RECENT WORK

Recent Work in Forgiveness

Simone Gubler

> Today is Forgiveness Sunday. But we cannot forgive the hundreds upon hundreds of victims. Nor the thousands upon thousands who have suffered… And God will not forgive. Not today. Not tomorrow. Never. And instead of Forgiveness, there will be Judgment.
>
> (Volodymyr Zelensky, March 6th, 2022)

1. Introduction

One of the oldest traditions in the Eastern Orthodox church is Forgiveness Sunday. It's a festive occasion: the last day to eat dairy before the onset of the fasting season that precedes Easter. It's also the day on which the faithful are enjoined to seek and extend forgiveness in hope of a happy outcome to the conditional set forth in Matthew 6:14–15:

> For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This year, Forgiveness Sunday fell on March 6th, only a few days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and even Ukrainian clerics were somewhat muted in their celebration of the festival. One bishop in Lviv suggested that members of the armed forces forgive the Russians, but only so that they would have 'clearer hearts and minds' when they fought them. Alexandra, a 52 year-old soldier who listened to this address, confided in a reporter shortly afterwards that: 'It will be a sin for what I will tell you next…I will forgive them only if they will be in the ground. Only then will I forgive them' (Brown 2022).

In making the case for the martial utility of forgiveness, the Bishop of Lviv did not stray so far from one of the earliest philosophical treatises devoted to forgiveness – another bishop's sermon, in fact, which remains the touchstone of much contemporary work. In that text, Bishop Joseph Butler conceives forgiveness as a complementary faculty to resentment. Butler's forgiveness functions like brakes on resentment – it serves to prevent resentment from giving rise to self-frustrating and antisocial behaviour (Butler 2017: IX:13). It need not (as against a

Analysis Vol. XX | Number XX | XX 2022 | 1–16 doi: https://doi.org/10.1093/analys/anac075

common misreading[1]) mean the end or renunciation of resentment. And it is well that this is so, for resentment can be, as Butler points out, both prosocial and prudent: 'one of the common bonds, by which society is held together, a fellow-feeling' consisting in 'the indignation raised by cruelty and injustice, and the desire of having it punished' (VIII:7).

Butler's sermon on forgiveness may have been delivered in a chapel, but it is naturalistic in spirit. It explains the psychological function of forgiveness as a useful adaptation in the life of social creatures like ourselves. In what follows, we will examine recent philosophical work on forgiveness and consider how things have progressed.[2]

Our focus will be on papers published in the last 10 years (with a few dusty classics, largely from the early 2000s, thrown in for context and edification). This article is not intended as a substitute to the fun of reading all of this excellent work, but as an amuse bouche, to whet the appetite and raise the fork. We will begin with a brief survey of the definitional debate concerning forgiveness, before moving to focus on a few recent papers that take up interesting philosophical problems concerning forgiveness and develop positive views.
The problems are, in brief:

A. *Forgiving the dead*: Alexandra, the Ukrainian soldier, will only countenance forgiving *dead* Russian soldiers, but forgiveness is standardly imagined as a relational undertaking between the living. So, can Alexandra forgive the dead? And is there value to doing so?
B. *Self-forgiveness*: Now, perhaps Alexandra feels a little morally shabby about withholding her forgiveness ('it will be a sin what I tell you next…'). She might even feel that she has wronged herself by falling short of her ideals. Could she then undertake to forgive herself for this? On the standard picture, forgiveness involves a dyadic relation between a wrongdoer and a wronged party – conceived as distinct agents. Self-forgiveness may not fit that picture. But it is a term with some currency in common discourse and place in the popular imagination. So, is self-forgiveness possible, and under what circumstances?
C. *Bad forgiveness*: Finally, there's another way to read Alexandra and Zelensky's refusals to forgive. Perhaps they are ultimately sceptical of

1 Butler is often said to offer an account on which forgiveness involves overcoming, or ceasing to feel, resentment (Garcia provides an excellent critical survey of this tendency Garcia 2011: 1). However, a more faithful reading of the *Sermon* [see Garcia (2011), Griswold (2007: 33) and Butler 2017: xxix)] reveals that Butler's account, while committed to a sentimentalist psychology, also places social function at its core – in this case, the function of preventing *acts of vengeance*. To this end, resentment is not necessarily abandoned or overcome, but rather, *restrained* by forgiveness.

2 We'll keep things naturalistic. There are important contemporary debates concerning the nature of divine forgiveness, but we have an eternity to resolve that question, so we shall here hew to more pressing and mundane considerations.

the moral goodness of forgiveness. Then, they might have joined a small band of radicals, discontents, pragmatists and Nietzscheans on the edges of the discourse who dare to call the moral value of forgiveness into question. What might bad forgiveness look like, and how much of a problem is it?

From this final vantage-point, we will move to close with a practical question and provocation: can we, and should we, seek to do away with our present practices of forgiveness?

But before we can address each of these problems, and the state-of-the-art responses that philosophers like Macalester Bell, Per Erik Milam and Myisha Cherry have developed, we must first attend to the ur-problem: that of definition.

2. *Defining forgiveness*

For people concerned with a conciliatory value, forgiveness scholars present as a fractious crew in print. Much of this disagreement may be attributed to the fact that there is no standardly agreed definition of forgiveness. Certain broad structural features of the practice are widely assumed. But when it comes to filling in the details, dissent reigns. So, let's begin on the relatively sure ground of those structural characteristics. Forgiveness is a practice that:

(1) Arises where there is a wrong, wrongdoer and wronged party;
(2) is undertaken in response to the wrong;
(3) has as its principal author, the wronged party; and
(4) alters the landscape wrought by the wrong – bringing about a new state of affairs that is standardly capable of characterization as a positive development for the wrongdoer.

Now, are there legible cases of forgiveness that fall outside the scope of this list? Almost certainly. Take, for example, *collective forgiveness*. If collectives can forgive (see Stockdale MS, for a survey), then the language above – which is suggestive of a dyadic relation between an individual wrongdoer and wronged party – might be insufficient. Although, as P.E. Digeser points out, if there is collective forgiveness, we can continue to conceive it as a dyadic relation: whether of one-to-many, many-to-one or many-to-many (Digeser 2010: 9). So, perhaps we just need to make sure that the concepts of 'wronged party' and 'wrongdoer' allow for collectivities. But there are other ways to exert pressure on the dyadic relation – we'll talk about the possibility of *self-forgiveness* shortly!

Indeed, each feature of the picture above is subject to pressure in recent literature. **(3)** specifies the wronged party (whom we naturally conceive as the primary victim of the wrong) as the principal author of forgiveness, but a growing community of thinkers, including Glen Pettigrove (2009), Alice

MacLachlan (2017) and Rosalind Chaplin (2019), make the case that *third parties* have standing to forgive. MacLachlan and Chaplin use the expression 'taking it personally' to describe how someone might experience the wronging of another and thereby come to enjoy standing to forgive. And Nicola Lacey and Hanna Pickard suggest that you might not even need to be a person to forgive: 'the criminal law itself can offer forgiveness, not on behalf or in place of victims, but in its own right' (Lacey and Pickard 2015: 668).

(2) says that forgiveness must be undertaken in response to a 'wrong', but what sort of normative breach are we talking about here? Derrida, who thought that forgiveness was and should be a rare event, once opined that true 'forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable' (Derrida 2001: 32). That seems to draw the scope a little narrowly. But then, what does make a wrong apt to forgiveness? Do only *moral* wrongings suffice? Are there acts of such iniquity to warrant designation as unforgivable? And what about extra-moral breaches of social or relational norms – are these apt to forgiveness? *Who* needs to recognize a wrong as wrong for forgiveness? And must that wrong exist prior to forgiveness? Many people would dismiss the possibility of preemptive forgiveness out of hand, but Nicolas Cornell (2017) makes an ingenious case for it, and in so doing offers a novel way to understand the normative operation of legal institutions like the liability waiver.

At any rate, it seems clear that even if we are happy enough to agree to **(1)**–**(4)** as basic structural features of forgiveness, taken alone, they don't suffice to *evoke* (let alone *define*) a recognizable conception of forgiveness. To arrive at a recognizable forgiveness, we need to flesh out **(4)**. We need to identify the change that forgiveness effects in the landscape of wrong. And here, we find still more diversity of opinion.

There are at least *three* species of achievement that are standardly attributed, whether together, or severally, to forgiveness. These are *(i)* the cessation of some sort of ill-feeling towards the wrongdoer, *(ii)* the restoration or reconciliation of the relationship between the parties and *(iii)* the removal or 'bracketing off' of guilt or sin (Garrard and McNaughton 2003: 41–42). *(i)* is accepted by the majority of scholars. It includes the position (sometimes misattributed to Butler), which could be called 'the standard view' of forgiveness, namely, that forgiveness characteristically involves the overcoming (or foreswearing, renouncing, elimination – the language used is quite variable!) of resentment. Hatred, anger, contempt and other negative reactive attitudes are also sometimes identified as potential targets of forgiveness.

Although the overcoming of resentment is required on many accounts of forgiveness, it is rarely held to be sufficient. The forgiver must overcome *in the right way*. This makes sense: one can't just pop a mood-altering drug and say, 'At last, I've forgiven all my enemies!' Jeffrie Murphy, for example, proposes that to forgive, the wronged party must forswear resentment 'on moral grounds' (Murphy and Hampton 1988: 24). Per Erik Milam argues that

the victim's perception of a wrongdoer's 'change of heart' supplies the right kind of reason to forgive (Milam 2019: 242). In a recent article dealing with the problem of repeated offenses, Alexandra Couto stresses that forgiveness should be granted only where the forgiver 'believes that the offender is not going to repeat their wrongdoing' (Couto 2022: 342). And, in a widely cited 2001 paper, Pamela Hieronymi offers a standard of judgment: arguing that in paradigm cases of forgiveness, the forgiver eliminates their resentment by rationally revising the judgment that the wrongdoer's past action constitutes a present threat (Zaragoza 2012; Nelkin 2013; and Warmke 2015 respond). Attempts to closely specify motivational conditions for forgiveness have invited some push-back: in *Elective Forgiveness*, Lucy Allais cautions against the 'over-intellectualizing and over-moralizing of forgiveness' (Allais 2013: 637).

The standard view might identify the overcoming of resentment as the characteristic achievement of forgiveness, but some accounts also implicate positive emotions. R.S. Downie locates the achievement of forgiveness in the restoration of *agape*, the forgiver's prosocial attitude of loving concern for the dignity of the person who has wronged them (Downie 1965: 133). More recently, Eleanor Stump has argued that forgiveness must 'involve some species of love for the person in need of forgiveness' (Stump 2019: 5). And indeed, ascribing a positive emotional dimension to forgiveness might help to explain another putative achievement: namely, relationship repair. Charles Griswold argues that the 'restoration of mutual respect and recognition between the parties' is an implicit end of forgiveness (Griswold 2007: 49). Macalester Bell writes that 'the badness of wrongdoing is primarily a function of how it *impairs our relationships* and forgiveness is fundamentally a process of *relational repair*' (Bell 2019: 32). The positive association of forgiveness to relationship repair and social restoration has attracted special attention in the legal domain, where scholars like Martha Minow (2019) consider the potential of legal analogues for forgiveness. But relationship repair is not widely conceived as a necessary achievement or goal of forgiveness. Michele Moody-Adams argues that the association of forgiveness to relationship repair is just that, a contingent association. On her view, forgiveness properly consists in a unilateral revision of judgement on the part of the forgiver (Moody-Adams 2015: 162).

The third species of achievement sometimes attributed to forgiveness is the elimination of guilt or sin. This might sound like the sort of strong magic that requires religious conviction. But in a compelling 2018 paper, Christopher Bennett makes a secular case for conceiving forgiveness as a normative power; one that alters the normative situation created by wrongdoing by waiving rights and obligations (Bennett 2018). In a similar vein, Dana Nelkin conceives forgiveness as effecting something analogous to debt relief (this might sound too coldly economic, but it's worth remembering, as David Graeber

notes, citing Geoffrey Ingham, that 'In all Indo-European languages, words for "debt" are synonymous with those for "sin" or "guilt"' Graeber 2011: 59). Nelkin writes that 'In forgiving, one ceases to hold the offense against the offender, and this in turn means releasing them from a special kind of personal obligation incurred as the result of committing the wrong against one' (Nelkin 2013: 175). Luc Bovens suggests that, by offending, the wrongdoer surrenders certain claims to respect in the moral community of equals, and that forgiveness effects the 'restoration of moral stature' (Bovens 2009: 230). Note that such accounts move us away from conceptualizing forgiveness as a primarily psychological or emotional phenomenon and focus on its social role and justification.

Here we may pause to observe that our attempt to bring a recognizable conception of forgiveness into view has instead functioned to bring several such conceptions into view. And indeed, perhaps the best descriptive account of forgiveness will be one that acknowledges that a concept with such a long history and diversity of uses will resist clear, univocal definition. As with many items in our armoury of moral concepts, 'forgiveness' might be best approached as a heterogeneous cluster concept, denoting a range of distinct but historically and practically interrelated ideas; ideas whose relationship is one of family resemblance and genealogy, rather than of shared necessary and sufficient conditions. For this reason, when confronted by the problem of description, the philosopher who wants to avoid giving a revisionary account might adopt a functional and historical approach, asking: 'In what ways, and to what ends, have we employed the concept of forgiveness?' And if someone were inclined to pursue such a path, then they could do much worse than to start with David Konstan's wonderful prehistory of the Judeo-Christian tradition of forgiveness, *Before Forgiveness* (Konstan 2010).

But we have spent quite enough time fretting over the problem of definition in broad terms. Let's look to some specific challenges in the boundary lands of forgiveness.

3. *Forgiving the dead*

> General Narvaiez...on his death-bed in 1868 is said to have answered the priest's question whether he forgave his enemies 'I cannot: I have had all of them executed...' (Kolnai 1973: 103).

The dead may be gone but we think of them yet. We vividly recall their characteristics and histories, revisit conversations and events, and interrogate the traces that they have left on us and the world. Can we, in so doing, come to forgive them? And, if we can, is it morally valuable to do so?

It might seem incoherent to claim to engage in a person-directed activity like forgiveness towards the dead. They don't exist as persons. But the dead (at least those we knew in life) aren't pure fictions either. And the complex

of feelings, beliefs, dispositions and duties that we experience towards them seem apt, even unremarkable, where they are continuous with attitudes that we held towards a living person: 'I still love him'. So, if much of the moral architecture of a relationship can persist and continue to exert a claim on us – if resentment against the dead can be coherent – then why not also allow for the possibility of forgiveness?

Macalester Bell raises the spectre of *forgiving the dead* in a 2019 article (Bell 2019). Bell defends the possibility and moral value of forgiving the dead, and the compatibility of this position with a prominent (but apparently hostile) position in the literature: 'the conditional view' of forgiveness.

Many philosophers of forgiveness hold that forgiveness must be *conditioned* by activity on the part of the wrongdoer: by an apology, reparations, evidence of a change of heart. On such 'conditional views' of forgiveness, if someone dies in an unrepentant state, forgiveness (or, at the least, morally praiseworthy forgiveness) looks to be off the cards. To return to the example of Alexandra: one reason to think that she can't (or even shouldn't) forgive her dead enemies is that she can have no assurance of their remorse.

But the conditional view is contentious. And Alexandra might not accept the constraints it imposes. She might protest that her forgiveness is in her gift: hers to offer at a time and under circumstances of her choosing. She might complain that, by vesting moral conditions on her forgiveness in the wrongdoer, we are transgressing the freedom that she should rightly enjoy, as victim of wrong, to forgive at will. She might, in short, insist on an *unconditional* view of forgiveness. And here, we butt up against one of the central debates in the forgiveness literature. The disagreement between adherents to conditional (Hieronymi 2001; Griswold 2007; Milam 2018, to name a few) and unconditional conceptions (Calhoun 1992; Garrard and McNaughton 2003; Allais 2008, 2013) has a relatively long history, and a habit of re-emerging whenever putative properties of forgiveness are under discussion. In a recent article, Miranda Fricker works to account for this disagreement by proposing a pluralistic conception of forgiveness whose parts preserve the relevant distinction (Fricker 2019).[3]

Now, adherents of the conditional view may be untroubled by the apparent incompatibility between their position and forgiveness of the dead. The especially hard-nosed among them may even take it as a reductio of the unconditional view that it could promiscuously allow for such superstitious nonsense. Bell, however, takes a different tack. She argues that the conditional view can in fact accommodate forgiving the unrepentant dead, and that, since forgiving the dead is a datum of moral experience for many people, it is good that it can do so.

3 Published in a special edition of the *Australasian Philosophical Review*, with responses by several philosophers cited above.

Bell conceives forgiveness as a form of relationship repair. Among the living, such repair depends on a *reciprocal* exchange between parties. But Bell argues that reciprocity is not required for forgiveness of the dead. Our relationships with the dead differ in key respects from our relationships with the living, and so too do the conditions that govern repair and its moral value. It might be morally neutral or wrong to forgive a living person who won't express remorse. But, *we can wait* for the living to express their remorse. Indeed, it might be morally required to do so – waiting for evidence of contrition demonstrates respect for the moral agency of the wrongdoer and for one's own status as an injured party. In forgiving the living, 'we care about wrongdoers *providing* reasons to forgive, or *inspiring* forgiveness…' (43). But we cannot give the dead time to come to their senses, or expect them to observe norms of reciprocity. There can be no expectation of remorse or apology from a dead party, so although we might feel injured by the fact that they did not repent and that might figure in our calculations concerning the value of the relationship, *conditioning* any future forgiveness on the possibility of repentance would be irrational. We may observe, moreover, that future-oriented moral concerns that arise with respect to forgiving the unrepentant living – like the prospect of condoning bad behaviour or inviting future disrespect – are greatly diminished when it comes to the dead.

Now, even if forgiving the dead is possible, and isn't morally bad, that doesn't establish the activity as morally good. To be good, the forgiver needs to aim at *something other than themselves*, something beyond a therapeutic outcome (although see Svirsky MS, for a critique of this assumption). Bell argues that this occurs where the forgiver acts not for their own sake, but *for the sake of the relationship*. The goal of relationship repair is not reducible to considerations of self-interest. When we forgive the dead for the sake of a relationship, we choose to value the relationship we have and to 'focus on the good things': the good qualities of the offender, and the positive aspects of our shared history with them (51). Such an act of forgiveness can be praiseworthy.

Bell's paper is an impressive work of moral psychology. It's also provocative. Many interesting questions remain. For example, Bell argues that we forgive a dead person in order to repair an existent relationship with them. To be successful, we need our relationship to persist through the process. But whatever forgiveness is, it's often imagined as transformative: it 'wipes the slate clean', it banishes negative emotion, it transforms the moral status of its target. And so, we might imagine a difficulty arising where a relationship is strongly characterized by past wrongdoing. Namely, forgiveness might destroy that which it is meant to repair. When a person is still alive, relationship repair can be a reciprocal process, and a hitherto bad relationship can be reconstituted by engaging in shared activities, and so forth. But, when a person has died, *whatever relationship persists is grounded in what came before*. Forgiving a dead person, where one's relationship is

inextricably bound up with their past wrongdoing ('my abusive partner', 'my deadbeat parent', 'my mortal enemy, Moriarty') might terminally disrupt the narrative, emotional and normative continuity of the relationship. If I can't refer to Moriarty as 'my enemy' anymore, then arguably too much has changed to allow the relationship to persist. Forgiveness has severed the string.

4. *Self-forgiveness*

> We've all been there. You forgot to send a wedding present, spilled a secret that wasn't yours to share, or perhaps even did something to intentionally hurt someone else. And now you feel like a total jerk... And you have no idea when—or even if—you'll ever be able to forgive yourself. (Oprah Daily 2019)

The notion of self-forgiveness has wide currency in popular discourse. But many forgiveness scholars have been reticent to accommodate its claim – whether as a form of forgiveness simpliciter, or, more narrowly, as a morally valuable form of forgiveness. This is due to a widely held belief that forgiveness is the sort of thing that, by definition, can (and/or should) only be tendered by the victim of a wrong. If we restrict the wrongs capable of self-forgiveness to those that we have visited upon ourselves, then perhaps we can reconcile a 'victim-only' constraint with self-forgiveness. But if we claim that wrongs that one visits against others are capable of self-forgiveness, then things get much more contentious. Even scholars permissive enough to allow for third-party forgiveness, rarely explicitly countenance the extension of their arguments to *wrongdoer* self-forgiveness. But in a 2015 article, Per Erik Milam does just this. He undertakes to demonstrate that there is such a thing as self-forgiveness – both for wrongs wrought against oneself, *and others* – and that those who insist on the victim-only constraint are mistaken.

He begins by setting forth putative cases of self-forgiveness: a husband who cheats, is forgiven by his wife, then forgives himself; a remorseful embezzler who confesses, and then forgives herself; and a murderer, Richard Herrin, who bludgeoned his sleeping partner to death, and then appeared to forgive himself after undergoing counselling (to the extent that he expressed the view, three years into his prison sentence, that it would be unfair for him to serve the remaining sentence) (2015: 3). Each case is presented as a plausible instance of self-forgiveness. They might not seem like morally good cases of self-forgiveness (the Herrin case is especially dubious!). But Milam is only concerned to defend the existence of self-forgiveness, not its moral value (the latter would be an interesting project for someone to undertake). He proceeds to identify a set of conditions on self-forgiveness. In brief:

> The self-forgiver must (1) believe that she has wronged herself or another, (2) that she is morally responsible for the wrong, (3) target herself with a negative attitude in light of that wrong, and, (1)-(3) obtaining, (4) undergo an improvement in her self-directed negative attitude that occurs in response to her perception of 'a relevant change in the quality of will behind the initial offense'. (2015: 7–8)

Note that the self-forgiver does not revise her perception of herself as a wrongdoer. She continues to recognize her guilt as justified, but the negative attitude that she held towards herself in response to her guilt is diminished. Key to Milam's account is the requirement that this reduction be driven by the self-forgiver's perception of a positive change in her own attitude towards the victim: from 'malice to appropriate regard', for example (13).

In developing these conditions, Milam makes a constructive contribution to an existing literature on self-forgiveness (see, e.g. Dillon 2001; Griswold 2007; Norlock 2009: 137), while departing from the literature's earlier focus on how self-forgiveness might effect something like 'self-reconciliation' – the overcoming of feelings of self-alienation induced by doing wrong. Milam accepts that self-reconciliation will likely figure in the phenomenology of self-forgiveness, but does not hold it as definitive, and so does not pursue the interesting matter of interrogating its moral psychology further. Having set forth his conditions on self-forgiveness, Milam moves to contest the claim that only victims can forgive; that, in particular, only victims have *standing* to forgive.

Standing-based objections to self-forgiveness take a variety of forms (see Pettigrove 2009, for a good survey). Perhaps the most intuitive objection posits the 'privileged moral standing' of the victim to forgive first and/or to the exclusion of others. After all, the victim was wronged. Something that should not have happened to her under the norms of our society, happened to her. And forgiveness, like apology, is one of a suite of entitlements that she now has as victim, which can conduce to her restoration. Other would-be forgivers should not transgress her moral claim to the initial (or sole) exercise of these entitlements. Now, although the assertion of the victim's moral privilege might preclude *morally good* cases of self-forgiveness for harms visited against others, it doesn't preclude self-forgiveness per se, as Milam points out. Indeed, claims about the victim's *moral* privilege are legible in virtue of the existence of boundary cases where that privilege is lacking – and, like third-party forgiveness, self-forgiveness might present just such a case.

Other claims about standing are conceptual in nature. If, by definition, forgiveness is the sort of activity that requires two agents (like debt release), then self-forgiveness is a non-starter. If forgiveness requires a certain kind of evaluative distance, if it relies on 'the victim's ability to view the offender in a way that the offender cannot view herself', that might also block self-forgiveness (15). Or, it might just limit certain possibilities for self-forgiveness:

Bell (2008) and Pettigrove (2012) have argued that we sometimes forgive people for *who they are* rather than what they do – an epistemic feat that may be beyond the self-forgiver. Finally, perhaps only certain emotions are apt to overcoming by forgiveness: we might feel negative reactive attitudes like guilt or shame towards ourselves, but it's more difficult to imagine *resenting* oneself. If forgiveness is a matter of overcoming resentment, then that too might rule out self-forgiveness.

The case of self-forgiveness thus illustrates how opting for a definitional stance in the forgiveness literature can have broad implications. The language of self-forgiveness is widely employed by the public. But if certain views of forgiveness, in vogue among philosophers, are followed through to their conclusion, then self-forgiveness becomes inapt or impossible.

5. *Bad forgiveness*

> To err is human; to forgive, malign.
> -Me, after Pope

We tend to think of forgiveness as something morally good and praiseworthy. But in considering forgiving the dead and self-forgiveness, we encountered legible acts of forgiveness that might not be good or praiseworthy. Indeed, despite its rosy public reputation, there is a quiet consensus in the philosophical literature that forgiveness is not *necessarily* morally good. Many philosophers admit of cases in which forgiveness is prudentially, rather than morally, justified in virtue of its therapeutic potential. And there is a growing recognition that some acts of forgiveness are not merely morally neutral, but morally bad.

A bad act of forgiveness might, for example, be borne out of cruel or selfish motivations. Imagine a Nietzschean figure who forgives in the hope of dominating and humiliating their target. Hobbes conceives a forgiveness that, like revenge, is 'hateful' to its target (Hobbes 1998: I:11–8). And Martha Nussbaum (2016) argues that certain strands of thought in the conditional tradition license a forgiveness that is a 'status-focused' act of 'payback' (77).

Perhaps this travels too far from the popular conception of forgiveness; some moral philosophers bake a loving or respectful attitude into forgiveness, thereby excluding the Nietzschean forgiver. But, even if we accept such limitations, there are cases in which forgiveness may be offered quite sincerely and out of love, and still prove morally reprehensible.

Take for example, the case of Marcus, who came out to his family as gay at fifteen. For a period of time, Marcus' mother was very angry and resentful towards her son. From her perspective, homosexuality was a grave sin. Then one day, she announced that – after much personal struggle, and guided by her faith – she forgave her son for his sinful sexuality. In so doing, she thought that she was demonstrating great beneficence. Marcus took his mother to be

sincere, but found the whole incident morally outrageous. Forgiveness presupposes wrongdoing. And his mother's forgiveness functioned both to constitute him as a sinner, and to inscribe into their relationship a framework of value that wrongly condemned him.

This motivates a general observation: the goodness of acts of forgiveness will depend upon the goodness of the systems of value that they arise within, because they entail endorsements of those values: 'You did wrong, this is a wrong/ I am in the right, this is what it is like to be in the right'. Marcus' case involved a clash between two systems of value, and the horror of encountering a forgiveness incommensurable with his own sense of the good. His mother's gesture had a colonial property. By 'forgiving' him she was continuing to assert the relative validity of her own standards of value, and to negate his.

We can also conceive of cases in which forgiveness is bad but nonetheless emerges out of a moral culture that we identify with. For example, forgiveness may serve as a benefit to the wrongdoer conceived in terms of her own self-interest, but there are some wrongdoers who, as a matter of public morals, absolutely must not be benefited in this way. Think not only of the authors of atrocious deeds that are so far beyond the pale that, in learning of them, 'it was as if an abyss had opened up', to borrow a phrase from Hannah Arendt (2000: 172), but also of those 'charming' rogues whose misdeeds shape so much of our contemporary politics, and who are, despite their unequivocal wickedness, forgiven time and again.

Forgiveness can be bad in virtue of its effects on public moral culture in other ways as well. Frantz Fanon supplies one example, when he points out the ideological utility of concepts like forgiveness to colonial powers in their endeavour to 'discipline, tame, subdue...and pacify' (Fanon 2004: 228).[4] In such a context, to participate in the practice of forgiveness, or indeed, in the celebration of forgiveness as good, is to contribute power to the oppressor.

This last species of concern underlies Myisha Cherry's recent work on racialized forgiveness (2021), which examines how the valuation of acts of forgiveness in contexts of structural and cultural racism can function to harm certain racialized groups. Her work in this vein builds upon and incorporates insights from feminist work by MacLachlan (2009) and Norlock (2009), who have examined the ways in which gendered norms concerning forgiveness can function to harm and oppress women. Cherry uses the term *racialized forgiveness* 'to refer to how race negatively influences whom we forgive; whose forgiveness we praise and criticize; and for what reason' (2021: 584). One of the most compelling sections of the paper deals with the

4 Elsewhere, Fanon raises the example of Adenauer's request for forgiveness from the Jewish people, and connects the political pursuit of forgiveness to the displacement of proper goals of justice: 'Moral reparation for national independence does not fool us and it does not feed us'. (Fanon 2004: 58)

ways in which Cherry's fellow philosophers have adopted historical figures like Gandhi and Mandela as exemplars of forgiveness, without adequately considering that these figures will be addressed as racialized persons (593). Celebrating and advocating the forgiveness of such figures may, in certain contexts in which the work is read, function to promote norms of forgiveness that harm: effectively promulgating racially asymmetrical expectations of forgiveness, or the notion that for certain racialized groups, forgiveness can be an adequate substitute for justice.

The solution, Cherry argues, is not to abandon forgiveness, but to recognize its potential for capture by systemic wrongs like racism, to resist bad practices and to create new ones. Like Norlock and MacLachlan, she advocates a form of forgiveness pluralism. There are many potential forgivenesses, and we can make some of them work for us.

6. *Letting go of forgiveness*

> Yes, and here's to the few that forgive what you do
> And the fewer who don't even care…
> (Leonard Cohen, 1984)

In our survey of recent work in forgiveness, we have seen that the parameters of forgiveness remain hotly disputed, that they are likely historically contingent, and that whatever forgiveness is, it's not always morally good and might sometimes (even often, given systemic racism or sexism) be bad. When confronted by serious problems, both conceptual and practical, with the operation of our norms, we should arguably be motivated to adjust our usage, or to advance alternatives. There are, after all, alternatives to forgiveness that perform a similar social function, that might better serve us, and that do not amount to excusing or justifying bad behaviour.

One possible alternative is 'letting go' (see Brunning and Milam 2022), where a victim ceases to blame not because she forgives, but because she, for example, 'views the offender as a lost cause and no longer worth his time' (Brunning and Milam 2022: 5). Brunning and Milam conceive letting go as an alternative to forgiveness, while maintaining that reasons to forgive will yet arise in some cases. But creatures like us might conceivably arrive at a world in which a practice like letting go ultimately supplants forgiveness. It might even be good for it to do so – a step beyond the logic of payback and score settling that Nussbaum deplores in her work on anger and forgiveness (Nussbaum 2016).

Another possibility, which lacks the categorical flavour of forgiving, forgetting or letting go, but which arguably fits human psychology nicely, is what I like to call 'shelving it'. This is where the victim effectively *turns away* from a wrong (this doesn't necessarily have to involve any fancy volitional feats, another matter might just become more salient, one's attention might

simply be redirected). The person who *shelves it* does not let go. They do not cede any of the normative entitlements that they might enjoy as the target of wrong, or indeed, resolve to give up on blame. They simply hit the pause button on offense. They recognize that they can deal with things later, when and if it becomes pressing or advantageous to do so. I suspect that many of us, when wronged, ultimately *shelve it*. And I further suspect, and this is going to be quite contentious, that doing so might ultimately be better for us, and for the good function of our system of morals, than forgiving. But here we encounter still more provocation, and we need to move to close (or, at least, shelve) this discussion for later.[5]

University of Nevada
Reno, NV, USA
simoneg@unr.edu

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5 Thanks for enlightening conversations and material assistance are due to Jonathan Dancy, Kathleen Higgins, Galen Strawson, Max Hayward, Ryan Doody and René.

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