

Forgiveness and Correction

Abstract. In this paper, I suggest that the conversation about the norms of unconditional forgiveness would benefit from a framing in terms of the question “How should I respond when I am wronged?” Taking cues from Thomas Aquinas, I propose that the best answer is “You should love,” and that there are two acts of love in response to wrongdoing: forgiveness and correction. I sketch some principles for deciding whether to do one or the other, and the result is an account which agrees in large part with “unconditional forgiveness views”, except that it holds out correction as a second—and sometimes better—option. (This, I think, is a more complete and more helpful bit of guidance than you normally get just by answering the question “When should I forgive?”) Finally, I reorient to the contemporary conversation by considering some objections to unconditional forgiveness views, and then comparing other unconditional forgiveness views to my own with respect to the reasons for forgiveness.

I. Responding to Wrongdoing

The conversation to which I am hoping to contribute is one framed by the question “When should I forgive?” That is, although the question is not always posed explicitly, the conversation is about when one should or should not forgive—under what conditions it is permissible or supererogatory, whether one ought to wait for an apology, etc. It consists mainly of proposals for norms of forgiveness, which in turn are followed by alternative proposals positing new norms of forgiveness or jettisoning old ones. If one should *not* forgive in a given situation, the alternative, we assume, is to hold on to resentment.

1.

My first aim in this essay is to show that this is not the only way to frame the conversation. It suits some of our purposes, to be sure. But I will argue that it would be fruitful to shift to (or, at the very least, to add) the question “How should I respond when I am wronged?”

My second aim for this essay is to propose an answer to that question. The answer is “You should love.” And in particular, I will suggest that there are two acts of love in response to wrongdoing,

namely, *forgiveness* and *correction*.¹ This answer takes its inspiration from the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas, so I'll refer to it as the 'Thomistic Picture'. (My goal in articulating it is not primarily to interpret Aquinas. The view I will present is by no means unique to him. I call it 'the Thomistic Picture' simply because he is the one who taught it to me.)

I will finish my answer by sketching some principles for deciding between forgiveness and correction. All this will be the work of §§I-III. Then, in §§IV-V, comes the work of taking stock of the picture I've sketched and reorienting to the conversation on the conditions of forgiveness. I will compare my view to other views favoring unconditional forgiveness, then consider objections from views that oppose unconditional forgiveness.

2.

I have mentioned that contemporary discussions about when one should forgive tend to begin in questions (and end with answers) about the conditions of right forgiveness.² I suggest that it would be

¹ I said 'wrongdoing' here where I could instead have said 'having been wronged'. In general, I mean for this question "how do I respond when I have been wronged?" to concern *wronging*, i.e., wrongdoing directed at the one posing the question. Having made that note, I will continue to use the word 'wrongdoing'.

² What I am claiming is typical is this: the contemporary philosophical discussion about when to forgive is framed as if the question facing someone who has been wronged is "Should I forgive or not?" It is assumed that not forgiving would amount to continuing to resent, or something like that. Strictly, then, what I want to suggest is that our philosophical discussion of the issue should at least sometimes be framed as if the practical question is "How should I respond to this wrong?", and that we should consider *three* legitimate practical options: punishment, correction, and forgiveness.

Perhaps I should give examples of this other work I have in mind, but it will come to little more than pulling from a hat of work on the conditions of forgiveness. See, e.g., Nicolas Cornell ("The Possibility of Preemptive Forgiving"), Miranda Fricker ("Ambivalence about Forgiveness"), Paul Hughes ("Two Cheers for Forgiveness"), and Jeffrie Murphy (*Getting Even*, the opening in particular), as well as every discussion of the conditions of forgiveness which I will cite later in this paper (my own included).

Some endorse a framework which includes options other than forgiving and continuing to resent. Martha Nussbaum, for example, also speaks of "unconditional generosity". But my point stands.

Now, obviously, all of these authors are aware that it is possible to withhold forgiveness in an attempt to amend a wrongdoer's behavior. Still, they generally elide (what I call) correcting and punishing, or do not mention correcting as a legitimate possibility at all, and at any rate they leave those matters for a largely separate (and decidedly political-philosophical) literature on punishment. One therefore gets the impression that the practical choice is between resentment (or its cousins) and forgiveness—one just act and one loving act.

I am *not* saying this approach is always illegitimate or misleading. I am not offering any sweeping *objection* to these papers. (Again, I include myself in the list of examples.) I am only saying that these discussions do not attend to something which, at some point, we should attend to. My goal is just to give the third alternative—

useful to ask instead—or at least in addition—“How should I respond when I am wronged?” I hope to vindicate my suggestion by demonstration.

The picture I will offer has the following structure. Responses to wrongdoing may be *answers* to wrongdoing, or they may not be. Among answers to wrongdoing, some are *acts of love*, and others are not. Among acts of love there are two: *forgiveness* and *correction*. Let me explain each of these distinctions.

We can understand answering wrongdoing by analogy with answering a question. Suppose you and I are at a small gathering in early spring, just standing on the lawn and talking. I ask how you liked the place where you grew up. There are many things you might do next. For one, you could ignore my question entirely. You could walk off and refill your lemonade, or you could turn to another friend, or you could launch into a story about your trip to Galway. But even if you do not ignore me, there is a difference between answering me and merely responding to me. You might say, “Oh, yes, that is a very interesting question.” Or you might ask, “How did *you* like the place where you grew up?” Or you might just politely decline to answer. These are mere responses. To *answer*, you would have to do something more. You would have to at least attempt to give me the information I was looking for.

This is not to say that wrongdoing has a strictly interrogative form. (Nor does everything to which an answer is appropriate have an interrogative form in general. After all, we could retell the conversation story as one in which I make a statement rather than ask a question.) I only mean that wrongdoing has an open-endedness to it. It awaits a response, so to speak, from the one to whom it was done. (And from the victim’s end, the sense of needing to give a response is one with which I think we are all familiar.)

Responses to wrongdoing which are not (*per se*) answers to wrongdoing may include avoiding it or defending against it, bemoaning it or gossiping about it, excusing it or shrugging it off, or doing any of a variety of things to heal the damage—rescue, relief, therapy, and so on. Into this category goes anything which does not address the wrong as an answer addresses a question.³

correcting—a name and a more definite shape, so as to situate it within the space of practical questions in response to wrongs. My hope is that this will help us better discuss the conditionality of forgiveness.

³ To a very few readers, this distinction may seem implausible for the following reason. Note that we can also distinguish between reactions (to use a neutral term for a moment) to wrongdoing *as such* and reactions to wrongdoing *not as such*. That is, we can make a *de dicto* / *de re* distinction here. Now, perhaps you will look at my list of responses (but not answers) to wrongdoing and think that they are nothing other than responses to wrongdoing *de re* but not *de dicto*—which is just to say they aren’t really responses to wrongdoing, properly speaking, at all. As a matter of fact, I agree. But if you are that sort of reader, then I suspect you and I are in

For those who are uncertain of their intuitive grasp of the distinction and want more concrete conditions, we can say this. An answer to wrongdoing must at least be the sort of thing which is communicative in nature, and which is properly communicated to the wrongdoer (as such); and the communication in question must be about the wrong (as such).⁴

II. Punishment, Correction, and Forgiveness

What, then, counts as an answer to wrongdoing? I would suggest that there are three possible answers, and in this I take myself to be articulating a view which I learned from Thomas Aquinas. These three acts are *punishment*, *correction*, and *forgiveness*—the first is an act of justice, and the latter two are acts of love.⁵ I take both punishment and correction to involve a certain return for the wrong, which, for the sake of clarity, I will call *penalty*. (There are other acts which are like correction except that they do not involve a penalty—see my discussion of *advising* in §II.2.)

1.

Penalty is understood here as an evil (in the classical sense—in this case, a harm) due to a wrongdoer because of her wrongdoing. Punishing is the inflicting of such an evil.⁶ It is the prerogative of those

the minority. I have chosen to frame things the way I have because it involves fewer contentious claims and will feel more natural to more readers. You are welcome to replace the framing I've opted for in the main text with the one you prefer. It will not make a difference as far as the argument is concerned.

⁴ I articulate this distinction, including fuller versions of these conditions, in more detail elsewhere. If you are interested, see Sigourney, “The Charity Account of Forgiving”. The general idea, though, was articulated better by others before me. See especially Michael McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility*.

⁵ At least three. If there are more, it will not importantly affect my argument. One thing I didn't name, but which is especially worth noting, is *blame*. Blame can be understood either as quite an action-like thing or as quite a perception-like thing, or as something in-between. Insofar as it is action-like, I mean for “punishment” and “correction” to include it in their scope (as should be evident later). Insofar as it is perception-like, it is not an answer to wrongdoing—no more than understanding a question is an answer to the question.

⁶ I use ‘punishment’ because I believe it is the word best fitted for the contemporary conversation. Aquinas actually considers phenomena in this area under several headings. He speaks of punishment in general as something due for sin (ST I-II 87, and cf. the second kind of fraternal correction distinguished in ST II-II 33.1); he speaks of punishment considered as an act on the part of the one wronged, which is retribution (ST II-II 108); he speaks of the corresponding act on the part of the wrongdoer, which is restitution (ST II-II 62); and he speaks of judgment as connected with punishment, as an act of reason and one proper to judges (ST II-II 60). In other words, Aquinas's view is complex and comprehensive. But the dialectical purposes of this paper are better served if we do not aspire to maintain all these distinctions, and as a consequence, I will sometimes

whom the wrong opposed, that is, those who were wronged. And for Aquinas, this includes both the victim of the wrong and also the author of the law according to which the act is a wrong in the first place.⁷ He counts guilt as a punishment administered by reason insofar as it legislates the lower part of the soul, and similarly for the more obvious cases of a ruler's enforcement of his or her positive laws and God's enforcement of the divine law. But, importantly, it isn't *only* legislators. Aquinas does not deny outright the appropriateness even of personal retribution. He takes pains, of course, to make it clear that retribution is often enacted unjustly, and it often does great harm. And, being a Christian, he is quick to point out that retribution is hardly ever the best path, as we will see in a moment. But the point is that, on this picture, there is such a thing as enacting due punishment (in our sense of the term) as a victim of the wrong. (The term 'due' signals a matter of justice, but it should not be understood to imply that punishment is owed to wrongdoers. It should rather be understood—for now, anyway—to imply only a certain fittingness in punishment.⁸) Aquinas's position is therefore quite definitely a retributivist one.⁹ But I recognize that retributivism is out of fashion at the moment, and I do not want to die on any hills defending it. I only bring up punishment at all in order to contrast it with correction and forgiveness.

use 'retribution' to delineate a category within punishment (for example), whereas, in his own context (and in Latin), Aquinas usually did not. I do not believe he and I disagree in substance.

⁷ What really matters here is that we recognize this distinction between two sorts of wronged party. But it is true that the justification I've given for the distinction is given in Aquinas's own terms: in a sense, he considers the legislator to have been genuinely wronged, despite the fact that he or she was not strictly the object of the wrongful act. You may think this introduces an unfortunate asymmetry between forgiving and correcting: forgiving is up to the victim of the wrong, whereas correcting is up to anyone with the appropriate authority. In fact, I don't think there is such an asymmetry. I think an authority can forgive or correct in the way appropriate for authorities, while a victim can forgive or correct in the way appropriate to victims. But I will not pursue that point further: it is contentious enough to require a lengthy discussion and not relevant enough to deserve it.

⁸ It is more than just permissible on Aquinas's view, but the 'more' can be left aside for now.

⁹ To be clear, I *am* using the word "punish" here with a retributivist sense attached. An act must be done because it is (seen as) just in order to count as punishment, as I will use the term. Similarly, an act must be done because it is (seen as) useful to the wrongdoer in order to count as correction, as I will use the term. (As a result, in the terminology I am using here, nonretributivism is the position that the permissible responses to wrongdoing do not include punishing. Perhaps they include correcting instead. Admittedly, that is not the way it is usually put, but it strikes me as a clear and accurate statement of the position.) Of course, an act of correcting will *also* involve the infliction of a penalty—or at least the threat of it—because it is just (cf. fn. 17).

Correction is like punishment except that it is an act of love, not an act of justice—and as such, its object is not the right, but the good of the beloved. So, in correction, any penalty inflicted is inflicted for a further end, namely, the wrongdoer’s own good. It is meant to direct her away from doing evil and toward a more virtuous path (for her sake). That’s not to say there is really no evil inflicted. In a time-out, a child suffers the loss of her opportunity to do what she’d wanted to do; a negligent builder suffers the loss of her money in a settlement; a rude coworker suffers embarrassment when the manager calls her out on her behavior; and all of these are evils. But these are only *means*: they are evils *referred to* the greater good of the wrongdoer. Were these penalties inflicted simply because they were just, these acts would have been (what I’m calling) punishments.

Note that my terms ‘evil’ and ‘penalty’ here ascribe only a certain quality to an act (or its aim), not a quantity. I do not mean only what we contemporary-English-speakers would actually call ‘evil’, for we reserve that word for the gravest situations (or for politics). But on my usage here, all the following are evils inflicted as penalties: the discomfort I inflict by ignoring your messages because you were unkind to me yesterday; the guilt I stir up when I imply that I know about some tactless joke you told about me to a mutual friend; the annoyance I stir up by mentioning for the thousandth time an old mistake you made; the extra time I take finishing the tea I’m making for you (though of course the term ‘foot-dragging’ never explicitly came into my mind) because you didn’t put your things away again. An evil need not be a great evil; not all penalties (nor all punishments) are obvious or violent.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, is very different. It inflicts no evil at all. In fact, it directly opposes any inclination to inflict evils, even deserved evils.¹⁰ Instead, it aims simply at reconciliation with the wrongdoer. It does not—not in itself, anyway—seek a good *for her*. What it seeks is simply *her, as a good*. It terminates in a righted relationship to the forgiven. (In this way, we can think of

¹⁰ More precisely, forgiving opposes the infliction of any evil *as an answer to the wrong*. Here is where the difference would matter: you may wonder, “But what about that phrase, ‘you will heap burning coals on their heads?’” If that phrase expresses your attitude in responding to wrongdoing, then one of two things may be going on.

First, you may truly take “heaping coals” to indicate a sort of pain or embarrassment which you’re hoping to cause in the wrongdoer *in answer to her wrongdoing*. You might intend this in a vengeful spirit or in an ultimately corrective spirit—but either way, you are attempting to inflict a penalty for the wrong, and this is incompatible with forgiving. At best, then, you are only pretending to forgive—just as, when you give a compliment with the aim of embarrassing someone, it is really only a pretense at a compliment.

Alternatively, you might take “heaping coals” to mean only a sort of incitement to change. (Cf. Aquinas’s commentary on Romans 12:20, *Super Romanos XII.3*.) *This* is compatible with forgiving. Any pain or embarrassment you may cause is not intended *as such* in answer to the wrongdoing—it is intended, if at all, only as motivation. (What you are doing is a rather subtle form of what, in just a moment, I will call “advising.”)

forgiveness and correction as corresponding to the two inclinations of love. Aquinas says that love has a two-part tendency: toward the beloved herself, and toward her good.¹¹ When there has been some wrongdoing on the beloved's part, forgiveness is the act which seeks the former—the beloved herself—which is just to seek a certain sort of union with her, which in this context we call “reconciliation”. Correction is the act which seeks the latter—her good.)

2.

I will dedicate space to the consideration of objections later, but one objection should be considered now. It will push us to make an important final clarification about the relationship between forgiveness and correction.

You may think the three-option framework I have suggested—in which the legitimate answers to wrongdoing are punishing, correcting, and forgiving—implies that those three acts are *incompatible*.

Now, in the case of punishing vs. correcting, the incompatibility is merely a verbal matter: I have decided to use the word “punishing” to denote an act which (by stipulation) is not correcting, just in order to keep my claims and arguments here as unambiguous as possible. I have no quarrel with those who use “punishing” differently.¹² The two acts are not contrary in a deeper or more interesting way than that. But forgiveness is different. And, you may think, surely it is possible to forgive and correct at once. It would be easy: just say, “You’ve done a terrible thing. I’ll forgive you—but don’t do it again.” Those sorts of cases are mentioned often in the literature on this question (though usually with a little more detail).

I certainly do not want to deny that there are many cases in which it looks like someone is (rationally) both forgiving and correcting. (I will focus on correcting rather than punishing, since, if forgiving and correcting are incompatible, then so are forgiving and punishing.) Admittedly, I do believe that forgiveness and correction are (rationally) exclusive, but only in a very narrow sense.¹³ I

¹¹ ST I-II 26.4.

¹² Cf. fn. 17.

¹³ Now, strictly, this position of mine is not entailed by the three-option framework itself. By itself, all the framework entails is that punishing, correcting, and forgiving are three legitimate and distinct options. And if that is as much as you will accept, then I am satisfied. Still, I do think the stronger point (about incompatibility) is true. I understand that it is controversial, and that the controversy has already worked itself into a large body of literature. So, though I will try to make my view plausible, I cannot possibly defend it against all comers. That simply is not one of this paper’s goals, and the task would be enormous. But cf. some who have defended a position in the neighborhood, like Leo Zaibert (“The Paradox of Forgiveness” and “On Forgiveness and the Deliberate Refusal to Punish”).

have already briefly indicated my reason for thinking so: that correction is apt to involve a penalty, whereas forgiveness is not. But let me explain more fully.

Two things may be exclusive and yet show up at the same time or in the same situation, as long as ‘time’ or ‘situation’ has a little give to it. Going to the beach and going to the mountains are exclusive, but you can do both in the same day if you can find a mountain close enough to the beach. One and two are exclusive, and yet I can have one thought and two thoughts at once just insofar as, on two perfectly sensible theories of thought individuation, you could count of my thoughts as one and as two. Oil and vinegar are exclusive, and yet we have salad dressings. My point is just this: the notion of exclusivity requires us to specify a sense or a domain in which A and B exclude each other.

The domain in which forgiveness and correction exclude each other is there, but it is narrow: you cannot both forgive and correct the same person at precisely the same time and in precisely the same way, and with respect to the same wrongdoing.¹⁴

This is because forgiveness and correction are contrary in their inclinations (more precisely, in their secondary formal objects). Remember that correction is like punishment, in that it is inclined toward the infliction of a penalty: yes, a very mild one most of the time—a stern word, a slap on the wrist, a minor embarrassment—but a penalty nonetheless.¹⁵ A stern word cannot do its work if it is not *stern*. The whole point of it is to threaten, at the very least, a bit of social tension—to give the one you’re speaking to an incentive to listen. And this incentive is clearly a negative form of reinforcement. Recall what we said just above (§II.1).

If you disagree, you might be confusing correction with a similar but distinct act which we can call ‘advising’. In advising someone, I tell her what it would be best for her to do. My advice *may* be contrary to what she is doing now. If so, we might be inclined to call it a correction, and that’s a perfectly normal use of the word. But advising is importantly different from what I am calling “correction” here. Whether the advisee is currently acting badly has no bearing on whether what I say counts as advice. I may then want to change the *content* of my advice, but advice as such does not *necessarily* bear on some bad course of action. A bad course of action is not the indirect formal object of an act of advising. Nor, even if it were, would the course of action necessarily be *wrong*—it might

¹⁴ I should say you cannot do so rationally. But the irrationality of it would be obvious enough, I think, that “impossible in a properly functioning psyche” is probably better than “irrational”.

¹⁵ You could call it ‘punishment’. Again, I don’t do so here merely for the sake of keeping terms straight.

just be ineffective, or expensive, or pointless. But correction is necessarily correction *of a wrong*. Wrong is the indirect formal object of correction.

(Neither does advising in response to wrongdoing amount to correction, as though correcting is no more than giving advice under certain conditions. To advise is merely to convey a certain practical wisdom, which the advisee may take or leave, depending on whether she sees you as a reliable advisor. But to correct is not merely to inform someone that what she did was wrong, nor merely to suggest that it would be best for her not to act that way in the future. To correct is to *tell her not to act that way*. It is an exercise of a certain authority. To lean on an accepted distinction in the philosophy of action, advice is a species of testimony, whereas correction is a species of command. That is why correction is the sort of thing which can involve a penalty, whereas advice is not.¹⁶)

I say all this only so that we can return to the relationship between forgiveness and correction. Correction is inclined toward the infliction of a certain evil, whereas forgiveness is inclined away from inflicting evil. (What it is inclined *toward*, I think, is reconciliation—but the important thing is just that it is inclined not to inflict evil. The one who forgives, *per se* and in forgiving, does not do or intend any evil to the one whom she forgives.) As a consequence, you cannot both forgive and correct the same person at the same time and in the same way, and with respect to the same wrong.¹⁷

It is worth emphasizing just how much space that leaves open. I mentioned that discussions of this question in the literature often involve cases like the brief one with which I began this section—I wrong you, and you say, “I forgive you, but don’t do it again.”¹⁸ These sorts of cases must not be

¹⁶ That is, correcting is the sort of act which can be performed *in* inflicting a penalty, properly speaking. On the contrary, you cannot give advice *by* (or *in*) inflicting a penalty, except perhaps in very special circumstances. Perhaps we have developed a secret language of social gestures in which we have determined that inflicting penalties means “Shape up!” in the same way that telling a boastful story means “Please pass the plantains.” (Obviously, nothing in the nature of the act prevents us from advising *simultaneously with* inflicting a penalty—but that could be said for just about anything.) Again, in most cases, the negative consequence we are speaking of is little more than sternness—but, importantly, it *can* be more. It helps prove the point, I think, that you can aptly correct by meting out a more severe punishment.

¹⁷ As these remarks suggest, the situation is different for the relationship between punishing and correcting. I have been using the word “punishing” of an act which has the infliction of a penalty as a final end—just because it is just (cf. fn. 9). That aside, it would be fine to say that correcting always includes punishing, or at least the threat of it—though, again, it clearly does not always involve any severe enough penalty that we would be comfortable calling it “punishment” in everyday speech—whereas punishing does not similarly include correcting.

¹⁸ E.g., Brandon Warmke, “Against the Punishment-Forbearance Account”, §4; cf. Tosi and Warmke “Punishment and Forgiveness”, §3.

ignored, because they highlight important aspects of this dynamic between forgiving and correcting. What they show us is that, in practice, there is plenty of room for interaction between correcting and forgiving. I can forgive you for hitting me and correct your rude language; I can *offer* to forgive you even while I correct you; I can determine to forgive you (some might prefer to say “forgive in my heart”) and yet correct you because I think it would be better for you, harboring no anger as I do it. I can forgive and then correct, or correct and then forgive, although strictly this would be irrational unless I thought the forgiveness or the correction were incomplete—e.g., I issued a halfhearted correction which did not seem to get through, and now I forgive you instead of bothering to try again. (Or perhaps I could simply change my mind, and perhaps even for good reasons—but in that case, the fact that I have *changed my mind* proves the point.) I can even forgive in one *capacity* and correct in another. Suppose a mother genuinely forgives an offense insofar as it is against herself, but disciplines her child anyway out of duty to her role.¹⁹ She forgives as victim but not as disciplinary authority. (A less dutiful and more petty mother might instead forgive as authority but not as victim.) As I say, the sense in which forgiveness and correction are exclusive is narrow, just as it is with other contrary acts and passions—gratitude and protest, joy and mourning, blame and admiration, fear and love.²⁰ And the framework I am defending allows for all of these phenomena.

¹⁹ This is especially prone to happen when the same person has two sorts of authority to punish—that of the victim and that of the legislator. (Cf. §II.1 and fn. 7.) But it can also happen (though it is more unusual) if someone is a victim of one wrong in two (psychologically distinguishable) ways. Imagine: “To commit such a crime against a low-life robber like *me* is one thing, but a slap in my face is a slap in the face of our whole gang, and *that* I cannot forgive!” Or we could imagine the victim distinguishing not two sorts of victimhood but two wrongs in the same act (akin to the hitting vs. rude language example from a moment ago): e.g., “As mere theft I could forgive it, but the sheer *insult* of it!” (I say “unusual” because I suspect that, most of the time, these sorts of cases are really just cases of unforgiveness.)

²⁰ There is one other rather subtle hang-up a reader may have, suggested by the “in” and “as” and “overtop” language. Could I not have a broad act, say, of forgiveness, which has as a part of it—a constitutive means, in technical parlance—an act of correction? (This would be the inverse of the second possibility I discussed in fn. 10.) Suppose I want to forgive you, and in order to communicate my forgiveness I first threaten a clearly just retribution, in order that you might better understand my forgiveness when I convey it. This is possible too, but even this is not a case of the strict sort of overlap I have described. In the present example, we use the word ‘threaten’ because, if I had actually enacted my retribution, it would have been silly for me to “forgive” after that. The wrong would already have been punished. Retribution must be incomplete in some way in order for forgiving to remain a rational option. (And, of course, if I understand all this ahead of time—which really is not very much to ask of me—then I cannot correct as a part of forgiving even in intention.) But then this is just one of the permitted cases I mentioned: a clever way to correct and then forgive.

One final point is worth addressing. Many arguments against the compatibility of forgiving with correcting rest on talk of forgiving as an “internal” matter, whereas correcting (like punishing) is “external”.²¹ But even if that were true, it would not prevent forgiving from having the normative and motivational structure which I have attributed to it, and *that* is what matters. Consider a different example: praising and disappointment. Disappointment is “internal”, we might say, whereas praising is “external”—an action. Even so, it is clear that there is a conflict between the two. Left to itself, my disappointment would incline me *away* from praising you. The two are contrary in that way. (And, for that matter, in their secondary objects. Your disappointment in me is about something bad in me; your praise of me is about something good in me.) So I cannot praise you and be disappointed in you at the same time, in the same way, for the same thing. (Unless I praise you dishonestly or mockingly. But that’s just to say I am not genuinely praising you.) Likewise for forgiveness and correction.

So we must balance on a line here. We must allow space for the possibility of forgiving alongside correcting (or punishing)—we mustn’t simply deny the cases I listed a moment ago. But we must also acknowledge and account for tension where it exists. And if it is obvious that you can forgive and correct at once, it is at least equally obvious that there is a certain contrariety between the two acts. I think the framework I am advocating balances the data of our experiences well.

III. When to Forgive (or Not)

Now let us put ourselves in the position of someone who has been wronged. This is the choice before us: we can punish, we can correct, or we can forgive. What should we do?

1.

Aquinas seems to think the best path will almost always be forgiveness or correction. And that is unsurprising. He is a Christian, after all, and his law is love. If love does not subvert justice but goes beyond it, then a loving response will always be better than a merely just response.²² For this reason Aquinas says, in the very passage in which he argues that retribution is sometimes lawful, that we do best to exact retribution only when we do so *also* for the sake of someone else—e.g., God or the

²¹ E.g., Jeffrie Murphy, *Getting Even*, 100 etc.

²² Perhaps some readers will want a more precise account of this “does not subvert but goes beyond” language. That is a deeper and more interesting request than it might seem. For now, I can only say this: I mean (at least) that a perfectly charitable act of correction will necessarily also be a just act of punishment, but the converse is not true.

Church—whereas “insofar as an injury done to someone pertains to his own person, he is obliged to bear it patiently if he can (*si expediat*). For likewise the precepts of patience are understood in accordance with the preparedness of the soul...”²³ In other words, although it may be permissible to avenge oneself in certain circumstances, it is best to avoid doing so when instead it is possible to bear the wrong without too great a cost—unless avenging oneself is important for the sake of another who was also harmed by the wrong.

Those who reject retributivism will be eager to agree with Aquinas on the main thrust of these claims (perhaps with a little distaste for his concessions to what he calls ‘justice’). But for the rest, allow me to offer a brief argument. To punish, as I said, is to inflict some evil because it is due to a wrongdoer. To correct may also involve inflicting a just evil—it may involve a penalty. But it is more than punishing, because it refers the punishment to the good of the wrongdoer. This, it seems to me, is simply and obviously better. There is now a further good in the picture, and no difference aside from that.²⁴

2.

So now the question is whether one should forgive or correct. When is the one or the other the best thing to do? If we are looking for Aquinas’s answer, we will find it mainly in his responses to questions about when one should or should not correct. Aquinas is clear that it is sometimes best to correct and sometimes best not to correct.²⁵ This is a matter of observing due circumstances—and anyone even

²³ ST II-II 108.1 ad 4, my translation. See also ad 2.

²⁴ No necessary difference, anyway. It may turn out that punishing will differ in some way from correcting in some cases (or even in general), because punishment is guided so as to conform as much as possible to what is due, whereas correction would be guided *also* to bring about a good for the wrongdoer. Perhaps (for example) correction will tend to be more painful but less permanent than punishment. Or perhaps punishment will tend to be more fearful, since it will then do a better job guarding the common good. We may grant these things, but our point still stands. If some acts allowed within the bounds of just punishment are better than certain different acts allowed within the bounds of just and useful correction, then an argument establishing that fact will appeal not to the principles of punishment or correction as such but to some other (and orthogonal) standard. And in that case, it can be introduced independently of our question here, which is simply whether one should strive to correct rather than to punish. In other words, one can accept that one should correct rather than punish, and then argue that we should correct in a way that conforms to whatever other standard we appealed to in order to show that some acts of punishing would be better than some acts of correcting.

²⁵ See ST II-II 33.2, esp. ad 3.

passingly familiar with Aristotelian ethics will recognize in this language the rapidly encroaching doom of our ability to articulate general principles. But let us articulate a few principles while we still can.

(I should mention that my goal here is not to defend the principles I will articulate against all possible alternatives. My first goal is simply to be practically helpful. I do think the principles I'll articulate are Aquinas's, and I think they are good ones. But my second and more academic goal is to demonstrate how the framework I've suggested—on which we ask “How should I respond when I am wronged?” and answer “I should love”—would have us approach the obvious follow-up question, namely, “...Love *how?*”)

First, we get an important hint from the fact that Aquinas often affixes ‘*fraternal*’ to ‘correction’. It is a matter for brothers—or those related like brothers, i.e., friends (in the Aristotelian sense). So this is our first principle: it is more appropriate to correct someone to whom you are closer.

We get a second hint from the third article in the *Summa Theologiae*'s question on fraternal correction. There, Aquinas asks whether correction is properly the domain of leaders and justices, or instead belongs to anyone who has charity. He concludes that it belongs to anyone who has charity, but that, with spiritual (here, i.e., moral) as with temporal goods, it is more important to secure goods for those who are more in your care.²⁶ Therefore, it is more appropriate to correct someone the more one has care of her.

Finally, we get our last hint from a more general principle of action. For Aquinas (and for any decent action theorist, really), when an act gets its goodness from a further end, we must consider the extent to which the act is a good means to that end. It will be a better act the more likely it is to succeed in securing the end, for example, or the more perfectly the end is secured (if the end is the sort of thing that can be had in degrees). If my goal is to catch a fish, then casting a lure would be a better act with respect to that end than reaching into the lake with a pair of tongs. Similarly, if my goal is to lead someone to virtue and to noble actions, my means will be better insofar as they *do* lead someone to greater virtue and nobler actions, and do so reliably. It is less useful for me to correct someone who is incapable of hearing it, for example. So we have a third principle: it is more appropriate to correct someone who will better receive the correction.

Aquinas mentions other “due circumstances”. But these, I think, are more truly and properly circumstantial than what we have mentioned already. They pertain to the act of correcting *per se* only

²⁶ ST II-II 33.3 ad 1.

distantly, if at all: such things as the risk of scandal or collateral harm, some urgency or danger in the situation, and so on. So, for the purposes of our sketch, let us be satisfied with these three.

- i) It is more appropriate to correct someone to whom one is closer.
- ii) It is more appropriate to correct someone the more one has care of her.
- iii) It is more appropriate to correct someone who will better receive the correction.

These are our guidelines for when one should prefer to correct someone rather than forgive her. To the extent that they are *not* satisfied, all else equal, one should prefer to forgive. As for when one should prefer either correcting or forgiving over punishing, our answer is “always”. And that, in a nutshell, is our picture. Let us turn now to see how it aligns with other contemporary views, and what objections it might face.²⁷ Objections first.

IV. Unconditional Forgiveness and its Detractors

The view we have been sketching falls solidly on the “unconditional forgiveness” side of the spectrum. (By ‘unconditional forgiveness view’ I mean a view on which the justification of forgiveness is not conditional on the wrongdoer’s actions or attitudes following the wrong—i.e., on these views, forgiveness may rightly be granted unconditionally.) Presuming that you are positioned to answer a wrong, and having acknowledged that it is possible to take revenge justly, our picture nevertheless recommends that you forego revenge in favor of love. If the wrongdoer can be corrected—and if you are in a position that makes it appropriate to do so—then you should correct her. If not, you should forgive her. This picture makes no mention of the wrongdoer’s state of repentance—nor, for that matter, the gravity of the wrong, nor the state of mind of the prospective forgiver (except we noted that no one on Earth is inclined perfectly to charity, so that it may not always be possible to do the most loving thing).

1.

Probably the most important objection to a view like this one comes mainly out of feminist ethics—but, though it gains a certain relevance and clarity from a focus on the lives of women, it can be

²⁷ I have not given a full account of forgiveness here, or even of correction—only a sketch, suited only to address a particular question. No doubt some readers will have noticed. If those readers are curious, I have defended a much fuller account of forgiveness in the same paper of mine which I cited earlier.

articulated and leveled more generally.²⁸ The objection is this. To forgive unconditionally can be painful, or even restrictive and damaging. And not only to the victim herself, but also to those connected to her by the social structure around her—if, for example, her forgiveness communicates a sort of condonation of evil. What’s more, reconciliation will sometimes be even more dangerous than forgiveness, which is problematic if (as we have said) reconciliation is what forgiveness aims at. Some readers may have experienced a half-conscious frown of disapproval earlier, at the phrase “bear it patiently”.

Often, this is the complete form of the objection: there is an extended look at the harms and problems often caused by forgiveness (or at least by a lack of correction), with the implication that forgiving should not be done if it will be harmful in these ways. In large measure, I agree. In fact, my hope in introducing correction into the conversation is precisely to suggest a way of amending these harms to the order of justice and the soul of the wrongdoer. If the harms are to cease, if the injustices are not to be perpetuated, then they must be corrected. This is one major advantage of the three-option framework (and, more generally, of the question “How should I respond when I am wronged?” over the question “What are the conditions of appropriate forgiveness?”).

But perhaps the objector is still not entirely satisfied. After all, sometimes (especially in the cases feminist authors usually have in mind) it will be all but impossible to correct a wrongdoer, and any attempt to do so will likely backfire. Sometimes the initiative to correct the wrongdoer may just be too burdensome a thing to ask of the victim herself. I should reiterate that the victim is not the only party situated to correct—an appropriate authority could do so instead.²⁹ But in some cases it may be impossible even to enlist someone else, the state included, to help. In that case, our condition (iii) suggests that one should forgive rather than correct, and then we’re back where we started.

I should first recall what I mentioned and then immediately set aside at the beginning. I distinguished between answers to wrongdoing and mere responses.³⁰ Sometimes a situation does not call for you to *answer* a wrongdoing at all, but only to respond to it. If there is a present danger, running away may be the thing to do, though it is not an answer to wrongdoing. In other words, there are many acts which would be live options for a real person in certain situations, but which simply are not

²⁸ I am appealing here especially to Kathryn Norlock and Jean Rumsey (“The Limits of Forgiveness”), who give a full and articulate version of this argument with extended explication of the views of Claudia Card.

²⁹ Cf. §II.1 and fn. 7.

³⁰ Or, again, between answers to wrongdoing properly speaking and in an extended sense.

the subject of this paper. Fleeing and protecting oneself are among these. Then again, sometimes even these options will not be available.

On the one hand, we acknowledged from the beginning that some of the “due circumstances” which we brushed over would involve collateral harm. Unfortunately, we are no better positioned now than we were then to articulate what harms should or should not be considered acceptable. Perhaps it would make a good subject for a much (much) longer paper. For now it must suffice to say that some harms are great enough that they would rightly dissuade you at least from voicing your forgiveness, if not also from forgiving itself, whereas other harms are not.

On the other hand, it is important that any ethical account should be true to life. It is true in some situations that all the best and most loving options are harmful, and that is part of the tragedy. Suppose the only ways to escape a contract which is wiping away your savings—truly the only ways—are to murder the other contracted party or to spend a decade convincing her to change her ways, and letting her live will only perpetuate her financial tyranny for countless other families in the interim. If I ask “what should I do?”, my ethical theory might not give me any way to resolve the problem immediately. It may tell me to wait and work ten years for relief. The situation is tragic—and my theory’s acknowledgement of the tragedy only makes it a truer theory. Similarly, it may be that what one should do is forgive, and that without broader institutional change there is no way forgiveness alone will solve anyone’s problems. That, too, is tragic. If the tragedy is real, a theory ought to acknowledge it. And if the only way to escape harmful cycles is to enact systemic change, then the theory should say so.

In the meantime, I suspect that objections of the sort we are considering—against forgiveness on grounds that it is harmful—are often objections against *recommending* forgiveness to the oppressed, the threatened, and so on. And that is fair enough. Whether you should recommend forgiveness to any particular person will depend on what goods of hers are your concern, whether you have the right sort of relationship to her, and on other factors besides. It may sometimes happen that, though you believe someone should act this way or that, you would not do well to say so. I would certainly hesitate to hand this paper to a survivor of the Mumbai trafficking network, for example. But I have written it to philosophers, and that, I hope, is acceptable.

A few other objections should be mentioned because of their prominence, but these can be addressed more quickly.

2.

Some say that forgiving is sometimes bad because it involves a lack of self-respect.³¹ And perhaps sometimes it does. But that is like pointing out that giving money to the homeless is sometimes a way of bragging to passers-by. That is not an argument against almsgiving—it’s an argument against boasting, noting also that the boasting here happens by wearing the clothes of almsgiving. A good ethical theory will not tell you to stop doing what is good just because you are not doing it the way a better person would do it.

Note also that correcting is not liable to this charge in the same way that forgiving is. And that is another advantage of our three-option framework.

We might also consider a variation on the objection: that forgiving does not treat a wrong with the appropriate gravity.³² We have shown that forgiveness is always a way to treat a wrong *as wrong*—but even so, the thought goes, it may sometimes lightmindedly skate by the opportunity to exact a penalty which would have appropriately signaled the seriousness of the wrong, as well as the victim’s dignity (and the offender’s). That is a missed opportunity, and forgiveness offers us no way to make up for it.

Here again we should note that this objection has much less purchase against our framework than against the usual recommendations of unconditional forgiveness. I do think we tend to overstate how important it is to signal the wrongness of an act. But when it *is* important, that would certainly count as one of the “circumstances” to be observed in deciding whether it is best to forgive or correct.³³ Of course, one could ask our question “How should I respond when I am wronged?” and then answer badly. People can do anything badly. But it would be hard to maintain that the suggestions I have offered here would *generally* incline one to condone or minimize wrongs. One would have to argue (with great ingenuity, I’d imagine) that correction, too, condones or minimizes wrongs.

³¹ For the archetypal version of this objection, see Jeffrey Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment”, 505 etc., though it has been posed by many others as well: e.g., Charles Griswold (*Forgiveness* ch. 2) and David Novitz (“Forgiveness and Self-Respect”). The objection is usually against forgiving unrepentant perpetrators or unatoned wrongs. There are many versions of this objection, and clearly I have not dealt with all of them here. But I do think what I’ve said suffices for the most prominent versions.

³² For the archetypal version of this objection, see Aurel Kolnai, “Forgiveness”. Again, other versions of it have been posed by others, e.g., Christopher Bennett (“Personal and Redemptive Forgiveness”, e.g. §2), Griswold (*Forgiveness*, 63-65), and Richard Swinburne (*Responsibility and Atonement*, 85-87).

³³ And I do want to insist that it belongs with the “circumstances”, not on our list of conditions proper. How important it is to convey that an act is wrong depends on factors outside the nature of forgiving and correcting.

So we have seen that, because our framework advocates correction as one possible loving response to wrongdoing, it helps us answer several charges which are often brought against defenses of unconditional forgiveness. But the last two objections I'll consider are objections just as much to correction as to forgiveness.

3.

David Beglin offers an interesting objection to unconditional forgiveness—interesting partly because it is precisely opposite the thought that forgiveness risks condoning a wrong. He argues that forgiving unconditionally involves a failure to engage with a (supposed) wrongdoer in a way that acknowledges her perspective on the situation. We know that it is typically rather condescending to try to forgive someone who did nothing wrong. And if we see things clearly (the objection goes), we can see that this condescension is still there even when there *was* a wrong, i.e., whenever we forgive someone without letting *her* be the one to acknowledge that it was wrong—for in doing so, we effectively impose our judgment of wrongdoing on her without acknowledging her own capacity for judgment.³⁴

The objection has some forceful intuition backing it. But the intuition, I think, is this: you ought not render judgment (much less *communicate* that judgment so blatantly as by literally saying the words “I forgive you”) on matters of moral controversy. I think it's a good general rule that we should be slow in judging others, especially when they might have had understandable reasons for acting as they did. Jesus seems to have endorsed such a principle.³⁵ But we should note that, even so, to make a judgment is not necessarily to disregard the perspective of the one you judge. You *might* be disregarding it, but that's a separate issue. You might instead just disagree with the other's perspective—sometimes, not even that.

On the one hand, if the thought here is just that we should not *judge*, then the question “What do I do in response to this wrong?” does not arise. You must judge there to be a wrong before you can answer it. In other words, Beglin's objection strikes home not against unconditional forgiveness nor against correction, but against the judgment of wrongdoing on which they are founded (and which they therefore imply). Again, I have no quarrel with the thought that we ought to be slow to judgment.

On the other hand, it is not *always* good, much less obligatory, to withhold judgment. The cases Beglin employs are clearly intuitive only when the “wrong” at issue is controversial at best (or

³⁴ Beglin, “Unconditional Forgiveness and Normative Condescension”.

³⁵ Matthew 7:1.

else uncontroversially not a wrong). His first story is about a girl who comes out to her parents as bisexual: her parents kick her out at first, but later call her to say they forgive her.³⁶ Sure, the forgiveness feels condescending here—but that intuition would have been harder to sustain if it had been the girl who forgave her parents. And it is even more difficult to sustain when the judgment of wrong isn't in the slightest danger of dispute—when it's John Paul II forgiving Mehmet Ali Ağca, or Emanuel Church forgiving Dylan Roof, or Joseph forgiving his brothers.

In sum, (unconditional) forgiveness and correction involve a moral judgment with which the wrongdoer might possibly disagree, but which is sometimes perfectly warranted. They do not necessarily involve a failure to acknowledge the wrongdoer's perspective—no more than any other kind of (possibly contrary) judgment.³⁷

4.

One more objection is worth considering. Martha Nussbaum argues that forgiveness is not ideal because there is an even nobler option, namely, unconditional generosity.³⁸ For Nussbaum, it is best not even to be angry in the first place. One should let wrongdoing go immediately, with no attempt either to avenge it or to address it in forgiveness. (This is very difficult, to be sure. But who ever said the heights of virtue should be an easy climb?)

We should first remember why Aquinas thinks correction is so important in the first place. Evil is bad for the one who does it as well as for the one who suffers it. At some point, it will be a serious neglect of love to let someone keep falling deeper and deeper into vice. On this I assume Nussbaum would agree. But she would hasten to point out that, strictly, she doesn't endorse what I've called "correction"—she endorses only what I've called "*advice*" (§II.2). *Correction*, she would say, involves anger, in the same way that forgiveness does. It is *anger* to which she is objecting, first and foremost, on the grounds that it involves a silly or evil view of things: anger suggests that we can make the world a better place, or restore some sort of karmic balance, just by adding more harm to it.

³⁶ Beglin, "Unconditional Forgiveness", §11.2.

³⁷ It is also worth noting that it can only be worse to hold on not only to a judgment of wrongdoing but *also* to enmity. If there is any problem of the sort Beglin points out with forgiving, it is not resolved simply by not forgiving. It is resolved, if at all, by condoning the action, or perhaps by just letting go. But it is broadly acknowledged that those options are generally not ideal.

³⁸ Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

Here I can only say that forgiving and correcting, on the picture I have offered, do not require anger (or any of its affective fellows).³⁹ No doubt Nussbaum would reply that, though it may not *require* anger, nonetheless it gives an approving nod to the problematically retributive view of the world which anger embodies. That much I acknowledge, except that I do not think anger represents the world quite as unfairly as Nussbaum says it does. But now that we are poised at the head of a long trail winding away into the philosophy of emotion, we cannot follow that line of investigation any further.⁴⁰

V. Unconditional Forgiveness and its Other Defenders

In conclusion, it will be worthwhile to consider some particular unconditional forgiveness accounts. The views of forgiveness on offer on which it is unconditional in least some sense are too many and too diverse to be reviewed thoroughly here.⁴¹ But we can at least mention some of the major accounts and ask how they align with our Thomistic picture, in particular, regarding the reasons for forgiveness. That way, we can improve our sense of how far our Thomistic picture compares with other major accounts of unconditional forgiveness about what goes into the choice to forgive. What will emerge is that, in general, the Thomistic picture will agree with any account of the reasons for unconditional forgiveness to the extent that those reasons can plausibly be construed as reasons of love.⁴²

³⁹ Again, elsewhere I present this claim better nuanced and better integrated within a theory of forgiveness.

⁴⁰ If you'd like a sense of where I would go with that investigation, I'll mention that I find Robert Roberts's work on these matters very insightful (e.g., *Emotions*, §3.3). The view I most fully endorse, unsurprisingly, is Aquinas's (see, e.g., ST II-II 158—article 1 ad 3 and article 2 are especially interesting in our present context). The point on which Nussbaum will most fundamentally disagree with me (and Roberts, and Aquinas) is whether a harm (in itself) can ever be a good—say, because it is just. But, again, that is far too complex an issue, and one insufficiently relevant to the task at hand, to be addressed here.

⁴¹ Some other prominent defenders of such views include Espen Gamlund (see “Supererogatory Forgiveness”), Trudy Govier (see *Forgiveness and Revenge*, esp. ch. 4), Margaret Holmgren (see *Forgiveness and Retribution* and “Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons”), and Glenn Pettigrove (despite his wariness of the label—see *Forgiveness and Love* and “Unapologetic Forgiveness”).

⁴² I will therefore emphasize points of agreement between these views and the Thomistic one. Obviously I am not trying to paper over any important *disagreements* here. Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, for example, hold that forgiving and punishing (and correcting, which undoubtedly they would include in their use of the word “punishing”) are compatible (“Conditional Unconditional Forgiveness”, 99). Perhaps our views are ever so slightly at odds, then, on at least that one point. But it would be tedious for me to point out every whisper of disagreement with the authors I will discuss in this section, and at any rate, it is not on the disagreements that my present task would have me focus. Again, my goal here is not to criticize other defenses of unconditional forgiveness.

1.

Eve Garrard and David McNaughton emphasize *solidarity* as a reason for forgiveness—what is expressed in the thought “we’re all in this together”, or perhaps “I, too, am sometimes in need of forgiveness”.⁴³ These thoughts will be available to any victim of any wrong. So, though perhaps it goes too far to say that one should always forgive, we will always have these two thoughts at least, and they will always provide sufficient reason to forgive irrespective of the wrongdoer’s state of repentance or unrepentance.

Our Thomistic picture is friendly to this thought as relevant to forgiveness (or to correction) insofar as it is a thought about the wrongdoer sharing a certain community, though perhaps a very broad one, with the victim. In that case, this notion of solidarity is something Aquinas would count as a consideration of love, since it belongs to those who love to share a community.⁴⁴ Community is, after all, a mode of union.

2.

Andrea Westlund defends a view on which forgiveness expresses a sort of “moral faith”, which testifies that there will always be sufficient grounds for goodwill toward those who have wronged us, though sometimes we may not see them. This may justify forgiveness even when the wrongdoer has yet to repent.⁴⁵

Heidi Giannini offers a similar thought, now defending an always-present sufficient reason to forgive, as Garrard and McNaughton did above. Whereas Westlund focuses on an unknown but present ground for goodwill, Giannini focuses on hope: the possibility of future moral restoration in a wrongdoer.⁴⁶

Westlund’s and Giannini’s views are both consonant with our Thomistic picture. Westlund’s notion of moral faith, in fact, again sounds a lot like something Aquinas would count as love. A love without its glasses on, to be sure, for which reason Westlund uses the word ‘faith’—but a love nonetheless. And this fact, that love can aim at a good which is not yet entirely clear, is a valuable point to have made about correction as well as about forgiveness.

⁴³ Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, “Conditional Unconditional Forgiveness”. See especially 102-103.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., ST I-II 28.1 ad 2, or II-II 26.6.

⁴⁵ Andrea Westlund, “Anger, Faith, and Forgiveness”. See especially §IV.

⁴⁶ Heidi Giannini, “Hope as Grounds for Forgiveness”, 58-82.

Giannini's notion of hope seems again like something Aquinas would count as love, if indeed it stems from a desire for the wrongdoer's future improvement. That, in fact, is precisely the essential aim of correction. But of course Giannini is not wrong to point out that it may also be the aim of forgiveness. I can forgive someone in the hope that she will become better, just as I can correct someone in the hope that she and I will one day be close again. And that is another valuable point to have noted.

3.

For others, the central reason to forgive unconditionally is a simple respect for the wrongdoer's humanity (or personhood, etc.).⁴⁷ To highlight just one example, Margaret Holmgren endorses a picture on which one of the primary virtues involved in forgiving is humility.⁴⁸ And humility's role is to nurture an appropriate appreciation of the offender's value and dignity (as well as that of the victim, and of everyone else, for that matter), and therefore attitudes of respect, goodwill, and compassion.

This, too, Aquinas would consider a good reason to forgive (or correct) someone. I have said the reasons to forgive (or correct) are reasons of love, but I hope I have not given the impression that the reasons to forgive (or correct) must therefore *not* be reasons of *respect*. Remember, love is broad on the Thomistic view: it is that which seeks someone's good and union with her. Perhaps, on the standard Kantian understanding, respect has little to do with union—but we certainly cannot say the same for the good. This value in the offender which grounds respect for her, then, is equally apt to ground love for her. And, in any case, a person's humanity (personhood, value, dignity, etc.) is an excellent reason to seek reconciliation with her in forgiveness, or to seek her good in correction. So this, too, is a thought which is friendly to the Thomistic view. (Goodwill and compassion, I think, need no further comment.)

In general, then, our Thomistic picture will agree that one always has sufficient reason to forgive (granted that one is in a position to answer the wrongdoing, as we have said, and noting that there will sometimes be good reasons to correct instead). It adds that one also always has sufficient reason to correct (as long as it is appropriate to do so, and I've tried to suggest principles for making that judgment), which will sometimes be the better thing to do. And that is a dynamic which the typical advocate of unconditional forgiveness happily allows space for. (Few suggest that forgiving is always

⁴⁷ Owen Ware endorses the "humanity" view explicitly ("Forgiveness and Respect for Persons"), but it is not at all uncommon to mention the wrongdoer's humanity among considerations relevant to forgiveness.

⁴⁸ Holmgren, "Forgiveness, Self-Respect, and Humility".

the best thing to do.) Finally, it gives a more systematic answer than many other accounts, and also a more inclusive one, about what may count as “sufficient reasons”. They are reasons of love. Though there are many reasons of love, they can always be put in terms of love’s two general concerns: for the beloved herself, and for her good.⁴⁹

4.

I could have mentioned many other writers, but I think I have now got the main idea across. So let me conclude with a final comparison between the view I have sketched here and unconditional forgiveness views—something between a clarification and a forestalling of an objection.

One motivation for unconditional forgiveness views (or for a stronger view, like Nussbaum’s), in popular thought as well as among philosophers, is simply the obvious nobility of it. There is an undeniable grace and power in someone who looks an evil squarely in the face, knowing it intimately and yet saying, with great courage, “No—I see that you have tried to kindle a war between us. But I will not have you as my enemy. I forgive you.”

One might worry that our Thomistic picture eliminates this beautiful grace—that it makes forgiveness a sort of second best, supplanted by a much easier and more worldly act which is really just revenge in a nicer suit (and paying a sort of political lip service to “the wrongdoer’s good”).

If that is your impression, reader, then I owe you an apology for my failure to speak truly enough of correction. All the nobility in our great hero of forgiveness—all the grace and power shining in her eyes—is not just *forgiveness*, but *love*. In this way our picture is yet a radical picture, and those who live it live radical lives: its highest ideal is an all-permeating and entirely invincible love. You must not imagine the one who opts for correction as a vengeful person in a smiling mask. You must picture her saying, with that very same astonishing courage, “You have tried to make me your enemy, but don’t you see what you are doing to yourself? How awful—how awful, though you do not know it. Let us work together. If you’ll let me, I will help you.”

Forgiveness is not the only act that answers evil with good. Correction does too. Where forgiveness (at its best) is a generous and soothing love, beautiful in its peaceful resilience, correction (at its best) is a fiery and adventurous love, reaching into the thorns and mire of evil in brave devotion to whatever may yet be golden in the beloved, that the gold might be rescued and made to shine. Each

⁴⁹ To put it a little more strictly, “reasons of love” may be reasons *to love*, or *to act from love*. That is, good reasons to forgive you will be 1) the same reasons for which I (would) love you, or 2) that forgiving or correcting will be for your good, or will serve my union with you.

response has its own place. Remember what we mentioned above: love wants both the beloved herself and what is good for her. Love desires to reconcile and restore union, and it also desires that the beloved be what it is best for her to be. Love must have *both* impulses.

My point is that our Thomistic picture preserves this important aspect of unconditional forgiveness views—this ideal of nobility and grace. And, in fact, what it preserves is a fuller picture of love, on which the best love is unconditional not only in its longsuffering, but also in its determination to guard and to nurture its beloved's good.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ I am grateful to Marshall Bierson, Bob Bishop, Mark LeBar, John Schwenkler, Spencer Smith, and Andrea Westlund for their helpful comments on several drafts of this paper.

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