncompromising.

I have already argued that moral responsibility does not entirely prohibit objective attitudes toward others and oneself, and that we do not necessarily deny responsibility when we attempt to understand transgressors as causally shaped by their upbringing. Different conceptions of moral responsibility are clearly operative in analyses of forgiveness, and they shape intuitions concerning the compatibility of excuse and forgiveness. To give a pertinent example, many philosophers argue that in extreme cases of bad childhood, we cannot take the offender to be responsible for even serious crimes. Gary Watson, for example, denies that a victim criminal (a person guilty of horrible crimes who was himself a victim of severe childhood abuse) is accountable for these crimes on the grounds that he did not have a fair chance to avoid our blaming attitudes.[[7]](#footnote-7) Because he did not have a reasonable opportunity to avoid our moral censure, blaming seems unfair, and because it seems unfair, he cannot be said to be responsible. However, given that the act is traceable to the victim criminal (he did it), and that it clearly reflects on his moral character, it seems arbitrary to deny responsibility for the offense.

As Angela Smith points out, the denial of responsibility in such cases has serious drawbacks. First, it suggests that the victim criminal is not accountable to us for his actions, a claim which his victims are unlikely to find plausible (Smith, 2015). And second, it comes at a high cost, for it seems to deny the victim criminal membership in the moral community. This seems patronizing; it implies that we are adopting a wholly objective attitude toward him, taking him to be so damaged by his past that he is beyond rational exchange. Smith does not suppose that the victim criminals upbringing should be ignored. Rather, she suggests that we understand it as relevant to whether he is blameworthy. We can grant that he is morally culpable (he is responsible for the act and it was wrong), but the further question of whether he is to be actively blamed (reproached, resented, shunned, and so on) will take his history into account. His history provides a kind of excuse according to Smith, one which should modify the response we take to him in actively holding him responsible. In finding him answerable for his conduct we take him to be a legitimate member of the moral community, and when we do this we are forced to acknowledge that as a member of the moral community, he failed to receive the protection from abuse that he too deserved (2015, 114-5). On Smiths account of responsibility, judgments about where and whether blame is appropriate will be influenced by numerous considerations, including whether or not the person has repented (2007).

It is a mistake, then, to suppose that any hint that we are taking an objective eye toward another precludes responsibility. If objective and participant attitudes are not as rigid and incompatible as often supposed, we can allow for modes of understanding and possibly excuse that are not inconsistent with responsibility. Our responses to wrongdoing are rather more sophisticated than is allowed by some accounts of responsibility and excuse. Non-articulate accounts of forgiveness, because they invoke indirect strategies which destabilize resentment and anger, acknowledge some of these complexities.

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1. For example, Glen Pettigroves (2012, 67) discussion of understanding as finding intelligible acknowledges that it meets Hieronymis uncompromising condition, but may not meet the articulateness condition. And Margaret Holmgren (2012, 102-3) notes that her account of unconditional genuine forgiveness is both articulate and uncompromising. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is important to note that not all accounts of forgiveness take it to involve the overcoming of resentment, and among those committed to the thesis that forgiveness involves overcoming resentment, there is disagreement about exactly what resentment involves. For my purposes, these details are not relevant. Hieronymi understands resentment to be a form of moral protest, and uses anger and resentment as equivalent. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We might wonder whether she had actually forgiven, if years after her initial attempts to forgive, resentment ceases. Does she need to be aware of the content of the change in judgment, or just that it happened? Hieronymi (2012, 542) explains that a person might forgive uncompromisingly, without being able to articulate why, and that confirmation that forgiveness is uncompromising can be had by asking the purported forgiver whether her change in view involves condoning the offense, rejecting the moral responsibility of the offender, or abandoning the claim of wrongdoing. I will return to this issue in Section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Zaragoza argues for this interpretation of Hieronymis view (2012, 607). It is worth noting that elsewhere, (2004) Hieronymi acknowledges a Strawsonian take on responsibility, but unlike Strawson, she argues that reactive attitudes represent complex judgment sets. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. David Shoemaker (2014) takes up the issue of dementia, arguing that it poses a problem for qualities of will theories of responsibility. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dana Nelkin (2013) makes occasional, suggestive remarks along these lines. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Watson (2004) does allow that he can be appraised for his character flaws and excellences (aretaic responsibility), so that we could correctly describe him as vicious. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)