

7. Giving Up, Expecting Hope, and Moral Transformation

KATHRYN J. NORLOCK

Summary: Trudy Govier (FR) argues for “conditional unforgivability,” yet avers that we should never give up on a human being. She not only says it is justifiable to take a “hopeful and respectful attitude” toward one’s wrongdoers, she indicates that it is wrong not to; she says it is objectionable to adopt an attitude that any individual is “finally irredeemable” or “could never change,” because such an attitude “anticipates and communicates the worst” (137). Govier’s recommendation to hold a hopeful attitude seems to follow from one’s knowing that an appropriate object of unforgivability is also an agent capable of moral transformation. I appeal to Blake Myers-Schultz’s and Eric Schwitzgebels’ account of knowledge without belief, and Schwitzgebels’ account of attitudes, to argue that a victim’s knowledge that a wrongdoer has the capacities of a moral agent does not entail belief in the possibility that a wrongdoer will exercise those moral capacities, nor does knowledge of a wrongdoer’s moral capacities entail hopeful attitudes toward the prospects of an individual wrongdoer’s moral transformation. I conclude that what victims can hope for should not be that which victims are held to as a moral minimum.

1. Introduction

I first read Trudy Govier’s work on forgiveness fifteen years ago. Her article on “Forgiveness and the Unforgivable” affirmed intuitions I had hesitated to articulate, and provided needed support for work that eventually took the form of my essays for the M.A. degree, my Ph.D. dissertation, and, later, my first monograph. Over the years, I have returned to her compelling work again and again, to agree and to

disagree, to lean on her as a philosophical ally and to question or quarrel with her claims. I'm sure I speak for many of my fellow contributors when I say that her contributions have come to constitute part of the furniture of my mind. In what follows, I move quite a bit of that furniture around and suggest possible improvements to some of its joints, but my arguments should not be taken as reasons to throw it out – something I couldn't do when I rest on it so often. Instead, I aim to engage in the sort of dialectical argumentation that Trudy Govier and I both endorse, occasionally employing minimal adversariality in the course of constructively sorting out our reasons to justify our beliefs.

Trudy Govier argues for the ethical importance of believing that moral transformation is possible for every individual, even unrepentant evildoers. Attitudes that hold anything less than belief in the possibility of others' improvement are "incompatible with moral respect" for other human beings (FR, 137). Hers is a hopeful account of what every person, even one guilty of great crimes, can conceivably do to be a better moral agent. Govier argues that much hope is rational, a sentiment with which I agree (Hope, 240). Yet, when she is advancing the argument that "we should never give up on another human being" (Hope, 140), I find more is required of her readers than agreement with hope's occasional rationality. Govier's suggestion is that it is not only *justifiable* to take and express "a fundamentally hopeful and respectful attitude" toward one's wrongdoers, it is also *objectionable* to adopt an attitude that any individual is "completely and finally irredeemable" or "evil through and through and could never change," because such an attitude "anticipates and communicates the worst" (FR, 137). Govier prescribes an attitude toward even unrepentant wrongdoers that cultivates hope for their moral transformation, implying that giving up hope amounts to a failure to respect them as human moral agents.

But I question whether victims of wrong fail morally when they have no hope for the possibility that wrongdoers will change. In this essay, I clarify the details of Govier's rejection of belief that a wrongdoer *cannot* change, and distinguish the pessimistic belief she rejects from belief that a wrongdoer *will* not change, or that such a change is highly unlikely; the latter beliefs are compatible with what Govier calls "conditional unforgivability" (FR, 102). I analyze Govier's account of belief in moral transformation, and her recommendations with respect to our attitudes toward wrongdoers. At times, it seems Govier argues for a normative expectation which may not necessarily be always available to victims of great harm. "Giving up," depending on what kind of resolution it turns out to be, can be held to be compatible with normative expectations that victims believe in the capacity for moral transformation. I conclude that the complexities inherent in the ethics of expecting victims to cultivate normative attitudes in particular relationships require us to better articulate what attitudes are, and what victims can (and need not) do to cultivate them. I rely on Eric Schwitzgebel's (2013) account of dispositional attitudes to make a case for holding that belief in the logical possibility of moral transformation is consistent with dispositional attitudes of hopelessness or despair. Sometimes it is reasonable to believe in another's commitment to intransigence precisely *because* they have the moral capacities for wrong as well as right.

With Govier, I believe it is both possible and ethical to recommend attitudes, assess attitudes, and expect some to be cultivated by good people. Therefore, in what follows, I do not disagree with Govier's view so much as I develop a clearer picture of the details and ramifications of her view: first, I contextualize Govier's account of the separability of agents from acts, then outline her related view of human nature as capable of moral transformation. I discuss her view of the appropriate

attitudes that others should take toward those in need of transforming—that is, to wrongdoers. I take up her argument that we should never give up on another human being, and I suggest that, at times, Govier bases her account of hopeful attitudes on the possession of beliefs in a way that may risk reducing attitudes to their belief-contents. And I maintain that Eric Schwitzgebel’s (2013) view of dispositional attitudes allows for the moral permissibility of what Govier might consider “giving up” on another human being; I find her account of conditional unforgivability to be compatible with an attitude she may seem to hold *prima facie* to be morally wrong. I conclude with my argument that hopelessness or despairing of a particular wrongdoer’s moral transformation is not even *prima facie* wrong, and I attribute even more moral importance than Govier seems to grant to her own conception of conditional unforgivability, in light of its coherence with dispositional attitudes of hopelessness or giving up on the moral transformation of others.

2. Agents, acts, and moral transformation

I start at our points of agreement; I share Govier’s related views that in principle, individuals are capable of moral transformation, and that it is correct to view human beings as more than, and separate from, their particular acts. What these two claims mean requires some contextualizing. In one way or another, every major contributor to the literature of forgiveness agrees we can separate acts from agents in order to discuss and appraise them. However, the separability of the linguistic concepts of acts and agents is held compatibly with a variety of views regarding the forgivability of individuals. Margaret Holmgren (2012), for example, criticizes retributive theorists who conflate authors of acts with their acts, “and then sit in judgment on the conglomerate” (93), confusing recognition-respect for persons with evaluative respect for their acts (90).

Holmgren, in contrast to retributivists, goes to the extreme of holding that internal attitude-cultivation can be absolutely separable from any facts about the wrongdoer, including whether or not he repents, ‘independent of his wrongful behaviour’ (67). Yet it is difficult for me to understand why, if the latter view is true, cultivation of forgiveness would be necessary. If the wrongness of acts and wrongdoers’ attitudes toward those acts are among the facts that are irrelevant, then there seems nothing to forgive. Reflecting on Holmgren’s analysis prompts me to conclude that the relationship of authors to their acts becomes so unhooked as to be meaningless. This does not sound like an account of forgiveness that most people would understand or accept.

Eve Garrard and David McNaughton (2003) apparently agree with me. Against Holmgren’s view of the absolute separability of acts and agents, which promotes cultivating attitudes only to agents and never to acts, Garrard and McNaughton argue that “her account does not explain what it is to forgive someone for a particular offence” (2003, 8). They reject her “attitude-focused reasons for action,” that is, “reasons for getting oneself into a particular psychological state, in this case the state of having a forgiving attitude” (9). They instead endorse “object-focused reasons,” which “reveal the way in which the relationship that actually holds between the victim and the offender makes a forgiving response appropriate” (9). Object-focused forgiveness seems a preferable account to Holmgren’s, more consistent with the reasons people tend to forgive or withhold forgiveness; that is, they forgive because they have been wronged. Victims are not incidental to evil acts; they are victims because of what has been done to them. However, Garrard and McNaughton’s object-focused account swings too far in the other direction from ignoring acts altogether; their emphasis on attending to “the relationship that actually holds” turns out to be rather close-up, eyes trained on the wrong act in that relationship. The object on which to focus was presumably

the relationship, but the wrongdoing seems to be the sole salient fact about the relationship that Garrard and McNaughton consider. In other words, whereas Holmgren's attitude-focused account of forgiveness ignores acts to focus on agents, Garrard and McNaughton's object-focused approach errs in the direction of over-attentiveness to the wrongdoer's act as the most important aspect of a relationship to the exclusion of other considerations, taking a close look at one thread and losing sight of the fabric that usually makes up relationships between two or more individuals.

Govier's account of the separability of agents and acts seems to hit a more plausible middle ground between these two positions. Like Holmgren, Govier persistently calls her readers' attentions to the "person whom we forgive as a human being not reducible to those deeds and capable of something better" (FR, 110). She keeps firmly in view that those who commit atrocious deeds are properly candidates for responsive attitudes precisely because they are "human beings whose past lives have included evil," but this is not the only fact about them in the relationship that actually holds; the same wrongdoers to whom victim stand in relation are also those "whose future lives are open to new choices" (112). Govier repeats this emphatically: human beings are individual moral agents "capable of deliberation, choice, and originality" (111). Govier's priority of attention to our individuality keeps her from zeroing in on the act to the exclusion of the person. She argues for the logical relationship of agents and acts simultaneously with arguing for their thick contexts, saying, "When we forgive, we distinguish that person, the agent, from the acts, however terrible those acts might have been. There is a logical and ethical distinction between the acts and the agent who committed them" (110).

Govier therefore resists "the idea of absolute unforgivability" (FR, 120). As she understands it, absolute unforgivability is constituted by a view that no conditions

could make it the case that a person currently unforgivable could be a forgivable person in the future. She rejects arguments for fixedness of character; whatever we hold to be true of an unforgivable person capable of moral agency can alter if they commit to moral change. One could argue against this position that it is acts which are unforgivable, but Govier's position is that "we do not forgive deeds; we forgive people who have committed deeds" (109). We may talk of unforgivable acts in colloquial senses, but she persuasively argues "that description is misleading, because it is not deeds that would be forgiven or not forgiven" (109). We may read popular press accounts of someone guilty of murder described as a monster; however, if the person under discussion is a moral agent, then "there is not a compelling argument from the monstrous character of acts to the conclusion that the agent is a monster" (111). We know the past, but we do not know what the future of this person holds. We can ascertain their capacities for choice and deliberation, and when we find them, we ought to recognize that we do not know the future. We do not know all the choices even unrepentant evildoers may come to make. As Govier says in her work on hope, it is impossible to falsify the claim that there's always some basis for hope, but we can also hope for more than just the abstractly possible; "hope can be reasonable and based on arguments for the possibility or probability of distinct positive outcomes" (Hope, 242).

Govier concludes in her reasonable and argument-based way that moral agents are capable of "moral transformation," a variety of moral change based on our capacity "to repent and reform ourselves, and to change our moral character" (FR, 186n23). If one did wrong due to circumstances, one can change one's circumstances or others could take responsibility for changing the circumstances. If one did wrong due to one's decisions and choices, then one can effectively commit to different decisions and choices. "Among the many capacities and habits that human beings can cultivate is the ability to

reflect on the merits of what they are doing and work to change some of their actions and tendencies” (123). Govier’s arguments for moral transformation amount to arguments for the metaphysics of personhood itself; “A person has... the present capacity to perceive, feel, think, reflect on his past actions and life, make fresh decisions and commitments, and seek to conform his *future* actions to those fresh resolves” (125).

Her account of personhood shows why Govier is “committed to the universal possibility of moral transformation,” and rejects absolute unforgivability. Because of what persons *are*, one can reasonably believe that there is something persons can *do*. “There are, then, many routes to moral transformation. Central to it will be the support of other people, and a philosophical pillar of that support is a grounded conviction that for moral agents, fundamental moral change is possible” (137). Govier recommends that we can and should believe in the possibility of moral transformation. Believing this is compatible, she adds, with “conditional unforgivability,” the view that current conditions hold which, if removed, would permit forgiveness (102). Since her account of forgiveness involves distinguishing an agent from his acts, one example of a conditionally unforgivable person is the unrepentant evildoer who strongly identifies *with* his wrong acts. Were he to change, to renounce his wrongdoing and express a new conviction that he ought to cultivate a different character, this would remove the conditions that make the person difficult to forgive (103).

3. Knowing, believing, and cultivating attitudes in giving up on another

These arguments for belief in the possibility of moral transformation and against belief in absolute unforgivability are compellingly established by Govier, who concludes that “[w]e should never give up on another

human being” (140). Attitudes that hold anything less than belief in the possibility of others’ improvement are “incompatible with moral respect” for other human beings; adopting the attitude that some “could never change is to anticipate and communicate the worst” (137). Interestingly, Govier holds that even if her metaphysical commitments to personhood are arguable, even if one can imagine counterexamples such as, say, “sane individuals who are impossible projects for moral transformation,” her commitment to moral transformation’s “possibility could [still] be defended on moral grounds alone” (137).

Victims of serious wrongdoing may not expect this ethical recommendation, and may have feelings of pessimism and disbelief in others already settled; if so, it is important to note that Govier argues victims, like offenders, “are distinct moral agents responsible for their own emotions and their own lives. In the wake of wrongdoing, it is up to victims to handle their own feelings and their own lives” (65). One may have some involuntary emotions about one’s suffering at the hands of a wrongdoer, but for Govier, even if some emotions and beliefs are involuntary, it is not the case that all of our emotional experiences are involuntary. I am tempted to resist her suggestion that victims bear responsibility for how they feel, except that in the preceding pages of this article I happily endorsed the arguments that wrongdoers can commit to different convictions and attitudes regarding their own characters and acts. If wrongdoers can change their characters, attitudes, and relationships, then we should be open to the argument that victims of great harm can take some steps toward deciding to adopt morally respectful attitudes. Attitudes can be both decisional and proper objects of evaluation, as Govier says: “Any decision about attitudes, policies, and actions towards perpetrators is a decision about how to regard and treat human beings and must be evaluated as such” (FR, 112).

I agree with Govier that for the above reasons, it is, at a minimum, justifiable to adopt “a fundamentally hopeful and respectful attitude” toward one’s wrongdoers, and it is reasonable to recommend that victims of wrongdoing who do not have such an attitude would be morally better actors were they to cultivate such an attitude toward those who wrong them. I am persuaded that it is good to remember that even monstrous deeds can be committed by persons capable of moral change, and that we all probably ought to cultivate attitudes which recognize the capacities of our wrongdoers to be and do better. However, I cannot endorse the view that it is *objectionable* to adopt an attitude that a particular individual is “completely and finally irredeemable” or “evil through and through and could never change,” and I am not convinced of the relationship between this attitude and the predictive expectation reflected in Govier’s statement that the hopeless attitude “anticipates and communicates the worst” (137).

I agree with Govier’s account of personhood as entailing capability for moral transformation, and I see why she argues that we can sensibly recommend victims ought to know such true metaphysical propositions about personhood. I agree that we can even argue victims are wrong to believe something we have grounds to say is false, such as the claim that a wrongdoer’s moral transformation is metaphysically impossible. However, I would not go so far as to say that victims fail morally when they adopt pessimistic or hopeless attitudes about the prospects of their wrongdoer’s moral change. One may have knowledge without belief, one may have correct and true beliefs which are not the basis of a particular attitude, and one may have attitudes which are predicated on attitudinal content in conflict with those true beliefs. To defend the distinction between a victim’s knowledge of a proposition, a victim’s belief in a proposition, and a victim’s attitude toward a person, I rely on Blake Myers-Schultz’s and Eric Schwitzgebel’s co-authored account of

knowledge without belief (2013). I then turn to Schwitzgebel's account of dispositional attitudes "outside the belief box" (2013).

Myers-Schultz and Schwitzgebel cite Gilbert Ryle's account of 'know' and 'believe' as "dispositional verbs of quite disparate types. 'Know' is a capacity verb, and a capacity verb of that special sort that is used for signifying that the person described can bring things off, or get things right. 'Believe,' on the other hand, is a tendency verb and one which does not connote that anything is brought off or got right" (quoted in Myers-Schultz and Schwitzgebel 2013). Myers-Schultz and Schwitzgebel provide empirical evidence that respondents to thought experiments consistently distinguish between the same agent knowing P and (not) believing P. They conclude, "it is not *prima facie* obvious that all instances of knowledge are also instances of belief;" instead, "it is as though knowledge requires only having the information stored somewhere and available to be deployed to guide action, while belief requires some consistency in deploying the information (at least dispositionally or counterfactually)" (2013). Knowledge of a true proposition can be on or off. The proposition is true, or it is false. It does not appear that belief follows propositional knowledge so inevitably that one can be held responsible for failing at belief, however. If knowledge does not entail belief, then at times, the knowledge-switch will be set to 'on' while the belief falters.

Belief in the moral transformative powers of unrepentant evildoers starts to sound more like a virtue or an imperfect duty, a view with which I suspect Govier agrees, but which bears further investigation regarding the incompatibility of disbelief with moral respect for all persons. My efforts in the first half of this paper were dedicated to establishing Govier's excellent arguments for a metaphysics of personhood which support the proposition that moral transformation is possible for individual human beings with moral agency. I agree with

the veracity of her view so much that I consider it safe to say I know it to be true: If moral agents are equal to the set of just those individuals capable of moral transformation, then I know moral agents are capable. This is a statement of equivalence packed with moral import, because its content is too tempting to ignore when one is in pain. If one is morally wronged, then one's wrongdoer is, by definition, capable of moral transformation. Yet even as I know that, I am inclined to agree with Myers-Schultz and Schwitzgebel that knowledge does not entail belief, that the former may be a propositional bit of information while the latter reflects "a tendency to succeed" (Myers-Schultz 2013). To believe is to carry one's knowledge forward into situations; it is to bring it off, to get its application right in the presence of competing information. If so, then a failure to believe what I know is not a moral failure. A prescription regarding what victims ought to believe amounts to a recommendation to carry forward a practice which it is not entirely up to victims to succeed at tending to do; more importantly, it is not a moral failure in one's respect for personhood, which one can know one ought to bear, regardless of what one believes over time.

For related reasons, attitudes are difficult to contain in inner landscapes; as Schwitzgebel says, "To have an attitude is, at root, to live a certain way... It is to have, in general though probably only imperfectly, a certain profile of outward behavior and inner experience, ... to embody a certain broad-ranging actual and counterfactual pattern of activity and reactivity" (2013). Attitudes are not internal representations written in a "Belief Box," Schwitzgebel says, but come with postures and patterns of behavior in the world, and he argues this account for both propositional attitudes (in the set of which he includes believing and hoping) and reactive attitudes (in the set of which he includes resenting, forgiving, and being angry). If knowledge does not entail belief, then belief does not entail appropriate attitudes, and Schwitzgebel rejects as 'misleading' the view that an attitude is "a matter

of possessing some particular internally stored representational content, a content perhaps poised to play some specific set of cognitive roles depending on the attitude type.” Instead of holding that to have an attitude is to have a relationship to a belief, Schwitzgebel argues that to have an attitude is to have, “though probably only imperfectly, a certain profile of outward behavior and inner experience... to embody a certain broad-ranging actual and counterfactual pattern of activity and reactivity” (2013).

I do not imagine that Govier would disagree overmuch with this description of attitudes, as correlative and not coextensive with one’s knowledge and one’s beliefs, in light of Govier’s brief but sensitive depiction of *conditional unforgivability*. Her view of this attitude appears to be entirely compatible with the way that Schwitzgebel characterizes attitudes:

There are indeed enormous psychological and moral obstacles to the forgiveness of very serious wrongs. These obstacles stem both from the appalling nature of those wrongs and from the cruel suffering of the victims. When atrocities are committed, the insults to humanity and moral principles is profound and deeply disturbing. In such a context, it is difficult to gain a sense of the wrongdoer as a person, difficult to comprehend how anyone could do such things... It may be virtually impossible for ‘ordinary people’ to feel empathy with such offenders – even though there is in the end some basis of common humanity. We may rightly regard a perpetrator as conditionally unforgivable if that perpetrator has not acknowledged, and does not morally regret, the wrongdoing... Failure to forgive perpetrators in these circumstances expresses our conviction that those acts, and any person still identified with them, are profoundly evil. To deny sympathy and empathy to such perpetrators, to wish to disassociate ourselves from them and avoid any implication that we might

condone those acts is an understandable human response. (FR, 117-118)

In this passage, Govier's account of conditional unforgivability is entirely consistent with Schwitzgebel's account of dispositional attitudes; patterns of activity and reactivity are understood in a context in which a particular victim responds to a particular wrongdoer.

However, it now seems that a victim with the attitude of conditional unforgivability is not doing something objectionable; holding an attitude that someone is conditionally unforgivable seems highly compatible with the reasoning of a victim of atrocity who knows that persons are capable of moral transformation, but does not, at this time, believe *this* wrongdoer capable of it. The attitude that the perpetrator of an atrocity is hopelessly committed to unrepentant disregard, and offers one no prospects for believing otherwise, no longer seems to "presume that he is nothing more – and is worth nothing more – than his wrongful deeds," even if the victim does assume that a particular unrepentant is never going to change (FR, 64). It seems unreasonable of us to expect hope from a victim of wrongdoing that a particularly unrepentant evildoer will exercise capacities for moral transformation. The knowledge that he *can* change does not entail that it is false to believe that he will never change, or to adopt an attitude that it is hopeless, that one's ongoing ways of living in the world simply cannot include the unrepentant evildoer. As Margaret Urban Walker (2006) says, hope can "die the natural death of exhaustion in the face of waning possibilities," and can even be killed (59). Walker identifies "hope's points of vulnerability," including "the real possibility (non-zero probability, less than certainty) of what is hoped for" (60), and here I take her to include not only normative expectations that humans can act as moral agents, but predictive expectations as well.

Govier's moral grounds for rejecting absolute unforgivability rest rightly on metaphysical accounts of personhood as well as normative expectations that we correctly hold people responsible for acting as we know they can and should. The practices of belief and attitude, however, are concrete and specific to particular relationships with individual wrongdoers, and one that announces his commitment to carry on unrepentantly wishing he'd finished the job of killing a victim's family gives the victim evidence of waning possibilities. The belief that all humans are capable of moral transformation, the normative expectation based on a reliable proposition, can in particular cases be held compatibly with adopting an attitude that an actual, particular wrongdoer is never going to change. I hold this is not a failure of respect for his moral agency. Instead, it is a dispositional attitude that informs the way this victim lives in the world; it may take the form of disassociating with this person, denying him sympathy, or refusing condonation of his acts, because of one's predictive expectations and not one's normative expectations. What I am attempting to describe is a form of relational hopelessness which gives up on another human being, not because one no longer believes he has capacities, but because one sees no prospects that he will exercise them in one's lifetime. What we can hope for is not that which we should be held to as a moral minimum.

4. Conclusion: Believing in, while giving up

What do we do when we give up on another human being? I mean that literally: What do we *do*? Our actions informed by adopting a despairing attitude toward the moral transformation of an individual are hard to distinguish from the actions Govier describes as justifiable in the context of conditional unforgivability. Imagine that I despair of former U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney ever coming around to seeing that his conduct and priorities are

morally bad. He is not getting any younger, and in fact is closer to the average age of death than I am. He routinely continues to appear on television broadcasts and oppose everything from conservation of electricity to feeding starving people. My responses to him include avoiding his broadcasts, expressing rejection of his views, and denying him the sympathy that I give to others. Am I conditionally despairing of him, while retaining a belief in his potential for moral change? I do not believe my attitude toward him is a failure of moral respect for his personhood. I believe that I have powerful predictive expectations that he will never change because he offers me a wealth of experience and evidence. I despair of improvement in my attitude toward him, but I know that he is a capable moral agent. If I didn't know and believe this, I would not resent his continued broadcasting of his views as much as I do. Yet I pronounce myself a believer in the proposition that he will never change in the short time left to him on this earth. I adopt an attitude which ceases to look toward the future.

I do not intend the forgoing to amount to a recommendation for hopelessness with respect to the prospects of all wrongdoers' moral capacities. With Govier, I believe that a receptivity to the possibilities of living together in the future is key to peace. However, I do not believe the forward-looking attitude of hopefulness that others will exercise their moral capacities is always necessary. Optimistic beliefs and hopeful attitudes are not always necessary for moral motivation, and indeed, some philosophers argue for a healthy pessimism that looks away from predictive expectations in order to focus on other goods. One firmly endorsed view of pessimism does not look to outcomes or progress, and instead "asks us to philosophize in its absence" (Dienstag 2009, 18). My own sentiments are captured in the statement that "peacemaking is always specific" (Ruddick 1995, 139). Our attitudes toward a particular evildoer

occur alongside our attitudes toward how we are living with others and with ourselves. What we know, believe and hope may all promote our abilities to continue the perpetual struggle.