

IN DEFENCE OF UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

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ABSTRACT In this paper, the principal objections to unconditional forgiveness are canvassed, primarily that it fails to take wrongdoing seriously enough, and that it displays a lack of self-respect. It is argued that these objections stem from a mistaken understanding of what forgiveness actually involves, including the erroneous view that forgiveness involves some degree of condoning of the offence, and is incompatible with blaming the offender or punishing him. Two positive reasons for endorsing unconditional forgiveness are considered: respect for persons and human solidarity; and it is argued that the latter provides more plausible grounds for it than the former.

We need to forgive and be forgiven, every day, every hour – unceasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.

Henri Nouwen

Lying in the rubble of the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bombing, Gordon Wilson held the hand of his daughter, Marie, as she lay beside him, dying. At that moment, he said, he forgave the bombers. Such forgiveness is clearly not conditional on any change of heart in the wrongdoer. Wilson did not wait to see if the bombers would feel remorse or change their ways. Assuming the forgiveness was genuine and that he had no ulterior motives for expressing it, it might seem churlish not to feel unreserved admiration for what he did. Yet a survey of the philosophical literature reveals that many writers on this topic think that this kind of unconditional forgiveness, at least for serious wrongs, is inappropriate or even just wrong. We should not forgive until the wrongdoer has at least repented and apologised, and perhaps offered reparation and evidence of reformation.¹

Our aim in this paper is to defend the view that unconditional forgiveness is morally permissible, and that there are morally cogent reasons in its favour. While it is always admirable to forgive (where the nature of the offence has been fully grasped), we need not suppose that it is obligatory to do so. In many cases, especially those involving serious wrongs, forgiveness is supererogatory. We shall suggest that much of the hostility to unconditional forgiveness stems from misconceptions about what is involved in forgiveness. Or rather, since there are a number of different models of forgiveness in various traditions, the hostility stems from a failure to appreciate that there is conceptual space for a coherent and defensible conception of forgiveness on which unconditional forgiveness does not have the objectionable consequences that its critics claim.²

I

Objections to unconditional forgiveness. Critics of unconditional forgiveness hold that one can be too willing to forgive. Here are two quotations which exemplify the main thrust of such objections.

Can the victim forgive [the wrongdoer] without any act of atonement on his part? The victim can indeed disown the act, in the sense that he explicitly says something like ‘Let us regard this as not having happened’ and then acts as

1 Among those advocating ‘no forgiveness without repentance’ are Kolnai, 1974; Lang, 1994; Murphy, 1988; Novitz, 1998; Richards, 1988; Swinburne, 1989; Wilson, 1988.

2 Opponents of unconditional forgiveness have not had things all their own way in recent literature. Among those who have made some of the points we wish to make ourselves are: Downie 1965; Holmgren, 1993; O’Shaughnessy, 1967.

though it had not happened. ... Not merely is it ineffective but it is bad, in the case of serious acts, for victim to treat the acts as not having been done, in the absence of some atonement at least in the form of apology from the wrongdoer. ... [Such disowning without atonement] involves your failing to treat [the wrongdoer] seriously, to take seriously [the] attitude towards you expressed in [the] action. Is the disowning of a hurtful act by the victim even forgiveness when no atonement at all has been made? I do not think that ordinary usage is very clear here In view of the fact that forgiving is normally thought of as a good thing, I suggest that a victim's disowning of a hurtful act is only to be called forgiveness when it is in response to at least some minimal attempt at atonement, such as an apology (Swinburne 1989: 85-87).

“[A] too ready tendency to forgive ... may be a sign that one lacks respect for oneself. ... Not to have ... the `reactive attitude' of resentment when our rights are violated is to convey - emotionally - either that we do not think we have rights or that we do not take our rights very seriously. To seek restoration [of relationships] at all cost - even at the cost of one's very human dignity - can hardly be a virtue. ... If I count morally as much as anyone else (as surely I do), a failure to resent moral injuries done to me is a failure to care about the moral value incarnate in my own person ... and thus a failure to care about the very rules of morality. (Murphy 1988: 17-18)

Those who do not endorse unstinted admiration for Gordon Wilson's response advance a variety of reasons. Firstly, it can be seen as an easy gesture, which puts those who cannot or will not forgive in a poor light. Secondly, it might be seen as undermining the position of those who are committed to fighting the evil of terrorism, to rooting out and destroying evil. Thirdly, it might be seen as a failure of loyalty to other victims.

These objections to unconditional forgiveness can, we think, be summed up under two heads. First, it fails to take the wrong sufficiently seriously. Second, it may show a lack of self-respect or self-esteem – as S.J. Perelman put it: "To err is human, to forgive, supine". We agree that these are serious charges to which a satisfactory account of forgiveness must supply a rebuttal.

II

Analysing forgiveness.

II.1. *The three elements.* There clearly are different conceptions of just what is involved in forgiveness, but these conceptions have a common core. In analyses of the nature of forgiveness three factors are frequently mentioned. First, forgiveness involves the suspension or overcoming of hostile feelings towards the wrongdoer. Second, it involves or fosters reconciliation and restoration of relationships. Third, forgiveness involves, in some sense, the removal or bracketing off of the wrong, or of the guilt created by the wrong - the wiping clean of the slate. None of these elements are, as yet, very clear, but enough has already been said to explain the hostility felt to unconditional forgiveness. For, first, is it not perfectly proper and a sign of a virtuous character to feel various kinds of hostility to serious wrongdoing? Second, would we not be condoning wrongdoing by being reconciled to its unrepentant perpetrators? Third, if we wipe the slate clean do we not let the wrongdoer off too lightly by waiving the just requirement for reparation from, and punishment of, the wrongdoer? And do we not thereby fail to take seriously the wrong which may have been done to other victims, who do not or cannot forgive? It seems reasonable to suppose that

anything that would count as forgiveness must contain or imply some version of these three elements. The task, therefore, of one who seeks to defend the acceptability of unconditional forgiveness must be to produce a coherent and plausible account that contains these three elements in some form, while not being open to those objections.

II.2. *Overcoming hostile feelings.* It is commonly held that one has only forgiven if one not merely ceases to express, but also ceases to feel, hostility to the wrongdoer. We agree.³ What precisely are these hostile feelings? Resentment and indignation or anger are the two most frequently mentioned.

Both Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton (1988) take it that the object of resentment is the lack of respect shown to us by the wrongdoer, and both see resentment as a way of defending one's self-respect. This account implies that any wrong can be resented, but that is a mistake. While indignation is always an appropriate response to the disrespect shown in wrongdoing, only some kinds of wrong can be resented. We can resent, as Hampton does note, only when we are slighted. This can happen in a number of ways. I may feel picked on or singled out for invidious treatment. My status is being ignored while that of others is acknowledged. Or I may fail to gain recognition from someone whose opinion I value or care about. But if my car is stolen by someone wholly unknown to me it would seem odd to say, without a special context, that I resent it, and this is because it would be odd for me to regard myself as being personally slighted. The unknown car thief does not pick on *me* (any car would do, mine just happens to be there), nor do I care about his view of me – I just want him to leave my car alone.

However, resentment does play a pivotal role in many cases of forgiveness, and the fullest and most interesting account of resentment is given by Hampton. On her view, whether victims resent the wrong will depend on whether it threatens their self-respect. She distinguishes between those who are beyond or above resentment, those who cannot resent and those who do resent, in terms of their differing attitudes to the implied verdict on their status revealed in the wrongdoer's disrespectful act.

Those who cannot resent are those whose self-respect is undermined, who take themselves to have the low status which the wrongdoer's act implies that they have. Those who are beyond resentment are so secure in their self-respect that nothing can ruffle their equanimity. They may recognise the demeaning nature of the wrongful act, and may be wounded by it, but they are not, and do not feel themselves to be, diminished or degraded. Those who resent, she suggests, have insecure self-respect. While believing to some degree that they are worthy of respect, they also *fear*, to some extent, that they may not have the status they like to think they have. This makes them touchy. Resentment, Hampton claims, is an emotion whose purpose is the defiant reaffirmation of your rank and value in the face of treatment calling them into question in your own mind. It can turn into a hatred that involves the desire to vindicate one's rank, either by triumphing over the wrongdoer and thus re-adjusting one's relative standings (malice) or, perhaps less satisfyingly, hoping some evil will befall him so that he joins you at the bottom of the heap (spite). One can overcome resentment by recovering one's sense of one's own worth.

We are inclined to think that Hampton has here captured, not the essence of resentment, but one form that it might take. Resentment need not betray an insecure self-respect, since people whose self-respect is secure can nonetheless rightly feel themselves to

³ There may be dissenting voices. Newberry (2001) argues that Butler held that all that was required for forgiveness was the checking of revenge.

be slighted. Where people's opinions matter to us, we can resent not getting their praise and respect without doubting that they are our due. We can resent the snubs or unkindnesses of our family or friends not only when we fear they may be right in their attitudes but even when we are sure they are wrong. The more we want their love and esteem the more hurt we shall be if it is not forthcoming and the more we may resent their failure to give us what we feel we deserve.

Hampton is right to claim that the forgiver must rise above resentment. But is there a way of being beyond resentment that is incompatible with forgiveness? On Hampton's account, having secure self-esteem is sufficient to put one beyond resentment, and there is nothing about secure self-esteem that is incompatible with forgiveness. On our analysis, secure self-esteem may not be sufficient for forgiveness, because even the secure may still resent if the demeaning behaviour comes from those who are important to them. One strategy for avoiding that source of resentment would be to cease to care what others thought. One may regard oneself as so superior to the pygmies who have had the temerity to attack one that it is beneath one's dignity to resent their puny insults. This seems to be the attitude of Aristotle's great-souled man who regards those beneath him, and hence the offender, with contempt. But contempt and forgiveness are antithetical. Why? It might be thought that this is because contempt is a form of ill will. But contempt is compatible with indifference, which is neutral between good will and ill will. Rather, to hold someone in contempt is to imply one's superiority to him, and it is this focus which, as we shall argue, is inconsistent with forgiveness. Is it sufficient for forgiveness that one rises above resentment, anger, hatred, and contempt? No, for forgiveness requires something more positive – an attitude of good will (or even love) towards the wrongdoer. There must be some concern for the welfare of the wrongdoer for there to be forgiveness, because one who forgives must be willing to do at least this much: to convey his forgiveness, where that is possible and appropriate, and not to spurn anything the wrongdoer may wish to do by way of atonement. But how much concern is needed depends on the context. The forgiver moves beyond resentment, but not in the manner of Aristotle's great-souled man. The focus is different; it is not on his own superiority but on the needs and concerns of others, including the wrongdoer.

As we have seen, the forgiver must overcome not only resentment, but any other hostile feelings, such as anger and hatred. Need the forgiver cease to feel indignant? Insofar as indignation involves anger, it too must be overcome. But there is more to indignation than feelings of anger, there is also the concomitant desire to do what one can to resist the wrong, by fight or protest, and to bring comfort and succour to the oppressed. We shall later argue that the forgiver can retain and act on this desire.

Following the tradition, we have talked so far of overcoming hostile feelings, but it is not the case that hostile feelings have to be present, and then overcome, in order for forgiveness to be possible. No doubt forgiveness which strives against obstacles has a heroic quality, and is particularly therapeutic for the forgiver, but one in whom the quality of forgiveness is deeply embedded may never feel resentment or hatred in the first place. Effortless virtue is still virtue.⁴

⁴ Most writers in this field think that forgiveness is essentially first-personal. Only those who have been injured have anything to forgive. Some, however, contend that it is possible to forgive wrongs which did not directly affect you. On our account, forgiveness requires the absence of both resentment and hatred. While the former is something only the victim can feel, the latter is something anyone could feel. So our account leaves room for forgiveness by third-parties.

II.3. *Restoring the relationship - Love and reconciliation.* Forgiveness is closely tied, on many accounts, with reconciliation and the restoration of relationship. How close is that tie? Forgiveness, as a dynamic, outreaching activity, standardly seeks to repair damage to relationships. Where possible and desirable, that will mean fully *restoring* the relationship damaged by the wrong. (This is particularly prominent, of course, in accounts of divine forgiveness.) But full restoration is not necessary for forgiveness. For it is not always possible, and where it is possible it is not always required, desirable, or even permissible. There are, we think, at least four possible kinds of case in which full restoration of relationship is ruled out yet forgiveness can have taken place: two of these are conceptual and two ethical. First, of course, there must have been a relationship there in the first place, prior to the wrong, in order for there to be an issue of restoration. Second, the wrongdoer must still be alive for restoration of relationship to be effected. Yet we can forgive the dead. Third, it may in a variety of ways be bad for the wrongdoer that we restore just the relationship which existed previously. And if the forgiver is motivated by concern for the well-being of the wrongdoer then he will not seek to harm her. Fourthly, it may be harmful or dangerous to the forgiver to restore the relationship. It is, for example, surely not required that the battered wife return to her abusive husband in order for her to be said to have forgiven him.⁵

Some deny that there are any cases in which there is no relationship to restore (e.g. Lang 1994, Roberts 1995). On their view, everyone on earth is in a relationship in virtue of their common humanity or (perhaps) their moral agency; this relationship can be damaged by wrongdoing; and it can then be restored by some act of reconciliation. We do indeed agree that this relationship exists and that it is morally highly significant for forgiveness. However, this relationship (like family relationships) is a non-voluntary one: we do not choose to enter it, we cannot leave it, we cannot damage it and hence it cannot be restored. What can of course be damaged, and hence restored, is the right attitude in us to those to whom we stand in that relationship. But that is a different matter. The objector could try to rescue his point by saying that what the forgiver seeks is to live in harmonious relations with his fellows. What he seeks is conciliation, not reconciliation. But then the objector is agreeing with us.

II.4. *Wiping the slate clean.* In forgiving, the forgiver is thought of as wiping the slate clean. One way of conceiving of this is that the forgiver behaves as if the wrong had never happened (as Swinburne suggests in the passage quoted at the beginning of this paper). And that seems to mean that once forgiveness has taken place, all reference to the wrong must be dropped, and all the consequences that might flow from wrongdoing are cancelled. So conceived, it is easy to see how unconditional forgiveness can be portrayed as letting the wrongdoer off too lightly. On the analysis we have suggested, forgiveness does not entail these consequences. An attitude of good will to the wrongdoer in the face of the wrong he has done me is, we shall claim, in principle compatible with my forthright condemnation of his wrongdoing, the acceptance of his apologies and regrets, the payment of reparation, and with the wrongdoer's punishment.

II.5. *Protesting and resisting.* To forgive an unrepentant, or a persistent, wrongdoer unconditionally does not rule out protesting at his wrongdoing and, where necessary, resisting it. For to protest and resist are not incompatible with an attitude of good will and love. This is easily seen if we think of a case where a good friend, or a loved child, is contemplating doing something wrong to someone else. It is precisely because we love him

⁵ Hampton (1988) makes some of these points: 42-43, 85.

that we are appalled by this prospective wrongdoing, and it's entirely compatible with a proper loving relationship that we should do everything reasonable to dissuade him, or even, in some cases, forcibly to prevent him. Forgiving your enemies may even be compatible with engaging in a just war against them.

II.6. *Atonement and reparation.* When I am wronged I normally have not one but two grounds of complaint. The first is that I have been harmed insofar as I have suffered some loss or damage. But of course I can be harmed in such a manner without being wronged. The second is that, in harming me, the perpetrator has wronged me and thus failed to show respect.⁶ We suggest that when I forgive I waive that second ground of complaint, and in this we find the (limited) truth behind the notion of wiping the slate clean. I do not hold it against the wrongdoer that he has wronged me. What does waiving the second ground of complaint amount to? It consists in not insisting on full atonement. Swinburne distinguishes four elements in atonement: repentance, apology, reparation and penance. (By penance, Swinburne means doing something extra, offering some gift, to make up for the wrong.) On our view, to forgive involves not requiring either apology or penance. To insist on an apology is to insist that the wrongdoer humble himself before one, and this implies that there is still some residual resentment. Any relishing of the wrongdoer's lowered standing in relation to the forgiver impugns the genuineness of the forgiveness. And similar remarks apply to insisting on penance. This does not mean, however, that I should refuse either apology or penance if the wrongdoer still wishes to give them despite my assurance of forgiveness. For it may be important to the wrongdoer's peace of mind that she apologise, and perhaps explain, and to brush that aside would itself be evidence that one had not fully forgiven, that one's attitude was more one of distancing both of us from the event rather than genuinely facing and forgiving the wrong done. And to refuse a gift would be churlish and unforgiving in the extreme. Nor, if the forgiveness is unconditional, can I insist on repentance as a condition of forgiveness, but I can hope for it and work for it - not for my own satisfaction, but because it is part of wishing the person well that I should wish her to repent. (A failure to forgive might go with the hope that the wrongdoer does not repent so that I can feel justified in keeping up my resentment.)

But things are quite different with reparation, in so far as it is restitution or compensation for the harm done, leaving the wrong to one side. If you damage my car and I forgive you do I have to let you off paying for the repair? Of course not. It might, in some circumstances (I am rich and you are poor) be generous of me to let you off, but I don't have to waive my right to reparation in order to have forgiven you. Because I have forgiven you, we suggest, the harm has been separated from the wrong. As someone who has harmed me you are still in my debt; since it is not unloving or unforgiving to insist on payment of a debt in a normal case (assuming you can afford it) it is hard to see how it could be unloving in the case where I have forgiven you for wronging me.

II.7. *Punishment.* To forgive is not necessarily to waive punishment, where that is in your power, or to plead that it be reduced or removed. That would be to confuse forgiveness with

⁶ In common with many writers, we hold that wronging someone is itself a form of harming, so there are in fact two kinds of harm in most cases: the damage the act does to me and the disrespectful message it conveys.

mercy. Holding that it is right to punish someone can be quite consistent with having an attitude of good will towards them.⁷

II.8. *Holding it against you.* Does forgiveness require that I somehow discount the wrong in all future dealings with the wrongdoer, that I am never allowed to mention it again? No. Suppose I not only forgive you for crashing my car after you have borrowed it but, in response perhaps to your repentance, lend you my new car. You crash it again and I forgive you again. Am I precluded from saying ‘You have crashed my car twice now and I’m not going to lend it to you again (at least until you learn to drive more carefully)’? No. It would be absurd to say that I had not really forgiven the first time because now I am counting it in again. The reasoning is the same as in our treatment of the demand for reparation. It is not *qua* wrong that I am bringing up the earlier crash, but *qua* harm. Drawing this distinction does suggest that to offer the fact that this is the second time you have wronged me (or wronged me in this way) as a reason for not forgiving you on the second occasion would indicate that I had not really forgiven the first wrong; that I still bear some grudge, which, when added to the second offence, has tipped me over the edge. To forgive a wrong entails not bringing it up when some new wrong is committed, as a further black mark against you, a stick to beat you with. It might be, however, that as someone concerned with the offender’s welfare, the forgiver should bring it up if, for example, the wrongdoer looks as if they might repeat the offence and needs reminding of their tendency to fall into that fault.

II.9. *Condoning.* Forgiving is not condoning, since to condone is to overlook a wrong that should not be overlooked, to excuse what is not excusable. A common form of condoning is failure to register one’s protest at wrongdoing in an appropriately forceful way. To forgive is not to overlook, nor to imply that the wrong was not really as bad as it seems. One forgives someone for the wrong he has done to you. Forgiveness of serious wrongs would not be the morally admirable thing that it is unless it took the wrong seriously. To take the wrong seriously may require the forgiver not to treat it as if it had never happened.⁸

II.10. *Hate the sin but love the sinner.* Nearly everyone who writes on this topic cites Augustine’s tag with approval. This dictum requires us to separate our reaction to the sin from our reaction to the sinner. Many have thought that we can only do this if the sinner is in some way distanced from the sin. To go down this road leads to the view that one can only

⁷ Consistent with deterrence, restraint, restoration, and reform, at any rate. If the retributive theory is, as its critics maintain, the simple desire for revenge disguised in sophisticated finery, then retributive punishment may be incompatible with forgiveness. But there are retributive theories, such as Hampton’s (Murphy & Hampton 1988, ch. 4) that appear to evade this accusation.

⁸ Swinburne takes it that the only alternative to forgiveness which is conditional on proper atonement is condoning the wrong.

Suppose that I have murdered your dearly loved wife; you know this, but for some reason I am beyond the power of the law. Being a modern and charitable man, you decide to overlook my offence (in so far as it hurt you). ‘The past is the past’, you say; ‘what is the point of nursing a grievance? The party we are both going to attend will go with more of a swing if we forget about this little incident.’ But of course that attitude of yours trivializes human life, your love for your wife, and the importance of right action. And it involves you failing to take me seriously, to take seriously my attitude towards you expressed in my action. (1989: 86)

As a complaint against condoning the wrong this is justified. What we hope to have shown, however, is that unconditional forgiveness is nothing like the distasteful scenario Swinburne here describes.

forgive if, for example, the sinner has repented, or if she has redeeming features, so that her sin is not to be seen as a typical or full expression of her personality. Jean Hampton holds that it is legitimate to hate someone who is morally rotten. If we can't disassociate her from her act then we can't forgive, and ought not to try to. We can only forgive her if we come to believe in her fundamental decency. This is how Hampton characterises the change of heart in forgiveness:

The forgiver who previously saw the wrongdoer as someone bad or rotten or morally indecent to some degree has a change of heart when he 'washes away' or disregards the wrongdoer's immoral actions or character traits in his ultimate moral judgement of her, and comes to see her as still *decent, not* rotten as a person, and someone with whom he may be able to renew a relationship. When one has a change of heart towards one's wrongdoer, one 'reapproves' of her, so that one is able to consider renewing an association with her. ... [The forgiver] revises her judgement of the person himself - where that person is understood to be something other than or more than the character traits of which she does not approve. (1988: 83, 85)

Some such change of heart may indeed *help* someone forgive, but we deny that it is necessary.⁹ We have three main objections to Hampton's account. First, we are highly sceptical of attempts to divide people, despite the mixed nature of their actual characters, into those who are fundamentally decent and those who are not. Second, her account does not explain what it is to forgive someone *for a particular offence*. In cases of mundane rather than spectacular wrongdoing, we may well regard the wrongdoer as fundamentally decent, and someone with whom we are happy to associate, while it remains the case that the wrong still rankles and we find ourselves unable to forgive that offence. Third, her account confuses love with moral approval. It is, no doubt, easier to love those who are decent, lovable and nice, but the tradition to which we are appealing demands more of love than that. The point is put crisply by C.S. Lewis:

We ought to hate [sins]. ... But [we ought] to hate them in the same way in which we hate [these] things in ourselves: being sorry that the man should have done such things, and hoping, if it is anyway possible, that somehow, sometime, somewhere he can be cured and made human again. ... I admit that this means loving people who have nothing lovable about them. (1952: 105)

III

Reasons for Forgiveness. So far our argument has been defensive, attempting to show that unconditional forgiveness is not open to the standard criticisms. We have argued that it is compatible with outright condemnation of the wrongdoing and a determination to fight against it, and thus with maintaining self-respect. Since it is (usually) supererogatory rather than obligatory, it need not be seen as an implicit criticism of those who do not or cannot forgive. But so far we have given no reason for adopting this approach to wrongdoing, nor have we said anything about how we might overcome our hostile feelings. We shall now attempt to remedy both defects.

Before doing so, we wish to put to one side a certain kind of reason for forgiveness, one advocated by many writers on this topic (especially Holmgren 1993). The thought here is

⁹ In a fascinating paper, Calhoun agrees that forgiveness does not require distancing the deed from the agent. But he sees what he dubs 'aspirational' forgiveness as meaning that 'one stops demanding that the person be different from what she is' (p. 95). But to suppose that this is what, for example, Gordon Wilson was doing is to play into the hands of those who object to unconditional forgiveness.

that a major reason for forgiveness is that it is good for the forgiver – it lifts the burden of hatred and resentment off her shoulders and allows her to move on in her life. But this is an attitude-focused reason for forgiving and we are seeking an object-focused one. Attitude-focused reasons for action are reasons for getting oneself into a particular psychological state, in this case the state of having a forgiving attitude. To adopt a forgiving attitude in order to make oneself feel better is to act on an attitude-focused reason. Object-focused reasons reveal the way in which the relationship that actually holds between the victim and the offender makes a forgiving response appropriate. Attitude-focused reasons do not, and this is why we concentrate on object-focused reasons in this paper.¹⁰

What object-focused reasons can we find for unconditional forgiveness? Since they must rule out any constraints, such as the repentance of the wrongdoer, they must be considerations which are present at the time of the offence and continue to be operative thereafter. Two possible candidates are respect for persons, and human solidarity.

III.1. *Respect for Persons*. Respect for persons seems at first sight very promising, since personhood is certainly present at the time of the offence (otherwise the issue of forgiveness won't even arise), and respect for persons, on one standard construal, is generally thought to be owed to all persons equally, regardless of their deeds or character. However it turns out to be less accommodating to unconditional forgiveness than might be expected. A strong proponent of respect for persons as the basis of *conditional* forgiveness is Trudy Govier (1999) who argues that we ought to forgive even the most terrible of offenders (so long as they repent) since (1) respect for their moral agency, and (2) their capacity for rational change, gives us reason to accept them back into the community of moral agents.

But firstly, though forgiveness certainly involves seeing the dreadful offender as part of the moral community, so too does refusal to forgive. In fact, it's *only* those whom we regard as members of the moral community whom we can possibly refuse to forgive. Admittedly we don't regard them as being members in good standing, but then how could we, given what they have done? And secondly, why should we respect the presence of moral agency in those who have put that capacity to so distorted a use? We might rather regard them as being worse than the unreasoning brutes.¹¹ (Lilies that fester do indeed smell far worse than weeds.) So respect for persons by itself doesn't seem to provide a reason even for conditional forgiveness, let alone one for unconditional forgiveness. It seems more plausible to regard it as a background condition for the possibility of forgiveness *or* of the refusal to forgive.

Nor does the capacity for rational change seem to provide the kind of grounds for forgiveness that we are looking for. Govier claims that to regard wrongdoers as permanently evil is to 'ignore their human capacity for choice and change, which is the very foundation of human worth and dignity' (1999: 71). That is, Govier is suggesting that because wrongdoers have that capacity we should adopt towards them an attitude of respect and good will – i.e. an attitude appropriate towards non-wrongdoers. But if the human capacity for choice and change precludes us from regarding anyone as permanently evil, then presumably it precludes us from regarding anyone as permanently good either. This is not an implausible claim, but it surely doesn't follow that we should display towards the virtuous agent attitudes appropriate to a non-virtuous agent – we don't withhold admiration and respect from her just

¹⁰ The standard example of this distinction is found in discussion of the toxin puzzle. I can have a reason to intend to take the toxin, without thereby having a reason to take it.

¹¹ See Garrard, forthcoming.

because she has the capacity for moral change, and hence might become an evildoer. So why should the bare capacity – the mere potential - for moral change in a wrongdoer provide us with a reason to treat him with the respect and good will appropriate to non-offenders – i.e. forgive him? If he does change, for example by repenting, then perhaps his morally improved condition gives us a reason to forgive him. But this isn't enough to show that the potential for reaching that improved condition, in one who chooses not to realise that potential, generates the same reason. What it might do is give us a conditional reason to forgive the bearer of the potential: conditional on his realising that potential. And this is in fact what Govier is arguing for: that everyone is forgivable so long as they repent and reform. So even if Govier is right in claiming that the capacity for choice and change is a reason not to regard anyone as permanently evil, it doesn't in itself provide a reason for unconditional forgiveness, rather than for forgiveness conditional on repentance. So this approach doesn't seem to provide the desired basis for unconditional forgiveness.

III.2. *Human Solidarity*. We turn now to a reason for forgiveness which derives from a feature different from moral agency, and which generates in turn something different from respect. Here what is foregrounded is our shared humanity with the offenders; the proposed reason for forgiveness is that they, like we, are members of the same species. (This is sometimes conflated with respect for persons, but clearly the two are different.)¹² On this account, what is focused on is the fact that the wrongdoer is, after all, one of us; and shared membership in the human community, like shared membership of the same family, provides a reason for forgiveness. Human solidarity is what is doing the work here, and what it is based on is the sense of a common predicament which we all share, and which gives us reason to be concerned for each other.

Some very obvious objections to this proposal arise at once. Firstly, do we really share so much with the perpetrators of wrongdoing? After all, they do these dreadful things, and we do not. But appeal to the shared predicament is partly a refusal to be certain that we really are so very different from the perpetrators. Often it is true to say that in their circumstances we too would have acted as they did. On the other hand, it is certainly true for at least some of us, with respect to some terrible kinds of offences, that we simply could not have done those things in those circumstances. But this truth does not preclude two further possibilities: firstly, that when the offences are described at some suitably high level of generality, then it turns out that we could indeed have acted in that general way. And, secondly, even if I could not, as I now am, do what the offender did, nonetheless had my early (and ongoing) circumstances been less favourable, I might have become the kind of person who could act in this way. One of the things at issue here is the question of moral luck, and the way in which awareness of it can produce a sense of commonality between the virtuous (or more frequently the continent) and the vicious. More profoundly at work is the sense that as a group, as a species, we are morally pretty unimpressive; the human nature which we have in common includes some very dreadful propensities. Our predicament includes the possession of this morally tainted nature; few of us would be inclined to say that we share nothing of this dark potential, and even fewer of us could say it truly.¹³

12 See for example Holmgren 1993:344. It is not, on our conception, a purely biological claim, but one about sharing a common psychology – something that we could in principle share with other creatures.

13 A similar approach is advocated by Kant, who also appeals to moral luck, as well as to the difficulty of knowing the inner springs of motivation, in recommending an attitude of humility rather

A second problem for this proposed basis for unconditional forgiveness, it might be argued, is that the objections which were raised against the respect for persons account of reasons for forgiveness can also be raised against the human solidarity account. Why, it might be asked, should we regard possession of a ticket of membership in the human race to be grounds for respect, and hence forgiveness, towards those whose human nature is so distorted? Two points need to be raised here: firstly, although the practical reason of offenders is distorted, it is not so clear that their human nature is – human nature is just what we humans are like, and a great deal of human history shows that what we are like is often very dreadful. Our shared humanity just is, among other things, a shared capacity for perpetrating horrors. Secondly, the appeal to common humanity as a ground for forgiveness is not an appeal to *respect*. Rather it is an appeal to human *solidarity*, the concern for the well-being of those who one feels are in the same condition as oneself.

Furthermore, the common nature and predicament being appealed to here is not simply the bare capacity for wrongdoing present in each one of us. If that were what was at stake, then the attempt to ground unconditional forgiveness in human solidarity would indeed be vulnerable to some of the objections we presented above against grounding it in the bare capacity for moral change. But what is involved in sharing the wrongdoer's nature is more than just possessing the bare capacity to do wrong, but rather the likelihood that there are circumstances in which we too would have done, if not what the wrongdoer did, some similarly awful deed. If the wrongdoer possesses the bare capacity for moral change, this is a matter of there being a possible world in which he would choose to change. However that world may be very distant; so distant that we can say with some confidence that it won't become actual. But a shared nature is stronger than this: it is a matter of there being a fairly *close* possible world in which we would act in ways similar to the way the wrongdoer did in the actual world. A being with a holy will possesses the bare capacity to do wrong – that's what's involved in having a will at all. But this capacity will not be realised in any but the remotest possible worlds, and we're not inclined to say that such a being shares our common nature on account of sharing the possession of this bare capacity. So the argument against taking the bare capacity for moral change as a reason for unconditional forgiveness need not go through against taking our common humanity as such a reason, since that is not a matter of bare capacities.

A third possible objection to the appeal to common humanity is that it is speciesist – it has the same structure as appeals to shared racial or sexual characteristics, and such appeals are discriminatory. However in the case of racism or sexism, what is discriminatory is the possibility of exclusion from some benefit of those of a disfavoured race or sex. But in the case of human solidarity, there is no-one left over to be excluded: the only ones remaining outside its scope are the animals, and the issue of forgiveness doesn't arise for them at all. Of course it is possible (though not as far as we know actual) for there to be other rational agents whose psychology differs from ours, and as such, were we to come into contact with them, they might become candidates for forgiveness (or the refusal to forgive). The human solidarity argument does not imply that we would have no reason to forgive such offenders. It does imply that any such reason would be different from the reason we have to forgive our fellow humans – at least, different from the reason being canvassed here. But there are

than superiority to manifest wrongdoers. In his discussion of Kant's claims, however, Murphy (1988: 97-103) mistakenly supposes that to acknowledge a large role for moral luck is to absolve wrongdoers from responsibility for their deeds. As we have stressed, to admit our capacity for evil is not to excuse, condone, or absolve from guilt.

uncontentious analogies for such differences: the reason I have for giving substantial financial support to members of my family is different from the reason I may have for giving such support to other unrelated persons, but both kinds of reason may be perfectly legitimate.

A fourth objection arises in connection with one particular way of expressing a sense of common humanity and a common predicament, namely the remark ‘There but for the grace of God go I.’ As a reason for forgiveness, it is often found suspect – to some, it sounds disturbingly like an excuse. But this is surely a mistake. ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ amounts to the claim that had I been in the offender’s position, I too would have done what he did. To suppose that it follows from this that what the offender did isn’t so very offensive is to suppose that anything I myself do can’t be so very offensive. It’s enough just to articulate this supposition to reveal its extreme implausibility! Saying ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ is perfectly compatible with saying ‘... and had I too done what the offender did, I too would have been wrong, and to be blamed.’ In this context, ‘There but for the grace of God go I’ offers not an excuse but rather an acknowledgement of our common moral frailty (or worse). Frailty which is widespread or even universal is nonetheless frailty (or worse); the comfort which acknowledgement of its pervasiveness may offer to the offender isn’t the comfort of excuse but of companionship – he (and we) are not alone in this condition. But the condition remains a fairly dreadful one; we have here a secular version of the sense that we are all miserable sinners.

This account of the reason for unconditional forgiveness shows that repentance, where it is present, can play a role other than that of functioning as a reason. What repentance does is align the offender with the victim. In repentance, he takes up the view of the original offence that the victim has, and abjures his own previous attitude to it. This attitude-alignment (see Roberts 1995) makes it easier for the victim to see the offender as similar to herself, as ‘one of us’, and hence brings into view the feature that has been present in the situation all along, namely their common humanity. Repentance, other than, or as well as, being itself a reason, acts so as to make more evident a separate reason: it makes it easier to see that we’re all in the same predicament, all members of the same human family, and hence have a reason to overcome hostility and seek each other’s good.

A final argument against basing unconditional forgiveness on human solidarity and a sense of shared moral weakness, is that it apparently rules out the possibility of Divine unconditional forgiveness (and even a resolutely secular thinker might not wish this implication to be built in to the argument.) But appearances here are misleading. The proposed basis for human forgiveness is our relationship with our fellow-humans, morally flawed as all of us are. Clearly God (if He exists) does not have *this* reason to forgive wrongdoers. But it doesn’t follow that He has *no* reason for unconditional forgiveness. He does not stand in the relationship of fellow-human to the offender, but He does stand in the relationship of Creator to His creature, and it may be that that relationship generates reasons to forgive unconditionally. (If so, we shouldn’t necessarily suppose that we will know what they are.)

Are there any features of forgiveness which suggest that it is apt for grounding in human solidarity? Standardly forgiveness is supererogatory – the wrongdoer does not deserve to be forgiven (and where he does deserve it, it ceases to be supererogatory). But the knowledge that he does not deserve it is put to one side in forgiveness. Unlike resentment it is not overcome, and indeed like the wrongdoer’s responsibility for the offence it must not be denied. But a forgiver who dwelt on the wrongdoer’s failure to deserve it would be offering a very thin and etiolated version of forgiveness, even though it might involve complete overcoming of hostility and adoption of a well-wishing attitude. We should not allow

ourselves to think that a forgiver who dwelt on the wrongdoer's undeservingness must be motivated by unresolved resentment; we have far too many motives for taking an interest in the weaknesses of others for that to be true. But constant consciousness of how much the forgiven one doesn't deserve it does seem to impugn the claim to have fully forgiven. The reason for this is that forgiveness involves a kind of humility, a readiness to see the forgiven one as not so markedly inferior to oneself. Since this must not amount to seeing the wrongdoer as morally in good shape, on pain of excusing his offences, it must derive from a sense of ourselves as less than morally impressive, as closer to the moral condition of the wrongdoer than we would like to be.

Humility in general has had a bad press since the decline of Christianity, and humility as an element in forgiveness has come to seem particularly objectionable, since it supposedly involves the victim in a less than admirable devaluation of her own status, of the importance of harms and wrongs done to her. And it certainly is important not to devalue the wrong done to any victim, since that runs the risk of excusing the offender. But the role being played by humility on the suggestion under consideration here is quite different from the allegedly objectionable one: what is being proposed is not humility in the forgiver towards her standing as victim of the offence, but humility in the forgiver towards her standing as author of other actions – not humility qua patient, but humility qua agent. If this is right, then we have here a feature of forgiveness which sits well with the claim that our common (and morally frail) humanity provides us with a reason for unconditional forgiveness. We are all in this boat together, and our common condition gives us a reason to be forbearing about each other's weaknesses and indeed wickednesses, a reason stemming from our awareness of our own.

What grounds forgiveness? On one account, that favoured by Govier and others, the appeal is to our respect for what raises us above the rest of creation and makes humanity noble – to our capacity for moral agency. This is a story of fallen grandeur, of a nobility which is admirable and potent even when low in the dust. On our view, in contrast, the reasons for forgiveness have their root not in what is noble and admirable about us, but in what is weak, pitiful and degraded. This, of course, offers much less of a feel-good factor. But it has the advantage of keeping firmly in centre-stage the undeniable fact that we are a pretty bad lot. We are, of course, also a good lot – but that's another story.¹⁴

¹⁴ Earlier versions of some material in this paper were given by David McNaughton at Keele University (as an Inaugural Lecture), at a postgraduate conference at Reading, at the Jowett Society, Oxford, at Leeds University, and at the Open University. We are grateful to members of the audiences for helpful comments. We are grateful to the following people for specific points: Nafsika Athanassoulis, Margaret Atkins, Piers Benn, Jonathan Dancy, and Brad Hooker. We are especially grateful to Andre Gallois for several helpful discussions. Thanks also to Lee Hunt for drawing our attention to the quotation from Henri Nouwen.

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