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# Chapter 11

## Practicing Imperfect Forgiveness

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**Abstract** Forgiveness is typically regarded as a good thing – even a virtue – but acts of forgiveness can vary widely in value, depending on their context and motivation. Faced with this variation, philosophers have tended to reinforce everyday concepts of forgiveness with strict sets of conditions, creating ideals or paradigms of forgiveness. These are meant to distinguish good or praiseworthy instances of forgiveness from problematic instances and, in particular, to protect the self-respect of would-be forgivers. But paradigmatic forgiveness is problematic for a number of reasons, including its inattention to forgiveness as a gendered trait. We can account for the values and the risks associated with forgiving far better if we treat it as moral *practice* and not an ideal.

**Keywords** Forgiveness · Resentment · Self-respect · Gendered virtue · Feminism

### 11.1 The Value(s) of Forgiveness

Forgiveness has enjoyed an unprecedented surge of academic enthusiasm in the last few decades. We have learned that forgiveness is good for your health (Thoreson et al. 2000), good for your business (Kurzinski 1998), good for your intimate relationships (Coleman 1998), and good for your politics (Shriver 1995, Tutu 1999, Amstutz 2005). According to several religious traditions, forgiveness is also good for your eternal soul. From clinical psychologists and democratic reformers to spiritual gurus and yoga teachers, a surprising number of authorities are suddenly counseling individuals that they can – and even *ought* to – forgive.

Despite the panoply of benefits now associated with it, feminists may have reasons to regard an ethics of forgiveness rather warily. After all, this spate of forgiveness promotion has followed relatively quickly on the heels of several significant

liberatory movements, including the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, and the rise of queer politics. One would be forgiven (pardon the pun) for noting, as Janice Haaken does – somewhat dryly – that just when ‘oppressed groups gain the strength to speak up and claim new rights, including the right to disengage from abusive relationships, the powerful rediscover the salutary virtue of forgiveness’ (2002, 184). At the very least, it is worth asking certain questions, most notably: *what*, exactly, is being advocated, when women are exhorted to forgive? Second, in praising forgiveness, what alternatives to forgiving do we thereby critique? Some fear that, in forgiving widely, we waive a valuable form of moral (and political) protest. Others worry that the new ethics of forgiveness masks a more familiar and oppressive paradigm in which women, in particular, are taught the values of self-sacrifice and servility, or concern for others at the expense of their own rights. Given the gendered history of these supposed virtues, the dangers of a new duty to forgive may appear particularly acute from a feminist perspective.

At the same time the intuitive appeal of forgiveness is based on a vision of moral life that goes beyond formal duties and obligations to others, and which imbues relationships as well as rights with value and significance. Forgiveness recognizes human imperfection *and* our capacity for change and improvement. When we forgive, we at least attempt to engage in moral repair: that is, to restore and revitalize moral relations between individuals in the aftermath of wrong, rather than to sever them (Walker 2006). This vision of repair is far from an anti-feminist vision. In other words, forgiveness may not be something we need either to promote or reject absolutely. The problem – or problems – with forgiveness arise from the simple fact that, at least according to many ordinary language uses of the term, we can forgive in a wide range of circumstances and for a wide range of reasons. Some of these circumstances and reasons are better (e.g. safer, more defensible, more self-respecting, more obviously *moral*) than others. That many acts of forgiveness, at least for the time being, must take place in contexts of uneven and often unjust power dynamics only serves to underscore the point.

Faced with the unsurprising observation that acts of forgiveness vary in value, philosophers of forgiveness have responded by calling for (theoretical) reinforcements. Clearly, forgiveness ought to be a moral action, they claim: not merely in the sense that it is open to moral evaluation and may hold moral significance, but moral in the sense of morally *good*, or praiseworthy. The variable moral value of our actual practices of forgiveness is therefore in need of theoretical clarification. Dividing themselves into ‘boosters’ and ‘debunkers’ of forgiveness (Murphy 2003), philosophers have, for the most part, either concentrated on shaping forgiveness into a rationally defensible moral ideal or have used examples of poor, risky and seemingly immoral forgiveness to undermine the potential value of forgiveness altogether. This has led to a narrow and often unhelpful set of dichotomies and oppositions, which together frame the philosophical discourse on forgiveness: either we resent wrongs or we forgive them; either forgiveness is conditional on the wrongdoer’s repentance or it is entirely *unconditioned*; either forgiveness emerges from a robust sense of self-respect or it is servile condonation; either forgiveness matches – or at least resembles – a philosophical paradigm and is

therefore genuine and praiseworthy, or it is imperfect, immoral, or even ‘pseudo-forgiveness.’

In this paper, I want to explore how we might go about theorizing forgiveness, if we begin by rejecting these dichotomies and the picture of forgiveness as a normative ideal from which they arise. I do this for several reasons: first, I see the effort to articulate the perfect paradigm of moral forgiveness as a doomed enterprise. I agree with Margaret Walker that it is unlikely that there is ‘a single correct idea of forgiveness, in the way that there is a correct theory of the structure of DNA’ (2006, 152). Moreover, searching for such a theory may be dangerous as well as futile, if it prevents us from attending to actual practices of forgiveness and the narratives told by those who do (or do not) forgive, in circumstances and for reasons not contained by philosophical paradigms. If, as I suggest, the neglected narratives are most often those belonging to members of oppressed or subordinate social groups, this neglect is particularly worrying. Finally, in abstracting from the messy details of forgiveness as a practice, philosophical paradigms of forgiveness display some of what Charles Mills calls ‘the vices of ideal theory’ (Mills 2004, 166). I focus in particular on the role of gender in philosophical discussions of forgiveness: the problematic absence (and presence) of gender in philosophical paradigms and examples, and the ways in which forgiveness is implicitly ‘gendered’ both in attributions and in expectations.<sup>1</sup>

I make my argument in three stages: first, I offer a wide account of forgiveness and contrast it with narrow philosophical paradigms. Second, I consider forgiveness as a potentially gendered concept, and demonstrate how ideals of forgiveness may reinforce problematic gender assumptions. Finally, I consider what it might mean to theorize non-ideal forgiveness, through an extended meditation on a short passage on women and forgiveness in Dostoyevsky.

## 11.2 What Does (or Should) Forgiveness Mean?

I understand forgiveness first and foremost as an event or a ‘happening’: someone forgives; someone else is forgiven. Insofar as forgiveness is deliberative, it is also an action: something we do, or at least aim to do. Of course, ‘forgiveness’ may also describe our disposition to perform acts of forgiveness (or indeed, if forgiveness is a virtue, to perform them well): Roberts and Griswold have nicknamed this trait ‘forgivingness’ while David Novitz speaks of what it is to ‘*be* forgiving’ (1995, 2007, 1998). Forgiveness is what forgivingness does. Finally, if acts of forgiveness do express important ideals, we could refer to these ideals, too, as forgiveness. But forgiveness *qua* ideal and forgiveness *qua* virtue both depend upon the act itself: the transformation we intend in uttering phrases like ‘I forgive you.’

What do we do when we forgive? Most philosophers agree that forgiveness is a *personal* (rather than an institutional or official) response to wrongful harm. It is also a generous or liberal reaction; acts of forgiveness mark a deliberate shift from away from a negative stance toward the wrongdoer – or, in some cases, the immediate substitution of a positive stance for the expected negative one, in the first place. This shift in stance does not diffuse or ignore the wrongness of the offense: forgiveness

confronts wrongdoing for what it is, and does not try to explain it away. While efforts to forgive may resemble excuses or justifications, articulating a decision to forgive includes the more difficult task of accounting simultaneously for why hostility might be justified and our willingness to forgo or rethink it. I am excused if I am less blameworthy for my action, but I am forgiven *for* my blameworthiness.

In everyday language, what we recognize as acts of forgiveness are also typically characterized by certain attitudes, rituals and behaviors, perceptions and even uttered phrases – but these may change, depending on the individuals involved, the relationship between them, and the nature of the offense. In some friendships, much is conveyed non-verbally; a single gesture may convey apology and its acceptance. In other relationships, words are *all* that is needed for both parties to accept that forgiveness has transpired. Certainly, at least the following cases are possible examples of what we might ordinarily refer to as an act of forgiveness:

- (i) Overcoming initial feelings of rage, resentment and anger.
- (ii) Coming to believe the wrongdoer is potentially more than the sum of her acts towards me.
- (iii) Tacitly or explicitly giving her permission to stop assessing herself morally in terms of that one act.
- (iv) Purposefully refraining from any retaliating behavior (including verbal behavior).
- (v) Articulating words of forgiveness, or participating in some equivalent ritual, with sincerity and good intentions.
- (vi) Sincerely accepting an apology.
- (vii) Moving on to a new, positive relationship, following a breach of the old by wrongdoing.

Not every possible way of characterizing forgiveness is listed here, of course. The list is meant to be characteristic, not exhaustive. Moreover, performing one of these actions in any particular situation would not guarantee forgiveness: in a long-standing, complex family relationship marked by distrust on both sides, words of forgiveness alone might be deeply unsatisfying for all concerned. In a more casual or formal relationship, on the other hand, talk of overcoming rage and hatred might actually exaggerate and fossilize hostilities, rather than transform them, especially if the wrong in question was relatively minor (Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2002). But we can certainly imagine that, in the absence of reasons to think otherwise, people who performed one of these actions might take themselves to have forgiven – and equally, if we were the recipients of such gestures, we might understand ourselves to be forgiven.

Moreover, it seems to me that it matters whether or not those involved in an act of forgiveness understand it as such; it may even determine whether or not the act 'counts'. Here I take issue with a recent treatment of forgiveness, which begins with the claim: 'forgiveness has not been given, or received, simply because one believes or feels that it has been. . . regardless of the level of subjective conviction' (Griswold 2007, xv). True, we can imagine cases where individuals are mistaken or deluded in

thinking they have forgiven – but acts of forgiveness also seems to function symbolically within a particular relationship. We cannot depend entirely on self-reporting perhaps but – equally – we cannot entirely cash out the entire meaning of any act of forgiveness in advance, any more than a disinterested observer can appreciate every gesture of love or apology, distrust or gratitude, from the outside. We must also in each case determine what it means to the forgiver and forgiven, by paying attention to how the concept is used by those in situ (O'Shaughnessy 1967).

Second, I disagree with the dominant assumption among philosophers that 'forgiveness is primarily a matter of how I *feel* about you (not how I treat you)' (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 21). Whatever else forgiveness may entail, they argue, it must at least involve a change in attitude: the deliberative effort to overcome warranted resentment and hostility, undertaken only for a prescribed set of morally acceptable reasons. Virtuous or ideal forgiveness is *conditional* on one or more of these reasons – most often, the wrongdoer's wholehearted and informed repentance.

Why the obsession with resentment? When philosophers take up the question of forgiveness, they do so primarily to problematize its moral value, most often in relation to standards of justice and self-respect (Murphy 1988, Novitz 1998, Hieronymi 2001). In failing to object sufficiently, some argue, the forgiving victim appears to condone and even collude in her own wrongdoing. She does not demonstrate appropriate self-respect. Articulating and promoting forgiveness may also undermine and diminish the potential moral insights of our 'negative' reactions to harm such as anger, resentment and blame (Boss 1997, Potter 2001, Quinn 2004). Since the purpose of these emotions is (i) moral protest and (ii) moral self-defense, they – and not the tendency to forgive – are *prima facie* virtuous responses to wrong (Murphy 1988, Brudholm 2008). All the therapeutic, physiological, strategic and political benefits of forgiveness must take second place to this protest. Only resentment can get the *moral* job done. Moreover, since forgiveness is a normative concept, they argue, (i) forgiveness must be premised on prior resentment and (ii) factors that promote and protect norms of justice and self respect must either be 'written in' to what counts as genuine forgiveness, or added as warranting conditions for successful (genuine, legitimate, praiseworthy, etc.) occasions of it. Understanding ideal or paradigmatic forgiveness is simply a matter of determining the appropriate set of conditions.<sup>2</sup>

I see this focus on the emotional dimension of forgiveness as problematic for two reasons. First, it risks excluding or undermining the ritualistic, behavioral and even pragmatic elements of forgiveness; to the person being forgiven, how she is treated by the forgiver may be far more important than Murphy allows. Being 'let back in' may be as much a matter of social gesture as it is a matter of deep emotional transformation. Second, Murphy and those who follow him tend to idealize and oversimplify resentment, allowing it to do all the moral heavy lifting in the aftermath of wrong.

Murphy understands resentment almost entirely in terms of moral protest. In doing so, he follows Rawls, who defines resentment as 'a moral feeling that invokes the concept of right' (1987, 533). Resentment is good, because it is clearly and unproblematically tied to 'a non-controversially good thing – self-respect' (Murphy 1988, 16). This philosophical definition of resentment is narrower than our common

usage – and that is not necessarily a bad thing. The difficulty is that Murphy shifts between common understandings of resentment (we naturally resent injuries) and Rawls' philosophical account (our resentment necessarily carries a morally robust claim). For example, Murphy moves too quickly from the fact that someone protests an injury to the assumption that her protest must be grounded in a robust sense of her own proper value, rather than – say – fear, need or desperation. Resentment does not always and only express self-respect; people with deficient or absent self-respect may still resent harms and wrongs. Second, daily resentments are often tied to far less impressive norms than the concept of (moral) 'right'. We resent failures of good manners, of reciprocal social conventions, even – as Margaret Walker notes – of fashion, like peculiar haircuts (2006, 124).

Walker remains more faithful to common usage than Murphy does, when she claims resentment is an emotional weapon employed in the face of threats to any number of cherished norms (128). The emotional phenomenology of resentment is the same in each case; our angry feelings represent a desire – a demand – that the transgressor of some norm be held accountable to that norm, that she be *made* to acknowledge its force, to regret her violation. In other words, resentment continues to behave as a reactive attitude (Strawson 1993) whether the norm in question is strictly moral, social or customary. Some resentments are cases of righteous indignation; others emerge from envy and insecurity, disgust and disdain. People can resent the effort to use inclusive language, renovations to older buildings to create accessible spaces, or a gay pride parade marching down their street.

Thus, resentment responds to the violation of norms but not all norms are created equal. When we limit use of the term to instances where it is deployed to defend uncontroversial moral concepts, we risk seriously over-moralizing resentment (Walker, 127). This is not to discredit resentment entirely; it may well express moral protest, as well as function as a witness to wrong, or an emotional refusal to accept the fact of injustice. It may also express fear, insecurity, misguided entitlement, or attachment to problematic, exclusionary norms. A plausible account of resentment must recognize both possibilities.

Instead of relying on resentment to determine whether and when forgiveness is warranted, we might examine 'typical' acts of forgiveness for what they tell us about the relation, or change in relation, between the forgiver and forgiven. There are good reasons to focus on what forgiveness produces as a potential source of its value, and not merely on what it overcomes or erases. Claudia Card describes our ability to forgive as a 'moral power,' capable of achieving something of moral significance (2002, 173). For Card, this achievement is the ability to cope with the moral remainders of wrong: suffering, guilt and regret. Hannah Arendt puts it another way: forgiveness 'frees' the wrongdoer, by releasing her from the worst consequences of her wrong (1958, 237). Forgiveness is meant as a kind of *relief*. Walker characterizes the restorative properties of forgiveness slightly differently; she focuses on *repair* rather than release (2006). Card, Walker and Arendt all emphasize forward-looking values of hope and trust in others, the presumption of goodwill and respect, and the desire to restore and improve relationships. To the extent that forgiveness is backward-looking, moreover, the forgiver may concern herself as much with the

breach of a valuable relationship as she does with potential injuries to her self-respect. In other words, I suggest that we forsake a singular ideal of forgiveness and redirect our attention outwards in two ways: first, in recognizing the variety of ways in which people may forgive, and the wide range of expressions that forgiveness may take. Second, I suggest we focus on forgiveness – or 'forgivenesses' – as a set of non-hostile practices for negotiating wrongdoing that may express a *number* of reparative aims: relief, release or reconciliation. We ought to re-orient ourselves away from the highest ideal and down to the threshold of forgiveness.

To those schooled in the philosophical discourse on forgiveness, it might appear as though I have simply presented an incomplete catalogue of usages familiar to *me*, and not a philosophical account. Ordinary language is a far from unproblematic methodology, of course; what is 'ordinary' to me, in my culture, class and circumstances, may be far from ordinary to you. In fact, it is precisely *because* usages vary so widely, and in relation to variables of culture, gender, race, class and historical epoch, that we ought to pay attention to them. Acts of forgiveness respond to two very concrete and immediate things: the offense itself, and the wrongdoer who committed it. It is hardly surprising that the meaning and phenomenology of forgiveness will vary as widely as wrongs and wrongdoers do; providing an exhaustive account is probably beyond the reach of the armchair philosopher. But this is not to say we cannot make headway. In the following section, I consider one problematic variable: gender.

### 11.3 Gendered Forgiveness

Understanding forgiveness as a moral practice requires that we understand it as gendered, among other things. Men and women are encouraged to express their gender in a number of ways; these expressions vary across social classes and cultures, and can change over time. The categories of 'masculine' and 'feminine' identify a shifting complex of traits, behaviors, images and social expectations. Gender is also expressed through moral norms. For example, Campbell notes that many of our virtue and vice terms are gendered (Campbell 1994). Since gender concepts are 'persistent and powerful organizing categories of thought,' it is hardly surprising that some of our moral ideals are also gender ideals (Norlock 2009, 13). When a vice or virtue term is gendered, it does not praise or censure uniformly; the same trait may be praised in women and criticized in men. Campbell describes the 'Kantian feminine' as an ideal of emotional sensitivity and sentimentality: sympathetic, delicate, compassionate and easily offended (1994, 56). These same traits applied to a man of Kant's time – or ours – would not be unambiguously flattering. The 'Kantian feminine' also calls to mind Virginia Woolf's specter of 'The Angel in the House':

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily... in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (Woolf 2008)

As moral exemplars go, the Angel in the House is not particularly empowering. One is expected to admire her for what she suffers and receives, not what she *does* or achieves. Her virtue lies in her own self-effacement; she is an exemplary moral agent by hardly acting at all. Eventually, Woolf concludes, the Angel must be eliminated:

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her she would have killed me. (Woolf 2008)

Since the history of gender is also a history of gender oppression, feminists have good reason to be critical of gendered virtues: the feminine virtues were also, traditionally, exactly those traits that supposedly rendered women unfit for the public sphere and for political power. As Claudia Card notes, oppressive social conditions can recast and disguise moral damage and survival strategies with the honorific of 'virtue' (Card 1996, 53). Of course, a survival strategy is not necessarily a wholly *bad* thing, either, insofar as it achieves just that: survival of its bearer under inhospitable conditions. Identifying a practice or trait as feminine does not require that we reject it altogether (not all Angels need killing), but it does alert us to ask *how*, as a gendered term, it is employed – and exactly what vision of 'good' it appears to promote.<sup>3</sup>

Is forgiveness a gendered concept? For some, forgiveness is most at home in the Christian religious tradition, which counsels that *everyone*, male or female, ought to forgive. If everyone faces a similar expectation to forgive, certainly, forgiveness is *not* gendered – or at least, not explicitly. But even within a Christian context of universally advocated unconditional forgiveness, the story is not so simple. Judith Boss notes that normative uses of forgiveness by Christian institutions focus on forgiveness in families, including abusive and violent families. Given the decidedly gendered nature of domestic violence, Boss asserts, 'discussions of forgiveness... cannot be separated from gender politics' (Boss 1997, 235). As long as forgiveness is advocated primarily to sustain abusive and oppressive relationships, its value cannot be separated from the gendered violence it enables (Lamb 2002). In other words, the objects and focus of forgiveness may be gendered. Furthermore, both Boss and Anca Gheaus remind us that the Christian argument for forgiveness is premised on universal fallibility and moral frailty – we forgive others because we ourselves are also sinners, and in need of God's forgiveness – a remark chillingly reminiscent of a long tradition of victim-blaming, in contexts of domestic and sexual violence (Boss 1997, Gheaus 2009). Gheaus notes that according to Christian theologian Paul Fiddes, in human relationships no one is an innocent party.

There are several good reasons to believe that forgiveness *is* gendered or, at least, that forgiveness as we understand it emerges from a profoundly gendered history. Certainly, 'forgiveness' or the disposition to forgive appears at home with other 'soft' attributes traditionally coded as feminine: patience, care, and sympathetic understanding. Indeed, it is exactly these aspects of forgiveness: that it is too soft, too yielding, too self-sacrificing, and fails to confront others appropriately, that motivate many of the philosophical objections to forgiveness raised by Murphy and others. Hannah Arendt notes that forgiveness has been relegated to the private,

rather than public realm – just as women were – in part because of the close association between forgiveness and love (1958, 243). If the ideal woman is responsible for maintaining relationships and for keeping domestic harmony, forgiveness will regularly be required of her.

In characterizing the ideal woman, forgivingness has also functioned as a tool for silencing her more assertive counterparts. Society is far quicker to castigate and to label the woman who will not forgive as angry, bitter or shrewish than her male counterpart – a phenomenon witnessed most recently in Hilary Clinton's campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination. Media commentators have remarked that despite her formidable legislative and political record, the single act that temporarily kept Clinton's campaign afloat was her willingness to forgive her husband: that single action redeemed her femininity sufficiently for middle America. Several recent studies in empirical psychology have indicated that willingness to forgive divides along gender lines, and women are more inclined to forgive than men (Exline et al. 2008, Toussaint and Webb 2005).<sup>4</sup> Exline remarks that the sex differences they uncovered were surprising and unexpected (Exline et al., 2008). Of course, those of us unwilling to accept gender dichotomies as essential may cast a critical eye over these studies, but they reinforce what feminists have long argued: in contemporary western society, women are more likely to be socialized to cultivate empathy and care, to sublimate their needs and rights to those of an ongoing relationship, and to reject negative emotions of anger and resentment.<sup>5</sup> It makes sense that an inclination to forgive – or a sense of its expectation – might be part of this socialization. Given this social pressure, and the historical association between forgiveness and some culturally encoded set of 'essential' feminine characteristics, women may have additional reasons *not* to forgive, or to resist *being* forgiving. Murphy begins his diatribe against forgiveness with a quote from feminist author Fay Weldon: 'understand and forgive, my mother said, and the effort has quite exhausted me' (Weldon 1988, 5). Rather than taking up the practice, many women may be interested in leaving it behind.

Finally, I would suggest that not only is our inherited concept of forgiveness gendered, but the philosophical discourse on forgiveness and the paradigms it generates are, as well. Who forgives, in philosophical examples? For the most part, philosophers writing on forgiveness illustrate their claims with what I think of as 'Smith and Jones' cases: the figures remain shadowy, identified only by the letters 'A' and 'B' (Downie 1965, Harvey 1993) or by single male, Anglo-Saxon names: 'Fred and Ralph' (Kolnai 1973) 'Smith and Robinson' (Benn 1996), 'Alston and Bennett' (Haber 1991), 'Jerry and Paul' (Boleyn-Fitzgerald 2002) or indeed, remain nameless but nevertheless male (Bennett 2003).<sup>6</sup> These forgivers tend to be colleagues, business partners, or casual friends: they forgive after they fail to collaborate appropriately on shared projects, break promises or contracts, and forget to repay borrowed money. In other words, they behave very much like the (male) heroes of classical liberal theory: autonomous, independent, atomistic agents, who deliberately choose to engage in shared projects for mutual benefit and advantage. Griswold comments, almost in passing, that the consensus against third-party forgiveness is premised, in part on presumably non-controversial 'common-sense moral individualism,' where

individuals are understood to be atomistic moral units (Griswold 2007, 118). Yet this assumption ignores several decades of work in feminist theory, which has introduced, critiqued and revised the insight that our agency as individuals is often constituted, at least in part, by our most meaningful (and often unchosen) relationships. The point is not to devalue autonomy or individuality, but rather, to rethink exactly in what these values consist.

When women do appear in the literature on forgiveness, they tend to do so in one of two guises: first, as the abused wife or victim of sexual violence (Holmgren 1993, Boss 1997, Haber 1998, Murphy 2003). Interestingly, these examples are always invoked as the quintessential case of problematic, disingenuous or even *pseudo*-forgiveness; they are destined to fail because, clearly, such women cannot possibly forgive and meanwhile possess (let alone express) self-respect. Second, women appear as the mother whose agency is so deeply identified with her child that she can forgive *as* him – the apparent counter-example to the ‘common-sense moral individualism’ that prevents third-party forgiveness. Mother and child are the exception that proves the rule, apparently, because the mother’s agency is indistinguishable from the child. She is so psychologically attuned to her caring relationship that she may not be a separate self at all (Murphy 1988, Haber 1991).

Why consider this paucity of female examples anything more than an unfortunate failure of imagination? Among the potential vices of ideal theory, according to Charles Mills, are its misrepresentations of social ontologies and of moral capacities (Mills 2004, 166). Examples matter because they reveal the subjects of a particular theory; to whom exactly it is meant to apply, and what sort of people they are. Here philosophical theories of forgiveness fall down on two accounts: first, in neglecting women as forgivers for the most part and second, in introducing them only to demonstrate *bad* forgiveness, or forgiveness *for others* and not on behalf of themselves. Insisting that victims of wrong must already have regained their self-respect before they can rightfully forgive may also attribute ‘completely unrealistic capacities’ to them (Mills, 166). Furthermore, gendered examples work so well in the philosophical discourse because they fit the paradigms they illustrate, suggesting that these too are problematically gendered.

Genuinely considering cases where sexist subordination and gendered violence play a role is not simply a matter of straightforwardly enumerating them, but rather, of taking care to reflect and account for the agency and the voice of women within them, not relying on cultural tropes of the helpless battered woman or the fierce and selfless mother. And while there may well exist an uneasy tension between practices of forgiveness and self-respect, choosing a particular (gendered) experience as typifying self-disrespecting forgiveness, then declaring it illegitimate – almost by definition – is a deeply problematic solution. I have difficulty seeing such a theoretical move as achieving anything except further diminishing the agency of those women who do see themselves as forgiving; neither does such a move attend sufficiently to the reasons they offer for their decision. Women who *do* forgive in these circumstances often describe a complicated moral calculation, in which self-respect is balanced against meaningful, even constitutive, moral relationships (Flanigan 1999).

Is such a narrative a guarantee against desperate or problematic forgiveness? Of course not, but it does not need to provide a guarantee, in order to be of value. For one thing, actually attending to victim narratives may draw our attention to sophisticated ‘adaptive strategies’ for regaining agency and a sense of control (Brison 1999, 218). The assumption that victims who suffer from diminished self-respect are incapable of anything but passive servility is both patronizing and implausible; it misrepresents the moral capacities of the individuals it claims to protect. As Martha Minow puts it, ‘restoring dignity to victims. . . should at a minimum involve respecting their own responses’ (Minow 1999, 8). Instead of creating paradigms with self-respect written in, philosophers would do well to attend to first person narratives of forgiveness, and the explanations that accompany them. For one thing, in many cases, the forgiver’s self-respect is not what has been damaged, but her trust and good will for another. Accurately understanding the potential value of forgiveness, therefore, may require that we focus on its relational aspects – and this in turn draws our attention back to the actual relationship in question, in all its particularity, and away from abstract paradigms or ideal cases.

#### 11.4 Imperfect Forgiveness

How can we theorize forgiveness without ideals? This may involve little more than looking carefully at non-ideal instances of forgiveness. Philosophers may have much to learn from empirical studies, first-hand reports, and even literary accounts of how and why people forgive. Consider, for instance, the picture of decidedly *imperfect* forgiveness described in the following passage, taken from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dmitry Karamazov (Mitya) is explaining to his younger brother, Aloysha, why he will not apologize to his lover, Grushenka. When Aloysha suggests that Grushenka would forgive him, Dmitry takes the opportunity to teach his little brother something of the relationship between women and men, and the kinds of forgiveness it engenders<sup>7</sup>:

May the Lord preserve you, my dear boy, from ever asking forgiveness from a woman you love, if you happen to be in the wrong. From a woman you love especially. Yes especially. However much you may be in the wrong! For a woman, my dear fellow, is the devil only knows what sort of a creature. I am an expert on them, at any rate! But try to tell a woman that you’re in the wrong – I’m sorry, it’s my fault, forgive me please – and she’ll shower you with reproaches! She’ll never forgive you frankly and openly, but will humiliate you to the last degree, bring up things that never happened, remember every little thing, forget nothing, add something of her own, and only then will she forgive you. And that’s how the best of them, the best of them, will behave! . . . A man must be magnanimous, and that won’t stain his reputation! It won’t even stain the reputation of a hero, not even of a Caesar! But don’t ever ask her forgiveness for anything all the same. (Dostoyevsky 1958, 697)

This passage could well be said to represent everything that is worrying to feminists about discussions of forgiveness. Not only are pejorative generalizations made about women as a group (they are manipulative, emasculating, emotional, and deceitful), but also a relationship of inequality and subterfuge between men and

women is advocated explicitly (men may forgive one another, but they must deny their faults to women at all costs). Forgiveness enters the picture as one strategy for maintaining – or undermining – the appropriately unequal relationship (Dmitry does not have similar reservations about women asking men for forgiveness; in these cases a man may be magnanimous and gracious, in response). In the hands of women, forgiveness is an unscrupulous and unjust power; to ask forgiveness is to surrender power that ought not to be surrendered. Forgiveness is something tricky and somewhat dishonest, this passage suggests – *just like women*.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, forgiveness is presented as a gendered trait. Female forgiveness is problematized as deceitful and manipulative, but at the same time, women are described as forgiving while men are *magnanimous*. The former has very different connotations than the latter. In Aristotle, the virtue of magnanimity is also translated as pride, and concerns itself with ‘great honors’ (1999, 1124a5). The magnanimous person is gracious and lenient with others because he can afford to be; his generosity emerges from an abundance of power, not the vulnerability of victimization. Unlike forgiveness, which is premised on the idea that we are able to harm and be harmed by one another, magnanimity is rooted in strength and imperviousness. Stoics such as Cicero and Seneca praised magnanimity for this very quality, along with the virtue of mercy (Roick 2008, Seneca 1995). In fact, the truly magnanimous person may be incapable of forgiveness, precisely because of his imperviousness; like Nietzsche’s forgetful noble, he is not capable even of recalling the wrongs of others (Griswold 2007, 8).

The forgiving woman is at the same time deeply resentful, and literally re-lives (‘remember[s] every little thing’, ‘forget[s] nothing’) and re-interprets the original wrong (‘bring[s] up things that never happened’, ‘add[s] something of her own’) as she re-tells it. Not only is her forgiveness conditional – conditions she appears intent on *extracting* from her unfortunate lover – but, Dmitry implies, conditions appear as if from nowhere and are added as she goes along. On the other hand, male magnanimity is a trait of the strong, even the heroic: abundant, unconditional and honest. The magnanimous man knows the truth, rises above the fray, and is ‘[frank] and [open]’ about it from the beginning. In other words, he is merciful.

There are several obvious responses to this passage; the easiest is perhaps to debunk the gendered generalization it makes: that the character of women as a group inclines them to be more resentful and less magnanimous than men.<sup>9</sup> If my analysis of gendered forgiveness is correct, the opposite is likely to be true: women may have more trouble expressing anger, and less trouble expressing empathy or care. Of course, the (fictional) women in Dostoyevsky’s passage are not particularly patient, caring or empathetic; they display obsessive resentment, whose object is their wrongdoer’s groveling humiliation. The ability to empathize and the tendency to resent are not incompatible; we might even understand resentment as a natural response to excessive expectations of care.

Resentment as Dmitry describes it is certainly not the noble sentiment described by Rawls and Murphy. Instead, the reiteration of wrongs narrated by resentful, forgiving-yet-unforgiving women resembles resentment (or *ressentiment*) as Nietzsche saw it: deceptive, malicious, emotionally poisonous, and an invaluable

creative resource for those who are weak, vulnerable, and lacking power (1967, 37–39).<sup>10</sup> These women re-narrate the wrong, in all its shamefulness, even as they claim to forgive it. Moreover, this interpretive narration is part of the *point* of their forgiveness. Rather than releasing the forgiven wrongdoer from the deeds of his past (Arendt 1958, 237), their forgiveness is designed – in part – to remind him of them. Whatever we may think of Dmitry’s gender politics, the self-righteous, guilt-inspiring forgiveness he describes is not unfamiliar.

## 11.5 Ambivalent Forgiveness

Evidently, Dostoyevsky’s passage does not describe an ideal case of forgiveness. What exactly is wrong with the picture Dmitry paints, according to philosophical ideals of forgiving? In the first place, the forgiveness expressed is not a pure change of heart; it is intermingled with and even constituted by unresolved resentment. Of course, if resentment were necessarily a moral, self-respecting response to wrongs, then to resent wrongs done is not necessarily a moral failing – following Murphy and others, it would be a moral requirement – but then, as I argued above, resentment also turns out to be more complicated and less upright than Murphy allows. We cannot always rely on its moral credibility. Dmitry’s women may also fail to express the *self-respecting* resentment Murphy endorses. We lack textual evidence to determine this absolutely – this is not Gruschenka’s narrative, after all, but Dmitri’s – but given the pleading and apparently duplicitous tone attributed to them, it is at least plausible that their resentment is grounded in fear and insecurity, rather than a robust and measured sense of their own value. Furthermore, in this passage, forgiveness is a vehicle for resentment and not an antidote. As any analytic philosopher of forgiveness will tell you, genuine or virtuous forgiveness is meant to overcome or eradicate resentment, not to disguise and express it. Insofar as the forgiveness in this passage finally *does* mark an end to resentful demands for an apology, it is untimely – delayed. The contrite wrongdoer is (at least in his own eyes) asked to do too *much*. The forgiveness he finally receives is a hard-won respite, and not a gift at all.

From the point of view of philosophical ideals, at least, the scene Dmitry paints is thus an apparent failure of forgiveness. Being forgiven in this way would feel a whole lot like being blamed. It is even what we might call, following J.L. Austin’s framework, an abuse or misfiring of the performative utterance ‘I forgive you’. The supposed forgiver fails to accomplish the moral transformation – whether conceived as release or reconciliation – that utterances of these words are meant to enact. The result is unsatisfying for the recipient, and unlikely to achieve the almost miraculous benefits of forgiveness mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Furthermore, at least according to Dmitry’s interpretation, this failure is a failure of character, attributable to the women themselves. They are ‘devil only knows what sort of a creature’, after all, and lack the appropriate virtue to perform acts of magnanimity, rather than repressed resentment. Women may utter words of forgiveness, but they cannot forgive *well*.



Performatives can fail for many reasons, however. Here forgiveness has apparently failed (if it has failed) because the supposed forgivers are excessively and inappropriately resentful. After all, Dmitry has accepted the need for apology – he does not even dispute that forgiveness is required: his warning to Aloysha is not to ask forgiveness of a woman, even *if he is in the wrong*. But Dmitry does display an unspoken assumption, even a sense of entitlement, that he himself is the best judge of what kinds of contrition are required of him. What frustrates him is his unwilling participation in an ongoing process or dialogue. While Dmitry would like to utter an apology and be done with it, his partner in this dialogue wants something more extensive: accountability as well as reconciliation. The mixture of forgiveness and resentment that emerges is her strategy for negotiating both.

Women in 19th century Russia lived under gender ideals not unlike those described by Virginia Woolf. Under the influence of the Orthodox Church, ‘the image of piety, modesty and self-denying service to the family and the unfortunate’ represented the culmination of feminine virtue (Bisha 2002). Perhaps even more than in the contemporary west, women were socialized to express soft, yielding, feminine traits while rejecting so-called ‘negative’ emotions of protest and demand. It seems plausible that they would be encouraged to engage in forgiving behavior, perhaps more than their male counterparts. But notice, in Dmitry’s narrative: being forgiven by women is an excruciating ordeal because their angry emotions are surprisingly overwhelming – because they *become* overwhelming once forgiveness is requested. If the question of forgiveness is avoided altogether, it appears, female anger remains under control. The question of forgiveness enables, even prompts it.

We can thus read Dmitry’s women as grabbing the only opportunity available to them. Resentful, ambivalent forgiveness is not a failure, but a subversive strategy for balancing seemingly incompatible moral demands. The outlawed expressions of protest – the need to tell one’s *own* version of the story and have it be heard, to have one’s hurt affirmed and acknowledged, and to have expressions of anger be acknowledged as warranted and legitimate – have been incorporated, even *smuggled*, into the socially and morally acceptable process of forgiveness. At the same time, Dmitry allows, these women *do* forgive: ‘and only then will she forgive you’. The value of forgiveness as a reparative strategy is not sacrificed absolutely to protest. The women in Dostoyevsky’s passage are, quite simply, refusing to choose between maintaining relatedness and protesting injustice. The ambivalent forgiveness that emerges is an adaptive strategy for negotiating an impossible choice.

Note too, that Dmitry focuses on forgiveness between intimates: ‘from a woman you love especially.’ Close, interpersonal relationships of love are often those least likely to be governed by norms of justice and rights-claims. The women described have consciously or unconsciously adopted emotional strategies for negotiating injustice without exiting the relationship altogether – perhaps because they lack that option, or perhaps because they are balancing its value alongside their emotional protest. They demonstrate an important insight that philosophical paradigms overlook; sometimes, forgiveness can exist alongside lingering resentment.

Linda Ross Meyer describes at least one situation in which the words, ‘I forgive you, but I’m still angry’ are not a contradiction: the case of parents dealing with

children (2000, 1520). We can at least imagine fully adult examples of this kind of case, in which the forgiver might say ‘I do forgive you, but bear with me – it’s going to take me some time to get past this. I hope you’ll be patient,’ or cases when a less prescient forgiver forgives, then inadvertently expresses resentment at a later date. If she sincerely intends to forgive, and has made a genuine effort to distance herself rather than endorse her original angry stance, it seems almost churlish to claim that she has *failed* to forgive. Indeed, I expect this particular experience – occasional, surprising moments of recalcitrant resentment – is more common than we might like to admit. Add to this a deeper layer of entrenched, deep-seated causes for anger, such as ongoing social injustice and oppression, and it becomes almost impossible to read or predict the moral ‘compass’ of individual angry occasions. For those individuals who constantly receive messages that they deserve *less* from society, gnawing, undermining resentment may be constantly present – and may either numb or inflame the emotional protest of specific, individual injuries. Admitting that forgiving is sometimes compatible with at least some minimal degree of continuing anger and resentment means that members of social groups who have good reasons to feel angry, may still have occasion genuinely to forgive.<sup>11</sup> Forgiveness can be ambivalent and still be real.<sup>12</sup>

In my interpretation of Dostoyevsky’s passage, however, I have gone one step further. Not only are forgiveness and (some degree of) resentment compatible; in some cases, one may actually enable the other. Campbell notes that in the absence of social uptake and acknowledgment, expressions of anger and resentment may be unrecognizable as such, even to their bearer (1994, 54). Ironically, it may only be through accepted practices of ‘forgiveness’ that members of subordinated groups are even *able* to become angry (with all the power and legitimacy conveyed by that word) – let alone in the right way, at the right time, and toward the right objects, as in the case of virtuous anger. At the same time, articulating and expressing anger may free a victim to forgive, should she so desire. Does forgiveness necessitate an (eventual) end to angry feelings? Not necessarily, anymore than we have to feel angry before we can forgive. In forgiving, we commit ourselves to ‘move past’ the wrong, and to repair whatever damage we can. But neither commitment precludes residual distrust or the emergence of a new and possibly distant relationship.

In other words, acts of forgiveness are not always linear progressions away from resentment and towards total reconciliation – but it is not always clear that they *should* be so. Instead, we sometimes find forgiveness mixed in with resentment. Gheaus describes this mixture as an ‘emotional dialectics’ of resentment and forgiveness, perfectly capturing the back-and-forth phenomenology of the convoluted emotional trajectory many of us experience, in forgiving (2009). Instead of contrasting unconditional, instantaneous forgiveness with conditional forgiveness, premised on a pre-ordained set of conditions that have already been achieved, we can understand these as limit cases, marking the outer limits of a much wider range of possible ‘forgivenesses’.

Forgiveness is not always the right strategy for demanding acknowledgment, of course; sometimes the refusal to forgive is far more powerful, especially when forgiveness is expected or even assumed, is more effective.<sup>13</sup> But in either case, the

practice of granting, receiving and withholding forgiveness functions as a sphere in which wrongdoing is articulated and for which someone is made accountable: it makes no sense to say, 'I forgive you, and I think you did nothing wrong', after all. In some, if not all cases, this sphere is a promising avenue for negotiating responsibility alongside reconciliation. Furthermore, the 'softer' and less retributive discourse of forgiveness may make it available to a wider range of individuals, including women and members of subordinated groups who are socialized to avoid more aggressive forms of protest. Far from closing off avenues of accountability, a discourse of forgiveness may even enable them.

## 11.6 Conclusions

This paper makes a preliminary case for treating forgiveness first as a (potentially) valuable set of moral practices, rather than as a moral ideal – or set of ideals. Acts of forgiveness may express virtues of compassion, trust, generosity and wisdom. Equally, they may be problematically unassuming, failing to protest wrongdoing sufficiently or prioritizing the maintenance of morally dubious relationships over self-respect. The particular range of cases to which I have drawn attention, in this paper, are those acts of forgiveness that appear to be both valuable *and* problematic; their problematic nature does not dilute the former, anymore than their value overcomes the latter. Negotiating how to assess or advocate acts of forgiveness requires that we look to the particularities of the context in which it occurs, rather than imposing a pre-ordained set of ideals or conditions. Moreover, the context of forgiveness includes the broader political context of the wrong including, for example, the role of gender politics. The gendered history of forgiveness as a moral concept may give women particular reasons to be wary of exhortations to forgive. Finally, we should be careful not to assume that unproblematic or 'easy' cases of forgiveness have more value than messy or 'imperfect' forgiveness – that is, value to the individual participants, as well as value to the philosophers who study them. 'Messy' forgiveness – that is, ambivalent, uncertain and sometimes inconsistent strategies of repair – may promote the good when paradigmatic forgiveness is impossible. Furthermore, as the passage from Dostoyevsky demonstrates, morally complicated forgiveness may reveal insights not captured by paradigmatic cases. Even supposed 'failures' of forgiveness may reveal themselves to be subtle and sophisticated methods for balancing competing values of respect, accountability and reconciliation.

## Notes

1. In this paper, I discuss forgiveness from the perspective of gender oppression, but my analysis is potentially applicable to questions of forgiveness in relation to other forms of injustice. For discussions of forgiveness in race relations, please see Howard McGary, 'Forgiveness and Slavery' (McGary and Lawson 1992). See also *Atonement and Forgiveness: A New Model for Black Reparations* by Roy Brooks (2004). A classic discussion of forgiveness in the context of group atrocity remains Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* (1997).

2. While I am largely critical of Murphy's approach to forgiveness, the caution that he and Brudholm employ – and their defense of 'unforgiveness' and resentment – is an important and timely response to the forgiveness mania that swept academia, following the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Murphy 2003, Brudholm 2008). Murphy and those who agree with him see themselves as attacking not the possibility of forgiveness but the *assumption* or the expectation of forgiveness.
3. For further critical discussion of care and other 'feminine' virtues, see Sarah Hoagland's *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Values* (1988) and also Friedman and Card's critical discussions in *Justice and Care* (Held 1995).
4. Interestingly, Exline observes that when men are encouraged to engage empathetically with the wrongdoer (by remembering similar offenses of their own), the gender gap disappears: the gendered difference in forgiving emerges from differing levels of empathy. Women, who were more likely to express empathy from the beginning, did not experience an increase in forgiving behavior when prompted to think of their own past offences; if anything, they were likely to be harsher – hence the disappearance of the gender gap.
5. For a discussion of women and anger, please see Bell, 'Anger, Virtue and Oppression' in this volume.
6. I would be remiss in making this claim if I did not acknowledge that while I describe the majority of mainstream philosophical writings on forgiveness, there are notable – often feminist – exceptions to this trend, including Jean Hampton, Claudia Card and Margaret Walker.
7. Dmitry is caught in a tortuous and complicated love-triangle with Grushenka and his one-time fiancée, Katerina. He is also on trial for murdering his father. I am not a specialist in Dostoyevsky or Russian literature, and I do not pretend to offer an authoritative interpretation of this particular passage in its literary context. What interested me when I first read this passage, however, was how instantly infuriating *and also plausible*, it was. The picture presented of how women and men forgive one another – or relate to each other more generally – is not inconsistent with the narratives reflected in Euro-American popular psychology, self-help books and women's magazines, and even in the examples and thought-experiments found in analytic philosophy on forgiveness.
8. That forgiveness may require deception is not always held as a strike against it. Jean Bethke Elshtain describes forgiveness as (virtuous) 'willed forgetting' and Julia Driver includes forgiveness among a class of virtues she calls 'virtues of ignorance' (Driver 2001, Elshtain 2001): Since I cannot actually be ignorant of what it is I am forgiving, if I am to forgive it, the ignorance involved is intentional.
9. The irony of choosing this passage does not escape me: having advocated for women's voices in philosophical argument, I turn now to a male author, whose fictional male character lectures another male on gender politics, through a series of sweeping and misogynistic generalizations. In one way, I see myself as uncovering the (silenced) female voices in Dostoyevsky – but this could also be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the trend I describe in the mainstream philosophical literature on forgiveness.
10. Nietzsche describes the ascetic ideal (the system of values created by *ressentiment*) in women as 'one more seductive charm, a touch of *morbidezza* in fair flesh, the angelic look of a plump pretty animal' (1967, 97). At various points in his writings, Nietzsche cites women as likely to espouse (and benefit from) a culture of *ressentiment*.
11. It is interesting to note that the definition of forgiveness as 'overcoming resentment', first made famous by Murphy and dominant in the philosophical literature for some time, is actually based on a textual misreading. Murphy claims that he 'follows Bishop Butler' in his definition (1988, 9); in fact, Joseph Butler's sermon's on resentment and forgiveness allow that forgiveness is compatible with a moderate level of resentment. Forgiving means curbing excessive resentment, and limiting one's angry perceptions to what any good person, disinterested in the case, might feel about the wrong (Butler 1949, 143). This definition is obviously amenable to a virtue-ethical analysis. From a feminist or critical perspective, however, the question remains: who is the standard for the 'good' 'disinterested' individual? Defin-

ing anger in terms of a 'disinterested' individual suggests that the individual interests of the resenter cannot themselves function as a warrant for her emotions. If the wrong or injustice is not yet recognized by her moral community (even the otherwise good and disinterested members of it) however, then her anger is not only illegitimate; it is illegible. I see this as a kind of 'moral failure' described by Cheshire Calhoun (1999, 89)

12. Anca Gheaus also discussed the value of ambivalent forgiveness (Gheaus 2009).
13. At the risk of falling into the trap of relying on typical examples of wives forgiving husbands, I was reminded of this point following former New York Governor Eliot Spitzer's prostitution scandal, apology and eventual resignation. At the time, there was a great deal of media attention on the 'ever-forgiving' political spouse – or more accurately, political wife. When I reflect on the situation facing suddenly famous political wives like Silda Wall Spitzer or Clinton or Dina McGreevey (whose husband, former New Jersey Governor James McGreevey resigned after confessing to an affair with a male co-worker), it seems to me that there exists such an expectation of at least *public* forgiveness, any spouse who refused to forgive would make a powerful, even shocking, statement.

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## Chapter 12

# Feminist Political Solidarity

Sally J. Scholz

**Abstract** This article examines some of the conceptual history of collective political action within feminist movements beginning with sisterhood and moving to feminist political solidarity. I argue that feminist political solidarity is built on a commitment by individuals to form a unity in opposition to injustice or oppression. Three moral relations emerge from this understanding of feminist political solidarity: the relation to the cause, the relation among members of the solidary group, and the relation between the solidary group and the larger society. These relations evoke certain obligations and responsibilities which I present and defend. Feminist political solidarity is informed by the particularities of the cause and thus any theoretical account of the moral obligations is necessarily limited, but by looking at these three relations together with a sociological account of transnational feminist political solidarity drawn from Clare Weber's sociological description of the Women's Empowerment Project, a clearer picture of some of the moral requirements of a commitment to feminist political solidarity emerges.

**Keywords** Political solidarity · Mutuality · Activism · Social criticism · Coalitions

One of the primary interests of feminists is developing strategies for collective action to bring about social change. In this article I briefly examine some of the history of the call to solidarity within feminist movements with the aim of highlighting three primary moral relations that emerge from feminist political solidarity. Political solidarity is built on a mutually undertaken collective commitment to a cause in opposition to perceived injustice. As such, three moral relations suggest themselves: the relation to the cause, the relation among members of the solidary group, and the relation between the solidary group and the larger society. In my book, *Political Solidarity*, I offer an extensive discussion of these relations and their incumbent duties as I develop a theory of political solidarity. Here, I explore feminist political solidarity as an instance or application of that framework. Any given instance of

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