

Unconditional forgiveness and practical necessity

By Christopher Cowley

Final draft. Eventually included in Lewis (ed.) (2016) *The Philosophy of Forgiveness*, Vernon Press

Abstract: 'Conditionalist' argue that forgiveness is only morally respectable if it waits on the offender fulfilling certain conditions, namely apology and repentance. 'Unconditionalists' argue that waiting on conditions makes forgiveness too much like a transaction, and lacks both the moral work and the electivity that forgiveness requires. In a recent piece, Steven Gormley (2014) proposes the following compromise: in order to avoid accusations from third parties of whimsy or arbitrariness, the victim has to be able to offer reasons why she forgave. At the same time those reasons, while genuine, are not sufficient to justify the forgiveness, either to third parties or to the victim herself. There remains a gap between the reasons and decision, and Gormley suggests that the only way to bridge that gap is through the phenomenon of 'practical necessity', first described by Bernard Williams. In this article I want to defend and develop Gormley's insight by examining a striking example of practical necessity and another striking example of unconditional forgiveness.

Introduction

Let us begin with the classic paradigm: an *offender* freely and knowingly commits an *offence* against a *victim*. The offender has no excuses or justification, nor does he believe that he does. How should the victim react? Her resentment is justified. She may take revenge on the offender, she may ignore the offence, or she may seek or invent excuses for it. Alternatively, she could decide to attempt to forgive the offender. (This may take time, and, psychologically, it may not succeed.) The question is: morally, should she try to forgive; that is, should she try to overcome her justified resentment?

There is a relatively clear debate in the Anglo-American literature between two accounts here. The 'conditionalist' (such as Kolnai, Murphy, Griswold) will say that the victim should wait for the offender to fulfil certain conditions (especially apology and repentance) before deciding to try to forgive; to forgive in the absence of fulfilled conditions would involve the victim condoning the offence and denigrating oneself. For forgiveness to be morally respectable, it must be guided and justified by norms, and these norms are publicly accessible. Therefore a perplexed third party observer can ask the victim why she forgave, and the victim needs to be able to justify the forgiveness by citing relevant and sufficient reasons, namely the fact that the offender has fulfilled the relevant conditions. There might still be room for debate between the observer and the victim about whether the offender has fulfilled the conditions to the right degree or in the right way, but the conditionalist will say that such a debate is informed and guided by the existence of relevant shared justificatory norms.

On the other hand, the ‘unconditionalist’ (Garrard and McNaughton, Derrida, and the Christian¹) claims that the conditional account comes too close to a transaction; once the offender has fulfilled the conditions, there is no longer any point to forgiveness – except to ‘rubber-stamp’ the deal. In many cases of apology, the offender will offer sincere and valid excuses, and if these excuses are recognised as such then what the victim can offer is to excuse the offender, rather than to forgive him. Whatever the nature of the apology, forgiveness becomes too easy, so that it involves no moral work that would merit the moral admiration that characterises our response to forgiveness. Although the victim may use the *words* ‘I forgive you’, this is not *real* forgiveness but a mere simulacrum – a socially useful simulacrum, of course.

Instead, real forgiveness involves precisely those situations where the offence is incomprehensible, inexcusable, or where the offender is blatantly unrepentant. Only in response to such an offence is admirable work involved in forgiving. In addition, the unconditionalist reminds us that forgiveness, like gifts, should be essentially elective. The bottle I bring to a dinner party is not a real gift but an entrance ticket; in contrast, a genuine gift cannot be obligated or expected, and so it is with forgiveness. The sincerely repentant offender cannot demand forgiveness, even when there is nothing left that he can do. (I am assuming that the victim’s resentment remains justified only on the basis of an offence that was genuinely harmful, unjustifiable and inexcusable.)

In a recent 2014 piece, Steven Gormley develops an interesting hybrid position between the conditionalist and the unconditionalist accounts. I want to describe it, and then develop it in ways that strike me as plausible (but which he might not agree with at all). In terms of the arguments as laid out above, his first step is inclined toward the unconditionalist account. However, he is troubled by the perplexed third party observer asking the victim why she decided to try to forgive. Gormley (p. 38 *ff*) understands the victim as having two possibilities: either she *can* give reasons or she *cannot*. Both possibilities undermine the unconditional forgiveness, albeit in different ways. If the victim *can* give reasons, the implication is that she was withholding forgiveness until the grounds of these reasons obtained, and this suggests some sort of conditional account, even if the grounds of her forgiveness are different than those of the traditional conditionalist. For example, the victim may forgive the offender “for old times’s sake.” This decision does not depend on the offender repenting, but there is a condition that the offender nevertheless fulfils in a way that other offenders do not. The implication of this kind of conditionality is that if the condition was not fulfilled, the victim *could not* forgive; and if it was, then she *had to* forgive. I have italicized the modal verbs here to show that either way, she seems to be acting under an obligation, and has lost the electivity that is crucial to the unconditionalist account. (This will be important later, when I consider ‘practical necessity’.)

However, if the victim forgives unconditionally, and is then interrogated by the third party, and the victim *cannot* give a reason for forgiving, the implication is that the act of forgiveness is at best whimsical or frivolous or arbitrary, at worst unintelligible. All the victim might say, lamely, is that “it felt like the right thing to do at the time.” This might

¹ There is a debate within Christian theology about whether forgiveness should be taken as unconditional and obligatory. For the purposes of this paper, I will assume that the Christian is an unconditionalist, and this will be relevant to our discussion of the Gordon Wilson example later on.

preserve electivity, but at considerable rational and moral cost. Importantly, it would not be clear why the rest of us can or should *admire* such forgiveness.

So Gormley wants to support the unconditionalist account, but finds he cannot, as conceived above. So Gormley offers an ingenious solution (p. 43 *ff*), based on Derrida. Derrida's account of forgiveness is obscure at the best of times, and I cannot claim to understand it sufficiently. But I think Gormley is right to highlight two key insights of Derrida's: (i) "forgiveness only becomes possible from the moment it appears impossible," (Derrida 2001 p. 33) and (ii) "the secret of this experience remains" (*ibid* p. 55). Gormley expands this as the following two-step. Real forgiveness cannot be spontaneous. It has to begin with the first step, with a pause, for the victim to truly appreciate the offense *as* wrong, inexcusable, incomprehensible – and *prima facie* unforgiveable. But the pause also allows time for the victim to deliberate about what to do. Such deliberation invokes reasons, reasons that could in principle be given to a perplexed observer. The second step then involves the victim's realisation that the reasons do not 'add up' to a decision, be it a decision to forgive or to not forgive; and yet the victim forgives. Gormley concludes: "an act of pure, unconditional forgiveness necessarily involves a moment of non-knowledge, a gap between the reasons one appeals to and the decision to forgive" (p. 44).

This compromise would allow enough room for reasons so as to preserve the rational intelligibility and moral justifiability of forgiveness under the conditionalist account, while also preserving enough of a gap to allow the electivity of forgiveness under the unconditionalist account. However, it is worth emphasizing: the gap of non-knowledge applies not only to the observer, but also *to the victim*. The victim can provide some reasons to explain the forgiveness, but if the observer persists and asks *why those* reasons were sufficient for forgiveness, then the victim has nothing further to say. This is not because the victim chooses to keep something hidden, it is because the victim does not herself know why these reasons were sufficient; neither the observer nor the victim can see into the gap.

This is more than agent-relativity of reasons: it is not a situation where, say, the 'career man' takes the boss's request as a sufficient reason to break his promise to his young daughter, whereas the 'family man' does not. In that scenario, both the 'career man' and the 'family man' can *fully* justify (or agent-relatively justify) their respective behaviour with reference to the different values and priorities they bring to the decision situation. In Gormley's scenario, the reasons only gesture toward forgiveness, and the gap between the reasons and the decision is essentially "secret" and impenetrable to the victim herself.

I find Gormley's compromise solution very interesting and intuitively plausible. As it stands, however, it is not sufficiently developed. And like many compromises, the chances are that neither conditionalists nor unconditionalists will be happy with it! In order to develop it, I want to look a bit more closely at the two examples that Gormley himself deploys: those of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Gordon Wilson.

Bonhoeffer and practical necessity

The following example is not directly about forgiveness, but it does show the 'gap' in action. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German theologian and priest, and had been an active opponent to the Nazi regime since its beginning in 1933. In 1938 he left Germany for the United States. A year later, however, he decided to return to Germany, at considerable risk to his safety and life. The risks were well founded: he was eventually imprisoned in 1943, and executed in 1945.

Bonhoeffer had two main reasons for returning, and he gave these reasons to concerned American friends: first, he felt he could not abandon his countrymen during their hour of need; second, he could not look forward to helping Germany recover after the war if he had not himself suffered during it. However, while Bonhoeffer was utterly sincere in being motivated by these reasons, he himself admitted that they did not, on their own, ‘add up’ to the decision to return:

today’s decision is ... full of anxiety, however brave it may appear. The reasons that one gives to others and to oneself for an action are certainly inadequate ... in the last resort we are acting from a plane that is hidden from us.²

If such a “plane” is “hidden,” the question is whether Bonhoeffer’s decision could be anything but whimsical or arbitrary or unintelligible. (Although the three terms mean different things, I will refer to them collectively as the ‘risk of arbitrariness’ from now on.)

Gormley gestures toward Bernard Williams’s concept of “practical necessity” to address this issue, and he does not explain it in much depth.³ The important phenomenology is that Bonhoeffer felt that he “had to” return to Germany. There are four things to say about Williams’s conception of practical necessity that will be relevant to our discussion.

The first thing is to distinguish it from other kinds of necessity: from (i) physical necessity (e.g. being carried off in a straightjacket, since these are forces external to the body), from (ii) psychological necessity (e.g. addictions and compulsions, since these are forces internal to the body but external to the self). (iii) Importantly, practical necessity is also to be distinguished from moral obligation, for the latter (however conceived) is normally expressed in terms of an ‘ought’, and is therefore essentially overridable: it is perfectly coherent to say “I know I ought to X, but I won’t,” whereas it is not coherent to say “I know I must X, but I won’t.”

The second thing about practical necessity is that although there is the same gap between reasons and decision that Gormley is interested in, the decision is *not* arbitrary in a different sense: because it is entirely expressive of the agent’s self, of her evaluative stance upon the world, and of her self-understanding as a particular agent living a particular life in that world. At the minimal level, this means that the decision must cohere with the rest of the agent’s values, principles, and with the narrative history of the life she has lived. But practical necessity goes beyond mere coherence with the self, to expression of the self: it becomes the only way that this particular self can go on. Sometimes a decision of practical necessity will be spontaneous and unsurprising, as when someone will reliably refuse a bribe, and we are inclined to say of her “she would never take a bribe”. Other times, as in the case with

² Bonhoeffer, cited in Gormley p. 44.

³ Bernard Williams wrote at least two articles on the subject, ‘Practical necessity’ (1981a) and ‘Moral incapacity’ (1995), such that each phenomenon is roughly the inverse of the other. Under necessity, I find I “have to” do something, while under incapacity, I find I “cannot” do something. Gormley actually describes the Bonhoeffer example under the concept of incapacity, but I prefer to use the concept of necessity because I will later be examining the possibility that forgiveness is a matter of necessity for the victim, as in “I had to forgive him”. Interestingly, Williams’s main example in ‘Practical necessity’ is that of Martin Luther, a figure facing a situation not dissimilar to Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s in many ways.

Bonhoeffer, that deliberation and discussion gradually revealed what he had to do, perhaps to the surprise of some of his friends, and perhaps even to the surprise of himself.

Genuinely arbitrary decisions can be a product of a flip of a coin, just as much as a product of whim or mood; I decide to go for a walk just because I feel like it, and my decision includes an awareness that I could well have remained at home, and could turn back at any moment. Neither the coin flip nor the whim have anything to do with the agent's self or evaluative stance, and as such the decision to go for a walk is arbitrary. (If my going for a walk somehow resulted in harming someone through my negligence, e.g. leaving my infant child at home alone, I would have no defence.)

The third thing about Williams's practical necessity is about the nature of the experience. Bonhoeffer did not *decide* to return to Germany, since deciding presupposes an awareness of genuine choice; instead, Bonhoeffer *discovered* that he *had to return*. In purely physical terms, there was more than one option open to him, of course, and this is precisely what tormented his friends, who begged him (and gave him excellent reasons) to remain in the United States. But given who Bonhoeffer was at that moment, given the way he had shaped his life and the way his life had been shaped, given the evaluative stance and self-understanding that he brought to the 'decision', then there was only one option available *to him*. A different person, with a different evaluative stance and self-understanding, may well have approached the 'same' situation by discovering that she had to remain in the United States. I put 'same' in scare quotes precisely because the situation is not exhausted by the physical description of the available options: it also includes facts about the person contemplating those options, and in that sense Bonhoeffer and this other person faced different situations. Part of what I mean when I say "I know Smith" is that I know something of the kinds of situation where she would act under practical necessity (and, by extension, something of the kinds of situation where she would "never do" X.)

This point about discovery can be put another way. Normally, when deliberation leads to decision, the agent can behold the reasons (for and against a particular option) at arm's length, as it were. Whereas insofar as this decision/discovery *expresses* the agent's self, there is not enough 'room' for the agent to 'get behind' it in order to compare the options and the reasons supporting each. Bonhoeffer's discovery was non-arbitrary in a second, more familiar sense as well: he understood how risky the return to Germany would be. When a reflective, informed person takes such a risk, there is a *prima facie* case for seeing her as deeply focused during deliberation, and as making a deeply serious decision. Bonhoeffer was not making a detached decision about travelling or not travelling, he was making a decision about the rest of his life, a life that might very well be cut off sooner rather than later because of that decision.

All this is perfectly compatible with others, especially concerned colleagues or relatives in the United States, being perplexed and indeed angry with Bonhoeffer's decision/discovery. They might say, for example, that he is a gifted theologian, and has plenty more to contribute to theology over a lifetime in an American university, rather than indulging these boy-scout antics smuggling papers under the noses of the Nazi police. They might accuse him of some sort of hero complex, or martyr complex, of a self-absorbed thirst for adventure. They might also accuse him of failing in his duties to his colleagues and relatives in the United States, by throwing his life away in a futile cause, at a very real cost to them. Bonhoeffer was well aware of this cost, and of the impression that he might give, yet he still felt he "had to" go. He

realised that his motives might be forever held up to scrutiny and found wanting. Perhaps the dilemma would have been a lot sharper if he had abandoned a child in the United States.⁴

The fourth and final thing to say about Williams's account of practical necessity is that the full force of the necessity may only be revealed in time. Once back in Germany, Bonhoeffer was well-connected enough that he could have escaped again, but he never tried. Indeed, even after his imprisonment in 1943 a sympathetic guard offered him the chance to escape, and he refused. So he had plenty of opportunity to change his mind by re-inhabiting his 1939 mindset and coming to the conclusion that he had made a mistake – and this might have been enough for him and others to judge that the 1939 decision had been arbitrary in some way (e.g. over-hasty, culpably ignorant, sentimental). The fact that he never did change his mind, as far as we know, corroborates our sense that he did indeed discover in 1939 what he had to do, and what he had to do was not arbitrary.

I have been trying to flesh out Gormley's use of the Bonhoeffer example to support the idea that a gap need not result in an arbitrariness that would damage the decision's rational and moral credentials. But this example is not about forgiveness (although it might touch on forgiveness when we look at the friends that Bonhoeffer left behind in the United States). It suggests an interesting possibility, however, which Gormley does not consider. Maybe the phenomenology of real forgiveness is not one of decision but of discover, such that the victim declares that she "has to" forgive the offender? With this possibility in mind, let us move to Gormley's second example.

Gordon Wilson

Gordon Wilson was a draper and a deeply committed Christian, living in Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. At a Remembrance Day service in 1987 the IRA detonated a bomb that covered him and his daughter Marie in heavy building rubble, and eventually Marie died from her injuries. Apparently the IRA had been targeting a platoon of British soldiers that were due to attend the ceremony, but in the end did not. Later, Wilson told a BBC reporter:

But I bear no ill will. I bear no grudge. Dirty sort of talk is not going to bring her back to life. She was a great wee lassie. She loved her profession. She was a pet. She's dead. She's in heaven and we shall meet again. I will pray for these men tonight and every night.⁵

The IRA bombers were never identified, and as an organisation they did not apologise until much later (and there are questions about the author and the sincerity of the 'apology'). So in terms of the debate between the conditionalists and the unconditionalists, there was a clear

⁴ In this I am reminded of another of Bernard Williams's examples (1981b), that of a semi-fictional painter named Gauguin, who feels he "has to" abandon his family in 19th-Century Paris (where their future, without relatives and without a welfare state, Gauguin knew would be "grim") in order to travel to Tahiti to paint. Williams argues that our moral attitude to him and to the abandonment will depend on the luck of whether it turns out that he has enough talent and that he can get his canvases back to Paris intact to become artistically successful. In contrast, we tend to admire Bonhoeffer despite the failure of his efforts, perhaps even because of that failure. But if Bonhoeffer had abandoned a family, those family members would have a real cause for grievance, whatever their father's posthumous success.

⁵ BBC, The Age of Terror: Clips, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p010gppk> [accessed March 2016], and cited by Gormley p. 27. The example is also cited by Garrard and McNaughton (2003).

failure to fulfil any conditions, at least at the time of Wilson's statement. Wilson would therefore be vulnerable to the accusation that he was condoning the action, as well as showing insufficient respect for either himself or his daughter.⁶ Gormley mentions (p. 27) another person, Daphne Stephenson, who was injured in the same explosion. Stephenson was asked what she thought of Wilson's response, and she said: "I wouldn't have had that attitude at all. The people who caused the explosion didn't ask to be forgiven and haven't shown any repentance whatsoever." Nevertheless Wilson seems to have forgiven, either with these words, if not earlier.

It is worth highlighting three things about Wilson's forgiveness. First, we may assume that Wilson understood exactly what had happened, and considered the bombing to be morally deplorable; it was not as if an unpredictable natural catastrophe had killed his daughter. Even if she had not been intentionally targeted, the bombers were guilty of gross recklessness.

Second, despite what the conditionalists might think, most people take Wilson's forgiveness to be morally admirable. Daphne Stephenson's declaration above is actually ambiguous here. It *could* mean that she herself hated the IRA for what they did, that she would never forgive them for her own injuries, and would never have forgiven them if her own child had been killed – maybe she was too polite to phrase it in those terms. On the other hand, it could also mean that she was only psychologically incapable of forgiving the IRA, much though she realises it would be the appropriate thing to do; in this respect her comments are compatible with an admiration for Wilson.

Third, although Wilson was injured, the important thing here is that it was Wilson's daughter who was killed. There is a question here of whether Wilson had the 'standing' to forgive the IRA for the death of someone else; one might argue that only the victim can forgive, and one can speculate about what Marie Wilson would have thought of the IRA, and would have thought about her father presuming to forgive them on her behalf. Nevertheless, if we assume that Wilson loved his daughter, then we can also assume that his life was very much bound up in hers, such that any attack on her was also an attack on him; indeed, he would probably have suffered much more from her loss than from any wounds the bomb could have inflicted on him. I think that while some people (especially Christians) could imagine being tortured, and going on to forgive their torturer, it is much more difficult for a parent to imagine their *child* being killed, and then going on to forgive the killer. I do not know if Daphne Stephenson was herself a parent, but perhaps this was also relevant to her inability to "have that attitude." Again, though, this seems to push our reactions even further to the extremes: on the one hand, Wilson's forgiveness becomes even more admirable; on the other hand, it becomes even more tempting to condemn him for 'betraying' his daughter.

The most obvious person who could criticise Gordon Wilson's forgiveness was Wilson's wife Joan. For Marie was her child too. Indeed, in the fact that it was she who bore Marie, that Marie was of her flesh, it could be said that she was more her child than Gordon's, and therefore that decisions about forgiveness would belong more to the mother than to the father. Even if we accept equal parenting status, there is a tension here. On the one hand, forgiveness is a highly personal matter, and each person has to answer the forgiveness question for themselves. On the other, it is interesting that we never hear about Joan Wilson's attitude to

⁶ It is true that some acts of killing might be justified by their occurrence within a just war, and some people might view the Catholic struggle against the British 'occupier' in these lights, but this particular bombing against innocent civilians (most of them elderly) was clearly unjustified.

the IRA murderers, either through her husband speaking of 'we' forgiving them (in the same way that he would be inclined to speak of 'our child'), or at least through a reference to what 'my wife' thinks. Presumably she agreed with his decision: it would be intolerable to live with someone whom one thought of as having betrayed one's child.

Now let me bring in the perplexed observer (the BBC reporter), asking Wilson why he forgave. Wilson mentions the pointlessness of "dirty talk." He mentions his intention to pray for the bombers, which suggests that he pities them. We therefore have two reasons that point in the direction of forgiveness, but, I think, fall far short of sufficiency. In his discussion of the example Gormley does not explicitly suggest that Wilson acted on practical necessity, but this is what I interpret him as implying. Wilson first paused to contemplate the enormity of the offence. He then deliberated about whether to forgive or not. And he discovered that he "had to" forgive them. I admit that I am speculating at this point – I could find no evidence that he would have articulated the forgiveness under the modality of necessity; but I want to argue that this is the most philosophically compelling account of real forgiveness, that it is essentially unconditional and essentially about the discovery of a necessity; without the practical necessity, then it would be a matter of decision, and without sufficient reasons then such a decision would indeed risk being arbitrary, whimsical, frivolous or unintelligible.

There is one more difference between Bonhoeffer and Wilson that is relevant to Wilson's forgiveness, and that is the role of Wilson's religious beliefs. Both men were devout believers, but Bonhoeffer was more interested in his country and his compatriots when looking for reasons to return to Germany. Wilson made an explicit reference not only to praying for the IRA bombers, but he also reaffirmed his faith that he would meet his daughter again in heaven. In dealing with a question of forgiveness, Wilson's Christianity would have been directly relevant, and so this is worth examining more closely.

A Christian duty to forgive?

I have already expressed my reluctance to go too far into the theological debate about the Christian obligations. The first thing to say is that it is perfectly compatible for a Christian to forgive her offender while at the same time supporting all the efforts of the secular criminal justice system to apprehend, prosecute and punish him. (As far as I know, Wilson never demanded that the IRA bombers be shown mercy.)

Second, I want to reject a conception of religious faith that reduces it to a mere struggle over psychological obstacles (e.g. one's selfishness, fear, the seven deadly sins...). I mentioned this when I introduced the possible criticism by the fellow survivor, Daphne Stephenson. Although this might have been what was going on in Wilson's mind, this conception is not very interesting philosophically or morally. Instead, I'm going to assume he was deliberating about whether or not to forgive, just as Bonhoeffer was deliberating about whether or not to return, *given* that they both had the strength of will to carry out their respective decisions or discoveries.

Third, it seems to be a clear command for Christians to "love your neighbour as yourself" and to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Such commands are surely central to the Christian faith in a way that the prohibition against contraception is arguably not really central to the Catholic faith. On the one hand this would provide an intelligible and sufficient agent-relative reason to forgive: to put the matter as a crude caricature, we could then describe Wilson as "merely following orders." However, I want to reject this conception of religious faith not only because it threatens the electivity which I am arguing is essential to real forgiveness, but more broadly because it threatens the free will

which is exactly what gives religious faith its value (God does not want merely servile obedience). Instead, it is better to understand the above expressions not as commands backed by threats, but rather as *definitions* of what a good Christian would do. And this leads me to the important point.

The best way of accommodating Wilson's religious faith in his discovery that he has to forgive is to see his dilemma as beginning *not* with the question "should I forgive?" but *one stage back*. I suggest that the murder of his daughter presented a deep challenge to his belief in God, and this is what he struggled with in the time between the offence and the forgiveness. Once he could reaffirm his belief in God, then the forgiveness followed on from that. By the time the BBC interviewer asks him the question, Wilson was able to re-affirm his faith: "I don't have an answer, but I know there has to be a plan. If I didn't think that, I would commit suicide. It's part of a greater plan, and God is good. And we shall meet again."

The problem now is that the reaffirmation of faith is essentially mysterious; indeed, just as mysterious as the acquisition of faith by a so-called religious experience. Almost by definition, there is very little that a believer can explain to a non-believer about her conversion, or about her reaffirmation, beyond a vague description of the experience. What seems clear is that reasons alone are never sufficient for religious belief, as the notorious failure of the so-called 'proofs of God' attest through the ages. There always has to be a non-rational leap for the final step. And this starts to sound like Gormley's description of forgiveness. The religious believer can offer certain reasons for believing in God, and knows that she has to offer some reasons if her belief is not to appear as mere superstition or self-consoling fantasy, and yet the reasons never come close to adding up to the final decision/discovery, and the final gap is and should be essentially mysterious to both others and the believer herself.

The non-believing observer will not understand this, and will apply standards of rational belief-formation in vain. For the conditionalist to challenge the Christian's unconditional forgiveness is to challenge the entire edifice of Christian belief. This is not the place to explore the relationship between rationality and religious belief. However, Wilson's decision to forgive could be criticised even by those who *accept* that Bonhoeffer's decision to return to Germany was not arbitrary because of the gap. For Bonhoeffer was literally risking his life to do what he felt he had to do, and this gave his decision/discovery the requisite moral seriousness and underpinned its authority in expressing his self-conception. The risks involved such a high degree of probability and severity as to override, in strictly rational terms, any positive reasons for returning to Germany (namely his obligation to help his compatriots in their hour of need). Only a self-expressing practical necessity could make that decision admirable and non-arbitrary.

For Wilson, on the other hand, there was no risk to his safety or life in his decision to forgive the IRA. He might meet the disapproval of Daphne Stephenson (the other victim of the same blast), or of his wife or of his daughter Marie's schoolfriends, but that was hardly a great risk. But maybe this is again looking at the matter too late. Wilson's real problem, before the problem of whether to forgive, was the crisis of faith. For Wilson, a devout Christian up to this moment of great evil, this crisis carried the same existential risks to Wilson's soul as any threat to biological life.

The classic counter-example

So far I have been expanding Gormley's account of unconditional forgiveness as involving reasons that render the forgiveness partly intelligible while being insufficient to fully justify

it, and I have been developing Gormley's suggestion that Williams's practical necessity could fill the gap between the reasons and the forgiveness in order to deflect the charge of arbitrariness. Gordon Wilson can give *some* reasons for having forgiven (e.g. the pointlessness of the "dirty talk"), but beyond these he might only say "I had to forgive them." In this final section, I want to deploy the classic counter-example of the conditionalists.

Imagine a husband who regularly and systematically inflicts physical and sexual abuse on his wife over the course of years. Relatives and friends know enough about it to beg her to leave him and to report it to the police. But the wife refuses to leave, refuses to press charges, refuses to complain despite her evident injuries and distress. Whenever the police do come to the house, she denies there is anything wrong and explains away the bruises as resulting from her own clumsiness. Perhaps she explicitly uses the words 'I forgive you', perhaps the mere fact that she remains with him without complaining is itself an expression of forgiveness. Either way, we would surely want to say that she is *mistaken*, that her forgiveness merely condones the evil and evidences a failure of self-respect.

And yet it would seem that Gormley's and my unconditional account would allow just such an example. The wife can offer certain reasons: "he needs me," "he's under a lot of stress," "I married him, and committed myself for life" which are intelligible as reasons to forgive, but in this case they are not sufficient. And yet the wife has deliberated – perhaps after each new incident – and "discovered" that she "has to" forgive him. We could accept all that, but surely we should still think her mistaken. With Bonhoeffer, I might well think that he is mistaken, but in a different way: my belief is fully compatible with admiring his risky decision and the high ideals that motivated it. With Wilson, I might think that he is mistaken, but there is no sense that he is denigrating himself in the process. Not so with the battered wife, whose behaviour I start to explain by reaching for various psychological concepts of impaired agency: adaptive preferences, learned helplessness, self-loathing. Such psychological concepts might even go so far as to undermine autonomy and thereby undermine the 'forgiveness' (with scare quotes) which she evinces. No matter what she said, she would not be forgiving so much as resigning.

The social and psychological problem of battered persons who seem to consent to their own battery is very complicated, and again, I cannot do it justice here. But I think it fails as a counter-example to Gormley's and my unconditionalist account precisely because of the element of *repetition*. When the wife is battered for the first time and the husband does not show any sign of apology or repentance, I would claim she can still forgive – genuinely forgive – in accordance with the account I developed above. But this forgiveness should not be seen in a vacuum, cut off from the past and future. It is not as if the wife faces the same dilemma after the first battery as after the second battery. For after the first battery she has forgiven him; by committing the second battery, he has effectively rejected the forgiveness, and this renders it null and void, as it were. Forgiveness, like a gift, has to be given *and received* in order to work as forgiveness in the full sense. For this reason, I do not think one can forgive only "in one's head" – sometimes called "therapeutic forgiveness" and a key part of the self-help industry. Forgiving in one's head is usually a matter of ignoring the matter, or explaining it away, or finding excuses, or getting over it etc.; whereas forgiveness is essentially bilateral.⁷

⁷ I acknowledge there is a special case when one forgives the dead, which I do think is possible.

However, surely Wilson's forgiveness was not received? Or at least, there was no evidence to Wilson that the forgiveness had been received, just as there was no evidence at the time that the IRA were apologetic or repentant. Wilson's forgiveness was made very publicly, and so it must have reached the bombers sooner or later. I have to admit that if another IRA bomb then killed Wilson's wife, and he proceeded to forgive the IRA again, that he would be in the situation of the battered wife, and his forgiveness, insofar as it could be called forgiveness at all, would certainly be much less admirable.

Conclusion

Forgiveness therefore remains mysterious: but I hope to have discussed the *limits* of that mystery, limits that allow it a certain amount of the intelligibility and admirability that is essential to the forgiveness as we know it in our daily lives. It is not wildly mysterious to the point of whimsy and arbitrariness; but nor is it rigidly rule-governed and unmysterious as the conditionalists would have it. I think Gormley's compromise points us in the right direction, and I have tried to develop it further.⁸

⁸ I would like to thank Sean Pierce and Court Lewis for comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

Bibliography

- Kolnai T (1973) 'Forgiveness' in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* vol. 74
- Murphy J (1990) 'Forgiveness and resentment' in: Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Cambridge University Press
- Griswold G (2007) *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, Cambridge University Press
- Garrard E and McNaughton D (2003) 'In defence of unconditional forgiveness' in: *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* vol. 104
- Derrida J (2001) *On cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, tr Dooley and Hughes. Routledge
- Gormley S (2014) 'The impossible demand of forgiveness' in: *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* vol. 22.1
- Williams B (1981a) 'Practical Necessity' in: *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press
- Williams B (1981b) 'Moral Luck' in: *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press
- Williams B (1995) 'Moral Incapacity' in: *Making Sense of Humanity*, Cambridge University Press