

# **Is unconditional forgiveness morally defective?**

**Eve Garrard and David McNaughton**

**NOT FOR CITATION**

## **Introduction**

There has been an understandable backlash of late against what Jeffrie Murphy (2003) has aptly called ‘boosterism’ about forgiveness – the view that advocates forgiveness of, and reconciliation with, those who have wronged you as the only proper response for victims, a response which will heal their wounds, and which will enable us all to move on from the offence. Boosterism carries with it the implication that those who fail to drop all negative feelings towards their persecutors and embrace them in fellowship are morally deficient.<sup>1</sup> Critics of this view typically doubt whether it is always a good thing to forgive people who have wronged you. Shouldn’t we withhold forgiveness unless and until they repent of their actions? Isn’t the maintenance of anger at wrongdoers, especially ones who don’t regret their offences, sometimes morally justified? Surely there’s such a thing as cheap, facile forgiveness, forgiveness which is objectionable because it is just too easy to be morally worthwhile?

We approach these questions from the standpoint of a commitment to unconditional forgiveness. That is, we hold that there is always good reason to forgive an offender, whether or not he has repented of his wrongful actions. Such forgiveness, when given for the right reasons, is always admirable. Since we have defended this view elsewhere, we shall not rehearse those arguments again here.<sup>2</sup> But on the face of it our view seems to be wide open to the objections raised against boosterism. In this paper, we argue against those objections. Unconditional forgiveness need not be docile, supine, or facile.

In particular, we shall try to show four things. Firstly, forgiveness is compatible with the maintenance of certain kinds of anger and other negative feelings towards perpetrators. Secondly, while forgiveness is always appropriate, even where the offender is unrepentant, forgiveness is different from reconciliation, and there are cases where reconciliation is not appropriate. Thirdly, we are not advocating a forgiveness that is *too* easy on the offender. While forgiveness is a free gift, reconciliation and reinstatement as a

member of the moral community in good standing may have to be earned. Finally, it might seem that, as advocates of unconditional forgiveness, we are committed to thinking that all forgiveness is good, and hence that there cannot be objectionably facile forms of forgiveness. But this is not so. There are indeed forms of forgiveness that are not admirable.

## **1 Negative feelings and forgiveness**

It is universally agreed that forgiveness involves the overcoming by the victim of a range of negative feelings towards the wrongdoer. Unconditional forgiveness, then, involves abandoning these negative feelings, even if the offender neither repents nor apologizes. The obvious objection to this view is that it seems too easy on the wrongdoer and too supine on the part of the forgiver. The victim, according to this objection, is warranted in having these feelings, and the wrongdoer must earn his forgiveness. In response to this objection, we seek to show that forgiveness is compatible with retaining a range of robust negative feelings and attitudes towards the wrongdoer. The victim can, and often should, retain these feelings and attitudes, until the offender has done something to earn their remission by such steps as repentance, apology, reparation, and so on. While it is true that a number of negative feelings must be abandoned in forgiveness, there are good reasons to abandon those ones even when the offender is unrepentant, and we can do so while standing up for ourselves and retaining self-respect.

So which negative feelings and attitudes might be present in the victim, and which need to be overcome in forgiveness? The most frequently discussed negative feeling is resentment, but it is increasingly common in the literature to mention others, including anger, hatred, loathing, disgust, contempt, sadness, indifference, disappointment, vengefulness, disdain and scorn<sup>3</sup>. There is widespread disagreement both about what constitutes these feelings, and also about which one(s) have to be overcome in forgiveness. Everyone agrees that certain hostile feelings – such as spite and malice – are incompatible with forgiveness, but most accept that the suggestion that *all* negative feelings must be overcome is too strong.<sup>4</sup> For example, my continuing to be disappointed that I have been betrayed by my best friend does not by itself show that I have not forgiven him. What has been missing from the debate, and what we aim

to supply in this section, is a principled way of determining whether any given negative feeling needs to be overcome in forgiveness. We maintain that forgiveness requires two things on the part of the victim: the absence of ill-will towards the wrongdoer, and also the presence, to some degree, of an attitude of good-will. Hence, the negative feelings which need to be purged if forgiveness is to take place will be all those which involve ill-will. Let us call such feelings not merely negative but hostile.

Two preparatory points need to be made. First, our focus will be on first-personal forgiveness, in which the victim forgives the person who has wronged her. However, we are persuaded<sup>5</sup> that there are cases where those who are not themselves the victims of wrongdoing may properly be said to forgive or withhold forgiveness, and so what we say here about overcoming hostile feelings would apply to them also.<sup>6</sup> Even if our readers are unconvinced about the semantic propriety of speaking in this way, third parties often do have hostile feelings towards those who have wronged others, and if it is good that victims overcome such feelings it is plausible to suppose that it will also be desirable for third parties to overcome them. Second, although we speak, for the sake of brevity, of overcoming hostile feelings in the face of wrongdoing, we of course acknowledge that a very virtuous agent might manage never to have these feelings in the first place, and so have none to overcome. It would be absurd, however, to deny that such a person forgave the person who wronged them. This is not to say, of course, that anyone who lacks hostile feelings in response to a wrong is thereby virtuous. For, as we shall later discuss, it is possible for the victim to lack such a response for the wrong reasons – because he lacks self-respect, or is in some other way cowed or supine.<sup>7</sup>

What is it to feel ill-will towards someone? We suggest that ill-will involves the wish or desire that something bad happen to that person for its own sake, and not simply as a means to some further goal.<sup>8</sup> Even if the goal we are pursuing is bad, harming someone in pursuit of that goal need not display ill-will, although it will display a lack of moral respect for that person. A bank robber who inflicts harm on a guard in order to effect her escape has no personal animus against the guard, no desire that he be harmed for its own sake. However, I can have ill-will without forming an intention to harm, since I may not be willing, or even inclined, to take any steps to harm the object of my ire myself, since I recognize that

there are good reasons not to. But if I feel ill-will towards you I would, at the least, find it satisfying if some misfortune were to befall you. Ill-will, of course, can vary in strength, so if the misfortune is severe and my ill-will is only slight, I may feel pity rather than glee when things go very badly for you. But for there to be some degree of ill-will, there must be some level of misfortune, however slight, that might befall you that I would find gratifying.

To feel ill-will is one thing; to endorse that feeling another. We might express that difference by saying that one who identifies with, and endorses, his feelings of hostility to A actually *has* ill-will towards A (even if he has decided not to harm A himself), whereas the person who wishes he did not have those feelings merely *feels* ill-will. While I may well have some control over whether I endorse my feeling of ill-will, I may have little or no control over whether or not I actually feel gratification at your misfortune, however hard I may be trying not to feel hostile. The recalcitrance of these feelings raises a difficulty for our account of what is needed for forgiveness. Suppose that I have taken all possible steps to overcome the hostility I originally felt towards you. I have forsworn revenge, am actively seeking your good, and treat you without rancour or hostility when we meet. Nevertheless, when I think of the wrong you did me feelings of hostility towards you well up; when I hear that some small mishap has befallen you I feel a momentary stab of malicious delight. I am immediately heartily ashamed of these reactions; I not only refuse to endorse them, but try to distance myself from them as far as possible. On our account, however, it would seem that I still have not forgiven you, and that judgment may seem unduly harsh, especially when that failure is not through lack of trying on my part.

Our response to this objection is that such a judgment would be unduly harsh if it were seen as reflecting poorly on my efforts to forgive. But it need not be seen as such a criticism. Whether you have forgiven someone is measured by the actual state of your feelings, not by the amount of effort you are expending in trying to change them. We do in fact say things like: "I have tried for many years to forgive but I find I can't; the wrong still rankles". Moreover, forgiveness, when it does come, may come swiftly and unexpectedly, when we have perhaps given up hope that it will.<sup>9</sup> But, our objector might respond, isn't a capacity for (non-facile) forgiveness a virtue on your view, and so doesn't the denial that someone

has forgiven, even when they have made every effort to change their behaviour and their feelings, amount to an implicit criticism of the would-be forgiver as having fallen short of the ideal? Our reply is that no *blame* need attach to a failure to forgive where all possible effort has been made. It is desirable to attain an ideal, and so praiseworthy to achieve it and a matter of regret if one falls short. But regret is not blame, and a judgment that one has not attained the highest standard need not, in that respect, be a criticism of the agent. If the reader is unconvinced by this defence, however, she can modify our account along the lines suggested by Griswold. He points out that ‘forgiveness’ may refer either to the process of overcoming resentment or to the end state. While we go for the latter, he proposes that “forgiveness requires that resentment for the relevant injury be appropriately moderated *and* that the agent make a further commitment to work toward a frame of mind in which even that resentment is let go” (2007, 42).

Our suggestion, then, is that forgiveness can only take place when all hostile feelings are purged. But not all negative attitudes involve hostility. If I am disappointed in, or disapprove of, what you have done, I need not have any desire that you suffer harm for its own sake. Attitudes such as malice and spite, however, clearly do involve hostility. It is some confirmation of our view that almost all agree that only the latter, and not the former, need be overcome in forgiveness.

Other attitudes, however, are harder to categorise. Consider resentment and indignation. Nearly all those who have written on the topic agree that resentment has to be (largely) overcome if forgiveness is to take place. But it is certainly possible to argue, as we did in our 2003 paper, that forgiveness is compatible with continuing indignation with the perpetrator of the wrong, especially if he is unrepentant. What differences might there be between these two attitudes that would justify this different treatment? One often noted difference is that resentment is now standardly taken to be first-personal – I can only resent a wrong done to me – whereas I can feel indignant when someone else is wronged. But that thought is not in itself sufficient to justify thinking of the two as distinct attitudes requiring different treatment, for the distinction may be purely semantic. I can surely feel indignation on my own behalf, and so one could think of resentment as merely another term for indignation, but one that can only be employed first-personally. Bishop Butler, indeed, goes further, taking the two terms to be synonymous, and happily

using ‘resentment’ in third-person as well as in first-person contexts.<sup>10</sup> Some have suggested, however, that our current usage – in which ‘resentment’ can only be used first-personally, whereas there is no such restriction on the use of ‘indignation’ – indicates more than a merely linguistic restriction.<sup>11</sup> Because resentment is first-personal in a way that indignation is not, resentment is a form of protest that only the victim can make, whereas indignation is a protest against the wrongdoer’s breach of the moral law that anyone can make, including the victim. So, for example, Jean Hampton suggests the following distinction:

Indignation is the emotional protest against immoral treatment whose object is the defense of the value which this action violated, whereas resentment is an emotion whose object is the defiant reaffirmation of one’s rank and value in the face of treatment calling them into question ... (1988, 59-60).

We have argued in our 2003 paper that this account captures, at best, not the nature of resentment, but only one form that resentment might take. Leaving that criticism aside, we might note two things. First, even if these two emotional attitudes differ in their content, it is unclear that the second is *necessarily* first-personal. Third parties can certainly defiantly reaffirm the rank and value of others who are badly treated. Second, allowing her claim that these are distinct attitudes, the difference between them would not license the thought that resentment, but not indignation, has to be overcome in forgiveness. Indeed, we suggest, both the attitudes to which Hampton draws our attention seem compatible with forgiving, for neither involves ill-will to the offender.<sup>12</sup>

Why, then, might one hold, as we earlier did, that resentment, but not indignation, needs to be overcome in forgiveness? In our own case, at least, it was because we took resentment essentially to involve ill-will as well as indignation. Someone who resents has vindictive feelings, bears a grudge. He wants the object of his resentment to suffer, would like the offender to have his come-uppance, and so on, irrespective of whether justice or the common good require it.<sup>13</sup> While it is natural to understand resentment that way, it is not, we now think, necessary. I can, after all, say “I resent that remark”, or “I resent your high-handed behaviour”, without wishing you ill. I am simply voicing my indignation at the

wrong done to me. Usage here is not clear, so we can stipulate. It seems wasteful to use resentment and indignation as synonyms, so we shall mark the difference between simple indignation and its vindictive cousin by calling the latter, when felt by the victim, ‘resentment’. And vindictiveness, which we take to involve a direct desire for the suffering of another, is of course incompatible with forgiving that other.

What, then, is indignation? In our 2003 paper we say that indignation involves “the desire to do what one can to resist the wrong, by fight or protest, and to bring comfort and succour to the oppressed” and that that desire is compatible with forgiveness. Though true, that remark does not seem to capture the essence of indignation, but rather one of its effects. We take it that indignation involves a feeling of outrage (or some similar but less intense emotion) by A towards an action of B’s which, A judges, B ought not to have performed, typically (but not necessarily) because B has breached some law, code, rule, or moral requirement that A holds that B ought to have observed.<sup>14</sup> While we can feel indignant about non-moral matters, it is moral indignation that primarily concerns us here – outrage at a moral wrong, at some breach of the moral law. We also take it that A’s indignation typically involves the desire that this breach of the moral law be rectified in some manner.

What does rectification require? It may require, among other things, that the offender’s wrongdoing be brought home to him in a way that will lead to repentance and reform, and that, where appropriate, he make apology and reparation to his victim. In the cases of lesser wrongs, that may be all that is needed for rectification. But in more serious cases rectification seems to require some form of punishment. Justice needs to be done to the offender; apology and reparation on his part are insufficient to satisfy our indignation. But this analysis raises a difficulty for our claim that indignation does not involve ill-will, and thus for the claim (which we endorse) that a desire for just punishment is compatible with forgiveness. For the desire for justice seems to involve a retributive element. It is fitting, according to the retributivist, that the serious offender be punished, simply in virtue of his offence, and irrespective of further good that may come from such punishment by way of reform, deterrence, etc. But punishment involves doing harm to the offender. So isn’t the desire for justice that is central to indignation a desire that the offender be harmed, irrespective of any further good that might flow from it? And doesn’t such a

desire constitute ill-will towards him? If that is correct, then on our account, that aspect of indignation would have to be given up in forgiveness. Moreover, we would only have forgiven an offender if we ceased to desire his punishment for its own sake – though we could desire it as a means if we thought it would bring about some desirable effects.

That justice contains a retributive element is, of course, controversial. We could handle this issue by appealing to a non-retributive account of justice. However non-retributive accounts fail to capture the rectificatory element in justice. Consequently, we wish to explore the possibility that vengeance and retribution are distinct, so that a desire for retribution is not merely a desire for vengeance masquerading as something respectable. We cannot, of course, offer anything like a full discussion of theories of penal justice here, but we shall try to indicate the lines along which a defense of the viability of the distinction between vengeance and retribution might go.

Retributive theories can be divided into weak and strong. Weak theories claim only that guilt is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for just punishment. We may not punish the innocent, but should not punish the guilty unless some further good is achieved. Strong theories hold that guilt is sufficient for just punishment; that we have reason to punish the guilty and should do so, unless there is some overriding reason against. It is only the strong version that need concern us here.

We might distinguish vengeance and retribution along the following lines. Vengeance is a response to a harm done to you and yours that seeks to get even with the perpetrator by harming him back. It takes its satisfaction in the downfall, or even the degradation, of its object. It need not involve the belief that I have been wronged. I may seek revenge because you have stolen the object of my affections, or ruined me in fair competition, without holding that you have acted wrongly in so doing. Even where it is directed at a wrong, its focus, we suggest, is not with the rectification of that wrong. Rather, what the vindictive person seeks is the satisfaction of seeing the perpetrator suffer, whether or not that suffering serves justice. In retribution, it is the rectification of the wrong that is the focus. No satisfaction is taken in the suffering of the perpetrator for its own sake, but only insofar as it serves justice. The attitudes of the vengeful and the indignant person to the suffering imposed in just punishment will characteristically differ. The indignant



person who is not vengeful will be pleased if the offender's punishment may rightfully be lessened, perhaps because the offender repents and reforms, or because we discover that the offence was less severe or mitigated in some way. The vengeful person, by contrast, is going to gloat over the downfall and even degradation of the one who has wronged him, and be frustrated if it turns out that the wrongdoer deserves a lesser punishment than the vengeful person would find satisfying.

There are two possible objections to our claim that the vengeful person desires the offender's suffering for its own sake whereas the indignant does not. The first objection argues that the indignant, as well as the vengeful, desire suffering for its own sake. There are two ways, the objection runs, in which suffering (or anything else) can be desired without being desired for its own sake. The first is where it is desired solely as a means to some goal that is desirable. Here, the suffering can be regretted, and we would not choose that means if there were an alternative route that did not involve suffering. The second is where what is desired is a complex state of affairs which happens to have suffering as a part. The suffering is not an essential part of the desired state; it is a contingent fact that, if that state is to be realized, there will be some suffering. Here again, the suffering is regretted, and if there were some way of realizing the other elements in that state of affairs without the suffering, that is what we would choose. The difficulty for retributivism, this objection runs, is that the suffering of the offender is conceived as an essential part of justice being done. The suffering is not a *means* to the good that justice seeks, nor is it contingently present in a state that is overall good; it is a *constituent element* in that good. The good of justice can only be realized in virtue of the offender suffering some harm. So both the vengeful and the indignant desire the suffering of the perpetrator for its own sake.

Our reply is that, even where the suffering of the perpetrator is an ineliminable part of the state of affairs that is desired, it makes a difference under what description that state is desired. The seeker after justice desires it because the imposition of the suffering is a morally appropriate response to the offence. The suffering is not desired *qua* suffering but *qua* rectification of a wrong. And that attitude, unlike the desire for vengeance, does not seek satisfaction in the suffering for its own sake, but for the sake of justice. An example from a different sphere may make this clear. Empathic suffering can be admirable.

We think that it is appropriate to respond to the suffering of innocent people or animals with sympathetic pain. Someone who suffered no discomfort at all on, say, witnessing another in deep distress or undergoing acute physical pain would be cold-hearted and unfeeling. That remains true, even if our empathic response brings about no further good, such as cheering up the sufferer. That the empathic person suffers is not a means to a good other than itself, nor an eliminable part of a state that is overall good; it is an essential part of a state of affairs that is better than one in which suffering meets with no empathic response. The response of a virtuous third person, C, who is aware of A's suffering and B's empathic response to it, will be complex. Given that A is suffering and that B is aware of it, he will be pleased that B is distressed at A's suffering. But it would be inappropriate to say that C wants or values B's suffering *for its own sake*. On the contrary, C will suffer a double dose of empathic pain at the suffering of both A and B, and will wish that neither were suffering. So it would be quite wrong to describe C as desiring B's suffering for its own sake, or as an end in itself. Rather, he values B's suffering because it is an appropriate response to A's suffering. Similarly, the seeker after justice does not desire the imposition of suffering on the perpetrator as an end in itself; rather he desires it because it is an appropriate response to the wrong the perpetrator has committed. Just as the state of affairs in which B responds empathically to A's suffering is intrinsically better than one in which B is unmoved, so a state of affairs in which a wrong is punished is intrinsically better than one in which it goes unpunished. In each case, the better state contains more suffering than the less good state. But that does not mean that the person who wants the better state of affairs to obtain, desires suffering for its own sake.

The second objection accepts our response to the first objection and then wonders, given our defense, whether it is accurate to say that the vengeful person desires the offender's suffering for its own sake. Here again, as with the retributivist, "it makes a difference under what description that state is desired". To say that someone wants the suffering of another *for its own sake*, might be taken to imply that the description – 'the suffering of another' – best captures that aspect under which it is seen as desirable. But presumably only an out and out misanthrope would want simply that people suffer. What the vengeful person wants is that the wrongdoer suffer as a revenge for the harm he did; that the wrongdoer be brought

down to, or below, the level of his victim, that he get a taste of his own medicine. So, the objection concludes, neither the indignant nor the vengeful are happily described as wanting the suffering of the offender for its own sake. We are sympathetic to the thrust of this objection, but notice that it still enables us to distinguish between the desires of the different parties. Instead of a contrast between wanting another to suffer for the sake of justice and wanting another to suffer for its own sake, we now have a contrast between wanting another's suffering for the sake of justice, and wanting it for the sake of regaining one's own standing vis-à-vis the offender, a standing which was damaged by the original offence. As we earlier argued, the sources of satisfaction and patterns of motivation of the two different stances will differ markedly

Finally, there is a group of attitudes which express our detestation of the agent – amongst them loathing, contempt, and disdain.<sup>15</sup> Are some, or all, of these compatible with forgiveness? None of these seems to be in itself a form of ill-will; we do not necessarily want the lives of those we loathe or disdain to go worse than they are. How do they differ? Of the three, disdain alone seems necessarily to require the judgment that I am better than the person I disdain. When we disdain, we look down from a superior position. Hence, we cannot disdain ourselves. But we can loathe ourselves and regard ourselves with contempt. When we loathe someone we just want to have nothing to do with him because we find him repellent. When we regard someone with contempt we typically view him as disgracefully failing to meet some standard of behaviour or attitude. Can we have forgiven someone if we still regard that person as loathsome or contemptible, or view him with disdain?

On our view, the absence of ill-will is insufficient for forgiveness, there must be some element of positive good-will as well. Disdain, if carried to an extreme, seems to undermine good will because it takes its object not to be worth bothering about. The disdained person is so lowly, as compared to me, that I have no reason to concern myself with his welfare one way or another.<sup>16</sup> What of loathing and contempt? Of course, an individual may perform a loathsome act without being loathsome himself if the act is out of character. But can I forgive someone I judge to have a loathsome and contemptible character? It appears that I can, for I can continue to have good will towards such a person. In particular, I can hope

that they improve and become less loathsome. Can I forgive someone whom I think of as *irredeemably* loathsome? There seem to be two ways in which his loathsomeness might be irredeemable. Firstly, we may judge that he is so steeped in wickedness that he is incapable of reformation; we simply “write him off” as hopeless. Or, secondly, we may think that he is perpetually soiled by what he has done, so that even if he were to repent and try to change he would be unable to wipe away the stain.<sup>17</sup> We are inclined to think that the first judgement is incompatible with forgiveness. While it may be true that some people are beyond redemption (though this is disputable) we certainly cannot know that they are. And it seems incompatible with the kind of good will we envisage that we should give up on them while there remains some possibility of improvement, however unlikely. We think, however, that we can forgive someone about whom we make the second kind of judgment. For it is clearly better that they reform than that they do not, and we can still regard them with good-will, and wish for their improvement, even if we judge that the stain will never be removed.<sup>18</sup>

## **2 Reconciliation**

Where does reconciliation fit into our picture? We think that forgiveness requires minimal goodwill, and that entails an openness to association or reconciliation (depending on whether there was a previous relationship) in certain circumstances. Should we be prepared to reconcile with the unrepentant? In some cases, there are very good practical reasons not to do so. For example, reconciliation may be dangerous, as might be the case, say, if a battered wife returned to her abusive husband. Or it may send the wrong signal to the offender, or to an onlooker, as might be the case if it implied that the wrong was not so dreadful, or that there was no real reason for repentance. (The communicative power of an act of reconciliation is particularly important where the offence isn’t just against the victim, but against the whole of society, or at least against a group of people of whom the forgiver is just one.) So the surrounding circumstances may make reconciliation inappropriate. However, where the deed was morally heinous or indicative of a loathsome character, it might be *intrinsically* inappropriate to reconcile without repentance. (Indeed, there may be cases where reconciliation is intrinsically inappropriate, even with

those who have repented. Eleonore Stump's discussion (in her 2004) of a stain on the soul builds on our intuition that there would be something grotesquely inappropriate about having even a repentant Goebbels round to dinner).

Many have argued that forgiveness ought only to take place when the offender has repented. In advocating unconditional forgiveness we are denying that claim. But we agree that repentance has a role to play in this area; we simply disagree with our opponents about the point at which it is relevant. It is, sometimes, a condition of reconciliation, but not of forgiveness. The repentance of the offender may be required in order for (renewed) association to become appropriate, and so for that reconciliation (to which the forgiver is always open) to take place. Some people think of forgiving as involving a readmission to good standing in the moral community, and such a conception will certainly require repentance. But we don't accept this view of forgiveness, and hence don't need to accept this role for repentance.

Finally, someone may object that the difference between us and the advocates of conditional forgiveness is merely verbal. They hold that forgiveness requires reconciliation (and hence repentance on the part of the offender) and should therefore be conditional. We think that forgiveness requires only openness to reconciliation, and consequently that we may forgive unconditionally. But we and they agree that reconciliation is a worthwhile goal towards which we should be striving. All we disagree about, then, is the scope of the concept of forgiveness. We doubt this. We are making a substantive claim that is frequently denied, namely that it is always admirable unconditionally to abandon hostile feelings and adopt an attitude of good will to unrepentant offenders. However, if someone wishes to agree with that claim, but deny that such a change of heart may properly be called forgiveness, we would not wish to continue the argument, for then our disagreement would be purely verbal.

### **3 Is unconditional forgiveness objectionably facile?**

So far, we have argued that forgiveness is compatible with the maintenance of some negative feelings towards the wrongdoer, and that there is a principled way of deciding just which negative feelings can be retained in forgiveness, and which must be jettisoned. We now turn to consider the question of whether

unconditional forgiveness is objectionable because it's too easy on the offender. Here the thought is that unconditional forgiveness gives the offender something she or he doesn't deserve, and also weakens the pressure on the offender of social disapproval and rejection, a pressure which can help him to see that what he did was wrong, and hence help him to a genuine repentance.

A further and related objection to unconditional forgiveness is the claim that it expresses a moral weakness in the forgiver – it shows that she doesn't take the offence seriously enough, or that she has too little self-respect. The wrongdoer has treated the victim as if she were of no account, as if harming or humiliating her were unimportant because she herself is unimportant. Where the offender acknowledges his wrongdoing by feeling and showing repentance, then it may be legitimate to forgive him; but the forgiver of an unrepentant wrongdoer, it is thought, betrays a kind of collusion in his low estimate of the victim's importance. Alternatively, it is sometimes said that forgiveness in the absence of repentance shows that the forgiver hasn't really grasped the true moral nature of the offence: she underestimates its wrongfulness. Here unconditional forgiveness is again seen as being too easy, but this time for the forgiver – she doesn't undergo the effort of grasping the full moral significance of the offence, and then overcoming the resentment which that grasp naturally produces in her. Forgiveness is difficult, and one who forgives an unrepentant offender hasn't done the hard labour that legitimate forgiveness requires.

These objections place constraints on legitimate forgiveness: constraints on the mental state of the perpetrator – he must be repentant - and also constraints on the mental state of the forgiver– she must not be deficient in self-respect, nor in the accuracy and fullness of her grasp of the moral nature of the offence. However, unconditional forgiveness can be defended against these objections. The constraints on the mental state of the offender rest on a conception of forgiveness that is not a compelling one; the constraints on the mental states of the forgiver can be accepted, since they are not incompatible with unconditional forgiveness.

Those who regard unconditional forgiveness as too easy on the offender conceive of forgiveness as something which has to be earned. But there is an alternative conception of forgiveness in which it's seen as supererogatory, as having the nature of a gift; and there are central features of forgiveness which seem

to require such a conception – in particular, the fact that in most cases, forgiveness can't be demanded of the forgiver by the offender. Proponents of unconditional forgiveness can agree that the unrepentant offender doesn't deserve to be forgiven, but maintain that gifts don't have to be deserved. It's one thing to claim that we aren't required to forgive unrepentant offenders (a claim which we endorse, since we view forgiveness as supererogatory); it's another thing to make the much stronger claim that we are required not to forgive such offenders. We see no reason to accept this latter claim, and it certainly can't be established by pointing out that the offender doesn't deserve to be forgiven.

Furthermore, unconditional forgiveness need involve no failure in self-respect, since the victim's sense of her own worth may not be dependent on the views of the offender, and hence may not be damaged by his actions<sup>19</sup>. Nor need it involve any failure to grasp the seriousness of the offence since, as we have argued, unconditional forgiveness is compatible with the maintenance of indignation, which is the appropriate response to serious breaches of the moral code.

So the claim that unconditional forgiveness necessarily amounts to an objectionably facile forgiveness does not seem to succeed. But from the fact that unconditional forgiveness needn't be facile it doesn't follow that it can't be. Another and stronger objection suggests that there may indeed be such cases. This objection is based on the claim (which we accept) that victims have a right to retain anger and indignation. They may, in some circumstances, have good reason to feel resentment, since in cases of severe wrongdoing ill-will may be a warranted response. As Brudholm (following Améry) has persuasively argued, the maintenance of resentment need be neither immoral nor pathological: it can in certain circumstances be an ethically legitimate attitude, and one which can produce some of the good consequences which are commonly thought (especially by forgiveness boosterists) to be the result of forgiveness.<sup>20</sup> Victims who demand punishment for offenders may be gripped by a desire not for vengeance but for justice; and even in maintaining resentment itself they may be insisting that we should not lose our morally essential sense of the responsibility and the culpability of those who have committed terrible wrongs. The persistence of resentment may, as Améry thought, protect us all from the easy forgetfulness that would allow the horrors of the past to be recreated in the future.<sup>21</sup>

This objection to unconditional forgiveness does not focus on the undeservingness of the offender or on any putative failure in self-respect on the part of the forgiver. Rather, it points out that in some cases, resentment and its constituent ill-will may be warranted – there may be good reason for it, and it may be driven by a concern for justice and moral responsibility. In such cases, so it is suggested, unconditional forgiveness is a facile alternative to the hard but necessary task of maintaining a clear-eyed understanding of the horrors that were committed, of the culpability of the perpetrators, and of what justice requires of us.

However, this insistence on the legitimacy of resentment is entirely compatible with the claim that there is always good reason to forgive the perpetrator. Grasping this reason does not require any denial of the weight of his offences or the depth of his culpability; rather it rests on a recognition of our common, flawed, human nature, and common susceptibility to evil (a view for which we have provided fuller argument elsewhere<sup>22</sup>). Resentment may be warranted, but so also is forgiveness, which precludes resentment (though not indignation). Since forgiveness is supererogatory, the alternative of resentment remains legitimate, and may indeed in some circumstances be preferable to a facile forgiveness. But there is something better than either, namely the kind of forgiveness which involves no distancing from or evasion of the nature and weight of the offence, which is open-eyed about the genuine violation of morality involved, but which nonetheless manages to overcome ill-will towards the perpetrator.

We have argued that unconditional forgiveness, as we construe it, is not objectionably facile. It may, however, seem to be open to another kind of objection altogether, the suggestion that its proponents must, counter-intuitively, regard all cases of forgiveness as morally legitimate. But it's an obvious part of our moral experience that some cases of forgiveness are defectively facile. However, the view that there is always a good reason to forgive perpetrators doesn't in fact entail the claim that forgiveness can never be morally objectionable, since here as elsewhere people can do the right thing for the wrong reasons or in the wrong way. On our construal, there can indeed be cases of facile forgiveness, since although forgiveness is unconditionally offered vis-à-vis the offender, it is not unconditionally legitimate vis-à-vis the forgiver.



#### 4 Defective forgiveness

Facile forgiveness can take a variety of forms, the most obvious of which involves downplaying the seriousness of the wrong done to the victim, suggesting that the offence wasn't really so very bad, and hence should be readily forgiven. (Of course, if the offence *really* wasn't very bad, then acknowledging this is not only permissible but obligatory, and failure to do so is morally objectionable on the other side, so to speak. But sometimes this diminishing claim is made in cases where it is simply false.) Or the victim may think that she deserves to be treated badly, even in cases where she would protest about others being treated in that way. We have argued that unconditional forgiveness needn't involve a lack of self-respect. But there's no doubt that in some circumstances forgiveness does in fact express a failure of proper self-respect, and where this is so, it's morally defective.

There is also the case where forgiveness comes easily to the victim because she has too little anger or indignation in the first place – too little, that is, in proportion to the seriousness of the offence – and consequently has little or no resentment to overcome. Where an offence is serious, the appropriate response to it is indignation<sup>23</sup>; a person who feels little or no indignation is unlikely to have adequately grasped its moral significance. Here as elsewhere, affective and cognitive responses are not fully separable, and the person who feels too little indignation is suffering from both an emotional and a cognitive deficit. Where resentment is minimal because indignation is minimal, forgiveness comes cheap; but it is bought at the expense of a failure to recognise and respond appropriately to the true gravity of the offence.

Earlier we denied that unconditional forgiveness must always reject the moral legitimacy of resentment. But people do sometimes insist on the therapeutic value of overcoming resentment, of rising above (in a question-begging idiom) the offence, and moving on. This smooth readiness to wipe the slate clean may silence the voices of those victims who claim that justice is what would heal them, not forgiveness – or at least not forgiveness in the absence of justice. There is an attitude that is readily overlooked in a culture which admires and celebrates forgiveness. But victims with this attitude may not

be primarily concerned with their own healing or well-being at all – their demand for justice or retribution may derive from a duty they feel to those who died as a result of the perpetrators’ crimes, or they may see the demand for justice as morally compelling in its own right, as necessary to rectify a violation of the moral order, irrespective of its effects on their psyches. An insistence that the importance of recognizing and acknowledging breaches of the moral order can outweigh questions of psychological health is not a morally negligible position<sup>24</sup>. In contrast, a readiness to forgive (and even more a readiness to advocate forgiveness to resentful victims) which ignores these possibilities may be objectionably facile.

Further forms of facile forgiveness involve motives which are both self-serving (as the putatively therapeutic motive is) and also independently objectionable (as the therapeutic motive is not). For example, forgiveness may be proffered as a way of attempting to gain the moral high ground in the eyes of others, or as a way of avoiding protest or confrontation, or just to make the forgiver feel good about herself. All of these skirt the real depth of the offence, and substitute a glossing over of what was done for a proper apprehension of the moral transgression, and an overcoming of the resentment it naturally produces. Indeed in cases where these motives predominate it generally isn’t clear that forgiveness – the overcoming of ill-will and the adoption of at least minimal good will – has actually taken place. If the desired outcome – the high standing, the keeping of the peace or the warm glow of self-admiration – fails to materialize, an uprush of resentment often reveals that the work of forgiveness is still to be done.

It’s tempting to think that what makes these diverse forms of facile forgiveness objectionable is solely that they display various character defects, such as spinelessness, or moral insensitivity, or a readiness to milk the situation of being a victim in order to increase one’s own standing in the eyes of others. However, to focus exclusively on such character defects would be to overlook a common factor here, which both unites these examples and contributes to the explanation of why they are objectionable. They all involve an attitude towards the offender which tends towards indifference to, or condoning of, the wrongdoing: they all effect some diminution of the offence.

One way of treating the issue of facile forgiveness would be to deny that it is genuine, since forgiveness is admirable and facile forgiveness is objectionable. We could categorise it as pseudo-

forgiveness, and insist that true forgiveness involves full recognition of the nature of the offence, since it's the ill-will which that recognition naturally produces that has to be overcome in forgiveness. Failing to notice that a perpetrator has done wrong is not a way of forgiving him. But this would be deviating too far from normal usage, and it seems better to retain the term 'forgiveness' for all cases of overcoming morally-motivated ill-will, and adopting good will, towards offenders.<sup>25</sup> The significant distinction is between legitimate and morally defective forgiveness, and the cases of facile forgiveness discussed above are morally defective in part because they tend towards condonation.

All this can be fully accepted by the proponents of unconditional forgiveness. Forgiveness is compatible with indignation and anger, and sometimes with the demand for punishment. The criticism of cheap boosterism and facile forgiveness is justified: victims are entitled to feel anger, and their resentment is often legitimate – that is, there is good reason for it<sup>26</sup>. If the alternatives between which we are judging are facile forgiveness or the maintenance of a justified resentment, then the latter may be morally more legitimate than the former. The resentment of a Jean Améry has a moral depth that the forgiveness of a Uriah Heep entirely lacks.

The central claim of those who endorse unconditional forgiveness is that there is always good reason to forgive a perpetrator, although in most cases forgiveness is supererogatory, so no blame attaches to the refusal to forgive. That reason involves no diminution of or glossing over the nature of the perpetrator's crimes; it involves only a solidarity which stems from a recognition that wrongful though the perpetrators may be, they're not entirely alien to us; and also from a refusal to give up on them completely, a decision to maintain hope in and for them. It is not, of course, any kind of solidarity with or support for what they have done.

What if such solidarity with the perpetrators causes distress to other victims? Here we might distinguish between forgiveness and its expression: normally the two go together, but in cases where unforgiving victims would be hurt (as they well might be) by the offering of forgiveness to the perpetrator, we might have reason to withhold, not so much the forgiveness itself, but the expression of that forgiveness. Victims will generally have a far greater claim on our attention and support than

perpetrators. Their concerns – for example, that there should be broad recognition of the injustice that was committed, and (in some cases) that the offenders should be punished – should come first; it doesn't follow, however, that we need to maintain ill-will towards the offenders, although it may follow that we should maintain indignation at what they have done.

We have argued that it is morally legitimate for victims to resent perpetrators. We have also argued that victims always have reason to forgive them: that is, they have reason to overcome the ill-will which is part of resentment. Which reasons win out? The balance of reasons, for and against forgiveness, will of course vary from case to case. But we should not assume that the specificities of the individual case are always what settles the matter. Background commitments, to goodwill rather than to ill-will, to love rather than to hate, may come into play here, and alter the interaction of the various considerations. Although many, perhaps most, moral issues are to be settled by a process of weighing and balancing the competing considerations present in the particular context which we're facing, this needn't always be the case – sometimes we feel ourselves called on to make a brute and fundamental choice, in which we commit ourselves to our broadest background values. What is the best response in the particular case can be determined by a wider world-view involving a preference for love rather than hate (even legitimate hate), a preference which is basic and cannot be further defended. Even Jeffrie Murphy, who defends resentment so persuasively, thinks that all of us would prefer to be inscribed in the Book of Love rather than in the Book of Hate (2003, 86), and that is a preference which may lead us to choose forgiveness over even a fully-justified, entirely legitimate resentment.

Finally, it might be thought that the position which we're defending no longer contains anything that's fully recognizable as a conception of *forgiveness* at all. On our account, forgiveness is compatible with the maintenance of anger and indignation; also, in some cases, with the demand that the perpetrator be punished in full for his crimes; even, in some circumstances, with the refusal to re-establish prior good relations. But is the condition of a person who has been forgiven in this way any different from that of someone who hasn't been forgiven at all? Is forgiveness really what's going on here? Surely it's too far

away from the usual understanding of forgiveness as wiping the slate clean, or forgetting along with forgiving.

There are, we fully acknowledge, a range of different conceptions of forgiveness, and the one we defend is certainly at the more robust and unsentimental end of the spectrum. Two things tie it, we suggest, to our common core conception of forgiveness: firstly, on our account forgiveness comes out as being *difficult*, since it requires a full grasp of the violation of the moral order which the perpetrator has committed, and the overcoming of the resentment which this naturally and justifiably produces. This difficulty in getting oneself to forgive is acknowledged in much of the literature on forgiveness, and is a readily recognizable part of our common moral experience. And secondly, our focus is on the rejection of ill-will, and the re-establishment of at least a modicum of good will towards the forgiven person. The difference between ill-will and even a modest degree of good will is enormous, a difference in kind, as anyone who has faced a serious case of the former can testify. A conception of forgiveness which has that difference at its heart is not one in which forgiveness is negligible or invisible. But nor is it one that lends itself to the easy reconciliations and cheap boosterism which others have rightly condemned, and which have diluted the general understanding both of what forgiveness really requires, and of the proper response to violations of the moral order.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Jeffrie Murphy 2003; Charles Griswold 2007; Thomas Brudholm 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See [reference removed] for more detailed treatments of the position.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Murphy 2003, 59

<sup>4</sup> The exceptions here are Norvin Richards 1988, and Jeffrie Murphy who writes that he has been persuaded by Richards and others that forgiveness requires overcoming "disappointment, or even sadness" (2003, 59)

<sup>5</sup> By Murphy 2003.

<sup>6</sup> As the title indicates, in his novel, *Can You Forgive Her?*, Anthony Trollope thinks it makes sense to ask that question of his readers. Speaking of the heroine, the last sentence of the novel reads: "But as they [all her friends] have forgiven her ... I hope that they who have followed her story to its close will not be less generous."

<sup>7</sup> This illustrates a general point about virtue. Both the virtuous and the non-virtuous agent may abstain from certain activities, or refrain from harbouring certain feelings. But the virtuous agent refrains because, as Aristotle would put it, he sees that such abstention is fine and noble, whereas the non-virtuous agent refrains for other reasons, or may simply constitutionally lack the impulse to act or behave in that way.

<sup>8</sup> We refine this distinction later.

<sup>9</sup> "Last week in prayer, I discovered, or at least I think I did, that I suddenly was able to forgive someone that I had been trying to forgive for over thirty years" (Lewis 1966, 106).

<sup>10</sup> In talking of our response to wrongs committed against others, Butler wrote "The indignation raised by cruelty and injustice, and the desire of having it punished ... is by no means malice. No, *it is resentment* against vice and wickedness: it is one of the common bonds, by which society is held together". *Upon Resentment*, emphasis added. Elsewhere he wrote "[M]ankind naturally feel some emotion of mind against injury and injustice, whoever are the sufferers by it ... Let this be called anger, indignation, resentment, or by whatever name anyone shall choose; the thing itself is understood ..." *Upon Forgiveness*.

<sup>11</sup> Butler stoutly denies this. Having discussed indignation or resentment directed against those who wrong others, he writes: "Suppose now the injury I have been speaking of to be done against ourselves; or those whom we consider as ourselves. It is plain, the way in which we should be affected would be *exactly the same in kind*: but it would certainly be in a higher degree, and less transient; because a sense of our own happiness and misery is most intimately and always present to us; and from the very

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constitution of our nature, we cannot but have a greater sensibility to, and be more deeply interested in, what concerns ourselves.”

*Upon Resentment* (emphasis added).

<sup>12</sup> Hampton does suggest that the defiant reaffirmation of one’s rank and value can take the form of the (self-defeating) strategies of malice or spite. These definitely are incompatible with forgiveness, but reaffirmation need not take that form for Hampton.

<sup>13</sup> We say more shortly about how vindictiveness differs from a desire that the offender should suffer a just punishment.

<sup>14</sup> For a somewhat similar, but fuller, account see Margaret Walker, 24-5.

<sup>15</sup> We are grateful to Jeffrie Murphy for drawing our attention to the neglected attitude of loathing.

<sup>16</sup> In this context, we discuss Aristotle’s megalopsuchos in XXXXX

<sup>17</sup> For an excellent discussion of this idea see Eleonore Stump 2004.

<sup>18</sup> We earlier distinguished between feeling ill-will towards someone (a feeling the agent need not endorse) and having ill-will towards him, which involves an inclination of the will. We suggested that both need to be absent in forgiveness. Similarly, we can distinguish feeling good-will from having good-will. Is one or both required for forgiveness? Clearly, it would not be enough to feel good-will if one reflectively rejected those feelings as unjustified. Forgiveness therefore requires having good-will towards the offender. Could one have that good-will yet lack feelings of good-will (as Kant suggests one could when he distinguishes pathological from practical love)? It seems possible and, we suggest, might not be a bar to one’s having forgiven, though perhaps this depends on whether there was a close prior relationship. Could a parent who had previously loved a child, had later become estranged from the child and resentful towards her, and had now forgiven her and currently wished her well, really be said to have forgiven that child if he no longer had *any* feelings of good-will towards her?

<sup>19</sup> For a contrasting view, see Jean Améry’s claim that identity is a socially given thing, and social reality cannot be resisted. Hence in conditions of sufficient social pressure the victim can’t rest independently in his own sense of individual worth, which is inevitably damaged by the perpetrator. However, it wouldn’t follow from Améry’s claim that the victim’s self-respect is always damaged by what the offender has done.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Brudholm 2008.

<sup>21</sup> See Améry, cited in Brudholm 2008, 78

<sup>22</sup> See XXXXX

<sup>23</sup> There is a threshold of gravity in offences, above which it will be right for the victim to be indignant, but below which indifference is a legitimate response.

<sup>24</sup> See Brudholm 2008

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<sup>25</sup> In following common usage in this way, we are adopting what Brudholm terms a ‘blurred’ rather than a ‘precise’ conception of forgiveness – see Brudholm 2008, 51-2. However the undesirable consequences of such a conception which he identifies seem to us to be avoidable.

<sup>26</sup> Of course, it’s also quite common for people to nurse resentment beyond the point of legitimacy. However, this in no way demonstrates that resentment can never be legitimate.