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Making a place for forgiveness in the context of public morality

Um lugar para o perdão no contexto da moralidade pública

Judith Baker[1]
jbaker@yorku.ca

ABSTRACT: This paper maintains that forgiveness of one human by another is not a merely personal transaction, but is social or public in nature. This leads to a better grasp of interpersonal forgiveness, and makes it easier to recognize and understand political acts of forgiveness. Such an understanding explains, and possibly reinterprets, the special authority of the victim to forgive. The victim's authority is puzzling, given that most offenses are not merely personal, but are moral. This puzzle prompts a turn towards the moral community, and it places the notion of reconciliation, and the desire to restore human relations at the center of the concept. Reconciliation by itself is not, however, forgiveness, and any adequate analysis must recognize as crucial both judgments about, and attitudes toward, the offender's character. Nonetheless, forgiveness is not simply a subjective story to be told in terms of an individual's psychological strengths or weaknesses. We need to examine public and political acts of forgiveness also. An account of political acts of forgiveness might well help us to be clearer about the nature of individual forgiving.

Keywords: public morality, public forgiveness, reconciliation, victim's authority.

RESUMO: Este artigo afirma que o perdão dado por um ser humano a outro não é uma transação meramente pessoal, mas tem uma natureza social ou pública. Isso leva a uma compreensão melhor do perdão interpessoal e torna mais fácil reconhecer e entender atos políticos de perdão. Tal compreensão explica, e possivelmente reinterpreta, a autoridade especial da vítima no ato de perdoar. A autoridade da vítima gera perplexidade, uma vez que a maioria das infrações não é meramente pessoal, mas é moral. Essa perplexidade leva a um voltar-se para a comunidade moral e situa a noção de reconciliação e o desejo de restabelecer as relações humanas no centro desse conceito. Porém, a reconciliação em si não é perdão, e qualquer análise adequada deve reconhecer a importância crucial tanto dos julgamentos do caráter do infrator quanto das atitudes para com ele. Não obstante, o perdão não é simplesmente uma história subjetiva a ser contada em termos dos pontos psicologicamente fortes ou fracos de um indivíduo. Também

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[1] Associate Professor, Glendon College, York University, Canada.

precisamos examinar atos políticos e públicos de perdão. Uma explicação dos atos políticos de perdão poderia nos ajudar a obter maior clareza sobre a natureza do perdão pessoal.

Palavras-chave: moralidade pública, perdão público, reconciliação, autoridade da vítima.

This paper maintains that forgiveness of one human by another is not a merely personal transaction, but is social or public in nature. This leads to a better grasp of interpersonal forgiveness, and makes it easier to recognize and understand political acts of forgiveness. Such an understanding explains, and possibly reinterprets, the special authority of the victim to forgive. The victim's authority is puzzling, given that most offenses are not merely personal, but are moral. This puzzle prompts a turn towards the moral community, and it places the notion of reconciliation, and the desire to restore human relations at the center of the concept. Reconciliation by itself is not, however, forgiveness, and any adequate analysis must recognize as crucial both judgments about, and attitudes toward, the offender's character. Nonetheless, forgiveness is not simply a subjective story to be told in terms of an individual's psychological strengths or weaknesses.

Our attitudes are fuelled by both philosophical and moral views, and it is these views, insofar as they make forgiveness paradoxical or irrational, which will be the subject of this paper.

We sometimes *want*, and, although perhaps less often, sometimes *ask* to be forgiven. It is not surprising: the goods of forgiveness[2] are obvious ones. When others overcome resentment or hostility towards us and are prepared to renew relations, the pleasures, kindnesses, and joys of being with others are again possible. This is not simply because the person we wronged is prepared to associate with us again but because of the judgment inherent in that decision. The victim of wrongdoing who neither excuses nor condones, yet nonetheless forgives, may fundamentally change the wrongdoer's own self-judgment, remove or assuage guilt. The wrongdoer, forgiven, is sometimes helped to become a better person.

I find these central ideas of forgiveness very puzzling. Another person's opinion cannot, logically, and should not, morally, alter the wrong, or affect the moral significance of my action. Given that the wrong is thought to be moral, the wrongful transaction is not merely personal; hence the victim's judgment can no more wipe away moral wrong, than can the judgment of any other human. If a person has knowingly done wrong, then both the resulting feelings of guilt, and the victim's forgiving, seem peripheral: what morality requires is that the wrongdoer change.

The special standing seemingly attributed to the victim, who alone is thought able to forgive, is disturbing for political as well as philosophical reasons. Victims may be unwilling to reconcile or to forgive. Moreover, relatives and friends and co-citizens of victims on both sides of violent conflicts often view their attitudes of non-forgiveness as morally owed to those directly harmed and particularly to the dead, who cannot forgive.

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[2] My paper comes somewhere in the middle of a larger project. It starts from an analysis, or rather, two, offered by Hampton and Murphy (1988), *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Disagreements focus on what ideas of forgiveness are central, and subsequent reinterpretation of other elements. On Hampton's account, forgiveness is the overcoming of resentment, angry feelings, or hatred toward a wrongdoer, as a result of quite specific moral reasons; one has experienced a change of heart regarding the wrongdoer's decency. It is a "welcoming back". Hampton adds that it is an "absolution from guilt". Murphy helpfully notes that forgiveness needs to be differentiated from a family of concepts with which it is often confused: *excuse*, *justification*, *mercy*, *condonation*, *forgetting*. Most of the distinctions are obvious, but one seldom thinks of the distinction between forgiveness, on the one hand, and mercy, as foregoing or softening punishment, on the other.

This paper is guided by the hypothesis that the two last two points are connected: that a proper understanding of the authority of the victim's forgiveness can explain and reinterpret what has sometimes been expressed in the form that forgiveness removes sin, alters the guilt or culpable nature of the wrongdoer.

Difficulties with the set of our beliefs about forgiveness are as old as Kant; a modern reformulation by Aurel Kolnai (Kolnai, 1973-1974) purports to show that the notion of forgiveness is incoherent: either a wrongdoer is repentant, and does not *need* forgiveness, or the wrongdoer is not repentant, and it would be morally wrong to forgive; he does not deserve it and we would be condoning evil. Kolnai proposes a rational substitute for a forgiving disposition, a principle which he claims will be a guide to morally appropriate action: one should respond to value appropriately, accepting the good individual (including the repentant individual) and rejecting the bad.

Of course we still want others not to hate us, want the benefits of association. Put that to one side, and forgiveness is incoherent, but also not needed, at least within relations of rational beings. Kolnai's position is easily stated. The conscientious person who reflects on any serious wrong she has (knowingly, intentionally) done ought to recognize that it is up to her to change, and that both her moral failure and moral development or change are her own responsibility. The opinion of others cannot make any difference to authentic moral judgment. To think otherwise is to succumb to a temptation, to be lured by what is psychologically comforting but fundamentally incoherent.

Of course, if I regret an action in which I have intentionally harmed another, I want to compensate for what I have done as well as I can, and want to deserve a better opinion in the future. But to suppose that the person I have wronged could wipe away my wrongdoing or my guilt, could "make it all better" or "ok" by forgiving me, seems to betray something like magical thinking. Yet, it seems both a fact and not irrational that most of us would, do, want to be forgiven.

It is part of the work of this paper to make what is conceptually disturbing more apparent, to articulate (some of) the paradoxes of forgiveness, and to offer at least some resolutions. The paper starts with Kant, for both historical and philosophical reasons: the tension between the autonomous nature of moral agency and external help, as well as the oppositional demands of justice and forgiveness, have Kantian roots. Kant's attempt to resolve them both reveals the complexity of the issues, and displays a subtlety of inventions. Kant poses dilemmas whose moral constraints are formulated from within a religious framework. To a large extent, I think, problems about divine forgiveness are also problems about human forgivers, and Kant's answers can be applied or extended to the relations between people. Perhaps more important, the structure of the religious notions is mimicked by the purely moral. We cannot, however, look to Kantian text for help in resolving the two, arguably connected, points I find most puzzling: the supposition that another person, and specifically the victim, is somehow able to absolve the wrong-doer of guilt. These difficulties require a reconceptualization of forgiveness and the paper's argument is no longer based on interpretation of historical texts. It will, nonetheless, become apparent that Kantian ideas provide a source for resolution of the problems.

It may be thought, all the same, a strange beginning, for many philosophers hold that Kant dealt a terminal blow to the concept, that there can be no forgiveness in Kant.

We might accept this common view if our only focus was the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 1959). But Kant's discussions of forgiveness and its problems are to be found almost exclusively in *Religion within the Limits of Reason*

Alone (Kant, 1960). The moral system of the *Foundations* may be rigorous, but the tone is nonetheless supremely optimistic; the power of reason expressed in moral obligations is as unqualified as the obligations. It is the strong voice of the Enlightenment. *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, in contrast, begins with a discussion of radical evil, of a propensity in human beings which is inextirpable. It is important to see that Kant does not qualify his previous views of absolute freedom and the power of reason. The propensity to evil is neither a result of passion nor due to our animal nature. Kant does not think that the desires we have, the incentives as he puts it, which arise from our sensuous nature, are in themselves bad. The propensity to evil reflects the human choice, to take what satisfies self-love as an adequate principle of action, and as one which makes the moral law subordinate. To knowingly do what is morally wrong is, consequently, to be understood as freely acting on a principle one has chosen or adopted: to prefer the satisfaction of inclinations to the moral law. To say evil is radical is to say that although we humans can choose to make self-love subordinate, and so may achieve a kind of sovereignty of the moral principle, we cannot *remove* the propensity to make self-love the principle of our actions.

Because freedom and reason remain unmodified, belief or hope in forgiveness is necessary, for moral reasons. Kant finds himself required to argue for a reasonable hope for divine forgiveness, without compromising his views on autonomy and justice. If moral action is to be possible, it must be reconciled with the possibility of divine forgiveness and a belief in Grace.

(Despite the differences I have claimed to hold between the *Foundations* and *Religion*, let me admit in advance that the editor of my edition of *Religion*, John Silber, nonetheless thought that Kant in all consistency could not acknowledge the concept of forgiveness [by God or man] as playing any significant role. Silber indeed holds that for Kant no man can be 'good for another', which I have understood as meaning no man can aid another to have a better moral character; he also thinks that within Kant's thought, divine mercy and freedom are incompatible.)

Kant claims that one must reconcile a belief in Divine Forgiveness with the requirements of morality. But why should he think divine forgiveness as well as the agent's belief that one will be forgiven are required? There is a short answer to this question: we must (morally) not let guilt lead us to despair, for a rationally based hope is required if we are to continue to act morally and strive to do better. Yet we may find ourselves *rationally* unable to hope, because a comparison of our actions and what morality demands shows us to be undeserving and inadequate to the ideal of a good moral disposition.

Resolution of the problem is not short. There may be a rational need for a forgiving God, but if God is just he will judge us in accordance with the demands of morality. Even, especially, God, as moral, as just, cannot favorably receive those who are morally blameworthy. It is immoral to favorably judge someone who freely chose evil, and rational guilt presupposes we had this free choice. Yet God (sometimes) forgives us.

Kant's resolution starts with the idea that the person who will be forgiven has repented, and is a new moral person, has a new moral identity. Hence the moral God does not judge incorrectly. The act, which is blameworthy, is distinguished from the individual agent, a familiar distinction expressed in Augustine's command to embrace the sinner but not the sin. But the sinner who is unrepentant is not seemingly forgiven by Kant. The remorseful individual who changes her moral personality, indeed identity, can be forgiven, without condoning what is evil in humanity. Forgiveness for Kant, in so far as it must meet the requirements of justice, does not annul punishment. For in rejecting her old self, the new moral person willingly accepts transformative pains which count as punishment.

But this resolution will not work as it stands, since our own inadequacy is founded in what Kant terms radical evil. If we understand that radical evil is inextirpable, then the new moral person cannot be understood solely in terms of a good moral principle with which she is now identified. In secular terms, no matter how sincere our repentance and change, we are faced with our persistent susceptibility to do what is wrong, to fail to do what we see is right and within our power. We are never fully good, we are always in the process of *becoming* a better person. Not that we can become "free" from a principle of evil, but we can aim at a secure sovereignty over it. (Let me however insist on a point here: this does not mean necessarily that we are making progress. We may be recovering from a failure).

Kant now adds: God credits us with ***being*** what we are only in the process of *becoming*. We are judged to be essentially an intelligible being of a certain disposition. That disposition is the supersensible and a-temporal ground of actions. But in terms of actions, even the best of us is only continually on the way to a pure moral disposition.

God must advance us what we do not yet possess. God's "credit" may answer to the charge that there is always a gap between the less-than-perfect goodness of our actions and the pure moral disposition required of us. Credit satisfies or reconciles just judgment and an imperfectly good, only becoming-good human. Belief in this generous judgment seems to offer itself as the foundation of rational hope. Yet again what is offered as a resolution gives rise to a new difficulty: to suppose a belief that divine credit is somehow efficacious, that hope might do some positive work in an individual agent's moral improvement, contradicts Kant's previously stated views. One can become "pleasing to God", that is, become a morally good person, only as a result of one's own effort and good works. Morally, what is required is not faith but works, one's independent effort.

We cannot help ourselves to a positive belief in God's forgiveness, or in Grace, in order to become good. That would conflict with the moral imperative. The previous discussion with all its inventiveness is meant to answer to theoretical doubts, to the supposition that we are, after all, doomed, and so leave room for rational hope.

That is not to say that answering theoretical doubts is without practical effect. We are creatures who not only theorize, but help ourselves to bad theories and bad reasons when it serves our purpose. Kant's view here is similar to that expressed in the *Foundations*, where Kant posited a possible objection to the moral theorizing in which he was engaged. People know what they ought to do; so a theoretical work on morality may seem unnecessary from a practical point of view. Kant answered that there was a dialectic of practical as well as pure reason, which could endanger moral behavior, which arises from our disposition to find self-serving reasons and excuses. A correct moral theory is thus, practically, of use, even if its use will be labeled as 'negative' by Kant; it is an important *theoretical* response to the difficulties we throw in our way. Here, in *Religion within the Limits of Reason*, he claims his deduction of the justification of an individual wrongdoer who has a change of heart has an important theoretical, albeit negative use. Negative, in providing a way to answer doubts.

But Kant's own moral phenomenology shows humans need more in the way of forgiveness if they are to combat rational despair. Kant recognizes that conscientious people are not only subject to doubts and despair, but that when seemingly most lucid, rationally toting up good deeds and lapses, there is what he calls an accuser within us whose eye is always on the disparity between our actions and what is morally required.

The inner accuser points to real disparities, and admits no excuses. In the hardest cases of forgiving, hardest both to enact and to understand, there are no circumstances judged sufficiently mitigating and no excuses to be made for the wrongdoer. We may part company with Kant insofar as we think that in some cases we are helped to forgive by understanding the pressures on someone, finding it painful, regrettable, but *understandable* that a friend failed us. Kant insists on absolute freedom, insists that reason is not weakened or limited by the power of the passions or inclinations, hence a blameworthy individual cannot appeal to excuses or mitigating circumstances. Despite disagreement with Kant on a range of cases, the hard ones, nonetheless, remain. One says to a friend "I know what tempted you, but how **could** you...?" We deny that we understand how such and such pressures could have led to the act. This is not to deny that a story can be told. (Indeed people's behavior would not look like human action if this were not the case.) It is to deny that the story provides sufficient motivation to mitigate responsibility and so excuse. This is easier to recognize in our own case. We often acknowledge, at least to ourselves, that the temptation to which we succumbed was **not** irresistible. Reason, morality, moves us, but not always, and it can happen that however vividly memory recalls the temptations or pressures, we do not understand our lapse.

Kant's observation is that we are judgmentally harder when we face only our own accusations; faced with another person accusing us, we may well find reasons to excuse ourselves. The hardest judge is the accuser within us. Self-trust may come with a good disposition; still, good dispositions are not guarantees that we will not at times behave badly, and if we have bad moral luck, very badly. We are not sheltered from the accusations that arise, and the capacity to reflect easily brings them forth.

Kant responds by seeing in the human plight need for an *advocate*, and he helps himself to the Christian idea and figure of an intercessor. But intercession and advocacy are transformed. Advocacy does not alter culpability or responsibility; it presents a better character as still possible. We know in advance that no legal, theoretical defense to charges is possible within the Kantian framework. The work of Kantian advocacy is complex. It is useful to summarize Kant's strategy in advance. Kant introduces the idea of Jesus as an Archetype of Moral Humanity. Jesus represents moral action as within human capacity, at any time. This is surely central to the message of forgiveness. And one who accepts this ideal can be rationally moved to act. The ideal inspires and moves one to act much like the confidence conveyed by a person who believes one capable of doing well, but with two striking differences. Belief that I am capable of change for the better is not based on my, individual distinctiveness, and the belief is inferred on my part from what I see in another.

Central to Kant's argument is the idea that the Archetype can be seen as equivalent to the Moral Law itself. An ideal of moral humanity can, in a role similar to that attributed to the moral law, serve as a rational incentive. Rational religious belief does not posit a divine son, but accepts an Idea of Reason, an Archetype of perfectly moral humanity. Jesus as Archetype is not a historical individual who was knowable by experience. Recall that Kant held that respect for the law was the only pure and acceptable motive for action recognized as morally worthy. Jesus, viewed as an Idea of Reason, represents Humanity's capacity to do what is morally required, in effect, the capacity to act on recognition of the moral law. Then, like the Moral Law, the Idea of Reason which Jesus represents can be motivationally effective without supposing there to be anything external to the law which motivates. This sounds much too mechanical. Kant's own description in the *Foundations* is better; respect for other human beings was to be understood as respect for their capacity to act on recognition of the moral law.

We can then say that there is a practical, in Kant's sense of the term, faith in an Archetype of Humanity, which meets the Kantian constraints. Neither purity nor autonomy are undermined by what I might call moral admiration. This is, perhaps, an unconventional analysis of Kant, but it allows us to understand an interesting, and overlooked, passage in *Religion*. Book Three is entitled "The Victory of the

Good over the Evil Principle and the Founding of a Kingdom of God on Earth". Here Kant claims not that a just or good society depends on just individuals, but (surprisingly) that the sovereignty of the good principle in an individual is attainable only through a *multiplicity* of individuals working towards establishing a **society** which is in accordance with the laws of virtue. "In addition to prescribing laws to each individual, morally legislative reason also unfurls a banner of virtue as a rallying point for all who love the good, that they may gather beneath it and thus at the very start gain the upper hand over the evil which is attacking them" (Kant, 1960, p. 86). Recognition that other individuals are committed to just or moral principles is given an essential role in one's own ability to establish a character in which moral considerations have a superior force.

Kant's discussion of an exemplar allows one to acknowledge, without undermining independent action, the practical efficacy of another's goodness in one's own change and development of moral character. It is a complicated route to practical belief in one's own capabilities, which works with the theoretical possibility of divine credit.

I propose to use Kant's insights and tools in understanding difficulties in our notion of humans forgiving one another.

If we are to extend Kant's answer to these difficulties, we must suppose that the wrongdoer who has repented is able to accept a generous judgment of herself, and can rely on the good judgment of the individual who forgives. The forgiver credits the wrongdoer with being what she is not yet. And the individual who might otherwise be discouraged or, in a serious enough case, despair of ever again being morally acceptable, finds an advocate – in the person of the forgiving human – to match the accuser within herself. She can then rely on herself and her own judgment.

Nonetheless, I wish to insist that this is a "formal", perhaps technical, extension of Kant's appeal to divine credit. Humans must **trust** that a wrongdoer has changed. Forgiving calls on the human forgiver's generosity of judgment and a capacity to take risks, to make herself vulnerable. There is nothing corresponding in a divine judge, who **knows** what a person really is.

Kant does not talk about human forgiveness, but it would be misleading to think of him as simply "unforgiving" and false to suppose him harshly judgmental. There are repeated injunctions against vengeance. More radically, he claims that humans do not have access to their own or others' inner disposition. This gives rise to one strand in Kant's thought, that we ought morally to refrain from judging others. (Within Kant's framework, this does not imply that we should refrain from punishing, for we punish people not because of any viciousness of character, which Kant held we cannot know, but because of intentional acts which are wrong.) Kant's position so interpreted would thus lead him to advocate more trust, greater effort in giving people the benefit of any doubt, and thus minimizing occasions on which it would be appropriate to forgive another. If such a largely nonjudgmental society were possible it might be preferable to our own. Perhaps it could be described, in Avishai Margalit's terms, as a truly decent society (Margalit, 1996).

We do not have Kant's reasons for refraining from judging another's character, insofar as most of us in philosophical and ordinary practice would not identify a person's character or inner disposition with a supersensible or intelligible being. There are, of course, other sources of skepticism about our knowledge of other people, which this paper does not address. It relies on the view that our general standards of knowledge permit us to make inferences about moral character on the basis of experience of another person's actions, words, and emotional expressions. This enables us to make use of Kant's discussion of divine forgiveness in ways he might not have taken.

There remains a crucial difference. The forgiving individual judges that the wrongdoer has repented and had a change of heart. But wrongdoers want or ask to be forgiven before behavior could furnish adequate evidence for a change of heart. Thus on either Kant's, or on a more empirical, view of the knowledge of other people, humans typically cannot know, but must **trust** that the person who has hurt or wronged them has changed, or will change.

Despite that difference, we can apply Kant's analysis of the work done in forgiving to human forgivers. The religious story appeals to a divine judgment which can credit individuals with a character they never quite manifest. The divine judge makes it possible for individuals to hope to and try to become better. Effort itself is mobilized by the goodness personalized in humanity's advocate. On the human scale, a moral wrongdoer may be forgiven by the person she has wronged; the divine judgment that she is ok is paralleled by the individual's trust in her. Kant's notions of a new moral person as well as that of extending credit help resolve the conflicts between justice, in the form of the deserved judgment, and forgiveness. The human individual who forgives, like the Advocate of Humanity, can be a subject of moral admiration and source of rational motivation.

The Kantian apparatus does not, however, fit as well as it looks. I will argue that it is inadequate, as it stands, to solve all of the initial problems, at least one of which it might be said, rather, to obscure. A shift in understanding forgiveness is required if the difficulties in understanding humans forgiving one another are to be resolved, although Kantian notions may be put to new work. To see what must be changed, one must first make the secularist's story of human forgiving as parallel to Kant's religious view of divine forgiving as possible.

Whether or not Kant's understanding of forgiveness is ultimately adequate to the human activity, we must find within our beliefs about human forgiving problems similar to Kant's. It might, after all, be thought that we can be interested in the difficulties Kant as a religious man faced, and his proposed resolutions, but that an extension of Kantian machinery to a secular society and human relations is a solution which has no problem. The conceptual difficulties Kant faced result from the theses that humans are radically evil, morally autonomous, and sometimes forgiven by God in some ultimate judgment. Radical evil and a divine judgment are religious notions; without them, the secular Kantian who believes she has freely done serious wrong may psychologically despair, and may or may not obtain some psychological consolation, but there are no rational conundrums about forgiveness.

A reply starts with a secular analogue to Kant's doctrine of radical evil in the form of the following three beliefs: (i) that there is no excuse for some wrongs and (ii) that there is no way to achieve a secure dominance over human tendency to wrongdoing, and that (iii) moral ideals do not let people simply accept themselves as faulty.

The religious individual, however, despairs not only as a result of what she regards as the inexcusable wrong done, the gap between what she is now and what she thinks she ought to be, even a difference which she believes will persist next year, and the next, but because she thinks the divine judge cannot ever find her morally deserving. A nonreligious individual posits no ultimate judgment, no divine judge. Although this might seem to make matters worse, because there is no (hope of a) generous crediting judgment, I believe it allows for a resolution well within the Kantian domain of moral ideas, and one which makes forgiveness a side issue.

The secular but moral individual can confront the seeming theoretical dilemma posed by the three beliefs by recognizing that she does not need a new theory, does not need some way of reconciling a belief that her inadequacies will persist with a belief that she must change. Instead, she needs to turn from theoretical belief and adopt a different **practical** stance. What she should recognize is that individuals do not have to accept themselves as flawed, nor as potentially perfect. Individuals should rather *act* to become better. Much like an existentialist Sisyphus's decision to push the rock uphill, one decides to wake up each day determined to be better. The secular individual can be practically committed to being better, without any theoretical beliefs that she will ever succeed, ever **be** as she aims to be.

This approach is both attractive and reasonable. What it seems to me to leave out, however, is the dual nature of our moral concern, which may well parallel Kant's religious cum moral beliefs. In the language of a contemporary contractualist[3], we understand someone who is morally serious as concerned both to act on good reasons and to act on reasons which are justifiable to others. What surely underlies this is the desire to be morally acceptable to others, to be part of the community of human, reasonable beings. The counterpart to an ultimate judgment can be expressed in this language as the judgment attributable to theorized, constructed others[4]. This has as a consequence the rational desire to be found acceptable by others, so forgivable, but it does not of course imply that an individual will ask to be forgiven.

[There is a separate question. If we really renounced any attempt at a theoretical resolution, it seems difficult to understand why anyone would choose to forgive. Individuals who are wronged must make themselves vulnerable in forgiving, that is, in trusting others to become better. There is no comparable practical stance for the problematic forgiver that would have the same force as the decision of wrongdoers that I have characterized above. One might decide to be a risk-taker, but one might just as reasonably decide to take as much distance as possible from given individuals.]

The puzzling nature of forgiveness resurfaces. But the last puzzle now takes shape. If a person is religious, it seems unsurprising that she thinks the ultimate judge is God. But there seems no reason to accept a particular human individual's finding one morally acceptable as establishing acceptability or justifiability. There is a, our, philosophical tradition which nonetheless places forgiveness in the domain of the victim because it regards forgiveness as essentially the overcoming of resentment, and resentment, as a matter of linguistic rule, attributable only to the victim. John Dryden ("Forgiveness to the injured doth belong" in Granada) and Bishop Butler are good representatives of that tradition in English. Whether or not this is linguistically correct, no essential feature is caught here. Indignation is close enough to resentment, and the capacity to be indignant about the wrongs done to others so central to morality, that its overcoming can be more generally predicable. (We can if we like call overcoming resentment, forgiveness$_1$, and overcoming indignation, forgiveness$_2$ (subscripts indicating two different uses of the word), but I do not find that very interesting.)

What is more important is to recognize that overcoming resentment and indignation are *preparatory* to the changes in judgment and action of someone who forgives. Forgiving another is fundamentally on my account an objective act, which takes place between individuals. It may require, but it is not to be identified with, an internal psychological process. Here I find the work of Hannah Arendt and the prominence she gives to forgiving illuminating. Forgiving and promising are equally necessary for there to be society, for there to be ongoing relations between people. Arendt speaks of the power of forgiving which prevents consequences which would undermine the possibility of future actions and relations between people. I understand this view in the following way. To forgive another (simpliciter? fully?) is to be prepared to return to the past forms of association, although one may forgive, with qualifications, and be prepared only for civic association with a former intimate. If one has forgiven, however, one is willing to accept another as a full member of the moral community and the reciprocal relations that implies. Forgiveness is not on this account to be understood as a form of dispensation or merciful judgment from a higher to a lower individual.

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[3] Most obviously, here I refer to the work of Scanlon (1998).

[4] But why not attribute to a fellow human being the same practical stance as I have outlined, and a correlative reluctance to form theoretical judgments regarding the 'real' acceptability of others? That would not avoid a decision, on the part of another, to take another as acceptable. And that is all that parallel with Kant requires.

An explicit act of forgiving another is an invitation to another to rejoin the relevant community. It is not that by some fiat or judgment, culpability is modified or evidence of wrongdoing annulled. But welcoming back expresses the idea that the individual is morally acceptable, that past actions do not now debar her from membership in the (perhaps idealized moral) community and, sometimes, more personal association. Trusting someone and renewing relations do alter the significance of the act of wrongdoing. These acts represent for me the substantial work that is done when one forgives.

The ideas of forgiveness upon which I draw are substantially those discussed by Murphy and Hampton. I differ in what I take to be the central elements. Jean Hampton intriguingly suggested that the victim who forgives can "annul the evidence" of wrongdoing. Her focus was the stain of evildoing which she thought the forgiver could remove. I do not underrate the metaphorical force, for those directly involved, of such language, but I think we will have a better understanding if we do not think of forgiving in the epistemological terms relevant to a theoretical judgment of character. Hampton herself noted, at one point, that to forgive someone is to decide to trust the person again, to be willing to enter again into relations and partnerships. We should keep the notion within the work of practical reason. Forgiving is not a finding of good or good-enough moral character, but a decision which can be made for good reasons.

The decision, however, has been the victim's. Why should we think the victim represents the moral community, is authorized to invite the wrongdoer back into anything more than personal association? Yet this is what is required if there is to be an analogue to absolution or removal of the stain of guilt, if forgiveness is the response to moral injury and not merely an individual's loss or harm.

I do not know any philosophers who have doubted the status of the victim to forgive. There is a gripping discussion of the possibility of people forgiving for others in Wiesenthal's book *The Sunflower*. And I know of at least one philosophical discussion which seeks to explain the victim's sole entitlement to forgive while still finding room for third parties to overcome their own indignation. In a very interesting article, Piers Benn (1996)[5] explicitly addresses the question whether individuals other than the direct victim can, morally, as well as conceptually, forgive. Benn argues that since it is the victim who has not been respected, whose value has not been recognized, he can, as it were, forgive or annul what is owed him. Others, however, cannot bypass the victim's right to assert his moral standing, to persist in his rightful resentment. The victim can be self-effacing, whereas those who were not wronged cannot morally be other-effacing.

I want to make use of a distinction Benn does not make, between what are at least different aspects of wrongdoing. Benn is probably right, with respect to betrayal or acts we find personally devastating, that the personal injury gives to the direct victim a special right. Betrayal by an intimate not only makes one angry and resentful, it hurts. One has been personally targeted, it is one's individual affection and past actions which have been devalued and discarded. The victim can put aside standard practices of vindication, at least in so far as only the personal devaluation or harm is concerned.

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[5] His is an intriguing discussion, although I disagree with many of his conclusions. I have not discussed in this paper his notion of quasi-forgiveness, in which a third party suffers because of the wrong done someone close to her. The moral choice available to a third party, to renounce her own indignation, is said to conflict with demands of loyalty. The conflict between forgiveness and loyalty is an important one. My criticism of Benn's account of this conflict rests not on his descriptive presentation of participants' views, but on the failure to note the conceptual confusions in them (Benn, 1996).

Benn is less convincing with respect to the, or a different, moral dimension. For in general, someone who wrongs another has failed to recognize and treat another as a fellow human being who has the same importance as she does herself. Although a given individual suffers, typically what the wrongdoer does not acknowledge is the value of human beings other than herself. The particular(ized) worth of the individual harmed is not, in general, challenged. Of course, I do not deny that the victim is wronged, that what is due her denied. But it is important to distinguish between value, rights and treatment which can be renounced and those which cannot. One's value as a human being, and the right to due respect which is said to go with it, cannot be renounced by an individual. Although our moral practice recognizes that an individual may be self-effacing with respect to honors and benefits and goods, may downgrade her own good when she promotes another's, as in acts of supererogation, it does not accept that she can give up her right, as a human, to the respect due human beings.

It might be thought that while an individual cannot renounce her right to respect, that she can nonetheless forego or annul what is owed as a result of her right being disrespected. Benn, on this view, would be arguing that there is a right both to resentment and to vindication that the particular individual wronged may give up. Resentment may surely be justified and in that sense "rightful". I neither understand what it means, nor know what is to be gained, by claiming a right to resentment or anger. What I find disturbing, if this is the correct interpretation, is that vindication of value takes on the role of punishment, restitution, or compensation. One may wish to cry out in the name of the worth of victims. It does not seem to follow that demands for restitution or retribution if successful effect any vindication of the victim's value. Even if they did, this would not resolve the puzzle raised by the authority to forgive. For forgiveness does not entail nor is it entailed by withdrawing a demand for punishment.

If one separates the issues of reparation or restitution from forgiveness, as I think one ought, the puzzle of giving the victim authority to forgive what is a moral wrong becomes more obvious. Given the wrong and harm to the victim, it is arguable that if there is reparation, it is owed to the victim. One can, however, forego reparation without forgiving, just as one can forgive and still demand reparation. (The latter has a current illustration. A recent NY Times magazine article cites parents who sue the parents of children who have killed, in this case it was the school killings at Columbine. The parents of a wounded victim who face medical costs their insurance company will not pay claim to have prayed and forgiven the killers' parents, but they still hold the parents responsible and want restitution from them.)

I return to my initial question. What entitles the victim to forgive? My suggested resolution starts with a view of forgiving that emphasizes its social role, of reinstating the wrongdoer within the moral community. Forgiving seems not to be a social act, because the victim has a special voice, and her understandable, indeed, justifiable difficulties have been the focus of attention. But the victim's welcoming back the wrongdoer is a privileged route to the wrongdoer's reinstatement. Privilege needs to be explained. The public nature of forgiveness lies both in regained membership in a community and in what must be inferred regarding the source or authority for renewed association. It is not a conceptual truth nor a simple consequence of morality that only the victim can forgive. Other cultures, even past practices of our own culture with similar moral principles are more generous in determining who can forgive than we are today. Recognition of these differences may help one to accept that someone's moral status to forgive is determined by our public practice, not something that just comes with morality.

Although I have suggested that the victim represents the moral community, this may be misleading. There is no story of representation implicit within moral judgment. The forgiver is neither the "representative other" nor the person "best placed to judge". She does not represent a point of view we can all take. She has her point of view, and what our practice "says" is that is the one that counts most heavily. Within limits. An abused spouse who continually forgives is deemed unreasonable and thought perhaps to collude and condone rather than to genuinely recognize wrong and forgive. A community may continue to be outraged by a crime and regard a victim's willingness to forgive as beyond the limits of morality.

I do not want to overstate the victim's authority. Being forgiven by the victim is not the only route to rejoining the moral community, but it can be a short cut compared to independently gaining public acceptance; and without it, there are often barriers to general acceptability. It is also difficult to clearly identify "our" practice. Some religious believers may well present exceptions within it. Although one strand of Christian thought, exemplified by Jean Hampton and others, has emphasized the power of human beings to absolve one another in forgiving, another clearly denies to humans such power. I noted in a BBC filmed documentary of hearings of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission the words of a White South African. His wife had been killed in a blind retaliatory action. He faced her killers and said that as a Christian he had finally come to forgive them for the hurt they had inflicted. But that he could not, and only God could, forgive them for the evil of their action. The husband in this case is viewed as himself a victim; the question he raises regards the nature of the privilege of the victim, whether it extends beyond the hurt the individual experiences to the moral evil of the act[6].

I cannot here explain, or justify, the authority we give to the victim. I can indicate what seems to me now the most plausible approach. I believe we assign to the victim the power to forgive because we place great emphasis on quasi-voluntary or voluntary personal human relations. The special standing of the victim reflects the importance of individual reciprocal relations as well as the importance of personal relations, within morality. We see the singularity of personal relations reflected elsewhere, in our recognition of special obligations towards family members and friends. Individual relations within the construction of the community, and the moral community, are assigned special importance, as seen in the special rights of the victim.

In fact, I think the phenomena of forgiveness are more complex. Attention to the place within our own practice of the victim's standing allows us to recognize in practices that may not be our own close or not-so-close variants. I have speculated that the victim's privilege is tied to a special emphasis on the personal, on quasi-voluntary relations. If we look at other societies, forgiveness takes on a more apparent social and public aspect. Who has special standing may be the family and friends of the victim, even that of a nation, as one sees in the case of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Recent studies of traditional Aboriginal justice in Canada (Ross, 1996) show that the friends and family of the *wrongdoer* may also be assigned a special role; that they also need to forgive the wrongdoer if

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[6] Donald Shriver (1995) in his book *Forgiveness in Politics: An Ethic for Enemies*, discusses the historical roots of humans granting absolution with early Christianity. He is an excellent example of the tradition, within Christianity, which assigns to humans full power to forgive.

reconciliation with society is to be possible. We need to examine these public and political acts of forgiveness. An account of political acts of forgiveness might well help us to be clearer about the nature of individual forgiving.

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