

# *Why Genuine Forgiveness must be Elective and Unconditional*

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ABSTRACT. Charles Griswold's 2007 book *Forgiveness* argues that genuine forgiveness of an unexcused, unjustified and unignored offence must be norm-governed and conditional. In the same way that gift-giving is governed by norms of appropriateness, so too is forgiveness; and the appropriateness of forgiving is centrally dependent on the offender's repentance. In response, I claim that genuine forgiveness must always be elective and unconditional, and therefore genuinely unpredictable, no matter how much – or how little – the offender repents. I consider and reject one defence of unconditional forgiveness, that of Garrard and McNaughton. I then develop my own account, which builds on Bernard Williams' notion of practical necessity.

KEYWORDS. forgiveness, Griswold, repentance, practical necessity, electivity

## I. INTRODUCTION

As an explicit philosophical topic, forgiveness has received a fair amount of attention among English-speaking philosophers in the last forty years, especially since Aurel Kolnai's 1973 seminal article "Forgiveness". Because of its close conceptual links to moral responsibility, however, the topic goes back at least as far as Aristotle. One task of any analysis of forgiveness, therefore, is to distinguish it from other responses to wrongdoing that fall short of full blame and condemnation, among them responses such as excusing, justifying, sympathising, ignoring, forgetting and showing mercy. The roots of the philosophical discussion of forgiveness also go back to the Christian tradition, where one person forgiving another was to be modelled on God's unconditional love and

forgiveness of all his children. One thing that seems to distinguish the Christian understanding of forgiveness from the Aristotelian is the question of conditionality. In this paper I do not propose to examine either Aristotle or Christian theology at all, but to focus instead on this question of conditionality, that is, whether the offender has to fulfil certain conditions in order to make forgiveness ethically appropriate.

Charles Griswold (2007) offers one of the most recent and certainly one of the most systematic analyses of forgiveness. He follows a number of philosophers who claim that forgiveness must be norm-governed and conditional, and challenging this will be my task in part I.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that, as a conceptual matter, forgiveness can only be unconditional. I have not been the only one to argue this. In part II, I consider but then reject the ‘defence of unconditional forgiveness’ offered by Garrard and McNaughton (2002). Part III will then develop my own argument for why and how genuine forgiveness must be elective and unconditional, and I draw on Bernard Williams’ notion of ‘practical necessity’ in this regard.

Let us begin with a schematic case to clarify the discussion. A person – the victim – has suffered a putative offence at the hands of a putative offender. The central question here is: what happens next? Should the victim forgive the offender? Or more specifically: what might be *said* to the victim as an attempt to persuade him or her to forgive the offender? And what sort of things could be said in support of the claim that the victim should or should not forgive?<sup>2</sup>

Now the victim is imaginative and open-minded, ethically serious and reflective, and therefore refuses to jump to any conclusions. He or she considers further aspects of the situation that might be relevant, aspects that might be offered by offenders themselves in mitigation. However, we have to be careful about such mitigation, because it might relate to justice rather than to forgiveness. (i) The offender might offer

an *excuse* based on a reduction of responsibility through ignorance or accident or compulsion (“I didn’t see you standing there”, or “I lost my balance when the train stopped suddenly”). The assumption here, of course, is that such ignorance or accident is itself non-culpable. (ii) Offenders might offer a *justification* for their action, comprising their expressed belief that the action was somehow necessary to achieve certain kinds of greater good or to fulfil a greater duty (e.g. “I was only being cruel to be kind”). If the excuse or justification is successful in the victim’s eyes, then he or she will not believe that any offence was committed after all, spontaneous resentment should fade away, and in principle no apology or corresponding forgiveness would be necessary, even if a *rhetorical* apology and corresponding forgiveness might be necessary for social lubrication. The situation that interests me in the present contribution, however, is where the excuse or justification fails to persuade the victim, or when the offender cannot or refuses to offer one at all, and the victim is left with an insufficiently excused or justified offence. Should the victim forgive the offender?<sup>3</sup>

We need a rough and ready definition of forgiveness at this juncture: the decision to forgive involves the conscious attempt to prevent one’s spontaneous and morally legitimate resentment from influencing one’s thoughts about the offender, on the basis of some sort of new understanding of the offender and the offence. I stress two words in this definition. First, it is an attempt; it may turn out that the attempt has to be repeated or sustained over a longer period, or indeed that it fails despite the victim’s best efforts. Second, the resentment is morally legitimate in the sense that such a response is compatible with justice (as opposed to my spontaneous resentment of the police officer for justly fining me for speeding). Moreover, forgiveness has to be distinguished from other intelligible responses to unexcused or unjustified offences: if the offence is slight or common, the victim might simply forget it; the victim might also ignore it, that is, might refuse to allow it into his or her deliberations (as much as he or she is able). Forgiveness, on the other hand, involves

keeping the offence clearly in one's memory *as* an offence, and endorsing a clear-eyed and continuous appraisal of it as wrong.<sup>4</sup>

One important note needs to be made before I continue: I will only be considering ordinary and familiar offences here, committed in the politically stable and wealthy modern West, and in familiar contexts such as school, work, democratic politics, marriage etc. Much of the philosophical literature on forgiveness concerns egregious wrongs such as those perpetrated within the context of the Holocaust or South African Apartheid, and I find it difficult to rely on my moral intuitions with any confidence in such discussions. Whether what I say in this article is applicable by extension to egregious wrongs I will not consider.

## II. GRISWOLD ON CONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

Griswold offers a *conditional* and *norm-governed* account of forgiveness. Conditionality means that the offender must fulfil some conditions in order to 'earn' forgiveness; if victims nevertheless go ahead and forgive the offender without the fulfilment of these conditions, then what they do is not forgive but make excuses for the offender, denigrating themselves in the process, and perhaps condoning evil (Griswold 2007, 63-64). Griswold outlines six conditions for genuine repentance in a "paradigmatic case" ("imperfect forgiveness", for Griswold, will then be an appropriate response to the partial fulfilment of some or all of these conditions):

- (i) "[T]he wrong-doer's demonstration that she no longer wishes to stand by herself as the author of those wrongs."<sup>5</sup>
- (ii) "[S]he must repudiate her deeds (by acknowledging their wrongness) and thus disavow the idea that she would author those deeds again."
- (iii) She "must experience and express *regret* at having caused that particular injury to that particular person."

- (iv) She “must commit to becoming the sort of person who does not inflict injury, and that commitment must be shown through deeds as well as words.”
- (v) She “must show that she understands, from the injured person’s perspective, the damage done by the injury.”
- (vi) “[T]he offender’s regretful address would offer some sort of *narrative* accounting for how she came to do wrong” (2007, 49-51; italics original).

It is important to note that there are *two* sets of conditions that are relevant here. The conditions that make forgiveness appropriate (such as those proposed by Griswold above) should be distinguished from the conditions that make the victim’s decision and action a reliably recognisable case of forgiveness in the first place. For example, if the victim claims to have forgiven the offender, and yet keeps trying to take revenge, then what he or she has done is probably not forgiveness, irrespective of the words he or she may utter. In the present contribution, it is only the appropriateness conditions that I will be challenging.

The other thing that forgiveness has to be, according to Griswold, is norm-governed. Norm-governance means that the repentant offender ‘earns’ or ‘qualifies for’ forgiveness, that forgiveness has become ‘appropriate’, and that the victim is ‘entitled’ to forgive, in accordance with relevant norms (these are the words Griswold uses). These norms should be distinguished from any logical or moral obligation.<sup>6</sup> The metaphor of ‘wiping the slate clean’ is misleading because it seems too close in conceptual terms to debt-repayment. Griswold looks to the etymology of the word ‘forgive’ in search of a clue, and argues that giving is also norm-governed, and that “gifts are normally accompanied by the expectation of reciprocity” (2007, 63). But these norms and expectations work in a particular way. When I am invited to dinner, there are norms governing the sort of gift to bring, the amount of money to spend on the gift, the presentation of the gift etc. Such norms do not require a specific gift on

a specific occasion: they delimit a space of appropriateness within which I am free to give whatever I want. Importantly, however, I can also refuse to give a gift, although I may be blameworthy for doing so: I may be rightly described as a cheapskate, for example (2007, 67). As such, Griswold concludes, the gift remains elective in this double sense: I am still free to give any of a number of more or less appropriate gifts, and I am still free to disregard the norms entirely, albeit at some cost. In contrast, if I refuse to pay my debt or fulfil my obligation, I am still indebted or obligated whether I like it or not.

As with giving, so with forgiving, says Griswold. The conditions still allow some room for me to choose how exactly to forgive, and they also allow room for me to refuse to forgive even after the offender has done all he or she can to repent, and thereby to risk receiving blame, both from the offender and from any spectators – I may rightly be described as ‘ungenerous’, ‘hard-hearted’ or ‘unforgiving’. Griswold hopes thereby to accommodate two *prima facie* incompatible intuitions. The first is that forgiveness should be elective rather than owed. The second is that it makes sense for a third party to tell the victim that he or she ‘ought to’ forgive the offender, or indeed for victims to ask themselves whether they ought to forgive.

Griswold’s etymological analysis is useful, and I would also like to help myself to it in order to launch my criticism of his account. Let us return to the dinner party, bottle in hand. I want to say that the bottle is not a gift in the full sense of the word. Why not? Not because there are no norms, but because the norms are too present *in the consciousness* of the donor and the beneficiary. The donor thinks: “it’s quite a formal do, I’d better bring a bottle” or “that was awkward, I should have brought something a little more expensive”. The host expects the bottle or something equivalent and notices its absence; they may smile, but they make a mental note. I want to suggest that this is not the psychology of gift-giving. It is a similar point about the psychology of the supererogatory,

e.g. of altruism and virtue. The genuinely courageous person is not conscious of his or her courage at the moment he or she expresses it. People who worry or gloat about their courage are more concerned with their appearance to others than with the proper object or end of the courageous action. At the same time, courage is of course subject to external norms. D.Z. Phillips puts it well in his discussion of the psychology of caring:

Is not the form of the imperative ‘You ought to heed these considerations if you care or if you are interested?’ This is not so. To think otherwise is to confuse the conditions under which a man has reasons for paying attention to moral considerations with his paying attention. He will not have such reasons unless he cares, but the fact that he cares is not his reason for caring. If, hurrying to the cinema, I stop to help the victim of an epileptic fit, while it is true that, in the absence of considerations of personal advantage, I should not have stopped unless I cared, it does not follow that my reason for helping him is because I care. The reason is to be found in the suffering of the epileptic (1992, 133).

The donor of a genuine gift has no expectations; the gift is in no way a payment, an investment, a lubricant; it has nothing prudential or self-regarding at all. It is true that an experienced person will be better able to read a situation, and to discern the beneficiary’s needs and wants, and his or her gift will therefore be more appropriate. But whether it is a gift in the first place will be a question of the donor’s psychology.

Similarly, when people receive a genuine gift, they do not allow (as far as possible) thoughts of expectation, appropriateness and cheapness to enter their mind. Of course such thoughts may enter their minds, but they do not endorse them, in the same way that people refuse to endorse other embarrassing thoughts (racist, cruel, sexually perverse) that stray into their minds. Rather, they are moved by the intention behind the gift. All this is compatible with Griswold’s norms: the gift may well be inappropriate for any number of reasons.

It might be objected that the donor expects, if nothing else, then at least gratitude. This is true, but such gratitude is not an *object* that is returned to the donor as part of the transaction, just as it is not an object that fills the donor's mind as the end he or she pursues in giving the gift (...and despite what implausible reductionist accounts would have us believe, the donor is not in search of the charity 'buzz'.) The genuine donor is motivated only by the apparent needs and desires of the beneficiary; and the beneficiary's gratitude is no more than the recognition of the gift *as* a gift: the donor expects gratitude only as confirmation that the gift got through. At the extreme will be the gifts offered by saints, where not even gratitude will be expected. Such giving actions are entirely selfless, and yet paradoxically the gifts in question express the donor's self in an especially pure fashion. Of course, most of us cannot achieve such selflessness, and so my account is one of degrees rather than absolutes. At one end is the pure economic transaction, at the other the selfless donation of the saint: in between runs a continuum upon which the given object has greater or lesser gift-like status.<sup>7</sup> My argument against Griswold is that by focussing on gift-giving norms and disregarding psychology, he seems to allow *all* actions on this continuum the status of gift: for even in crude economic exchanges he would probably perceive sufficient electivity (in both having a range of appropriateness, and having the freedom to defy the norms).

Now, in the same way that 'gift' is used in a thin sense to denote my entrance ticket to the dinner party, so too can 'forgive' be used in a thin sense as social lubrication. There is nothing wrong with such courteous exchanges, and our social world would be impossible without allowing face-saving ways of dissipating momentary friction. The most primitive exchange rituals are those of 'please' and 'thank you' taught to pre-school children, which then move on to reconciliatory expressions such as "I'm sorry" and "it's all right". There might be a moment's hesitation when there is a suspicion of malice, but most people can give the benefit of the doubt and move on, without anything as clumsy or formal as robust forgiveness.



Given its supererogatory status, genuine forgiveness cannot be expected, and especially not by the offender, regardless of how many of Griswold's conditions he or she has fulfilled. The offender has to be genuinely unsure about whether he or she will be forgiven or not, and indeed genuinely unsure of whether he or she will have anything further to do with the victim. After all, what is the *point* of forgiveness, what does it achieve, if it is to function as no more than a rhetorical full stop to a process that is initiated and concluded by the offender along reliable lines?<sup>8</sup> Griswold believes that the modicum of electivity he affords the victim can provide the space for achievement, but I suggest this is small beer.

Indeed, Griswold's emphasis on conditions comes too close to the indecency of an imperious victim *waiting* for the conditions to be fulfilled before handing down his or her forgiveness. As Garrard and McNaughton put it:

In our view, to forgive involves not requiring apology or penance. To insist on an apology is to insist that the wrongdoer humble himself before one, and this implies that there is still some residual resentment. Any relishing of the wrongdoer's lowered standing in relation to the forgiver impugns the genuineness of the forgiveness. And similar remarks apply to insisting on penance (2002, 47)

I agree.<sup>9</sup> Forgiveness should be a response to the offence, or more precisely to the offender-who-has-performed-the-offence, rather than to what the offender does or says *after* committing the offence.

By way of a final response, Griswold would spell out two limiting situations that seem to be implied by the radical electivity I am proposing. The first situation would see the offender attempting to do *everything* to be forgiven, not only the conditions laid out by Griswold, but even ad hoc conditions stipulated by the victim, *and still* he or she could be refused forgiveness with impunity according to my account. Indeed, the

offender could be refused forgiveness for even trivial and unintended slights. Surely there is an enormous risk here for sheer bloody-minded stubbornness on the part of the victim, or for preciousness and vanity. Surely it is implausible to place so much power in the hands of the victim, without any accompanying pressure on the victim to account for the decisions resulting from his or her power. Let this be called the ‘sheer bloody-mindedness objection’.

The second limiting situation, already mentioned above, would involve offenders who do not repent at all. Maybe they do not acknowledge the act as an offence; maybe they consider the harm excused or justified; maybe they enjoy the victim’s suffering; maybe they are supremely indifferent to the victim’s plight. Worst of all, maybe they are *akratic* to such a degree that their sincere repentance is short-lived and they re-offend again and again. According to my account of radical electivity, *none of this* would matter in the slightest, for it would put no pressure on the victim to forgive, to ignore, or to withhold forgiveness. An extreme example of this might be the battered wife, who ‘forgives’ her husband, if not in word than in the mere fact of remaining with him. Let this be called the ‘battered wife objection’.<sup>10</sup>

Any criticism of Griswold’s account will have to deal with these two limiting situations, and I will have to leave my response to the fourth section, where I lay out my positive thesis.

### III. GARRARD AND MCNAUGHTON ON UNCONDITIONAL FORGIVENESS

In this section I want to consider the account of unconditional forgiveness set out by Garrard and McNaughton (2002; henceforth G&M). Although I obviously agree with their opening intuitions, in the end I reject their account, and showing why will help to clarify my own account in contrast. G&M argue that genuine forgiveness should not depend on the offender fulfilling general or specific conditions. They argue, however,

for a different set of conditions to underlie the victim's *motivations*; genuine forgiveness should be motivated only by a sense of 'human solidarity', by an awareness of the common vulnerability that he or she shares with the offender (2002, 54).<sup>11</sup> Such an awareness partly comprises a generous imaginative acknowledgement that I, too, might have committed the same type of offence in the same type of circumstances. And even when I cannot imagine *myself* committing that type of offence in that type of circumstances, solidarity involves imagining myself having become *the person that might have committed it* if my early and ongoing circumstances had been less favourable. And since we can never be sure about such hypothetical life histories, G&M conclude, we should give the benefit of the doubt, and forgive.

G&M's account therefore rejects Griswold's conditionality and accepts the need for normative guidance of some sort, while accepting Griswold's intuition that victims can be legitimately subject to moral criticism for failing to forgive, although here that means failing to have or to exercise sufficient imagination and humility to appreciate the brute contingency of the interaction between him or herself and the offender. This account also generates reasons that victims might invoke when they ask themselves whether they should, after all, forgive the offender.

There is a lot to be said for a spirit of "there but for the grace of God" in any conflicts with others, and indeed in our ethical lives as a whole. But as a response to the problem of forgiveness we are discussing it is confused on some crucial points. First, it comes too close to *excusing* the offender, to diminishing his or her responsibility, to a point where what is going on is better described as sympathetic understanding rather than forgiveness. Instead, I suggest that sympathetic understanding is compatible with a refusal to forgive. Griswold concurs: "The 'common frailty' thesis might just as well lead to the view that it is all the more important – just because we are so frail – to hold ourselves and each other accountable by *not* forgiving unless there is warrant for doing so" (2007, 66).

Second, it would be hard to delimit the scope of such an approach, for it would seem to rule out the possibility of *any* form of robust condemnation based on the key difference between me and you: that it was you who committed the offence and not I; but, moreover, it was you who committed the offence *against me*. G&M might have a point if they were referring to some idealised imperative that can be applied to saints; but insofar as I am not a saint, then I take the offence personally. It was committed by someone who meant harm to me, or who should have taken greater care to avoid harming me.

In addition, if I *cannot* understand the offender's act as a sign of weakness to which I am or could easily be prone or have been prone, then there is another key difference between the offender and me: the fact that he or she would do such a thing, but I simply would not. While it is true that any number of adverse situations might surprise me by revealing what I am in fact capable of, the key point here is that there has to be a limit to my imagination: my self-understanding relies on their being certain things I cannot imagine doing, however great the temptation or provocation. I can be reasonably confident in these limits, given my life experience so far. So human solidarity is all very well when it comes to theft by a starving stranger, and I can confidently say "there but for the grace..."; it is quite another thing when it comes to a betrayal by an ambitious work colleague, where all that goes through my mind is "how could he...?"

Third, it is of course true that if my upbringing had been marked by much greater deprivation, I might be a lot more inclined to commit such an offence; but then it would no longer be *me* against whom the offence was committed. The whole point about me is that I was – completely contingently, of course – *not* brought up like that. It is now too late to wonder what I would have done or said or thought because it would be a completely different ethical encounter.

This is not to reject G&M's account completely, if it can be taken as an impetus to the deployment of greater imagination and sensitivity in

trying to make sense of the offender's action, and Griswold would surely agree with this too. But this will come too close to understanding the offender's action, and thereby excusing or justifying it – rather than forgiving it. Instead, I would argue that forgiveness becomes a genuine issue and marks a real achievement precisely when I *cannot* understand the offence, no matter how hard I try, no matter how hard the offender repents, because the offence is incomprehensible. At this point there is a gap between the situation and the victim's decision, and in this gap lies the electivity.

Not only is the offence incomprehensible, but it is also *prima facie* unforgivable. Its very nature as an offence, when first appreciated, is incompatible with forgiveness. I am referring here to a famous paradox described by Jacques Derrida:

In order to approach now the very concept of forgiveness, logic and common sense agree for once with the paradox: it is necessary, it seems to me, to begin with the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is it not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that *calls* for forgiveness? (2001, 32, italics original)<sup>12</sup>

I don't know about the rest of Derrida's argument, but I think this expresses a profound insight about the failure of conditional accounts. First, we should be clear to understand 'unforgivable' not as meaning 'very serious', and I declared at the start that I am not discussing war crimes and genocide. Instead, we are talking about a personal, individual reaction coloured by bafflement and hurt. For Derrida, the very notion of an offence being in principle forgivable already entails its being forgiven, in some possible world or at some point in the future; so the nominally forgivable offence is nothing more than the first move in another norm-governed transaction. Whether or not the act *is* then nominally forgiven adds nothing new to our understanding of that act.

Griswold has little time for Derrida.<sup>13</sup> For Griswold, either an act is forgivable or it is not. Some acts might be genuinely unforgivable,

meaning that the act is so serious and/or the perpetrator so unrepentant that nobody's forgiveness would be appropriate in that situation. The only way to interpret Derrida is by saying that an *apparently* unforgivable act turned out to be – upon reflection, after the heat of the moment – appropriately forgivable. In other words, there is a truth value to forgiveness: in the same way that the offence takes place (or does not take place) at a time  $t$ , and the offender's repentance takes place (or does not take place) at time  $t+1$ , then the temporally-limited package of offence and repentance is either forgivable or not, timelessly. In contrast, Derrida presupposes an open future. The act *is* unforgivable *until it is forgiven*: there is nothing in the offence itself (or in the package of offence and repentance) that contains the subsequent forgiveness, in the sense of the norms of appropriateness. Forgiveness might ensue, or it might not – it is genuinely up to the victim, acting unpredictably in an open future. And if it does ensue, even if Griswold would applaud the forgiveness as appropriate, this does not then reveal the offence to have been forgivable all along: indeed, the offence may continue to seem to others as unforgivable, but this need not matter in the slightest to the victim.

So Derrida has challenged the temporal presuppositions of realism. In the next section we shall challenge the absolutist presuppositions of realism, and this will enable us to return to Derrida later on.

#### IV. FORGIVENESS AND THE PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

There is one aspect of my criticism of Griswold that overlaps with my criticism of Garrard and McNaughton: all three authors, I believe, neglect the nature and the role of the personal in ethics, including its role in the victim's decision of whether or not to forgive. In this section I would like to say more about what this could mean.<sup>14</sup>

Most of the time, our language reflects a philosophical *realism* about the world. This means that we acknowledge that our perceptions and our

beliefs are answerable to the way things are in the world; we might be mistaken, and sometimes we can be legitimately criticised by others with a better view of the world or more accurate beliefs. Much of our ethical talk (for example, “one has a moral duty to do X in such a situation”, “it would be cowardly to do Y here and now”) is grammatically similar to talk about tables and chairs, and so invites a similar interpretation. In a given situation, there is a singular moral fact of the matter, ‘out there’, to which each of us – anyone who stumbles upon the situation – is answerable, regardless of who we are. This perspective on the world and on the agents operating in it might be called ‘third-personal’ in that it asks what ‘one’ ought to do, where ‘one’ means anybody finding themselves in that situation: the familiar principle of universalisability. Sometimes, of course, there will be features of a particular agent that distinguish him or her in morally relevant ways from other agents, so that the same situation might generate different moral obligations for different agents (e.g. when facing the same situation of a drowning swimmer, the trained lifeguard will have different obligations than a non-swimmer). But the obligation is still universalisable across that narrower class of people.

Griswold is a realist: he believes there is a fact of the matter about whether what A did to B was an offence, about whether A was therefore an offender, about whether A therefore owed an apology to B, and about whether B had an imperfect duty to forgive A. As we saw, there is also a fact – a timeless fact – about whether the offence was appropriately forgivable.

I am inclined nonetheless to accuse Griswold of neglecting the first-personal perspective, that is, the perspective within which I do not ask what ‘one’ ought to do, but what *I* ought to do, regardless of what other people feel or say I should do. The offence (what I consider to be an offence) has been committed against me, and I am left with the question of whether to forgive. As part of that deliberation, I may consult a friend, and that person may advise me one way or another. I may also take into account the fact that the offender has not repented, or offered

insufficient repentance. But in the end the decision is still not made *until I make it*. This is the radical electivity that I believe is essential to forgiveness. And in making my decision, there is no implication that I am correctly *discovering*, out there, what ought to be done, nor the opposite implication that I am failing to discover what ought to be done. My friends might indeed blame me for whatever I decide, but *pace* Griswold, this does not imply that they have better access to a moral fact; all it means is that, as far as they can tell, they would have decided differently if they had been in the same situation.

Griswold might well reject this as a recipe for facile subjectivism, and this is not entirely incorrect. The decision to forgive or withhold forgiveness, as well as the reasons given, will tell us about the subject and the way he or she sees the world. However, just because the decision is personal does not mean that it is *merely* personal; decisions to forgive are not expressions of arbitrary preference such as musical and gastronomic taste. Unlike the paradigms of subjective taste, the offence in question is experienced as serious – and *objective*. The wrongness of the offence is experienced as something out there, in the world. Deliberations about whether to forgive are deliberations about the world, about the offender, the offence, his or her repentance etc.

In the same way as my emphasis on the personal perspective does not constitute a slide toward full subjectivism, neither is it a slide toward mere feelings. The popular discussions of ‘therapeutic’ forgiveness in the self-help literature are all about feelings and attitudes, and how to dispel or overcome them, without any necessary connection with the reality of what happened or what was said. In my account, victims still experience the world, from within their perspective, as making *objective* ethical claims on them, claims that they discover ‘out there’.

One way to understand the role of the personal is to consider the phenomenon of ‘practical necessity’, a term coined by Bernard Williams in his 1981 article of the same name. Practical necessity refers to a distinctive experience, whereby the agents describe themselves using the



first person rather than the third person ('I' rather than 'one'), such that they commit themselves to no implicit universalisability. Consider the example of Martin Luther, standing at the Diet of Worms, wondering how far to take his protest against the corruption of the Catholic church. He declares that he "must" go through with the protest, that he "cannot do otherwise". In making this declaration, he is not advising or prescribing his like-minded friends to join him in their protest; he is simply speaking for himself. At the same time, he is not expressing a whimsical preference as conceived by subjectivism: he is taking himself as responding to an objective ethical demand, and a very serious one at that, one that he knows will involve a risk to his life.

Luther's action still makes sense to his like-minded observers: he is protesting against the Catholic church for good reasons, and his protest coheres with many other ethical values and principles that he and his observers share. But against the reasons for protest will be intelligible prudential reasons to stay quiet, and most of Luther's friends will find that these latter reasons easily override the reasons to protest. The practical necessity that Luther acts under is not a duty generated by an impersonal weighing of all relevant reasons, themselves generated by the situation: unlike his friends, Luther found that the reasons to protest silenced the reasons to keep quiet. And yet there is no necessary sense that Luther was right and his friends were wrong or weak or selfish; or that Luther was irresponsible, or power-hungry, or self-absorbed, or neglectful of his family, while his friends were not. The reasons generated by the situation did not compel action. At the same time, neither Luther nor his friends were necessarily ignorant of relevant facts or reasons (I stress this 'necessarily', since it might well have been the case that Luther was no more than an adroit political schemer, acting on strictly Machiavellian considerations).

All that one can say, at least in Luther's situation, is that Luther found that he had to protest and his friends found that they had to stay quiet. The reasons that Luther can give for his action make sense to his

friends, and yet they do not ‘add up’ to the action: viewed from outside, there is a gap between Luther’s declared reasons and his action, and there is nothing further about the situation, or about likely futures resulting from different decisions that could be made in the situation, that would be news to Luther. In one sense, therefore, Luther and his like-minded friends face the same situation; in another, they face different situations as revealed by the fact that Luther found he had to continue with the protest, and his friends did not. The gap between reasons and action, the same gap between Luther and his friends, is therefore essentially mysterious, since there is nothing further that can be said about it.

We can imagine Luther being blamed for his decision – perhaps his family would be legitimately angry at being placed at risk, perhaps his friends believe that the move is politically misguided and will harm the cause. And Luther can listen to the reasons offered by family and friends, and yet he finds he is ‘unable’ to help them. They may continue to blame him, but there is an important sense in which the blame finds no purchase in Luther, for Luther cannot be other than who he is. This is because the family and friends are themselves conceiving of the situation from within their own perspectives. There is no overarching perspective to which they can appeal in blaming Luther for his actions.

I suggest that the challenge posed to moral realism by Williams’ account of practical necessity will be useful in making sense of why genuine forgiveness should be unconditional and elective. Griswold was trying to make explicit the basic norms that moral actors follow when engaging in the practice of determining when to forgive. I am suggesting that while there is room for reflecting on the offence, the victim is not thereby reviewing Griswold’s conditions; instead, what is going on is something akin to victims discovering that they ‘must’, or that they ‘cannot’, forgive.

There might seem to be a problem here. I have been arguing that genuine forgiveness must be *elective*. And yet here I am speaking of practical *necessity*, as if the agent did not have a choice, as if he or she was

compelled by something. To understand why this is not a contradiction, it is worth dividing up the victim's deliberations into two temporal stages. The first stage begins with the victim being struck by the initial injury of the situational package – the offence, plus whatever subsequent business logically relating to the offence, such as the offender's repentance. In Derrida's terms, he or she is struck by the unforgivability of the package – for his or her mind would already be made up if he or she were able to conceive of the offence as already forgivable. At this stage the future is wide open, and the decision of whether to forgive is entirely up to the victim. Importantly, from the point of view of the offender, as well as that of any other observers, the future is also open: nobody knows whether the victim will forgive, although some think he or she should and some think he or she should not. It is during the mysterious second temporal stage that the victim makes his or her discovery about what he or she has to do, but because this is not a discovery of something that was only in the situational package waiting to be discovered, it does not negate the electivity of the first stage.

Within the third-personal perspective, the decision to forgive the unforgivable (including the unrepentant) can then only appear 'mad' or 'illogical' (Derrida), or inappropriate (Griswold). The victim cannot explain the decision to forgive, cannot give full reasons for it, for this would be to bring the decision and the act into the third-personal space of reasons. This also entails that the victim's decision is not subject to moral praise and blame, to encouragement or discouragement, in accordance with Griswold's understanding of the electivity requirement. Viewed third-personally, the forgiveness will simply become a fact, as immune to subsequent moral judgements as a natural disaster.

At the same time, there is nothing essentially unrevisable about a decision to forgive, or to refuse to forgive. This is not the obvious point that further facts may come to light that reduce the seriousness of the offence or reduce the offender's responsibility for committing it. Rather, I am talking about situations where no further information is forthcoming, and yet

the victim decides to revise their decision. In the same way that the original situational package does not dictate the appropriate response, nor does it dictate the appropriate revision (e.g. as a ‘correction’ of an earlier ‘mistake’). The process of revision is as essentially mysterious and unpredictable as the original process of decision.

#### V. GRISWOLD’S TWO OBJECTIONS

What about the two objections that I anticipated Griswold making, the ‘sheer bloody-mindedness’ objection and the ‘battered housewife’ objection? According to the first, the victim refuses to forgive no matter what the offender does, and observers blame him or her for being bloody-minded and unforgiving. I have been describing the failure of such blame in finding purchase on the victim, but surely there have to be *some* situations where we, as observers or offenders, correctly think the victim was being stubbornly unforgiving?

My response to this is not going to please Griswold. When faced with the offence and the offender’s sincerely repentant efforts, the victim is not only considering the particular offence, but he or she is also re-evaluating the entire antecedent relationship with the offender in the light of the revelation that the offender ‘had it in him or her’ to commit the offence. In other words, what is at stake is a much larger situational package than Griswold had assumed, reaching further into a past that is less and less accessible, even in principle, to outsiders. If the victim deliberates sincerely and discovers that he or she cannot forgive the offender, this will almost certainly alter the relationship, if not destroy it altogether. But there is a very real sense in which it is only the victim’s relationship to re-evaluate: it is the victim and the offender who are alone in that relationship. In the case where the offender and the victim have no antecedent relationship (e.g. the victim was mugged by a stranger), the victim still faces a decision of how much he or she wants to try

to learn and understand the offender's behaviour, and thereby create a quasi-relationship. Some victims may not want to know anything further about the offender, may want to write him or her out of their lives, despite the offender's sincere repentance. Again, it has to be the victim's decision.

A third party can certainly accuse the victim of being hard and unforgiving and bloody-minded (whether or not the third party knows the offender and is in a position to provide further explanation); and this may get through, but then again it may not. However, this does not imply that the third party necessarily has privileged access to the truth of the alleged bloody-mindedness. Indeed, the third party might then deliberate about how his or her own relationship with the victim will be affected by the latter's bloody-mindedness; but so be it, that is *their* relationship.

My answer to the second objection will be similar. Griswold could point to those awful cases of wives who suffer continual physical and psychological abuse at the hands of their husbands, and yet who refuse to leave them, let alone complain about them. Whether or not they say the words 'I forgive you', their behaviour does indeed seem inappropriately forgiving in the sense of being self-denigrating and condoning the abuse (throughout we are taking the wife as legally competent to make decisions about her own well-being).

My first attempt to meet this objection will invoke a distinction I made at the beginning, that between the conceptual conditions of forgiveness and the appropriateness conditions. I accepted that conceptual conditions could be placed on an action for it to be recognisable *as* forgiveness in the first place. Where I disagreed with Griswold was about the need for appropriateness conditions. So my first suggestion to accommodate this objection would be to say that what the wife is doing is not forgiving at all, but ignoring or excusing or justifying. One of the conditions for an act to be one of forgiveness is to hold the offence in mind *as* an unignored, unexcused, unjustified offence, both before and after

the forgiving act or words. Despite the expression “forgive and forget”, true forgiveness does not forget – although it does not dwell on it either. I suspect that the wife tries to forget or ignore the abuse by focusing her attention on her husband’s better qualities; or else she tries to excuse it by imagining her husband as ill and needy; or else she tries to justify it by focusing on the prudential benefits of remaining in the marriage, e.g. perhaps she lacks the confidence to leave him and go it alone.

I believe that this reduction of the wife’s apparently forgiving behaviour to something else would account for most cases that baffle us as observers. But there are probably some cases of genuine forgiveness of brutal husbands, and my response to such a counter-example would echo my response to the first: the reminder that such a decision to forgive is made within a context of a long and private relationship. Marriages are one of the most opaque objects in the universe, often opaque even to their participants. As close friends to the battered wife, we can urge her to leave, we can offer her help and shelter and money, we could talk to the husband; but if all that fails, and the wife is not legally incompetent, then there may be nothing more we can do – or think. Yes, we continue to believe she is inappropriately forgiving of the unforgivable, yes, we wouldn’t put up with it if we were in her shoes, and yes, we continue to hope that she will one day see the light. Once again we are back at the mystery at the heart of forgiveness, a mystery that has to do with those striking moments when we are struck by the otherness of the other.

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## NOTES

1. In addition to Kolnai (1973) himself, the most famous conditional account is that of Jeffrie Murphy (Murphy and Hampton 1988).

2. For reasons that will become apparent, I use 'putative' above, thereby giving explicit priority to the victim's perspective on the event. I do not want to beg any questions by taking the offence as *given*, for whether it was offensive at all might be part of the conflict between offender and victim. The victim may be over-sensitive or self-important.

3. Again, I want to avoid describing the offence as *in fact* unjustified or unexcused, and prefer to focus instead on the victim's impression.

4. Griswold's book offers a much more detailed analysis of forgiveness, which I do not have space to summarise here. However, it is not directly important to the question of electivity, which is my main concern. Allais (2008) also offers a nuanced discussion of the concept, but without much interest in the electivity question.

5. Griswold considers one popular interpretation of "distancing oneself": Augustine's dictum to "hate the sin, love the sinner". As if the offender approaches the victim and invites him or her to jointly condemn the aberration. But Griswold is right to reject this: first, because it sounds like the offender is asking to be excused rather than forgiven; second, because the offender should be asking to be forgiven precisely *for committing the offence*. Loosening the ties of moral responsibility for one's freely-chosen past actions (in the way the pop existentialist might advocate) threatens to undermine too many important components of people's lives, such as promises and debts, not to mention contracts and friendships. However, some sort of distancing is one of the conditions for repentance, argues Griswold (2007, 55).

6. Schimmel (2002, chapters 2 and 3) argues that within Jewish thought, it is generally regarded as wrong to forgive unrepentant sinners, although it becomes obligatory if they truly repent and make appropriate restitution (cited in Allais 2008, 38)

7. Jacques Derrida (2001) also examines the practice of gift-giving in his discussion of forgiveness, but comes to a much more radical conclusion than I: that *only* the saint (my term, not his) can give a genuine gift, everything else is mere 'economy'.

8. This question echoes the question posed in discussions on the theory of punishment: if offenders are genuinely repentant, what is the point of punishing them?

9. Griswold (2007, 64) does not, saying that apologising need not involve "humbling", and the victim need not "relish" it. He then reiterates his concern about condoning the offence.

10. This particular consideration is of central concern to Jeffrie Murphy (Murphy and Hampton 1988). Not only might forgiveness be inappropriate, but there is nothing wrong with cultivating a lingering muscular resentment insofar as one's mental health will allow it.

11. The term 'offender' comes from my Schematic Case, not from Gerrard and McNaughton.

12. Derrida's writings are notoriously difficult, and I do not have the space (or the expertise) to go into them any further in this paper. It will suffice for my purposes to explore this one insight.

13. See footnote 22 on p. 63 and footnote 52 on p. 90 of Griswold (2007).

14. My account involves a type of forgiveness that will seem *prima facie* similar to two other types in the literature, that described as "personal" by Christopher Bennett (2003) and that described as "aspirational" or "full-blooded" by Cheshire Calhoun (1992). For reasons of space I cannot go into the important differences between our accounts, but suffice to say that mine is more radical.