Living a Life of Forgiveness

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1 Introduction

Attempting to provide a philosophical analysis of forgiveness can prompt a reaction similar to Augustine’s in his attempt to formulate a philosophical account of the nature of time. In book eleven of his Confessions he writes, “What then is time? If no one asks me, I know: if I want to explain it to a questioner, I do not know” (Confessions of St. Augustine, Book IX, Chapter 14). Most of us, no doubt, believe we have an intuitive sense of what forgiveness is and how it should be enacted; nonetheless, when we attempt to give a clear account of its nature, forgiveness proves to be an elusive concept. Forgiveness, of course, can be a response to a variety of contexts from mundane transgressions such as forgetting your spouse’s anniversary, your child’s birthday, or making a rude remark to a friend, to more severe wrongs like assault, rape or murder. So much seems clear. But exactly what the nature of this response involves is much harder to articulate. This thesis is an attempt to dispel, at least partially, our Augustinian puzzlement concerning the nature of forgiveness.

1.1 Strategy

Our approach to this topic will be through a challenge that Aurel Kolnai raises against our common sense notion of forgiveness. In his seminal paper “Forgiveness” Kolnai argues that forgiveness can fall into a paradox (now known as “Kolnai’s paradox”).

In addition to using his paradox to frame the analysis of forgiveness below, for reasons of simplicity and continuity, we will follow Kolnai’s practice of situating forgiveness in an interpersonal context where there is one wrongdoer and one victim.
(a potential forgiver). The wrongdoer inflicts a direct wrong on the victim and the victim is well aware of being wronged.

In the current, albeit scant, philosophical literature on forgiveness, the focus is often on more extreme cases; that is, forgiveness for serious moral wrongs such as assault, rape, or murder. The focus in this thesis, however, is on forgiveness for more common and less severe cases of wrongdoing. The reason for this limitation is because less severe cases of wrongdoing are more common. Further, understanding how to forgive in less severe cases still has application to more severe cases of wrongdoing.

1.2 Organization

The thesis will be organized as follows: In section 2, I formulate a detailed reconstruction of Kolnai’s paradox. Sections 3 and 4 present and critically evaluate two of the more prominent solutions to Kolnai’s paradox. Specifically, in section 3, I consider and diagnose the shortcomings of Kolnai’s own solution to the paradox. In section 4, I turn to Jeanne Hampton’s solution to the paradox. Though I identify several respects in which Hampton’s solution is superior to Kolnai’s, I conclude, nonetheless, that it suffers from several inadequacies as well. Having explicated and evaluated the solutions of Kolnai and Hampton, I build upon their work in section 5 to advance my own theory of forgiveness. I argue that the theory provides a better response to the paradox than either Kolnai’s or Hampton’s solutions while also offering some preliminary insight on the shape of a life in which the practice of forgiveness plays a prominent role.


2 Kolnai’s Paradox

2.1 Caveat Lector

Before delving into my exposition of Kolnai’s theory, I must add an important caveat. The exposition that follows often resorts to charitable speculation and reconstruction concerning exactly what Kolnai had in mind. As might be expected from one of the first philosophical passes at a topic, Kolnai’s account is both highly suggestive and seriously underdeveloped. The following reconstruction builds upon several of Kolnai’s more salient points and does not, as far as I can tell, contradict anything he explicitly says; nonetheless, it is important to bear in mind that matters are presented in an order, depth and detail that goes beyond what Kolnai himself actually provides. Thus, although I do not think this is the case, the reader should bear in mind that it is possible that any flaws in Kolnai’s account that I go on to expose may be the product of the reconstruction presented herein as opposed to Kolnai’s actual position.

With this caveat in place, we begin our exposition of Kolnai by looking at one feature of his account about which he is perfectly clear; namely, his analysis of the nature of forgiveness and his development of the paradox are informed by the importance of distinguishing excuse and condonation from forgiveness.

2.2 Excuse

Kolnai defines excusing a wrong as any case in which one does not take offense even though one has prima facie grounds to take offense. Specifically, Kolnai distinguishes between excuse and forgiveness by saying excuse “omits to actualize the primary indignation and retributive attitude” essential to forgiveness. Kolnai states that
forgiveness must “dig deep into its object” before it looks away from the wrongdoing (Kolnai, 94). What Kolnai seems to mean by “dig deep” is that the victim must understand and feel, or fully appreciate, the wrong done to her before she can forgive the wrongdoer. With excuse, by contrast, the wronged party quickly moves past the offense, acting as if it is of no account. For instance, the professor might be irritated by the student’s late arrival to class; however, upon learning that the student was late because she stopped to administer CPR to a person who collapsed on the sidewalk, the professor excuses the student’s late arrival.

2.3 Condonation

The next distinction is between forgiveness and condonation. Kolnai defines condonation as, “the victim is clearly aware of the wrongdoer’s wrongdoing, insult, offence, or viciousness and per se disapproves of it but deliberately refrains from any retributive response to it” (Kolnai, 95).

Condonation, like excuse, differs from forgiveness in that it fails to actualize a primary retributive attitude. I assume, although it is not clearly stated in the paper, that condonation also fails to actualize primary indignation. Kolnai does not distinguish between a retributive attitude and indignation, but it seems reasonable to view indignation as one kind of retributive attitude. Condonation involves persisting in one’s love for the wrongdoer by separating sin from sinner and thereby maintaining one hates the sin but not the sinner (Kolnai, 96).¹ Condonation differs from excuse as

¹ It is not clear what Kolnai means by “quasi-automatically loves the wrongdoer” but it seems reasonable to say that the victim is predisposed to love the sinner but still wants to hold on to hating the sin.
it does not “overlook the offense but rather condonation acquiesces in the offence” (Kolnai, 96) by failing to enact any retributive attitude towards the wrongdoer. So, unlike excuse, condonation fully recognizes the depth of the offense but chooses not to internalize the wrongdoing by avoiding the depth of feeling that typically accompanies being wronged. Condonation might be motivated by any number of considerations, including a desire to avoid conflict or special feelings of affection for the wrongdoer.

An example of condonation, used by Hampton in her book *Forgiveness and Mercy*, nicely illustrates the concept and helps differentiate it from forgiveness. She describes a situation where a wife’s father-in-law finds her conduct irritating. In fact, he finds her so irritating that he continually demeans her. The wife is notably upset and tells the husband that what his father is saying is hurtful. The husband responds poorly, noting that because her father-in-law is his father and they should be on good terms with him, she should let go of her resentment towards her father-in-law to maintain the peace (Murphy, 39). If the wife chooses to let go of her resentment to maintain the peace, this what Kolnai and Hampton would identify as “condonation”. In this context, the wife is forgoing a retributive attitude and action towards a wrongdoer (her father-in-law) for the sake of maintaining peaceful relations with him.

### 2.4 Forgiveness

Now that condonation and excuse have been distinguished, it is time to look at Kolnai’s account of what proper forgiveness entails. The pre-conditions of a person offering forgiveness are the following: 1) prima facie indignation toward the wrongdoer, 2) prima facie retributive attitude toward the wrongdoer, 3) deep
understanding of the wrong done, and 4) the wrongdoer undergoing metanoia and repenting of his wrongdoing. According to Kolnai, all of these conditions must be met before one can properly forgive a wrongdoer. If one of these conditions is not met, then it ceases to be proper forgiveness and is merely a case of excusing or condonation.

2.5 Kolnai’s Paradox

Having explained excuse, condonation, and the conditions of forgiveness, Kolnai proceeds to formulate the paradox that befalls forgiveness. The concept of condonation supplies the first leg of Kolnai’s paradox. Kolnai considers forgiveness in a case where the wrongdoer has not acknowledged the wrong and the need to atone. He states,

Thus condonation very easily takes on the semblance of forgiveness and may therefore be seen as constituting the first term of the logical dilemma: Forgiveness is objectionable and ungenerous inasmuch as there is no reason to forgive, the offender having undergone no metanoia (“Change of Heart”) but persisting in his plain identity qua offender (Kolnai, 97).

In this situation, forgiveness threatens to fall into condonation because it is no longer at odds with wrongdoing. However, by forgiving the wrongdoer when there is no change of heart, the victim fails to condemn the offense while fully knowing it is wrong and thus, instead of forgiving the wrongdoer, the forgiver ends up condoning the offense. Kolnai does say that it is an over-reach to condemn all condonation because it seems infeasible that without condoning some faults, humans could not possibly live together (Kolnai, 96). What Kolnai seems to be admitting is that there are
some forms of condonation that are necessary and good for relationships; nonetheless, he maintains that forgiveness must involve something more than condonation.

To set up the second leg of the paradox, Kolnai imagines a wrongdoer who has had a change of heart and asks whether forgiveness is a possible response to a repentant wrongdoer. What Kolnai argues is that forgiveness, in this context, would fall into “mere redundancy”. If a person’s heart changes and he repents of the wrong that he has done and perseveres in this repentance, then it becomes redundant to forgive him, as there is nothing left to forgive. The wrongdoer has turned a new leaf, so to speak, and to forgive the wrongdoer when he is a different person with a different moral outlook post-metanoia is simply redundant.

While Kolnai formulates the paradox in merely suggestive terms, Hampton does an excellent job of providing a more precise formulation of this side of the paradox. She writes that because of the wrongdoer’s repentance, one is morally required to sever any dealings with him based upon the grounds of his immorality. But if he does truly repent then his repentance morally obliges one to reaccept him on the grounds that he has repudiated his former ways and thus merits moral respect. But if renewing a relationship with a repentant wrongdoer is morally required, then forgiveness does not add anything new. Therefore forgiveness becomes otiose. The forgiver would merely be treating the wrongdoer reasonably and fairly in view of his repentance (Murphy, 41).
In summary, Kolnai’s paradox maintains that forgiveness is either redundant or collapses into condonation. Therefore, there is no logical room for the concept of forgiveness since it is either condonation or a waste of breath.

3 Kolnai’s Partial Solution

In this section, I will discuss the major points Kolnai introduces to resolve the paradox. After identifying, and in some cases, reconstructing these points, I will then explain how Kolnai might see them as solving the paradox.

3.1 Degrees and Variants

Kolnai attempts to save forgiveness from logical havoc by arguing that the paradox he presented is, “too mechanical to do justice to the complexities of ‘moral life’” (Kolnai, 99). In other words, our lives are not formulaic to the degree that this paradox suggests. Every situation is different and every person is different; therefore, to try to portray something as complex as forgiveness in terms of a strict dichotomy is not representative of the complexity, particularity, degree and nuance characteristic of actual human relationships. In elaborating on this point, Kolnai first asserts that there are differing degrees of wrongdoing, from something as minor as failing to RSVP to a wedding invitation to something as severe as murder.

Kolnai appeals to contextual factors to further pull apart the strict dichotomy the paradox lays out. Consider the hypothetical wrongs inflicted by two possible sorts of friends. One wrongs you, but it is an isolated and uncharacteristic act. The other friend consistently demeans and belittles you without provocation. You treat each of
them differently because the context of the wrongdoing is different. The first is an uncharacteristic act, which could stem from an extenuating circumstance while the latter friend has a character that is disposed to wronging you. These are, of course, only two extremes of a whole spectrum of patterns of wrongdoing. Kolnai states, “The classic distinction between the primitive impulsive and uncontrolled type of behavior and the depraved character is far from covering the whole field of possibilities as regards wrongdoing” (Kolnai, 99).

Kolnai takes the fact that offenses come in degrees of severity to suggest that forgiveness also comes in degrees. He does not, however, provide any further justification for transferring the notion of degrees from wrongdoing to forgiveness. Though Kolnai does not make this point, it is easy to see one reason that this connection seems plausible; namely, since forgiveness presupposes having suffered a wrong, it is natural to think that forgiving a greater wrong might be a greater act of forgiveness than forgiving a lesser wrong.

Another sense in which forgiveness can come in degrees, and the one on which Kolnai focuses, has to do with how wholeheartedly the forgiveness is, and whether it is offered enthusiastically, with hesitation, or begrudgingly. This variation of degrees in that sense of forgiveness would have more to do with the victim’s character than the degree of wrongdoing; however, it seems reasonable to suppose in addition that it is often harder to enact a forgiveness that is enthusiastic when the wrong suffered is particularly severe.
An example that links degrees of wrongdoing with degrees of forgiveness is an extension of the previous example with two sorts of friends. The one perpetually wrongs you whereas the other’s is an uncharacteristic act. You may forgive both of them but only associate with the latter. This would be the varying degrees of forgiveness. The strength of forgiveness given differs based on two metrics: the degree of wrongdoing and known factors about each friend’s character. This example prompts the following interesting questions about the nature of reconciliation and forgiveness. Is reconciliation a necessary component of forgiveness and if so to what degree? Or is reconciliation fully separate from forgiveness so that one either forgives or not, and one’s forgiving is fully consistent with any degree of reconciliation or even the complete lack thereof? I will explore these questions in section 3.5 where we will have a more complete view of the nature of forgiveness and thus achieve greater insight on the role of reconciliation in forgiveness.

Not only do wrongdoing and forgiveness come in degrees but repentance can as well. Kolnai does not go into the degrees of repentance, but I find that this is a logical implication of the degree and variants argument that Kolnai presents. For instance, a wrongdoer could come to the victim crying and begging for forgiveness, or the wrongdoer could ask for forgiveness but it not is wholehearted. The latter situation is akin to a child who has hurt a peer and the parent of the offending child makes the child say “sorry” to the child who was harmed. The repentance is halfhearted at best. Further, there is the epistemic problem of being able to discern true repentance. Take the example of the man begging for forgiveness and right after receiving forgiveness
he goes right back to the same wrongdoing. Especially in cases like this where the
wrongdoer is known to be manipulative, it is hard to really know whether the offender
is truly repentant.

3.2 The Supererogatory Nature of Forgiveness

Kolnai touches upon the extent to which forgiveness is obligatory. On the
assumption that Ralph (the wrongdoer) has undergone a change of heart, he states of
Fred (the forgiver) that, “Fred can -- and, we may well say, ought to -- change his
attitude to Ralph a fond, that is give up and revoke radically his own retributive
position. Unless he does so, he appears to be guilty of sheer vindictiveness” (Kolnai,
98). Kolnai’s point is if a wrongdoer has undergone a change of heart and credibly
changed his ways, then the victim ought to “change his attitude toward the wrongdoer,
that is give up and revoke radically his own retributive position”. For if the victim
does not let go of his retributive attitude he seems to be guilty of vindictiveness.

This seems to hint at an obligatory nature of forgiveness, yet Kolnai goes on to
explain that even in such a situation, forgiveness is at most a “quasi-obligation.” He
argues that forgiveness is not a strict obligation like promise keeping but rather it is a
“residually free act” (in the sense of “freedom from the law”) (Kolnai, 102). So unlike
keeping a promise one is obligated to keep, forgiving is a virtuous thing to do but
withholding forgiveness does not break any set moral law. Though he uses the term
“quasi-obligation”, essentially, Kolnai seems to view forgiveness as supererogatory
rather than obligatory. Something that is supererogatory is known as going above the
call of duty whereas something obligatory is doing what is required morally in a given
context. For example, paying taxes and repaying one’s debts are obligations, but giving to charity is considered supererogatory.

Although forgiveness is supererogatory, Kolnai believes that whether an individual withholds forgiveness or not does speak to his character. He states, “While I deny that a virtuous person forgives every wrongdoer and for any wrong done by him, I suggest that, other things being equal, the more virtuous I am the more disposed I am to forgive” (Kolnai, 104). It is worth noting that Kolnai believes that just because one is liberal with forgiveness does not necessarily mean that person is virtuous. Based on his discussion regarding condonation it seems likely that Kolnai would have thought those who forgive too liberally would be guilty of supine cowardice or practical expediency.

3.3 Moral Vs. Personal Life

Kolnai argues that forgiveness does not remove the guilt of the wrongdoer in her wrongful act. The act is not just forgotten when forgiven and thus does not “undo the offense committed” (Kolnai, 101). Kolnai states, “Ralph (wrongdoer) who has undergone this metanoia (heart change) is in one sense no longer identical with Ralph (wrongdoer) the offender qua offender, but in another sense he is still identical with the Ralph who committed the offense, for he is still Ralph, i.e., the same person” (Kolnai, 101). What Kolnai seems to have in mind is that Ralph can be seen from two perspectives: first in terms of his moral life and second in terms of his personal life.

Although Kolnai does not further expand upon this interesting notion, Nicholas Wolterstorff provides an account that can be used to develop this suggestive remark.
Wolterstorff argues that to forgive is to not hold the act against the wrongdoer although the forgiver does know the act has been done. But now, the forgiver resolves to believe that wrongdoing was only part of the offender’s personal history and not part of his moral history. A moral history is simply the things an offender has done to contribute to the extent to which and respects in which he is a good or bad person. Thus if one forgives the wrongdoer, one resolves to not hold the act against him even though it remains in his personal history (Wolterstorff, 170-171). According to Wolterstorff, when a wrongdoer genuinely repents, she has shown that she disapproves of her past actions and thus has become a morally better person; therefore, in arriving at an estimate of the wrongdoer’s moral character, the victim can overlook her previous offense by eliminating it from her moral history. Nonetheless, it remains true that the offender did something wrong in the past, a fact that remains part of the wrongdoer’s personal history.

An example would help bring this abstract distinction down to earth. Say there are two girls named Rachel and Felicia. They are in school together and Rachel is a friend of poor character and starts to spread a rumor about Felicia. Felicia catches wind of this rumor and is obviously hurt. Rachel realizes what she has done is wrong and asks Felicia for forgiveness. Felicia decides to forgive Rachel and Felicia drops any sense of resentment or indignation toward Rachel. But while Felicia treats Rachel as if she has never committed the offense, Felicia still remembers that Rachel did in fact spread rumors about her. So what Felicia has done in deciding to treat Rachel as if she never spread a rumor about her is she has chosen to believe that the wrong is no
longer part of Rachel’s moral history in the sense that it is not relevant to Rachel’s present moral identity. But Felicia nonetheless knows that that offense is still part of Rachel’s personal history as Felicia continues to recognize that Rachel spreading rumors about her did in fact happen during Rachel’s life.

3.4 Kolnai’s Attack on the Paradox

This section draws upon the resources we just teased out of Kolnai’s account to provide a reconstruction of his solution to the paradox. First I will discuss how degrees of forgiveness and the distinction between moral and personal life works against condonation. Then I will explain how moral complexity, epistemic uncertainty, and the supererogatory nature of forgiveness breaks down the redundancy leg of the paradox.

Since forgiveness admits of degrees and it is difficult to know what the forgiver is thinking while forgiving, a third party cannot accurately infer if the forgiveness performed is genuine or not (Kolnai, 100). It could be that the forgiver genuinely forgives the wrongdoer but it is done with hesitation. To a third party this forgiveness may seem naïve or seem like the forgiver is actually condoning the offense, but since forgiveness comes in degrees and one cannot epistemically know to what degree a forgiver forgives, the possibility remains that an act of forgiveness that appears to involve an unequivocal act of condonation is actually a much more nuanced act that involves a more measured reaction on the part of the forgiver. This alone should give one pause about the claim that forgiveness collapses into condonation if the wrongdoer has not undergone a clear change of heart.
More important to Kolnai’s elimination of the condonation side of the paradox, however, is the distinction between a moral and personal life. This distinction gives space to forgive the offender while allowing the victim to still maintain that the offense is wrong. This will also prevent forgiveness from collapsing into condonation. The forgiver still knows that what the offender did was wrong and disapproves of it as part of the wrongdoer’s personal history, but then the forgiver chooses to treat the repentant wrongdoer from the perspective of his present moral history and thus as if he never committed the offense. So forgiveness can still be performed while maintaining that the offense was nonetheless wrong; thus, the first leg of the paradox is eliminated as forgiveness ceases to collapse into condonation.

The arguments that seem to best eliminate the redundancy side of the paradox are the combination of moral complexity, epistemic uncertainty, and the supererogatory nature of forgiveness. The presupposition of the redundancy leg of the paradox is that the forgiver is obliged to forgive a repentant wrongdoer. This may be plausible for a trivial wrong where the repentant wrongdoer confesses to the forgiver, but the obligation that the redundancy argument asserts does not make sense in the context of more severe wronging. It would be odd and in some cases even repugnant to think a victim of a severe wrong, such as rape, had an obligation to forgive his abuser based on the abuser’s repentance. Additionally, the fact that one cannot know if a wrongdoer is truly repentant means that even in lesser wrongs, it is harder to obligate a victim to forgive a repentant wrongdoer. Maybe in cases where the wrongdoer is absolutely and utterly repentant and the signs of this repentance are unmistakable and
Thus knowing the complexity of moral life and the epistemic uncertainty associated in assessing true repentance, it is implausible to assume that a forgiver is obligated to forgive a repentant wrongdoer. Therefore the assumption of the redundancy leg of the paradox, that the victim is obligated to forgive a repentant wrongdoer, loses its force as forgiveness is actually supererogatory. This means that when a victim does forgive a repentant wrongdoer, the forgiveness granted is not merely treating the offender as he or she deserves; rather, forgiveness continues to hold its weight in virtue as an unexpected and gracious act.

3.5 Reconciliation

As promised in the section on degrees of forgiveness, I will now discuss the nature of reconciliation. Although this section is not directly working against the paradox, I think it is a feature of Kolnai’s account of forgiveness that is worth noting and will become relevant later where I develop my own account of forgiveness.

Kolnai does not go into detail about this concept beyond the notion that sometimes when one friend forgives a truly repentant friend, their relationship becomes stronger as a result. I would like to develop this thought in more detail and discuss its implications. First it is important to understand what reconciliation is in the context of forgiveness. Reconciliation is hoped for as a result of forgiveness, but is not a necessary component of forgiveness. The reason it is not necessary is because there
are situations where reconciliation is simply unwise. For instance, one should not be in close relationship with a manipulative person even if one has forgiven the manipulator. In fact, having the manipulator realize that his manipulation can irretrievably damage a relationship may help him realize that he needs to stop being manipulative lest he or she irretrievably damage other relationships as well.

Given that reconciliation is not necessary for forgiveness but is something hoped for, it would be completely legitimate for a victim to maintain a distant relationship with the wrongdoer even after forgiving the offender. Kolnai would agree as he states that, “Fred (the forgiver) might have legitimate reasons for persevering in merely cool and distant relations with Ralph (the offender)” (Kolnai, 102). The victim could choose to forgive but take his time to re-associate with the offender or the victim might decide that it is not worth re-associating with the wrongdoer despite having forgiven the offender. Further, given the supererogatory nature of forgiveness it can be argued that since reconciliation is hoped for as a result of forgiveness, reconciliation is by no means an obligation on the forgiver’s part.

3.6 The Shortcomings of Kolnai’s Solution

My main criticism of Kolnai’s solution is its brevity and the consequent underdevelopment of key points. He tends to touch upon subjects that suggest important points about the nature of forgiveness; however, he does not expound upon them adequately. For instance, the idea of a personal versus a moral history only had a few lines and had no real explanation of what work he intended it to do; thus, the reader is forced to resort to charitable conjecture. In addition, his contention that both
wrongdoing and forgiving come in degrees is richly suggestive, but he never explicitly states how such complexity in moral matters helps to soften the paradox.

Unfortunately, when one pushes on many of Kolnai’s arguments, one too often finds a need to undertake a project of filling in a detailed structure and content to Kolnai’s highly interesting and suggestive reflections. While he may be credited with setting the agenda for much philosophical discussion of forgiveness and offering a few suggestive remarks about how one might resolve the paradox, there is neither a full solution to the paradox nor complete theory of forgiveness evident in his discussion.

4 Hampton’s Solution

In the book *Forgiveness and Mercy*, Jean Hampton and Jeffrie Murphy have a dialogue about the nature of forgiveness. In her portion of the text, Hampton uses Kolnai’s paradox to show where Murphy’s definition of forgiveness fails. In the course of doing so, she does a great job of carefully reconstructing both Kolnai’s paradox and the solution he proposes. For instance, Hampton explains different types of cognitive responses to wrongdoing that may or may not get in the way of forgiving. In this section, I will quickly summarize Hampton’s position and explain her solution to Kolnai’s paradox.

4.1 Hampton’s Critique of Murphy

Murphy defines forgiveness as “…forswearing resentment on moral grounds” (Murphy, 24). Hampton responds by saying that one can both overcome anger towards a wrongdoer and do it for moral reasons but still not be performing an act of
forgiveness. She pulls from Kolnai and argues that Murphy’s definition does not distinguish between forgiveness and condonation. It is here that Hampton uses the example of condonation with the wife having to endure mean comments from her husband’s father in order to maintain the peace mentioned above. She argues that the main difference between condonation and forgiveness is that condonation fully recognizes the wrong done, but the victim deliberately fails to have a retributive attitude towards the offense; whereas, forgiveness has a retributive attitude but chooses to forgo retributive action. In fact, forgiveness cannot by definition accept a moral wrong because it by nature involves a repudiation of the wrong that has occurred (Murphy, 40). For how can one forgive another if there was no wrong that ought to be atoned for and can therefore be forgiven?

4.2 Cognitive Responses to Wrongdoing

Before she attempts to solve Kolnai’s paradox, Hampton identifies the following cognitive and affective responses to wrongdoing: Being demeaned, diminishment, indignation, resentment, hatred, and moral hatred.

The first cognitive response Hampton considers is being demeaned. According to Hampton, being demeaned entails that the victim endured treatment too low for his actual worth, but does not entail that the victim has thereby been literally degraded. An example of being demeaned is a prince who is mistaken for a pauper, and thus does not receive royal treatment, and who regards this treatment as insulting since it is too low for his actual princely status. He does not literally become a pauper nor does
he doubt he is a prince or otherwise loses his princely privileges, but he deems the
treatment as demeaning because he knows he is not a pauper.

Being demeaned is contrasted with diminishment. On Hampton’s view, diminishment occurs when a victim takes the diminishing action as evidence that her value is lower than she thought. Unlike a person who feels demeaned and knows that the treatment in question is too low for her, a person who is diminished will raise the possibility in her mind that her idea of her value is incorrectly high. For instance, a girl might be insulted for being overweight and succumb to the lie that her worth is tied to her appearance. Her value has not actually changed, but her perception of herself as a person of value has been diminished.

Another way of being diminished is through an immoral action that actually degrades a person’s life. There are some ideals, like being an athlete, which are such that if the one were to be physically or psychologically rendered unable to attain those ideals one might feel that the value of one’s life had been diminished. An example would be a gunshot wound that leaves a man paralyzed and prevents him from pursuing athletics. Note how this sort of diminishment differs from the previous example in the previous paragraph. In the former example, the diminishment was in one’s intrinsic value whereas in the latter example the degradation is tied to the opportunity to pursue things one values. No doubt the recently disabled man feels degradation in opportunity. He may, of course, also feel degradation of personal value, but the two sorts of value can come apart, for degradation in opportunity does not entail degradation of one’s value as a person.
Next Hampton explains the differences between indignation and resentment. Hampton calls indignation an impersonal protest of an immoral action. She uses a child lying to his mother as an example. The mother is not indignant at the child but she is indignant at the immoral action of lying. It is something that the mother protests but does not take personal offense to. On the other hand, resentment is a personally defensive response to an immoral action (Murphy, 56). Resentment consists of a fear that the insulter may have acted in accordance with the victim’s true worth. The victim’s fear consists of some degree of belief that the insulter is correct about her worth.

Take the mother and child example and assume that the mother is highly insecure and the child’s behavior even more deeply objectionable. Instead of the child lying to his mother, he insults her in a calculated and gratuitous manner. In this case, the mother might feel resentful towards the child because she has some degree of belief that what her child said reflects her true worth. This fear that the child is right would fuel resentment as an act of defiance where the victim defends herself and asserts that the insulter is wrong about her worth (Murphy, 57). Driven by fear, the victim uses resentment as a defensive response to wrongdoing.

Hampton then explains the concept of hatred. This is different from resentment in that hatred is when the victim hates the person whereas resentment is specifically when the victim takes personal offense to the action and not necessarily the person who does the action (Murphy, 60). Essentially, hatred is an emotion toward a certain individual whereas resentment is a protest and personal defense against an action.
After explaining hatred, Hampton introduces moral hatred. This is a more qualified version of hatred, when a person has an aversion to someone who identifies with an immoral cause such as hating a Nazi named Rick because of his Nazi ideology.

4.3 Hampton’s Theory of Forgiveness

After her extensive section on cognitive responses to wrongdoing, Hampton lays out the following three steps in forgiveness: first, psychological preparations, second, the forgiver’s change of heart, and third, communicating forgiveness. After her second step, she gives reasons as to why her solution avoids the paradox.

The first step towards forgiveness according to Hampton is the psychological preparation for a change of heart by the forgiver. What this involves is “regaining one’s confidence in one’s own worth despite the immoral action challenging it” (Murphy, 83). In order to regain confidence, it is necessary to give up or repudiate spite, and malice, and overcome resentment. Even after the arduous task of overcoming spite, malice, and resentment, the forgiver must also overcome indignation and moral hatred.

Only after these emotions are overcome can a forgiver have a change of heart towards the wrongdoer. Hampton argues that a change of heart occurs when

The forgiver who previously saw the wrongdoer as someone bad or rotten or morally indecent to some degree has a change of heart when he “washes away” or disregards the wrongdoer’s immoral actions or character traits in his ultimate moral judgment of her, and comes to see her as still decent, not rotten as a person, and someone with whom he may be able to renew a relationship (Murphy, 83).
She identifies several reasons a forgiver might have a change of heart with respect to a wrongdoer. The first is a wrongdoer’s repentance may give the forgiver evidence of the offender’s overall decency. Second, if forgiveness would spur on repentance on the part of the wrongdoer, then it would be advantageous to forgive. And finally what Hampton deems the most worthy reason to forgive is so the effects of moral hatred would be lifted off the wrongdoer. The effects of moral hatred would be a subsisting guilt upon the offender that what he did was hurtful and wrong. The hope is that forgiveness would release the wrongdoer from that subsisting guilt.

Basically, Hampton thinks that in order to forgive, one must disregard the immorality of a person and only look at the person’s decency to determine that this person is good enough to be forgiven. Unlike Kolnai who presupposes that the forgiver waits for the wrongdoer to prove his moral rebirth, Hampton argues that the “forgiver trusts that, although he [the wrongdoer] has undergone no rebirth, he is still “good enough” despite what he has done” (Murphy, 84). Therefore forgiveness amounts to seeing the offender in a more favorable light, morally speaking, such that the wrongdoer’s transgression is not viewed as determinative of his overall moral character.

She then explains how this definition of forgiveness does not collapse into condonation. Rather than condoning the wrong, the forgiver is still upholding the offense as wrong but is forgiving the wrongdoer. In her words, “The forgiver never gives up her opposition to the wrongdoer’s action, nor does she even give up her own opposition to the wrongdoer’s bad character traits. Instead, she revises her judgment of
the person himself” (Murphy, 84-85). The wrongdoer is seen as more than the disapproved character traits so the victim can then reach an honest decision that this person does not deserve her moral hatred, as he is decent despite his immoral actions.

Hampton sums up this point as follows: “She [the victim] does not condone something bad by forgiving him [the offender] because forgiveness is precisely the decision that he isn’t bad (even though his action and the character trait that precipitated it are)” (Murphy, 85). And since the forgiver grants the wrongdoer approval of his personhood despite the immoral action done to the victim, it is only natural that the forgiver communicates that approval to the wrongdoer.

4.4 Hampton’s Biblical Foundation

An important feature of Hampton’s account that I have not remarked on up to this point is her reliance on biblical scripture in developing the theory. At multiple points in Hampton’s discussion on forgiveness she references scripture with an eye to conveying that her account is consonant with what the Bible says on forgiveness. For instance, she uses Matt. 5:23 and Matt. 10:34-36 to support the claim that one ought not be reconciled to a wrongdoer who has not renounced her or his evil ways (149). That she thinks her position is consistent with biblical scripture is noteworthy because I will later develop a biblically based challenge to her theory.

4.5 Criticism of Hampton’s Solution

Despite the valuable advances that Hampton makes to Kolnai’s position, there are nonetheless four problems that I find with Hampton’s solution. First, the character of the wrongdoer should not be the basis of forgiveness. Second, Hampton does not
take into account the focused nature of forgiveness. Third, her notion of the communication of forgiveness requires clarification. Finally, her account is an inaccurate portrayal of the biblical forgiveness. Before I delve into my four reasons, it is important to note that what Hampton seems to be advocating is some element of self-deception in order to forgive a wrongdoer.

She argues that the one extending forgiveness must go through a change of heart and come to realize that the wrongdoer is still a decent person and someone the victim could renew relations with. A change of heart by the victim occurs when she “disregards the wrongdoer’s immoral actions or character traits” in his ultimate moral judgment of the offender’s character (Murphy, 83). But if the victim initially has deemed that the wrongdoer is bad based on the evidence of his current character, then how can she honestly change her conclusion? In order to conclude something different, the forgiver would have to 1) change the evidence itself by either artificially adding/denying relevant evidence or 2) altering the weight that is assigned to the evidence. She ends up thinking either that an instance of poor character is not as bad as originally thought or that the good characteristics now outweigh the bad.

In both cases it seems that there is some risk of self-deception to bring oneself to trust that the wrongdoer is good enough for forgiveness when previously the victim did not trust that the wrongdoer deserved forgiveness.

An example of changing or denying relevant evidence in the assessment of character is a parent who is getting a report from a teacher that her child bites other children in the classroom. The parent responds to the teacher that her child would
never do such a thing, even though the parent has heard similar things about her child from other parents and teachers. The parent has just denied a crucial piece of evidence in determining her child’s character. Although this example has more to do with punishment than with forgiveness, the relevant point is that the denial of evidence is one way to lead to a different conclusion about someone’s character; however, unless one has good reason to deny the evidence, one may well be engaging in self-deception.

Taking the second notion of altering how the victim weighs evidence into consideration, it would be easy to see how the victim might weigh some evidence of bad character less in order to make forgiveness possible. This is typical with people who are manipulative. Despite knowing the tendency of a certain person for manipulation, we often find ourselves giving those types of people second chances. Even though they have manipulated before, there is a tendency for questioning our judgment of them and then convincing ourselves that it is not going to happen again.

But knowing the ability and talent of Hampton as a philosopher I highly doubt her intention is for people to commit self-deception in order to forgive others, though it is one natural way to interpret her claim that the forgiver “disregards” the immoral action of the wrongdoer in her assessment of his character. Though she does not explicitly say this, what is more plausible is that Hampton believes that the victim ought to change her view of the evidence in light of further evidence such as coming to know the abusive upbringing of the wrongdoer. Perhaps understanding where the wrongdoer is coming from would temper the victim’s judgment of his character.
Further, it could be that the victim is overly sensitive to the offense committed than she ought to be and comes to that realization and therefore shifts her weight on the perceived wrongdoing. In addition, the wrongdoer might reflect that there is a salience effect that tends to distort our estimation of the evidentiary value of wrongs committed against us; that is, because they are front and center in one’s experience, one might overestimate the evidentiary weight that a wrong one suffers has with respect to arriving at an overall estimate of the wrongdoer’s character. If these are some of the factors Hampton has in mind with her suggestion that an immoral action be “disregarded” in one’s estimate of a wrongdoer’s character, I find that this is an insightful observation about the nature of forgiveness.

### 4.6 Naivety and the Knowledge Problem

Despite the merit in Hampton’s solution, I find that her theory is a bit naive. She argues that the victim ought to determine whether to forgive or not based on his ultimate moral judgment of the wrongdoer’s character. Although character does play a crucial role in determining how to interact with a person, it ought not be the basis of forgiveness. A person’s character should only affect the ease with which forgiveness is given but it should not be the reason.

There are two main reasons why character should not be the basis of forgiveness. Before delving into the arguments some discussion on the concept of character is important. The old saying, “Character is what you do when no one is looking,” sheds some valuable light on this concept. A person’s actions do not tell the whole story of their character; rather, it is the motives behind the actions that truly
reflect a person’s character. Just as the old saying indicates, when watched a person will be on better behavior because getting caught is an immediate threat if he chooses to do otherwise. That is why many stores conspicuously post that there are security cameras installed. It makes a potential shoplifter think twice before acting, but the motive behind the crime is still to shoplift but not get caught.

With this conception of character in mind, the first issue that arises is the knowledge problem. Unfortunately, humans are not mind readers. Ascertaining motives is elusive and difficult. Can someone honestly trust that a wrongdoer has good enough character to be forgiven when it is impossible to actually know someone’s true character? It is plausible that one could look at the wrongdoer’s past actions and try to assess her character, but the issue of ascertaining motives remains a thorny one. Even in cases where the wrongdoer appears repentant, there is still a good chance that the wrongdoer is motivated out of fear of punishment rather than genuine repentance. This temptation of the wrongdoer is considerable because forgiveness often presupposes a reduction or elimination of punishment. Punishment could mean actual jail time or the victim ceasing to associate with the wrongdoer. Since it is hard to know the motives behind the actions of a wrongdoer it becomes difficult to truly know her character as well as the genuineness of repentance; therefore, character is not the ideal metric for forgiveness.

The second issue lies in knowing at what point someone is morally decent enough to merit forgiveness. Let us assume that it is possible to perfectly know the offender’s character. Now the question becomes at what point should you forgive the
offender? Hampton argues that the victim must see the offender as decent, but what if the person is like Hitler and just objectively not decent. Can one still forgive him? It seems as though Hampton would say no.

4.7 Focused Nature of Forgiveness

The second problem Hampton’s account faces involves the focused nature of forgiveness. This argument is in response to Hampton’s argument that the victim must determine that, all things considered, the wrongdoer is a decent person. Nicholas Wolterstorff uses this argument in response to Jean Hampton’s solution in his book, *Justice in Love*. He asserts that forgiveness and repentance are both more focused than Hampton seems to think. Wolterstorff writes, “I think one forgives a wrongdoer for his act of wrongdoing and that to forgive him is to enact the resolution no longer to hold that deed against him, this resolution including the resolution to overcome one’s anger at him for the thing he did” (Wolterstorff, 176). This frees the forgiver to forgive someone even if the person is still deemed rotten. The forgiveness also does not assume that the forgiver regarded the wrongdoer as rotten nor does it mean that the forgiver now thinks highly of the wrongdoer. Since forgiveness is focused on one deed, the character of the wrongdoer does not really figure in an account of the essential nature of the act of forgiveness.

4.8 Communicating Forgiveness

The third critique focuses on the last step of Hampton’s theory; namely, communicating forgiveness. She does not explicitly state that this step is necessary; rather, she merely says it is natural. My criticism is simply that she should have
explained this step in greater detail. On this point, I would like to augment Hampton’s view by specifying that the communication of forgiveness may be valuable; yet, it is not a necessary condition of forgiveness. The communication of forgiveness is conditional upon the wrongdoer’s repentance. Again, Hampton does not explicitly states this view but if communication of forgiveness were necessary to forgiveness, then it would lead to the awkward situation of being obliged to overtly communicate forgiveness to someone who has wronged you but fails to see it as wrong. What forgiving someone who is unrepentant could do is make the offender view the forgiver as arrogant or might even further entrench a wrongdoer in hatred and bitterness.

4.9 Inaccurate Portrayal of Biblical Forgiveness

Her use of scripture is, for the most part, unobjectionable; however, I would here like to focus on one notable exception. Speaking of her view of the role of decency in forgiveness:

. . . Jesus’s opposition to the maxim ‘Love your friends; hate your enemies” may have been opposition not to the lex talionis or to the principles of retribution, but to the moral hatred of people. Indeed, what marks his moral teaching as distinctive is his encouragement of the idea that despite our immoral actions or traits, we are still not ‘bad things’ to be derisively dismissed or exiled. This thought is also encouraged by the way in which he makes God our ‘father.’ As any parent of the name knows, it is difficult to lose completely the sense of your child as special, of worth and inherently good, no matter how wretched he appears. If God sees all of us this way, then how can we dismiss one of our own as ‘gone bad”? (Murphy, 151).  

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2 The first problem with her statement is that she assumes all people are children of God when that is not evident in scripture. Only those who have received and believe in Jesus are considered children of God, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,” (John 1:12). Therefore her analogy of a parent and child relationship is only applicable to those who are Christians.
My main qualm with Hampton’s use of scripture in this passage connects with her contention that that one must be judged “good enough” to merit forgiveness. In section 4.5, it was noted that an implication of Hampton’s theory is that there may be some people who are unforgivable. What Hampton seems to imply in the paragraph just quoted, however, is that everyone is forgivable because everyone can be seen as morally decent enough to merit forgiveness just as God views everyone as inherently good. If her position is that everyone can be forgiven, then I would agree and say that that assertion is consistent with the Bible. But the way she approaches forgiveness based on a person’s inherent goodness is directly against what the Bible teaches.

If Hampton believes the Bible at all, then she would realize that the way God forgives is not based on human decency, inherent goodness, or righteousness. According to Romans 3: 10-19 there is no one who is righteous. Yet, throughout the Bible, God does interact with humans. If God’s relationship to humans is not based on human decency or inherent goodness then what is the relationship’s basis? That basis is love manifested in undeserved grace. “For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:7-8). The whole point of the gospel is that despite the fact that humans are wretchedly sinful, He sent Jesus to die for our sins so that those who would believe would be declared righteous and justified before the Father. Even for the non-Christian, the fact that you are alive is evidence of God’s grace and love (Matt 5:45). We can never be good enough to merit any of God’s favor let alone forgiveness. What
makes God great is not that he loves us, both non-Christian and Christian, for our
decency but that he still loves us in our wretchedness.

Therefore, if Hampton’s contention that forgiveness is contingent on having a
canacter that is “good enough” is directly at odd with one of the dominant themes of
the Bible. Thus the victim does not forgive out of recognition that the wrongdoer is
good on the whole; rather, it is a direct command for a Christian to forgive as God has
forgiven us: “…forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must
forgive” (Col. 3:13) and “…forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you”
(Eph. 4:26). The bible does clear impose an obligation to forgive; however, it is
important to note that the obligation is indirect. One doesn’t have an obligation to
forgive other human beings in virtue of anything about their characters; rather, one’s
obligation to forgive is an obligation that goes through a command of the creator.
Understanding forgiveness in the light of the Bible also means that the reason all are
forgivable is because of how loved we are by God despite our wretched nature.

Now that both Kolnai and Hampton have been discussed and critiqued, it is
time to look at the theory of forgiveness I propose. Before delving into my own
theory, it is worth reviewing the major pitfalls of the accounts of Kolnai and Hampton.
The main problem with Kolnai’s account is its obscurity and underdevelopment.
Though it contains many valuable, suggestive remarks, he leaves too many critical
components of his theory largely unexplained and undefended. The main
shortcomings of Hampton’s account are basing forgiveness on unreliable estimates of
canacter, neglecting the focused nature of forgiveness, not adequately developing her
account of the role played by the communication of forgiveness, and inaccurately
portraying biblical forgiveness.

5 Proposed Theory of Forgiveness

Having discussed the pros and cons of both Kolnai and Hampton’s solutions to
Kolnai’s paradox, it is time to move on to my own theory of forgiveness. The
immediate philosophical goal of this section is to formulate a theory of forgiveness
that avoids the shortcomings of Kolnai and Hampton’s accounts while still being able
to solve Kolnai’s Paradox. The ultimate hope, however, is that this section will serve
as both a theoretical framework and a practical guide to living out a life of
forgiveness, a guide that when pursued will promote more meaningful relationships
and possibly heal some fractured ones.

5.1 What is Forgiveness?

In the limited philosophical literature dealing with forgiveness, attempts to
define forgiveness have dominated the discussion. Some have tried to give necessary
and sufficient conditions for forgiveness. That these attempts at a strict definition
sometimes fails to capture the complexity of forgiveness as can be seen by the
problems that beset both Kolnai’s and Hampton’s accounts of forgiveness. I am,
consequently, sympathetic to Anthony Bash’s attempt to understand forgiveness more
as a loose association of characteristics rather than a set of necessary and sufficient
conditions. I find Bash’s assertion convincing because attempting to rigidly define a
concept such as complex and multifarious as forgiveness seems utterly unfeasible.
Whereas other philosophers propose a rigid definition, Bash and Kolnai thinks that forgiveness can come in degrees. Bash, for instance, particularly emphasizes a point that Kolnai only gestures at: forgiveness comes in degrees. What Bash means by this is that forgiveness can be more or less realized and the extent to which this is so is a function of the characteristics it contains or lacks and the degree to which it contains or lacks them. For instance, consider the contrast between someone who forgives perfunctorily versus someone who forgives deeply and resolutely. Both have “forgiven”, but the latter instantiates the act of forgiveness much more robustly than the former.

That is why I find Wittgenstein’s notion of family resemblance particularly useful in this context. He argues that the instances that fall under concepts are united by loose family resemblances as opposed to a specific set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Just as one cannot point to a set of necessary and sufficient conditions that determine resemblance among members of a family, one cannot specify necessary and sufficient conditions possessed by all acts of forgiveness. I am, thus, sympathetic to Bash’s view that forgiveness is “defined” by a loose association of characteristics that occur in varying degrees.

Each situation is unique because the people, the wrongs, and the circumstances are different. In this essay, I will explain the following loose association of characteristics that shape the family of acts of forgiveness: recognition of wrongdoing, grace, correction, repentance, and the act of forgiveness itself. This analysis will, in turn, provide a general framework for living a life of forgiveness.
5.2 Recognition of the Wrongdoing

Before forgiveness can occur, there must be a wrong done and the victim must recognize that wrong. Therefore, a response to wrongdoing is necessary for proper forgiveness. If the victim thinks that what was done to her is not wrong, then how can she possibly forgive? I will not go into detail about the multiple cognitive responses to wrongdoing as Hampton has already done a more than adequate job, but I will assert that feeling resentful about an offense is a proper and good response. Just so long as one does not sit in anger and allow it to fester into bitterness, resentment is an appropriate and even healthy response to being wronged. Jeffrie Murphy argues that resentment is good so long as it functions to protect one’s self worth (Murphy, 94-95). Therefore, resentment is primarily a defensive measure against an attempted diminishment of one’s self-worth being perpetrated by the wrongdoer.

On the one hand, resentment is going too far when a victim meddles in the offender’s life via passive aggression, bodily harm, or gossip, because at that point one is no longer defending her self-worth but is actually assaulting the other’s. On the other hand, this concept of resentment also implies that cavalierly forgiving people who wrong you is failing to uphold your self-worth. Resentment is an appropriate and healthy response to the extent that it encourages you to not be a doormat, but not to the extent that it hardens into a state of persistent malice that motivates you to pursue calculated acts of retaliation. The purpose of resentment is to simply uphold self-worth.
On the whole, I find Murphy’s argument about resentment convincing. I will, however, use the term “anger” where Murphy uses “resentment.” The reason for this substitution is that the word resentment is often taken to connote the holding a grudge. It appears that a resentful person is one who holds a grudge. I recognize that Murphy has placed many constraints on what proper resentment looks like by explaining that acts of passive aggression, gossip, etc. are not representative of what he claims resentment entails. Nonetheless, to forestall potential misunderstanding produced by common connotations of resentment, I will replace resentment with anger.

5.2.1 Wrongdoing as a Two Way Street

Throughout this paper I have operated under the context of one victim and one wrongdoer where the victim has done no wrong to provoke the offender. So there is a clear difference between victim and wrongdoer. I have also operated as if there is only one instance of wrongdoing and that the wrong is not therefore part of a pattern of wrongs inflicted by the perpetrator on the victim. Unfortunately, life is not this easy to categorize. It is so crucial to understand that wrongdoing is, more often than not, a two way street. Furthermore, it is important to realize that relationships are developed and lived out in time, which means there are previous wrongs and hurts that can influence current circumstances.

Take divorce for instance. It is not plausible that right after a wedding the couple that was so infatuated with each other decides to get a divorce, unless of course one of the newlyweds has extremely poor taste in significant others. Normally people do not go to their wedding night thinking they will divorce their spouse. It is
something that happens over time with many wrongs and hurts inflicted by both parties that little by little separate the couple who were so in love. It is simply unrealistic to think that only one person in the relationship has done all of the wrongdoing. Even in cases of adultery, both parties may be wrong, albeit to different degrees and in different respects. Consider the case of a wife who cheats on her husband. Adultery does not normally happen all of a sudden after a wedding unless the bride or groom have poor judgment of character. If a wife has been loved and cared for by her husband, then the wife does not really have a reason to cheat. Now, this is not an attempt to justify or excuse the wife’s behavior. In this case, the wife is the one more at fault; however, it is important to note that moral transgressions do not happen in a vacuum and that sometimes the party wronged plays a role in bringing about circumstances that contributed to the wrongdoer’s behavior.

5.3 Grace

Grace is the next step in the process of forgiveness. The word grace is used pretty casually in conversation, but it is important to specify clearly what grace means. Grace is unmerited favor motivated by unconditional love. In the notion of forgiveness, grace is absolutely necessary in that without grace, forgiveness ceases to be forgiveness.

We must further clarify the role played by grace as a condition of forgiveness. Specifically, it must be noted that a condition can either be causal or constitutive. A causal condition is like a pizza oven. The oven itself is not part of a pizza, but without it pizza cannot be made. A constitutive condition is like the dough of the pizza.
Without dough, pizza is no longer pizza because it is a necessary constituent or ingredient of pizza. There are situations where you can have something that is both constitutively and causally necessary. An example would be the heat involved in boiling water. A specific degree of heat is a causal condition of the water hitting a certain temperature – 100°C at sea level – and yet it is also constitutive of boiling water because the water will need to have at least that degree of heat in order to continue boiling.

To arrive at a condition where you can forgive, you must be able to have grace, but forgiveness is an ongoing and continuous action as opposed to a discrete act, and the presence of grace seems to be a constituent of this ongoing act. Therefore, forgiveness as a continuous act involves the ongoing incorporation of grace just as boiling water, as a continuous act, involves the ongoing presence of a certain degree of heat. If grace dries up then so shrivels any semblance of forgiveness. Grace causes and is a constituent of forgiveness just as heat causes and is a constituent of boiling water.

It is also important to note that grace is not an excuse although it can excuse. An excuse is finding some reason to exculpate a wrongdoer from a consequence, whereas grace excuses out of unmerited favor motivated by unconditional love towards the offender. The motive behind the act of excusing is what makes an excuse and grace different. The former rests on some exculpating condition whereas the latter is a benevolent, unconditional action on the side of the victim. For instance, consider a case where a friend of mine insults me. I can say to my friend, “You need to know that
what you said was hurtful, but I love you anyway and will extend grace to you. Not because of anything you have done or any other reason, but because I love you and I choose to do so.” In this scenario, my overlooking the offense is not due to an excuse; rather, I recognize the offense and choose to abandon my resentment and have grace for my friend out of love.

Needless to say, this is no easy task. The old adage “love is a verb” sheds some light on the nature of this counterintuitive concept, for grace is, in its essence, a form of love. Much like the love of a parent to a newborn baby, grace is based on no merit of the recipient. From the outset, the parent loves that child and the child has done nothing to deserve such affection. Since grace is a form of unconditional love, many of the characteristics of love are true for grace as well. For instance, extending grace to those who have wronged us is an active process. We must continually work at it. Not only will we be wronged continually in life, but also certain wrongs can have more lasting effects that are more difficult to forgive. Ongoing work is required to persist in grace despite encountering numerous wrongs, many of which can have lasting effects.

It is important to note that excuse is not all bad. In fact, one of the most useful steps of excuse is to recognize the exculpating potential of another person’s situation. Further, it is impractical to think that the characteristics of the person and his situation do not influence how you can care for him. To imaginatively put oneself into another person’s place is a good practice that can make it easier to give grace. For instance, a person who has been a great friend to you is going through a rough patch in life and lashes out at you. You know that this is uncharacteristic of him and that it is directly
linked to the challenges he is currently enduring. Knowing what that friend is going through can spur compassion for him. While it is out of love that I would forgive this friend for the wrongdoing, knowing his current situation and his past character makes it much easier to have grace on him.

By arguing that grace ought to be the impetus of forgiveness, I avoid the shortfall of Hampton’s solution where she argues that one ought to trust that the forgiver is good enough to merit forgiveness as a condition of offering forgiveness. The main issue with Hampton’s position is the risk of naivety in judging another’s character and the worry that an offender’s expression of remorse is not genuine and thus does not warrant forgiveness. By basing forgiveness on grace one can avoid all of these issues. This prompts the question of under what circumstances one ought to give grace. The real question is not whether one ought to give grace, as grace is simply a mindset; rather, the real question is how one should enact grace.

In some circumstances, grace comes in the form of exculpation where one waives any requirement that the wrongdoer pay for his transgression. Other times grace is enacted through loving discipline. For instance, if a child continually misbehaves and refuses to clean his room when told to, the parent may decide periodically to enact grace in the form of exculpation, but loving discipline is another form grace may take and is just as important as grace in the form of exculpation. It is important to know that love is behind the discipline. It is necessary for good character development for a child to understand that there are consequences to actions.
It should also be noted that when a parent is disciplining out of love rather than vexation that the motive for the former is selfless while the motive for the latter is selfish. A parent who disciplines a child out of love is doing so because the parent wants to break the child’s bad habits that have or could potentially harm the child. On the other hand, a parent disciplining a child out of annoyance is doing so out of the selfish desire to not be annoyed. Although it is often the case that annoyance is what brings bad behavior to mind, discipline ought to be out of love. In other words, when the child does something annoying the parent is able to take notice of it because it is annoying, but when the parent is about to discipline the child the annoyance should not be the motive; rather, that motive should change to love for the future well being of the child.

This is the same with forgiveness. Forgiveness ought to be motivated out of love and one should not treat forgiveness as a pragmatic means to get over the offense. Unfortunately, no motive is totally pure and sometimes parents discipline out of annoyance and love. Sometimes people forgive out of practicality and love. Ideally one should not have mixed motives but the reality is one always will.

5.4 The Third Party Obligation of Forgiveness

As discussed in the section dealing with Kolnai’s account of the quasi-obligatory nature of forgiveness, I find that the forgiver is never obligated to forgive by any direct merit of the wrongdoer. As a Christian, however, I believe that there is
an indirect obligation to forgive the wrongdoer that runs through a direct obligation to God.³

The verse in Matthew 18:21 provides a nice platform for discussing the indirect obligation to forgive that is part of a Christian model of forgiveness. In this verse, Peter asks Jesus how many times should I forgive to which Jesus responds 77. In order to fully understand Jesus’ response, it is important to interpret this verse in light of the parable that precedes it. In this parable there is a King that forgives a servant of a massive amount of debt, roughly equivalent to 6 billion dollars today. But when the same servant who was forgiven saw a fellow servant who owed him about $12,000 in today’s dollars, he started to choke him.

Eventually, the King finds out and punishes the first servant. Jesus says that God will punish those who do not forgive from the heart. The point of the parable is that a transformed heart forgiven by God will forgive others as a result. Further, the debt shows how much is owed due to sin and how impossible it is to pay it back. True disciples of Jesus understand the gravity of their sin and should often and quickly forgive from the heart.⁴ Therefore, just as God has forgiven the Christian of their debt in sin, so the Christian must forgive others. This is a direct obligation to God to forgive.

5.5 Getting Over Anger and Bitterness

³I do think that non-Christians should forgive as well because holding bitterness is sin and those who harbor bitterness will be judged accordingly, irrespective of whether they profess the Christian faith.
⁴This means that a one cannot forgive out of fear of God’s punishment either
If love is essential to the grace that is part of forgiveness, then how does one move from being angry to loving? There are probably many ways to overcome anger. There are the practical “take a breather” tips such as walking away from the situation and calming down. But there is still a risk of the anger turning into bitterness if the problem in the relationship is not addressed.

We began the thesis by relating the surprising elusiveness of the concept of forgiveness to Augustine’s comments about the surprising elusiveness of the concept of time. Here I will again draw inspiration from Augustine, but this time from his use of autobiography as a vehicle for pursuing philosophy. As is well known, one of his most influential works, the *Confessions*, was also a work of both intellectual and personal autobiography. Though I do not believe my life and experiences have the weight and insight of Augustine’s, they are nonetheless the only experiences I can attest to. Moreover, they are directly relevant to the topic of this section: strategies for overcoming anger.

Before describing my current experience in dealing with anger, however, it is important that I first give some background on the development of my encounters with anger. My parents are not religious and I did not grow up in a Christian home. Moreover, I was a very angry kid, especially as an adolescent, who was not taught about Christian responses to anger. The only way I knew how to deal with my anger was through acts of rebellion or fits of rage. As I grew older, I became less volatile and did not have as many fits of rage, but upon Jesus saving me, I came to realize that
I had years of bitterness stored in my heart. Before I was a Christian I dealt with anger by suppression and fits of rage. Both resulted in bitterness.

Now as a Christian, I have tools to actually get rid of the bitterness and forgive. This could not have been done with just reading the Bible and praying on my own; rather, it took someone who is a few steps ahead of me to lead me in how to forgive well. The procedures I will delineate can be done independently without any help, but are only the blueprints for getting over anger. In addition, the actual work or healing of the anger must be done by God’s grace. The first practice is having an eternal perspective and the second is letting God be the judge.

An eternal perspective is having the understanding that this life is only a moment (James 4:13). For those who are Christians, there is heaven to look forward to. This perspective helps the Christian realize that being wronged in this life is not of great significance. Now it should be noted that there are typically two contexts of wrongdoing. One is when the victim does not know the perpetrator, such as being cut off on the highway, and the other context is when the victim does know the perpetrator, as happens, for instance, when one is wronged by a friend. When a Christian has an eternal perspective in both contexts, the wrong inflicted on her or him should just roll off like water on plastic, thus making it easy to not sit in anger. Having an eternal perspective gives the Christian a better ability to fight off anger and turn towards grace.

Understanding that judgment is reserved for God alone is the other pragmatic way a Christian lets go of anger. The purpose this truth seems to hold is to allow the
Christian to trust God with his judgment and stop trying to be God in judging. It is important to understand what is meant by “judgment” in this context. God’s judgment is more akin to sentencing and not just the act of discerning whether something is morally right or morally wrong. When someone wrongs a Christian, typically the Christian, like anyone, initially responds with anger. But, the Christian should quickly remind herself that God is ultimately the judge and it is not up to the Christian to bring justice upon the wrongdoer. Having thus reminding herself, she will then be better able to choose to love and forgive the wrongdoer. Now, it is important to not twist this truth and start harboring resentment towards those who have done wrong and think things such as, “there is a special place in hell for that person”. That is just twisting the truth of God’s judgment to justify bitterness.

5.6 Correction

At first glance the word “correction” can be unsettling. In American culture, correcting others is looked down upon. It can be seen as gratuitously judgmental and intolerant, but when a person does something wrong it is right for the victim to use his judgment to determine that that action was wrong. It is also right to deem that action intolerable. For instance, a friend hitting a classmate ought to be judged as being bad and the act of hitting another held as unacceptable. I assert, nonetheless, that an act of correction, when done out of love, can be beneficial for the wrongdoer. Remember, the impetus of forgiveness is grace and the aim of correction is love. In this theory, the purpose of correction is for the victim to lovingly tell the wrongdoer that the offense
done was hurtful and wrong. The hope is that the offender would recognize that what she did was wrong and repent.

It is crucial to understand that the aim of the correction is not to make the person repentant. Although that could be an effect, it is not the goal as it is not absolutely necessary for forgiveness. While forgiveness would not occur when grace is completely lacking, it might occur in the absence of a repentant wrongdoer. Though the highest forms of forgiveness would involve the wrongdoer’s repentance and sincere seeking of forgiveness, a victim can extend forgiveness in the absence of the wrongdoer’s repentance. No human has the ability to make someone repentant or change another’s view of right and wrong. That is not our place. The wrongdoer must realize herself that what she has done was wrong. The purpose of the correction is to uphold the offense as wrong and to show that one does not condone such behavior in the hope that the wrongdoer would turn and repent.

One worry related to correction is that the corrector will be perceived as arrogant. The best way to prevent the perception of arrogance is for the victim to have a true and genuine relationship with the person being corrected. Without active demonstrations of love through a real relationship, the already difficult task of correction is made even more challenging. But even if a person has the best relationship with the person being corrected, it will be fruitless if the recipient is unable to make that adjustment. This typically happens with those who are prideful. When being corrected by a loving friend the prideful person thinks, “Who are you to tell me how to live?” when the proper response should be, “Would you help me?”
Thank you so much for loving me enough to tell me where I am going wrong”. I think that the former response is the natural response of everyone. So if you are ever corrected, then it is important to fight the inclination to be prideful and really listen to those people in your life you trust and love.

Correction prevents forgiveness from collapsing into condonation. Remember that condonation is defined as “the victim is clearly aware of the wrongdoer’s wrongdoing, insult, offence, or viciousness and per se disapproves of it but deliberately refrains from any retributive response to it” (Kolnai, 95). The act of correction shows the offender that what he has done is, in fact, wrong. By engaging in correction, one displays an outward behavior that one does not view the act as of no moment. Although this may not be a strict retributive response in the sense of punishment, it is a response and upholds wrongdoing as genuinely wrong.

5.7 Repentance

The hoped for result of correction is repentance but it is important to know that repentance is not a necessary condition of forgiveness as forgiveness is given by grace. But true repentance is not so easy to discern as discussed in section 3.1 and 4.5. While it is true that actions speak louder than words, it is often the case that motives give actions worth. For instance, picture two guys going to the gym. The first guy is going because he wants to be healthy, and that is his only motivation. The second guy is going so he can look better in order to “pick up” girls. The action of working-out is the same, but the motivations for working-out differ dramatically, and it is the motivation and not just the action that determines someone’s character. The main
difference between counterfeit and true repentance is the motivation. Below I describe two common motives driving counterfeit repentance.

The first motive is fear of punishment. Just because someone is scared of being punished does not mean that person is truly repentant. A wrongdoer could be terrified of the consequences of his action and not be truly repentant because he is only upset that he was caught, and not because of the realization that what he did was wrong. Until the person’s actual heart changes and turns away from wrongdoing, rather than simply being overcome by terror, can that person be truly repentant.

Another motive behind counterfeit repentance is pride. A person changing his behavior for prideful reasons will think that the wrongdoing he has committed in the past is beneath him. Therefore, he resolves to stop doing it. That is not true repentance because the offender does not think that he is wrong nor does he feel sorry for the effects of the wrong. The wrongdoer ceased that misconduct because he now thinks more highly of himself. He finds that behavior below him. For instance, take a man who is frequently inebriated and whose inner rage comes to the surface with each drink. Now this man comes to realize that his drowning in alcohol reduces his productivity at work and he loves to brag about his job. So in order to be more productive (and continue bragging) he stops drinking, but does not care about the people he has hurt during his intoxicated outbursts. He exchanged one wrong to bolster another, the wrong of inordinate self-esteem.

A truly repentant person would typically tell the victim what he did was wrong and that he deserves punishment. Not only would a repentant person say he deserves
punishment, but he would willingly be punished and not expect to be pardoned because of his repentance. What this shows is that he feels what was done was truly immoral and that he does not deserve any grace for his transgression.

It is pretty easy to see that distinguishing true repentance from counterfeit repentance is a difficult task. The fact is that we cannot definitively know a person’s motives for a particular action. If forgiveness is grounded in repentance, we run the risk of providing an incentive for the wrongdoer to fake repentance because we cannot be fully certain that all the motives stated above have been avoided.

5.8 The Act of Forgiveness

Next is the conditional fourth step: the act of forgiveness. This step is conditional because it is based upon the wrongdoer’s repentance. If the wrongdoer is unrepentant, then it would be unwise to perform the act of forgiveness. If the wrongdoer is repentant, then the act of forgiveness can do much good in the wrongdoer’s life. The act of forgiveness encourages a repentant wrongdoer to continue on a better path then the one previously chosen. It enables the wrongdoer to permit his guilty conscience to come to a rest.

It is unwise to perform the act of forgiveness to an unrepentant wrongdoer because of the risk that the forgiver will be perceived as arrogant by the wrongdoer. If someone is forgiven of an act he does not think is wrong, then he will take forgiveness as an insult. This is analogous to an innocent person being granted pardon for an offense he did not commit. As a result of the wrongdoer being insulted; the tension between the forgiver and the wrongdoer will be further intensified. Unlike grace, the
act of forgiveness is not necessary for genuine forgiveness. The fullest form of forgiveness will include the act of forgiveness, although forgiveness can occur without this act.

5.9 Reconciliation

Although it is not a step in forgiveness per se, it is often hoped that the act of forgiveness will result in full reconciliation. I think it is important to understand what reconciliation really means. To be reconciled is to restore the relationship after the wrongdoing to the level of relationship before the wrongdoing. For instance, say I forgive a friend who has wronged me. To be fully reconciled, my friend and I must be back at the level of relationship before the wronging occurred. Obviously, there are some situations where two parties should not be fully reconciled. Consider the case of an abusive boyfriend. The abused girlfriend should not be reconciled to the nature of the relationship pre-abuse even after forgiving the repentant boyfriend. It is simply unwise. Now if after a period of time, the boyfriend demonstrates self-control or takes steps toward remedying his abusive behavior, perhaps through anger management courses, then the girlfriend can start to think about being fully reconciled to him. Even then it should be a very cautious and gradual process as only time will be the test of the genuineness of the boyfriend’s life change. The girlfriend is able to forgive her abusive boyfriend completely without being fully reconciled to him.

A practical piece of advice in deciding whether a victim should decide to be reconciled in a fuller sense to the wrongdoer would be to observe how the wrongdoer’s behavior has changed as a result of genuine change in the offender.
These observations will show whether an offender’s repentance is genuine and provide a metric as to whether a victim should start to reconcile or continue to allow reconciliation with the wrongdoer.

As stated previously, it would be wise for the girlfriend to slowly and cautiously re-associate with the boyfriend rather than dive back into the pre-abuse level of relationship. The reason is so the girlfriend can sit back and see how the boyfriend reacts to other situations. For instance, say the girlfriend and boyfriend are hanging out with friends and one of the friends says something that the boyfriend would normally find insulting and get angry over but, after going through anger management, he responds uncharacteristically and calmly tells the friend that what he said was hurtful and unappreciated. That would be a good indicator of the genuineness of the boyfriend’s repentance and of his character, which gives the girlfriend a metric that aids in the decision of whether to continue in rebuilding the relationship with her boyfriend.

Clearly there is a process of forgiveness in the example with the girlfriend and the angry boyfriend and, to varying degrees, that seems true of all cases of forgiveness. It is important to understand that the act of forgiveness may be a one-time thing for one offense, but actually forgiving a person internally may happen many times even if it is only for a single offense. Even after performing the act of forgiveness, there can be days where bitterness or anger arises about the offense that has already been forgiven. All this means is the victim still has to process through truly forgiving the wrongdoer and even get healed of being hurt. Often bitterness is
like a wound that has festered Forgiveness is like cleaning out the wound, but without
the wound being healed another round of bitterness will ensue.

5.10 Final Thoughts

As indicated at the outset, I have not touched upon the extreme cases of
wrongdoing such as rape and murder in this essay. This was intentional. While I think
the steps of forgiveness just outlined are applicable to those extreme transgressions, I
would venture to say those wrongs constitute an overwhelming minority of offenses. I
believe that commonplace cases of wrongdoing, such as hurtful words and neglect, are
collectively more relevant to the whole population. It might seem trivial, but the
constant drip of resentment from small wrongs can lead to a bitterness capable of
spoiling relationships for a lifetime. This is a threat that applies more universally than
extreme cases of wrongdoing.

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, forgiveness is a complex and
elusive concept. Providing a clear analysis that captures its fundamental nature is no
easy task. Putting the practice of forgiveness into one’s everyday life is much more
challenging still than its intellectual analysis. There are numerous issues that can
hinder one’s progress towards forgiveness. It is hoped, however, that this essay
provides a theoretical framework for living out a life of forgiveness that can serve all
human beings in their daily lives.
6 Bibliography


