

Kantian Guilt

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I

Recently Claudia Blöser (2019) has proposed a novel interpretation of the argument in support of the Kantian duty to be forgiving (TL, AA 6: 460-1).¹ She argues, “Kant concludes from the fact of moral fallibility that we are all in need of forgiveness, [and] on this basis he derives a wide duty to be forgiving” (2019, 1). The duty to be forgiving is grounded on the need to be relieved from the burden of our moral guilt, a need we have in virtue of our morally fallible nature, irrespectively of whether we have repented. Kantian forgiveness is seen as an *emotional* phenomenon, involving the overcoming of *appropriate* resentment (Blöser, 2019, 14). The duty is taken to be both *elective*, that is, we have rational latitude with respect to whether we forgive on a particular occasion (2019, 8), and *unconditional*, that is, forgiveness does not depend on the wrongdoer’s repentance. Blöser claims that we should not “exclude the possibility that even non-repentant wrongdoers might have a need for forgiveness” (2019, 16). Kant does not provide a full derivation of this duty. Instead, he cryptically asserts: “[the] human being has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of [forgiveness]” (TL, AA 6: 460).² Blöser interprets Kant as maintaining that we are all morally fallible, which she takes to imply that there are likely to be circumstances in which we too would fail—or indeed *have failed*—morally (2019, 3). It is our awareness of this moral fallibility that grounds our need for forgiveness, which, in turn, grounds the duty to forgive. Since we have this need, we have a wish for its fulfilment. Since we wish for others to forgive our transgressions, we cannot adopt a maxim of refusing forgiveness while simultaneously willing that this maxim be universal law. Thus, we should adopt a maxim of forgiving others for their wrongdoing. The claim that we have a need for forgiveness is crucial to Blöser’s reconstruction of Kant’s argument. However, as Blöser admits, Kant does not provide an account of this need (2019, 2 and 15).

¹ Citations of Kant’s work will reference the volume and page number of the Prussian Academy Edition, followed by the page number in translation in the case of direct quotes. Translations used are listed in the bibliography.

² Here I am citing Blöser’s translation (2019, p. 2). Gregor translates *Verzeihung* as ‘pardon’ (See her 1991, p. 253). Blöser maintains that ‘forgiveness’ is closer to the original German (2019, fn.3).

So, she complements Kant's account with her own account of the need to be forgiven, claiming that it involves a need to be relieved of the burden of our moral guilt.

I argue that Blöser's proposal does not fit well with certain central aspects of Kant's views on moral guilt. Blöser's interpretation gains some support from Kant's claim that, the "human being has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of forgiveness," but this claim seems to be in tension with other Kantian texts. For instance, a passage from the *Religion* states explicitly that others cannot erase our moral guilt or debt (RGV, AA 6:72). Furthermore, Kant's treatment of moral guilt in the second *Critique* (KpV, AA 5:98-99) suggests that it is not even *possible* for us to fully overcome our intellectual guilt, and that, to the extent that it *is* possible to ameliorate our felt guilt, this is largely a matter of self-forgiveness. I argue that self-forgiveness is only appropriate when there is repentance for the wrongful action and rejection of its underlying immoral maxim by the wrongdoer as part of a project of moral transformation. I end the paper by suggesting an alternative account of the human need for forgiveness, an account that makes forgiveness conditional on repentance.

II

Blöser claims that the need to be forgiven arises from a need to be relieved from the burden of moral guilt, a need we have in virtue of our fallible nature, which exists irrespective of whether we have repented (2019, 16). Her interpretation involves two claims: (i) moral guilt is a burden for us because it can impede our happiness and our capacity to act morally- at least to the extent that it can lead us to despair and self-deception; (ii) other people's forgiveness can relieve us from the burden of our moral guilt. Moral failure is experienced as a burden because we care about moral demands even when we fail to live up to them. The moral law is a fact a reason, and thus, an incentive to morality, even for the vicious (RGV, AA 6: 36). The tension between our awareness of moral obligation and our awareness of having failed morally is experienced as a psychological burden. Internally, the pangs of conscience manifest this burden. Externally, when the other person harbours resentment towards us, we experience this resentment as the *social* aspect of the burden of moral failure. Blöser here draws from Lucy Allais's analysis,³ concluding that, "as moral agents who fail we are in danger of succumbing to either despair or self-deception" (2019, 17). We despair when we collapse under the burden of moral guilt. Alternatively, we might try to avoid this burden altogether by engaging in self-deception. I note

³ Unfortunately, I have not seen Allais's manuscript, so I am not able to comment on Allais's claim.

that self-deception typically characterises those who remain unrepentant: when we act wrongly, we are typically self-deceived insofar as we mistakenly take the demands of self-love to have more justificatory force than moral demands. The need to be relieved from this burden, thus, stems from a need to ward off despair and self-deception, as these can prove to be obstacles to both our happiness and our capacity to act morally. For Blöser, forgiveness can play a role here because it can relieve us of the social aspect of the burden. She writes:

Forgiveness means that the wrong “does not count” anymore – at least not in terms of the other’s affective attitudes. In this way, the victim shows the wrongdoer that the moral failing is not a burden for her anymore – *and this may motivate the wrongdoer to adopt a similar attitude and stop perceiving the wrong as a psychological burden* (2019, 17, *my emphasis*).

This, however, does not mean that the wrongdoer should forget about the transgression or cease their attempts at self-improvement. Rather, “this can be done—arguably even better—without feeling a heavy burden rooted in the past” (2019, 17), remarking that “the need for forgiveness can be explained by the need to be relieved of the burden of being indebted to the victim” (2019, 17, n.56).

III

Kant might agree that our moral guilt is a form of debt. Notwithstanding, he does not seem to think that this debt can be erased by someone else. He writes:

[...] whatever his state in the acquisition of a good disposition [...] *he nevertheless started from evil*, and this is a debt which is impossible for him to wipe out. He cannot regard the fact that, after his change of heart, he has not incurred new debts as equivalent to his having paid off the old ones [...] [T]his original debt [i.e., radical evil] cannot be erased by someone else. For it is not a *transmissible* liability [...] in the manner of a financial debt [...] but the *most personal* of all liabilities, namely a debt of sins which only the culprit, not the innocent, can bear, however magnanimous the innocent might be in wanting to take the debt upon himself for the other (RGV, AA 6:72/ p.89).

The passage makes it clear that others cannot erase our moral guilt regarding our previously evil disposition, and the wrongful acts ensuing from it. This is a *personal* debt and, thus, it cannot be paid by others’ vicarious atonement, nor can their forgiveness erase this guilt. Kant states that the moral guilt for our fundamental evil disposition is infinite (RGV, AA 6: 72) in the sense that by choosing a fundamental immoral maxim “we are condoning an unlimited neglect of morality” (Pasternack, 2012, 33). Some commentators have claimed that overcoming such infinite guilt would ultimately require divine assistance, viz. in the form of God’s forgiveness. We take the first step by attempting a change of heart by then God forgives

our inevitable falling “short of compliance with the moral law’s demand for perfect obedience” (Quinn, 1990, 425). This solution, however, is controversial because, as noted by Pasternack (2012), the idea that God would forgive our debt of sin does not sit well with other fundamental tenets of Kant’s practical philosophy, including his views on justice and moral worth. The idea of divine forgiveness seems to be in tension with Kant’s theory of the Highest Good, understood as an ideal state of affairs in which happiness is distributed in exact proportion to our moral worth (KpV, AA 5: 110). This tension would represent a serious problem at the heart of Kant’s practical philosophy because Kant’s doctrine of the Highest Good is “arguably the foundation of his entire positive philosophy of religion” (Pasternack, 2012, 42). In any case, this passage offers limited support for my position as here Kant is referring to our guilt regarding our fundamental evil disposition, which is ultimately a debt of sin owed to God. This is true. However, the passage is important because it shows that Kant thinks that the debt incurred by our moral guilt is a personal liability that cannot be paid by anyone other than the person who originally incurred it. I will now examine some passages in the second *Critique*, which are more relevant for us, as they deal specifically with guilt felt in relation to *particular* past transgressions.

In the “Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,” Kant argues that what indeed *proves* the reality of freedom—which affords freedom the status of a ‘kind of fact’—is precisely guilt.⁴ Guilt is conceptualised by Kant as a complex phenomenon involving both an intellectual, *cognitive* aspect, and an affective, *felt* aspect. Kant’s analysis begins by exploring the reactions that a reflective conscience might have upon recollecting a former misdemeanour:

Let a human being use what art he wants in order to paint to himself a remembered unlawful behaviour as an unintentional oversight - as a mere carelessness, which one can never avoid entirely, and thus as something in which he was carried away by the stream of natural necessity - and to declare himself innocent of it; he nonetheless finds that the lawyer who speaks in his favor can in no way silence the prosecutor in him, if only he is conscious that at the time when he committed the wrong he was in his senses, i.e. has the use of his freedom (KpV, AA 5:98/ pp. 124-5).

Kant is describing the struggle that we usually experience when we recall a putatively immoral past action. This is the struggle between an instance of self-accusation and the tendency for self-defence. The self-defensive tendency appeals to natural necessity,

⁴ The link between guilt and our awareness of our freedom that Kant makes in these passages is also emphasised by Zupančič, 2000, 21-42 and Gamberini, 2013.

determinism, and situationism in order to excuse the agent. We might try to depict the act as being determined by past events, empirical causes, and psychological mechanisms. However, Kant says that, ultimately, *the self-accusing voice cannot be silenced*. Our moral guilt thereby proves to be testament to our fundamental freedom. Guilt, in the intellectual sense, consists in passing a guilty verdict regarding our violation of the moral law. That is, when we reflect lucidly about our (objective) past wrongful acts, we cannot avoid reaching a guilty verdict. The mere fact that we judge ourselves as guilty shows that we take personal responsibility for our actions, and that, on the ultimate analysis, we think we could have acted otherwise in those same circumstances. This is evidence that there is an alternative description of actions, namely one appealing to a causality of freedom, which transcends the determinism of empirical causes.

This judgement, however, also has an affective, painful side, viz. that of repentance or remorse:

Repentance is a painful sensation which is brought about by a moral attitude and which, to the extent that it cannot serve to undo what has been done, is empty practically [...] but as pain is entirely legitimate, because reason, when the law of our intelligible existence (the moral law) is at issue, acknowledges no distinction of time and asks only whether the event belongs to me as a deed, but then it always connects the same sensation with it morally, whether the deed is being done now or was done long ago (KpV, AA 5: 98-99 /p.125).

Here Kant refers to repentance in a broad sense, that is, to the painful feeling of guilt, which usually accompanies the judgment that we are morally guilty. This is a moral feeling, i.e., a form of displeasure that arises from awareness that our actions are contrary to the law of duty (TL, AA 6:399). The affective side of guilt also constitutes evidence of our fundamental freedom. This is a pain that is aroused by the rational representation of the moral law, which, as such, remains unchanged over time. Every lucid recollection of the action is accompanied by a painful feeling of guilt, which remains irrespective of time elapsing. To the extent that we cannot undo the past, this pain is empty of practical effects. However, it is still legitimate since it also provides evidence that we cannot but think of ourselves as free agents, who could have acted otherwise and are thus able to act independently of empirical determinations. Importantly, repentance also has an intellectual aspect, involving the commitment to abandon immoral maxims and become a better person as part of an ethical project of self-reform.⁵ Kant rejects the notion of repentance as a form of self-punishment or chastisement (V-Mo/Collins, AA 27:464). Nevertheless, he insists that, “inner contrition for our offences and the firm resolve

⁵ For a defence of an intellectual form of Kantian repentance, see Satne, 2016, 1044.

to live a better life” is the only thing that is truly helpful to ourselves and others (V-Mo/Collins, AA 27: 464/ p. 216).

Now, overcoming moral guilt *qua* intellectual feat is not possible. This is because any sincere apprehension of a past, objectively wrongful act would involve a verdict of guilty. Moreover, this judgement will be accompanied by affective guilt (remorse). This remorse arises from the painful realisation that, during our deliberations, we did not prioritise the demands of the moral law, even though we now think that we could have done so. However, in a person who is committed to making the moral law the supreme principle of all her actions, remorse will also involve the intellectual aspect of repentance. The acknowledgement of guilt involves the recognition of the impermissibility of the action and its underlying maxim. This recognition would lead a virtuous agent (or the person who is struggling to be virtuous) to repentance in the intellectual sense, that is, repentance of the immoral act and an attempt to overturn the immoral maxim. Thus, acknowledging our moral guilt is not always a burden because it can play an important role in our moral development. Moreover, although the affective aspect of guilt is painful (and, to that extent, a burden), intellectual recognition of our guilt is bound up with the recognition of our freedom as the necessary condition of the very possibility of this guilt. Thus, guilt does not *necessarily* lead us to despair. On the contrary, it is precisely *because* we grew aware of our fundamental freedom, indeed through the acknowledgement of our guilt, that awareness of this freedom represents an opportunity for change and improvement.

Perhaps once we have completed this process of acknowledgement and repentance we can be hopeful—if not fully confident—about our prospects of becoming better people. It is likely that our guilt—its affective, felt, aspect—will diminish, at least to the extent that we are taking steps to transform ourselves morally (not because a long period of time has elapsed). Note, however, that this process of acknowledging, recognising, repenting, and ultimately *ameliorating* our guilt is mainly a matter of moral self-transformation. To the extent that ameliorating our guilt is at all possible on the Kantian framework, it is going to require a kind of moral transformation, which is akin to self-forgiveness, not other people’s forgiveness. Blöser claims that the victim’s forgiveness “may motivate the wrongdoer to [...] stop perceiving the wrong as a psychological burden” (17). However, a Kantian agent can only stop perceiving the wrong as a burden when she is committed to maximizing her efforts of moral improvement. I contend that, for Kant, the victim’s forgiveness cannot help us to overcome our own guilt. Blöser’s proposal is particularly incongruent here, since she wants to allow for the

need of forgiveness for the unrepentant. However, this seems to conflict with Kant's views on moral guilt. It would be wrong for someone who remains unrepentant (and thus incapable of fully recognising the extent of their wrongdoing), to be motivated to overcome their moral guilt owing to their victim's forgiveness. This point is emphasised in Margaret Holmgren's (1998) illuminating (Kantian) account of self-forgiveness. Holmgren defines self-forgiveness precisely as the overcoming of "any negative feelings [one] harbors toward [oneself] because of [one's] offence, such as guilt, self-resentment, and self-contempt" (1998, p. 76). Holmgren argues that a morally legitimate form of self-forgiveness (understood as the overcoming of guilt for *objective* violations of the moral law)⁶ would require the acknowledgement of our wrongdoing, taking steps to address past wrongs and making amends, including various possible forms of redress that would be appropriate in accordance with the circumstances. Ultimately, legitimate self-forgiveness requires one's firm commitment to making the moral law the supreme principle of all acts, or, as Kant puts it, a revolution of one's heart (RGV, AA 6:47, 51). As Holmgren explains, "if [the wrongdoer] attempts to forgive herself before acknowledging that the act was wrong and that she is responsible for it [...] her self-forgiveness [...] will amount to condoning the wrongful act [...]" (1998, 77). Thus, I contend that on the Kantian account, repentance is a necessary condition of our moral transformation and the very possibility of ameliorating our own guilt. Ultimately, it is incoherent to assert simultaneously that forgiveness can be both given unconditionally while at the same time playing a role in helping the wrongdoer to overcome their moral guilt.

IV

Yet, Kant claims that the "human being has enough guilt of his own to be greatly in need of forgiveness". Therefore, we still need to make sense of this claim. Given that the passage taken at face value conflicts with Kant's views on moral guilt as developed in the *Religion* and second *Critique*, my suggestion is that we should not read the passage in isolation. Instead, we should take into account the various strands of Kant's practical philosophy and read Kant's position as maintaining the following: the human predicament is a predicament of evil in the sense that the default position of the human will is radical evil, that is, a tendency to give priority to the

⁶ Note that self-forgiveness here does not involve forgiving oneself on behalf of the victim, but rather overcoming one's guilt for having committed an offense against another. The victim, of course, retains the prerogative of forgiving or refusing to forgive me for the wrong committed against her, as she is the only one who can decide to overcome her own resentment. The point I am stressing is that the victim's forgiveness cannot help me to overcome my guilt if I have not repented. Conversely, if I have repented and the victim's forgiveness is not forthcoming, I may still be able to ameliorate my own guilt by transforming myself. In defence of this last point, see Holmgren, 1998, pp. 82-85.

demands of self-love over moral demands (RGV, AA 6:32). The first and most important moral task for us is to reorientate our wills towards the moral law through a revolution of heart that makes the moral law the supreme principle of all acts, thus committing to a project of self-reflection and self-reform. Although perfect virtue is beyond our reach and moral progress always represents a struggle to us (TL, AA 6:409), it is likely that those who are firmly committed to a project of moral transformation will eventually acknowledge their past wrongdoings. This, of course, is not always an easy task. When we recognise our past wrongdoings, we experience intellectual and affective guilt. This guilt, however, is also the very testimony of our fundamental freedom and, thus, represents an opportunity for change. Indeed, although the recognition of one's guilt may be painful, ultimately it does not necessarily lead to despair. Only if the wrongdoer repents, attempts to change, and does everything she can to acknowledge and rectify her wrongs, but the victim still refuses to forgive her, may the wrongdoer be lead to despair, since she might feel as though her efforts have been in vain. This gives us a reason to forgive: when we see that someone has acknowledged their wrongdoing, and is taking steps to repair and repent their wrongs, we have reason to forgive them because our forgiveness can be a way of *ratifying their repentance* and thus a way of encouraging them to continue on the path of moral improvement. Furthermore, forgiveness can help us to fulfil our collective task of overturning radical evil by helping us to restore relationships and reintegrate offenders into the community. However, when the wrongdoer has not fully recognised their wrongdoing and acknowledged their guilt, and therefore continues to engage in a project of self-deception, forgiveness is not helpful and satisfies no need. Ultimately, repentance is *both* a necessary condition of our moral transformation (and the very possibility of ameliorating our own guilt), as well as conditioning morally appropriate forgiveness.

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