ABSTRACT

Donald Callen, Advisor

This dissertation defends a particular account of forgiveness called the “quasi-unconditional” view. There are two main reasons for preferring this account over the ordinary philosophical one which, for the sake of convenience, I have called the “transactional” account. First, the transactional account depends upon the belief that wronging others is inherently tied to how we choose to act as moral agents, meaning that wronging others can be avoided as long as we do what is right. Hence, under this assumption, forgiveness is called for only in the case of actions where the doer is both responsible and blamable. This implies that the transactional account has nothing to say on forgiveness in the case where right action can be wrongful (i.e., where inevitable wrongdoing happens), a feature of what I have called an actual moral world. In an actual moral world, human experience is a theatre of practical and ethical incoherence in virtue of the difficulties we face in carrying out the multiple and yet specific roles that are simultaneously imposed on us as members of society. Thus some form of unconditional forgiveness is necessary simply as a way of grappling with the problematic nature of the moral life. Quasi-unconditionality is a form of unconditional forgiveness but one that is different from the ordinary philosophical account of unconditional forgiveness. For instance, unlike its rival, it addresses a whole range of circumstances or wrongs for which we may not know who is responsible, or where the issue of responsibility and/or blame is genuinely in dispute. The second reason for preferring quasi-unconditionality is that even if we live in an ideal moral world where it is impossible to wrong others as long as we do what is right, the transactional account cannot address the worries that arise in cases of extreme wrongdoing. Cataclysmic evils generate contentious concerns over the appropriateness of forgiveness. For instance, forgiveness has no
“meaning,” and there is nothing that can be done to rectify the moral scales in these kinds of offenses. Under such cases, an approach to forgiveness is called for that depends neither on remorse, recognition of guilt or other conditions as a basis for forgiveness, but which still sees these things as necessary for the forgiving process to be realized. This eliminates the ordinary philosophical account of forgiveness, implying a commitment to a form of unconditional forgiveness of a different kind. Extreme, massive and horrific evils are like an epidemic, and hence they pose a serious threat to the very fabric of society. In such extreme cases, the moral situation might demand that unconditionality as a practice be treated both as an obligation and as a “gift”. The gift introduces a new dimension into the moral life: grace. Grace renews the moral life in the face of tragedy, extreme wronging, and injustices, but it does not erase these evils. Like a double-edged sword, grace serves the course of justice but also makes it possible to live in a way that transcends the walled-in moral world that we would otherwise face.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

(i) The scope
Forgiveness is a difficult subject to discuss because there are a range of ideas that characterize and shape the different things people say about how forgiveness should be understood. We can separate these ideas into three categories: the definition, the justification, and the conception.¹

As for the definition question, the issue is to explain what it means to forgive someone. The concern here is with answering the important question of “what is forgiveness?” The justification question has to do with the conditions under which matters of forgiveness ought to arise. A strong moral presumption here is that forgiving someone (if you were the victim) or expecting forgiveness (if you were the offender) is unwarranted in certain cases. Finally, the conception question deals with questions about the moral meaning of forgiveness—how forgiveness should be conceived in view of its place in the moral life. The place of forgiveness in the moral life has to do essentially with how forgiveness as a practice affects its participants, whether as individuals or the moral community at large. So the conception question is about whether the deeper underlying moral intuitions, values, beliefs, or aspirations of those whose interests are under consideration have been secured.

The focus of this dissertation is the conception question. Hence, the dissertation’s concern, strictly speaking, is not to answer the question of what forgiveness is or how it is

¹ There is difference of opinion about how to categorize the different ideas people have on forgiveness. For instance, instead of the three conceptual aspects we have identified above (i.e., definition, justification, and conception), others prefer limiting them to two aspects only, such as definition and justification, for example. In the end, there is no consensus as to what or how many these conceptual aspects are, making this a very interesting philosophical problem in the conceptual analysis of forgiveness. But the focus of this dissertation is not about this debate. While such a problem is interesting and worthy of discussion, a direct and thorough discussion of the problem is outside the scope of this dissertation.
justified. Rather, the dissertation’s focus is to develop an account of forgiveness that best addresses the complex role or function of forgiveness in the moral life. At the center of any moral discourse is the fundamental question of how to maintain the flow of the moral life, whether for the individual or the community, without discounting the course of justice for any of the parties involved. Forgiveness as a moral institution has to function as an instrument of moral interaction that enables us to have a restored relationship in which ordinary life is once again possible. Thus, whether one wants to talk about the question of the definition of forgiveness or its justification, meaningful philosophical discourse requires that we pay attention to this critical concern we have about forgiveness in the moral life.

Put another way, discussion about the definition of forgiveness and its justification is relevant because it reveals the model conception of forgiveness implied in the ordinary philosophical account of forgiveness. As I will show, there are certain complex problems touching on forgiveness that require a different model of approach to how forgiveness should be conceived. My proposed model provides a proper understanding of forgiveness that is lacking in the ordinary philosophical account.

So, then, the primary focus of the dissertation is to discuss a new and different moral conception of forgiveness rather than the definition of forgiveness or its justification. Having made clear what the overall nature of the dissertation is about, let

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2 For instance, we will see that conception has a direct bearing both on the nature of forgiveness, i.e., the concept and why it is a justified action. A thoroughgoing philosophical conception of forgiveness not only affects our views of the concept but also its justification. Thus a proper philosophical account of the concept should pay close attention to the moral meaning or significance of forgiveness in the moral life. A default in the understanding of forgiveness as a concept could be traced back to how it is conceived in the moral life. In the same vein, answering questions of justification require a right account adequately showing how forgiveness functions in the moral life. Hence, ordinary philosophical accounts of justification will not do as long as they are insensitive to the underlying intuitive beliefs or values of the moral life expressed by our actions.
us continue to set the stage for this discussion by looking at an account of the tripartite distinction we have highlighted above.³

(ii) Forgiveness: definition, justification, and its conception

(a) Forgiveness: the definition

There is an important distinction between a concept X, its justification, and the different conceptions of X. We will work with the idea of “forgiveness” to be clear on this distinction. Let us start by addressing what seems to be the most fundamental of these three ideas, i.e., the one of definition. What is forgiveness? That is, what does this term mean?

I see forgiveness as a moral problem-solving strategy requiring an active engagement of the mental, affective, and behavioral aspects of the individual.⁴ Forgiveness is a process by means of which we let go of the grudges we might hold against those who in our assessment stand accused of wronging us by virtue of their actions. To forgive means to undergo a change in the way we think about, feel towards, and treat the offender, a process characterized by the use of the right words, beliefs, and actions towards the offender. When one forgives, there is a renouncement of certain claims that one makes against the offender. Through this renunciation, repair of the mental, emotional, social and spiritual aspects between the two parties is made possible.

Since forgiveness by its very nature is a rational and voluntary exercise, the process of letting go of the grudges must have something to do with the offender’s

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³ I have stated that the primary focus of this dissertation is not about the definition question. Nor are we dealing directly with the problems about its justification. That said, however, questions about the definition of forgiveness and the justification of forgiveness are still relevant and will be pursued to a limited degree.
supposed or actual offense. Hence, as a practice, the issue of forgiveness does not arise unless (i) the offender (or the supposed offender) is believed to have acted wrongly, contrary to the general ethos and (ii) it functions within human intentions, purposes and beliefs reflective of our aspirations and ideas as individuals and members of the moral community. Thus, a crucial point in the conceptual meaning of this practice is that forgiving someone is not like, for example, writing philosophy, playing cards, and similar acts done entirely for their own sake.\(^\text{5}\) Rather, a proper philosophical definition of forgiveness, it has been argued, requires a corresponding account of the underlying moral aspirations (beliefs, intentions, purposes) guiding such an act.

Thus, a refined version of the definition has two basic components. First, to forgive someone, or the practice of forgiveness is the voluntary process by means of which we let go the injuries suffered from and the wounds that come as a result of that suffering. Second, replacing the hostility towards the offender with a positive attitude, all with the intention of achieving and/or preserving certain personal or objective goals, fulfilling certain values, and carrying out purposes characteristic of the moral, social, political and civic aspirations of the society. For example, forgiving may be done because we want to transform the parties involved (e.g., the victim and the offender) and to extol positive values that make a better society, or forgiving may be done as a way of restoring and/or renewing a broken relationship so that ordinary life is once again possible.

Thus defined, a comprehensive philosophical account of forgiveness directly draws on or is affected by its moral conception—that is, matters touching on the significance of forgiveness in the moral lives of those directly involved and the collective

\(^{5}\text{Ibid.}\)
moral community.\textsuperscript{6} In other words, a proper philosophical conception of forgiveness affects what our understanding of the concept should be; the concept of forgiveness has to function within a human community as it relates to the personal and objective moral aspirations of its members. These moral aspirations define our inner longings or deepest desires as moral agents, what is also expressed variously in the ordinary expectations called the \textit{renewed sense} of the moral life. In other words, at the center of any moral discourse is the issue of how to maintain the smooth flow of the moral life for both the individual and the community. Any moral institution, like forgiveness, has to function and articulate its meaning with this in mind.

Thus, a right definition of forgiveness must pay attention to this critical belief we have about the place of forgiveness in the moral life: forgiveness as an instrument of moral interaction should not only serve the course of justice, but should make it possible for us to live in a way that transcends the walled-in moral world we would otherwise face.

(b) Forgiveness: Justification

There are two ways the idea of justification is discussed. First, justification is about the conceptual conditions under which forgiveness as an institution is practiced. Justification in this case deals with the question of the moral appropriateness of forgiveness, that is, of when forgiving someone is appropriate. For example, justification can mean being able to show that the proposed offender is responsible for the wrongdoing, or that there is no valid excuse for the offense committed; thus, he or she should be blamed. A strong moral presumption here is the idea that forgiving someone

\textsuperscript{6} Needless to say, a detailed account of the conception issue requires the consideration of the moral life and moral community—forgiveness as an institution articulates its meaning within a specific ethical view that is geared towards securing certain values and beliefs that help to make up a human community.
can be unwarranted, therefore wrong if we cannot establish that these conceptual conditions have been met. Hence responsibility and/or blame are essential conditions justifying the individual acts of forgiveness.

The second aspect of justification is drawn from the ordinary sense of justification that most people use. Ordinarily, justification is defined as “the reasons for doing, supporting, or believing something; what backs up a belief, the evidence for a position.” Justifications for forgiveness, therefore, are the reasons for forgiving a person; it is an account of the grounds for the individual acts of forgiveness. The concern here is with the question, “why should we forgive someone?” Answering this question requires that we should be clear about the conditions under which it is justified to forgive someone. The point here is that forgiveness should be tendered only when it makes sense to do so, i.e., when there are reasons or conditions justifying a forgiving response.

The justification issue is evident in our everyday relations with each other. For example, the society seems to draw heavily from intuitive ideas about the notion of fairness, which is synonymous with another idea we often call reciprocity/exchange. The basic tenet of the doctrine of “fairness” is that people should get what they deserve and pay what they owe. Thus, as victims of offense, wrongdoing, or injury, it is natural for us to be resentful and/or unforgiving because we believe it is unfair for someone to treat us inhumanely. What has been done is not in harmony with our sense of fairness. So forgiveness here is an unnatural thing to do unless one meets certain conditions. For

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8 See Sarah Elizabeth, “Rethinking Justice with Kierkagaard, Levinas, and Derrida” (PhD dissertation, Purdue University), 6., for further reading on the idea of fairness. Drawing from the Aristotelian notion of fairness (or justice), the principle of fairness, according to Elizabeth, can be used to resolve disputes after crimes have led to what might be referred to as an “inequality”—which comes after the victim undergoes suffering, thus “loss,” and the offender experiences a “gain,” through the pain he/she might have inflicted.
example, we want the offender to show a change of heart, to repent, to be sorrowful about the injury he/she has inflicted or to act in a way that merits the forgiveness. Our sense of fairness tells us that people should be made to pay for the wrongs they have committed if the moral scale is to be restored. By and large what this means is that in matters of forgiveness, the ordinary accounts of justification are shaped and operate within an ethical framework emphasizing these intuitive notions of fairness, the latter of which leads to a culture of forgiveness tendered on and limited to a transactional model with the conditional and unconditional notions of forgiveness as the norm. Under the former, both parties (as victim and offender) have specific roles to play in order for forgiveness to be realized. For example, the offender must meet certain conditions (e.g., acknowledge their wrongdoing and show the need for forgiveness) followed by the victim’s response to grant the forgiveness once these conditions are met. Hence conditional forgiveness rests on the wrongdoer’s remorse and/or recognition of guilt. Roughly stated, the offender is said to merit the forgiveness, under this approach. On the other hand, unconditional forgiveness is solely the prerogative of the victim. This means the forgiving process can and does carry on without any participation from the offender; the offender’s state or condition does not determine or affect the victim’s decision to forgive.

But a common feature of these two notions of justification is the place assigned to guilt and culpability. This is clearly evident in the conditional view because recognition of guilt and/or remorse is part of what it takes for forgiveness to be realized. The unconditional view is different; it is a unilateral act by the victim, and the perpetrator neither takes responsibility nor does anything that merits the forgiving response. Still, there is no question as to who the guilty party is as far as the victim (the unconditional
forger) is concerned. The offender’s moral culpability is not in dispute in either conditional or unconditional cases of forgiveness.

Clearly, forgiveness in both conditional and unconditional cases operates within an ethical framework of moral transaction where it is received and granted on certain conditions, like acknowledgement of wrongdoing, remorse, guilt, and culpability. Under this conception, forgiveness is morally significant, and thus has a central place in society because it is a medium of exchange, enabling us to fulfill basic duties within a moral community consistent with the terms of the exchange. Joseph Butler and Jeffrie Murphy are two prominent figures in the history of philosophical discussions of forgiveness whose views, as we will see, fall under this category.

Hence a very important question that needs to be asked is whether such analysis of justification of forgiveness is consistent with the underlying moral intuitions or aspirations of those whose interests are under consideration.

The above question could be put in a different way: is justification simply a laundry list of the conditions (whatever they may be) under which one is justified in forgiving another person? So far as we can tell, the ordinary account proceeds as though this is all that matters in trying to understand the meaning and the reasons in support of individual acts of forgiveness. However, I think such an approach in the understanding of forgiveness is problematic primarily because it fails to offer a proper account of the significance of forgiveness, one that articulates its meaning as an instrument of moral interaction for individuals and for sustaining the moral community.

Take, for example, a case where the significance of forgiveness is seen in terms of merit, exchange, based on the offender’s repentance, remorse, and the like. We have seen
that under ordinary analysis, the accounts of justification of forgiveness are essentially transactional in nature, meaning they are devoid of interactional considerations (a renewed sense of the moral life). But imagine a situation where forgiveness has to function and articulate its meaning in the wake of a wrongdoing that involves victims who conceive of the significance of forgiveness essentially in terms of its interactional nature, a scenario so common in everyday life. The situation described demands that the interactional considerations must be at the forefront in the attempts to restore human relations (between victim and offender) and maintain the dynamism of the moral order. Also, as we will see later on, there are times when the moral equilibrium is beyond rectification, where nothing can be done to restore the moral order. A concept of forgiveness that emphasizes exchange, in this situation where no exchange is possible, seems to imply that we are trapped in a tragic moral situation. All this is to show that ordinary accounts of justification are at variance with our deeper understanding of the significance of forgiveness.

A right account of justification requires a conception of the significance of forgiveness that explains how forgiveness as a practice affects its participants. Forgiveness is an institution that functions within a certain moral milieu with moral concerns unique to that moral situation; thus, its moral meaning has to be consistent with the moral aspirations of the participants in that context. Hence proper justification will have to go beyond mere stipulation of the conditions under which it is justified to forgive someone (like acknowledgement, apology, remorse, and guilt); a proper account of justification requires that we dig deeper and consider the underlying values or beliefs consistent with the aspirations of those whose lives are being affected by the practice.
This, in essence, is what we will be referring to as the moral conception of forgiveness. A proper conception of forgiveness is what enables us to know the kinds of justification we need in order to forgive rightly.

(c) Forgiveness: its conception

So what is a moral conception? How does it relate to the other ideas in our discussion, namely, concept and justification? First, we have already addressed some issues by way of preliminary remarks that should give us a rough idea about conception and how it fits in the tripartite debate. Thus the current discussion will, for the most part, endeavor to amplify these preliminary points.

To begin with, consider what might be called an ordinary conception of the moral life. As conscientious moral agents, we are cast into different social roles with various responsibilities and expectations. Therefore, our actions are subject to moral evaluation whether we like it or not. We are praised and at times rewarded for right conduct, and we are blamed and at times punished for wrong conduct. The reason this is the case is because of a critical belief we have concerning the moral life: the moral world usually presents us with clear choices between right and wrong such that the moral world is a product of how we choose to act. So as free agents the moral standard is such that by choosing to do what is right, we avoid wronging those who may be affected by our actions. The converse is also true: wrongdoing is directly tied to one’s bad conduct. Thus conceived, the moral situation is such that it not only presents us with clear moral demands but with different moral options as well, some which are acceptable, some which are not. In such a situation, we have grounds to blame the agent if he/she chooses

\[\text{An ordinary conception of the moral life is taken to underlie the practice of forgiveness, certainly a moral action in a much broader sense.}\]
not to do what is right. Thus described, this situation is what will be referred to as an
*ideal* moral situation.

So the ordinary moral world presupposes a moral conception of some sort where
morality is about *transacting business*, broadly speaking, and human conduct is what is at
the center of this exchange. Forgiveness as a practice functions within this moral
framework. We are disadvantaged whenever bad things are done to us, and a state of
moral disequilibrium ensues. This disequilibrium brings with it a disruption in the smooth
flow of the moral life. For example, we cease to view the offender as a dutiful member of
the moral community, and as victims, we have difficulty moving on with our lives unless
the injuries are appropriately addressed (for example, by way of restitution).

Thus conceived, the moral use of forgiveness presumed by ordinary philosophical
account is such that it lubricates the wheels of moral transaction. In other words, under
this moral framework, which we might call the “transactional” framework, forgiveness
occupies a central place in the society and is morally significant due to how it enables us
to fulfill our duties by keeping up with the terms of the exchange. So it is clear that the
ordinary conception of the moral life, and hence forgiveness, falls short of addressing the
fundamental concerns about the complex role or function of forgiveness in the moral life.
This is a major point in the dissertation which must be emphasized. We saw that at the
center of any moral discourse about the place of forgiveness in the moral life is the issue
of how to maintain the flow of the moral life—that forgiveness as an instrument of moral
interaction should not only serve the course of justice (fulfillment of moral duties), but
more importantly, it has to make it possible for us to live in a way that transcends the
walled-in moral world we would otherwise face. But a transactional conception of the
moral life and forgiveness is inadequate because it fails to account for certain common or critical concerns affecting the moral community. For instance, as I will show in chapter 3, the moral life as prescribed in the *ideal* moral world is unrealistic. On the contrary, the moral landscape is very complex and paradoxical in the sense that wrongdoing often is inevitable. This condition will be referred to as the *actual* moral situation.

An *actual* moral situation is the idea that our ordinary lives are dense with wronging others even as we seek to do what is right, meaning we cannot help wronging others even as we go about fulfilling our duties. Hence, the reciprocal harmony as presumed in the *ideal* moral world is unattainable. To the extent that wrongdoing is inevitable, we have no grounds to blame the doer of the act. In the end, the notions of blame and responsibility are challenged in an *actual* moral situation. This has an effect on the ordinary account of forgiveness normally used. There are at least two of them. First, it is difficult to see how one would conceive of forgiveness as a form of transaction when in reality the ordinary moral situation is one in which wrongdoing has little to do with culpability for that wrongdoing. The traditional accounts of justification are disenabled in such a moral situation. For example, the claims of justice in a spirit of forgiveness are unattainable (e.g., the practical difficulties of “just deserts” policy in an *actual* moral world), and yet the nature of the moral life requires the evening of moral scales as a way of restoring the moral flow once someone has been wronged. Second, some extreme cases of wrongdoing pose major difficulty to the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use. The exact nature of these difficulties and their implications will be spelt out later in the dissertation, especially in chapter 4. There, I will show that no forms of justification (like restitution) would work because, as I argue, forgiveness is meaningless in the face of
extreme wrongdoing—nothing can be done to right the moral equilibrium. This is why I want to propose and defend a different form or conception of the moral life and forgiveness that addresses these concerns.

In summary, a very important distinction has been made between a concept X, justification of X, and conception of X. In this discussion we have seen how the three ideas intersect, and why conception is an answer to an important question (i.e., about the place of forgiveness in the moral life) that neither a definition nor justification provides. Framing the discussion this way has also allowed us to see that the ordinary conception, thus account of forgiveness (the transactional account exhibited by exchange) has some fundamental flaws that render it ineffective. In the end, the discussions offer us a platform for introducing and defending a new conception, thus an account of forgiveness that pays attention to the important question of the place of forgiveness in the moral life, forgiveness that is an instrument of moral renewal.

To repeat, the focus of this dissertation is to develop an account of forgiveness that best addresses certain critical concerns we have about forgiveness in the moral life, the concerns that generate questions about how forgiveness should be conceived in view of its place (its complex role or function) in the moral life. Hence, the account of forgiveness that I am developing is one that pays attention to these critical concerns we have about forgiveness.

(iii) What the new account of forgiveness looks like—a brief version

We now should show how this new account is different from the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use. Understanding this difference is important in at least two ways: one, it

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10 The reader should be aware that the features mentioned here only foreshadow the new account. A detailed version of the account to come later.
helps to show why there is need for a new account; and two, it allows the unique qualities of this new account to emerge, thereby setting it apart from its rival.

First, I am promoting a rich account of forgiveness that operates in a complex moral order. There are two realities that define a complex moral order. A complex moral order is distinct from a non-complex moral order because in the case of the former, an actual moral situation prevails. Briefly stated, an actual moral world is the idea that paradoxically, the reality of the moral life is such that wrongdoing is inevitable. Thus the moral life is very complex. But the ordinary account of forgiveness cannot account for the complex nature of the moral life in the sense that it lacks a rich enough account of forgiveness to address a whole range of circumstances or wrongs for which we may not know who is responsible, or where the issue of responsibility and/or blame is in dispute. Thus, we need a new account of forgiveness that can speak to this wide range of circumstances that are experienced in the moral world.

Besides, even if we lived in an ideal moral world where wrongdoing is not ubiquitous, cataclysmic evils are in a class of their own; hence they define what a complex moral order is because of the difficulties they pose to the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use. The nature of an ideal moral world as briefly described is that it is governed by an ethical framework of exchange; forgiveness is morally significant because of its exchange relation. Murphy, Butler, and a host of scholars subscribe to this view, where forgiveness is a morally justifiable act because it is received and granted on certain moral grounds. But cataclysmic evils present difficulties because they defy any forms of transaction with respect to forgiveness. That is, if forgiveness is conditioned in the ordinary way, then it is indeed the case that there are deeds so awful, atrocities so
appalling as to be beyond forgiveness. Forgiveness would be meaningless in such cases because there is nothing that can be done to rectify the moral equilibrium once people suffer from these extreme wrongs. But an effective theory of forgiveness is such that its qualities and character have been tested and found reliable both in the everyday challenges of morality as well as in the difficult ones; indeed, morality may require that we transcend even the worst tragic moral situations to restore the dynamism of the moral life. The ordinary account of forgiveness is not up to the task when it comes to these difficult cases. An expansive, non-transactional account of forgiveness is what we need to address the difficulties presented by cataclysmic evils.

In short, there are two realities that define a complex moral order. First, an actual moral situation prevails, and the notions of responsibility and blame are challenged. Second, the moral situation is such that forgiveness ceases to have “meaning” in cases involving cataclysmic evils. Any account of forgiveness worth its name should address the problems experienced in a complex moral order. This is the first fundamental aspect that characterizes the account of forgiveness that I am advocating and what sets it apart from its rival.

The second fundamental feature that characterizes my account is the comprehensive characterization of the action of forgiveness. This characterization consists of two aspects. The first one has to do with the issue of the intention of forgiveness, dealing with the question of what we normally intend to achieve whenever an inner resolve to forgive is made, i.e., how the victim sees the other once the decision to forgive the latter is made. For instance, central in any account of the definition of forgiveness is that forgiveness has to function within human intentions, purposes and
beliefs reflective of our aspirations and ideas as individuals and members of the moral community. Hence any philosophical account of forgiveness must address the question of the intentionality component of forgiveness (what we have referred to as the character of forgiving action). The right way to answer this question, is by offering a clear articulation of the relationship between the victim and offender or how the forgiver regards the offender after forgiveness is tendered. Ordinary accounts of forgiveness (to be illustrated in the Butler/Murphy accounts) are wanting because of how they address this central question, where the practice of forgiveness in a very general sense is about the fulfillment of duties (a transaction, an exchange); moral action is right if it enables us to keep up with the terms of moral exchange. The problem this poses to the form of forgiveness is that it is too narrow, thus inadequate.

For example, a husband who wants his wife to forgive him may want to see their relationship restored. He wants things to be as if he had never misbehaved, and does not feel forgiven if they are not. He assures his wife that the affair between him and a younger woman colleague is over. There are tears and apologies and hugs and kisses. And she looks him in the eye and says, “I forgive you.” Nevertheless, in the following weeks and months she does not act as though she has forgiven him. She occasionally inquires about the details of his comings and goings and about the younger woman.\(^{11}\)

This example shows that how we regard the offender is as important as the forgiving action. That is, forgiveness by its very nature is an other-regarding act; it is the sort of thing that is done out of our considerations of the other. Hence the intention of forgiveness has to be consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action.

\(^{11}\) This example is adopted from Trudy Govier’s text. See Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge* (London: Routledge, 2002), 43.
Otherwise we will not address the deeper moral concerns that underlie how forgiveness should be conceived in view of its place in the moral life. So, while it could be true that this woman may have forgiven her husband as an act of will, her *regard* for the man does not seem to have changed since she has not ceased to see him as an adulterer.\(^\text{12}\)

Achieving a change of regard as we will see is not always a simple undertaking because it requires work and effort; the amount of work and effort changes according to the circumstances, such as the nature of the wrong, the victim’s perception of the wrong and the wrongdoer, and character traits of the forgiving agents. Thus a comprehensive characterization of the action of forgiveness should take into account the work and effort that goes into the cultivation of this new regard—a regard that is expressed by proper attitudes, and thus, has to be compatible with ordinary expectations of a forgiving action.

Also, a comprehensive characterization of the action of forgiveness is revealed by how the account caters for the deep and complex struggles and experiences we undergo in the aftermath of a wrongdoing. The nature and scope of these struggles is a matter that hinges largely on the nature of these wrongful acts and the character traits of those who are involved. Here is an example to help flesh out and shed more light on the kinds of problems we have in mind.

Imagine Ms. Stacy Johns whose husband frequently belittles her in public. Most recently, he has done this in the company of some new acquaintances whose opinion was especially important to her. The episode has made her furious and seething with rage. She

\(^{12}\) Murphy, for one, will insist that forgiveness as a process has been realized as far as the transactional forgiving process goes. However, this example has shown that we are not out of the woods yet. A simplistic characterization of forgiveness (like Murphy’s) is too narrow and inadequate to account for the proper intention of forgiveness consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action.
reaches a point where she decides to kill the man, due to uncontrollable anger and resentment. One fateful night, she loads a gun and safely hides it under the bed, ready to strike as soon as the man gets home from work. She has put up with the abuses for too long. Now it is her turn to seek revenge, and she is willing to live with the consequences of her action. Suppose again, on second thought, Ms. Johns changes her mind owing to a shift in her emotions. The powerful emotions feeding the killing instinct have subsided, and she is able to keep her cool, but cannot move beyond this point. That is, she is no longer resentful to the point of wanting to kill the man, but is unwilling to stay in the relationship, not out of her fears for the future but because she simply cannot stand the man. The claim that she has not forgiven him does not seem right because it is obvious Ms. Johns has overcome resentment, as an act of will. On the other hand, to say that she has truly forgiven him is equally problematic because she is still harboring a hostile attitude towards him.¹³

The example (above) shows that the ideas of forgiveness that see forgiveness exclusively as a shift of emotions (Murphy) or as a change in the treatment of the offender (Butler) are problematic because they fail to account for a much broader view of who we are as moral agents. Human beings are bio-psycho-social in nature, with needs that are deep and complex. A right approach to forgiveness is one that takes into consideration this rich conception of moral agency. My analysis of forgiveness is that it is a complex process. I offer a multi-faceted approach of what should constitute an action of forgiveness consistent with a much broader view of who we are as moral agents. As I am going to show, to forgive involves a shift of behavior, emotions and thought patterns. So,

¹³ This example is adopted from Norvin Richards. “Forgiveness.” Ethics 99 no. 1 (October 1988): 78.
forgiveness cannot be defined exclusively as a shift of emotions. Nor can it be defined simply in terms of our actions—how we treat the offender. Murphy, Butler and a host of the contemporary school fell into this trap, but I seek to avoid it.

In the end, ordinary views of forgiveness have a deficit because of their simplistic approach and characterization of a forgiving action. Murphy, Butler, and a host of prominent scholars are at fault for this reason: they treat forgiveness as primarily a matter of how I feel or act towards you.

An arboreal analogy is useful for summarizing the main points of the account of forgiveness I am developing in the dissertation. The account is like a large tree, with two huge trunks and four smaller branches. There are two fundamental features that characterize this account (the trunks). The first “trunk” offers a rich conception of forgiveness that operates in a complex moral order. A complex moral order is defined as one in which 1.) an actual moral situation prevails, and 2.) where forgiveness has no meaning because the moral scales are beyond rectification. These two characteristics constitute the first two “branches”.

Second, the account of forgiveness I espouse exhibits a comprehensive characterization of the action of forgiveness, constituting the second trunk. A comprehensive characterization of the action of forgiveness has two defining components (another set of branches): the first component is an intention of forgiveness that is consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action; the second component has to do with how the account caters for the deep and complex struggles and experiences that we, as bio-psycho-social beings, have to undergo in the aftermath of wrongdoing.

With the use of different examples, I have articulated a wide range of challenges
and circumstances that a good account of forgiveness needs to address. For example, the account should address the problems that are experienced under a complex moral order. Also, this new account should provide a complex analysis of the process of forgiveness, where forgiveness as an action is seen as a multi-faceted approach consistent with a much broader view of who we are as *bio-psycho-social* beings, with needs that are deep and complex. The account of forgiveness ordinarily in use is insufficient to address these issues. I am offering an alternative account in response to these inadequacies.

My account of forgiveness is modeled after the tradition of Derrida. Derrida’s conception of the gift provides a good framework for understanding forgiveness as an instrument of moral interaction both for the individuals and the moral community. The essence of the gift is the obligation to grant unconditional forgiveness that captures the concerns of injustice, resentment, and the complex moral order. Gift is a form of grace which renews the moral life without erasing these moral burdens, making it possible for us to transcend the walled-in moral life that we would otherwise face. In the end, my account of forgiveness has what it takes to succeed where its rival has failed.

(iv) Dissertation Chapters—Overview

The thesis is developed in five steps (chapters 1-5). Chapter 1 offers an introduction of the project and articulates the tripartite distinction alluded to earlier. It also explains the meaning of the distinctions between definition, justification, and conception and shows how they intersect. This tripartite discussion forms the basis for introducing the overall scope of the dissertation and the central question this dissertation addresses, namely, how forgiveness should be conceived in view of its *place* in the moral life. This in the end, leads to a much bigger discussion about the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use
versus the new account of forgiveness that I am promoting in the dissertation.

In chapter 2, I discuss forgiveness as a concept. Thus, the chapter is concerned with answering the fundamental question of “what is forgiveness?” I will do this by discussing the views of two prominent figures in the philosophical history of forgiveness, Bishop Joseph Butler and Jeffrie Murphy, followed by a critique of their views. There are five main points to be discussed to represent the rest of their views, itemized as (i)-(v).

(i) Both Butler and Murphy see forgiveness as a process that is essentially tied to the overcoming of resentment. Both believe that resentment, and thus forgiveness, is appropriate only in those cases where there is culpable wrongdoing.\(^{14}\) If Murphy and Butler are right, then there are at least three things we can derive from their views. One, the wrongdoer has to be resented in order for the issue of forgiveness to arise, so it is a mistake to forgive someone we do not resent. Second, only culpable wrongdoers should be resented. Finally, forgiveness is a process which requires the elimination of resentment, so there is no forgiveness where there is still resentment. Here are some of the problems I find with the Murphy/Butler account of forgiveness in lieu of the above. First, the account is too restrictive, for it fails to account for the complexity of forgiveness in which there are a whole range of other circumstances and/or wrongs that are experienced for which we may not know who is responsible, or where culpable wrongdoing is genuinely in dispute. Stated differently, we will see that the moral life is paradoxical in the sense that it is dense with wrongdoing, a feature of the actual moral

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world. There, the notions of responsibility and blame are challenged. The Butler/Murphy account of forgiveness is paralyzed in such cases. Second, I will reject the view that ties forgiveness to resentment. I will show that there are cases where the victim need not deal with the barrier of resentment to arrive at forgiveness. In other words, it still makes sense to talk about forgiveness even in the absence of resentment. Third, I will show that overcoming resentment may be a necessary but not sufficient condition of forgiveness.

(ii) There is the question of what the action of forgiveness involves, a problem whose nature can be expressed through another question, namely, “what exactly are we doing when we forgive?” This question has to do with the actual forgiving process itself. According to Murphy, forgiveness “is primarily a matter of how I feel about you (not how I treat you).”\(^{15}\) Hence forgiveness is an internal emotional change. Butler, on the other hand, reduces forgiveness to a behavioral change, i.e., how we deal with the offender through our actions, when we do not act vengefully.\(^{16}\) The overall view here is that forgiveness is reducible to the performance of a single act, like a shift in behavior pattern (as per Butler) or emotional state (as per Murphy). However, such a view of forgiveness is too simplistic and cannot account for a broader view of who we are as moral agents. Human beings are \textit{bio-psycho-social} in nature, with needs that are deep and complex. I offer a multi-faceted approach as opposed to a simplistic one. In addition, my approach has the virtue of promoting a comprehensive way of looking at the action of forgiveness where there is an assessment not just of how one feels or treats the offender but how he/she relates with the offender, overall, in a much broader sense. A proper

\(^{15}\) Murphy, \textit{Forgiveness and Mercy}, 21.

account of forgiveness clearly spells out what it is we are doing when we forgive, i.e., the work and effort that goes into the cultivation of a positive response (regard), consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action—where forgiveness symbolizes a fresh start, thus an instrument of moral renewal.

(iii) The third point I will discuss is the view that moral injuries are messages, symbolic communications in virtue of the insulting message that is conveyed from the injuries. Hence moral injuries establish a connection between the demeaning message and the actor, according to this view. Resentment (which is also a symbolic message) functions primarily or is a response not to general wrongs but to wrongs against the self. Given this view of injury and resentment as symbolism, it is not hard to see why forgiveness is also a symbolic message.\(^{17}\) The problem I find with this approach is that it limits the discussion of resentment and forgiveness to moral injuries. It suggests that ordinary injustices and other general wrongs are not part of this class. Such an approach is out of step with the ordinary language of forgiveness. A right account of resentment and forgiveness should account for a wide range of wrongs and violations of responsibilities in which self-respect is not involved.

(iv) The fourth point I will discuss is Murphy’s clarification that not every person who has ceased to resent another has exercised forgiveness. According to Murphy, overcoming resentment the right way is what constitutes forgiveness. Resentment is overcome in the right way when it is overcome for the right reasons, specifically the reasons that are consistent with the ideas of self-worth (e.g., when the offender’s demeaning message is withdrawn by way of repentance, remorse, acknowledgement etc).\(^{18}\) So this account makes the offender’s conduct central to the justification and the

\(^{17}\) For example see Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 16-17.
meaning of forgiveness. For example, repentance sends a different message, symbolically withdrawing the demeaning one, thereby reestablishing that the two parties (victim and offender) are equal in value and rank. But this presents a serious problem for the Murphy-Butler account. For example, such an approach of forgiveness heavily relies on the offender’s action, not the victim’s. Because this account is not victim-centered, forgiveness cannot be justified if the victim decides to forgive purely out of compassion, or when forgiveness is seen purely as a gift, an act of grace given out of the deeper altruistic attributes of our being. Hence the account is ethically lacking.

(v) The fifth point I will discuss is the suggestion that forgiveness is possible where we can draw a line separating the immoral act from the agent, or where the moral equilibrium can be restored. For example, true repentance in Murphy’s view is a means by which a wrongdoer separates himself from an evil act. Forgiveness is made possible due to this symbolic distancing.19 There are some major problems with this way of looking at forgiveness. The first difficulty comes when we are unable to make a clear distinction between an immoral act and the actor. Cataclysmic evils present deeper moral questions that render the matter of divorcing the actor from the actions irresolvable. The second difficulty has to do with the matter of evening the scales. Murphy believes that forgiveness is possible once we even the moral scales, for example when the wrongdoer’s status has been lowered or when the victim’s is raised. However, there are certain cases, as will be discussed where the equilibrium will not be rectified because there is nothing that can be done to even the moral scales (whether by raising the victim’s status or lowering the offender’s). Lastly, cases of non-culpable wrongdoing present another set of

18 Ibid., 24.
19 Ibid., 24-26.
difficulties to the Murphy/Butler account. Where the moral life is dense with wrongdoing (a feature of the actual moral world), a different conceptual meaning of forgiveness is necessary, namely, a non-transactional conception (as opposed to a transactional one). Such a conception would include situations in which forgiveness functions purely as a gift, as an act of grace, not exchange. Otherwise forgiveness will be impossible if it functions as a medium of exchange in such difficult cases.

The significance of the discussion in Chapter 2 is that it seeks to show how my approach is different from and preferable to this prominent and influential philosophical account normally in use. Moreover, my characterization of forgiveness has the virtue of promoting the new account of forgiveness that will be defended in the dissertation.

In Chapter 3, I defend my claim that the ordinary account of forgiveness cannot address instances of inevitable wrongdoing. Central in this discussion is the distinction that has been made about two different societies, a simple society (in which an ideal moral situation prevails) as opposed to a complex one where an actual moral situation prevails. The ordinary account of forgiveness (as illustrated by the Murphy/Butler account) depends on a certain misconception about the moral world. This misconception is that wronging others is inherently tied to how we choose to act as moral agents, meaning that wrongdoing is something that can be avoided as long as we do what is right. Hence, under this assumption, forgiveness is called for only in the case of actions where the doer is both responsible and blamable. This implies that the ordinary account of forgiveness has nothing to say on forgiveness in cases where right actions can be wrongful, a feature of the moral world we have described as an actual moral situation. There are two arguments presented to defend the claim about inevitable wrongdoing,
which I will call the main argument and the weaker argument. In the main argument, the claim is that wronging others is part of our everyday experience owing to the numerous and yet specific duties we face in virtue of the social and interpersonal roles we hold in the society. Fulfilling these responsibilities simultaneously implies the undercutting of another person’s expectations, and the wrongdoing generated by a particular decision is not offset or righted by the benefits that are realized once the overriding decision has been made. For instance, even though the familial obligations are as important as the civic ones, there are times when as a soldier, one must sacrifice one obligation in order to fulfill the other—both cannot be done at the same time. And the disharmony in the reciprocal fulfillment of the obligations is not the result of one’s moral failure.

In the weaker argument, I am highlighting a problem involving garden variety conflicts that are otherwise dismissible as not requiring forgiveness because of their less complex nature. Thus, unlike the moral conflicts experienced in the first case, garden variety cases are conflicts whose resolution can be attained in a way that most people will find agreeable; the decisions concerning such conflicts can be made in a way that secures considerable justice to the parties involved, overall. That said, however, the problem with these ordinary conflicts is that they still confirm that the moral life is inherently problematic, even though such kinds of culpability are ones that are justifiable on certain moral grounds. For example, it is common for spouses to fail to meet certain aspects of their obligations due to pressing professional commitments. When people are conflicted between two obligations, they have to resolve what to do by determining the best that can be done under those circumstances; but in so doing, they still do evil. Hence the weaker argument and the main argument are still birds of the same feather in that both reveal the
same condition of the moral life—that wrongdoing is inevitable.

In the end, this chapter shows that the ordinary account of forgiveness is ill-equipped to deal with instances of inevitable wrongdoing. The root cause of this limitation is a function of the transactional nature of the moral life that renders forgiveness as an exchange. I am introducing and defending a non-transactional account where the meaning of forgiveness is seen from a different light. In an actual moral world, some form of unconditional (non-transactional) forgiveness is necessary simply as a way of grappling with the problematic nature of the moral life.

In chapter 4, I discuss the charge that the ordinary account of forgiveness has difficulties dealing with instances of extreme wrongdoing. Where there is extreme wrongdoing, I argue that forgiveness has no meaning because there is nothing the offender can do to justify a forgiving response. So another reason for preferring a new account of forgiveness is this: even if we live in an ideal moral world where it is impossible to wrong others as long as we do what is right (an idea that we will see as false), and the difficulties experienced in an actual moral world do not obtain, the ordinary account of forgiveness seems not to fully address the worries that arise in cases of extreme wronging. Thus, cataclysmic evils preclude any form of justification, the preceding difficulties notwithstanding. For example, gross, massive human abuse and violations of humanity where victims suffer irreversible mental, emotional damages throw the moral equilibrium into a serious imbalance. Forgiveness has no meaning and there is nothing one can do to even the moral scales in such cases. This eliminates the ordinary forms of justifications, implying a commitment to a form of unconditional forgiveness of a different kind, like the one to be developed in the dissertation.
The chapter is structured in the form of a debate featuring Vladimir Jankelevitch and Jacques Derrida, two prominent figures in the contemporary discussions on forgiveness with respect to cataclysmic evils. The fundamental question at the center of their debate is whether there are deeds so awful, atrocities so appalling as to be beyond forgiveness. Jankelevitch’s response is in the affirmative. Derrida, on the other hand, sets no limits to the possibility of forgiveness especially where such extreme cases are involved. In the end, there are two conflicting voices in this chapter, representative of the central arguments of the debate. Jankelevitch’s views fall under the transactional account of forgiveness where forgiveness is granted because it is justifiable on certain moral grounds, i.e., the wrong is punishable, expiable, reparable, etc. So forgiveness is impossible because none of these things is possible where cataclysmic evils are involved. Derrida, on the other hand, is championing an account of forgiveness that is purely non-transactional. He uses the language of “gift” to capture the idea of forgiveness he has in mind, one that is pure and innocent from the systems of exchange. One of the major implications of this discussion is that it reveals that Jankelevitch’s account of forgiveness falls in the same category as Butler’s and Murphy’s; therefore it faces some of the difficulties as the ones we have attributed to Murphy and Butler.

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Chapter 5 is the concluding chapter, and as such, it summarizes the main charges against the ordinary account of forgiveness that will be discussed in the dissertation, especially that the ordinary account of forgiveness has difficulties dealing with instances of inevitable wrongdoing and instances of extreme wrongdoing. Also, the chapter provides a descriptive account of the new account of forgiveness I am developing in the dissertation, a non-transactional account called the quasi-unconditional view. As we will see later, quasi-unconditionality is a unique form of the unconditional view because it is an account of forgiveness with a conceptual meaning that is different from Butler’s and Murphy’s, one that is compatible to and pertains to an ethical situation where the ordinary notions of responsibility and blame are suspended. This is the only way to overcome the ethical and methodological difficulties of the moral life as characterized in an actual moral world. Quasi-unconditionality is perhaps the only way for forgiveness to still have meaning in the face of extreme wrongdoing. In addition, a quasi-unconditional forgiver avoids the mistake of failing to be sensitive to the fundamental question of the place of forgiveness in moral life. By virtue of his/her membership in a moral community where a non-transactional worldview prevails (as opposed to a transactional one), such a forgiver is aware that a right account of forgiveness is one that, among other things, addresses the question of the sustenance of dynamic moral order as much as it is possible to do so.
CHAPTER 2: THE DEFINITION OF FORGIVENESS

(i). Introduction

Contemporary philosophers have different ideas on the proper definition of forgiveness. For example, some say that forgiveness is an action that requires the eradication of excessive resentment; others, that it is the overcoming of resentment on moral grounds. The first account is largely attributed to Bishop Joseph Butler. The essence of Butler’s account is that forgiveness is defined in terms of how one acts, not how one feels.\(^\text{22}\)

Jeffrie Murphy is a leading proponent of the second account. Crucial to Murphy’s account is that forgiveness depends on the motives under which it is rendered, the primary one being the defense of one’s self-worth.\(^\text{23}\)

The primary objective of this chapter is to present a working definition of forgiveness. Thus, we will be concerned with answering the question of what it means to forgive. The plan is to critique the ways Butler and Murphy conceive of forgiveness and to offer an alternative. This provides a conceptual foundation of the idea of forgiveness that will be used in the dissertation and it shows how my approach is different from and preferable to the ordinary philosophical account. My characterization of forgiveness has the virtue of promoting a particular moral account of forgiveness that will be defended in the dissertation.

(ii) Bishop Joseph Butler and forgiveness

a. Butler’s characterization of forgiveness

Butler’s ideas on forgiveness are found in a collection of his sermons published in 1726, known as the *Fifteen Sermons*.\(^\text{24}\) Our discussion will focus mainly on two of these

\(^{22}\) See Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 233-243 for this interpretation of Butler’s characterization of forgiveness.

sermons: Sermons VIII and IX, entitled *Upon Resentment* and *Upon Forgiveness of Injuries*, respectively. Butler believes that forgiveness and resentment are related (thus, to understand his idea of forgiveness requires a discussion of resentment). He considers resentment a natural emotion owing to its origin and purpose; it was implanted in us by a loving God for purposes of self-protection. Hence, for Butler, resentful response is both natural and justified if it is in keeping with the purpose or end for which the emotion was implanted in us, that is, as a disapproval of the unfair injuries we are subjected to by others. However, he maintains that in order to fulfill this objective resentment should never exceed certain bounds, otherwise, it ceases to function as a preventive natural emotion.  

To this end, Butler shows that there are times when resentment becomes a destructive emotion instead of a positive one. He says, “malice or resentment towards any man hath plainly a tendency to beget the same passion in him who is the object of it; and this again increases it in the other.” Butler’s idea can be illustrated by a thought experiment. Take the case of two neighboring communities, A and B, that have for several years enjoyed a peaceful co-existence that has promoted a situation in which both communities have come to have much in common. For example, suppose that apart from

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24 Butler, *Butler’s Fifteen Sermons*.
25 Butler, VIII, 3, 7, 8; VI, 10; III, 9, in Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 234. Granted that Butler’s ideas of resentment and forgiveness have a theological flavor, seeing resentment this way (as a self-protective emotion, thus a natural human reaction) is significant because then it does not sound implausible to say that Butler’s account of resentment, thus forgiveness, does not depend on a theological justification. So, while he still might say that to forgive is an act of obedience to the divine command, Butler’s ideas can be seen and applied in a broader context, without having to restrict ourselves to the realm of theology. This view is important because it lines up with one of the ideas I am promoting in the dissertation, that the act of forgiving is a voluntary action that needs no external agency, human or divine.  
the intermarriage relations between them, the residents of A and B crisscross each other’s borders in search of better schools, jobs, housing, legal, and medical services oblivious of the socio-economic, political, and geographical boundaries between them. Further, suppose that B has better services than A, comparatively. Now imagine that a small group from A starts to manifest symptoms of swine flu infection and, as a result, decide to seek for medical attention from community B. But on realizing the danger this poses to its residents, B unilaterally decides to close its borders followed by a circular that declares the A residents are *personae non gratae*. On realizing that they are being discriminated against and denied access to B’s amenities, the residents of A resent the residents of B. To them, B’s actions come across as inconsiderate and selfish, hence not justified, especially given their shared history. Suppose that a handful of residents of A are now in serious condition and in need of urgent medical attention, otherwise they will start to succumb to the deadly virus. Further, suppose that the frustration level and ill-feeling has built up so much that a small group from A decides to go on a rampage such that they not only violate the border restrictions but attack and vandalize B’s properties several millions of dollars’ damage. As expected, the B residents are morally outraged, and they bitterly resent the residents of A. To them, the initial act to close the borders is justified—to prevent the likelihood of swine flu epidemic and protect its residents. Thus, A’s residents are the aggressor as far as community B is concerned. But A’s residents are not about to relent, they feel justified in their course of action since only a handful of its members were involved in the crime and it is B’s initial act that set in motion the chain of events that have now put in jeopardy the socio-economic and political relationship which the two groups have shared up until now. But since B was the first to be harmed (through
the acts of vandalism), its resentment (and subsequent vengeful response) towards A will be intensified as a continuous disapproval of the wrongdoing and the damage caused to its property.

The end result is that the residents of A and B are caught up in a reciprocal pattern of bad feeling and ill will, which, if not addressed might lead to other ugly incidents likely to undermine the very fabric of peaceful co-existence they have known for decades. Butler’s puzzle therefore is this: “How could a loving God who commanded that we love our neighbor implant in us so unloving a passion as resentment? Is not this attitude unambiguously bad and any actions or practices based on it (like retributive punishment) also bad?” Butler argues, in response to this puzzle, that resentment often serves as a moral good, since it is a “protective” emotion. Resentment is thus consistent with the Christian doctrine of love: the individual must love others the same way she loves herself. Therefore, the fact that resentment often has negative consequences does not warrant its wholesale condemnation. Someone could still love her neighbors, including her enemies, even if she acts resentfully because resentment is a proper emotional response to injury. According to Butler, what makes resentment inconsistent with the doctrine of Christian love is when we let ourselves be dominated by these strong urges. The moment we let the good of resentment slide into a vengeful state that leads to bad actions, we violate the law of love. This brings us to one of Butler’s main points about the meaning of forgiveness. Key to his account is the use of the word ‘revenge.’ While mere resentment is compatible with the divine command to love, excess

27 Butler wants to show that there is a greater evil when the negative emotions remain unchecked. Granted that the initial harm is perhaps already an ugly incident, there is an increase of evil incidents if the reciprocal pattern of bad feeling and ill will is not addressed.
28 Butler, in Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 235. Also, see Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 22.
29 Butler, in Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 236.
resentment (expressed in revenge) is not, given its destructive nature. Hence, forgiveness is the thing that enables us to avoid the bad actions of revenge, or the abuse or excess of resentment. Its function primarily is to ensure that excessive resentment is kept under control. Thus forgiveness is not concerned with resentment as such. Rather, forgiveness, says Butler, only forbids “the excess and abuse of this natural feeling.”

Since this idea is central to the way he sees forgiveness, we need to be clear about what Butler means by “the excess and abuse” of resentment. Butler identifies five “chief instances of abuse” of resentment: first, imagination of an injury done to ourselves when there is none; second, exaggeration of the size of the injury; third, resentment toward someone who intended us no injury; fourth, resentment out of proportion to the injury; and fifth, infliction of pain or harm of any kind “merely in consequence of, and to gratify, that resentment, though naturally raised.” He faults the first four instances for being too “unreasonable, disproportionate, and absurd” as to allow no “shadow of justification.” Specifically, Butler thinks such cases of resentment are morally unjustifiable because they are unreasonable. For example, if resentment is the result of moral injury, it is irrational to resent when no moral injury has occurred. Concerning the fifth instance (commonly referred to as revenge or retaliation), Butler wants to show, contrary to common feeling, that this is unjustifiable on moral grounds. To see this point, let’s

32 Butler, IX, 2.
33 Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds., D.D. Raphael and A. L. MacFie (London, 1976), 70-71 {II. i. 2.5}) confirms this ordinary view: “When we see one man oppressed or injured by another, the sympathy which we feel with the distress of the sufferer seems to serve only to animate our fellow-feeling with his resentment against the offender. We are rejoiced to see him attack his adversary in his turn, and are eager and ready to assist him whenever he exerts himself for defense, or even for vengeance within a certain degree”, as footnoted in Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 236. As I indicated in the text, there is a difference in the way Butler is approaching the fifth abuse from the rest. In the fifth form of abuse, Butler is referencing a moral justification; in the first through fourth forms of abuse, he is
recall his definition of revenge: it is the infliction of “pain or harm of any kind…merely in consequence of, and to gratify, that resentment, though naturally raised.”

Butler is saying that given its origin and role in the individual and society, resentment is morally justifiable but revenge is not; this is because the latter does not fulfill the purpose for which resentment was implanted in us, namely, protection against injury. Revenge gratifies and goes beyond the purpose of resentment; it brings about more harm, and this is what makes it unjustifiable. Forgiveness is not the overcoming of resentment, it is the checking of revenge.

There is another important point about the way Butler sees revenge which brings out another element of his characterization of forgiveness. For Butler, resentment ceases to be an emotion once it slides into revenge. In other words his use of the term “revenge” indicates that it is an action, not merely a feeling. Specifically, he sees “revenge” as that which one performs in order to gratify the emotion of resentment. Revenge is a harmful action done to an enemy that is over and above what is necessary to prevent further harm to the victim. Thus, the act of revenge is wrong because it increases the overall harm done in the world. The essence of forgiveness is in the way we deal with the offender through our actions, when we do not act vengefully. Forgiveness is that which we do to either eliminate or minimize the negative consequences of revenge. To be more blunt, Butler does not see forgiveness as the elimination of negative emotions. Under his

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34 Butler, III, 11.
35 Butler sees revenge as an act done to bring about additional suffering in the world. The right act is that which promotes the most good, or the least harm, overall. Butler, IX, 5-9; Butler, in Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 237.
37 Butler, IX, 5-9; Butler in Newberry, “Joseph Butler on Forgiveness,” 237.
account, the only thing required as proof of forgiveness is the way the offender is treated; forgiveness has little to do with the victim’s bio-psycho-social condition.

In sum, there are two important ideas in Butler’s account of forgiveness.

First, once resentment gets out of hand, it ceases to be an emotion. Second, granted that the account makes it clear that feelings have a significant role to play with regard to the nature of forgiveness, it is nevertheless true that Butler does not see forgiveness as the overcoming of resentment or any emotional state as such. Rather, forgiveness is the overcoming of revenge. Forgiveness is characterized in terms of what we do, not feel.

b. A critique of Butler

By reducing the process of forgiveness only to a change in the way we act, Butler’s account seems too simplistic, thus problematic in a number of ways. First, if forgiveness is simply what we do or how we treat the wrongdoer (which as we have seen is by not taking revenge) without paying attention to other empirical conditions necessary for forgiveness as a justifiable action, then one who undergoes some form of behavior modification (or a kind of therapy that organizes their behavior) has the right to claim to have forgiven so long as they exhibit proof of “forgiveness,” i.e., a form of behavior. The problem is that such an approach omits a change in the emotional, mental, social disposition.

A shift in behavior pattern—for Butler, not taking revenge—is not a sufficient condition for forgiveness. Even if we were to take Butler’s standard as a model, still, a bigger picture is required that spells out exactly what we are doing when we forgive.

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38 A comprehensive empirical account of any justifiable action (especially one in the category of forgiveness in which the well-being of the individuals have been negatively impacted) proceeds from the assumption that because humans are complex beings, such an act requires an active engagement of the different dimensions of a person, i.e., the mental, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual aspects. Hence, the mental, affective, and behavioral shifts are the complete set of the empirical manifestations of a given forgiving act.
exactly what forgiveness entails and/or how to get to the point of forgiving. In short, a bigger picture requires explaining what the action of forgiveness looks like. Hence, even though what we do or how we relate to the offender is a sign of where we are with the offender, this shift of behavior is itself a process that entails the agent’s inner struggles with herself. For example, as we will see shortly below in the case of a woman named Stacy Johns, there are instances when one’s actions as a victim conflict with the inner resolve to forgive the offender. Besides, a shift of behavior is only a fraction of the complex struggles and experiences the forgiving parties have to undergo as they work their way towards forgiveness or unforgiveness.

In the final analysis, even though Butler’s account of forgiveness is placed in a context of rational and moral justification, it is wanting because it fails to provide a full account of the character of the action of forgiveness compatible with what actually happens, or what we normally intend to achieve whenever an inner resolve to forgive is made. Spelling out this character requires that we be clear about what exactly is the general picture of the relationship between the two parties. How does the victim see the offender once the former resolves to forgive the latter? This is a matter that calls for a clear articulation of the nature of the forgiving attitude in question: *it involves an intention with a general character and a precise character*. The general character of the forgiving attitude concerns what exactly we intend to do in our resolve to forgive the offender. The precise character concerns the defining elements of the forgiving attitude, i.e., what the intention entails. Briefly stated, the crucial point about a forgiving attitude is whether or not the forgiver has a new regard for the wrongdoer now that an inner resolve to forgive has been made.
Ordinarily, the intention in forgiving someone is so that we could have a fresh start, to cease to see the offender as such, implying a renewed commitment to regard him as an integrated human being, no longer associating him with his bad action, but rather as a responsible member of the moral community. Such a new attitude requires, simultaneously, that we seek for the right ways to manage what we thus intend. For example, we may need to make emotional, mental, and behavioral adjustments so as to bring ourselves in line with this new regard. This answers the question of the general nature of the intention of forgiveness.

When answering the second question about the precise character of forgiveness (i.e., what the intention entails) the concern is with the axiological components of the intention rather than the intention itself. Forgiveness in this case is something more than a shift in the regard for the offender. That is, in addition to the latter, forgiveness is an expression of a certain level of confidence one has towards the offender. So in forgiving you I am also making a statement that, to a certain extent, you are able to become a dutiful member of the moral community, your past record notwithstanding. Arriving at such a judgment may require that I establish a connection (at least mentally) between my action and the expected outcome. For example, there is a likelihood that a repentant and genuinely remorseful offender will live up to these expectations more than someone who is not. Forgiveness in this case is an affirmation of trust that the offender will turn out as expected. If he does, then we were right to express such confidence in him. However, if he does not, then our trust will have been broken. But suppose that instead of trust, forgiveness affirms simply a faith in the offender? Forgiveness grounded in faith does not rely on such calculative thinking, there is no relationship between the action and the
expected outcome. When it is grounded in faith, forgiveness functions like a gift, it
ceases to be something that can be merited. So, faith and trust are two different,
alternative elements of a forgiving attitude. They show exactly what the renewed regard
entails.

This is a sketch of what a comprehensive character of the action of forgiveness
should look like. Characterizing it in this way enables us to capture the attitude of
forgiveness compatible with ordinary expectations of a forgiving action (expressed in the
form of the general and precise attributes of the forgiving attitude). This is what brings to
focus a broader picture of the relationship between victim and offender once the former
decides to forgive the latter. Butler’s account lacks such a characterization of forgiveness.
Based on his account, the intentionality component is focused on resentment and revenge,
not forgiveness. The idea is to cease excess resentment. But what of the second question?
Here the nature of the forgiving action entails eliminating the bad consequences of
revenge. In other words, the defining elements of a forgiving action is in the balancing of
good versus bad consequences.

The essence of Butler’s account of forgiveness is that it is a state in which there is
no revenge. Hence, the account fails to show how the forgiver regards the offender.
Except for behavior (restraining from revenge), there is no characterization of the attitude
of the forgiver in Butler’s view.

This point is worth emphasizing because it reveals a sharp contrast between the
ordinary conception of forgiveness in the moral life, where forgiveness in practice is an
exchange relation, and a new conception of forgiveness that I am trying to defend. As I
will show later, a defensible account of forgiveness goes beyond the limits of moral
transaction and addresses the fundamental question of maintaining the flow of the moral life. Forgiveness is significant essentially if it functions as a tool of moral renewal/interaction, something which is impossible in the absence of this new regard.

In the final analysis Butler’s account treats forgiveness as a means to an end, the end being the maintenance of a society that has the least amount of suffering overall. Since revenge increases the amount of suffering in the world, revenge is evil and should be eliminated. Forgiveness is the means to this end. But the paradox of this consequentialist thinking is that the agents (specifically victim and offender) are worse off in the end than at the beginning. That is, seeing forgiveness strictly as an act that we do to improve the world means that a commitment to the agents’ well-being is not a central motivation for our actions. For example, it is possible to envisage a situation where one might be asked to forgive outside their own accord because a failure to do so might impact negatively on the general welfare. By the same token, exercising or developing a forgiving spirit is something that could easily be manipulated by utilitarian considerations, not as an aspect of individual virtue seen as part of one’s self-development. Thus, even though Butler’s account starts out with a keen eye on acts that bring about good consequences, the account is liable for blame owing to its indifference to the agents’ well-being.

The right act, I believe, is not just that which promotes the most good or the least harm, overall. Morality is also about what one ought to be, the character of our actions. As moral agents we have attitudes, intentions, ideas, values, beliefs, norms, feelings, thoughts, etc., attributes which define the character of our actions. There are qualities that are admirable and those that are not. Admirable qualities, for instance, are
what they are because of their selfless nature, i.e., the ability to rise above the self in order to seek the interests of the other in our actions. Forgiveness by its very nature is an other-regarding act that draws its integrity from powerful and rich human reservoirs of self-sacrifice, expressed in the form of mercy, gift and grace. Thus conceived, it requires the careful cultivation of the positive qualities of our being, like compassion, empathy, faith, trust, generosity, and sympathy that are components of complex acts of forgiving. The cultivation of these qualities enables one to offer forgiveness that is comprehensive in character, for example, as a form of gift and grace. Besides, proper cultivation of these elements could lead to a meaningful change in the recovery of the individual, something that is lacking when one has not dealt with the past injuries, or where a comprehensive account of the character of the action of forgiveness is lacking, as in Butler’s account.\(^{39}\)

(iii) Jeffrie Murphy and forgiveness

a. Overview

Forgiveness, according to Jeffrie Murphy, “essentially involves an attempt to overcome resentment.”\(^{40}\) This suggests that one cannot claim to have forgiven without first having dealt with resentment. However, Murphy goes a step further and argues that not every instance where resentment is overcome is a case of forgiveness. Murphy thinks that forgiveness is the sort of thing that should be done for the right reasons. As he puts it, “Forgiveness is not the overcoming of resentment \textit{simpliciter}; it is rather this: forswearing resentment on moral grounds.”\(^{41}\) Thus, for Murphy, the answer to the question “what is forgiveness” is intertwined with that of its justification. It should be

\(^{39}\) The idea being expressed here is a recovery that restores us back to the original position of wholeness or the totality of our humanity.

\(^{40}\) Murphy, \textit{Forgiveness and Mercy}, 20.

\(^{41}\) \textit{Ibid.}, 24.
pointed out that both Murphy and Butler share a common belief about the moral significance of resentment in the individual and society. Both see resentment as a potentially justifiable response to wrongdoing. Thus, as in Butler’s account, resentment plays a central role in Murphy’s account of forgiveness. However, Murphy’s account of resentment (and thus forgiveness) stands out from the rest because of the specific defensive role it plays against moral injuries. Resentment, says Murphy, “functions primarily in defense, not of all moral values and norms, but rather of certain values of the self.”\textsuperscript{42} Specifically, Murphy identifies self-respect as the primary value defended by resentment. And since the problem of the nature of forgiveness is tied to that of its justification, in the end, what Murphy wants to say is that “the primary reasons justifying forgiveness will be found, not in general social utility, but in reasons directly tied to an individual’s self-respect or self-esteem, his perception of his own worth, of what he is owed.”\textsuperscript{43}

My discussion of Murphy’s ideas revolve around two groups of problems. The first group pertains to the nature and role of resentment and how this plays into the question of what forgiveness entails, that is, what we do (or claim to do) when we forgive. The second group is concerned with answering the question of when forgiveness is morally warranted, and the view that reasons (moral grounds) for forgiveness are an essential part of its definition.

(iv) Murphy’s characterization of resentment

Resentment, according to Murphy, is an emotional reaction, an anger and hatred directed toward a person who has done one an unjustified and inexcusable moral

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
injury.\textsuperscript{44} There are three crucial points that need to be developed here in order for us to have a full view of Murphy’s account of resentment and the moral force and implication these views have on the concept of forgiveness as a whole. One point involves the issue of justified/unjustified wrongdoing on one hand, and excusable/inexcusable wrongdoing on the other hand, what we will refer to as culpable and non-culpable wrongdoing.

Another concern is the specification that resentment has to do with moral injuries. Finally, I will address the question of whether there is a specific role to be assigned to resentment, what we will describe simply as the \textit{primary function of resentment}.

\textbf{a. Culpable and non-culpable wrongdoing}

The suggestion seems to be that resentment is appropriate only in cases where the wrongs are neither justified nor excusable. To justify a wrong, according to Murphy, is to say that even though what has been done was prima-facie wrong, however, because of other morally relevant factors, the action was, all morally relevant factors taken into account, the right thing to do.\textsuperscript{45} According to Murphy, a Roman Catholic woman who has taken vows of chastity but has several siblings to feed may resort to prostitution and still continue to be a nun (without losing her sense of self-worth) if that is the best of all options available for feeding her siblings, and we should have no qualms with her decision because we believe she is doing it for a greater good. And, to excuse a wrong, in Murphy’s view, is to say that “what was done was morally wrong; but, because of certain factors about the agent (e.g., insanity), it would be unfair to hold the wrongdoer responsible or blame him for the wrong action.”\textsuperscript{46} We might be sad that an insane person

\textsuperscript{44} \textit{Ibid.}, 15-16.
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Ibid.}, 20.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Ibid.}
has sexually abused a minor, but we cannot blame him for it. Nor can he be held responsible owing to his condition. Murphy believes that when the wrongs are justifiable and/or excusable, the wrongs do not warrant resentment. This implies that the question of forgiveness does not arise in such cases. The following quote by Murphy reinforces this point:

"we may forgive only what it is initially proper to resent; and, if a person has done nothing wrong or was not responsible for what he did, there is nothing to resent (though perhaps much to be sad about). Resentment—and thus forgiveness—is directed toward responsible wrongdoing; and therefore, if forgiveness and resentment are to have an arena, it must be where such wrongdoing is intact—i.e., neither excused nor justified."\(^{47}\)

So, it is clear that Murphy believes that it is a mistake to forgive someone we do not first resent.

A closer look at Butler’s account reveals a similar belief. To repeat, Butler believes that resentment is a natural self-protective emotion against unfair mistreatment from others. And as a self-protective instrument resentment acts as a weapon, so to speak; it is our way of “hitting back,” and hence should be directed strictly at the offenders. In Butler’s view, to direct resentment at anyone else is an improper use and/or abuse, of the emotion. In addition, Butler’s discussion of the abuses of resentment requires the belief that we should not resent those individuals whose actions are justified and/or excusable. One of the five “chief instances of abuse” is when we resent someone who had no intention of causing injury. A construction worker does not commit a wrong when he accidentally hits another worker with a plank he is carrying (assuming he is exercising reasonable care). In Butler’s view, to resent the construction worker is a case of the abuse of resentment. In other words, resentment here is not ethically warranted, implying that

\(^{47}\) Ibid.
the issue of forgiveness is equally unwarranted.

Like Murphy, Jean Hampton believes that forgiveness presupposes resentment especially of the wrongs that are connected to matters of self-respect. She sees resentment as “an emotion which reflects the judgment that the harmful treatment they [the victims] experienced should not have been intentionally inflicted on them by their assailants in so far as it is not appropriate given their value and rank.” In Hampton’s view, the feeling of resentment has to do with the way in which we do make moral assessment of how we are treated by others and/or should be treated by others. Human beings have a sense of their ethical status and intrinsic worth. Hence we have expectations of how we should be treated. We also believe that others could treat us better because they have an objective sense of the inherent worth resident in every human being. Hampton’s point is that demeaning treatment should be resented because those who commit such wrongs have willingly chosen to do something they themselves know is wrong. Hence they are fully responsible for their wrongdoing and cannot escape blame.

But does this mean that every demeaning treatment is a candidate for resentment? That is, are all injurious actions (in a demeaning sense) an instance of responsible wrongdoing and blame? Hampton says, “we resent the wrongs committed by wrongdoers, but not the wrongs by (non-culpable) actors or the harms committed by

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48 Ibid., 54-55.
49 See Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, chapter 2, Ibid.
50 A very interesting issue implied by this question concerns the general scope of the objects of resentment. Hampton thinks that resentful response should be directed specifically at human agents: “people don’t resent the injuries caused by earthquakes or tidal waves; they only resent injuries that have been deliberately inflicted by one who is able and required to respect—but does not—their value and rank.” Thus natural forces (and perhaps non-human animals) are not part of the ethical world, according to this view. Events attributed to mother-nature have no ethical meaning and matters of resentment and/or forgiveness do not arise. Thus, the surviving victims of the Tsunami and hurricane Katrina may have suffered severely but such injuries should not be resented because only humans have a sense of their ethical status; only humans have an objective sense of the intrinsic worth incarnate in others. Human actions reveal or effect low value and rank because human actors are responsible actors, unlike mother nature, Ibid., 54.
The point here is that a distinction has to be made between culpable and non-culpable wrongdoing. Hampton sees this as an important distinction that cannot be ignored. The significance of the distinction for Hampton is seen when she emphasizes that,

one resents only culpable wrongdoings—demeaning actions for which their agents can be not only held responsible but also blamed. So we resent the bank robbery by a terrorist but not the bank robbery by a man who is told by the terrorist that his family will die unless he robs the bank.\(^{52}\)

We do not resent the bank robber in the second case because the actor is not responsible for his actions. With the terrorist’s gun to his head, the decision to rob the bank is an involuntary one. And while robbing the bank is itself wrong, we cannot blame him for this action, all things considered.

To recap the main points, Hampton believes that not every actor who commits a wrong is a wrongdoer, i.e., worthy of blame. Blame and responsibility apply only in the domain of culpable wrongdoing. Only culpable wrongdoing generates a demeaning effect that is worth a resentful response.

So, like Murphy and Butler, Hampton’s account of forgiveness requires, as a necessary condition, that the actor be resented; and only culpable wrongdoers should be resented. There is no need for forgiveness where resentment is unwarranted.

Along with Murphy, Butler, and Hampton, Robert Roberts, Cheshire Calhoun, Paul Hughes, Margaret Holmgren, Aurel Kolnai, and Joanna North all support a similar position.\(^{53}\) For example, in discussing self-forgiveness, Margaret Holmgren says that

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\(^{51}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{52}\) Ibid.

\(^{53}\) Ibid.
“there must be an element of objective fault or wrongdoing on the part of the offender, who must have a just sense of the wrong.” Objective wrongdoing or fault is the type that cannot be justified or excused. Aurel Kolnai also requires this condition:

“Forgiveness presupposes an affront, injury, transgression, trespassing or offense committed by one person against the other and consequently the other’s readiness or refusal to ‘forgive’ him.” Joanna North stresses the same point by saying that “one cannot forgive when no wrong has been done, for there is no breach to be healed and no repentance is necessary or possible.”

In short, there are a number of philosophical treatments that say resentment and forgiveness are called for (i.e., ethically justified) only in cases where the agent being forgiven is both responsible and blamable for his/her faults. This position raises serious concerns that will be explored later on. A notable problem that will be addressed is the question of whether it would still make sense to talk about forgiveness without resentment, especially in virtue of the problems pertaining to the actual moral world.

b. Resentment and moral injuries

We will now consider the second feature of Murphy’s characterization of resentment. Murphy sees resentment as an emotional reaction directed at those who by their actions cause an unjustified and inexcusable moral injury.

What are moral injuries? Murphy offers no definition. However, two discussions


54 Holmgren. “Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency,” 75.

55 Kolnai, Ethics, Value and Reality, 211.

in his account give us insight regarding what he means by moral injuries. One is his discussion of what I call a situational definition, or a context within which moral injuries occur. Another is his discussion of why we so deeply resent these injuries.

In Murphy’s view, moral injuries occur within human relationships: “The people with whom we are most intimate are those who can harm us the most, for they are the persons to whom we have let down our guard and exposed our vulnerabilities.” Without suggesting that moral injuries do not occur between strangers, Murphy seems to be drawing on an important feature of the moral community. A human community is what it is because of the responsibilities and expectations that are fulfilled consistent with a transactional view of the moral life. The more intimate we are with someone, the greater the transactional possibility, and the greater the expectations. For example, we expect others to exercise care as long as they are in a relationship with us. So the degree of injury and resentment is deep and probably hard to forgive when such expectations are not forthcoming because of the disappointment one feels as a result and the realization that the wrongdoer does not care as much as may have been thought.

Murphy emphasizes the difference between injuries experienced in this setting from ordinary ones by characterizing them as betrayals: “Because of the nature of intimacy, moral injuries here tend to be not just ordinary injustices but also betrayals.”

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57 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 16.

58 I am using care here to mean two things. First, it refers to the idea that the subject of recognition has certain inherent interests (for example the interest to be safe from any gratuitous harm), that they are deeply respected, and that these interests are ones we would be willing to protect as though they were our very own, meaning we would not trade them for anything owing both to their invaluable nature as well as the impact their loss would have on the bearer’s wellbeing. Second, to care for others means much more than to protect their interests, promoting their interests becomes a concern. When we care for someone in this second sense, we normally go out of our way (e.g., through self-sacrifice) to help him/her secure these interests.

So moral injuries are largely not ordinary injuries. When they occur, certain values and valuable experiences of human existence like trust, love, respect and intimacy, which are the foundation of any human relationship and/or society, are threatened.

We now turn to the second part of this discussion: why people deeply resent moral injuries. In Murphy’s view, “One reason we so deeply resent moral injuries done to us is not simply that they hurt us in some tangible or sensible way; it is because such injuries are also messages—symbolic communications.”  

And regarding the content or nature of the message, says Murphy, “they are ways a wrongdoer has of saying to us, ‘I count but you don’t,’ ‘I can use you for my purposes,’ or ‘I am here up high and you are there down below.’” In essence, what Murphy is saying is that the problem with moral injuries is the insulting message they convey. The specific nature of this insult has to do with an important question in ethics, the question of moral worth and respect that ought to be assigned to every member of the moral community.

Put in ethical terms, the problem with moral injuries is their message that the victim has no moral worth, that his/her interests do not count, or that his/her interests rank second to the injurer’s, if at all. Murphy reinforces this point: “most of us tend to care about what others (at least some others, some significant group whose good opinion we value) think about us—how much they think we matter. Our self-respect is social in at least this sense, and it is simply part of the human condition that we are weak and vulnerable in these ways.” So when I injure someone morally what I am saying to the victim is that “I am better than you, there is no place for you at the table, and I see you

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60 Ibid.  
61 Ibid.  
62 Ibid., 25.
merely as an object, tool, something to be used at my convenience.” And why exactly should this be a problem? For Murphy, this requires us to be clear on the features used to determine the ethical status of the agent in question. There is no doubt that Murphy is operating from a Kantian legacy where the standard of respect and moral worth comes from the inherent worth of persons. Rationality is the foundation of this moral worth. Hence, persons have dignity and should be respected based on their sheer possession of rationality. So moral injury is wrong and should be resented because it violates the victim’s inherent worth; it is a threat to personhood. In Murphy’s own words, such injury “attempts (sometimes successfully) to degrade us.” Thus, even if the victim does not believe the wrongdoer’s demeaning message, he is still deeply injured given that he has to endure the message. But the greatest moral havoc done by such messages is their actual degrading effect on the victim. When this happens, there is damage to the very essence of one’s being or sense of moral worth.

In sum, moral injury, according to Murphy, is the injury that occurs when a moral agent’s self-worth is compromised. Moral injuries harm their victim in certain profound and deeply threatening ways primarily because they are betrayals. But they also establish a symbolic connection between the message and the messenger due to the insulting message conveyed by the injury that negatively impacts our well-being. Such injuries are deeply resented. Indeed, resentment itself is a message—it is our way of freeing ourselves from the wrongdoer’s grip.

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63 The principle of respect for persons is derived from Kant’s second version of the categorical imperative. The following is the statement in its complete version: “For all rational beings stand under the law that each of them should treat himself and all others never as means but always at the same time as an end in himself,” Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1993), 39.
64 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 25.
65 I am using moral sense or worth to capture a rich conception of human beings, as bio-psycho-social agents.
Clearly, Murphy wants to limit his discussion of resentment and forgiveness to moral injuries, an indication that ordinary injustices like petty offenses are not part of this class. My failure to compliment my wife’s hair or dress is a relatively small offense in Murphy’s view. Such an offense might cause a temporary discomfort or tension between us, but would certainly not warrant resentment (at least not in the category we have been talking about).

There is one last question that needs to be addressed in order to fully lay bare Murphy’s characterization of resentment and how it weighs in on the account of forgiveness he espouses. The question is about the primary function of resentment.

c. What is the primary function of resentment?

Moral injuries attack personhood, and resentment is a response to these injuries. So the function of resentment, at least implicitly, has to do with the protection and promotion of personhood. Murphy goes a step further to clarify the specific function of resentment. He declares that “resentment . . . functions primarily in defense, not of all moral values and norms, but rather of certain values of the self: Resentment is a response not to general wrongs but to wrongs against oneself.”66 Murphy continues, “the primary value defended by the passion of resentment is self-respect . . . proper self-respect is essentially tied to the passion of resentment, and . . . a person who does not resent moral injuries done to him . . . is almost necessarily a person lacking in self-respect.”67 This means that resentment is a good thing, in at least a limited sense, because it is necessarily tied to another good thing, namely, self-respect. One who sees nothing wrong or fails to resent such injuries has a condition we might call self-worth deficiency syndrome (SWDS).

66 Ibid., 16.
67 Ibid., 16.
SWDS is self-inflicted, and is a moral failure. Murphy nicely expresses this point: “If I count morally as much as anyone else (as surely I do), a failure to resent moral injuries done to me is a failure to care about the moral value incarnate in my own person (that I am, in Kantian language, an end in myself) and thus a failure to care about the very rules of morality.”  

Paradoxically, Murphy’s view implies that forgiveness is *not always* a good thing. A hasty tendency to forgive is a vice—a different symptom of the same SWDS. So forgiveness is appropriate only when it is done for the right reasons. And reasons justifying forgiveness, Murphy maintains, are those that are connected to self-respect: “the primary reasons justifying forgiveness will be found, not in general social utility, but in reasons directly tied to an individual’s self-respect or self-esteem, his perception of his own worth, of what he is owed.”

To understand forgiveness, in Murphy’s view, requires first that we explicate resentment, and second, that we ask whether or not the reasons for forgiveness are ones that address the moral issues that justify the elimination of resentment.

(v) How Murphy sees forgiveness

So what is forgiveness? Murphy responds to this question by first considering what forgiveness is not. He believes that this restriction is necessary if we are going to distinguish “real forgiveness” (i.e., forgiveness as a virtue) from cases in which people merely cease to resent. He uses two examples to illustrate this point. The first involves forgetting:

> Sometimes we lose a vivid memory of old wrongs, become bored with our resentments, and simply forget.

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69 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 16.
But this just happens to us; that is, it is totally non-voluntary. As such, it seems too removed from agency to count as a moral virtue—though it still might be a desirable disposition of character to possess. Thus, to the extent that forgiveness is properly regarded as a moral virtue, it strikes me as a mistake to identify forgiving with forgetting.\(^{70}\)

Murphy’s second example is when people “forgive” for what he calls “selfish” reasons, for example where one “forgives” in order to have a “peace of mind.” For Murphy, such actions do not qualify as instances of forgiveness, because in this case, the act is driven purely by selfish motivations.\(^{71}\)

You have wronged me deeply, and I deeply resent you for it. The resentment eats away at my peace of mind—I lose sleep, snap at my friends, become less effective at my work, and so on. In short, my resentment so dominates my mental life that I am being made miserable. In order to regain my peace of mind, I go to a behavior-modification therapist to have my resentment extinguished. (Let us suppose there are such techniques). Have I forgiven you? Surely not—at least not in any sense where forgiveness is supposed to be a moral virtue. For my motivation here was not moral at all; it was purely selfish: the desire to promote my mental health.\(^{72}\)

Murphy’s point with the two cases is that not every instance where resentment is overcome is a case of forgiveness.\(^{73}\)

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\(^{70}\) Ibid., 23.

\(^{71}\) Ibid.

\(^{72}\) Ibid.

\(^{73}\) I will not contest Murphy’s view at this point of what counts as real forgiveness and what does not. I will address this matter later on. As a side comment, however, I should mention that while I find his first example (about forgetting) agreeable, the second one is not. That is, Murphy is right when he says that to forgive is not to forget. To forgive neither depends on nor implies forgetting. The past wrongs are not erased. On the contrary, if we are going to forgive, one has to remember the past, put it into perspective, and move beyond it. In forgiving, all we do is to let go of the anger and resentment that comes with the injury. We are not erasing the original wrongs from our memory. That said, however, it would be helpful for the forgiver to practice some “forgetting” once forgiveness is tendered. This is what Patrick Boleyn-Fitzgerald calls *virtuous forgetting*. Virtuous forgetting is an idea of forgetting that is not incompatible with forgiveness because it suggests that we should not dwell on the past since doing so might be more injurious than the injuries themselves. This kind of forgetting doesn’t encourage passivity or loss of memory of the past, rather, it involves the belief that it is part of what we need as forgivers in order to remove our attention away from angry thoughts thereby enabling the negative emotions to cool down; in the final analysis,
Murphy has stated that not every instance in which one ceases to resent is a case of forgiveness. So, if behavior-modification therapy and such related processes could rid us of resentment, but could not produce forgiveness, then what does? The problem we are pursuing here could be captured differently through what is now a familiar question: what exactly are we doing when we forgive?

Murphy has a candid response to this question. Forgiveness, says Murphy, “is primarily a matter of how I feel about you (not how I treat you), and thus I may forgive you in my heart of hearts or after you are dead.” The basic point is that as an act, forgiveness first and foremost has to do with ridding oneself of the negative emotions. Forgiveness requires mastering the emotions; it is an internal emotional change. Hence, we can determine whether one has forgiven by looking at how they have dealt with the emotions. So what I do or say does not count much, only how I feel. He adds, “I may think I have forgiven you; but, when old resentments rise up again, I may say, ‘I was wrong—I really have not forgiven you at all’.” An interesting question is how we would reliably determine that resentment is defeated. This is a fundamental problem Murphy recognizes, but does not address. Another interesting question is whether there is a comprehensive way of looking at forgiveness which includes an assessment not just of how one feels but how one relates with the offender overall—in a much broader sense, dealing with feelings, thoughts, and behavior patterns. Clearly, Murphy’s account is devoid of such a comprehensive perspective. We will now proceed with showing how

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74 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 21.

75 Ibid.
Murphy defines forgiveness.

Murphy clarifies that not all instances of ceasing to resent are cases of forgiveness. He believes that overcoming resentment the right way is what counts as forgiveness, when it is done for the right reasons. Hence to understand the nature of forgiveness requires a corresponding account of its justification. Murphy declares, the question “What is forgiveness?” cannot after all be sharply distinguished from the question “How is forgiveness justified?” . . . We cannot define forgiveness and then ask what moral reasons make it appropriate; because, I suggest, my ceasing to resent will not constitute forgiveness unless it is done for a moral reason.76

Murphy’s most explicit statement of a definition of forgiveness is his claim that forgiveness is “not the overcoming of resentment simpliciter; it is rather this; forswearing resentment on moral grounds.”77 Murphy presents five reasons that he thinks are, in ordinary life and discourse, most often given as grounds for forgiveness:78

1. the wrongdoer has repented or had a change of heart.
2. the wrongdoer meant well, i.e., he had good intentions
3. the wrongdoer has suffered enough
4. the wrongdoer has undergone humiliation
5. for old times’ sake (e.g., “He has been a good and loyal friend to me in the past).”

The central question is whether forgiveness in these five cases is consistent with the constraints of self-worth. One way to achieve this consistency, according to Murphy, is to draw a line between a wrongdoing and its perpetrator. To see how this works, recall Murphy’s characterization of moral injuries as messages or symbolic communications. Moral injuries have ways of conveying messages that negatively impact our well-being. This is primarily because wrongdoers are connected to their wrongdoing by virtue of the symbolic message conveyed by the wrong act. The trick is to see what happens when

76 Ibid., 23-24.
77 Ibid., 24.
78 Ibid.
there is a divorce (if possible) of the act from the agent or where the insulting message is no longer implied.

I will discuss three of these cases to illustrate Murphy’s five reasons as listed above. The first is repentance. Murphy has this to say about what happens when one repents: “In having a sincere change of heart, he is withdrawing his endorsement from his own immoral past behavior; he is saying, ‘I no longer stand behind the wrongdoing, and I want to be separated from it. I stand with you in condemning it.’” Thus, true repentance in Murphy’s view is a means by which a wrongdoer separates himself from the evil act; forgiveness is justified in this case because the insulting message has been withdrawn.

One problem with Murphy’s account is this: what should we do in cases where there are grounds to think that a wrongdoer is intimately identified with his wrongdoing? Consider the case of someone who is emotionally, mentally, and spiritually evil in character; what we might refer to as a moral monster, a sadist who derives pleasure from inflicting injury on others and seems, rather strangely to us, to do it with passion and rage. And the evil he causes has no purpose other than his own sinister and sadistic enjoyment, and his victims are innocent and good people. Later on in the dissertation (chapter 4), we will see that cataclysmic evils are evils in which victims have been injured in this manner, and the doers of such acts are people we might consider to be fundamentally wicked and monstrous in character. In such cases, drawing a moral line between the evil deed and its perpetrator is difficult. When the agent is inseparable from the evil deed, forgiveness becomes impossible without tacitly approving the evil deed.

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79 Ibid., 26.
80 This example has been adopted from Govier’s case of the Myth of Pure Evil. See Govier, Forgiveness and Revenge, 125-129.
The second case to be considered in Murphy’s list is the one of suffering, the idea that forgiveness is justified because a wrongdoer has suffered enough. What does it mean to say that someone has suffered enough? And what does this have to do with someone’s self-worth? Murphy is working with a thought prevalent in our culture, that suffering is redemptive. Normally, a self-respecting person will not forgive me if my actions are a reflection of his or her lowered status. Once our status has been lowered, the prevailing state of affairs is that the injurer is superior to the injured. To forgive under these circumstances is inappropriate because it implies that one is acquiescing in his or her own lowered status, something which a self-respecting agent should not do.  

However, Murphy says that a status of equilibrium can be attained through the wrongdoer’s suffering. And how exactly does this work? Suffering, says Murphy, “tends to bring people low, to reduce them, to humble them. If so, then enough equality may be restored in order to forgive them consistent with self-respect.” Examples of such severing suffering might include cases of disgrace, like falling from a high position, sadness and hurts that are a by-product of a wrongdoing, e.g., the loss of a spouse, job, wealth, respect from loved ones, friends, colleagues, etc.

But how do we determine that someone has suffered enough? For example, is this a qualitative or quantitative account of suffering? Is it a question of ‘how many times I have suffered?’ or it is about the kinds of bad things happening to me? Besides, there is the issue of how to even the moral scales, overall. In Murphy’s account, restoring moral equilibrium requires the lowering of the offender (this is explicit in the account); but it might also require the raising of the victim’s moral worth or well-being (this is implicit

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81 Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 26-27.
82 Ibid.
in the account). Now imagine cases where victims have suffered irreversible self-worth impairments. In this case, SWDS is not self-inflicted but is a condition brought about by the injury; for example, a case in which a victim is repeatedly brutalized and dehumanized as to be incapable of continuing to respond as a moral agent, thus sliding into a vegetative state following these monstrous attacks. Trying to raise such a victim’s moral worth is impossible. Cataclysmic evils tend to impact their victims in this manner as we will see later on in chapter 4.

The last kind of forgiveness to be considered is that done “for old times’ sake.” What does it mean to forgive someone for old times’ sake? Murphy says: “when I forgive you for old times sake, I forgive you for what you once were. Much of our forgiveness of old friends and parents, for example, is of this sort”83 So, based on our previous relationship we might forgive others if we see them for what they were prior to the wrongdoing. Seeing them this way enables us to see them not as wrongdoers but as friends, or as those who would look out for our interests. In the end, this enables us to be able to separate them from their present wrongdoing. The problem with this kind of forgiveness (apart from the fact that a divorce of the act from the agent is still needed) is with the image we have of the wrongdoer when we forgive. We are not considering the person for what he really is, namely, the wrongdoer but for what he once was, in the past. So the question might still be asked whether we are really forgiving the wrongdoer (e.g., the monster image that he has become) or the former person who has once been nice to us. The kind of forgiveness that I am developing is one that sees the wrongdoer for what he really is. It requires that we bring everything into perspective, including the full image of the offender. Forgiving someone in the light of what they once were seems to

perpetuate the culture of glossing over the offense. This is incompatible with what it means to forgive.

In summary, Murphy does not see forgiveness merely as the elimination of resentment (behavior modification or forgetting cannot produce forgiveness); rather, it is the activity of ceasing to resent for the right reasons, specifically the reasons that are consistent with the ideas of self-worth. My discussion of his argument has revealed a number of problems with his account of forgiveness, which, render the possibility of forgiveness under such circumstances a very difficult task. Our next assignment is to offer a thorough analysis of Murphy’s account of forgiveness as a whole, and to show where the account is wanting, with final aim of proposing a new account that would overcome these flaws.

(vi) A critique of Murphy

There are two main sets of problems with Murphy’s account of forgiveness. The first set of problems involves Murphy’s view that the reasons for forgiveness are an essential part of its definition. The second set of problems involve the meaning of forgiveness, especially the connection Murphy draws between forgiveness and resentment. I aim to

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84 The first difficulty was when we are unable to make a clear distinction between an immoral act and the actor. Cataclysmic evils present metaphysical and moral questions that render the matter of divorcing the agent from the actions irresolvable. The second difficulty had to do with the matter of evening the scales. Under Murphy’s account forgiveness is possible once we even the moral scales, for example when the wrongdoer’s status has been lowered or when the victim’s has been raised. However, there are certain cases where the equilibrium will not be rectified because there is nothing that can be done to even the moral scales (whether by raising the victim’s status or lowering the offender’s). The difficulty with Murphy’s account can be framed in the following terms: forgiveness is possible and morally justifiable because there is something we can do to even the moral order, for example through offender’s suffering, the victim’s benefit, or the separation of the agent from the evil act. Under ordinary circumstances, forgiveness is possible because there is something that can be done to rectify the moral situation. The bad news is that certain extraordinary circumstances render the forgiving act meaningless because nothing can be done to rectify the moral order. Forgiveness is impossible in such cases.
sever this connection, allowing the positive elements of my account of forgiveness to emerge. Let us begin by looking at the first set of problems.

Understandably, forgiveness may come across as a value-laden concept, just because it is the sort of thing that is ordinarily done for the right reasons, where “right” is understood in a normative, ethical sense. For example, Murphy has explored five reasons why forgiveness is morally justified. From his account, the grounds for forgiveness are those that are tied to respect for persons. In a way, Murphy makes the offender’s conduct central to the justification and the meaning of forgiveness. This presents a serious problem. Violations are necessarily an affront on personhood. There are four elements that are intertwined here, according to his view: the messenger, the immoral act, the victim, and the message, with the message as the connecting thread. So essentially, any justification of forgiveness must untie the message from the messenger. The answer to the question, “what is forgiveness” demands that we show that it restores the harmony between the messenger and the victim, and harmony is attained \textit{if and only if} a different message is conveyed than the message conveyed by the immoral act. For example, wrongdoing suggests the perpetrator is higher in value and rank, and the victim lower in value and rank. Repentance sends a different message—symbolically withdrawing the demeaning one, thereby reestablishing that the two parties are equal in value and rank. This applies to the other accounts of justifications as well.

Such an approach to forgiveness is, however, one-sided. It relies on the offender’s action, not the victim’s. That is, forgiveness is justified because the degrading message has been withdrawn through repentance, or, because the offender has suffered enough, or any other reason in Murphy’s list. Because this account is not victim-centered,
forgiveness cannot be justified if the victim decides to forgive purely out of compassion, or when forgiveness is seen purely as a gift, an act of grace arising out of the deeper positive (altruistic) attributes of our being. But this account is ethically lacking. It ignores questions about who we are (the ethics of character) as moral agents. There might be grounds to justify forgiveness in situations in which the victim’s action of forgiveness is driven by victim’s altruistic motives. Such a conduct need not compromise the victim’s self-worth. This, however, cannot be accounted for on Murphy’s theory.

Justifying forgiveness on the basis of the offender’s action has other difficulties. Murphy suggests that forgiveness is possible when we can draw a line separating the immoral act from the agent, or when the moral equilibrium can be restored. There are situations, however, in which the moral equilibrium cannot be restored or where the dividing line between an agent and his action is not easy to define, as we saw earlier. The implication is that forgiveness is impossible in such cases. Put differently, the point of our objection is this: in certain cases, repentance, suffering, remorse, etc., may be necessary but not sufficient conditions for making forgiveness a reasonable act. Besides, restoring the moral equilibrium seems to require that the victim be capable of moving towards forgiveness, something that is impossible in certain kinds of injuries as we will see later on in chapter 4. Further, Murphy’s account seems to suggest that we cannot speak of or offer forgiveness for wrongs that do not involve threats to personhood. However, such a view is clearly out of step with our everyday intuitions of what we mean by forgiveness. Usually, the ordinary language of forgiveness is quite broad, not limited to the ideas of self-respect. For example, ordinarily, people seek and provide forgiveness for a wide range of wrongs where violations of self-respect
is not involved. A good example is a case of doctors’ negligence in their handling of patients. There may still be moral factors for forgiveness where such wrongs occur, even though the wrongs and violations of responsibilities do not involve seeing patients as mere means.

Murphy limits what counts as forgiveness. For Murphy, not every instance in which resentment is overcome is a case of forgiveness. He thinks the restriction is necessary so that we can distinguish cases where people forgive for “selfish” reasons as opposed to non-selfish ones. In his view, there is no forgiveness if the act of forgiving is driven purely by selfish motivations. Let us be clear precisely what the difference between selfishness and self-interestedness involves to see what really is at issue here. To be selfish is to be egoistic and narrow-minded (the self becomes the center of the universe). Self-centeredness could also imply a lack of generosity. Some people associate selfishness with greed. Altruism is the reverse of selfishness. Self-interestedness, on the other hand, is simply acting for personal reasons. We may act self-interestedly without being selfish, i.e., without believing that we should act exclusively for personal gain. The reasons for our action may be self-motivated but they need not be self-centered. For example, I can try to lose weight for reasons of self-interest, e.g., to be healthy, but it need not exclude (or fail to imply) the idea that I am setting a good example for my family, hence making my actions altruistic. In neither case is losing weight selfish. One of them is self-motivated, the other one is not. If this is right, then forgiveness based on personal reasons, like the desire to promote mental health, is a self-interested, but not a selfish act. Hence, the overcoming of resentment for personal reasons is morally

85 Ibid., 22-23.
86 For example, *The Oxford Pocket American Dictionary of Current English*, s.v. “Selfishness.”
justifiable for exactly the same reasons as losing weight (whether for personal or non-personal reasons). What this implies is that the two words should be set apart: selfishness is incompatible with forgiveness, but self-interestedness is not. It is possible for one to have the latter, without such concerns collapsing into the former. Clearly, Murphy does not seem to recognize this important distinction.

Now that we are clear as to the distinction between selfishness and self-interest, we can proceed to counter Murphy’s view that not all instances in which resentment is overcome are examples of forgiveness. For a start, it is interesting how Murphy thinks resentment functions like a disease. That is, resentment eats away at our peace of mind like cancer that preys on the body. It renders us dysfunctional; we become less effective at work and are not able to maintain good relationships with friends, colleagues or family. In short, our lives are drastically interrupted because of the mental pain from resentment. Hence, going to see a behavior-modification therapist for the extinguishment of resentment is like visiting a doctor for a dreaded illness such as cancer. In Murphy’s view (at least implicitly), we should not credit the patient with the success of the cancer treatment—science, technology, and the doctor are the key players in the successful outcome. The patient’s actions are ethically irrelevant. Analogously, the extinguishment of resentment (via behavior-medication therapy) cannot be attributed to the victim—science and the therapist are responsible. The message here is that the victim has not carried out an act of serious ethical significance. According to this way of thinking, such acts do not count as real forgiveness because they are based on non-moral grounds, driven by wrong motives. However, I beg to differ with Murphy. The decision to see a behavior-modification therapist and to follow through with the appointments, and to keep
up with one’s medications is a task that is equally demanding, considering the victim’s mental condition (if we can trust Murphy’s characterization). Such an achievement strikes me as something bordering on the virtues of care and responsibility; it also requires self-discipline. Hence, contra Murphy, the pursuit of forgiveness for such “selfish” reasons is no less virtuous than for cases where there is forgiveness for what might be referred to as the non-self-absorbed reasons.

Thus, we have to ask whether a self-interested forgiver has the proper attitude of forgiveness (compatible with a comprehensive character of the action of forgiveness). A proper attitude as we saw has to do with the intention of a forgiving action, i.e., ceasing to see the offender as a wrongdoer but as a responsible member of the moral community. So the crucial issue here is to show that self-interested motivation does not preclude such an attitude or that forgiving actions ensuing from the attitude are compatible with a comprehensive account of the character of forgiveness. Self-interested motivation does not preclude the proper attitude described a moment ago for the following reasons. First, forgiveness, even if for personal reasons, is a self-interested but not a selfish act. A self-interested act as we saw is compatible with how we see forgiveness as an other-regarding act, but a selfish act is not. Second, the pursuit of forgiveness for self-interested reasons can be a virtue (e.g., if it exhibits the attributes of care, responsibility, and self-discipline). Hence, fully developed, self-interested motives do not rule out a proper intentionality of forgiveness; they allow the cultivation of an attitude of forgiveness compatible with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action. Clearly, Murphy’s account of forgiveness cannot accommodate this type of forgiveness.

In the long run, Murphy’s account is elegant in that it tries to see forgiveness in a
new light, where forgiveness is appropriate only when it is presented for the right reasons. Nonetheless, the root cause of all his problems has to do with his language about the messages that need to be communicated for forgiveness to be merited, and the message that is implicitly carried in forgiveness itself. Thus, the main problem with Murphy’s account is the transactional dimension he lends to the meaning of forgiveness. He cannot address certain problem cases, like the ones of non-culpable wrongdoing and cataclysmic evils.

Now that I have discussed the first set of problems, it is time to turn to the second set. A central feature in this second set is the idea that there is a connection between forgiveness and resentment, since, as Murphy puts it, forgiveness is the overcoming of resentment for the right reasons. If Murphy is right, then there are at least two points we can derive from his view. One, since forgiveness is a process which involves the elimination of resentment, there is no forgiveness where there is still resentment. Two, people will always have to resent before they forgive. There are some major problems with these views.

First, if the overcoming of the feeling of resentment is central to the nature of forgiveness, then a forgiving person has to adopt a certain emotional disposition as a condition for forgiveness. That is, the act of forgiving requires right emotions and the expulsion of the unwanted ones. Thus, a failure to forgive could be explained largely by one’s inability to control the negative emotions. Conversely, the ability to forgive could be explained by developing one’s capacity to master and exhibit the right kind of emotions. As we saw earlier, Murphy declares that “forgiveness is primarily a matter of how I feel about you (not how I treat you).” The idea is that forgiveness has little to do

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87 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 21.
with the actions people perform. Instead, it is a matter of one’s emotional state. Furthermore, if to forgive simply means to feel in a certain way, then this seems to endorse the idea that the overcoming of the feeling of resentment is not only a necessary but a sufficient condition for forgiveness. While such an approach may be an easy way to determine if forgiveness has indeed taken place, there are a number of problems with this view. One has to do with the problematic nature of the emotions. Human emotions can be elusive; they cannot usually be summoned and/or banished at will. You might be led to believe (mistakenly) that you have forgiven someone only to discover that this is really not the case. The negative emotions just happened to go underground only to resurface at a later time.

Murphy seems to recognize this problem when he talks about the recurring nature of resentment. But this raises another question for his account. Can we reliably determine that one has forgiven an offender, considering the unreliability of the emotions? I will respond to this question by substituting resentment with love, since both are very powerful emotions. Love is a very powerful, complex and yet essential emotion for a successful marriage. A couple that bases the health of their relationship primarily on feelings of love will probably not enjoy a lasting and fulfilling marriage, since there are times when one actually feels exactly the opposite of love towards their spouse. Feelings are unstable, they change often beyond our control. Thus, a full definition of love is more complex than what a lot of people take it to be. To be able to determine whether or not one is loved by their spouse requires a broader assessment of what is going on in the relationship than merely relying on how they feel. For example, actions and attitudes, have an integral role to play. We let people know that we love them not just by how we
feel but how we act, for example, the words we say. Our thoughts equally have a significant role to play.

Consider a second example. Imagine Ms. Stacy Johns whose husband frequently belittles her in public. Most recently, he has done this in the company of new acquaintances whose opinion was especially important to her. The episode has made her furious and seething in rage. She decides to kill the man, due to her uncontrollable anger and resentment. One fateful night, she loads a gun and safely hides it under the bed, ready to strike as soon as the man gets home from work. She has put up with the abuses for too long, now it is her turn to revenge, and she is willing to live with the consequences of her action. Suppose, on a second thought, Ms. Johns changes her mind owing to a shift in her emotions. The powerful emotions feeding the killing instinct have subsided, and she is able to keep her cool, but can’t move beyond this point. That is, she is no longer resentful to the point of wanting to kill the man, but is unwilling to stay in the relationship not out of her fear of the future but because she simply cannot stand the man. The claim that she has not forgiven him doesn’t seem right because it is obvious Ms. Johns has overcome resentment, as an act of will. On the other hand, to say that she has truly forgiven him is equally problematic because she’s still harboring a hostile attitude towards him. This example shows that the accounts of forgiveness that see forgiveness exclusively as a shift of emotions are problematic because they fail to cater for a much broader view of the struggles we go through as we work our way towards forgiveness or unforgiveness. Human beings are bio-psycho-social in nature, with needs that are deep and complex. A right account of forgiveness is one that caters for this rich conception of human

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88 This example is adopted from Richards, “Forgiveness,” 78.
experience. Hence forgiveness is a complex process; it should involve a change in the way we perceive, feel towards, and treat the offender. A multi-faceted approach to the nature of forgiveness is what we need to restore wholeness to the different parties involved in the wake of a wrongdoing. In addition, such a multi-faceted approach—a comprehensive characterization of the forgiving action—enables us to see what the general picture of the relationship between the two parties look like overall. It should also be consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action—namely, that forgiveness symbolizes new regard, and a fresh start.

Murphy’s account of forgiveness has difficulties similar to Butler’s. That is, other than a change in the emotions, there is little else that shows how the forgiver regards the offender differently. So the problem with Murphy’s account is that it lacks proper intentionality. A proper intention of forgiveness as we saw requires at least two things. First, forgiveness by its very nature implies a change of regard towards the offender where we cease to see the offender as such, and begin to regard him as a dutiful member of the moral community. This change of regard propels us to act in ways compatible with this change in regard, so that we make emotional, mental, and behavioral adjustments in order to view the offender differently. Second, this attitude enables us to develop higher levels of interaction with the offender. For example, forgiveness is seen as an expression of the faith and trust we have towards the offender as an integrated human being and member of the moral community, past records notwithstanding. Clearly, Murphy’s account leaves out these important aspects of a forgiving action.

In the end, many common philosophical accounts of forgiveness have a deficit because of their simplistic approach and characterization of a forgiving action. Murphy,
Butler, and a host of contemporary authors are at fault for this reason: they view forgiveness primarily as a matter of how the victim feels about or behaves toward the offender.

What of the idea that resentment precedes forgiveness? Murphy is right to suggest that we should deal with resentment if we are going to forgive. Since resentment is a natural response to unfair mistreatment from others, resentment might actually be a psychological barrier and thus a hindrance to forgiveness. It is therefore appropriate that we deal with this negative reaction if we are going to be whole again. This caveat notwithstanding, however, it is not clear that forgiveness as such has anything to do essentially with resentment. Hence, I disagree with Murphy that forgiveness is simply the foreswearing of resentment. As I see it, forgiveness can still take place without one having to overcome this psychological barrier. Imagine a kind of person who I shall refer to simply as a forgiving person. A forgiving person is someone whose character is dominated by the readiness to return a redemptive regard to others when he/she is wronged. I have two kinds of forgiving persons in mind. The first one experiences no resentment at all. His name is forgiving person Charlie. The other forgiving person does not allow resentment to take hold and put down roots. I will refer to him as forgiving person Andy. Andy is an excellent man. Excellent men may be wronged, but their selfless character allows them to be redemptive towards the offender by turning the other cheek, and they do this without any approval of the wrongdoing. Rightly or wrongly, forgiving persons (Charlie and Andy) simply will not feel the weight of resentment because of the deep selfless nature of their character. A forgiving person has what I refer
to as a *forgiving spirit*. A forgiving spirit is the ability to cultivate positive responses to harm and/or wrongdoing without allowing the negative emotions to take their toll on the victim and/or the offender. Thus compassion, empathy, sympathy, generosity, and self-sacrifice are attributes that are exhibited with ease by such persons. Forgiveness in this case is not the overcoming of resentment since there are no such feelings to be dealt with (as in the case of Charlie), or the feelings were defeated before they could take hold of the agent (as in the case of Andy). Plus, forgiveness is not an act that is self-oriented in anyway. There are no issues of self-respect to be addressed before the victim offers forgiveness. This is because of the selfless nature of the characters.

Contrary to Murphy, I have shown that one need not overcome the barrier of resentment in order to forgive. Forgiving persons, via a forgiving spirit, enable us to overcome this barrier of resentment with ease. Before we bring this discussion to a close, it might be worthwhile to pause and address certain concerns that might be voiced by those who may not agree with the ideas of forgiveness I have sketched above. One critic might charge “Who cares about such selfless characters? After all, forgiving persons are not easy to come by because such altruism demands the cultivation of qualities possessed only by saintly individuals, not ordinary mortals like you and me.” I will respond to this...

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89 According to R. S. Downie. “Forgiveness.” *Philosophical Quarterly* 15 no. 59 (1965), the *forgiving spirit* is described as the mode of behavior which is appropriate to relationships of persons as such, where we ought to treat others with a loving concern and dignity. Hence we cease to see them merely as sentience beings, but as those who are rational, capable of obeying moral rules and pursuing moral values just like us. In short, this is the treatment of others as ends in themselves. This is what he refers to as the *agape*. The *agape* becomes the *forgiving spirit*. However, my account of the *forgiving spirit* is different from Downie’s. Seeing offenders as ends in themselves seems to perpetuate the idea of retributive thinking (as Kantian arguments on retributive punishment are known for), and thus revenge, rather than the exhibition of positive qualities of compassion, empathy, sympathy, and generosity that Downie wants to cultivate in the victim. In the end, Downie’s notion of *agape* seems to consign the offender to her fate. That is, as a rational and responsible moral agent, the offender is also self-legislative and should be treated the same way she treats others. On the contrary, I consider the *forgiving spirit* to be a moral achievement that enables the forgiver to be altruistic in a way that allows her to present forgiveness as a pure gift, i.e., where it is not susceptible to the transactional approaches of forgiveness. Downie’s notion of *agape* does not escape the serpent-meanderings of exchange/reciprocity, features which nullify the purity of a gift.
criticism along with what might be a general charge that such an attitude of character (readiness to return a redemptive regard to wrongdoers) is morally inappropriate. The readiness to return a redemptive regard, says the critic, perpetuates a lack of regard for one’s own self-worth. Forgiveness is justified if and only if the demeaning message has been withdrawn. Forgiveness where resentment is not overcome suggests that the violations of personhood are still intact. Plus, the negative message has not changed yet, and there is no separation of the wrongdoer from the immoral act, our opponent might argue. Murphy for one might use this line of argument to insist that altruistic people are not exercising real forgiveness.

Here is my response. *Forgiving spirit* might be seen in the same light as other positive qualities that people develop and/or demonstrate, like athleticism. Michael Jordan is one of the foremost legends of basketball. He was not born a champion. His is a talent that was nurtured, developed and increasingly polished. The world is filled with people who have done exceptionally well in different aspects of life. Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Einstein, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, etc., are in the same category as Michael Jordan. No one is ethically or practically obligated to be a Michael Jordan, or a Shakespeare, a Mandela, or Gandhi. But we admire these great people. We want to be like them, we like being associated with them. We love to honor them. The world is a better place because of their contributions. That we have such people thriving in our midst seems to suggest there is so much potential around us, most of which is untapped. Analogously, that we have people who can act in a redemptive manner seems to show that it is a quality that is open to those who aspire to pursue this path of excellence. If we have not come across such people, that
does not mean they do not exist. Nor is it an indication these positive elements are hard to come by. They might just be like a singing talent yet to be discovered. In the final analysis, seeing forgiveness as the readiness to return a redemptive regard has the virtue of presenting us with a richer understanding of the meaning of forgiveness where the forgiver need not deal with the psychological barrier of resentment.90

(vii) Final Remarks and implications of Butler-Murphy account

We have been concerned with answering the fundamental question of what it means to forgive. We have done this by discussing and critiquing the views of two prominent figures in the philosophical history of forgiveness, Bishop Joseph Butler, and Jeffrie Murphy. Both Murphy’s and Butler’s accounts fail to provide a comprehensive characterization of the action of forgiveness. For example, a comprehensive account of forgiveness would need to include how forgiveness involves the forgiver cultivating a new respect for and a new trust/faith in the offender. But neither Murphy nor Butler include this in their account of forgiveness. In Murphy’s and Butler’s accounts, forgiveness as a practice functions as a medium of exchange. This is different from a new account of forgiveness that I am developing. We saw that a defensible conception of the moral life, hence forgiveness, has to do with the fundamental question of sustaining the flow of the moral life for both individuals and the collective moral community.

Butler and Murphy also have characterized forgiveness as an action that is essentially tied to resentment and the belief that resentment is appropriate only in those cases where there is culpable wrongdoing. I have shown that this is a mistake for at least

90 In forgiving the offender, a forgiving person resolves to regard the wrongdoer no longer as such but as a responsible member of the moral community, without having to be entangled with any negative feelings. The objection that there is no real forgiveness without dealing with the negative feelings is no longer viable. As the old saying goes, if it walks like a duck, talks like a duck, and looks like a duck, it is a duck.
three reasons. First, resentment need not precede forgiveness; forgiving persons do not necessarily have to deal with the barrier of resentment. Second, focusing exclusively on resentment or seeing forgiveness in terms of the defeat of resentment implies the overcoming of such negative emotions is not only a necessary but a sufficient condition for forgiveness. However, such an approach robs us of a comprehensive perspective of looking at forgiveness which requires an assessment not just of the emotional, but the mental, behavioral, and social features of a forgiving action. This is what captures the bigger picture of how the forgiver should see the offender, overall. A comprehensive perspective is what is consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action, since ordinarily, forgiveness symbolizes a fresh start. Murphy’s and Butler’s accounts fall short of this definition. The problem is that forgiveness as an instrument of moral interaction is impossible in the absence of this new regard. But this new regard cannot flourish in a framework where the spirit of exchange is the underlying motivation for actions, as is the case in Murphy’s and Butler’s accounts. Lastly, there is the problem of actual moral world and voluntary but non-culpable wrongdoing. There, the notions of responsibility and blame do not have a meaning. Butler’s and Murphy’s accounts of forgiveness are paralyzed in such cases.

(viii) Conclusion

There are four major points that standout in this chapter. One is the problem of forgiveness in the absence of responsible wrongdoing. The question here is whether forgiveness is possible and warranted when moral culpability is in dispute or not present. Contrary to Murphy and Butler, the conceptual criteria that ties forgiveness to responsibility and blame will not work in certain cases, especially in an actual moral
situation where voluntary but non-culpable wrongdoing happens. A second problem involves the belief that resentment precedes forgiveness and that one has to resent in order to forgive. I have rejected this position. The view that one has to resent in order to forgive is reflective of a simplistic approach and characterization of a forgiving action, one that does not account for a broader view of who we are as moral agents (as bio-psycho-social beings). Thirdly, a simplistic characterization of forgiveness is inconsistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action. Ordinarily, forgiveness symbolizes a renewal of the moral order. I have described this as an “interactional” or “non-transactional” view of the moral life. Contrary to conventional philosophical views, I have argued that forgiveness is attainable without overcoming resentment. Finally, I have shown that even if overcoming resentment were a necessary condition of forgiveness, it is nevertheless not a sufficient condition of forgiveness.

These four points foreshadow the features of the account of forgiveness that I am developing in remainder of this dissertation. The new account is called the “quasi-unconditional” view. A fully developed version of the quasi-unconditional account is discussed in chapter 5. But even at this stage the reader should be able to see the connection between this chapter to the specific features of the account of forgiveness to be discussed later on in chapter 5. For instance, I have shown that there are many reasons why we need the new account of forgiveness. First, quasi-unconditionality accommodates the view that wrongdoing (thus need for forgiveness) need not be tied to how we choose to act as moral agents. Forgiveness is called for even in cases where the actor is neither responsible nor blamable. The account can function in what has been referred to as an *actual* moral situation where wrongdoing is ubiquitous. In addition,
quasi-unconditionality has the attributes of a proper character of the action of
giveness, the one we have been championing all along, where forgiveness means a
fresh start for individuals (both victims and offenders) and the collective moral
community. For the victim, forgiveness symbolizes a new beginning because it is
concerned with restoring the holistic balance (i.e., the bio-psycho-social dimensions). For
the offender, on the other hand, forgiveness means a fresh start; he will no longer be
regarded as an offender but as a responsible member of the moral community. For the
entire moral community, forgiveness stands for the renewal and sustenance of the flow of
the moral life, without which we would be trapped in a world of hatred and resentment.
At the center of any articulation of forgiveness is the issue of an attitude of forgiveness
that relates to that forgiving action. The ordinary philosophical understanding of
forgiveness (as illustrated in the Butler-Murphy account) is lacking because the
underlying motivations or intention are largely driven by ideas of exchange, or simply the
pursuit to fulfill the duties within the moral community.

On the contrary, the account of forgiveness I espouse is guided by the idea that
the intentionality of forgiveness has to be compatible with our expectations of a forgiving
action in general. This means that forgiveness should function as an instrument of moral
interaction that enables the victim to have a restored relationship with the offender so that
ordinary moral life is once again possible. This point is important, and hence worth
emphasizing, because it shows how conception has a direct bearing on the nature of
forgiveness in question. In addition, we can also see how conception implies things about
justification. For instance, in some cases, ordinary rational justification will not work
because the moral scales are beyond rectification (e.g., in a case where wrongdoing often
happens perforce, or in a case of cataclysmic evils). But even in these cases, we can still find reasonable grounds for forgiveness as an act of grace, or we can cultivate a forgiving spirit. In chapter 3, we will look at another reason why an alternative account of forgiveness is required. There, I will show that the moral life is problematic and that wrongdoing does not depend on what we do as moral agents. Wrongdoing depends simply on any human action, good or bad, right or wrong. A new account of forgiveness is necessary to deal with the inevitable conflicts we face in the moral life.
CHAPTER 3: ACTUAL MORAL SITUATION AS THE REAL MORAL LIFE

(i) Introduction

In this chapter I argue that inevitable wrongdoing happens, that any account of forgiveness should deal with it, and that the ordinary account of forgiveness is ill-equipped to deal with it. Crucial in my discussion of this claim about inevitable wrongdoing are two separate ideas about the moral world, what I am referring to as the ideal and actual moral worlds. A very important feature of the actual moral world is that human experience is a theater of practical and ethical incoherence due to the difficulties we face in carrying out the multiple roles that are simultaneously imposed on us as members of society. These difficulties involve us in indiscriminate wrongdoing. Thus, it follows that an actual moral world is inherently problematic, since good choices do not guarantee good moral outcomes.

An ideal moral world, on the other hand, assumes that the nature of the choices we make determines the moral outcomes of our actions so that wronging others is a consequence of one not doing what is right, i.e., failing to fulfill one’s obligations. Thus unlike in an actual moral world, a fundamental feature of an ideal moral world is that there exists a neatly cut-out moral world where it is unlikely to run into serious difficulties when fulfilling our obligations. The belief here is that we live in a simple, straightforward moral terrain: you get what you deserve as long as you do your part in fulfilling your moral obligations. However, as I will show, the condition of the moral life characterized and presented as the ideal is not in tandem with everyday human experience. Hence I will reject the ideal as an unrealistic fiction or construction.

In the end, I will show that the traditional model of forgiveness can only function
in an ideal moral world, and is rendered moot in an actual moral world. The general root cause of this limitation is a function of the transactional nature of the moral life that renders forgiveness as an exchange. I am introducing and defending an alternative account of forgiveness that is non-transactional, in which the meaning of forgiveness (as in the conception) is seen in a different light, in the form of a gift.

We will begin by looking at what we are calling a transactional framework governing the moral life, before looking at the nature of these two moral situations.

(ii) Transactional model of the moral life

Let us begin by briefly describing an account of the ordinary conception of the moral life as lived and experienced in society. A good way to proceed is by examining one crucial aspect of the human experience. Even a cursory look at human interactions reveals that there is a prevalent and influential principle that seems to govern human relationships called the principle of reciprocity or exchange.\(^91\) That is, human interaction is governed by an age-old notion that we can call “the right of mutual expectation,” the idea that a society is what it is because we each share (as responsible members of the community) a deep sense and commitment to the obligations we owe to others and others to us. For instance, we are generally predisposed to be nice to those who are nice to us; there is harmony and peaceful coexistence in society when people seek the good of others, e.g., when we do not harm others without reason. The members of such a society are obligated to do good to us in return (i.e., not to harm others). And, in the event that one crosses the line and behaves badly, thereby causing unnecessary harm to other member(s) of society, the victim can, within reasonable limits, act in self-defense. Besides, society is structured

\(^91\) From now on, reciprocity and exchange will be used interchangeably. In its colloquial terms, the basic idea in this principle is “you scratch my back and I will scratch yours.”
in such a way that it not only seeks to prevent wrongdoing, but also punishes the wrongdoers. Such action is known as retributive punishment. The death penalty for capital crimes is a case in point.\textsuperscript{92}

Hence, in a way, it is plausible to say that the larger society is formed and sustained by some form of tacit contract. On the one hand, this tacit contract outlines what our general duties are (what we owe others), and on the other hand, specifies what benefits are due to us (i.e., a form of credit that accrues to our account once we fulfill our part of the bargain). Life is defined in terms of rights (credits) and duties (debts), where people get what they deserve and pay what they owe.

Matters of ethics are then typically seen through the lens of this tacit contract. For instance, reciprocity suggests that social roles and relationships are conceptually holistic in nature, with a wrong assumption that the good of the whole is to be equated with the good of the self (and vice versa) as we fulfill the responsibilities these roles impose on us. Take the case of parental and professional duties, each of which is carried out under the larger units of family and society, respectively. Each of these duties and responsibilities may be well defined. Each of these roles may have well defined duties and responsibilities. Each entails differences in standards and expectations of what makes one (say) a good father or professional. However, a moral situation with a reciprocal worldview wrongly assumes that somehow the moral equilibrium (a form of distributive justice) could be attained implying that we each at the same time will be better-off as long as everyone within our reciprocal circle fulfills his or her obligations. For example,

\textsuperscript{92} There are those who think that the death penalty is not a good form of punishment even on retributive grounds. For example most of “developed” countries (aside from the US) have abolished the practice because of the claim that it has dehumanizing effects. However, the abolishment of the death penalty as a practice is not itself a negation of the principle underlying the practice, i.e., exchange.
it is believed that a good father is one who readily sacrifices his personal interests for the
good of the family, so that whenever there is a conflict of roles in the society, family
comes first.

In the same vein, a good doctor should not base her decisions on personal
considerations like family interests. Otherwise she risks jeopardizing the integrity of the
profession, among other things. Hence under the reciprocity framework, the doctor who
carries out her professional duties within the ethics of the profession deserves our praise
even if in so doing she lets her family suffer. The belief here is that the good of the
profession somehow equals the good of the self (i.e., family) and consequently that the
family will be better-off in the end if the doctor does her job. By the same token, a man
who sacrifices the good of the family to save one million lives still fails in the family
front, and hence deserves our blame (i.e., the virtuous act has caused a disequilibrium
following a failure in fulfilling the family obligation).93

In sum, a very important feature of the ordinary conception of the moral life is
this: the moral situation is such that it not only presents us with clear moral demands but
different moral options as well, some acceptable, some not. Here, we are not bound to go
wrong as long as we do what is right. The moral situation thus described is what we will
be referring to as the ideal moral world. An ideal moral world (to emphasize the main
point above) is a moral world presupposing the idea that equilibrium is attainable in the
fulfillment of our obligations, where each of us get what we deserve by fulfilling our
obligations. Thus failure to achieve this harmony results from a failure to fulfill these

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93 It is abundantly clear that the reciprocal thinking is skewed. The faulty assumption upon which it is based
leaves us with awkward moral outcomes as can be seen in these two cases. Hence, the notion that someone
will scratch your back once you scratch theirs (morally speaking) doesn’t always hold in real life.
obligations. Such a world assumes that we will not run into serious practical, ethical
difficulties while fulfilling our duties, or that the difficulties will smooth out as we do
that which is right. It depicts the notion of a simple, straightforward moral terrain.

Thus conceived, the moral use of forgiveness presumed by ordinary
philosophical language is such that it lubricates the wheels of moral exchange. In other
words, under this moral framework forgiveness occupies a central place in the society
and is morally significant due to how it enables us to fulfill our duties by keeping up with
the terms of the exchange, as when one acknowledges wrongdoing, shows remorse, or
otherwise makes amends.

By and large what this means is that in matters of forgiveness, ordinary accounts
of justification are shaped by and operate within a moral framework emphasizing these
notions of exchange, leading to a culture of forgiveness tendered on and limited to a
transactional model. Under this account, forgiveness is significant and has a central place
in society because of its exchange relation, enabling us to fulfill basic duties within a
moral community consistent with the terms of exchange.

However as I have suggested, we should reject a worldview governed by
reciprocal thinking because there is a problem with the moral life which presumes an
ideal moral situation. For example, it is not always the case that harmony is achieved
even when people reciprocally fulfill their obligations. In the doctor/parent cases alluded
to earlier, it is possible for us to do wrong (hence get what we do not deserve, like blame)
even though we have fulfilled our obligations.

(iii) Hegel and the human society: the case for actual moral world

We have seen in the previous sub-section that a general transactional framework exists
that governs the moral life. A very important feature defining this framework is the moral situation we have thus described as presuming an *ideal* moral world. Be that as it may, however, I want to propose and defend a different conception of the moral life that is interactional in nature, with a characteristic moral situation known as the *actual* moral world. What is an *actual* moral world? How is it different from an *ideal* moral world? What are its defining features?

Before offering a descriptive account of an *actual* moral world, however, a good account of the social structure of the moral life is necessary to anchor the claims we are about to make concerning an *actual* moral world. Hegel offers a unique account of the society that would be a good model of the kind of social complexity of the moral life we need for this purpose. Charles Taylor’s work is a good contemporary source for laying out this Hegelian idea of society.94

We will limit this discussion to two of Hegel’s ideas featured in Taylor’s text. One is the relationship between the individual and society. The other is the nature of human obligations that come from the multiple roles we play as members of a society. The two ideas are particularly interesting for our purposes because of their interdependent relationship in a Hegelian society. For example, in Taylor’s interpretation of Hegel’s account, the key to understanding what our obligations are as members of society lies in the way the individual relates to the society.

Taylor identifies some key Hegelian terms that characterize the relation of the individual to the community. One of them is what he calls “substance.” He says that society is the “substance” of the individual. He also refers to society as the “essence” for

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the individual.\textsuperscript{95} Taylor gives us an insight on what these terms mean: “the notion behind ‘substance’ and ‘essence,’” he explains, “is that the individuals only are what they are by their inherence in the community,”\textsuperscript{96} which is the same as saying the individual is a product of the larger community. We need to explain further what it means to say that the individual is who he is in virtue of this larger life.

Consider Taylor’s description of a human being. A human individual, says Taylor, is a “being who can think, feel, decide, be moved, respond, enter into relations with others.”\textsuperscript{97} So an individual is a fully developed, rational being, one that is actively engaged in the community’s life.\textsuperscript{98} Active, rational engagement in the affairs of the community, not passivity, defines a person (and by extension a Hegelian society). In this sense, human persons are essentially social, interactive, and serially interconnected. Meaningful human life involves us in obligations flowing from the social connections in society. For example, one could be a doctor, father, husband, parishioner, citizen, friend, and a Democrat or Republican, all at the same time. This is what real human life is in a Hegelian society, where civic, social, and moral obligations flow from these roles and relationships. In other words, what I am as a US citizen, doctor, and spouse, I am only in virtue of the society from which the multiple and simultaneous obligations flow. No doubt the life of society is one whose locus is larger than that of the individual. It happens in the community. Hence, the individual possesses his or her essence and identity by participating in this larger life.

One last point about the individual/society relation can be seen in the debate about

\textsuperscript{95} Taylor, \textit{Hegel and Modern Society}, 85.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Ibid.}, 85-86.
\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}, 87
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Ibid.}
which of the two units (the individual or society) is superior. Hegel rejects such a debate as unnecessary, according to Taylor by saying “this relation of ends and means is quite inappropriate here. For the state is not something abstract standing over against the citizens; but rather they are moments as in organic life, where no member is end and none means . . . The essence of state is ethical life.”

Thus, according to Taylor’s interpretation of Hegel, a society is a living organism with different living parts and with no place for the notions of ends and means. In the end, community has a higher life because the parts are related to the whole, and vice versa. There is a teleology but of a different kind; it is an internal teleology “where the individual is not serving an end separate from him; rather he is serving a larger goal which is the ground of his identity, for he only is the individual he is in this larger life. We have gone beyond the opposition of self-goal and other-goal.”

In other words, Taylor thinks that Hegel sees the structure of the society as something analogous to a marital relationship between two individuals each with different roles and responsibilities. The betterment of a married couple’s well-being hinges on how well they relate and fulfill their unique roles within the family unit. Hence, as husband and wife, both parties are interdependent; each one of them is seen as having a complementary role in the marriage. Thus, the question of seniority and/or conflict of interests theoretically should not arise.

The other Hegelian idea to be discussed is that of human obligations in the society. I have already given a hint as to what these obligations are and how these obligations look. The nature of the obligations is derived from what we have said so far.

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100 Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 86.
about the design of society we each ought to belong, as active, rational participants. For example, we said that the individual and society complement each other, like husband and wife in that their destiny is linked. Meaningful human life is experienced as we actively involve ourselves in the public/community life by fulfilling the obligations that the social roles and relationships impose on us within the society. These sets of obligations constitute what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*. The doctrine of *Sittlichkeit* comes from the idea that morality reaches its completion in the community. So our individual *Sittlichkeit* consists simply of the moral obligations we have to the community of which we are a part.\(^{101}\)

We have seen that the Hegelian notion of society requires an understanding of the relationship the individual has with the society. Hegel has said that individuals are what they are in virtue of their participation in the community as a whole. And yet, it is in their active participation as members that the essential elements of society (indeed the society itself) are generated and sustained. This is evident, for example, from the complementary way in which both the individual and society see each other, as well as in the Hegelian idea of a person (i.e., as an active, rational being). In the end, this shows what Hegel means when he speaks of the norms or ends of society (the *Sittlichkeit*) as being sustained by our actions, and yet as already in existence so that the member of society ‘brings them about through his activity, but as something which rather simply is.’\(^{102}\) Hence, one of the central features of *Sittlichkeit* is that it enjoins us to bring about that which already is. In other words the common life which is the basis of my *sittlich* obligation is already there in existence. It is in virtue of its being an ongoing affair that I have these obligations; and

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\(^{101}\) *Ibid.*, 83-84.

\(^{102}\) *Ibid.*, 89.
my fulfillment of them is what sustains it and keeps it in being. So, for example, I am
able to train and become a judge because of the existing rules and ethical guidelines
governing this profession. I need the rule of law to become a judge. Once a judge, it is
my responsibility to uphold the rule of law. Hence in Sittlichkeit there is no gap between
what ought to be and what is. What ought to be is and what is ought to be.¹⁰³

Hegel contrasts Sittlichkeit with the Moralitat. His ideas about Moralitat and how
they differ from those about Sittlichkeit can be found in his criticism of Kant. In turn,
understanding the nature of Hegel’s critique of Kant requires some elaboration on Kant’s
ethics.¹⁰⁴

For Kant one has to apply a strictly formal criterion to the prospective actions in
trying to figure out what the right choices and actions should be. Rationality is a matter of
people thinking in universal terms and doing so consistently. And there is a rule to be
followed: the rightness or wrongness of an act depends on whether or not we are willing
to apply the same standard to ourselves and others without a contradiction. So the content
of Kant’s moral obligation comes purely from the will, a will that is totally free from any
grounds of determination, be it from within (e.g., desires) or from without (e.g., society).
A moral agent is one who is fully free and autonomous in this strong sense. This is the
origin of Hegel’s quarrel with Kant, according to Taylor: “Because he only has a formal
notion of freedom, Kant cannot derive his notion of the polity from it.”¹⁰⁵ Kant, Taylor
adds, “cannot generate a new substantive vision of the polity in which it would be
realized, one founded on goals derived intrinsically from the nature of the will itself,

¹⁰³ Ibid., 83.
¹⁰⁴ “The aim of Kant was to cut loose altogether from the reliance on nature (for Kant, this means society),
and to draw the content of obligation purely from the will. A moral subject is thus autonomous in a radical
sense. He obeys only the dictates of his own will,” Taylor, Hegel and Modern Society, 75-76.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 78.
which would be thus unconditional for men.”

So the problem with Kant’s ethics is in the way that his idea of rationality is conceived. That is, unlike what we have seen with Hegel’s idea of society, Kant’s theory takes its start from persons as individuals seeking particular ends and goals. The demands of morality and rationality only enter as restrictions and limitations imposed on individuals from outside. So rationality is not immanent to social life. Rather, it is an external, formal universality whose only demand is that the negative freedom of individuals be made compatible. In the end, there is a fundamental difference between Hegel’s and Kant’s center of moral obligation. For Hegel, morality is given its content via the social vision of society and the obligations that hold of us in virtue of being part of the larger community. For Kant, it is an ethic of the individual that is radically free and can, therefore, not offer content to our moral obligations in society.

In the end, according to Taylor, Hegel is saying that Kant identifies ethical obligation with the *Moralitat*, not *Sittlichkeit*. That is, given the way Kant’s idea of autonomy is conceived, where the basis of moral obligation that holds a moral agent as an individual is defined in contrast to nature/society, it renders him or her as a being who is in endless opposition with what is. And the moral life which Kant’s ethics enjoins us to seek and sustain is not about that which already is but that which ought to be. So there is a conflict between what ought to be and what is. The harmony of the whole is non-existent; the complementary relationship between the individual and society is missing.

106 Ibid.

107 Ibid. Kantian freedom suggests no attachment or influence from the society or the self (i.e., desires).

108 Ibid., 83-84.
(iv) Summary of the main points

We started by looking at what might be called a simple society—as opposed to a complex one where an actual moral situation prevails. In a simple society, an ideal moral situation prevails, and an ethical framework of exchange governs the moral life. Its important assumption is that the moral terrain is problem-free. The belief here is that people do not feel cheated as long as they keep their end of the bargain. Kantian ethics is an improved version of this moral life owing to the rationality component. For example, rationality requires that we treat others with respect, not merely as a means. So I should treat you with respect because this determines how you and others reciprocally respond to me. This is how we each become authors of the moral law. Thus, Kantian ethics is a milestone in that it outlines how individuals should act towards each other on rational grounds; at the very least, this is what a decent society should look like.

But the structure of Kantian society is no different than what we have described as simple society inasmuch as one of its central features is the belief that all we need to do to act rightly is to follow the dictates of the moral principle that is rationality. In a Kantian society, wrongdoing is a matter of violating this principle, i.e., failing to fulfill our obligations. Hence, a fundamental feature of such a society is the presupposition that out there exists a neatly delineated moral world where one is unlikely to run into serious difficulties when fulfilling one’s duties: we are bound to avoid doing wrong as long as we keep to the rules of morality. However, we have seen that this belief is misleading since it does not reflect what real-life in society looks like.

But in a Hegelian society the moral values, principles, and obligations are defined and determined by the structure of the society. Indeed, they flow from the society. A
society is a complex network of social, civic, and interpersonal relationships. Institutions like family, friendships, professions, clubs, collegiality, and citizenship, etc., are the engines that drive social life. As members of society, we are often implicated in numerous and yet specific duties by virtue of these social roles and relationships. This makes the moral landscape very complex.

(v) a. The argument for inevitable wrongdoing

We are now ready to offer the main argument for an actual moral world. The basics of this argument have already been outlined, more or less. It deals with the multiple, simultaneous duties we hold within a community. The point of the argument is that fulfilling certain obligations like civic or professional obligations is sometimes predicated upon discounting other different sets of obligations, like family obligations, or the obligations we owe to friends, the church, or to other social organizations whose demands may make equal or even stronger claims on us. Thus, to fulfill my ethical obligations as a doctor or citizen might mean two things: one, that I set aside the interests of the other (in this case my spouse, son, a friend, etc.); two, that I undercut their legitimate expectations. In the end, these multiple roles involve me in wrongdoing because the demands of one role conflicts with the demands of the other role(s). As a good soldier, one will most likely spend his productive life in the battlefields at the expense of his family and friends. He risks his life for the good of his country, but perforce subjects his family to stress and anxiety at the same time. Life in many of our veterans’ homes is miserable, largely because of the neglect and ingratitude from the larger community. For example, it is common knowledge that veterans usually experience serious, multiple health complications commensurate with the changes and
challenges of aging, not to mention the daily physical, emotional and psychological issues they have to deal with in their post-war life.\textsuperscript{109} The point here is that as a soldier, one has worth in the eyes of society as long as one is in the service. However, once soldiers have become a spent force, they are virtually on their own or in the hands of a few close friends and/or family. It is they who will feel the pain and make sacrifices. They are the ones who deal with the troubles that come with soldiers’ civic accomplishments, not the state nor the larger community. Hence, the nature of an actual moral world is that it is inherently problematic; wrongdoing occurs all the time, even when people fulfill their moral obligations.

The claim that wronging others is part of our everyday experience can be restated differently using what I will call the foregrounding and backgrounding argument. Here is the structure of the argument. Imagine a situation whereby in order to do X (where X entails fulfilling a certain duty, say a duty to the state), one has to simultaneously set aside a duty called Y (Y entails obligation to another person, say a spouse) because though they are of the same value and rank, X and Y cancel each other out such that doing X means one has a strong preference for X (foregrounding) and a lack of preference for Y (backgrounding). In the same way, doing Y shows there is a significant preference for Y (foregrounding) and a lack of preference for X (backgrounding). Suppose one chooses to do X. What this implies in the end is that fulfilling X (foregrounding) is predicated upon backgrounding the needs or obligations to Y. Hence it seems that by doing what is right, paradoxically, wronging others often happens perforce.

b. An actual moral world portrayed through drama

We will use another set of cases to illustrate the problem of an actual moral world. This time we will consider tragedy in drama (as a form of art) to mirror the moral difficulties we grapple with everyday in the real life.

In a broad sense of the term, a tragedy is a play or an event that conveys “the tragic sense of life” and can be captured in A.C. Bradley’s lamentation when he asks “why it is that a man’s virtues help to destroy him…?”110 Ordinarily, tragic consequences ensue from bad actions, but not with the tragic cases. Here, it is the reverse, i.e., paradoxically, tragic consequences ensue from our good actions. A similar paradoxical ambivalence is noted by Max Scheler when he describes tragedy as a condition in which “the same traits of character which permitted a man to do his best have brought him to catastrophe.”111 Thus, a tragic sense of life is a state of mind in which man’s situation is seen as “impossible,” inherently destructive, and/or dependent on terms that oppose it. A tragic sense of life is synonymous with the sort of inevitable wrongdoing we have been talking about. Tragedy presents itself in the struggles of man with Fate, often expressing vividly to our eyes inexplicable evils and undeserved sufferings of the tragic figure. The tragic figure has an appointment with destiny no matter what he or she does to change it. This is an absurd paradox.112

Tragedy has three components: an individual who we refer to as the tragic hero/heroine, the condition of the tragic hero/heroine, which we refer to as the tragic

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112 For further reading on the discussion of the problem of the paradox of tragedy, and the ethical implications ensuing from the tragic figures’ actions, see my paper on “Undoing the Tragic Knot? An Epistemological Problem,” *Proceedings of the Kent State University May 4th Philosophy Graduate Student Conference* 3 (2004), http://philosophy.kent.edu/journal/003003.
issue, and the message the play or the event communicates (i.e., its effects on the audience). I will use the historical play, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* to show the tragic contradictions in the three components of tragedy identified above.

In Aeschylus, Agamemnon is the tragic figure and hero. He is a character with immense power, virtues, and nobility. Thus, he is identified as strong, flawless, innocent, even admirable, and undeserving of his fate. Yet it is within his power or virtues that the paradox of tragedy resides. For instance Agamemnon’s courage, decisiveness, and desire to secure justice for the state and piety for the gods motivate him to obey Zeus’s command to punish Troy. However, “Offering no evidence to the contrary, the play also asserts that these same powers which win him victory also lead him to sacrifice his daughter [Iphigenia], and to despoil the alters of Troy, and finally to fall victim of Clytemnestra’s knife.” Thus, the tragic sense of life is evident. As Max Scheler affirms, “it would be most tragic if the same power which has brought either itself or another object to very high positive value becomes its destroyer—especially if this takes place in the very act of its achievement.”

The tragic sense of life is also evident in the tragic issue. Max Scheler explains further what we mean by tragic issue. He says, “If we are observing a certain action which is realizing a high value, and then we see in that same action that it is working toward the undermining of the very existence of the being it is helping, we receive the most complete and the clearest of tragic impressions.” In the play, Agamemnon’s goal is to secure justice, which is demanded by Zeus for the rape of Helen. Agamemnon

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secures justice by defeating Troy. But in order to secure this good, he has to commit the
inescapable acts of sacrificing Iphigenia and the devastation of Troy’s altars. And for
these, he must be destroyed. He becomes a victim of his fate at the hands of
Clytemnestra, an imperfect minister of justice who is also executed in turn. Here the
tragic issue is a mystery. The tragic hero seeks not evil but good. The good that he seeks
and finds destroys him. Thus, it is a moral order that seems to engender evil within itself,
where good rewards its seeker with its possession but simultaneously consumes him/her.

Finally, a tragic sense of life is manifest in the effects of tragedy. The tragedy
invades our intellectual as well as our emotional experience as we see, hear, read, or
experience a tragic episode. We are neither comforted nor outraged. Our belief in a world
of justice and moral order is neither affirmed nor denied. Our feeling is neither one of
hope nor despair. We are neither reconciled nor opposed to see a good man destroyed by
the power of good which he sought and achieved. In sum, the effects are both basically
pleasant and painful.

There are many plays of great repute which depict the tragic sense of life
symbolic of the dilemmas we face in real life and which leave us with no reasonable
explanation and/or resolution to the moral difficulties we face. Aeschylus’ Agamemnon,
Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex, Shakespeare’s Hamlet and King Lear, Ibsen’s Ghosts, and
Strindberg’s The Father, among others, all testify to the breadth, magnitude and anguish
of the tragic sense of life. I have used Aeschylus’ Agamemnon to represent the rest of the
plays. In all these cases, the institutional order does not provide a resolution to the
conflict of duties. Sadly, the tragic consequences of one’s good actions ensue.

Thus, even though Agamemnon represents the best that is possible for his world,
tragically, it is not good enough to save him from the consequences of the tragic conflict in the ethical life of the state. This is the paradoxical nature of the moral life. Thus, it is incumbent on Agamemnon to discount his commitments to Iphigenia in order to fulfill the duties required by state, even though his daughter could make equal or even stronger claims on him. Here, the assumption that there is a possible harmony in the reciprocal fulfillment of one’s obligations does not exist. People often receive what they do not deserve. And the failure to achieve harmony in the reciprocal fulfillment of the obligations has nothing to do with one having failed to fulfill his/her obligations. Rather, it has to do with the problematic nature of the moral life.

The problem of an actual moral world can be described briefly like this: in any situation where there is a duty to do X and a duty to do Y, where doing X and doing Y are mutually exclusive actions, then wrongdoing need not depend on the nature of what we do as moral agents but simply on any human action, right or wrong, good or bad. The ordinary notions of responsibility and wrongdoing are challenged in an actual moral world: right choices do not guarantee good moral outcomes, and wronging others have little to do with culpable wrongdoing.

c. The prima facie obligations and the moral life—a weaker argument

My major claim up until this point has been that an actual moral world is a situation where right choices do not guarantee good moral outcomes. However, in this section, I will defend a minor claim by considering some less complex cases which illustrate how the moral life is inherently problematic. The less complex cases should not be confused with the ones that are experienced under what we have described as an actual moral world. The moral conflicts I am referring to in this section are ordinary conflicts—
garden variety cases that are relatively easy to resolve and/or explain. All that it takes is for one to be able to apply prudent and sound judgment, or simple common sense, something we all posses as human beings. Thus, unlike in an actual moral world, garden variety conflicts are difficulties whose resolution may not be radically offensive to common sense beliefs, and the decisions involving such moral conflicts can be made in a way that secures considerable justice to the parties involved.

Two problem cases will be used for this argument. The first one has to do with the social obligations we hold in society. For instance, as a husband and a father, one’s primary obligation is to attend to the needs of the family. In such a situation, cases of the conflict of duties may not arise because duties to the family comes first. Although a man who forgoes playing golf with his buddies in order to attend his son’s football match has, in one way, disappointed his friends, he has nonetheless done a morally praiseworthy act. Morality in this case requires that he be discriminate in how he treats and relates to others. The commitment he has to his friends at the golf club could be seen as prima facie duty, i.e., a duty one ought to fulfill unless there are other compelling or stronger obligations that come into conflict with the original one. But if the same man was to miss playing golf with his buddies and instead spends the entire day lying lazily on his couch and watching TV, his friends would have a bone to pick with him. He would come across as someone who does not take his commitments seriously. What he has done is prima facie wrong.


Another duty in this category is, for example, the duty not to kill. But we know that there are instances where we usually act in contrast to this command. Soldiers have a duty to kill; and as a parent one has a duty to defend the family from the attacks of any intruder. When faced with such decisions, ordinary people
Consider a second case. As professionals, doctors have certain values and principles that govern the ethical obligations of their practice. For example, the doctor/patient relationship is built on the principle of medical confidentiality. Under normal circumstances, doctors are bound by their pledge to a patient’s confidentiality as provided in the Hippocratic Oath. Besides, certain diagnoses and therapies require that patients provide doctors with certain personal and highly intimate information about themselves. Hence, a patient’s right to confidentiality is guaranteed not only by the doctor’s oath but also because this secrecy is necessary if the doctor/patient relationship is to be maintained. This relationship is a necessary condition for success in medical practice.

However, imagine the following scenario. Ron and Samantha are engaged. They are graduate students at the same university. Ron contacts the doctor at the students’ health center and instructs the doctor to not to disclose the nature of his illness to his fiancée because he believes the disclosure might negatively impact the prospects of their marriage: Samantha might change her mind if she learns that Ron is HIV positive.

Aware that HIV/AIDS is a deadly disease, Ron is not sure whether he will survive or not. He cherishes the life he has and wants to make use of every bit of it. Besides, in the event that the worst is inevitable, he believes that being married, and the possibility of being a father, are achievements that would both enable him enjoy his final moments here on earth as well as fulfill his intrinsic ends as a person. So, suppose the results are back

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118 A brief excerpt of the Hippocratic Oath reads: “Whatever I see or hear, professionally or privately, which ought not to be divulged, I will keep secret and tell no one,” as discussed in Ronald Munson, *Intervention and Reflection, Basic Issues in Medical Ethics*, 7th Edition (Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004), 114.
and Ron is HIV positive. What is the doctor supposed to do? Is the doctor bound by the
commitment to confidentiality no matter what is at stake?

This case requires that the doctor apply his prudent, sound judgment. As a
doctor, he or she has other prima facie obligations of nonmaleficence and beneficence,
duties which have overreaching repercussions not only on the patient and his fiancée but
the medical profession as well. The situation requires first that the doctor make a
general assessment of the moral situation as a whole if he is to make the right decision.
That is, where there is a conflict of duties because of other competing prima facie
obligations, the right thing to do is to examine or weigh the various countervailing prima
facie obligations as if they were on the proverbial scales of justice. In other words,
although as moral agents we are faced with experiences that demand that we make
choices, some of which are in conflict with our values and institutional standards, “what
agents ought to do is, in the end, determined by what they ought to do (the actual
obligation; the right thing to do) all things considered.” This kind of conflict is a
familiar condition of the moral life. We are usually confronted by conflicting ethical
demands requiring that we consider different options before we can act. We will have to
sift through the alternatives, deliberating each possibility before we can make a better
judgment. This does not mean that any of the options is problem-free; it only means that
it is the best option out of those available.

In this case, the doctor is under obligation to break the confidence because other
lives are at risk from Ron’s HIV status. Besides, given the relationship Ron has with his

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119 For example, once people discover that doctors can break the confidentiality commitment at will, there
will be a loss of trust from the patients, the doctor/patient relationship shall be in jeopardy, something that
even doctors do not want to happen.

120 Beauchamp and Childress, 15; also, see W. D. Ross, The Right and the Good (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
fiancée, and she with the doctor, she has a right to have access to Ron’s medical information so that she can decide whether or not she wants to proceed with the marital plans. The only way to treat her with respect is to let her have access to all the information she needs in order for her to freely choose on her future plans. Granted, Ron is bound to be harmed once the confidentiality pact is broken assuming that she later on opts out of the relationship. But granting Ron’s request seems to imply that he is using Samantha merely as a means to his ends. This is a violation of her autonomy and a violation of the demand that the doctor should treat her with respect, not merely as a means but also as an end.

As we have seen, the arguments warranting the violation of confidentiality rule can still be made without appealing to the physical harm and dangers that would likely ensue if confidentiality were maintained. But for most people, the physical harm and dangers are the most crucial reason why confidentiality rule should be violated. For instance, we can say that confidentiality should be violated owing to the danger and possibility of the spread of the disease to Samantha and to any children Ron has with her (in the event that Ron fulfills his dream of being a father, the kids might be born with the virus). Such dangers can be prevented when the information about his medical condition is not kept as a secret between him and the doctor. In the end, violating his autonomy is the right thing to do if we are going to maximize a similar but greater good, namely, public autonomy, which promotes public welfare, not just the welfare of a particular individual. Suffice it to say, there is a conflict of duties here nevertheless—doctors as professionals have a social duty to promote public welfare as well as a private

121 Ron might even decide to fulfill his dreams or fantasies by having multiple sexual encounters.
duty to a patient. The social duty is especially strong where there is a direct threat to known individual(s) in the community. An individual patient has a right to confidentiality, but the duty to protect public welfare should trump this right.

The point of this discussion is to show that there are instances when it is possible to resolve moral dilemmas in a way that strikes a positive chord with what people normally find as morally agreeable. Even if no moral theory can successfully resolve the conflicts of duties we face even in these garden variety cases, the decisions involving such conflicts can still be made in a way that secures considerable justice to the parties involved. The harm and/or wrongdoing engendered by one particular decision is offset or righted by the benefit(s) that are realized once the overriding decision has been made.

That said, however, and granted that these ethical problems are categorized as those that do not pose serious dilemmas compared to those in the actual moral world, the question still stands whether garden variety cases are not themselves a sign of the problematic nature of the moral life that was discussed earlier on. Do these garden variety cases also involve us in instances of indiscriminate wrongdoing just like the ones within actual moral situation? For instance, the golfer and the doctor have each failed to meet certain aspects of the obligations that call for their commitment to duty (the golfer disappoints his friends by opting to be with his son instead; the doctor breaches the oath of confidentiality by revealing Ron’s HIV status). Even if such kinds of culpability are justifiable on certain grounds it is still not clear that the decisions made in resolving the kinds of culpability that ensue are ones that leave us wholly in the right. For example, the doctor might decide that the lesser evil is in breaching the oath of secrecy, but in
choosing to do so, is he wholly in the right?\textsuperscript{122} Arguably, Ron’s doctor has resolved what to do, determining the best that can be done under these circumstances. But in so doing, he still does evil.

In the end, it seems that the garden variety cases are, in and of themselves, a launching pad to investigate what is a larger problem. For example, the competing prima facie obligations are a testimony of the practical, ethical incoherence of the moral life involving us in indiscriminate wrongdoing. Even if we were to choose the best option from what is available, such a resolution would nonetheless not leave us wholly in the right. The garden variety cases and the cases involving the \textit{actual} moral world are birds of the same feather. They both speak to the problem we face in the moral life: inevitable conflicts.

\textit{(vi) Summary of the main points}

This chapter has two arguments that wrongdoing is inevitable. One is weaker, one is stronger. The weaker argument concerns those cases where we grant that certain moral difficulties are such that their resolution can be made in a way that is not morally offensive, such as in the doctor’s case where the decision to breach patient confidentiality still resonates with our common sense beliefs. Or in the golfer’s case where we feel the golfer is justified in disappointing his friends in order to attend his son’s event in school. And the decisions involving such conflicts can be made in a way that secures considerable justice to the parties involved, overall. However, these moral difficulties and the ones that are characteristic of an \textit{actual} moral world have certain things in common. First, the competing prima facie duties we face testify to the practical, ethical incoherence

\textsuperscript{122} For example, consider the case of lying to the patient. Not telling patients the truth has serious ethical implications, as we are about to see.
of the moral life that involves us in inevitable wrongdoing as we carry out our duties.
Second, even if one were to choose the best option from what is available, it would still
not leave that person wholly in the right.

The main argument concerns those cases where the moral landscape is very
complex. We are often simultaneously implicated in numerous, and yet specific, duties
because of the social and interpersonal relations in which we are involved in the society.
Fulfilling one’s responsibilities implies undercutting the other’s moral expectations, even
if such expectations have equal or stronger claims on that person. In addition, the harm
and/or wrongdoing engendered by a particular decision is not offset or righted by the
benefits that are realized once the overriding decision has been made. Thus, unlike with
the garden variety cases, the notion of lesser evil as our default position disappears. For
instance, the familial obligations are as important as the civic ones. And we must
sacrifice one obligation so as to fulfill the other. Both cannot be done at the same time.
The problem at hand can be seen where a conflict pitting family versus civic obligations
play out. To resolve this conflict, we might be inclined to think that the right thing to do,
all things considered, is to secure peace, justice, and the safety of our citizens (public
welfare). Indeed, it might well be said that the well-being of the individual depends on
that of the state. However, that we have to sacrifice our own well-being or the well-being
of a loved one at the altar of civic gains (as Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia) is, at the
very least, to do the unthinkable. Either way, there is no such thing as a lesser evil. But
the disharmony in the reciprocal fulfillment of our obligations is not the result of one’s
moral failure; it is the nature of the moral life.

The crucial question then to be asked is what kind of forgiveness befits the
difficulties experienced in an *actual* moral world. But before answering this question, there is an important objection about the idea of an *actual* moral world we need to address: are the injuries suffered in an *actual* moral world cases that involve us in wrongdoing? Or are they instances in which victims have only been harmed, without having been wronged? Take the case of Ron and the doctor that we saw earlier. Does the doctor’s actions perpetuate wrongdoing at all? How about in Agamemnon’s case? Does his faults amount to any wrongdoing, or are they merely instances of severe pain and suffering?

First, this objection rightly suggests that a distinction needs to be made between harming and wronging someone. This is an important distinction we should bear in mind when thinking of the problems experienced in an *actual* moral world. That said, however, I think it is right to say that these cases and such similar ones are those in which the individuals have been wronged as much as they have been harmed.

In the doctor’s case, the decision to breach patient confidentiality leaves him in an awkward situation. For instance, as far as Ron is concerned, the doctor is guilty of perpetuating a lie because he did not keep his word, which is the same as not telling the truth. But not telling patients the truth has serious ethical implications as well. For example, by lying to the patient, the doctor has not treated Ron with respect. The doctor’s commitment to the confidentiality agreement gave Ron a false hope. Ron was misled to believe that he would fulfill his life’s dreams as he deemed fit. However, the paternalistic decision by the doctor denied Ron this right. His individual autonomy has been violated.

Not telling patients the truth has other problems. It renders professional integrity in jeopardy, thereby subjecting the integrity of the profession to ridicule. Besides, the
doctor/patient relationship is compromised where there is an erosion of trust (trust is a product of truth telling). Earlier, we said that one of the main reasons doctors are ethically required to tell the truth is because when people are ill, they cannot be effectively treated without full participation and compliance, something that will not be guaranteed once patients perceive doctors to be untrustworthy. The loss of public confidence has other consequences, not just on the patients, but the doctors as well. Once public confidence in the doctors starts to wane, patients will be reluctant to go to the doctor unless they are seriously ill. Eventually, people will begin to succumb to minor illnesses which could have been avoided through prevention or early treatment.

As for Agamemnon, conventional views about this case are that familial and civic obligations are equally demanding. Agamemnon’s act of courage is a double-edged sword that grants him victory but simultaneously finishes him. His success comes at a costly price. The death of his daughter comes out as a moral failure on his part, a betrayal to the family. And in the court of public opinion, Agamemnon is perceived as a man who does not care for his family. I am using “care” here to mean two things. First, it refers to the idea that the subject of recognition has certain inherent interests (for example, the interest to be safe from any gratuitous harm), that he or she is deeply respected and valued. These interests are ones we would be willing to protect as though they were our very own, meaning we would not trade them for anything owing both to their invaluable nature as well as the impact their loss would have on the bearer’s well-being. Second, to care for someone means much more than the duty to protect their interests; promoting these interests now becomes our preoccupation. When we care for others in this second sense, we normally go out of our way to help them secure these interests. Clearly, Agamemnon comes short of this definition of what it means to care for someone.
Earlier, we talked about the challenges experienced by military families. We saw that most veterans hardly live a normal life. There are physical, emotional, and mental sufferings that are common to service men and women. For example, some of them return from combat with missing legs, missing arms, and/or other physical wounds. The post-traumatic stress disorders, the suicidal thoughts, and the nightmares are everyday challenges with which these families have to contend. But such families have also been wronged. Often the veterans receive little or no special care befitting the risks and sacrifices they have made while in service. Most of our veterans feel neglected and despised. Rightly or wrongly, many of them feel as if the government’s contractual silent *modus operandi* is the “use and dump” policy with no serious regard for their well-being.

In sum, it is apparent that Ron’s doctor, Agamemnon, and the state may still be in need of forgiveness because of the wrongs they have perpetrated, even though these wrongs and violations of responsibilities may or may not involve voluntary, culpable wrongdoing as such. These cases are typical of the problematic nature of the moral life, where we cannot help wronging others even when we do what is right.

(vii) Conclusion

I have argued that the moral life is such that wrongdoing is inevitable. I have defended

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this claim by showing that this phenomenon is a function of the general transactional nature of the moral life, where forgiveness is morally significant because of its exchange relation. A transactional nature of the moral life wrongly presupposes that right choices bring about good moral outcomes, and that wrongdoing is simply a failure to fulfill our obligations, a condition we have described as an ideal moral situation. However, I have shown why we should reject a worldview governed by transactional or reciprocal thinking. Specifically, we have seen that there is a problem with the moral life which is characterized as presuming an ideal moral situation. It is not always the case that harmony is achieved when people reciprocally fulfill their moral obligations. It is possible for people to do wrong (hence get what they do not deserve, like blame) even though they have done what is morally required. This is due to the conflicting demands from the numerous duties that are imposed on us in the community, duties that involve us in inevitable wrongdoing. This condition is characteristically defined as the actual moral world, where wrongdoing has nothing to do with what we do, whether good or bad, right or wrong. There are two arguments in defense of this view: a weaker argument and the main argument.

The virtue of the weaker argument is that it highlights a problem involving garden variety conflicts, cases that are otherwise dismissible as not requiring forgiveness owing to the fact that their resolution can still be made in a way that strikes a positive chord with our common sense beliefs. But as we have seen, garden variety conflicts are in and of themselves a recipe for indiscriminate evil, evil that constitutes the ground for forgiveness. The main argument introduced a new aspect in the debate about forgiveness by pointing out a common phenomenon of the moral world: a cloud of the inevitability of
wrongdoing prevails that is not addressed, and that needs to be addressed in the language of forgiveness. In the end, the discussion shows that a new account of forgiveness is what we need if we are to address the problems experienced in an actual moral world. The general moral framework of such an account is what we have described, at least implicitly, as having a non-transactional, interactional form, the opposite of which is reciprocal thinking.

So what account of forgiveness do we need in order to deal with these cases? Clearly, it is difficult to see how one would conceive of forgiveness as a form of transaction when in reality the ordinary moral situation is one in which wrongdoing is ubiquitous. Thus, the traditional accounts of justification are disenabled in such a moral situation. For instance, the claims of justice in a spirit of forgiveness are unattainable. An example of this unattainability is found in the practical difficulties of “just deserts” policy in an actual moral world.

What is needed in such a situation is a different account of forgiveness. First, the new account has to be one with a conceptual meaning that is compatible with and pertains to a moral situation where the notions of responsibility and blame are suspended. This is what shall enable us to make room for and allow individual acts of forgiveness to flourish. This means that a conceptual shift in our understanding of forgiveness has to occur; as a social practice, forgiveness as such is not the sort of thing that is essentially tied to the notions of blame and responsibility. Contrary to the ordinary philosophical account, forgiveness can still be conceived and practiced in the absence of these ideas.

Secondly, the new account of forgiveness in question must be non-transactional in nature for it to overcome the difficulties mentioned above. For example, administering
the claims of justice in a spirit of forgiveness is practically impossible where wrongdoing is ubiquitous. Any account of justification based on the offender’s merit will not work.

Third, as a non-transactional account of forgiveness, the defining nature of this account is that it is a gift. The concept of a gift introduces a new dimension in the moral landscape, namely grace. Grace, compassion, faith, empathy, and trust [among others] are the altruistic attributes enabling us to forgive unconditionally where the moral life is inherently problematic. Forgiveness in the form of a gift is what we need to renew and transcend the walled-in moral world we would otherwise face.

In this chapter we have seen that the ordinary account of forgiveness cannot deal with the cases of inevitable wrongdoing. An alternative account of forgiveness is necessary to deal with these instances. The new account is called quasi-unconditionality. The nature of this new account and its distinguishing features have just been highlighted in the previous three paragraphs. However, this is only an introductory account of what the quasi-unconditional view looks like. A fully developed version of this new account will be presented in chapter 5. Suffice it to say, the current discussion has advanced the argument for the need of a new account of forgiveness and no doubt helps the reader to connect the chapter to the larger version of the quasi-unconditional view still to come in chapter 5.

In the next chapter (chapter 4), I will not insist that there is necessarily an actual moral world where inevitable wrongdoing happens. But I will still argue that a new account of forgiveness is necessary because of the problems experienced in the moral life, namely, cataclysmic evils. There, I will be saying that cataclysmic evils pose a whole different set of problems to the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use.
CHAPTER 4: FORGIVENESS: POSSIBILITY AND IMPOSSIBILITY INTERTWINED

(i) Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that the moral life is such that right choices do not guarantee good moral outcomes, and wronging others has little to do with culpable wrongdoing. This condition of the moral world is what we have described as an actual moral situation (i.e., where inevitable wrongdoing happens). We saw that the ordinary account of forgiveness is ineffective where inevitable conflicts happen and should be replaced by a new account capable of accounting for such a state of affairs.

In this chapter, I set to one side these arguments about an actual moral situation. However, I still argue that a new account of forgiveness is necessary because of the difficulties experienced in the moral life with respect to cataclysmic evils. So another reason for preferring a new account of forgiveness is this: even if we live in an ideal moral world where wrongdoing is not ubiquitous, the ordinary account of forgiveness will not fully address the worries that arise in cases of extreme wrongdoing. Even if the moral situation described as the actual is non-existent, and the ensuing difficulties do not obtain, cataclysmic evils pose a totally different set of problems to the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use.

The discussions in this chapter are in the form of a debate between two opposing camps, featuring Vladimir Jankelevitch and Jacques Derrida. Jankelevitch maintains that there are certain evils that are so wrong as to be unforgivable; Derrida argues that morality requires that we transcend even the worst tragic situations to ensure the dynamism of the moral life.

(ii) Cataclysmic evils: towards a working definition
Before we consider the main arguments of the debate and the ethical implications that are brought to bear on forgiveness, let us work our way into the debate by first explaining the concept of cataclysmic evils. Trudy Govier’s account will be our starting point. After discussing the Holocaust, she continues:

In the Ukraine, Stalin deliberately orchestrated a famine that may have killed more than twenty million people. In China, Communist soldiers buried opponents alive during the struggles for political power. In Vietnam, the American military bombed civilians with napalm. In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge killed an estimated 1.7 million people deemed intellectuals and enemies of a new “pure” communist order. In Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil military dictators arranged for the torture and “disappearance” of leftist activists and union organizers. In the Yugoslavia, Serbs, Croats, and Muslims perpetrated brutalities against those whom they identified as ethnic enemies, “cleansing” hundreds of villages in campaigns characterized by humiliation, rape, torture, and murder.\(^{124}\)

And, of course, we must not forget the Rwanda genocide of 1994, the religious conflicts in Sudan (the Darfur crisis), the massive human rights abuse of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and the terrorists attacks in the United States and London.\(^{125}\)

Clearly, a fundamental feature of cataclysmic evils is this: the evils transcend our ordinary sense of wrongdoing in two ways. First, the nature and/or sense of evil here is so intense, symbolizing a thick, dark moment in human history that impacts us at the very core of our beings. The experiences are not easy to forget; the bio-psychosocial traumas may linger for several decades.\(^{126}\) Second, there is gross, massive, extraordinary human abuse and violations of humanity, with victims suffering irreversible psychological, emotional damages from the offenses. We are talking about instances of mass murder or

\(^{124}\) Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 105-107.
\(^{125}\) Ibid.
\(^{126}\) For example, America may never forget the 9/11/2001 terrorists attack on its soil; the mass graves in Rwanda will perpetually haunt the Rwandese people. These horrific events have left an indelible mark or stain of evil written in the hearts and minds of its victims, their nations and the world at large, a mark that cannot be erased easily.
massacres, targeting specific groups [e.g., religious, ethnic, or elites groups] for torture and rape, torching of plantations/farms and other private properties, mass exodus due to insecurity, political tyranny and state terrorism, with cities and infrastructures being destroyed, villages and communities wiped out, leaving millions that are maimed and traumatized.\(^{127}\) Hence cataclysmic evils are like an epidemic with a capacity to not only paralyze but wipe out an entire community’s moral, cultural, socio-economic, and spiritual civilization. In the words of Michael Walzer, cataclysmic evils are actions that “have shocked the moral conscience of humankind.”\(^{128}\)

Let us articulate the idea of cataclysmic evils via a different route by making a connection between cataclysmic evils and the events attributed to nature. I will show that certain aspects of cataclysmic evils are more or less similar to those that might be ascribed to natural disasters.\(^{129}\) To fully capture the conceptual and ethical significance of the problem we are grappling with, and to showcase the implications this might have in the current discussion, we will make a terminological distinction between the notions of evil and wrongdoing. The wrongs that fall in the category of extreme wrongdoing should be classified as evil, not merely as wrongdoing.

Used as a noun, a wrongdoing refers to a wicked act or behavior, an offense, or misdeed. The doers of such acts have behaved badly; they have departed from what’s morally acceptable, transgressing the moral and/or civil law. From a legal standpoint, the acts are injurious, criminal, and improper. On the other hand, an evil act means at least the following four things. First, evil is that which is morally objectionable, an iniquity,

\(^{127}\) Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 100-118.


\(^{129}\) The natural evils we are talking about do not include minor natural evils.
sin or wickedness. Second, evil refers to a misdeed, an offense, a crime, or immorality. Third, it refers to whatever is destructive or harmful; and finally, evil is seen as an agent of suffering, something causing affliction or illness, a curse, plague, a scourge, or woe.  

So what is the difference between a wrongdoing and evil? One needs to read between the lines to see what the differences are. At the pain of repetition, let us start by mentioning what seems obvious about both terms. Both belong to the category of ethical wrongness; both represent a moral depravity. The agents are involved in acts that are not acceptable by society. But there is something unique about evil that sets it apart from wrongdoing: the definition includes things normally categorized as natural disasters such as curses, plagues, scourges, etc.

Without necessarily implying that evils are not humanly engendered acts, and while steering clear of the controversies that surround the nature of such events, the resulting picture is that we now have what could be classified further as moral evils and natural evils. Natural evils include natural disasters like earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and tornados. Moral evil, on the other hand, refers to evil as it is understood in most

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131 For example, on one hand, there are those who think that the so-called natural disasters are not “natural” as such. According to this view, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornados, droughts, etc., can all be explained in human terms—either due to human negligence and failure to take the necessary precautions, or, that they are the results of wear and tear characteristic of the human attitude to always want to dominate the earth. At any rate, the overall claim here is that humans are directly responsible (the causal agent) for these disasters.

On the other hand, there are those who think that we inappropriately use the term evil (evil in the metaphysical sense) when we actually mean the moral (what is within human domain), especially due to religious influence, or because we want to evoke certain emotional responses against perceived opponents. The criticism here is that evil is too closely tied to the metaphysical, i.e., religion, and should not be used in reference to human affairs as in politics or business. For example, President George W. Bush has been criticized for referring to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as parts of an “axis of evil.” His critics think that by using this word, Bush wants people to believe that the current world violence, e.g., terrorism and threats of nuclear war, is part of a religious conflict between the two predominant religions, Islam and Christianity, while in reality, the critics believe, the matter has nothing to do with religion.
cultures, especially the Western societies, where it refers to atrocities or moral
corruption that have reached a strikingly high degree. The upshot is that while both moral
evil and wrongdoing belong to the category of wrongness (where the agents are rational
persons, thus blamable), the moral evil raises the notch of wrongness significantly higher
once such transgressions get to a certain level of wrongness.\textsuperscript{132} Once they are categorized
as such, moral evils belong to the same category as natural disasters, for example, owing
to their confounding nature as well as their massively devastating, immobilizing, and
extraordinary impacts. For example, based on what we have seen from the effects
of moral evil, one is unsure if such wrongs should be attributed to a demon, monster, or
any other non-human agent. Hence, the nature and/or magnitude of these wrongs demand
that we view them in an ethical sense of a different kind, for example, perhaps in a deeply
metaphysically ethical sense. This also brings up another question on the topic of
forgiveness: should all injurious agents be the objects of our resentment?\textsuperscript{133} This, in the
end, reveals some of the underlying ethical implications of the terminological distinction
above.\textsuperscript{134}

We should not end this section without saying something about the perpetrators of

\textsuperscript{132} Many cultures have a belief in the degrees or levels of evil (for our case moral evil) and/or immorality,
as evidenced by our systems of laws, judgments and punishments for wide variety of crimes.
\textsuperscript{133} According to Jean Hampton: “people don’t resent the injuries caused by earthquakes or tidal waves; they
only resent injuries that have been deliberately inflicted by one who is able and required to respect—but
does not—their value and rank.” Natural forces (and perhaps non-human animals) are not part of the ethical
world, according to this view. Events attributed to mother nature have no ethical meaning, thus matters of
resentment or forgiveness don’t arise. Hampton’s reason is simply this: only humans have a sense of their
ethical status; only humans have an objective sense of the intrinsic worth incarnate in others. Human
actions reveal or effect low value and rank because human actors are responsible actors, unlike mother
nature. Murphy and Hampton, \textit{Forgiveness and Mercy}, 54.
\textsuperscript{134} It is not clear what Hampton and others might say if the terminological distinction is to carry some
weight, and, if its logical implications are followed to the latter. For example, Hampton might, for
consistency’s sake, say that given characteristic tendencies of natural disasters, cataclysmic evils are in that
regard outside the human domain, thus unforgivable. But given their human dimension as well, however,
Hampton’s, just like Murphy’s views, might suggest that the wrongs fall within the terrain of forgiveness
as long as the offender’s symbolic message is withdrawn, something that is not easy to achieve when it
comes to the kinds of evils we are dealing with. Thus, the ethical and logical difficulties Hampton and
Murphy have to contend with in order to maintain the views they hold on forgiveness are daunting.
these wrongs. How should we view such people? Given the terrible nature of the wrongs (e.g., as seen in the magnitude of the evils), it has been argued the perpetrators have done things normal human beings should not do. The argument, as Govier points out, is simple and straightforward: the deeds are horrible (monstrous), those who commit them are moral beasts, and moral beasts should not be forgiven. This view suggests that there is a connection between the evils and the people that commit them. Characterizing cataclysmic evils using this “monstrous agent” argument brings up another issue in the debate about the possibility or impossibility of forgiveness. We saw earlier, in the discussion of Jeffrie Murphy’s view, that when the perpetrator is intimately identified with his or her deeds, as it is the case with cataclysmic evils, drawing a moral line between the evil deed and perpetrator is difficult. This implies that forgiveness might be impossible without tacitly approving the evil deed.

Let us emphasize one last point to clarify the definition of cataclysmic evils that we are working with. The question is whether something is judged to be cataclysmic based on the number of people affected (like mass killings), or whether the term cataclysmic applies also to cases where an individual is the victim.

Consider the following story. It is a sad story about a teenage girl called Veronica. Veronica’s mom was recently separated from her father, who is a member of a vigilante group known as the Legion of Doom (LD). One of the rules governing this group’s practices is the oath of secrecy. It stipulates that members are disallowed to share any information about the group’s activities with outsiders. Membership is either by choice or affiliation. As a way to ensure adherence to the oath, one must remain a member in

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135 See Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 103.
perpetuity. Those who choose to walk away from the group may never live a normal life again, if they live at all. Veronica was abducted by the group on her way from school. Her abductors repeatedly brutalized and dehumanized her, subjecting her to gross, systematic torture (i.e., she has been gang raped numerous times). And for several days, the group has denied her access to drinking water and food; instead, they have, against her will, made her drink and feed on human flesh, urine, and feces. As if this is not monstrous enough, Veronica has been forced to witness similar torture of members of her own family, culminating in their execution. It certainly seems possible that Veronica might, as a result of her ordeal, be unable to experience the same kinds of emotional responses and reactive attitudes that she would have experienced under normal circumstances. And suppose, sadly, that this was actually the abductors’ intention: to disrupt her moral agency, to deprive her of her sense of self, and to turn her into a vegetable. As horrible as it is, however, Veronica’s experience is not unique. Sadly, victims of gross human abuse in the cases we have described so far (e.g., in Govier’s account) have undergone an ordeal relatively similar to Veronica’s. Hence, a moral offense which is explicitly aimed at the total dehumanization of a victim, the complete destruction of the victim’s moral agency, and to render him or her into a vegetative state might be judged to be as cataclysmic as mass killings.  

(iii) Jankelevitch: introducing the arguments against the possibility of forgiveness

Now that I have presented a conceptual foundation of cataclysmic evils, I will first present Jankelevitch’s views as he argues for the impossibility of forgiveness, before considering Derrida’s counterarguments.

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136 The story of Veronica is adopted from Karen Hoffman’s example of the demoniac. She sees this as the most compelling candidate for unforgivability. See Karen Hoffman. “Reflections on the Unforgivable.” Perspectives on Evil and Human Wickedness 1 no. 4 (2004): 20.
There are two forms of the same argument offered by Jankelevitch. The first form of the argument posits that there are certain things, like cataclysmic evils, which transcend our ordinary sense of wrongdoing, and which simply are impossible to forgive. The second form claims that one cannot forgive if there is no “meaning” attached to the forgiveness: cataclysmic evils are such that forgiveness ceases to have meaning because the wrongful acts are so horrible, and create such a moral imbalance, that nothing the actors do could ever remedy the imbalance.

a. Jankelevitch’s first argument: that forgiveness is impossible because cataclysmic evils are in a class of their own—they transcend ordinary sense of wrongdoing

Jankelevitch has written essays on forgiveness upon which Derrida comments. Jankelevitch has the following to say about his own work: “I have written two books on forgiveness: one of them, simple, very aggressive, very polemical whose title is: Pardonner? And the other, Le Pardon, which is a philosophy book in which I study forgiveness in itself, from the point of view of Christian and Jewish ethics. I draw out an ethics that could be qualified as hyperbolical, for which forgiveness is the highest commandment; and, on the other hand, evil always appears beyond.”

Thus in these writings and especially in the Le Pardon (1967), Jankelevitch is making a very important point, namely, that the scene of forgiveness is an ongoing struggle between two opposing camps—the infinite power of forgiveness (which is stronger than evil) and the power of evil (which is also stronger than forgiveness). As if to emphasize this same point,

Jankelevitch adds that:

Forgiveness is stronger than evil and evil is stronger than forgiveness. I cannot get out of this. It is a species of oscillation that in philosophy one would describe as dialectical and which seems infinite to me. I believe in the immensity of forgiveness, in its supernaturality, I think I have repeated this enough, perhaps dangerously, and on the other hand, I believe in wickedness.\(^{138}\)

But if Jankelevitch believes in forgiveness as a greater good we all should seek to promote, that is, if he speaks of a ‘hyperbolic ethics’ that is without limits or obligations, then we need to explain why he still finds himself in a state of self-contradiction. There is a particular argument Jankelevitch is working with here: that though forgiveness is the highest good, there are certain actions that cannot be done. Speaking about the horrors of the Nazi regime, he says, “When the crime is too serious, when it crosses the line of the radical evil, or of the human, when it becomes monstrous, it can no longer be a question of forgiveness.”\(^{139}\) And that once we cross this line, forgiveness is impossible. He continues, “there would be no question of forgiving crimes against humanity, against the humanity of man.”\(^{140}\) “Forgiveness,” declares Jankelevitch, “died in the death camps.”\(^{141}\)

In the end, this implies that Jankelevitch’s belief in infinite forgiveness is contingent on the nature of the wrongs for which one is to be forgiven. The form of the

\(^{138}\) Ibid.

\(^{139}\) Ibid., 27. Emphases are mine.


argument we have been working with has fully come of age. Cataclysmic evils are in a
class of their own; the severity, the inhumanity, the degree of harm and wrongdoing is so
extreme that cataclysmic evils transcend our ordinary sense of wrongdoing. For example,
they have the capacity to paralyze an entire community's moral, cultural, socio-economic
and spiritual order. Such offenses are beyond the human capacity to manage. Thus it is
impossible to think in terms of forgiveness.

Jankelevitch is stuck between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, he is a
stauch believer in forgiveness as the highest good. On the other hand, he still maintains
that the crimes against the Jews are wrongs that are unforgivable. But Jankelevitch is not
alone in this predicament, as we are about to see here below.

In the story called *The Sunflower*, Trudy Govier discusses a moving story
featuring a German soldier named Kurt. As an enthusiastic Nazi, Kurt had participated in
great brutality, torturing and killing many Jews, including innocent children and civilians.
Kurt was later injured himself. Due to the suffering he experienced prior to his death,
Kurt had come to the realization of the magnitude of the wrongs he had committed
against the Jews. But since the immediate victims of his crimes were dead, he asked to be
sent a Jew so he (Kurt) could confess and ask for forgiveness. Thus it so happened that
Simon Wiesenthal, at the time a young prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp, was
brought by a nurse to the room where Kurt was lying. With Wiesenthal at his bedside,
Kurt provided the details that give us a glimpse of the horrific nature of the crimes, his
involvement, and the agony the victims underwent prior to their deaths. He says, “Jewish

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142 Jankelevitch seems to be in favor of the important distinction made earlier between *evil* and *wrongdoing*. He is implying that cataclysmic evils be classified as moral evils, not merely as wrongdoing.

143 “The story is called the *Sunflower* because of the sunflowers that were planted at the graves of German soldiers, while the Jews were only thrown into mass graves. The belief here is that the Germans wanted to preserve their superiority over the Jews even in death,” Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 100-101.
men, women and children were herded into a building, hand grenades are thrown in, setting it on fire; we stood on guard, ready to shoot Jews (including little children) trying to escape the flames through exits or by jumping from windows.”

The soldier tells Wiesenthal a chilling story about an incident involving a particular family. Here is a brief account of the story:

> Behind the windows of the second floor, I saw a man with a small child in his arms. His clothes were alight. By his side stood a woman, doubtless the mother of the child. With his free hand the man covered the child’s eyes . . . then he jumped into the street. Seconds later the mother followed. Then from the other windows fell burning bodies . . . We shot . . . Oh God!

In spite of the desperation and the urgency of the case, Wiesenthal had difficulty forgiving this man. After listening carefully to the horrifying story and confession, Wiesenthal left in silence. He did not say anything. But he remained deeply troubled afterwards and continued to wonder whether he did the right thing by not forgiving the man.

The moral of this story is to underscore the significance of the dilemma of forgiveness in the face of these horrific offenses. Thus we could still ask whether Wiesenthal could have felt good about himself should he have forgiven this man. In the end, none of these options is problem-free. That is, one would still be left wondering whether forgiving or not forgiving is the right thing to do under these circumstances.

Mark Goulden is a British journalist and a worker for humanitarian causes. He has commented widely on the Holocaust experience. He notes that the Nazis fed approximately 960,000 innocent children into their gas chambers. And about whether

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or not the Nazis should be forgiven, he asks: “How can you possibly forgive monsters who burned people alive in public; in ceremonies, staged in the open, with typical Teutonic pomp and precision?”\(^{147}\) And for us to even start thinking of any forgiveness, he says,

First, we must ask ourselves in whose hands lies the privilege of granting forgiveness? We can, of course, say with the ecclesiastics, that mercy and forgiveness belong entirely to God, in which case the whole dialogue comes abruptly to an end. Or we can subscribe to the dictum of the poet Dryden—“Forgiveness, to the injured doth belong.” But unfortunately, the injured in this case (six million martyred dead) are incapable of exercising such prerogative or indeed of expressing any opinion at all. And if the dead can’t forgive, neither can the living.\(^{148}\)

So like Jankelevitch, Goulden is saying that forgiveness in such cases is impossible for at least two reasons: one, the deeds are monstrous—transcending our ordinary sense of wrongdoing; and two, because forgiveness did come to an end in the death camps.\(^{149}\)

Sidney Shachnow, himself a Holocaust survivor, also argues for a similar position, more or less. Commenting on the *Sunflower* story, he says:

Kurt managed to overcome the voice within him that said a person cannot murder innocent men, women and children and still call himself a human being. He allowed himself to be changed into a foul beast who did the unforgivable . . . What he did was the ultimate and irreversible denial of his humanity.\(^{150}\)

In this argument we have been articulating the view that forgiveness is impossible where

\(^{146}\) Such staggering numbers, Goulden maintains, put cataclysmic evils in a different category of wrongdoing. He says, “the human mind is incapable of comprehending the magnitude and the mathematics of such slaughter”. Quoted in Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower*, in Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 103.


\(^{149}\) According to Goulden, forgiveness died in the death camps because: one, the would-be forgivers are all dead; two, due to the extreme nature of the wrongs.

the wrongs are unforgivable. The main point of the argument is that there are things which simply cannot be done, i.e., they are in a class of their own; and once we cross that line, the language of forgiveness abruptly comes to an end. Two, there is the issue of the image of the monster in our heads that will not go away, making it difficult to forgive for the reason that the wrongdoer is intimately tied to the crimes. In the end, the discussion points us to the paradox we face with respect to these evils. We are pulled into two different directions as exemplified by Sunflower story. However, Jankelevitch (as do Wiesenthal, Goulden, and Sidney) leans more towards the impossibility of forgiveness in such cases.

b. Jankelevitch’s second argument: that forgiveness is impossible because it is “meaningless”

But have they ever asked for forgiveness? It is only the distress and the dereliction of the guilty that would give forgiveness a meaning and a reason for being. If they had begun in repentance, by asking forgiveness, then we could have conceived granting it to them, but that was not the case.151

The second argument proceeds from the notion that forgiveness should only be granted if it makes sense to forgive. Where there is no “meaning” tied to the forgiveness, this view holds that it is impossible and inappropriate to forgive. Jankelevitch wants to show that forgiveness ceases to have “meaning” where cataclysmic evils are involved.

But what does it mean to say that forgiveness has or does not have “meaning?” To proceed, let us first consider how the term “meaning” is used in our everyday language

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before looking at Jankelevitch’s usage of the term. Ordinarily, forgiveness is said to have “meaning” if there is something the forgiving parties could do to repair or even the moral scales, for example, in the form of compensation to the victims. Compensation may come in several ways, notable ones being the punishment of the offender, restitution, reparation, expiation, redemption, and restoration of the victim to something close to their original state before the ordeal.

For Jankelevitch, forgiveness has “meaning” if the crime committed and the reactions it generates both fall within the realm of human possibility. His notion of forgiveness presupposes that forgiveness remains a human thing. For him, forgiveness ceases to be human (thus lacks “meaning”) when the offending action is beyond the realm of humanity. He identifies two ways by means of which this could happen. He says, “Properly speaking, the grandiose massacre (the Shoah, the ‘final solution’) is not a crime on a human scale any more than are astronomical magnitudes and light years.”

So one reason a crime is considered to have transcended the human scale is because of the magnitude and the mathematics of human suffering. Secondly, the evils are beyond the human scale if “the reactions it inspires are above all despair and a feeling of powerlessness before the irreparable.” He adds, “One can do nothing. One cannot give life back to the immense mountain of miserable ashes.”

There are at least two things he is saying here. First, he is pointing out that there is a sense of human impossibility because the offenses fall outside the societal structure of how a criminal act should be conceived. That is, the crime is indescribable, incomprehensible in human terms, as seen in the unfathomable magnitude and

153 Ibid.
154 Ibid.
mathematics of human suffering. Second, he is pointing out that forgiveness lacks “meaning” (falls outside the realm of human possibility) as long as there is nothing that can be done to right the moral disequilibrium, like punishing the wrongdoer and/or compensating the victims for the injuries suffered. Forgiveness of the Shoah is impossible on both counts: first, because there is no form of compensation to the victims that would even the moral scales; second, because it is practically impossible to come up with a punishment proportionate to the crime: “for next to the infinite all finite magnitudes tend to be equal; in such a way that the penalty becomes almost indifferent . . . One no longer even knows whom to put the blame on or whom to accuse.”

In step with this tradition, Hannah Arendt sees a correlation between the unpunishable and the unforgivable. She says

The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without interference could go on endlessly. It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable.

Thus like Jankelevitch, Arendt thinks that forgiveness should remain a human thing; and that it ceases to be a human thing, thus unforgivable, the moment it defies the institutional structures that seek to secure justice or any form of compensation to the

155 This idea is consistent with the earlier descriptive account of cataclysmic evils, especially the point that there is a connection between cataclysmic evils and the evils attributed to mother nature.
aggrieved parties.

The nerve of the argument we are working with here goes like this: where human crimes are unpunishable, irremediable, inexpiable, irreparable, that is, where they defy the human capacity for explanation and/or balancing of scales, forgiveness is impossible. This argument establishes a strong connection between, for example, what is punishable, explainable, describable, repairable, and the forgivable.

(iv) Derrida: introducing the counterarguments

I said at the beginning of this chapter that it would unfold in the form of a dialogue featuring two camps. One camp is represented by Jankelevitch and the other camp by Derrida. So far we have been focusing on the arguments that claim that cataclysmic evils are absolutely unforgivable (Jankelevitch). Two major points have been discussed to advance this claim.

The first argument is the idea that forgiveness is impossible because certain evils are simply unforgivable; that is, that they are in a class of their own because of the degree or magnitude of human suffering. The point here is that there are certain things humans simply cannot do while still maintaining their humanity. And once we cross that line, the language of forgiveness comes abruptly to an end. There is also the issue of the monster image we have in our heads that is inerasable, which leaves us with a picture of an agent that is intimately identified with the crime. Also, the discussion points us to the issue of the paradox of forgiveness where we are both pulled in two opposite directions, and we are not sure which of these options is a better choice, all things considered (e.g., as seen in Sunflower story). However, Jankelevitch leans more towards the impossibility of forgiveness in such cases. The second argument proceeds from the belief that forgiveness
has to have a “meaning” if it is to be granted. Where there is no meaning tied to the forgiveness, this view holds that it is impossible for one to forgive. Jankelevitch has shown that forgiveness ceases to have meaning where cataclysmic evils are involved. The verdict, therefore, is that it is impossible for us to forgive in such cases.

a. Derrida’s indirect response to the view that forgiveness is impossible because the wrongs are Unforgivable

In Jankelevitch’s first argument, we saw that the virtue of forgiveness is contingent upon the nature of the wrongs for which one is to be forgiven. The language of forgiveness comes abruptly to an end where cataclysmic evils are involved. Hence, the tension leading to the paradox of forgiveness eventually disappears because forgiveness does not and cannot happen.

Derrida, for his part, starts by acknowledging the legitimacy of the dilemma in which Jankelevitch finds himself. He cautions against refusing to recognize the gravity of this tension, saying “we must take it very seriously and pay it careful attention because it picks up on the strongest, the most strongly traditional, logic of the religious and spiritualist semantics of forgiveness, which grants it when there is repentance, confession, a request for forgiveness, a capacity to expiate, to redeem oneself, and so forth.”158 So Derrida starts by recognizing that forgiveness as a concept owes both its nature and history to the tradition of exchange that requires that forgiveness is to be granted after certain conditions have been fulfilled.

But Derrida hastens to add, that “One of the great difficulties that awaits us, in effect, stems from the fact that the hyperbolical ethics, which will also guide me, both lies in the wake of this tradition and is incompatible with it, as if this tradition itself carried in

its heart an inconsistency.”

What Derrida is saying here is that the notion of forgiveness also presupposes a phenomenon of non-exchange, where forgiveness is granted purely as a gift, an act of grace, not because someone deserves it. In the end, Derrida, unlike Jankelevitch, is claiming that we have two antagonistic frameworks resident within the concept of forgiveness.

Let us be clear about what Derrida is trying to do here. First, like Jankelevitch, Derrida believes that the scene of forgiveness is an ongoing struggle between infinite forgiveness and infinite evil. But he differs with Jankelevitch in his diagnosis of what is really at issue here. Earlier, Jankelevitch had said that the reason there is a tension is because of the nature of the wrongdoing we are dealing with; this implies, according to Jankelevitch, that the tension disappears once we start dealing with ordinary wrongdoing. For Derrida, however, the tension has little to do with the external conditions of the world (like the nature of the evils we are dealing with); it is a problem whose origin is internal, having to do with the very nature of forgiveness itself. Hence, it is something that we may not dispense with that easily.

In other words, Derrida is saying that underneath this paradox lies the key to understanding the very essence and meaning of forgiveness as a concept, and that grasping this conceptual detail is the key to answering any problem (big or small, involving ordinary or extraordinary evils) about the possibility of forgiveness, the external conditions not withstanding.

Derrida sees forgiveness as a concept that is inwardly disturbed by the demand to surpass itself. It is a force that stirs within the concept itself. Forgiveness is

159 Ibid.
160 “The result of which is that we can never rest with what in the world passes itself off as “forgiveness”; so forgiveness is what it is in the face of the unforgivable, the impossible,” John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley,
pulled in two directions. There is the side whose demand is the unconditional, gracious, infinite, *aneconomic* forgiveness that should be granted to the guilty as such, even to those who do not repent or ask forgiveness. On the other hand, there is the conditional forgiveness which is granted because it is merited. Derrida thinks this tension is healthy, it is what keeps the concept of forgiveness both alive and effective. Put differently, he is saying that the concept of forgiveness springs from the tension between the forgivable and the unforgivable, between the possible and the impossible, but we must be willing to go beyond the limits of the forgivable to the next level, without which the term forgiveness has no meaning. He says, “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 from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that calls for forgiveness?”

He continues, “If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable, what the church calls “venial sin” then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear. If there is something to forgive, it would be what in religious language is called mortal sin, the worst, the unforgivable crime or harm.”

Derrida will not abandon the paradox. Unlike Jankelevitch, he is challenging us to give equal consideration to the other side of the dilemma, namely, infinite forgiveness, to go beyond the limits of finitude (obligation, exchange), to forgive even the unforgivable.

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162 Ibid.

163 Ibid.
He insists that “forgiveness be granted where it is neither asked for nor deserved, and even for the worst radical evil, forgiveness only acquiring its meaning and its possibility of forgiveness where it is called on to do the impossible and to forgive the unforgivable.”

We have been looking at Derrida’s first response to the view that maintains that forgiveness is impossible because the evils are so wrong as to be unforgivable. To answer his opponents, Derrida has used a very clever approach. His is not a direct attack of his opponents’ position. He reasons that the question of the possibility or impossibility of forgiveness for cataclysmic evils gives rise to a more important, fundamental question about the meaning of forgiveness in general (any forgiveness, for any kind of crime). By so doing, Derrida is showing that his opponents’ position is mistaken, and hence, that it should be rejected because it limits the debate about the potential of forgiveness to one factor only, namely, the external conditions prevailing in the world at the time (like the nature of the evils involved, or the conditions that justify a forgiving response, e.g., the offender’s remorse). Derrida, for his part, is showing that in order to resolve the ethical (external) struggles we face with cataclysmic evils, one must first understand the conceptual (internal) anatomy of forgiveness as such. Focusing on the anatomy enables us to see something we are not likely to see if we had fixed our eyes on the external conditions alone: the concept of forgiveness is inherently in conflict with itself. And it is this constant struggle that bequeaths forgiveness its life line, where the possibilities of forgiveness are constantly renewed. And as Derrida has repeatedly told us, “forgiveness acquires its meaning and the possibility of forgiveness where it appears to come to an end, where it is called upon to do the impossible, to forgive the unforgivable, precisely at

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the end of the history of forgiveness.”\footnote{Derrida, “To Forgive,” 30.} So far this has been Derrida’s indirect way of responding to his opponents.

b. A transactional approach and syntactic ambiguities

Derrida has a separate argument trying to show that tying forgiveness in terms of the conditions of exchange involves us in committing errors that are grammatical in nature, especially the one of syntactic ambiguity. Here is what he says in an effort to drive this point home: “Imagine, then, that I forgive on the condition that the guilty one repents, mends his ways, asks forgiveness, and thus would be changed by a new obligation, and that from then on he would no longer be exactly the same as the one who was found to be culpable.”\footnote{Derrida, \textit{On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness}, 38-9.} In other words, he is showing us that to forgive someone on condition that they meet the terms of forgiveness implies we are forgiving a different/new person. But since none of us thinks this way at the time, an idea of forgiveness based on exchange involves us in this error of grammatical speech. But this is more than a problem of language for Derrida, as there are ethical implications to this mode of speaking as well. He adds, “In this case, can one still speak of forgiveness? This would be too simple on both sides: one forgives someone other than the guilty one.”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}} And this, he thinks, is not genuine forgiveness. In order for there to be forgiveness, he says, “must one not on the contrary forgive both the fault and the guilty \textit{as such}, where the one and the other remain as irreversible as the evil, as evil itself, and being capable of repeating itself, unforgivably without transformation, without amelioration, without repentance or promise?”\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 39.}

So apart from the syntactic ambiguities one commits, genuine forgiveness, or true
spirit of forgiveness is compromised once we begin to see a forgiving action as something that is predicated on certain terms of the exchange. His point is that the very word “forgiveness” is in total disharmony with a spirit of exchange.

In chapter 2, we saw that one of the reasons Murphy offers as the grounds for forgiveness is if it is granted “for old times’ sake.” Murphy said that to forgive someone for old times’ sake is “to forgive them for what they once were.” He believes that based on the relationships of the past, we might forgive others if we see them for what they were prior to the wrongdoing. Seeing them this way enables us to see them not as wrongdoers but as friends or people who were once loyal to us, as those who would look out for our interests. In the end, this enables us to be able to separate them from their present wrongdoing.

As we saw earlier in my critique of Murphy, the problem with this kind of forgiveness is with the image we have in our head when we forgive. We are not considering the person for what he or she really is, namely, the wrongdoer, but for what he/she once was, in the past. So the question might still be asked whether we are really forgiving the wrongdoer (e.g., the monster image that he/she has become) or the person that has been nice to us (who no longer exists). The kind of forgiveness I am advocating is one that sees the wrongdoer for what he/she really is. It requires that we bring everything into perspective, including having the true image of the offender. Forgiving someone in the light of what they once were seems to perpetuate the culture of glossing over the offense. Such glossing is incompatible with what it means to forgive.

We have been looking at Derrida’s responses to Jankelevitch’s first argument, the

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169 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 29.
view that forgiveness is impossible because the wrongs are so evil as to be unforgivable. There are two arguments Derrida offers as a response. He says that the question of the possibility and impossibility of forgiving cataclysmic evils generates another important issue: the terminological aspects of forgiveness as such. By this he is showing that the possibility and impossibility of forgiveness are always intertwined; the concept of forgiveness is always not at peace with itself, but it is because of this perpetual conceptual struggle that the possibilities of forgiveness are constantly renewed. And there is forgiveness just when forgiveness seems to come to an end, where it is called upon to do the impossible, and to forgive the unforgivable. This is the first counterargument Derrida presents. In the other argument, Derrida has shown how an account of forgiveness contingent on the demands of exchange involves us in committing simple errors of language, especially the syntactic ambiguities that eventually end up compromising the spirit of real forgiveness.

In sum, Derrida’s discussion reveals that Jankelevitch’s account of forgiveness faces difficulties similar to the ones we had attributed to Murphy and Butler earlier on. Under Murphy’s and Butler’s accounts, forgiveness functions as a medium of exchange. This is different from a new (non-transactional, interactional) conception of the moral life and forgiveness that I am defending, which has as its fundamental concern the question of sustaining the flow of the moral life both to the individuals and the moral community as a whole. We will proceed with the discussion and look at the other counterargument in the debate.

c. Responding to the view that forgiveness is impossible if it lacks “meaning”
And now, Derrida says, “for the common or dominant axiom of the tradition, finally, and
to my eyes the most problematic, is that *forgiveness must have a meaning*. And this meaning must determine itself on the ground of salvation, of reconciliation, redemption, atonement, I would say even sacrifice."\(^{170}\) Recall in our earlier discussion the view that says that forgiveness has to have “meaning.” We said that forgiveness has a “meaning” if there is something that can be done (i.e., a compensation, punishment, reparation, expiation, redemption) to repair the moral scales in the wake of a wrongdoing. And, as we saw with Jankelevitch, forgiveness has “meaning” if it remains a human thing. In this argument, Jankelevitch establishes a strong connection between the punishable, the expiable, explainable, and the forgivable. That which is punishable, expiable, comprehensible, reparable is also forgivable, and vice versa.

Derrida finds fault with this pattern of reasoning. He says, “this connection does not seem to me to follow. For the reason I gave (what would be a forgiveness that forgave only the forgivable?) and because this logic continues to imply that forgiveness remains the correlate to a judgment and the counterpart to a possible punishment, to a possible expiation, to the ‘expiable.’”\(^{171}\) Derrida is suspicious of an account of forgiveness that addresses the question of the possibility or impossibility of forgiveness based on the external conditions prevailing in the world at the time and not on the nature of forgiveness as such (its internal anatomy). And by insisting that there is a symmetry between the punishable, expiable, and the forgivable, Jankelevitch places himself in this vulnerable position. Derrida sheds more light on the nature of this mistake, saying that it has to do with “the anthropological feature which decides everything (because it will always be about, at the end of it, *knowing if forgiveness is a possibility or not*, or even a

\(^{171}\) *Ibid.*, emphases are mine.
faculty, thus a sovereign ‘I can’, and a human power or not’.

So the mistake is in the human dimension of forgiveness, where the potential of forgiveness falls victim to the idea that wrongdoing is only forgivable on certain terms, or that the external world has the potential to limit the possibilities of forgiveness. Put differently, the problem with this trend of thinking is with its calculative nature, where the possibility of forgiveness is made possible because it can be granted in exchange of something else, like punishing the wrongdoer. In the end, Derrida rejects this position for exactly the same reason as in the previous case. There, he had said that forgiveness “becomes possible from the moment it appears impossible. Its history would begin, on the contrary, with the unforgivable.”

But Derrida moves beyond this point in answering his critics. Simply showing why the opponents are wrong is not enough, he thinks. He still has one piece of ammunition left in his bag as can be seen in the way he describes the account of forgiveness that he prefers, which is radically different from those of his opponents.

In his own words, the new account goes “beyond the exchange and even the horizon of a redemption or a reconciliation.” No doubt he is advocating a new way of looking at the meaning of forgiveness as something that is pure and innocent. But his new conception does more than this. The difference with this new account could be seen in the selection of his words. He says: “…this radical purity can seem excessive, hyperbolic, mad. [But] if I say, as I think, that forgiveness is mad, and that it must remain a madness of the impossible, this is certainly not to exclude or disqualify it.” So Derrida sees

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172 Ibid., 37, emphases are mine.
173 Ibid.
174 Ibid., 38.
175 Ibid.
forgiveness as ‘mad;’ the ‘madness’ has to do with the fact that it starts to have meaning just when it is not supposed to have any meaning at all, e.g., in the face of the impossible.

But perhaps we should ask ourselves another question: could forgiveness have “meaning” once these conditions are met?176 Before addressing this question, first, let us do a quick summary of the gains we have made under this sub-section.

We have been looking at the position that forgiveness should be granted even when it seems to have no meaning. In other words, we have seen that forgiveness could still have meaning where there is no meaning at all. Derrida has presented three reasons why forgiveness would still be meaningful in these kinds of cases. The first argument is that forgiveness worth its name forgives the impossible, the unforgivable. This includes cases where forgiveness does not seem to make any sense at all. Second, the tendency to tie forgiveness to the anthropological features of the world (external) is detrimental to any account of forgiveness because it makes forgiveness susceptible to the baggage of calculative thinking. This limits the possibilities of forgiveness to human possibilities, like exchange. Third, Derrida is championing an account of forgiveness that is absolutely devoid of the elements of exchange, describing it as radical purity, investing forgiveness with meaning precisely when it is supposed to have none.

Now that we are through with summarizing the central points discussed in this sub-section, we can move on with the debate and answer the question of whether forgiveness could still have “meaning” [in Jankelevitch’s sense] if the preconditions are met.

Usually we think certain acts or persons are unforgivable unless the offender

176 This is a different way (a tactical approach) of answering Derrida’s opponents by giving them the benefit of the doubt but still showing why their view will not work, and thus should be rejected.
meets the conditions of forgiveness, like repentance, admitting the wrongs, and showing signs of remorse or transformation. When people commit horrific offenses, however, it is harder to forgive them than those who are guilty of somewhat mundane wrongs like bank robbery or car theft. There are serious moral and psychological obstacles to the forgiveness of such offenses. Consider Veronica’s story discussed earlier. It is nearly impossible for her to fathom the mental condition of the perpetrators at the time; she cannot understand why a normal person would do such a thing to a fellow human and the beastly actions are, from a moral point of view, unforgivable, because the perpetrators are intimately identified with their deeds.

In a sense, it is right to believe that it may be virtually impossible for ordinary people to feel empathy for such offenders. The failure to forgive the perpetrators is in keeping with the view that those acts, and any person identified with them, are profoundly evil. In other words, to deny sympathy and empathy to such offenders, to wish to disassociate ourselves from them and avoid any implication that we might condone those acts is an appropriate human response. Hence it is right to regard the offender as conditionally unforgivable as long as he/she has not acknowledged, repented, or showed any remorse for his/her actions. In such a case, we may say that the offender has not separated himself/herself from the evil acts committed, and thus inherits the unforgivability thereof.\(^\text{177}\)

The above view can be expressed differently in the following manner. Where there is extreme evil, so much is at stake. For example, aside from the extreme human suffering, fundamental ethical values (like justice, and respect for human life) are at risk.

\(^{177}\) This view is partly adopted from Trudy Govier’s discussion of the unforgivable, see Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 117-18.
Ignoring these values might undermine the moral basis on which the society is built. Thus, the need to redeem and/or preserve these values essential for a moral community may require that such wrongdoers disassociate themselves from their deeds. They might do this by taking responsibility, publicly renouncing their wrongful acts, and showing remorse to the victims; in other words, the offenders should do things to merit the forgiveness. Hence it might be argued that under certain extenuating circumstances, the demand that the offender meets the conditions for forgiveness is one that could be justified on the moral grounds of the claims of justice and the sustenance of the society’s moral infrastructure. Thus, when it comes to cases of extreme wrongdoing the attempts to right these wrongs may be a necessary component of the notions of forgiveness we are working with. Hence Jankelevitch may be right to insist that the offender merits the forgiveness in these kinds of cases. Meriting forgiveness is a justifiable and necessary step towards the sustainability of the moral order. So we are saying that there are some cases of wrongdoing, like cataclysmic evils, where we would rather the offender met these conditions.\(^\text{178}\)

The biggest question to be asked is whether compensation or merit is attainable in these kinds of cases. For example, how would Hitler or Stalin be made to pay for their crimes, even if they were alive today? What form of punishment would that have to be in order to be proportionate to their crimes? How about the masterminds of the elimination of communities and ‘unwanted’ groups in the name of “ethnic cleansing”? What of the perpetrators of mass murders, rapes, and other monstrous mistreatments, groups like the

\(^{178}\) The idea that forgiveness can be merited once someone fulfills certain obligations is a view we have already rejected. However, I am using merit to roughly capture the notion that people who have met these conditions (like remorse, repentance, etc) have performed a symbolic act of disassociating themselves from the evil deeds. And it is in the spirit of this symbolism that the said actions carry weight, without implying that the said actions earn them a right to the forgiveness.
Legion of Doom? And, is there a way to compensate the victims, ways that will make them see forgiveness as a meaningful act? Would forgiveness have a “meaning” in Veronica’s case, and for the countless millions whose sad stories we have discussed? For example, what if the offenders owned up to their wrongs? Would it make sense to forgive? Would forgiveness now have “meaning”? Is there a certain amount of money or wealth that would make a reasonable compensation to the victims enough to even the moral scales?

Clearly, cataclysmic evils by their very nature create such a moral imbalance that nothing the actors do could ever remedy the imbalance. For example, it is not clear whether repentance would be a justifiable recompense for forgiveness. Thus, even after the offenders admit their mistakes and take responsibility for their actions, however, like Jankelevitch, we would still have reasons to believe that repentance is not a good enough reason to justify a forgiving response. Hence, though it is a welcome move, repentance or any form of compensation may be a necessary but not sufficient ground for rendering forgiveness. By the same token, no form of compensation is going to restore the victim to his or her original state in a way that evens the moral scales. For instance, we saw earlier that some evils are immense, monstrous and complex, precipitating the damaging of the physical, emotional, psychological, biological, socio-cultural dimensions of a person and community. There is no form of punishment that would even these scales; no amount of money in the world would reverse the condition of someone like Veronica who is now in a vegetative state.

So even if these preconditions were to be granted, forgiveness is still a senseless endeavor on Jankelevitch’s terms, meaning that we would still be justified to withhold it,
under these terms. But such a position leaves us with an equally terrible outcome, if not worse, namely, a world filled with anger, bitterness, hatred, resentment, and despair. This is why a new account of forgiveness is necessary, one that sees forgiveness purely as unconditional gift. Forgiveness, in this new account, is our way of transcending the walled-in moral world that we would otherwise face.

(v) Other relevancies of Murphy in the debate

Jeffrie Murphy’s account of forgiveness was discussed earlier in chapter 2. However, there are some aspects of his account that could serve us well in the current debate.

Recall that Murphy sees forgiveness strictly as an activity that involves the overcoming of resentment on moral grounds. Central in Murphy’s account is the idea that forgiveness is dependent on the motives for which it is tendered, the primary one being one’s self-worth. He identifies five reasons as the moral grounds of forgiveness, the first four of which are as follows:179

1. the wrongdoer has repented or had a change of heart.
2. the wrongdoer meant well, i.e., he had good intentions
3. the wrongdoer has suffered enough (‘redemptive suffering’)
4. the wrongdoer has undergone humiliation

According to Murphy, moral injuries are messages, symbolic communications—they have ways of conveying messages that negatively impact our wellbeing. This is primarily because wrongdoers are connected to their wrongdoing by virtue of the symbolic message conveyed by the wrong act. An important question for Murphy is whether forgiveness (in these cases) can be consistent with the constraints of self-worth. One way this could be achieved, in his view, is to seek to draw a line between an agent and the immoral act. Since wrongdoers are symbolically tied to their sins, the trick is to see what

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179 Murphy, Forgiveness and Mercy, 23-24.
happens when there is a divorce (if possible) of the act from the agent; or where the insulting message is no longer implied.

For purposes of our present discussion, consider the first and third items on Murphy’s list. Regarding the first item, Murphy has this to say about what happens when one repents: “In having a sincere change of heart, he is withdrawing his endorsement from his own immoral past behavior; he is saying, “I no longer stand behind the wrongdoing, and I want to be separated from it. I stand with you in condemning it.”

Thus, true repentance in Murphy’s view is a means by which a wrongdoer separates himself from the evil act; forgiveness is justified because the insulting message has been withdrawn.

Here is what I consider to be one of the problems with Murphy’s account as constructed in the above. The problem can be expressed in the following question: what should we do in cases where there is seemingly sufficient grounds to think that a wrongdoer is intimately identified with his wrongdoing? Consider the case of someone who is emotionally, mentally, and spiritually evil in character; what we might refer to as a moral monster—a sadist who derives pleasure from inflicting injury on others and seem, rather strangely to us, doing it with passion and rage. And the evil he brings about has no purpose other than his own sinister and sadistic enjoyment, and his victims are innocent and good people, like we saw with Veronica. In such cases, drawing a moral line between the evil deed and its perpetrator is a very hard thing to do. When the agent is inseparable from the evil act, forgiveness becomes impossible without the tacit approval

180 Ibid., 26.
181 This example has been adopted from Govier’s case of the Myth of Pure Evil, Govier, Forgiveness and Revenge, 125-129.
of the evil act.

The other case to be considered is the third one dealing with suffering—the idea that forgiveness is justified because a wrongdoer has suffered enough. What does it mean to say that someone has suffered enough? And what does this have to do with self-worth?

Murphy is working with a thought prevalent in our culture, that suffering is redemptive. A self-respecting person will not forgive someone whose actions are a reflection of her lowered status. Once our status has been lowered, the prevailing state of affairs is that the offender is superior. To forgive under these circumstances is inappropriate because it implies that we are acquiescing in our own lowered status, something which a self-respecting agent will not want to do.182

So Murphy wants to say that a status of equilibrium can be attained through the wrongdoer’s suffering. And how exactly does this work? Suffering, says Murphy, “tends to bring people low, to reduce them, to humble them. If so, then enough equality may be restored in order to forgive them consistent with self-respect.”183 Examples of such severing suffering might include cases of disgrace, like falling from a high position, sadness and hurts that are a by-product of a wrongdoing, e.g., the loss of a spouse, job, wealth, respect from loved ones, friends, colleagues, etc.

But how do we determine that someone has suffered enough? For example, is this a qualitative or quantitative account of suffering? Is it a question of ‘how many times I have suffered’ or it is about the kinds of bad things happening to me?’ Besides, there is the issue of how to even the moral scales, overall. From Murphy’s story, restoring moral equilibrium requires the lowering of the offender (this is explicit in the account); but it

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182 Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 26-27.
might also require the raising of the victim’s moral worth or well-being (this is implicit in the account). Now imagine cases where victims have suffered irreversible damages to their own self-worth. I am thinking of a case where, for example, as a victim one is repeatedly brutalized and dehumanized so as to be incapable of continuing to respond as a moral agent, and slides into a vegetative state following these monstrous attacks. Trying to raise such a victim’s moral worth is next to impossible. Cataclysmic evils tend to impact their victims in this manner, like we saw in Veronica’s case.

In sum, Murphy’s account is typical of the tradition that requires that forgiveness has to be justified for it to be granted. But we have seen that the grounds of forgiveness in Murphy’s list are faced with a myriad of problems rendering the exercise of forgiveness under such circumstances an uphill task.¹⁸⁴

In the end, Murphy’s account (like Jankelevitch’s) lends itself to the spirit of the tradition that attaches “meaning” to forgiveness. “Meaning” here is driven by a spirit of a conditioned economy that seeks the reconciliation of two parties in the form of exchange. Any attempts at initiating the process of forgiveness based on this spirit of transaction will not work because there is little or nothing the forgiving parties could do to merit the forgiveness in the face of these appalling wrongs. By the same token, no form of compensation is going to restore the victim to his or her original state in a way that evens

¹⁸⁴ The first difficulty involves the inability to make a clear distinction between an immoral act and the agent. Cataclysmic evils present metaphysical and moral questions that render the matter of divorcing the agent from the actions impossible. The second difficulty has to do with the matter of evening the scales. Under Murphy’s account forgiveness is possible once we even the moral scales, for example when the offender’s status has been lowered, or when the victim’s is raised. However, there are certain cases where the equilibrium will not be rectified because there is nothing that can be done to even the moral scales (whether by raising the victim’s status or lowering the offender’s). The difficulty with Murphy’s account can be framed in the following terms: forgiveness is possible and morally justified because there is something we can do to even the moral order, for example through offender’s suffering, victim’s benefiting, or separation of agent from the evil act. Under ordinary circumstances, forgiveness is possible because there is something that can be done to rectify the moral situation. The bad news is that certain extraordinary circumstances render the forgiving act meaningless because nothing can be done to rectify the moral order. Forgiveness is impossible in such cases.
the moral scales. In the end, the attempt to want to explain these evils using the language of “meaning” has the element of impeding genuine or true forgiveness.

(vi) Conclusion

There are two conflicting voices in this chapter, representative of the central arguments of the debate. Jankelevitch’s argument can be summarized in three steps. First, there is the connection of what is punishable, remediable, reparable, comprehensible, expiable, and the forgivable. Second, cataclysmic evils are so wrong as to be unpunishable, irremediable, irreparable, incomprehensible, inexpiable. The conclusion is that cataclysmic evils are unforgivable.

Derrida, for his part, argues that forgiveness as a concept is inherently paradoxical, where the possibility and impossibility are intertwined. This is a healthy tension; it is what bequeaths forgiveness its life line, where the possibilities of forgiveness are constantly renewed. Thus questions about the possibility of forgiveness require us to dig deeper into the anatomical structure of forgiveness as such. Doing so enables us to see that forgiveness worth its name has neither end nor limit; it forgives the unforgivable and does the impossible. Such a view of forgiveness is one that is purely non-transactional. It is a radical departure from exchange. Forgiveness is mad. It starts to have “meaning” just when it appears to have no “meaning”.

In the end, Jankelevitch’s views fall under the transactional account of forgiveness, where forgiveness is granted because it is justifiable on certain moral grounds. Seeing forgiveness from this standpoint has one major deficit: we are trapped in a world of bitterness, revenge, ill feeling, resentment, etc. Derrida, on the other hand is championing an account of forgiveness that is non-transactional in nature, one that sees
forgiveness purely as unconditional gift. He believes that a non-transactional account is what is needed especially in such horrifying cases.

The account of forgiveness I am espousing in the dissertation takes after the tradition of Derrida, as we are about to see shortly in the next chapter. But before moving on to the next chapter, it should be noted that the current discussion has already revealed some important things about the features of this new account, even if in a preliminary form. For example, we have seen that the new account of forgiveness must be non-transactional in nature, thus it is pure and innocent from the serpent meanderings of the spirit of exchange. Two, such an account of forgiveness that is radically innocent from the patterns of exchange is what we need considering the difficulties experienced in the moral life with respect to cataclysmic evils. Forgiveness based on the traditions of exchange has one major difficulty—the scales of equilibrium are beyond moral rectification where cataclysmic evils are involved. Thus forgiveness has no “meaning” in such cases unless one is a quasi-unconditional forgiver. Stated differently, only a quasi-unconditional forgiver can see forgiveness as a “meaningful” act in the face of extreme wrongdoing. Hence a non-transactional account of forgiveness that I am developing is consistent with the ordinary intentions of forgiveness as such (at least implicitly), where forgiveness symbolizes a new beginning, a renewed sense of the moral life, the appalling wrongs notwithstanding. A transactional forgiver, on the other hand, leaves us in an abyss of resentment, revenge, anger, hopelessness, despair, where cataclysmic evils are involved.

This is only a brief highlight of the distinguishing features of the quasi-unconditional view. In the next chapter (chapter 5), a fully developed version of
this account will be articulated. We will do this by presenting an account of the distinctive features of quasi-unconditionality, showing how the account is different from the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use. The discussion will show precisely why the new account has the potential to succeed where its opponent will not, thus offering a defense as to why it should be preferred over its rival.
CHAPTER 5: THE CONCLUSION

(i) The new account of forgiveness: quasi-unconditional view

I have sought to make the case for a different account of forgiveness. I have argued that the transactional account is incapable of accounting for certain critical realities bothering the moral order. Overall, the root cause of the problems in the ordinary philosophical tradition has to do with the transactional dimension and the meaning of forgiveness, as revealed, for example, in Murphy’s language of the symbolic messages that need to be communicated for forgiveness to be merited and the message that is implied in forgiveness itself. This is different from the new conception of the moral life, and hence forgiveness, that I have proposed and defended. A defensible conception of the moral life has to do with the fundamental question of sustaining the flow of the moral life both in regard to individuals and the moral community as a whole. Forgiveness as a moral institution has to be sensitive to these underlying everyday expectations. Besides, there are instances where the moral scales are beyond being corrected by any transaction; there is little we could do (like punishment, reparation, or any form of compensation) as moral players to restore the moral equilibrium, like the cases of inevitable moral conflicts and extreme wrongdoing. Under the former, the notions of blame and responsibility have no meaning. And for the latter, the ordinary justifications of forgiveness will not work. In view of these shortcomings, my suggestion is that the ordinary account of forgiveness be replaced by a new account. The new account is called quasi-unconditionality. I will use two approaches to explicate the nature of this new account. In the first approach, I present a new conceptual understanding of the meaning of forgiveness—one that addresses the critical problems concerning forgiveness in the moral life. In the second approach, I
provide a descriptive account of the features of this new account. In the end, we will be able to see clearly how and/or why the quasi-unconditional view is an account of features the other accounts of forgiveness fail to provide.

(ii) What it means to forgive

Respect for ourselves, for others, and for the moral law constrains us to respond in certain ways after we suffer significant wrongs that negatively impact our well-being. Such injuries normally affect the emotional, mental, as well as social dimensions of a person. Usually, this is characterized by a shift in our beliefs, judgments, ideas, and attitudes/behavior towards the offender. Hence, negative emotions like anger, hatred, and resentment are usually seen to be common human responses. For example, it is not uncommon for people to lose both our respect and trust once we suffer at their hands. In addition, our judgments, thoughts, or beliefs about them start to change because of how we associate them with our injury or their wrongdoing. This explains why even in the case of ordinary wrongs there is a tendency to identify the agent with the immoral act, the sin with the sinner. Typically, this has to do with the fact that when we are harmed and/or wronged in certain ways, some of the emotional, mental, social, and spiritual wounds do not heal easily, and to heal at all, it is necessary that the offender/offense be confronted and dealt with before we become whole again.\(^\text{185}\) This is the important moral role that forgiveness plays. It helps us deal with these complex wounds, whether at individual or collective level. Hence, forgiveness functions as an instrument of moral renewal, both for the individuals and the moral community as a whole.

So what is forgiveness? I answer this question in two ways: one, by laying out

\(^{185}\) Here, I am working with a comprehensive account of human wholeness. Under this conception, different individuals react differently after they are exposed to harms and/or wrongful actions. Suffice it to say, unjustified mistreatments bring about a disequilibrium to our well-being.
what I consider to be a conceptual platform for my definition and two, by presenting a
descriptive account of what it means to forgive. The first question deals with the
foundation or platform on which our ideas of forgiveness rests. The second category
deals with the actual process of forgiveness; that is, what it is that people do when they
forgive and what forgiveness entails, its scope, and effects on the players. We will start
with the first one.

First, forgiveness is both a conscious and voluntary act that an individual
undertakes. This means that it should not be granted as an oversight or as the result of
coercion, but rather should be given freely. In other words, forgiveness is a rational
process. We choose to forgive because it makes sense to do so, for whatever reasons; we
understand what we are doing. Hence it is an active undertaking. For example, one
cannot forgive as the result of being distracted.

Second, forgiveness, like any other undertaking, will require considerable effort
in order for it to be achieved. It is not the sort of thing that will just happen. Effort here
need not suggest a laborious task, but the forgiving agents have to coordinate their
emotions, channel beliefs and judgments (through self-persuasion and self-confidence,
self-assurance, courage, etc.), process the implications of what they are about to do (by
overcoming trepidation concerning the recipient’s response, self-discouraging emotions
like fear), and seek to perform those actions that are in accord with forgiveness. This
might also imply that the amount of effort required in a given case largely depends on the
nature of the wrong done, our perception of the wrong and the wrongdoer, the degree of

harm inflicted and one’s own character traits as a forgiver. Ordinarily, severe harms and serious wrongdoing require greater effort on the forgiver’s part for forgiveness to be realized. This is simply because such mistreatments cause major imbalance in the moral scale to the disadvantage of the victims. For example, the effort to forgive a moral monster is different than forgiving a neighbor who calls me “fat.” In the same vein, the effort to forgive first-time offenders and/or remorseful offenders may differ from say, such efforts directed toward chronic offenders or unrepentant ones. Character traits vary. Individual histories and personalities may also vary, thus, affect the ability to cultivate positive responses to harm and/or wrongdoing (this ability is what we have called a forgiving spirit). For instance, people who have been victims of abuse, like domestic violence or bullying in schools, could be very vulnerable, and hence, require greater work and effort to forgive in the future than say, people who have never experienced such abuse. On the other hand, whether by nature or virtue, some people are disposed to exhibit the requisite qualities of a forgiving spirit more readily such that they need not resent or, as a whole, be entangled by negative feelings in order to forgive. Such people forgive without having to overcome the negative feelings and attitudes that result from unfair mistreatment from others. For most of us, however, generosity, empathy, compassion and sympathy are not qualities that are readily at our disposal. What this means is that our dose of the forgiving spirit has to be developed, something which takes work and effort.\(^{187}\) In the end, the forgiving task is a very complex undertaking because

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\(^{187}\) David Novitz. “Forgiveness and Self-Respect.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 no. 2 (June 1998): 309-310. The world would be a much better place if these positive qualities were in abundance, or, at least, if they were readily at our disposal. That human history is characterized by endless tribal, racial and ethnic conflicts, betrayals, rapes, revenge, murders, among others, is an indication that for most of us, these qualities do not naturally come to us.
there are several factors that determine the work and effort that goes into the realization of the action of forgiveness.

I have been concerned with answering the question of what it means to forgive. I started by saying that I will answer this question in two ways: one, by laying out a general conceptual foundation upon which the definition and/or the action of forgiveness occurs, and two, by offering a descriptive account of the forgiving process itself. So far I have dealt with the first aspect of the question of what it means to forgive. I will now move on and consider the second aspect of this question.

I see forgiveness as a moral problem-solving strategy requiring an active engagement of the mental, affective, and behavioral aspects of the individual. These three aspects of forgiveness can be characterized further as follows.

First, when one forgives, there is a renunciation of certain claims that one makes against the offender. Through this renunciation, repair of the mental, emotional, social and spiritual aspects between the two parties is made possible.

When others do bad things to us, our thoughts about them change, especially if deep injuries resulted. We cease to see the offender the way we would under normal circumstances, in the totality of their humanity; instead, our beliefs, judgments and attitudes about them shrink and we focus on their wrongful actions. We see them as their wrongful actions, i.e., as those who have hurt us. The change of focus can be explained by the fact that there is a tendency for people to identify with their pain, hence define the world from this limited perspective, especially when dealing with those who are causally connected with their pain. Hence, there is a tendency to refer to the offender simply as

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188 Similar characterizations have been discussed by among others, Gould, “Better Hearts,” 1-26; Enright and Gassin, “Forgiveness: A Developmental View,” 1-15.
“the one who wronged me.” By putting in the effort and undertaking the forgiving task, forgiveness brings about a shift in our thinking where we begin to see the offender in a new way. Thus, forgiveness refocuses our attention from the self to the other. This means that in order to forgive, our regard/perception of the other has to expand. We must cease to view him or her simply as one who has hurt us, but must instead return to viewing him or her as a responsible member of the moral community who, like everybody else, is capable of doing both good and bad things. Like a non-self-regarding act, forgiveness makes us begin to concentrate on the humanity of the other, not our own. But such an undertaking, as I have shown, is a very complex exercise.\textsuperscript{189}

Secondly, along with a change in thoughts, forgiveness requires a shift in our emotions. To forgive means to abandon the bitter feelings like anger, hatred, and resentment. For this to take place, the victim needs to undergo a genuine change of heart, achieving peace with one’s emotional self. As we have seen, genuine change of heart does not come easily.\textsuperscript{190} Some effort is required in which the victim has to be able to identify with the offender at least feelingly and understandingly. For instance, the victim must be able to see the offender as a human being, a fellow member of the moral community who, like anybody else is capable of error. Identification with and understanding of the offender helps to generate positive feelings in the victim, or, at the very least, eliminate the hostile, negative ones. In the end, this brings about a replacement

\textsuperscript{189} Gould, “Better Hearts,” 19. For instance, seeing forgiveness as non-self regarding act that requires us to change our perception of the offender is compatible with my account of the forgiving spirit. The latter is what cultivates the altruistic tendencies in the individual. In the end, this is what enables us to offer forgiveness as a true gift. We focus on our own humanity in different ways, at times in bits and pieces, at times holistically. For example, people might focus on their emotional injuries or lowered status at different intervals. But just because we are concentrating on a particular aspect of our humanity need not imply that we are exclusively focusing on one part of our being; it could only be that one area needs special attention owing to pain, injury or some discomfort. In the end, focusing on our own humanity empowers us to focus on the humanity of the other.

\textsuperscript{190} Ms. Stacy John’s story perfectly illustrates this point.
of the negative feelings with positive ones. Thus, genuine change of heart enhances a forgiving spirit. This empowers us to act altruistically so that we can offer forgiveness as a true gift. In fact, for most people, forgiveness simply means a change of heart. But as I have shown, there is more to it than a change of heart. This has to do with who we are as bio-psycho-social beings.

Third, to forgive means to change the way we treat the wrongdoer. Renouncing behavioral claims means we cease to seek revenge and/or to display indifference to the offender. Here, there is a shift of attitude that may lead to a restoration of a previous relationship. However, this is not to say that reconciliation is a necessary condition of forgiveness. There is still forgiveness even when as a victim, one is unwilling to resume a previous relationship with the offender.

In sum, there are at least three elements of forgiveness: mental, emotional, and behavioral. To forgive means to undergo a change in the way we think about, feel towards, and treat the offender, 191 a process characterized by the use of the right words, beliefs, and actions towards the offender. Clearly, such a characterization of forgiveness is what we need in order to have a full view of how the victim sees the offender once the decision to forgive has been made. For instance under this account, it is abundantly clear that the victim has a new regard for the offender. Also clear is the question of what this new attitude entails, as in, the precise attributes of the forgiving attitude.

I have presented a multi-faceted approach of what should constitute an action of forgiveness. To forgive involves a shift of behavior, emotions and thought pattern. As a cautionary remark, however, no single element can constitute forgiveness independent of

the other elements. For example, forgiveness cannot be defined exclusively as a shift of emotions. Nor can it be defined simply in terms of our actions—how we treat the offender. Murphy, Butler and a host of the contemporary school fell into this trap. For example, we have seen that one of the reasons Murphy’s account is weak has to do with his singularly-phased account of forgiveness where forgiveness is primarily a matter of how I feel about you. Such an approach runs into problems that are not a challenge to a multi-faceted account.

(iii) What makes the quasi-unconditional view so unique: the features

In what follows, I offer a descriptive account of the features of the quasi-unconditional view. There are at least six things to be said about this account. First, quasi-unconditionality is an unconditional approach. Hence, a necessary feature of the account is that there are no conditions to be met by the offender in order for forgiveness to be tendered; forgiveness is not based on the offender’s merit (e.g., remorse, repentance, etc.). To forgive is purely the victim’s prerogative—it is a supererogatory act. As such, the quasi-unconditional view overcomes the general shortcomings of transactional forgiveness as discussed in the dissertation.

Second, as a distinct form of the unconditional approach, quasi-unconditionality differs from the ordinary/simple unconditional view because the quasi-unconditional view accommodates the idea that wrongdoing and hence the need for forgiveness is possible even when culpable wrongdoing is in dispute or not present. Therefore, the quasi-unconditional view is an account of forgiveness with a conceptual meaning that is compatible with and pertains to a moral situation where the notions of responsibility and blame are suspended, where forgiveness is conceived and practiced in the absence of
these factors. For instance, under the simple/ordinary unconditional approach, the agent chooses to set aside the terms of exchange/transaction in his or her capacity as an unconditional forgiver but still believes a certain individual ‘X’ is morally culpable. A quasi-unconditional forgiver need not share that belief about the moral world in order to render unconditional forgiveness. Stated differently, a quasi-unconditional forgiver has the necessary hardware to function in a complex moral situation—an actual moral world which requires a complex conception of forgiveness that accounts for a whole range of circumstances or wrongs for which we may not know who is responsible, or where the issue of responsibility and/or blame is in dispute.

Third, quasi-unconditionality is (a distinct form of the unconditional approach in that it is) a form of unconditionality that becomes conditional without being conditional. When people commit horrific offenses, it is harder to forgive them than those who are guilty of somewhat mundane wrongs like bank robbery or car theft. Here is a good example to help illustrate this point.

Consider the case of a sadist, someone who derives pleasure from inflicting injury on others and seem, rather strangely to us, to do it with passion and rage. And, suppose that the evil he or she brings about has no purpose other than his/her own sinister and sadistic enjoyment, and its victims are innocent and good people. Such a person is wicked in character, both emotionally, mentally and spiritually, typical of what we have referred to as a moral monster. And the heinous actions affect us (individually and/or corporately) in such a profound and disturbing manner due to the cruel suffering of the victims and the appalling nature of these wrongs. For instance, they are an insult to our humanity and to societal moral principles (e.g., they are the sorts of actions associated only with beasts,
not humans). Hence, there are serious moral and psychological obstacles to the forgiveness of such offenses. For example, it is, or nearly impossible, for the victim to fathom the mental condition of the perpetrator at the time of the assault for one cannot understand why a normal person would do such a thing to a fellow human; and the beastly actions are from a moral point of view unforgivable because the perpetrator is intimately identified with his or her deeds.

In a sense, it is right to believe that it may be virtually impossible for “ordinary people” to feel empathy for such offenders. The failure to forgive the perpetrator is in keeping with the view that those acts, and any person identified with them, are profoundly evil. In other words, to deny sympathy and empathy to such offenders, to wish to disassociate ourselves from them and avoid any implication that we might condone those acts is an appropriate human response. Hence, it is right to regard the offender as conditionally unforgivable as long as he has not acknowledged, repented, or showed any remorse for his actions. In such a case, we may say that the offender has not separated himself from the evil acts committed, and thus inherits the unforgivability thereof.192

The above view can be expressed differently in the following manner. Where there is extreme evil, so much is at stake. For example, aside from the extreme human suffering, fundamental ethical values (like justice, and respect for human life, among others) are at risk, what might undermine the moral basis on which the society’s existence rests. Thus, the need to redeem and/or preserve these values (without which a moral community cannot be sustained) may require that such wrongdoers disassociate

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192 This view is partly adopted from Trudy Govier’s discussion of the unforgivable, see Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 117-18.
themselves from their deeds (e.g., by taking responsibility and publicly renouncing their wrongful acts, and showing remorse to the victims), which is another way of saying the offenders should merit the forgiveness. Hence, unlike the standard beliefs of the simple/ordinary unconditional account, quasi-unconditionality functions where the demands to merit forgiveness may be justifiable and necessary for the sustainability of the moral order.\(^{193}\)

So we are saying that there are some cases of wrongdoing, like cataclysmic evils where we would rather the offender met these conditions. This way, the conditions of forgiveness become the grounds for unconditional forgiveness. But as we have shown in the dissertation, forgiveness of cataclysmic evils is not merited, strictly speaking—this is what we meant when we said that forgiveness has no “meaning” in such cases because nothing the actors do justifies a forgiving response under such extreme circumstances. For example, we saw with Veronica’s case that no form of compensation would restore her to something close to her original state prior to the ordeal; there is no way we can repair the moral scales in a way that serves the course of justice. Thus, even though we have insisted that certain conditions have to be met for unconditional forgiveness to be rendered, the said conditions are only necessary, not sufficient grounds for a forgiving response. In the end, quasi-unconditionality embraces conditionality without losing its unconditional character.

Fourth, my quasi-unconditional view is an account of forgiveness in which the actual forgiving process as well as the outcome of the process is consistent with the

\(^{193}\) The idea that forgiveness can be merited once someone fulfills certain obligations is a view that is not easy to defend, and hence should be rejected. However, I am using merit to roughly capture the notion that people who have met these conditions (like remorse, repentance, etc.) have performed a symbolic act of disassociating themselves from the evil deeds. And it is in the spirit of this symbolism that the said actions carry weight, without implying that the said actions earn them a right to the forgiveness.
ordinary expectations of a forgiving action overall. The quasi-unconditional view of forgiveness is one that exhibits a comprehensive characterization of a forgiving action, an idea that we expressed through the following question, namely: what do we normally intend to achieve whenever a decision to forgive is made? The central idea here has to do with the issue of the place of forgiveness in the moral life—how forgiveness as a practice affects its players. We saw that forgiveness as a moral institution functions as an instrument of moral interaction that enables us to have a restored relationship with the offender where ordinary life is once again possible. Hence, the proper intention of forgiveness is one that enables us to achieve a forgiving action or process where the deeper underlying moral aspirations of those whose interests are under consideration have been secured. Forgiveness is thus an instrument of moral renewal and interaction, not exchange.

There are at least two elements that characterize this new attitude: the general and precise aspects of the forgiving intention. About the former, the concern is with the bigger picture of the relationship—how the victim sees the offender once the former resolves to forgive the latter overall. That is, the general element of the forgiving intention is concerned with whether or not the forgiver has a new regard for the wrongdoer now that an inner resolve to forgive has been made. The precise component as we saw is about the defining elements of this attitude, i.e., what the intention entails. The concern is with the axiological components of the intention rather than the intention itself. Forgiveness in this case is something more than a shift in the regard for the offender. That is, in addition to the latter, forgiveness is an expression of a certain level of confidence. So in forgiving you, I am also making a statement about you; that, to a
certain extent, you have what it takes to be a dutiful member of the moral community, past record notwithstanding. Arriving at such a judgment may require that I establish a connection (at least mentally) between my action and the expected outcome. For example, there is a likelihood that a repentant and genuinely remorseful wrongdoer will live up to these expectations more than someone who is not. Forgiveness in this case is an affirmation of trust that the offender will turn out as expected. If he does, then we were right to express such confidence in him. However, if he does not then our trust will have been broken. But suppose that instead of trust, forgiveness affirms simply a faith in the offender? Forgiveness grounded in faith does not rely on such calculative thinking; there is no relationship between the action and the expected outcome. When it is grounded in faith, forgiveness functions like a gift, like grace: it ceases to be something that can be merited.

So, a fresh start, faith, grace, and trust are some of the elements that define a proper attitude of forgiveness. Characterizing the forgiving action comprehensively reveals an attitude of forgiveness that is compatible with ordinary expectations of a forgiving action. This is what brings into focus a broader picture of the relationship between victim and offender once the former decides to forgive the latter.

In the end, the features that make the quasi-unconditional view a unique account include seeing forgiveness as symbolizing a fresh start, a gift, an act of grace. Forgiveness is thus an expression of faith, trust, and confidence in the offender (in spite of the past), consistent with the ordinary expectations of the place of forgiveness in the moral life. This point is worth emphasizing because it reveals a sharp contrast between the quasi-unconditional view and the features characterizing the ordinary account of
forgiveness that were illustrated in the views of people like Murphy and Butler. As I have shown, a defensible account of the moral significance of forgiveness should go beyond the limits of moral exchange and address the fundamental question of maintaining the smooth flow of the moral order. Forgiveness is significant essentially if it functions as a tool of moral renewal, something which is impossible in the absence of this new regard, even apart from its altruistic elements such as faith, gift, grace, trust, new respect, etc.

A proper intention of forgiveness propels us to act in ways compatible with what we thus intend. That way, there is a connection between the intention of forgiveness and the forgiving process itself. The intention as we have seen has to do with addressing the question of the place of forgiveness in the moral life—forgiveness symbolizing a renewed sense of life, a fresh start. The forgiving process, on the other hand, is a problem whose nature can be expressed through another question: what exactly are we doing when we forgive? This has to do with the actual process of forgiveness, what it is that we do when we forgive, its scope, and effects on its players. I offer a complex analysis of forgiveness that sees forgiveness as a process requiring a change in the way we think about, feel towards, and treat the offender. Such a process is characterized by the use of the right words, beliefs, thoughts, judgments, attitudes, feelings and actions.

So quasi-unconditionality is an account of forgiveness requiring an active engagement of the mental, emotional, and behavioral aspects of the individual—this is what brings about the repair of the mental, emotional, social and spiritual dimensions of the individual, consistent with a broader view of who we are as moral agents. Human beings are bio-psycho-social beings, with needs that are deep and complex, especially when it comes to the struggles of trying to work our way towards forgiveness or the
refusal to forgive in the aftermath of an injury.

Hence, in essence, the quasi-unconditional view is a rich account of forgiveness that cannot be reduced simply to the performance of a single act, like a shift in behavior pattern (as per Butler) or emotional state (as per Murphy). Instead, it is a multi-faceted approach to forgiveness. My approach has the virtue of promoting a broader way of looking at the action of forgiveness where there is an assessment not just of how one feels or treats the offender, but how he/she relates with the offender overall in a more comprehensive sense. Such a rich account of forgiveness is what spells out clearly what it is we are doing when we forgive, consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action—where forgiveness symbolizes a fresh start. In addition, a quasi-unconditional forgiver through this new attitude (new regard) develops higher levels of interaction with the offender. Forgiveness is seen as an expression of faith, trust, and respect towards the offender as an integrated human being and member of the moral community, past offenses notwithstanding.

Finally, quasi-unconditionality is distinct from its rival because, it is a form of forgiveness that functions where the moral situation demands that unconditionality as a practice should be treated both as an obligation and as a gift. But before we proceed with explaining this point, let us pause and remind ourselves of some of the main points we have so far mentioned in this discussion, ideas that are useful in advancing our current discourse about the quasi-unconditional view.

We saw that in a moral world where an actual moral situation prevails, to condition forgiveness on merit is to ask for the impossible; thus, a form of unconditional forgiveness is necessary simply as a way of grappling with the problematic moral
situation. Another important point concerns the “meaning” of forgiveness. Here, we said that there is meaning to forgiveness if there is something the offender could do that evens the moral disequilibrium, like remorse, reparation, etc. Under the simple/ordinary unconditionality, forgiveness could still have meaning notwithstanding the victim’s decision to forgive unilaterally. On the other hand, a quasi-unconditional forgiver does not have this option; but this does not rob him or her of the ability to render unconditional forgiveness. And the reason he/she is still able to do such things is because of quasi-unconditionality’s unique attributes. So far our discussion has identified five attributes of this view.

We are now ready to look at the last attribute, i.e., the idea that quasi-unconditionality functions within a framework of gift and obligation. Ordinarily, obligations may be thought of as forces which weigh upon us contrary to our natural or normal dispositions. A person who naturally does the right thing does not act from obligation. For the rest of us (the majority), however, what this implies is that we may have an obligation to develop the right attitude/spirit, and might be blamed if we do not, especially when it comes to the cases of extreme wrongdoing where there is more that is at stake than the well-being of an individual person (whether a victim or offender). Obviously, when it comes to cataclysmic evils, a moral community is better off

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194 For instance we can imagine a situation where two victims, Randy and Tobriner both set out to forgive their wrongdoers. Randy sets out to unconditionally forgive someone who later realizes the mistake of his actions, repents and tries to make amends. Randy could still derive meaning in his act of forgiveness if he wants to, even though he chooses to forgive absent the offender meeting this condition. On the other hand, Tobriner (the quasi-unconditional forgiver) does not have this option because nothing the offender does (whether before, during or after the forgiveness) could bring about the repair of the moral disequilibrium. No matter what the offender does to meet these conditions, Tobriner’s act would still have no meaning.

195 This feature, however, is not problem-free. For example there is a common objection that gift and duty are incompatible terms (for example once forgiveness becomes a gift, it is no longer a duty, and when it is a duty, it ceases to be a gift, the argument goes). I think otherwise.
cultivating a forgiving attitude that goes beyond our absolute readiness to forgive unconditionally. Indeed, in the face of such horrific offenses where nothing good makes sense at all, a community’s future depends on the hope that is likely to come through forgiveness; we are better off with faith and hope in human goodness, under such circumstances, not despair, anger, hatred, bitterness, or resentment.

What this means is that while the act of forgiveness properly speaking must be motivated in the right way (for example, as an act of grace, faith, hope, trust, etc.), such an attitude may spring from all sorts of reasons, like a sense of obligation. Hence, gift and obligation are not in disharmony. That is, though springing from a sense of obligation, it could be also the case that forgiveness is ultimately an act of grace, one that is motivated by a spirit or attitude of pure forgiving, thus strictly a gift.

Seeing forgiveness as a gift secures a richer conception of the moral life in a way that captures the complexity of the moral debate. Gift introduces a new dimension into the moral life, namely, grace. Grace is that which enables us to experience a positive benefit of what is otherwise beyond our reach; it is a free gift that one cannot work for, no matter what one does to earn it. Grace renews the moral life in the face of tragedy, extreme wrongdoing, and injustices but it does not erase these evils. Grace serves the course of justice but also makes it possible to live in a way that transcends the walled-in moral world that we would otherwise face.

Now there is a criticism that one could bring against the quasi-unconditional view. The critic could be bothered by my use of forgiveness as a gift. The objection is that an account of forgiveness that involves an appeal to the concept of gift or grace is an account of a phenomenon that is, strictly speaking, not forgiveness. This criticism,
however, seems to suggest that the quasi “gift” and “forgiveness” are synonyms. There might be reasons for one thinking they are synonyms. For example, “gift” and “forgiveness” each denote supererogatory acts and are performed for the benefit of others and not for selfish motives. Hence the opponents’ objection that quasi-unconditional view as a gift is an account of a phenomenon that is something other than forgiveness might have been driven by an apparent confusion or misunderstanding of how these two conceptual terms are used in the dissertation. I will try to shed some light on the conceptual usage of these terms to defuse this confusion/misunderstanding. Hopefully this will help to lay my critics’ concerns to rest.

First, forgiveness and gift are not synonyms, but they are closely related. As I have shown in the dissertation, my analysis of forgiveness is that it is a complex process that involves at least two basic components: one is that the right intention of forgiveness has to do with the question of the place of forgiveness in the moral life—forgiveness has to function as an instrument of moral renewal/interaction consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action. The quasi-unconditional view as we have fulfills this function. Forgiveness under this new account symbolizes a new beginning, a fresh start. Second, as a complex process forgiveness involves the active engagement of our mental, affective, and behavioral faculties. Thus forgiveness is both a conscious and voluntary act. Hence, forgiveness is more than an intention. As a forgiver, one has to work towards undergoing change, making adjustments in the emotional, mental, and behavioral self, and to respond to the wrongdoer in the same manner such that as a forgiver, one is able both to experience and exhibit a renewed sense of life. Thus the forgiving intention must be acted upon or accompanied by forgiving action in order for forgiveness to be truly
realized. The proper intention propels us to act forgivingly; to cultivate a *forgiving spirit*, to use a familiar phrase. For example, we begin to look at the offender differently—with respect, compassion, empathy, trust, faith, etc. This is a higher level of interaction, both ethically and in our relation with each other. For instance the *forgiving spirit* enables us to show grace or to act graciously (it softens our hearts towards the other), to be able to offer forgiveness as a gift. Therefore seeing forgiveness as a gift is not to suggest that gift takes the place of forgiveness. Nor does it mean that there is no longer forgiveness. Gift never replaces forgiveness in my account.

Rather, and this is the second point, it is forgiveness that *functions* as a gift. Forgiveness is presented here in the form of a gift. Forgiveness draws its strength from the notion of grace. Since the forgiving process is a complex undertaking, grace enables us both to experience and to participate in this process. Stated differently, acting graciously or in a manner that softens our hearts to be able to heal and respond to the offender in a forgiving manner is an important ingredient in the understanding of the composition of forgiveness—it is what enables us to be able to offer forgiveness *as* a gift. Thus seeing forgiveness through the notion of grace empowers the agent to cultivate the appropriate attitude that propels one to forgive unconditionally. But we still have to cultivate a forgiving attitude and to develop and offer a forgiving action by acting in a forgiving manner. This is what we have described as a comprehensive characterization of the forgiving action. Forgiveness in the form of a gift symbolizes a fresh start for all the players. As a true gift, there are no strings attached to the forgiving action, meaning that forgiveness in its letter and spirit is driven by this unconditional spirit called grace/gift/interaction, not transaction/exchange or merit.
This section has been devoted to explicating the nature and the distinctive features of the quasi-unconditional view. The discussion has enabled us to see how the new account is different from the account of forgiveness ordinarily in use. A different approach we could use to show how the quasi-unconditional view stands out from its rival is to answer the question of why there is need for a new account; the concern here is with the reasons or the justification for a new account.

Recall that there are certain problems concerning forgiveness in the moral life, as discussed in the different chapters of the dissertation. First, there is the issue of forgiveness in the absence of responsible wrongdoing. The question here is whether forgiveness is possible and warranted when moral culpability is in dispute or not present. I have shown that this conceptual criteria will not work in an actual moral world where wrongdoing is ubiquitous.

What is needed is a new account of forgiveness with a conceptual meaning that is compatible with and pertains to a moral situation where the notions of responsibility and blame are suspended, where forgiveness is conceived and practiced in the absence of these elements. Besides, to condition forgiveness on merit is to ask for the impossible in such a moral situation. Hence the new account has to be unconditional simply as a way of grappling with the problematic moral situation. But that the ordinary form of unconditional account will not work either and thus should be replaced is equally clear; it shares the same misapprehension of the moral situation and therefore lacks the hardware necessary to function in an actual moral situation.

Second, there is the question of how to address problems of forgiveness in cases of extreme wrongdoing, where wrongdoing seems beyond rectification. I have shown
why ordinary accounts of justification will not work. Forgiveness is impossible under the transactional framework because nothing the actors do could ever remedy the imbalance, nothing justifies a forgiving response. We need an account which enables forgiveness to still be meaningful in the case of such horrifying offenses. For this to happen, there are certain conditions that need to be met, especially having to do with the offenders symbolically distancing themselves from their deeds. This is important for at least two reasons. One, the symbolic distancing becomes the ground/the moral basis for an unconditional forgiving response. By renouncing this monstrous image we have about him, the offender brings himself to the table of forgiveness. This also invokes a positive feeling (sympathy, empathy, compassion etc.) from us (the potential forgivers and/or observers). Two, the need to redeem and/or preserve the society’s fundamental ethical values dictates that the offenders distance themselves from their deeds. Otherwise we risk undermining the moral basis on which the society’s existence rests.

Third, there is the question of the place of forgiveness in the moral life, how forgiveness should be conceived in view of its place in the moral life, its moral meaning, having to do with the underlying moral expectations (beliefs, values, etc) of forgiving action. We saw that answering this question is tied both to the question of the conceptual meaning of forgiveness as well as its moral justification. For example, Murphy and Butler see forgiveness exclusively as having to do with the emotions or ceasing to do certain actions; the standard belief here is that resentment precedes forgiveness, and that ceasing to resent (whether by appealing to behavior or as an emotional state) is a sign that forgiveness indeed has taken place. I have rejected this position. The latter view is reflective of a simplistic approach and the characterization of a forgiving action in a way
that does not account for a broader view of who we are as moral agents. Besides, such a
simplistic approach and characterization of forgiveness is incompatible with the ordinary
expectations of a forgiving action, having to do with what we normally intend to achieve
when the decision to forgive is made, where forgiveness, at the very least, implies a fresh
start. And, contrary to the ordinary philosophical beliefs, I have shown that forgiveness is
attainable without overcoming resentment. Lastly, we saw that overcoming resentment
may be a necessary but not sufficient condition of forgiveness.

These points imply a weakness or inadequacy of the account of forgiveness
ordinarily in use, hence justifying its replacement. As implied in the highlights above,
there are many reasons why we should embrace the quasi-unconditional view. One, the
new account accommodates the view that wrongdoing (thus need for forgiveness) need
not be tied to how we choose to act as moral agents. Forgiveness is called for even in
cases where the actor is neither responsible nor blamable. Quasi-unconditionality is the
only account that can function in a problematic moral situation where wrongdoing is
ubiquitous. In addition, it is what is needed in cases of extreme wrongdoing. The new
approach functions within the model of gift. It introduces a new dimension into the moral
debate, namely, grace. Gift, faith, grace, compassion, empathy (these are attributes of a
forgiving spirit), are altruistic elements that renew the moral life without erasing these
burdens, enabling us to act forgivingly and transcend the tragic moral world that we
would otherwise face.

Finally, quasi-unconditionality has the attributes of a new approach in the
conceptual understanding of forgiveness we have espoused in the dissertation. We saw
that there is a connection between the conceptual meaning of forgiveness and the place of
forgiveness in the moral life. The former as we saw is concerned with the meaning of forgiveness as such, what the actual process of forgiveness entails, the scope of this process, and how the process affects its players. We said that to forgive is to undergo a change in the way we think about, feel towards, and treat the offender, a process that is characterized by the use of the right words, beliefs, and actions towards the offender.

Thus the new account is holistic and multifaceted in nature: to forgive requires a shift of behavior, emotions, and thought patterns. Such an approach is consistent with proper character of the forgiving action, having to do with the question of how the victim sees the offender once the decision to forgive has been made. For instance, under this account, it is clear that the victim has a new regard for the offender because there are mental, emotional and behavioral adjustments made towards the offender. Forgiveness means change, a fresh start, renewed faith, trust, and respect for the individuals and the collective moral community. It symbolizes a new beginning. For example, the offender is no longer to be regarded as such but as a responsible member of the moral community.

Thus the quasi-unconditional view is an account of forgiveness in which the philosophical understanding of forgiveness is consistent with the ordinary expectations of a forgiving action, having to do with the critical concerns of the place of forgiveness in the moral life, what we expressed simply as the renewed sense of the moral life.

On the other hand, the ordinary philosophical understanding of forgiveness is at fault because the underlying motivations are driven by a spirit of exchange. The root cause of the problems in the ordinary philosophical account, as we have seen, has to do with the transactional dimension of forgiveness and its meaning.

In contrast, quasi-unconditionality is guided by the idea that intentionality of
forgiveness has to be compatible with our expectations of a forgiving action in general, meaning that forgiveness should function as an instrument of moral interaction that enables us to have a restored relationship, where ordinary moral life is once again possible. This point is important, hence worth emphasizing, because it shows how one’s conception of forgiveness has a direct bearing on the nature of forgiveness in question. In addition, we can also see how conception has implications for justification. For instance, in the cases where ordinary rational justification will not work (i.e., where the moral scales are beyond rectification, e.g., in an actual moral world where wrongdoing is inevitable, or in the case of cataclysmic evils where forgiveness has no ‘meaning’), we can still find reasonable grounds for forgiveness by seeing forgiveness as a gift, as an act of grace, or by the cultivation of a forgiving spirit.


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