

Forgiveness: Overcoming versus Forswearing Blame

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ABSTRACT *Philosophers often identify forgiveness with either overcoming or forswearing blaming attitudes such as, paradigmatically, resentment for the right reasons; yet there is little debate as to which of the two (if either) is correct. In this article, I present three arguments that aim to strengthen the forswearing view. First, on the overcoming view, many paradigm cases of forgiveness would turn out to be mere ‘letting go’ instead. Second, only the forswearing view plausibly allows for forgiveness in cases where the victim lost resentment before she had a reason to forgive. Third, only the forswearing view can show why victims of an offense are usually able to know whether they are in a position to forgive.*

1. Introduction

Forgiveness is often identified with either *overcoming* or *forswearing* blaming attitudes such as, paradigmatically, resentment for the right reasons; yet there is little explicit debate as to which of the two is correct or more plausible. Sometimes, philosophers use both notions interchangeably. And while at other times only one of these notions is used, this choice is never explicitly defended. This sentiment is epitomized in Peter Strawson’s famous lone assertion that ‘to forgive is to accept the repudiation and to forswear the resentment’.¹ Thus, an explicit treatment of this question has yet to be provided. This is the aim of this article.

I shall argue that forgiving means forswearing blame for the right reasons, that is, making a moderately effective forward-looking commitment not to blame. Of course, in many cases, overcoming blame greatly facilitates successfully making the relevant commitment. If I am right, however, such overcoming is not constitutive for forgiveness.

Talk of forswearing or overcoming suitable blaming attitudes is everywhere,² which is why the issue should not be side-lined. What is more, forswearing and overcoming are undoubtedly not equivalent mental processes. It is possible to overcome blame simply by blaming less. In this sense, ‘overcoming resentment’ is, at bottom, a first-order description of a person’s fading blame. Forswearing, on the other hand, is essentially second-order. It is an attitude that a forgiver adopts towards her blaming attitudes. Given that the issue is prominent and that both notions are distinct, the time is rife for an explicit discussion of the issue.

Before delving into the thick of things, let me use this introduction to adopt a slightly more aerial perspective in situating my project in the wider array of theories of forgiveness. These theories are sometimes categorized into theories of ‘forgiveness from the heart’ and theories of ‘performative forgiveness’.³ According to the former family of views, forgiveness can be fully achieved privately. According to the latter family of views, most forcefully defended by Brandon Warmke, forgiveness is only peripherally related to private attitudes

such as resentment.⁴ Instead, forgiveness is seen as the exercise of a normative power that changes the normative relations between victim and offender⁵: in forgiving, the victim gives up certain rights (e.g. to demand an apology) and releases the offender from a range of obligations (e.g. to apologize). On Warmke's view, the exercise of this normative power involves a declarative act.⁶ More precisely, the norms governing the offender–victim relation are altered in virtue of a declaration by the victim that signifies that the offender is forgiven.⁷ Again, the difference between these two ways of thinking is rather pronounced in that only forgiveness from the heart, but not performative forgiveness, can be achieved privately. Private forgiveness does not require declarations or communication. Adjudicating between these two views is beyond the scope of this article, and in what follows, I will simply assume that forgiveness can be achieved privately.

Lastly, it has sometimes been argued that forgiveness can be unconditional.⁸ Anyone who espouses such a view might think that the ensuing discussion relies on the false premise that forgiveness, by its nature, happens for certain reasons. In light of the existence of such views, I would like to point out that Garrard and McNaughton's set goal is to show that the appropriateness and possibility of forgiveness is *independent of the perpetrator's actions or attitudes*. It is in this sense that forgiveness is argued to be unconditional. In contrast, Garrard and McNaughton agree that forgiveness cannot be given for what they call 'attitude focused reason[s]'; for instance, because forgiving would make one feel better. 'Unconditional forgiveness', in this sense, is not intended to mean 'not dependent on any specific reasons'. Instead, it means something like 'independent of the perpetrator's actions and attitudes' (e.g. their penance). Similarly, Giannini argues that forgiveness can be 'unconditional', but further defines this as 'forgiveness in the absence of the wrongdoer's repentance'.¹⁰ Forgiveness, on this view, is grounded in 'hope for the wrongdoer'.¹¹ Here, again, 'unconditional forgiveness' is not intended to mean 'not dependent on any reasons'. In the present article, I shall not commit to any particular view of the right reasons to forgive. Instead, I shall simply assume that forgiveness requires the presence of some reasons, whatever they turn out to be. In particular, I shall not presume that forgiveness must happen because the perpetrator has done certain things or has undergone a change of heart.

The article develops as follows. Section 2 explains the notions of overcoming and forswearing, and their relation to forgiveness, in greater detail. Section 3 illustrates the dependence of forgiveness on reasons. Sections 4 to 6 present three arguments in favor of the forswearing view. Section 7 provides a more detailed discussion of the forswearing view.

2. Overcoming and Forswearing Resentment

Forgiveness is often *identified* with the moderation or elimination of blaming attitudes such as, paradigmatically, resentment for the right reasons.¹² This is a bold claim, and it is sometimes stated more cautiously that forgiveness merely *crucially implicates* overcoming such attitudes;¹³ but this is really an understatement. Authors such as Griswold and Murphy think that overcoming resentment is not just one necessary condition for forgiving. Rather, it is what forgiveness is *about*. It is its aim.¹⁴

This might be a good place to say just a little bit about the nature of the blaming attitudes that forgiveness is said to overcome or forswear. According to a popular view, this

attitude is resentment. Resentment is a form of moral anger which is felt as a kind of heat that is constituted, in part, by bodily states such as an increased heart rate and increased skin conductance. These bodily causes are sometimes called *arousal states*. The action tendency of such moral anger, as almost everybody agrees, is *retaliation*.¹⁵ Lastly, being a form of anger, resentment appraises its object in a negative way. On a popular view, this valence is best described as the ‘seeming badness’ of its object.¹⁶

This description does not yet account for the specifically *moral* character of resentment. Someone who hits her feet on a rock might well get angry at the rock, but she will not, at least not in normal cases, resent the rock for being in her way. Resentment is a ‘cognitively sharpened’ emotion that embeds a moral judgment.¹⁷ Cognitively sharpened moral emotions such as contempt, resentment, and moral disappointment are negatively valenced in two ways. On the one hand, their non-moral counterparts (i.e. disgust, anger, and disappointment) are negatively valenced in their own right, yet their negative valence is not, by itself, a form of *moral appraisal*. The cognitively sharpened forms of these emotions on the other hand embed additional *moral appraisal*. In the case of moral anger, a moral judgment about its object’s conduct is embedded. Such moralized anger is experienced as indignation (when third-party-directed), resentment (when directed against a person who wronged us), or guilt (when self-directed).¹⁸

In the philosophical literature on forgiveness, we can find further explications of this judgment component that was illustrated schematically just above. Pamela Hieronymi, for instance, treats resentment as an attitude that ‘protests [the offender’s] action as a present threat’.¹⁹ Letting go of resentment is concomitantly characterized as overcoming such protest.²⁰ Alternatively, Charles Griswold argues that resentment is not just a moralized form of *anger*. Instead, giving up resentment requires giving up a host of negative moral emotions such as ‘moral anger, [...] scorn [and] contempt’.²¹ Ultimately, it may seem plausible that forgiveness seeks to overcome or forswear *blame* quite generally, and that negative moral emotions are mere instances of this general claim.²² I shall adopt this broad focus on blame simply to remain as neutral as possible, but resort to resentment (as a paradigmatic manifestation of blame) when presenting specific examples and vignettes.

Now, as indicated above, *overcoming* blame merely requires²³ first-order psychological processes. When we know that a person has overcome her blame, we know that she has less of it, i.e. that it has subsided. *Forswearing*, on the other hand, is a second-order ‘deliberate act’ that takes one’s first-order blame as its content.²⁴ Murphy and Hampton state that forswearing is the ‘*resolute* overcoming’ of negative emotions.²⁵ The same sentiment is captured by Pettigrove who argues that forswearing involves a ‘commitment’ not to ‘nurture a grudge’.²⁶ These remarks all point in the same direction. Forswearing is a type of mental act – a resolution, decision, or commitment – whose aim is to make the absence of resentment permanent.

Beyond these somewhat cursory remarks, the notion of ‘forswearing’ is not usually subject to further explication and analysis. In many cases, the forswearing language is simply used without explanation. For instance, Strawson simply asserts, but does not discuss, that ‘to forgive is to accept the repudiation and to *forswear* the resentment’.²⁷ In many cases, overcoming and forswearing are mentioned in a single stroke²⁸ without a clarifying discussion of how these attitudes differ and why both are appropriate. Thus, Hughes and Warmke conclude that ‘the difference between overcoming and forswearing (or renouncing) some attitude is not usually made explicit’.²⁹ In what follows, I will adopt the commitment idiom. *Forswearing blame is a commitment not to blame*.

This idea needs further specification. Not every commitment not to blame is compatible with forgiveness. A victim who commits to the attenuation of blame, but who is nevertheless filled with it, has not forgiven, as the following vignette illustrates:

Humiliation. My good friend humiliates me in front of my colleagues. After a long talk with my friend, he later comes to see how bad his action had been. He sees that he betrayed my trust and promises to never do such a thing again. Thinking of my friend's apology, I come to judge that I should forgive my friend for the offense. In light of my friend's apology, I deem my lingering resentment to be inappropriate and commit to working on its attenuation. Unfortunately, seeing my colleagues at work serves as a constant reminder of my friend's betrayal. Rather than subside, my resentment towards him seems to grow stronger by the day. Frequent resentful thoughts and angry feelings take hold of me, which is why I withdraw from the friendship altogether.

Of course, I have not forgiven my friend for his offense. Quite the opposite! My commitment to the attenuation of my resentment does nothing to change that. I want to forgive him but simply cannot. Our definition of forswearing, if it is to be used in defining forgiveness, should respect this intuition. We started with the idea that forswearing blame is a commitment not to blame; given what was said just above, we should modify this idea and state that forswearing is a (moderately)³⁰ *effective* commitment.

Forswearing Blame =_{DF} A moderately effective, forward-looking commitment not to blame, that is, in paradigmatic cases, not to be resentful.

Introducing the idea of an *effective* commitment may look like cheating. After all, a commitment not to blame is effective only if the person who makes it also overcomes her blame. As a result, distinguishing between forswearing and overcoming blame may seem like a distinction without a difference. This is not so. First, although many of those who successfully forswear blame might have to overcome it first, others might successfully forswear blame without having blamed in the first place. In short, overcoming, but not forswearing, presupposes earlier blame. A father whose child lied about her grades might forswear blame without ever having blamed his child to begin with. Second, forswearing blame is a forward-looking notion, i.e. it precludes future blame. Overcoming blame, in contrast, is not forward-looking. It marks forgiveness as the end of a process. Third, forswearing, unlike overcoming, means committing, which, as I have discussed above, is a second-order attitude. Fourth, and most importantly, although forswearing blame may require overcoming it, the forswearing theory of forgiveness does not require that blame be overcome *for the right reasons*. I will elaborate this point further in the following sections.

3. Forgiving for Reasons

Not every way to either overcome or forswear blame is compatible with forgiveness. For instance, a victim who forgets about the offense, and thereby ceases to blame, has not forgiven. Something different is required. Much of the philosophical debate on forgiveness can be understood as an attempt to properly constrain this process by giving an account of the reasons for which one can and cannot forgive. Murphy, for instance, lists five types

of reasons to forgive: repentance or change of heart, the fact that the offender meant well, that she has suffered enough, has undergone humiliation, or simply for old times' sake.³¹ Others have appealed to the offender's 'good intentions',³² to the elimination of a threat posed by the offender,³³ to solidarity,³⁴ or the offender's expression of remorse.³⁵

In this article, I will not take sides in this debate. For our purposes, it will be enough to extract a desideratum from the discussions about the proper reasons to forgive. Those philosophers who agree that forgiveness consists in either overcoming or forswearing blame also agree that forgiveness must happen for a narrow set of quite specific reasons, e.g. the offender's perceived change of heart, solidarity, or the elimination of a moral threat. Importantly, abandoning blame as a result of either justifying,³⁶ excusing,³⁷ or condoning³⁸ the putatively wrongful act is not compatible with forgiveness. This was forcefully argued in Hieronymi's seminal piece 'Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness' and many have either followed suit or anticipated her view.³⁹ With this desideratum in hand – that forgiveness must happen for a narrow set of specific reasons – I would like to focus on the *role* that the right reasons are thought to play in forgiving.

Intuitively, forgiving *for* certain reasons means that the perception of the right reasons (e.g. an apology) bears on, or causes, whatever psychological state or process one deems relevant for forgiveness. On the overcoming account of forgiveness, the perception of the right reasons should bear on one's overcoming blame. On the forswearing account, the perception of the right reasons should bear on one's forswearing blame.

This piece of conceptual analysis is mirrored in the literature. Hieronymi, who defends a version of the overcoming account, emphasizes that forgiveness requires that 'an apology *brings about* a change in view or revision in judgment that allows one to forgo resentment'.⁴⁰ Griswold states that forgiveness is 'letting go of resentment *for* moral reasons'.⁴¹ Alternatively, Murphy gives voice to the way friends of the forswearing account would think about the connection between reasons to forgive and the mental state that forgiveness aims at: 'Forgiveness is [...] forswearing resentment on moral grounds'.⁴²

Taking into account these observations about the role reasons play in forgiving, we can finally state two views⁴³ of forgiveness whose plausibility will be scrutinized in the critical sections of this article:

The Overcoming View of Forgiveness

Forgiving consists in overcoming blaming attitudes such as, paradigmatically, resentment for the right reasons.

The Forswearing View of Forgiveness

Forgiving consists in a moderately effective, forward-looking commitment, made for the right reasons, not to blame, that is, in paradigmatic cases, not to be resentful.

Let me be clear, these are claims about the nature of forgiveness; claims about what forgiveness is. It is, of course, true that those who forgive often do both: they cease to blame and commit to its continued absence. Such co-extensionality, however, is insufficient to sort out the metaphysical question about the nature of forgiveness. More importantly yet, although most of those who forswear blame may need to overcome it first, and although those who have overcome blame may often go on to forswear it, these

concomitant processes may or may not happen *for the right reasons*. For instance, if the forswearing view is correct, then someone may cease to blame *for any reason whatsoever* and still forgive, if her commitment is made for the right reasons. If, in contrast, the overcoming view is correct, then forgiveness requires not just overcoming blame, but instead overcoming it *for the right reasons*. This insight will be important for the three arguments presented in the next sections. These arguments are designed to weaken the overcoming view, and strengthen the forswearing view, mainly by showing that ‘overcoming blame for the right reasons’ cannot be a necessary condition for forgiveness.

4. Argument 1: Expiration

Suppose you were wronged and, as a result, harbor grave resentment towards your offender. Luckily, your anger quickly subsides naturally until, two weeks later, all your negative emotions have faded entirely. Another week later, the offender shows up and issues a sincere and heartfelt apology. Surely, your negative emotions did not fade *for the right reasons*. When your resentment faded, you did not even know about the offender’s remorse. Forswearing resentment – i.e. making the relevant commitment – for the right reasons, however, continues to be possible. Of the two views under consideration, only the forswearing account of forgiveness can accommodate this possibility. On the overcoming account, forgiveness has an expiration date that is marked by the date when blaming attitudes such as resentment are lost.

Putting an expiration date on forgiveness is implausible. First, it is at odds with our pretheoretical intuitions. Second, the right reasons to forgive can still do meaningful moral work, even if the victim has long lost her resentment. To see this, consider the following case:

Inattentive Husband. Marty was an inattentive and often disrespectful husband to Maggie. For instance, while they were married, he would routinely get drunk with his colleagues even when he had promised to come home instead. And when this happened, and Maggie later asked him where he had been, he would tell her to ‘shut up’ and to mind her own business. In general, he did not treat her cordially. He would belittle her in front of others for not having a ‘real job’ and would generally not take her wishes into consideration as legitimate concerns. Finally, Maggie left him and remarried soon after. Ten years later, Marty finally comes to see how wrong his behavior had been, judging that he shirked his responsibility to treat her with respect and love. So he decides to apologize to her and ask for forgiveness. Maggie’s resentment, however, was short-lived and had long subsided. She accepts his apology and forgives him.

When Maggie lost her resentment, she did not possess any of the right reasons to forgive. On a plausible elaboration of this case, it may have been sheer psychological resilience that caused her to overcome her resentment (and, in this case, her blame). Although she has not forgotten about what happened, she might simply not go in for blame anymore. The overcoming view would simply render forgiveness impossible. After all, forgiveness, as I have been assuming, must happen for the right reasons, and Maggie did not overcome her resentment for such reasons. Intuitively, however, forgiveness remains a possibility, and it is easy to see why. Even if Maggie has long overcome her resentment,

there is still more for the right reasons *to do*: in light of these reasons, she can still forswear future resentment (and other blaming attitudes). This is something that Marty has an interest in – presumably, it is the reason why he asked for forgiveness in the first place – and it is also something that Maggie might be ready to grant, recognizing Marty’s sincere apology.⁴⁴

A critic may object that Maggie’s resentment may have been largely dispositional throughout all these years. The fact that she has undergone few emotional *episodes* leaves intact the possibility of mere *dispositional* resentment on her part. Elaborating the details of the case in this way is of course one possibility and may resemble a host of real-life cases. A different elaboration, however, according to which her resentment had been fully overcome prior to the apology, is also a real-life possibility. Experimental research on human emotional resilience – our capacity to overcome emotionally disruptive events psychologically and physically – strongly suggests that emotional adjustment is often surprisingly quick, thorough, and brought about by a brute, reasoning-insensitive mechanism.⁴⁵ In the context of many real-life cases that resemble ‘Inattentive Husband’, emotional resilience may well explain why a victim ceased to blame. But we would not want to deny the possibility of forgiveness in these cases; and we do not have to. As indicated just above, despite the fact that Maggie’s resentment had long faded, the right reasons to forgive still have an important role to play: they provide the basis for her forward-looking commitment not to be resentful.

Could a slightly amended version of the overcoming theory accommodate examples such as ‘Inattentive Husband’? The idea could be this: when Maggie learns about Marty’s apology, she acquires a reason to forgive. Although this reason played no role in her overcoming blame – she did not have it when she overcame her blame – this reason *is* causally relevant in *maintaining* the absence of blame. This ‘maintenance theory of forgiveness’, as it were, would preserve much of the spirit of the overcoming theory in that it operates entirely on a first-order level. This proposal will not work, for the following reason: acquiring a reason, R, for an attitude, A, that the agent held even before acquiring R, does not thereby make R a reason on the basis of which A is held. To see this, consider the following analogy: Joe’s table has four legs, all of which are necessary to keep it from collapsing. One day, Joe acquires a spare leg on eBay which he plans to use if one of the table’s four legs were to break. So far, however, none of the original legs broke, which is why Joe stores the spare leg in a living room cabinet. As long as the leg is not installed, it does not causally contribute to the table not collapsing; it is not a reason, as it were, for which the table is held upright. Analogously, Maggie’s newly acquired reason, constituted by Marty’s apology, *may* play a causal role in explaining why she continues not to blame Marty. It may, however, just be a ‘spare leg’ which would become active if she were to lose one of her other reasons. Thus, Maggie’s new reason may merely become dispositionally causally active in maintaining the absence of blame. In this case, the continued absence of blame would not be based on the right reasons.⁴⁶ The forswearing theory, however, can easily make sense of Maggie’s newly acquired reason and its relevance to forgiveness. It is a reason for which she can commit to blame’s continued absence. This commitment would then play its role, say, in her monitoring her current attitudes such that it would become causally active, aiming to curb resurfacing blaming attitudes, were they to flare up. In Section 7, I will come back to this issue and provide further details on the structure and strength of the relevant commitment.

5. Argument 2: Causal Structures

Let us proceed with the second argument against the overcoming account of forgiveness. If would-be forgivers must overcome their blame for the right reasons, then many paradigm cases of forgiveness turn out to be mere letting go instead. Let me illustrate this with a rather detailed vignette:

Valentina. Valentina and Martin met in Barcelona when they were both 18 years old. It was their senior year of high school. Martin lived in Barcelona as an exchange student. They had been going out for about six months when, one night, Valentina got quite drunk and asked Martin to escort her home. Having arrived at her place, Valentina just wanted to go to sleep; but Martin felt like he had the right to sex and started undressing Valentina. She resisted but he kept pursuing her until, finally, he raped her. A week later, Martin left Spain and went back to the United States. For Valentina, the next two years were a time of grave emotional turmoil. At times, she hated Martin for what he had done; other times, she hated and blamed herself; sometimes, she doubted that what had happened was, in fact, rape. ‘Your boyfriend cannot rape you and, in a way, I led him on’, she thought. For periods of time – the longest of these periods was two months – she felt fine. She did not think about the assault much and simply went on with her life, but sooner or later her feelings of resentment always caught up with her. When two years after the assault permanent improvement seemed to be unachievable, she sought professional help. Her doctor prescribed medication that really seemed to help. She now felt less affected, less resentful, and less shameful. To Valentina’s surprise, another year later, Martin reached out to her. He issued the sincerest apology and asked her to forgive him for his offense. Moreover, in his hometown Martin had founded an organization in support of victims of sexual assault. ‘Wow, I had no idea. He truly deserves to be forgiven’, she then thought. Although she still finds herself sporadically angry at Martin, and although she still sometimes feels shame and guilt, these emotions are now confined to *episodes*. They do not consume her. They do not take over her life. ‘You know’, she recently told her best friend Anna, ‘sometimes I’m still so angry at Martin, it can be quite strong, and most likely, these emotions will never completely subside. But that’s okay, when I feel these things, I can usually find ways to regulate these emotions down. I think of how much I love my current boyfriend; sometimes even taking a bath helps. Martin has made proper amends and I’m glad that he did. I think I really have forgiven him for what he did, and he deserves that too!’

This depiction of Valentina’s path towards forgiveness presents us with a rough approximation of what real-life cases of forgiveness often look like. In fact, this description is an opinionated modification of Thordis Elva’s case as described in *South of Forgiveness*.⁴⁷

Most of the features underlying Valentina’s recovery are not compatible with forgiveness. Taking pills, forgetting, engaging in motivated reasoning, and good old natural resilience are all inappropriate reasons to forgive. Note that this observation is largely theory-independent as virtually *all* theories of forgiveness exclude forgiving for such reasons. We can easily imagine elaborations of this case in which the right reasons do *not* make a

difference to her recovery, and we can of course also imagine elaborations in which the right reasons *do* make a significant difference. Let me consider both options in turn.

Suppose, first, that the right reasons do not causally contribute to her recovery. In this case, her overcoming resentment cannot count as forgiveness. Therefore, if the overcoming theory is correct, this way of presenting the details simply precludes forgiveness altogether. Consequently, cases such as ‘Valentina’ may turn out to be something else entirely.

Occasionally, philosophers seem to have embraced a conclusion along these lines. Milam, for instance, believes that, in forgiving, a victim must overcome her resentment based on a perceived change of heart on the part of the offender; and since, in many cases, victims overcome their resentment for quite different reasons, his position ‘implies that we forgive less often than we might have thought and that we often let go instead. We forgive only when we change our attitude towards an offender for the right kind of reasons’.⁴⁸ Curtailing forgiveness in this way would be a mistake.

We should distinguish two claims, both of which are present in Milam’s analysis: first, his central claim that the right reasons are often absent, which is why these cases do not, on reflection, qualify as forgiveness; second, the claim that the right reasons, although perhaps present, may not play their proper causal role in overcoming blame, which is why these cases do not, on reflection, qualify as forgiveness. The first of these claims, I shall grant, is plausible. It explicates our existing practice and points towards features that underly its moral significance. The second claim, however, is less plausible and might easily amount (not to an explication but) to an untoward revision of the practice. After all, many of the cases that we care about (e.g. ‘Valentina’) are cases in which the initial offense was severe, and forgiving is consequently difficult. In these cases, ceasing to blame can be a lengthy and arduous journey during which several features – e.g. medication, resilience, rationalization, apologies – may (or may not) play a causal role. It would, however, be a theoretical cost to discard seemingly paradigm cases such as ‘Valentina’, for instance, for the relatively trivial reason that she turned out to be particularly emotionally resilient, preempting the causal contribution of the right reasons in overcoming blame.

To see this more clearly, it is worth comparing how blaming emotions such as resentment typically arise and subside. Imagine you learn that your best friend disseminated secrets about you at a party simply to garner some cheap laughs. Almost certainly, you will be angry *immediately* and it is obvious why: because your friend betrayed you. Thus, the onset of the relevant emotions is typically sudden, making it utterly unmythical what caused them. Compare this to the way in which these emotions typically subside. You might need some time. Maybe you avoid seeing your friend for a while. You mull it over and try to make sense of what he did. As this process of emotional adjustment unfolds, your friend issues a heartfelt apology. Your resentment continues to fade until, a month later, you are ready to be friends again. The point is this: while the onset of blaming emotions is mostly a sudden, direct response to an offense, their abatement, in contrast, is paradigmatically gradual and the causal structures underlying this process are often messy. What is more, the more severe the offense, the longer and the messier the causal process of emotional adjustment tends to be. A requirement that these processes must happen for the right reasons would, thus, have the tendency to discard many important contender cases of forgiveness for relatively trivial reasons, e.g. that the right causes were preempted by the wrong ones.

6. Argument 3: Introspection

Thus far, I have considered an elaboration of ‘Valentina’ in which her recognizing Martin’s apology did *not* causally contribute to her recovery. Suppose, next, that the right reasons *did* make such a contribution. In this case, the overcoming theory faces yet another problem. Even if the right reasons played their suitable causal role when ceasing to blame, victims such as Valentina may not usually be in the position to *know* whether they did. Since, on the overcoming view, forgiveness depends on the causal efficacy of the right reasons in overcoming blame, not knowing which reasons were efficacious likewise entails not knowing whether one has forgiven. Let me elaborate on this point further.

Knowing whether a particular consideration was causally efficacious involves knowing whether one would have felt worse absent the consideration (at least in standard cases).⁴⁹ However, such counterfactuals are chronically hard to assess. Furthermore, 40 years of research in cognitive science have established that people are, quite generally, incredibly unreliable in assessing the mental causes of their own mental states.⁵⁰ The classic article that incited an industry of psychological research on this matter is by Nisbett and Wilson, who found that subjects will often misidentify even proximal causes of their mental states.⁵¹ Such misidentification goes two ways. On the one hand, subjects will think that certain reasons were efficacious that really were not (e.g. the influence of loud noise on one’s rating of a movie); on the other hand, subjects think that certain reasons were not efficacious that really were (e.g. the influence of a product’s shelf position for product quality ratings). In more recent studies, researchers have found that subjects will misidentify reasons for why they judged a face to be (un)attractive;⁵² and why they decide to tidy up in the house.⁵³

Many findings in cognitive science are subject to revision, but I shall assume that this one is at least roughly correct. In any case, we should acknowledge the severity of these self-knowledge problems especially in paradigm cases of forgiveness. While lab-based studies show that subjects are unreliable in identifying even immediate causes of their mental states, Valentina’s recovery process set out in the above vignette takes several years. During this time, she undergoes a whole range of elusive psychological processes. It is plainly unrealistic to suppose that she would be in a position to know which of these factors played a suitable causal role in her emotional recovery.

I take it that this problem demands a solution. Although not strictly speaking incoherent, it is highly implausible to maintain that people such as Valentina are not usually in a position to know whether they can forgive or have forgiven. Let me be clear. The problem, as I see it, is not only that we may sometimes not know whether we can forgive. Rather, the problem is that these problems related to introspective failure are most severe in *paradigm cases* of forgiveness, because in these cases, there is often much time between the offense and the fading of one’s resentment, and there are a myriad of hard-to-introspect processes underlying a victim’s emotional recovery.

There are two ways out. We could try broadening the range of admissible reasons to forgive. But this idea is a non-starter. After all, forgetting, condoning, exculpating, and cognate phenomena are simply different from forgiving. Alternatively, we could loosen the alleged connection between the right reasons and one’s overcoming of resentment. This is exactly what the forswearing view of forgiveness suggests. Forgiving, on the forswearing view, means committing to the continued absence of blame for the right reasons. On this view, we get the best of both worlds. The process by which blame is allowed to subside is

unconstrained, yet we can still make sense of the idea that forgiving requires certain reasons. Reconsider Valentina's case and imagine that eight years after the offense, she does not feel resentful towards Martin anymore. She may not know why she feels better. Maybe it was Martin's apology, maybe it was resilience or the doctor's pills. However, she may still judge that her present emotional state is a good fit given that Martin showed adequate signs of repentance. Given these reasons, not being resentful is a state worth maintaining, she might judge. It can, thus, still be true (and she can know that it is true) that she has forgiven him.

Let me address one looming objection. The forswearing view, a worry has it, may encounter first-person access problems of its own. Reasons, on this view, are said to make a causal difference to one's forswearing; and this commitment, it may seem plausible to say, makes a causal difference to one's actions and attitudes. By parity of reasoning, knowing whether one forgave would require knowing these causes; but philosophers, the objection continues, have often raised *general* doubts about the reliability of introspective access to the causes of one's mental states and behaviors. Carruthers, for instance, argues that *most* access to one's mental states is interpretative.⁵⁴ Others (e.g. Schwitzgebel and Rosenthal) have reached similar conclusions.⁵⁵ Furthermore, the objection has some independent intuitive bite. Maybe, after my friend apologizes to me for having disseminated my secrets, it may *seem* to me that I commit to keeping my resentment in check because he has apologized, but really it may have been my desire to save myself from being lonely that was causally efficacious. Such scenarios seem possible. Facing up to the truth is sometimes hard and self-deception goes a long way. Thus, if introspective access is generally unreliable, then, even according to the forswearing account of forgiveness, would-be forgivers might not generally be in a position to know whether they forgave.

In answering this objection, we should be content to show that the forswearing view is reasonably well-equipped to handle these worries, much better in any case, than the overcoming account of forgiveness. Importantly, we do not have to argue that introspective access to the processes involved in forswearing is anywhere near infallible.

There are important asymmetries between the two contender views. First, only according to the overcoming view do the reasons to forgive operate mostly sub-personally on dispositional emotions. Forswearing, on the other hand, is a person-level conscious process, which is why we should have much greater confidence in the introspectability of processes involved in forswearing than in the processes involved in the sheer moderation of one's emotions. There are several reasons supporting this idea. First, even the most stalwart critics of introspective access such as Peter Carruthers allow that conscious mental processes are available for introspection.⁵⁶ Second, thinking back to Valentina's case, there are various causes, operative over a long period of time, that are responsible for the abatement of her emotions. During this time, there is no enduring occurrent feeling on which the relevant reasons could operate. Rather, these reasons do their work sub-personally, mostly without Valentina noticing. She merely recognizes *post hoc* that her emotions have undergone moderation. Forswearing resentment, on the other hand, consists in consciously considering reasons and taking a stance towards one's emotions based on these reasons. Thus, on the forswearing view, the relevant reasons to forgive are not essentially operative sub-personally. Intuitively speaking, we should have more confidence in the knowability of these person-level processes required by the forswearing view than in the sub-personal-level processes required by the overcoming view. Furthermore, the idea that these sub-personal emotional changes are

hard to track gains indirect empirical support from research on grief abatement in bereaved spouses. The basic finding is that many people (about half of the population) overcome grief due to natural resilience but are largely unaware that such resilience is the operative cause.⁵⁷

Knowing whether one forgave, on the overcoming view, requires correctly *remembering* the relevant causal processes. When, years after the offense, Valentina thinks back to her overcoming resentment, she is thinking about an *event in the past*. Forswearing, on the other hand, can be reaffirmed in the present. Even after having overcome her resentment (or at least parts of it) Valentina can forswear her resentment for the right reasons in the moment.

Above, I strengthened the objection under discussion by pointing to its intuitive appeal; let me now, in rebutting the objection, likewise appeal to intuition. Cases in which the actual and the perceived reasons for mental acts diverge due to confabulation strike us as rare cases of self-deception; and it takes a good amount of Nietzschean cynicism to view these cases as part of the human condition more generally.⁵⁸ Distrust in our ability to correctly remember the causes of our past emotions, on the other hand, does not seem to require any cynicism at all. Again, I admit that we sometimes misidentify both the reasons operative in our deliberation and the reasons for which we act. In this sense, the forswearing view of forgiveness is not fully immune to introspection-related worries. But we should not overstate these problems and should remember that *knowledge* of one's forgiveness requires less than infallible introspective access. It merely requires good enough evidence or a reliable relation to the pertinent processes.⁵⁹ Knowledge of one's forgiveness, on the overcoming view, however, requires *remembering the past sub-personal causes for the long-term abatement of largely dispositional emotions*. And we should not assume that access to these causes is anywhere near reliable, or that beliefs about these processes are anywhere near justified.

7. A Moderately Effective Commitment

Let me address, finally, why I cast forgiveness as a *moderately* effective commitment. A commitment's effectiveness comes in degrees. It depends (a) on whether a person in fact achieves what she has committed to (e.g. preventing blame from resurfacing), and (b) on how robustly she achieves this (e.g. preventing blame from resurfacing in a range of situations that a person might find herself in). The satisfaction of these criteria can come apart. Suppose I commit to never drinking Coca-Cola again. My commitment might be strong in that I would not choose to have Coca-Cola as long as there are feasible alternatives. If, however, I were to find myself in an exceptional situation (e.g. a desert vacation) in which I was desperate for something to drink, and Coca-Cola was the only potable substance at my disposal, then I would surely break this commitment. In this case, my commitment satisfies (b) but not (a). Consequently, it was not effective. Alternatively, consider a case in which I never, in fact, drink Coca-Cola again, not because my commitment is strong (which it is not), but just because Coca-Cola happens to be unavailable. In this case, I satisfy (a), but not (b). Consequently, my commitment is not effective either. I just got lucky.

In specifying the degree of effectiveness of the kind of commitment relevant to forgiveness, we need to be careful not to invite the same first-person access problems that I relied on when arguing against the overcoming view. This is a worry about criterion (b). While it

is easy to predict, relying on introspection and memory, how I will behave in *familiar* circumstances, it is rather difficult to predict or introspect how I will perform in *unfamiliar* circumstances. For instance, while I can confidently predict that my will is strong enough to choose Pepsi, rather than Coca-Cola, when buying my soda in a convenience store, it might be difficult to predict whether my resolution is strong enough to resist the temptation of a Coca-Cola after a long hike in the Thar desert. Thus, if forgiveness were to require a hyper-effective commitment, as it were, agents might not usually be in a position to know whether their commitment has the relevant robustness. To avoid this problem, we should regiment the required degree of effectiveness to a *moderate* level:

Moderate Robustness. A person's commitment not to blame is moderately effective at some point t , only if, at t , this person succeeds in not letting blame resurface in a range of circumstances that are familiar and require only reasonable effort.

The emphasis on familiarity and reasonableness requires the exercise of judgment to fill in the details on a case-by-case basis. The spirit of the principle, however, is straightforward. Suppose that Valentina no longer blames Martin but were she to become interested in philosophy and started theorizing about the nature and significance of consent, then her blame would resurface. Since this is an unfamiliar, counterfactually removed, possibility for her, the fact that her blame would resurface in this situation is compatible with forgiveness. This is all I shall say about (b), the robustness requirement. Let me address (a) next.

Intuitively, my commitment not to blame is not effective if my blame in fact resurfaces, even if my commitment was robust. Above, I illustrated this point with regard to my commitment not to drink Coca-Cola, but we can likewise find illustrations pertaining to forgiveness. Suppose that, however unlikely, Valentina does become interested in philosophy and starts researching the nature and significance of consent. Consequently, her blame resurfaces. Although her commitment was robust in that it prevented her from blaming Martin in all familiar circumstances, ultimately, her blame *did* resurface, which is why her commitment ceased to be effective. In this case, it seems, she no longer forgives Martin for the offense. To capture this intuition, let me add a second clause in specifying the meaning of 'moderate effectiveness':

Factivity. A person's commitment not to blame is moderately effective at some point t , only if, at t , this person does not blame.

Let me add one final specification. Although we should require that the commitment that is necessary for forgiveness is *made for* the right reasons, we should not require that this commitment is *effective* for the right reasons (i.e. that blame continues to be absent for these reasons). To see why, consider the following elaboration of 'Valentina'. Suppose she commits, based on Martin's apology, not to resent him anymore. Suppose further, compatible with the theory I have proposed, that her resentment had long subsided for the wrong kind of reasons and henceforth simply does not resurface. Since she does not resent Martin anymore, there is nothing for her commitment to cause. Instead, her commitment is *counterfactually* active: if there were even a flicker of resurfacing blame, she would take sufficient steps to curb it. But since there is no such flicker, her commitment remains causally dormant. Consequently, the continued absence of blame is not based on the right reasons. Instead, it is based on whatever originally caused her resentment to subside. This reiterates the point made earlier, in Section 4: monitoring an existing state, S, and counterfactually intervening to maintain S does not, thereby, amount to causally maintaining S.⁶⁰ Overall, then, forgiveness requires that blame remain absent. It also requires that the commitment would become causally active,

in familiar circumstances that require reasonable effort, if there were a flicker of resurfacing blame. It does not, however, require that the continued absence of blame is, in fact, based on the right reasons.

8. Conclusion

In this article, I have advanced several lines of criticism against the view that forgiveness consists in one's overcoming blaming attitudes such as resentment for the right reasons. First, on this view, some paradigm cases of forgiveness will be labeled as mere 'letting go'. Second, the overcoming view implausibly puts an expiration date on the possibility of forgiveness. Finally, the overcoming view seems to imply that we often do not know whether we forgive. These arguments are abductive in nature, but in conjunction they are strong. We should distance ourselves from the idea that forgiving consists in the moderation or overcoming of blaming attitudes for the right reasons. That said, completely severing any constitutive link between these attitudes and the right reasons may be rushed, which is why I have sided with those who believe that forgiving consists in *forswearing* blame for the right reasons.

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NOTES

- 1 Strawson, "Freedom," 6.
- 2 E.g. Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness"; Holmgren (1993), 341; Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 32; Kekes, "Blame versus Forgiveness," 490; Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 14ff; Nelkin, "Freedom and Forgiveness"; Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*; Radzik, *Making Amends*, 117; Roberts, "Forgivingness," 289f; Scarre, *After Evil*, 101; Zaibert, "Paradox of Forgiveness," 388, make reference to both forswearing and overcoming resentment.
- 3 E.g. Adams, "Forgiveness: A Christian Model," 294.
- 4 Warmke, "Economic Model"; Warmke, "Normative Significance."
- 5 E.g. Warmke, "Economic Model," 576.
- 6 Warmke, "Economic Model," 578; Warmke, "Normative Significance," 697f.
- 7 Note that this does not mean that the forgiver has to utter the words 'I forgive you'. Sometimes simply nodding or mumbling 'no worries' *en passant* may suffice.
- 8 See e.g. Garrard and McNaughton, "Defence."
- 9 *Ibid.*, 51.
- 10 Giannini, "Hope as Grounds for Forgiveness," 2017, sect. 1.
- 11 *Ibid.*, sect. 5.
- 12 E.g. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 40; Murphy, *Getting Even*; Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 545; Milam, "Reasons to Forgive."
- 13 Hughes and Warmke, "Forgiveness."

- 14 Griswold takes the idea that forgiveness is ‘letting go of resentment (for the right reasons)’ as its definition (Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 40). Similarly, Murphy adopts this idea as a definition of forgiveness (Murphy, *Getting Even*, 16).
- 15 Izard, *Human Emotions*; Keltner *et al.*, “Beyond Simple Pessimism”; Nichols, “After Incompatibilism”; Shaver *et al.*, “Emotion Knowledge.”
- 16 Carruthers, “Valence and Value,” 663. This description will be agreeable to most theorists. Perception theories of emotions have explicitly defended the idea that an emotion’s valence is a perception-like seeming (see e.g. Döring, “Seeing What to Do,” 2007; Tappolet, “Emotions, Values, and Agency,” 2016). Cognitivists about emotions argue that these seemings are in fact beliefs.
- 17 D’Arms and Jacobson, “Significance,” 143. See also Hughes, “What is Involved in Forgiving?”; Russell and Fehr, “Fuzzy Concepts in a Fuzzy Hierarchy,” 1994; Schönherr, “When Forgiveness Comes Easy”; Shoemaker, “Responsibility from the Margins,” 2015, 89.
- 18 While regular anger gives rise to a disposition to retaliate, *moral* anger, it has been increasingly popular to argue, gives rise to a disposition to communicate (see e.g. Darwall, “Authority and Reasons,” 2010, chap. 1.3; McKenna, “Conversation & Responsibility,” 2012, chap. 6; Shoemaker, “You Oughta Know,” 2018).
- 19 Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” 546.
- 20 Several authors (e.g. Nelkin, “Freedom and Forgiveness”; Warmke, 2015, 6) have objected that these threat-related judgments are not constitutive of resentment. Rather, revising these judgments ‘typically results in the disappearance of resentment’ (Warmke, “Articulate Forgiveness and Normative Constraints,” 2015, 6). At times, Hieronymi herself seems to favor this interpretation, arguing that continued resentment after the threat has been eliminated would be irrational, and not, as the constitutive claim would suggest, impossible. She writes: ‘Once the offender himself renounces the deed, it may no longer stand as a threat to either the public understanding of right and wrong, to his worth, or to one’s own. It has been cut off from the source of its continued meaning. The author has retracted his statement, and anger loses its point. Continued resentment would now constitute mere vindictiveness, betraying a smallness of character or lack of self-esteem, rather than showing an admirable appreciation and defense of genuine goods’ (Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” 548).
- 21 Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 41.
- 22 E.g. Milam, “Forgiving.”
- 23 Of course, while second-order processes can causally *aid* overcoming resentment, overcoming resentment is nevertheless not essentially second-order.
- 24 Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness.”
- 25 Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 15, emphasis added.
- 26 Pettigrove, 2012, 13.
- 27 Strawson, “Freedom,” 6, emphasis added.
- 28 E.g. Blustein, *Forgiveness*, 21; Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 29ff; Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 52; Walker, *Moral Repair*, 154f.
- 29 Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness.”
- 30 In sect. 7, I will discuss what I mean by ‘moderately’.
- 31 Murphy, *Getting Even*, 24. See also Roberts, “Forgivingness.”
- 32 Murphy and Hampton, “Forgiveness and Mercy,” 1988; Richards, “Forgiveness.”
- 33 Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness.”
- 34 Garrard and McNaughton, “Defence”; Garrard and McNaughton, “Forgiveness,” 2010.
- 35 Griswold, *Forgiveness*. For an excellent summary, see Milam, “Reasons to Forgive.”
- 36 Judging that the action was not wrong after all (Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness,” sect. 2.1).
- 37 Judging that the wrongdoer was not morally responsible for the action (Hughes and Warmke, “Forgiveness,” sect. 2.2).
- 38 [F]orfeiting one’s claim against being wronged’ (Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” 531).
- 39 *Ibid.* See e.g. Allais, “Wiping the Slate Clean”; Roberts, “Forgivingness”; Warmke, “Economic Model”; Zaragoza, “Forgiveness and Standing,” for similar claims.
- 40 Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” 545, emphasis added.
- 41 Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 40, emphasis added.
- 42 Murphy, *Getting Even*, 13.
- 43 We can construct a third view that conjoins both criteria: ‘Forgiving consists in an effective commitment, made for the right reasons, not to blame, and in overcoming blame for the right reasons’. My arguments against the overcoming view are intended to show that ‘overcoming blame for the right reasons’ cannot be *necessary* for

- forgiveness. If these arguments are successful, then the combination view is likewise implausible. After all, the combination view takes 'overcoming blame for the right reasons' to be one necessary condition of forgiveness.
- 44 I have emphasized that, even after Maggie has lost her resentment, there is more for her reasons to do (i.e. to make the relevant commitment). It is a further question, however, what the force of these reasons is, i.e. whether she *may make*, *can appropriately make*, or *is obligated to make* such a commitment. This question, concerning the force of reasons to forgive, has itself attracted much philosophical attention (e.g. Gamlund, "Supererogatory Forgiveness; Murphy, "Forgiveness, Mercy, and the Retributive Emotions") and answering it is beyond the scope of this article.
- 45 There is mounting empirical evidence on emotional *resilience* suggesting that negative emotions often subside quickly for largely forward-looking self-interested reasons. This line of empirical research, conducted roughly over the past 20 years, provides powerful evidence supporting the idea that a significant proportion of the population exhibits a staggering degree of emotional adaptability. In response to an 'emotionally disruptive event [resilient individuals] maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning as well as the capacity for generative experiences and positive emotions' (Bonanno, "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience," 2004, 20). Further research on resilience indicates that around half of the population is resilient and that resilient individuals often return to a baseline welfare level of happiness often after only four months of being bereaved without signs of depression or post-traumatic stress (e.g. Bonanno *et al.*, "Resilience to Loss"; Jordan and Neimeyer, "Does Grief Counseling Work?"; Litz *et al.*, "Early Intervention for Trauma"; Zisook *et al.*, "Many Faces of Depression"). Although research on psychological resilience is weighted towards grief, studies indicate that emotional resilience is a much more general psychological feature: Gilbert *et al.*, "Immune Neglect," show that academics are resilient to being denied tenure; Brickman *et al.*, "Lottery Winners," find quick emotional adjustment to suffering debilitating spinal cord injuries, and Riis *et al.*, "Ignorance," find strong evidence for resilience in the case of a range of severe medical problems. More recently, there has been some evidence of resilience related particularly to abusive mistreatment. Consistent with earlier findings on psychological resilience more generally, Poole *et al.*, "Childhood Adversity," find evidence of psychological resilience in a substantial percentage of individuals who were subject to childhood abuse.
- 46 Counterfactual causation is not sufficient to hold an attitude for the right reasons. This has been emphasized, for instance, by Schönherr (2022); Swain, *Reasons and Knowledge*; Turri, "Believing for a Reason."
- 47 Elva and Stranger, *South of Forgiveness*.
- 48 Milam, "Reasons to Forgive," 8.
- 49 Non-standard cases might involve causal preemption and over-determination.
- 50 Goldman, *Simulating Minds*, 233, nicely sums up the consensus asserting that '[n]o careful privileged-access theorist should claim that people have introspective access to the causes of their behavior, in fact, it seems adequate to call it philosophical orthodoxy'.
- 51 Nisbett and Wilson, "Verbal Reports."
- 52 Johansson *et al.*, "Failure."
- 53 Carruthers, *Opacity of Mind*, 342.
- 54 Ibid. Phenomenal consciousness is the exception.
- 55 Schwitzgebel, "Knowing"; Rosenthal, "Introspection."
- 56 Carruthers, *Opacity of Mind*, 14.
- 57 See Bonanno *et al.*, "Resilience to Loss," 2005.
- 58 Nietzsche (*Daybreak*, 116) famously held that self-deception is the epistemic status quo. 'Actions are never what they appear to be ... all actions are essentially unknown'.
- 59 Note that infallible access is not a requirement for knowledge; neither on reliabilist nor 'true justified belief' accounts need epistemic access be infallible. Knowing P is compatible both with the idea that the process by which one is connected to the truthmaker of P is not perfectly reliable, and with the idea that whatever in fact justifies P could have been misleading evidence.
- 60 Turri, "Believing for a Reason," 387, illustrates this point nicely with the help of the following example: 'The Red Sox are playing the Yankees for the American League Pennant. Curt Schilling gets the start in game seven for the Sox. He pitches brilliantly and the Sox win 2–0. Schilling obviously helped cause the Sox victory. As sports announcers and fans are apt to say, "Schilling is a difference-maker". Pedro Martinez sat in the clubhouse the whole game. He made no difference to this Sox victory. But had Schilling not pitched, Pedro would have pitched and won.' Since Pedro did not play and did not make a difference to the game, he did not cause the Red Sox to win. The moral, in this case, is that monitoring the game and counterfactually intervening to secure the win does not, thereby, amount to causing the Red Sox to win. To become a cause, Pedro would need to play. See also Schönherr, "Doxastic Justification," for an elaboration on this point.

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