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Abstract: Forgiveness is widely considered a paradigm of supererogation: it seems to be morally permissible without being obligatory, and it seems to be almost always admirable and praiseworthy. I want to show that the phenomenon is a bit more complicated, and that many instances are hard to describe as supererogatory. First, I will distinguish forgiveness from some other responses to the transgression (ignoring, excusing, letting go). Second, I will examine the philosophical debate over the question of whether or not the victim should wait for the transgressor to fulfil some kind of condition (e.g. repentance, apology, compensation) before forgiving, and how this might affect the supererogatory status. Third I look at more serious cases of transgression and ask what it might mean for something or someone to be unforgivable.

Key words: supererogation; forgiveness; excuses; understanding; unforgivable.

Forgiveness is widely considered a paradigm example of supererogation. It seems to be elective, neither obligatory nor prohibited, and genuinely up to the victim; and it seems to be almost always a positive thing, certainly if one is to judge from the tone of the hundreds of titles on Amazon. So as elective and positive, it will be praiseworthy if performed, but not blameworthy if omitted. (That's enough of a definition of 'supererogation' to be getting on with.) The only difficult thing would seem to be overcoming the psychological resistance of one's understandable pride and pain. This seems to be basically similar to the way that supererogatory heroism has to overcome the psychological resistance of one's understandable caution and fear.

The philosophical literature on forgiveness is by now quite substantial, and I cannot hope to do it justice here.¹ Suffice to mention Hughes and Warmke's entry 'forgiveness' in the *Stanford Encyclopedia* and the recent Pettigrove and Enright (eds) *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy and Psychology of Forgiveness* (2023).² My aims in this chapter are more modest. I want to ask whether forgiveness, or certain kinds of forgiveness, or forgiveness in certain kinds of situation, might or actually might not be supererogatory, what that means, and what follows on from it. I have two broadly sceptical conclusions: first, forgiveness is more complicated and often more mysterious than it first appears; second, many instances of forgiveness are less obviously supererogatory than they first appear, even when they are still touching and admirable.

At some point I need to define forgiveness, of course; but it will prove helpful to start negatively, by looking at several responses that are similar to but distinct from forgiveness, and which themselves might be supererogatory: ignoring, excusing, and letting go. This approach allows us to take a

¹ There is also a substantial theological (especially Christian) literature on forgiveness. One important text would be Anthony Bash's *Forgiveness: a Theology* (2015), which also contains a good deal of philosophical argument. The Templeton organisation has sponsored a large project on Forgiveness (<https://forgiveness.templeton.org/>), which is very Christian in tone, but also claims to find scientific support on how healthy it is to forgive. In what follows I will mention some *popular* Christian ideas, but will not discuss the theology in any depth.

² Unlike Pettigrove and Enright, I will not be dealing with any of the psychological literature on forgiveness, and will only be considering 'folk' psychological ideas. For completeness I should mention that Routledge offers another recent volume, *The Handbook of Forgiveness* (2nd ed. 2020), edited by Worthington and Wade.

victim's-eye view of the 'practical space' of deliberation among the possible responses. Along the way we can introduce some of the main philosophical issues relevant to forgiveness and supererogation. To complicate things, the victim's response might be a hybrid of responses, and this might change the supererogatory status.

Later, I want to consider one central distinction in the philosophical literature: between *conditionalist* and *unconditionalist* accounts of forgiveness, framed around the question for the victim: should she wait for the transgressor to fulfil certain conditions (e.g. by apologising) before she forgives him? The two accounts raise different issues about supererogation. My third aim will be to look at *egregious* transgressions, and how we are to make sense of victims and third parties who forgive the transgressors. Here I will argue that such forgiveness is characteristically personal in a way that defies understanding as elective and praiseworthy, and therefore that defies understanding as supererogatory too.

What is forgiveness? What is it *not*?

To organise the discussion, I'll start with a basic schema and bring in complications as we go along:

- a (male) Transgressor encounters a (female) Victim, and commits a Transgression against her. (The genders are merely to allow efficient use of pronouns.)
- According to the schema, the Victim is morally justified in her anger against the Transgressor.³

The question for the Victim will eventually be whether she can and should forgive. Note the double-object structure of the verb: the Victim would forgive *the Transgressor* for *the Transgression*, in normal cases both objects are necessary (we will later ask whether the Victim can have different responses to Transgressor and Transgression). However, logically and chronologically prior to the question of whether to forgive, the Victim will have the option of at least five other responses. More positively, she may choose (i) to ignore the Transgression, (ii) to excuse the Transgressor, (iii) to 'let go' of the whole encounter. I group these responses together since they resemble forgiveness, they may sometimes be mixed with each other or with forgiveness, and they may turn (partly) into forgiveness over time. Alternatively, the Victim may choose something more negative: (iv) to retaliate against the Transgressor, or (v) to withdraw and nurse her justified anger against him.

Ignoring

In our busy lives it is inevitable that putative transgressions will often result from ordinary friction and imperfect knowledge; the crowded bus jostling or the ambiguous social media post or the lack of recognition from the stressed boss. And most of the time, most of us can overcome our momentary anger and ignore the encounter, we move on, and eventually we probably forget it. (If the transgression is more serious, the victim might still insist on ignoring, in a spirit of "it's beneath me to respond", although probably without forgetting.) This is not forgiveness, however, despite the

³ Two comments. First, some object to the word 'victim', which seems to imply a passivity that would hinder growth after the transgression; the better word is often 'survivor'. I share the concern, but since my discussion focuses very much on the moment of choice among possible responses, 'victim' seems more appropriate. Second, the relevant emotion (reactive attitude) is often described as 'resentment', but this has always struck me as too modest, too prim, too contrived to capture the rawness and the retributive force of the victim's response in many scenarios. Other emotions might be relevant in some situations, e.g. contempt, disappointment, sadness, loathing, hatred. For brevity I will use 'anger' throughout.

mechanical use of expressions such as “forgive me”.⁴ If the Transgressor is a stranger, this might make it easier to move on, since we have things to do and places to go; if they are a colleague or a family member, we can give them the benefit of the doubt since we have to continue working or living with them. None of this is problematic; beyond a basic social duty to ‘get along’ there will be clear admirable and non-obligatory instances of ignoring that may be supererogatory.⁵

Reconciliation is often taken as a key component of forgiveness. But sometimes I can forgive without seeking reconciliation (especially if the Transgressor was a stranger to me); and sometimes I can seek reconciliation without forgiveness, as when the relationship is too useful to break off, or when I am ‘stuck’ in a family or work relationship with high exit costs.

This issue of psychological resistance has to be a major element in any discussion of forgiveness – and of ignoring, excusing and letting go. The Victim might *try* to ignore the Transgression, might *want* to ignore it, might judge her anger to be petty and vain, but still she can’t ignore it. Indeed, the force of the transgression might linger, as she obsessively revisits the sequence of events over and over again. Or maybe the Victim succeeds in ignoring it for a while, if necessary by avoiding the Transgressor, until she bumps into a striking reminder and the anger flares up again, much to the Victim’s frustration. Because of this longer-term psychological resistance, one should really not speak of ignoring or forgiving as a once-off autonomous decision but as a partly unpredictable process that can only be attempted and renewed. Importantly, such efforts might indeed last a lifetime, and might become a central project in the Victim’s self-concept.

Excusing (and justifying)

Sometimes the Transgressor might offer, or the Victim might make efforts to discover or imagine, some relevant excuse. An excuse is something that reduces or even eliminates the Transgressor’s moral responsibility for the Transgression. The Transgressor might have been (partly) ignorant of something, or might have been (partly) unfree to refrain from transgressing. If the Victim accepts such a (partial) excuse, such acceptance will not constitute forgiveness; it will involve an appropriate recognition of the moral reality. If the excuse is only partial, however, then the Victim can excuse that proportion of the wrong, and will face a new decision of whether to generously ignore or even forgive the remainder.⁶

There is a popular expression “to understand all is to forgive all”, and most philosophers seem to reject this as incoherent. In simple cases, when the Victim seeks to *understand* the Transgressor, then she is looking for relevant excuses. Once she understands ‘all’, then she has found sufficient excuses (noun) to excuse (verb) him – rather than forgive him. So the popular expression should perhaps read “to understand all is to excuse all.” As such, it seems more plausible to say that the Victim’s dilemma of whether to forgive only begins when she is unable to understand the

⁴ The Templeton Forgiveness project (<https://forgiveness.templeton.org/>) defines forgiveness on its homepage as “to stop feeling anger toward or blaming someone who has done something wrong” – but by itself, that defines no more than ignoring, forgetting or letting go of the transgression.

⁵ In passing, we have the injunction to “forgive and forget”. Most philosophers have dismissed this as incoherent. First of all, one cannot choose to forget: one has to *ignore* and hope that the memory fades. But second, to forgive involves facing the transgression, and the wrongness of the transgression, squarely, and this would seem to hinder forgetting, at least in the short term. As a result, the injunction should read either “ignore and hopefully forget” or perhaps “forgive, then ignore, then hopefully forget.”

⁶ For a detailed analysis of the difference between excusing, justifying and forgiving, see Allais 2008 pp. 33-41.

Transgressor, that is, unable to find a relevant excuse: the Victim says to herself “How *could* he do this to me? It’s incomprehensible, inexcusable.”⁷

However, the notion of understanding another person is often more complicated. The Victim’s efforts to understand a putatively accidental Transgression might reveal excuses, and she can excuse; on the other hand, it might reveal that the Transgression was more intentional or reckless – and less excusable – and with such an understanding she would then have to decide whether to ignore or forgive. But even when the Victim comes to understand the Transgression as deliberate, there will be a further question of whether she can understand the degree of *malice*. Perhaps the Transgressor was seeking revenge for a real or imagined prior transgression on him, combined with stress or over-sensitivity in the Transgressor’s wider life – and this might be an unthinking lashing-out and therefore excusable. But the precise degree, focus and causal origins of the malice (real or imaginatively inferred) might remain stubbornly incomprehensible even after sympathetic and epistemically responsible investigation.

But insofar as the Victim thinks in terms of unconfirmed excuses, this is still a kind of ignoring, or an ignoring-excusing hybrid; at any rate, it is still not quite forgiveness, although it can be supererogatory. Paradoxically, someone who regularly deploys this sympathetic ignoring-excusing strategy might be described as a “forgiving” sort of person (i.e. as possessing the virtue).⁸ However, as we will see below, this might not be as positive as it sounds, since it might be a strategy for avoiding conflict or turning a blind eye to disturbing injustice, at which point it would lose any supererogatory status.

The Victim might talk to the Transgressor or investigate the putative Transgression and find that it was *justified*, e.g. by a greater good. The classic example would be of a Transgressor violently pushing the Victim out of the way of an on-coming car: the momentary outrage at the violence would quickly turn to gratitude. A more difficult and often tragic class of cases would involve a justification that does not stand to benefit the Victim herself. So if a boss is forced to downsize in order to save the company, he is ‘politically’ (under the ‘big picture’) justified in firing one of the more recent hires, and the recently-hired victim can understand this to a degree, but she is angry because she had been working demonstrably harder than some of the older colleagues who are to

⁷ Westlund (2019 p. 186) thinks there *is* room for taking “to understand all is to forgive all” at face value. This is because ‘understanding’ is not only about possible excuses, but also about distinctive cognitive and emotional failures to which I too am vulnerable, and so ‘forgiveness’ here amounts to a kind of non-judgmentalism:

[One kind of forgiveness] marks a kind of forbearance, or nonjudgmentalism, toward others, which may be rooted in a sense of the fragility of our grasp on the full moral import of anyone’s actions, including our own. Forgiveness, in this sense, expresses a principled refusal to place oneself morally above others, as in a position to condemn or dismiss others in light of their moral (and narrative) failings.

See also Pettigrove (2007) for a similar argument.

⁸ Or she might be called *merciful*. Mercy is normally the prerogative of judges and presidents. But a personal merciful attitude will be relevant for transgressors who e.g. are offensive without transgressing against the merciful person. Bennett (2004) offers the example of a ‘genteel racist grandfather’, who uncritically inherited his racism during his childhood in 1950s Britain. He is not a dangerous thug, and he has not harmed the grandson, so forgiveness is not at issue. Instead, the grandson mercifully refrains from fully condemning his racism. Bennett’s point is that such merciful restraint is actually a kind of insult, for it implies that the grandfather is no longer able to accept moral criticism and to reflect on his objectionable attitudes.

be spared. Assuming that the Victim is not happy to sacrifice herself for her boss or for the company, would the victim be in a position to *forgive* the boss? I don't think so, because the decision to fire the victim was not personal, and in many ways the boss's hands were tied. The Victim can only ignore the decision as best she can.⁹ Would this be supererogatory? I'm not sure, to be honest. It might be admirable to watch the dismissed employee put a brave face on it, mutter "stuff happens" and launch her job search with elan.

Letting go

I would say that most of the 'forgiveness' books on Amazon are not actually about forgiveness but about *letting go*. They are not about forgiving, I would argue, because the Victim is primarily motivated by her desire for relief from her own suffering. Letting go is a kind of therapy – and of course a perfectly legitimate kind. The Victim's focus is on the suffering, and in that sense her efforts are unilateral. As such, I would also argue that letting go cannot be supererogatory, since it is effectively a kind of enlightened self-interest, without self-sacrifice. In contrast, and to anticipate a later argument, forgiveness has to be bilateral and has to somehow involve the Transgressor: the ideal involves the Victim forgiving the Transgressor *to his face*.¹⁰ This is perhaps controversial, since it exposes the Victim to the risk of a second indignity of having her forgiveness rejected, and such failure of recognition might undermine its status *as* forgiveness. (Compare: if I admire Jones and leave a gift on her doorstep, she has to recognise it *as* a gift for it to *be* a gift: if she thinks it's just rubbish and throws it away, it is no longer a gift.) However, it is important for the attempted forgiveness to be anchored to the reality of the Transgressor and the Transgression, to prevent the anger from distorting her perception. Consider the case of a person who enjoys *wallowing* in victimhood, in taking offence from this slight and that insult, and yet who, once in the presence of her favourite audience, magnanimously 'forgives' all.

The face-to-face requirement is additionally controversial, since it might be described as effectively giving control over the forgiveness to the Transgressor. In the best case, however, it might be the beginning of a mutually-revealing conversation and reconciliation between Transgressor and Victim, but of course it might not; in which case, all the Victim will be left with is the option of letting go, away from the Transgressor.

Letting go is also distinct from ignoring, in two ways. First, under letting go, the anger characteristically involves a keener awareness of both sides of the Transgression: the Victim's thought is "I can't believe *he* did that *to me*", and she has to let both transgression and transgressor go. Second, with letting go there is greater need for the Victim's deliberation and commitment (and re-commitment) over time, whereas ignoring is structurally simpler. While ignoring aims at forgetting, letting go tends to aim at motivational inertness. But there is a fuzzy boundary between letting go and ignoring, and there is room for the result to be supererogatory.

⁹ An extreme example of a 'political' transgression comes from the philosophical literature about moral dilemmas: the mythological Agamemnon, who chose (was 'obliged') to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to placate the Gods and save his troops from impending starvation. The philosophical discussion normally focuses on Agamemnon. But there is a real question of what Iphigenia thinks (or allow herself to think) about her father as he lifts the knife. Does she hate him? Pity him? Would she be able to forgive him for doing what he had to do *qua* commander, even though he betrayed her *qua* father?

¹⁰ Such bilaterality is also essential to justice. In court, a defendant must be accused to his face, and must be allowed the chance to respond to the accusation.

As a result of the face-to-face requirement, one cannot, strictly speaking, forgive the dead, one can only let go of them and their deeds. However, I think one can aspire to a quasi-forgiveness within the context of a continuing 'conversation' with the dead. I have in mind a widow who regularly visits the grave of her dead husband, in order to tell *him* – not tell *his body* or tell *his grave* – about how her week has gone. Importantly, the widow need not necessarily be superstitious or religious here; she would not deny the biological events happening to her husband's body underground, for example. But she will see herself as carrying on the same conversation as they had when he was alive, and as part of *that* conversation I think she could meaningfully forgive her husband, where such a forgiveness would require an imagined response from him too.

Retaliating and protesting

The first three positive responses formed a group that were similar to forgiveness, and might indeed be mixed with forgiveness. (I'm aware I still haven't defined forgiveness positively, but bear with me.) To complete this account of the Victim's 'practical space' I now turn to the two other, more negative responses, which are clearly opposed to forgiveness.

If the Transgression genuinely angers the Victim, then perhaps retaliation might be the *first* option, spontaneously, rather than ignoring or excusing! And the Victim might well be justified, at least if the retaliation is proportionate to the Transgression. She then might have to "talk herself down" from the urge, either in realistic acceptance of a power imbalance, or in pursuit of a higher pacifist ideal ("I'm not going to let myself be provoked.") Retaliation has the sound of vigilante justice, with all the risks of disproportionality and cycles of violence; but within the category 'retaliation' I am also including the possibility of protest. The Victim might simply declare to the Transgressor "you have treated me unfairly." This might well lead to an ignorant Transgressor apologising, and that might be the end of it. Or it might lead the Transgressor to reject or ignore the Victim, and the Victim will be back at the question of what to do about the Transgression. Importantly, the Victim's protest might lead to a new discussion about whether the putative Transgression was or was not unfair.¹¹ Even if the Victim chooses not to retaliate, awareness of the *option* of justified retaliation may well be morally healthy when we're talking about gross injustice, and about a transgressor likely to interpret forgiveness as weakness or condonation.

Nursing one's justified anger

The Victim might try and fail to ignore the Transgression. She might decide, for whatever reasons, to refrain from retaliation or protest. She might be unable to discover or impute excuses. And so she is left with her justified anger. (I am still calling the anger 'justified' by a real moral transgression, and not a matter of, say, mere injured vanity.) Sometimes long-term anger is as corrosive as the self-help books assume; sometimes sulking or wallowing merely makes the insult worse; sometimes strong emotions can blind one to one's better interests and important relationships. In all such cases, trying to ignore or let go will of course be advisable. But we should not assume that justified anger is always destructive. To lose the justified anger is sometimes to risk losing the motivation to change the world.

I am not just making the merely psychological claim that justified anger can be productively channelled. More than this, righteous anger is associated with a fundamental sense of self-respect.

¹¹ Here it has to be noted how I loaded the dice in my basic schema by stipulating that a Transgression had indeed been committed; for the putative Transgressor might reject the suggestion, and have good reason for believing the putative victim to be over-sensitive.

Even when the Victim has calculated that retaliation and protest are not in her self-interest, the continuing anger is part of an honest recognition of the moral reality of the world she lives in: one needs landmarks of good and evil to preserve one's moral orientation. I am taking the phrase 'moral reality' from the Holocaust survivor Jean Améry (1980), who believed that the magnitude of the offences against him demanded enduring resentment as the only appropriate response, precisely in order to avoid the crimes being "lost to history" through an indiscriminating blanket letting-go, even if driven by the prima facie admirable need for reconciliation and co-operation in rebuilding Europe. A well-intentioned therapist who advised Améry to overcome or repudiate his anger for the sake of his own psychological health would have missed the point. Of course the Holocaust presents exceptional problems for victims' responses in virtue of the sheer scale of its evil, and I will return to it in the final section.

Forgiveness

The best place to start in any discussion of forgiveness is with examples, such as those in the 'stories' section of the on-line *Forgiveness Project*¹² or in Beverley Flanagan's 1994 book. Philosophers too often forget the sheer range of contexts in which people struggle to forgive, and the shape that forgiveness can take. So let that be my first advice to the reader before continuing.

By laying out the different responses we have described the 'practical space' the Victim finds herself in; whether or not she considers each option, she has reached a position where she wonders whether to forgive. How is she supposed to think about forgiveness, exactly? It's surprisingly hard to specify in the abstract. For a start, we can reiterate the point that it is not a discrete action of just "forswearing resentment" (Butler's seminal idea) or of repudiating justified anger,¹³ but rather the launch of a gradual process, subject to unpredictable psychological resistance, and requiring self-monitoring and perhaps regular re-commitment. I am taking forgiveness as a scalar notion: I can forgive somewhat, then a bit more, then more again. (I can even go back on my forgiveness, when it becomes apparent later that e.g. an apology was not fully sincere.) Some transgressions can be carried for years without the victim ever being really sure how much she has forgiven, and she may remain vulnerable to sudden painful reminders.

During this process, forgiveness requires some deft mental gymnastics. With ignoring, the process is guided by a "single consciousness:" I turn my attention away from both the Transgression and from my anger and I (try to) get on with my life amid other distractions. In contrast, forgiveness involves a "double consciousness;" I remain acutely conscious of the Transgression *as* inexcusably and incomprehensibly wrongful, while at the same time repudiating my anger, and restraining its influence on my relationship with the Transgressor. The wrongfulness has to remain clear, even while (I hope) its painful and insulting hold on me loosens over time.

An obvious way of resolving this paradox is by invoking the Augustinian maxim to "hate the sin, and love the sinner." When the Transgressor apologises and I forgive him, he repudiates the Transgression and invites me to join him in condemning it as a separate, loathsome object in the past. I've never been sure about this maxim, for the simple reason that the Transgression *came out of* the Transgressor, and the Transgression remains *his act*, even if it's now in the past. If the harm was intentionally directed at me, then the intention links the actor to the act. Even if it was

¹² <https://www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/>.

¹³ Benbaji and Heyd (2001) suggest the notion of 'suspending' the resentment (rather than attempting to silence it), taking the verb from Coleridge's description of theatre-goers as 'suspending disbelief'.

unintentional (it was a case of recklessness or negligence), then it was still his act – whose else would it be? I might excuse him for it, of course, but insofar as it is inexcusable and he is a fitting object of forgiveness, then it is because of the act, and it cannot be conveniently separated away. And in the case where the Transgressor does not apologise, of course, then the separation would be even more difficult.

Consider an extreme case such as murder. Here the act transforms the agent into a murderer, and he will remain a murderer for the rest of his life, *even if* he has repented, *even if* he has served a fair prison sentence, *even if* he is forgiven by his victim's family. There is no such thing as an ex-murderer. In that sense he continues to carry the act with him, wherever he goes. And he also carries it with him as the potential to do it again, once the circumstances are right. The rest of us, without the experience of murder, have grounds for believing that we would never do such a thing (even if we might not be able to predict our own response to e.g. intense provocation).

There are two questions about the meaning of any attempted act of forgiveness. Earlier I argued that forgiveness cannot be unilateral but must be articulated to the Transgressor himself. There is a risk here. The Victim might be genuinely hurt by the Transgression, but when she goes to forgive the Transgressor to his face, he just laughs at her, deepens the wound, and degrades what was meant to be a noble gesture. Would this transform the Victim's action, against the Victim's intention, into a unilateral letting-go? It's true that this would seem to leave a lot of power in the hands of the still malicious Transgressor.¹⁴

Second, in my basic schema I did not say anything about the antecedent relationship between Transgressor and Victim. When there is such a relationship (be it one of mutual affection or mutual advantage, or merely being stuck in the same workplace or family), then forgiveness might be motivated by a desire for reconciliation. But the forgiveness, if successful, does not guarantee reconciliation; reconciliation will be a matter for a separate decision, more or less successful. (Perhaps in some cases the forgiveness can lead to the creation of a new relationship where none existed before the Transgression; both parties are moved by the experience to discover commonalities.) Of course, when there is an antecedent relationship and the Victim *does* want to repair it, it should be remembered that the Transgression will inevitably get in the way of full repair, since both parties will – and should – remember precisely that it was *this* Transgressor who did *that* against *this* Victim. As such the relationship has been changed irreversibly, even if the Transgressor's contrite apology and reparation might be an occasion for rapprochement.

For completeness, I should briefly mention a subsidiary debate about who has the 'standing' to forgive. If a person has standing it means that she is entitled to forgive, given her particular status in relation to the Transgression. At first glance, it would seem to be only the direct Victim who has such a standing. However, insofar as a third party *identifies* with the Victim, such a third party can have at least a secondary standing. A paradigm of such secondary standing would be the parent of the Victim; it would make sense to say that any harm caused to the child will also be caused indirectly to the parent. Murphy (2009) also suggests that there might be those with *tertiary* standing, though

¹⁴ Indeed, this mirrors the risk from the other side: when asking to be forgiven the Transgressor also takes the risk of being rejected. However, the two risks are not symmetrical because of the different underlying attitudes: the Transgressor has to expect the possibility of rejection since he has no right to forgiveness; whereas the Victim, insofar as she has understood the facts correctly, can rightfully hope that her forgiveness will be welcomed.

they might not know the Victim personally, share a group membership with her. For my purposes, I am happy to allow these multiple victims.¹⁵

Should the Victim forgive?

I opened with the view that forgiveness seemed to be supererogatory because of its electivity and its positive valence. But things are not so simple. One long-standing philosophical debate that I want to focus on surrounds the *conditionality* of forgiveness: that is, the question of whether the Victim should wait for the Transgressor to fulfil certain conditions before forgiving him. A *conditionalist* will insist that true forgiveness, or the best kind of forgiveness, will wait on the fulfilment of the relevant condition. Under the simplest version, this would make forgiveness either obligatory or prohibited, and either way this would deny it supererogatory status.

In contrast, an *unconditionalist* account entails that the Victim may – or should – forgive without waiting for the Transgressor’s fulfilment of any condition, and insofar as this would be admirable and elective, it would be supererogatory. The debate between the conditionalist and the unconditionalist presupposes a disjunction: ‘true’ forgiveness must be one or the other.¹⁶

The conditionalist accounts

There are actually two conditionalist accounts: action-focused and status-focused. The most famous action-conditionalists are Jeffrie Murphy (in Murphy & Hampton 1988) and Charles Griswold (2007).¹⁷ Under a more sophisticated version, the action-conditionalist will emphasise that ‘earning’ forgiveness is not the same as ‘having a right to’ forgiveness; there would be some normative pressure rather than the imposition of an obligation. There would thus remain *some* room for electivity even after the fulfilment of any relevant conditions. Such a constricted electivity would still allow supererogation, although the admirability of any resulting forgiveness would be reduced by its fittingness as a response to the normative pressure.

What sort of conditions? We already mentioned apology. There are various other candidates, and there will be a separate debate about which of them should be necessary or primary. Some philosophers focus on *repentance*, some on the apology, some on the offer of reparations, some on the explicit repudiation of the transgression, some on the corroborated desire for reconciliation, some on the commitment to non-recidivism. Repentance is an internal state of mind, and it is often assumed that it will be reliably expressed in some or all of the external behaviours. I will not engage in this debate, and for the remainder I will speak only of the Transgressor repenting or not.¹⁸

¹⁵ The distinction between primary and secondary standing raises an interesting question in cases of disagreement between the two victim parties. Imagine the victim of an assault, who then forgives her assailant. Her father is horrified by the assault, and refuses to forgive him. The daughter might say that she is the victim, that her decision should have priority, and that the father should respect that. The father might respond by saying: “what you decide is your business, but I cannot forgive him for what he did to you, and that’s my business.” For a discussion of broader issues of standing see Pettigrove (2009).

¹⁶ I too (Cowley 2012) accepted the disjunction, and argued for the unconditionalist account, but now I am a bit more pluralist. In what follows I will be accepting that both the conditionalist and unconditionalist accounts can be appropriate in different situations.

¹⁷ Griswold (2007) offers a whole book on the subject, and includes a discussion of *political* forgiveness, which I will not be discussing at all.

¹⁸ For completeness, here are some other relevant debates, which I do not have room to discuss properly: (i) about whether the apology is ‘worth’ only as much as the real or symbolic reparations that follow it (after all,

We can understand the intuition behind earning forgiveness and thereby placing normative pressure on the Victim; a genuinely repentant Transgressor might voice his frustration as: "I've apologised! What more do you want me to do?" We can also imagine a third party importuning the Victim to forgive by vouching for the sincerity of the Transgressor's repentance. The worry here leads to the main criticism of the conditionalist account. In waiting for the Transgressor to do the moral work of repenting, the Victim's forgiveness, while elective, is not much of a moral achievement. The strongest version of this criticism would say that the genuinely repentant Transgressor does not technically *need* forgiveness, since he has understood everything of moral relevance and his repentance is appropriate; it is *his* job to get on with other appropriate responses and with character reform. However, he still needs forgiveness in two senses. First, in the same way that the forgiveness needs the Transgressor's recognition to work as forgiveness, so too the apology needs recognition in order to work as a full apology: the Transgressor has to apologise to the Victim face-to-face, and has to be ready for the real possibility of rejection. Second, although there is not much moral work in recognising the Transgressor's repentance, there *is* some moral work in hoping that the Transgressor will actually improve (and possibly in supporting his reform efforts). For both these reasons, forgiveness would still be supererogatory, but perhaps not as admirable as the heroic or saintly acts in most discussions of supererogation.

The other important intuition behind the conditionalist account takes the opposite situation. The Transgressor refuses to repent, and has therefore *not* earned forgiveness. At the same time, perhaps the Victim has not understood the insulting message, or has not realised just how harmful the Transgression was (or could have been); or she does not understand what the Transgression reveals about the Transgressor's character, and about the likelihood of future Transgressions; or she has low self-esteem, is too fearful of conflict, and too eager to please. If such a Victim forgives such a Transgressor, we would want to say that she has done wrong, despite the positive valence of all the self-help manuals with 'forgiveness' in the title. And as wrong, of course, it cannot be supererogatory. The stronger version of this intuition would describe unearned forgiveness as communicating two unfortunate messages to the Transgressor: first, a message of condonation of (or at least an indifference to) the wrong; second, a message that the Victim feels she does not deserve any better.

Following on from this second intuition, the conditionalist draws attention to the problem of repeated Transgressions, where the Victim forgives the Transgressor over and over again. Here it is the repetition that makes the forgiveness blameworthy, since the second Transgression already (i) falsified the Transgressor's implied commitment not to do it again, and thereby (at least partly) (ii) undermined the earlier repentance, however genuine at the time. One thinks of those awful cases of chronic domestic abuse, where the wife 'forgives' her husband again and again, motivated by fear or pragmatism or by a misplaced obligation of self-sacrifice: she might well have internalised various oppressive norms that expect more from women and especially from mothers. Surely we, as third parties, would want to advise the wife to get out of the relationship rather than forgive again.

"talk is cheap"); (ii) about whether it is possible to apologise without repudiating the transgression (e.g. because the Transgressor still considers it to have been politically necessary); (iii) about whether the Transgressor sufficiently 'owned' the Transgression to apologise for it deeply; (iv) about whether the Transgressor does enough, following the Transgression, to promote reconciliation and/or avoid recidivism in the long term; (v) about the status of 'rehabilitationist' forgiveness, where the Victim believes that the forgiveness will itself motivate the Transgressor to apologise, (or at least to refrain from committing the Transgression again).

So far I have been talking about an action-focused conditionalist account, i.e. which describes what the Transgressor must *do* to earn the forgiveness. In contrast, a status-based conditionalist account focuses on who the Transgressor *is*: either (i) he has been humiliated enough or has suffered enough, or (ii) in virtue of his antecedent relationship to the Victim. (Perhaps the length of time since the Transgression will also be relevant.) So the Victim might try to forgive the Transgressor “because he’s family” or “for old times’ sake” (Murphy and Hampton 1988 p. 28-29).¹⁹ The Victim would normally refuse to forgive this type of Transgression (assuming the Transgressor has not repented, or not repented enough), but the long-term family relationship or friendship is important enough for the Victim to overlook any implied disrespect.

Motivation will be relevant here. Consider a Victim stuck with the Transgressor in the same family. If her motivation is merely to preserve a useful contact, or to avoid awkwardness, then this will be too self-oriented to count as forgiveness and would be better described as ignoring, and would not be supererogatory. If her motivation is focused on the preservation of the meaningful relationship with the other (even if only a remnant, even if only in memory), and therefore partly for the other’s sake, then we could call it forgiveness, we could admire such a Victim, and it would be supererogatory. Between these two versions, however, there might be more complicated situations where the Victim *needs* the Transgressor precisely because their relationship is important to the Victim’s sense of identity: such a need would reduce the electivity, perhaps to the point of making the forgiveness non-supererogatory.

The unconditionalist account

The alternative to the conditionalist account is the unconditionalist account. This begins with a popular understanding of what Christianity requires. In the Lord’s Prayer, Christians ask God to “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This will be supported by the thought that it is a virtue to be ‘forgiving’ and a vice to be ‘unforgiving’, regardless of the Transgressor’s behaviour.²⁰ The most famous unconditionalist accounts are those of Holmgren (1994) and Garrard and McNaughton (2003); a very different unconditionalist account comes from Derrida (2004). In his discussion of forgiveness and supererogation, Gamlund (2010) describes unconditional forgiveness is ‘typically’ supererogatory.

Following the original basic schema, the Victim suffers the incomprehensible, unexcused Transgression, but then launches the forgiveness process without waiting for the Transgressor to fulfil any conditions. As we saw, the main criticism of the conditionalist account was that any forgiveness did not amount to much of an admirable moral achievement, once the Transgressor had repented. In contrast, the unconditionalist would see the Victim as doing the hard moral work precisely because there is no normative expectation on her to do so. Calhoun puts it like this:

¹⁹ Hughes and Warmke (2017) distinguish between ‘wrongdoer-dependent’ and ‘victim-dependent’ reasons to forgive. This is a separate distinction from the one I am making here. The wrongdoer-dependent reasons concern the wrongdoer’s repentance. In contrast, there are two types of victim-dependant reasons – legitimate and illegitimate ones – and these refer to the victim’s motivation. If the victim forgives out of fear or submission (as in the abused wife counter-example), then such reasons are illegitimate, as the unconditionalist claims; if the victim forgives out of a love that preserves self-respect, then such a reason is legitimate.

²⁰ Heyd (1982 p. 115) argues that true forgiveness has to be “done voluntarily for the sake of someone else’s good, and is thus meritorious.” The worry is that if unconditional forgiveness is not guided by the Transgressor’s repentance, it needs to be optimistically re-oriented toward its possibility by the Victim’s benevolent motivation. Certainly some forgiveness is driven by benevolent motivation, but I disagree with Heyd in thinking that all forgiveness must be so. And this may well affect its status as supererogatory.

“forgiveness is conceptually connected with supererogatory acts of generosity and charity ... because [it] is an elective response to culpable wrongdoing ... It is something we ask or hope for, rather than demand, for ourselves, and grant, rather than owe, to others. Forgiveness is a gift, not the paying of a debt or the remission of a debt whose collection would prove too costly.” Calhoun (1992, p. 81)

As Derrida (2004) famously put it, conditional forgiveness entails no more than a ‘transaction’, guided by social norms. Such transactions certainly have a useful social function, but they are a far cry from the examples of the more substantial forgiveness cited in the Forgiveness Project. In almost all of those cases, there is no repentance, no apology, and the Victim is struck not only by the incomprehensible and inexcusable wrong they have suffered, but also compounded by the second wrong of the Transgressor’s indifference or contempt. The Victim would be entitled to nurse her anger, to retaliate, and of course to ignore it – and yet she forgives. Despite the conditionalist’s fears, such unearned forgiveness could be a show of strength, not just psychological but moral. Forgiving that double-wrong, without any transactional prompt or pressure, at risk of ridicule: that’s the substantial moral achievement, and that’s where meaningful supererogation lies.²¹

Once again, I don’t think it’s quite so simple. Consider the classic example of supererogatory heroism: running into the proverbial burning house to save the baby.²² Here the electivity and the positive valence is clear to all. It makes sense for complete strangers to congratulate and celebrate the hero. She has performed an unequivocal good that nothing can take away. It makes sense for the baby, once she grows old enough to understand, to be deeply grateful. It even makes sense for the hero to feel rather chuffed with herself in front of the cheering crowd.

Here’s the important point: I’m not sure this public response applies in the cases from the Forgiveness Project, because the forgiving responses seem so starkly *personal*. When I read the stories, sometimes I am appalled, sometimes I am horrified, often I am moved; but often I am mystified, and more often than not I honestly don’t know what to make of the forgiveness. Was it right? Was it wrong? I don’t know. Would I have forgiven the Transgressor in the Victim’s shoes? I don’t know. Sometimes yes, sometimes no.

But I can confidently say one thing: it would not be at all appropriate for me to go up to such a Victim and say “well done!” – in the way I would with the hero emerging with the baby from the burning house. And I don’t think the Victim expects any such praise or even admiration from third parties, because even she might not be at all sure whether she did the right thing or wrong thing in forgiving. Just as she is not interested in what I would or would not have done. All we are left with are the stories; *their* stories. For me, that is what renders the supererogation question *idle* in a way that it is not for the hero rescuing the baby.

²¹ Garrard and McNaughton (2003) argued for unconditional forgiveness motivated by ‘solidarity’. However, by the time of their 2011 article (p. 105), they had come to be worried about “defectively facile” unconditional forgiveness, where the Victim failed to grasp the moral significance of the transgression. So even without the need for the Transgressor’s repentance, there is a minimal requirement of serious engagement with the reality of events. We can also consider Fricker’s (2018) example of Torvald forgiving his wife Nora in Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*, where he is oblivious to the oppressive power structures that have blinded him to Nora’s true situation, with the result that his ‘forgiveness’ can only be condescending.

²² I’m not speaking about a trained firefighter on duty, since such a person has an obligation to run into the burning house, and therefore – arguably – cannot be a hero. When praised, she ought to say “I was just doing my job”. (It’s true that a firefighter can be a hero by exceeding the norms of the job, and perhaps by becoming a firefighter rather than a stockbroker in the first place.)

This 'personal' interpretation might be valid, but it runs a new risk explained by Gormley (2014). Not only is there the aforementioned risk of the Transgressor misinterpreting the unearned forgiveness as condonation and/or a lack of self-respect, but there is also the risk of the unearned forgiveness appearing to be *morally arbitrary*. Gormley imagines himself as a third party, asking the Victim why she forgave. If the Victim cannot refer to the Transgressor's repentance or rehabilitation, if she cannot refer to the relationship between them ("because he's family" etc.), then there might not be anything she can say. This makes it sound arbitrary or whimsical, and therefore frivolous. And even if she says "because he's family" or even "because I love him," that is hardly a *satisfactory* reason, since it depends on too many contingencies, as well as on the Victim's personal interpretation of the concepts of family and love. (It's also compatible with unhealthy forgiveness motivated by fear or moral resignation.)

Instead of this being a criticism, I actually think Gormley's point supports my conception of the Victim's *moral isolation* during the forgiveness process, to the point where no third party evaluation, or question, or judgement is relevant. Again this is unlike the very public situation with the hero. And again I think this means that many of the acts of forgiveness in the Forgiveness Project cannot be easily classified as admirable, and therefore cannot be easily classified as supererogatory. It is a Kantian prejudice to think that the Victim's lack of a comprehensive reasoned account for why she forgave automatically demotes her decision into the realm of the morally arbitrary; it resists moral arbitrariness precisely because it is a serious and difficult decision that she wrestles with and which she will have to live with; so we should trust the Victim on this account.²³

Forgiveness and choice

In the first two sections I looked at various responses to the Transgression, and then I looked at forgiveness. In the third section I looked at conditionality. In all three sections I assumed that it was possible to *choose* to forgive – or at least to choose to try to forgive, or to launch the forgiveness process, subject to unpredictable psychological limitations. Forgiveness being a matter of choice would seem essential to its being supererogatory. Many instances of forgiveness are clearly matters of choice; but in this section I want to look at situations without choice: those Victims who claim they 'had to' forgive, or 'could not' forgive (i.e. the Transgression was 'unforgivable').

Already the popular Christian conception of forgiveness would seem to make it a matter of obligation, not of choice. If so, that would make it more difficult for third parties to praise the act of forgiveness, and the Christian Victim would not be prepared to accept our words *as* praise. Although we might admire the Victim's action when compared to non-Christians refusing to forgive similar Transgressions, such comparisons will again be irrelevant to the Christian Victim herself. This has always been a problem in considering saintliness as supererogatory; for the saint will not see any of her acts as a sacrifice, but instead as dutiful service to her God. As Alfred Archer puts it, "these self-reports from moral exemplars present a challenge to the traditional view of supererogation as involving agential sacrifice" (Archer 2015 p. 107).

Even if the Victim was not serving God, but some important identity-conferring commitment such as her family, then her forgiveness might be experienced as an obligation, and she might well use the words: "he's family, so of course I had to forgive him." And by rejecting choice and electivity, this would seem to deny supererogatory status.

²³ For more discussion of the 'arbitrariness' charge see Garrard and McNaughton 2011.

And then there is the category of the “unforgivable”.²⁴ Right away, following Hallich (2017 p. 40 ff), we have distinguish different meanings. Some acts will be unforgivable in the *logical* sense because the act, on second look, turned out not to be a transgression, or the victim turns out not to have suffered. Some transgressions will be unforgivable in the *psychological* sense, even though the Victim wants very much to forgive. The *morally* unforgivable is the most relevant for our purposes. Perhaps one obvious reading of moral unforgivability is no more than the conditionalist conclusion about the unrepentant Transgressor: he *ought not to be forgiven*. If the Victim nevertheless forgives, she will be blameworthy for this. Hallich orients his whole discussion around this version, while missing two key points. First, if the Victim declares the Transgressor ‘unforgivable’ but then proceeds to forgive him, then he was not in fact unforgivable. Second, Hallich relies on a straightforward objectivist singularity to assume there is a right answer about every situation, without acknowledging the difficulties of trying to discover such a putative answer to the satisfaction of all parties involved, and without acknowledging the very different perspectives of Transgressor, Victim and Observer.

Some will reject the notion of moral unforgivability entirely. Presumably most Christians would, for example. Govier, in a secular vein, states (1999 p. 70): “From any moral point of view that incorporates respect for persons, there are no absolutely unforgivable persons.” Murphy (2009 p. 570) agrees, and recommends that the putatively unforgivable Transgressor be approached in moral humility, in a spirit of “there but for the grace of God, go I.” However, there are important limits to sympathetic imagination of oneself in another’s shoes. Part of my self-conception is precisely that I would never carry out an unjustified killing, for example. Of course a lot of people in 1940s Germany thought that about themselves, and went off to commit atrocities (Murphy cites Christopher Browning’s classic *Ordinary Men*). But the possibility that I too might have been transformed *that much* is simply too abstract to induce non-judgemental moral humility, and certainly too abstract to prevent me from confidently labelling such horrendous deed ‘unforgivable’. (Moreover, if I had been so transformed, I cannot imagine the resulting person being *me* in any recognisable sense.)

However, there is a second reading of moral unforgivability, and that relates solely to the nature of the Transgression. Given that it is inexcusable and incomprehensible, the Victim might consider it *egregious* (my term) because it betrays one of her deepest identity-conferring commitments or relationships, and she will declare it unforgivable even if the Transgressor fulfils all the repentance conditions. Of course there is room for disagreement here between the Victim, the Transgressor, and any third party observer, about the wrongness of the Transgression and its particular disvalue as a betrayal of the Victim’s identity-conferring commitment. In the best case there will be mutually-enlightening dialogue. In the worse case it will be the Transgressor, insofar as he cares, to come to terms with his new status as unforgiven.

Take the classic example of the Transgressor’s sexual infidelity against the Victim, his spouse. Here we really could say that some people would find infidelity unforgivable; others would find it conditionally forgivable (with repentance); and yet others would find it a merely venial sin and easily

²⁴ Derrida famously declared that “one can only forgive the unforgivable” (2001 p. 7). Many philosophers have dismissed this as meaningless and provocative nonsense. I think, however, there is an interesting insight here about the temporal progression of the Victim’s experience, as I explained in Cowley 2012. After ruling out the conditionalist account on the grounds of its status as a transaction, Derrida argues that any conception of the Transgression as *in-principle forgivable* lets reasons and conditionality back in. The Victim’s question about whether to forgive only begins when the transgression appears very much unforgivable. The Victim *then* moves onto the second stage, and this is logically a new situation, unconstrained from the first stage judgement. Ultimately the decision to forgive or not forgive is ineffable and impenetrable, both to outsiders and to the Victim.

forgivable. So much will depend on the individual person, on their wider values (both inherited and chosen), on the place of the marriage in their life, the particular agreements, explicit and implicit, within the marriage so far, and perhaps on the available options (financial and social) for a new start outside the marriage. Following on from the Augustinian maxim, Govier (1999 p. 65) suggests that it is possible to forgive the Transgressor while preserving the unforgivability of the Transgression: “Forgiveness is something we extend or do not extend towards *persons*, and it fundamentally affects the relationship between persons. And yet it is *deeds* that are said to be unforgivable.” As I argued before, I am not sure this is coherent, and in this situation it is even less so, because insofar as the Victim forgives the Transgressor then she necessarily has to make some kind of peace with his status as the author of the Transgression.

Either way, there is a strong sense that the Victim should have the last word because it is her life; perhaps a sympathetic third party friend might play down the Transgressor’s infidelity as “not a big deal,” given that “boys will be boys”; and yet the Victim declares it unforgivable and files for divorce. Has the Victim done something wrong? Or understood something incorrectly? Hard to say, especially given the opacity of marriage, both to outsiders but also, paradoxically, to the participants. Certainly the friend thinks the Victim is being hard-hearted or unsympathetic (“unforgiving” as a vice), but the friend hardly has an epistemically privileged vantage point, and the friend now has to accept and respect the Victim’s decision and support her as she deals with the aftermath. If the Victim later changes her mind and forgives, is this necessarily a better outcome? Has she come to see the situation more clearly? Maybe she continued to describe herself under the opposite sense of necessity, as in “I took my marital vow seriously, and so I have to forgive him.” Does she deserve praise for it? Again, hard to say. We have one person just trying to make the best sense of her life. So again, I think, the question of any possible supererogatory status falls idle.²⁵

The Sunflower

There is a third reading of morally unforgivable, regardless of the Transgressor’s repentance, and that concerns a universally egregious Transgression. The paradigm would be the Holocaust, where the crimes are unforgivable because of both the scale of the harm, and the evil of the intentions behind them. Again, whether or not the transgressor repents would normally be irrelevant to the status of unforgivability; and one would have good reason to doubt the sincerity or even the possibility of any clear-eyed repentance by someone capable of overcoming all moral restraint in committing the atrocity in the first place.

A central example in the forgiveness literature is *The Sunflower* by Simon Wiesenthal. In 1943 in Nazi-occupied Lemberg (in present-day Ukraine), a dying SS officer asks Wiesenthal, then a Jewish slave labourer, to forgive the officer for his participation in atrocities against other Jews, now dead. Wiesenthal says nothing, leaves the room, and the officer dies the next day. The bulk of the book comprises 53 responses from a range of public figures, including theologians, political scientists, jurists, Holocaust survivors, and even former Nazi Armaments Minister Albert Speer.

I confess to having never understood the central philosophical *problem* of the book (including, in my edition, the garish cover with the sensationalist sub-title). First there is the issue of standing. Surely

²⁵ Fricker (2018 p. 176) describes how forgiveness can even be used as a way to prevent healthy discussion about the state of the relationship, and impose a one-sided moral interpretation of the events. She imagines the Transgressor complaining: “I admit that what I did was pretty thoughtless, but to say it was a ‘betrayal of our friendship’ is melodramatic... But now I don’t even have the chance to discuss it, because apparently I am ‘already forgiven’.”

the young Wiesenthal did not have the standing to forgive on behalf of the officer's dead victims, and any attempted 'forgiveness' on his part could only constitute a deep betrayal of the victims. Second, there is the question of whether Wiesenthal had *effectively* forgiven by refusing to refuse, as it were.²⁶ But leaving those two points aside, given the universal egregiousness of the crimes in question, given the status of the officer and of Wiesenthal with respect to those crimes, and given the timing of the request while the crimes were on-going, I would say that *of course* the crimes are unforgivable.²⁷ On the other hand Dith Pran (Wiesenthal p. 230), a survivor of the Cambodian terror, *would* be inclined to forgive the guards who carried out the terror (although he would not forgive the leadership). This is a remarkable claim, but for me frankly incomprehensible. And as incomprehensible, I find myself unable to praise it. And being unable to praise it, I would say it cannot be supererogatory: it is just a brute fact in the world.

There is a lot more one could say about *The Sunflower*, but that would take us too far into the particularities of the Holocaust, which would merit a book-length treatment. Suffice to say that the book sold well, and so its readers have evidently found some way of grasping the central question, and understanding the positive responses better than I.²⁸

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²⁶ Wiesenthal's friend Bolek, who suffered as much as he did in the camps, says "through his confession [...] his conscience was liberated and he died in peace because you had listened to him" (Wiesenthal 1997 p. 83). Bolek thought the officer deserved forgiveness, even if Wiesenthal remained ambivalent.

²⁷ One of the respondents, Cynthia Ozick, even described the officer's repentance as an *aggravating* factor, for it revealed that he had a conscience all along, and had actively suppressed it while committing the crimes. However, I would add that there is a sense that the officer still did not understand the enormity of the crimes, for if he had, he would have understood full well that they were unforgivable, and he would not have dared to ask for forgiveness.

²⁸ My thanks to David Heyd for his comments on the first draft.

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