

Forgiveness

A Philosophical Exploration



Charles L. Griswold

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Nearly everyone has wronged another. Who among us has not longed to be forgiven? Nearly everyone has suffered the bitter injustice of wrongdoing. Who has not struggled to forgive? Charles L. Griswold has written the first comprehensive philosophical book on forgiveness in both its interpersonal and political contexts, as well as its relation to reconciliation. Having examined the place of forgiveness in ancient philosophy and in modern thought, he discusses what forgiveness is, what conditions the parties to it must meet, its relation to revenge and hatred, when it is permissible and whether it is obligatory, and why it is a virtue. He considers “the unforgivable,” as well as perplexing notions such as self-forgiveness, forgiving on behalf of others, and unilateral forgiveness, while also illuminating near-cousins of forgiveness – pardon, mercy, amnesty, excuse, compassion, and apology. Griswold argues that forgiveness (unlike apology) is inappropriate in politics and analyzes the nature and limits of political apology with reference to historical examples (including Truth and Reconciliation Commissions). The book concludes with an examination of the relation between memory, narrative, and truth. The backdrop to the whole discussion is our inextinguishable aspiration for reconciliation in the face of an irredeemably imperfect world.

Charles L. Griswold is Professor of Philosophy at Boston University. He has been awarded Fellowships from the Stanford Humanities Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the National Humanities Center. Winner of the American Philosophical Association’s F. J. Matchette Award, he is the author and editor of several books, most recently *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment*.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521878821

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First published in print format 2007

ISBN-13 978-0-511-34932-4 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-10 0-511-34932-7 eBook (EBL)

ISBN-13 978-0-521-87882-1 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-87882-9 hardback

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To Lisa and Caroline

After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

T. S. Eliot

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Prologue</i>	xiii
1 Forgiveness Ancient and Modern	1
[i] Pardon, Excuse, and Forgiveness in Ancient Philosophy: The Standpoint of Perfection	2
[ii] Bishop Butler's Seminal Analysis	19
[ii.a] <i>Resentment</i>	22
[ii.b] <i>Forgiveness</i>	31
2 Forgiveness at Its Best	38
[i] Forgiveness, Revenge, and Resentment	38
[ii] Resentment and Self-Respect	43
[iii] To Be Forgiven: Changing Your Ways, Contrition, and Regret	47
[iv] Forgiving: A Change of Heart, and Seeing the Offender and Oneself in a New Light	53
[v] The Conditions of Forgiveness: Objections and Replies	59
[v.a] <i>Atonement and the Payment or Dismissal of a Debt</i>	60
[v.b] <i>Forgiveness as a Gift and Unconditional Forgiveness</i>	62
[v.c] <i>Praiseworthy Conditional Forgiveness</i>	69
[vi] Moral Monsters, Shared Humanity, and Sympathy	72
[vi.a] <i>Moral Monsters</i>	73
[vi.b] <i>Shared Humanity and Fallibility, Compassion, and Pity</i>	77
[vi.c] <i>Sympathy</i>	83
[vii] The Unforgivable and the Unforgiven	90
[viii] Forgiveness, Narrative, and Ideals	98
[ix] Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Friendship	110
	vii

3	Imperfect Forgiveness	113
	[i] Ideal and Non-ideal Forgiveness: An Inclusive or Exclusive Relation?	113
	[ii] Third-Party Forgiveness	117
	[iii] Unilateral Forgiveness: The Dead and the Unrepentant	120
	[iii.a] <i>Forgiving the Dead</i>	120
	[iii.b] <i>Forgiving the Unrepentant</i>	121
	[iv] Self-Forgiveness	122
	[iv.a] <i>For Injuries to Others</i>	123
	[iv.b] <i>For Injuries to Oneself</i>	125
	[iv.c] <i>For Injuries One Could Not Help Inflicting</i>	128
	[v] Forgiveness and Moral Luck	130
4	Political Apology, Forgiveness, and Reconciliation	134
	[i] Apology and Forgiveness Writ Large: Questions and Distinctions	135
	[ii] Political Apology among the One and Many	146
	[ii.a] <i>Many to Many Apology: Test Cases</i>	147
	• The University of Alabama and the Legacy of Slavery 147	
	• Apology, Reparations, and the Wartime Internment of Japanese-Americans 152	
	• Desmond Tutu and South African Churches 157	
	• King Hussein in Israel 159	
	• The United States Senate and the Victims of Lynching 161	
	[ii.b] <i>One to Many Apology: Two Failures</i>	163
	• Robert McNamara's War and <i>Mea Culpa</i> 163	
	• Richard Nixon's Resignation and Pardon 165	
	[iii] Traditional Rituals of Reconciliation: Apology, Forgiveness, or Pardon?	167
	[iv] Apology and the Unforgivable	172
	[v] Apology, Forgiveness, and Civic Reconciliation	174
	[vi] A Culture of Apology and of Forgiveness: Risks and Abuses	180
	[vii] Political Apology, Narrative, and Ideals	183
5	Truth, Memory, and Civic Reconciliation without Apology	195
	[i] The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: An Interpretation	201
	[ii] Reconciliation without Apology?	206
	<i>Epilogue</i>	211
	<i>Bibliography</i>	215
	<i>Index</i>	233

Acknowledgments

The bulk of this book was written while I was a Fellow at the Stanford Humanities Center during the 2004–2005 academic year. I am deeply grateful for the Marta Sutton Weeks Fellowship awarded me by the Center, as well as a Boston University sabbatical for the same year. The Center truly provided the perfect working environment.

For helpful comments or conversation about the ideas and arguments of this book, I thank Lanier Anderson, Margaret Anderson, Keith Baker, Sandra Barnes, Heike Berhend, John Bender, Christopher Bobonich, Rémi Brague, Michael Bratman, Susanna Braund, Richard Carrington, Lorraine Daston, Remy Debes, Steve Feierman, Eckart Forster, John Freccero, Aaron Garrett, Hester Gelber, Peter Goldie, Jeffrey Henderson, Pamela Hieronymi, Walter Hopp, Brad Inwood, Laurent Jaffro, Simon Keller, Nan Keohane, Barnabas Malnay, Richard Martin, Christine McBride, Mark McPherran, Adam Morton, Josh Ober, John Perry, Robert Pippin, Linda Plano, Christopher Ricks, Amelie Rorty, Lisa Rubinstein, Steve Scully, David Sedley, Tamar Shapiro, James Sheehan, John Silber, Ken Taylor, Howard Wettstein, Elie Wiesel, Ken Winkler, and Allen Wood. I am forever grateful to Stephen Darwall, Ed Delattre, Steve Griswold, David Konstan, and David Roochnik for their comments on large swaths of the manuscript and for discussion about the effort as a whole. Lanier Anderson, Stephen Darwall, Alasdair MacIntyre, Jonathan Lear, Robert Pippin, and Howard Wettstein supported my project at crucial stages, and I am much in their debt. I also thank the Press' reviewers for their extraordinarily useful queries and comments.

Discussions with my Boston University students in two seminars on the “reconciliation with imperfection” theme were very helpful during

the early stages of this project, as were those with the participants in my seminar at the University of Paris 1 (Sorbonne) in May 2004. Audiences at Boston University, Harvard University, Stanford University, St. John's College, the University of Arizona, and the University of California (Riverside), offered valuable criticisms and suggestions. A conference on "Memory, Narrative, and Forgiveness: Reflection on Ten Years of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," held in Cape Town in November 2006, was stimulating and enlightening. I am grateful for the responses to my presentation, and for the opportunity to participate in presentations by Desmond Tutu and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela.

I am pleased to thank Collin Anthony and Jennifer Page for their efficient assistance in collecting and organizing many of the secondary sources on which I have drawn. The Boston University Humanities Foundation generously supported Lauren Freeman's expert compilation of the index; I am grateful on both counts. I also thank my editor at Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl, who was wonderfully supportive and efficient throughout the entire process, and Jennifer Carey for her patient copyediting. Leslie Griswold Carrington and Sarah Fisher were especially helpful with respect to the choice of cover image, and Peter Hawkins inspired the phrasing of the subtitle. Oxford University Press granted permission for quotation from its edition of Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

I can scarcely repay, and shall never forget, the support and encouragement given me by family and dear friends as I pushed through to completion of this book.

To Katie: we are testimony to the benefits of mutual forgiveness. For your honesty, steady sense of what really matters, and trust through so many seemingly impassable junctures, thank you. May our friendship continually deepen.

To my daughters Caroline and Lisa: you know the meaning of the phrase of the ancient tragedians, *pathei mathos*. For your depth of soul, brilliance of mind, exemplary generosity of spirit, and forgivingness – not to mention for those wonderful discussions as we made our way up and down invented alpine paths – I am forever grateful. I dedicate this book to you with love and admiration. *Pas à pas on va loin*.

On the façade of beloved Chalet Killarney it is also written: *Je lève mes yeux vers les montagnes, d'où me viendra le secours*. This book was twice revised from start to finish at the Chalet. The sublimity of the Swiss Alps and the tranquillity of high meadows helped me gain clarity about the sense in

which forgiveness is an appropriate response to the wrongs that plague human life in every valley of our troubled Earth.

I have frequently placed epigraphs at the start of chapters and sections. These are not necessarily meant to encapsulate the main point of the discussion in question. At times they offer a counterpoint or question to what I have to say, and in this and other ways are meant to enrich the discussion. The epigraph to the book as a whole is taken from T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1962), p. 22.

Prologue

Nearly everyone has wronged another. Who among us has not longed to be forgiven? Nearly everyone has suffered the bitter injustice of wrongdoing. Who has not struggled to forgive? Revenge impulsively surges in response to wrong, and becomes perversely delicious to those possessed by it. Personal and national credos anchor themselves in tales of unfairness and the glories of retaliation. Oceans of blood and mountains of bones are their testament. Homer's Achilles captured the agony of our predicament incomparably well:

why, I wish that strife would vanish away from among gods and mortals, and gall, which makes a man grow angry for all his great mind, that gall of anger that swarms like smoke inside of a man's heart and becomes a thing sweeter to him by far than the dripping of honey.¹

How often have we dreamed of the reconciliation that forgiveness promises, even while tempted by the sweetness of vengeful rage?

Forgiveness is of intense concern to us in ordinary life, both as individuals and as communities. Not surprisingly, the discussions of forgiveness, apology, and reconciliation in theology, literature, political science, sociology, and psychology are innumerable. In a development of great importance, Truth and Reconciliation Commissions have been forging powerful new approaches to age-old conflicts. Ground-breaking work in conflict resolution, international law, the theory of reparations, and political theory pays ever more attention to forgiveness and the related

¹ *Iliad* 18.107–110; Achilles is reflecting on his furious resentment of Agamemnon. Trans. R. Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961). All further citations from the *Iliad* advert to this translation.

concepts of pardon, excuse, mercy, pity, apology, and reconciliation.² Surprisingly, philosophy has hitherto played a relatively minor (albeit ongoing and increasingly vocal) part in the debates about the meaning of this cluster of concepts. Yet every position taken in theory or practice with regard to these notions assumes that it has understood them accurately. The implicit claim of this book is that these topics are of genuine philosophical interest, and benefit from philosophical examination. My explicit claim is to have provided a defensible analysis of forgiveness in both its interpersonal and political dimensions. Consequently, forgiveness, political apology, and reconciliation are my central themes.

What is forgiveness? A moment's reflection reveals that forgiveness is a surprisingly complex and elusive notion. It is easier to say what it is not, than what it is. Forgiveness is not simply a matter of finding a therapeutic way to "deal with" injury, pain, or anger – even though it does *somehow* involve overcoming the anger one feels in response to injury. If it were just a name for a *modus vivendi* that rendered us insensible to the wrongs that inevitably visit human life, then hypnosis or amnesia or taking a pill might count as forgiveness. Our intuitions are so far from any such view that we count the capacity to forgive – in the right way and under the right circumstances – as part and parcel of a praiseworthy character. We justly blame a person who is unable to forgive, when forgiveness is warranted, and judge that person as hard-hearted. The person who finds all wrongs unforgivable seems imprisoned by the past, unable to grow, confined by the harsh bonds of resentment. He or she might also strike us as rather too proud, even arrogant, and as frozen in an uncompromising attitude. At the same time, someone who habitually forgives unilaterally and in a blink of an eye strikes us as spineless. One should protest injury, and feel the gravity of what is morally serious. Given that wrong-doing is pervasive in human affairs, the question as to whether (and how) to forgive presents itself continuously, and with it, the question as to how the idea should be understood. The daily fact of wrong-doing requires us to answer the question whether, when, and how to forgive.

² The bibliography to the present book lists all of the relevant recent philosophical work, including on political forgiveness, apology, pardon, and related concepts such as mercy and pity, that I have been able to find. The bibliography includes some works that are more psychological or theological in character, but does not aspire to completeness in respect of them. See www.brandonthamber.com/resources_forgiveness.htm, www.forgiving.org, www.forgivenessweb.com/RdgRm/Bibliography.html, www.learningtoforgive.com, and the "Kentucky Forgiveness Collective" at <http://www.uky.edu/~ldesh2/forgive.htm> for a sample of the non-philosophical literature, with links to more of the same. I regret that M. Walker's *Moral Repair* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), came into my hands just as this book was going to press.

It may seem at the outset that the dream of reconciliation, both political and private, cannot be fulfilled through forgiveness because forgiveness and its political analogues aspire to something impossible: knowingly to undo what has been done. The stubborn, sometimes infuriating metaphysical fact that the past cannot be changed would seem to leave us with a small range of options, all of which are modulations of forgetfulness, avoidance, rationalization, or pragmatic acceptance. Yet forgiveness claims not to fall among those alternatives; it is a quite different response to what Hanna Arendt aptly called “the predicament of irreversibility.”³ Because a central purpose of this book is to work out a defensible conception of forgiveness as it pertains to the interpersonal as well as political realms, I also seek to explain the sense in which it undoes what was done.

One reason philosophers have shied away from giving the topic its due, or from counting forgiveness as a virtue at all, may concern its religious overtones. While it is true that in the Western tradition forgiveness came to prominence in Judaic and Christian thought, I see no reason why we should be bound by its historical genealogy.⁴ There is nothing in the concept itself that requires a religious framework, even though it may be thought through within such a framework. The question as to the conceptual relation between a religious and a non-religious view of the subject is interesting in its own right. In the present book I offer an analysis of forgiveness as a secular virtue (that is, as not dependent on any notion of the divine), although I will also make reference to theological discussions as appropriate, both by way of contrast and because the touchstone of modern philosophical discussion of the topic is to be found in Bishop Butler. Let me sketch the strategy I will pursue as well as some orienting distinctions and questions.

A fundamental thesis of this book is that forgiveness is a concept that comes with conditions attached. It is governed by norms. Forgiveness has not been given, or received, simply because one believes or feels that it has been. Uttering (even to myself, whether about another or about

³ As she writes: “the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving.” *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 237. This is well put, except for the clause freeing the agent of responsibility.

⁴ Arendt overstates the point when she writes that “the discoverer of the role of forgiveness in the realm of human affairs was Jesus of Nazareth.” The historical genealogy of the notion is much more complex. But her next sentence is on the mark: “The fact that he made this discovery in a religious context and articulated it in religious language is no reason to take it any less seriously in a strictly secular sense.” *The Human Condition*, p. 238.

myself) “I forgive you” does not mean I have in fact done so, regardless of the level of subjective conviction. So too “I am forgiven.” Any number of thought experiments confirm this point, as, for example, that already mentioned: if a victim of injury has pretty much forgotten what took place, we would not accept the inference that all is therefore forgiven.

One of my central themes is forgiveness understood as a moral relation between two individuals, one of whom has wronged the other, and who (at least in the ideal) are capable of communicating with each other. In this ideal context, forgiveness requires reciprocity between injurer and injured. I shall reserve the term *forgiveness* for this interpersonal moral relation.⁵ All parties to the discussion about forgiveness agree, so far as I can tell, that this is a legitimate context for the use of the term; and most take it as its paradigm sense, as shall I. This implies a controversial position about “forgiveness” in the political context, which I will defend in detail.

There are modulations of forgiveness that lack one or more of the features of the model case. These notions include (i) forgiving wrongs done to others (including victims no longer living), i.e., “third-party forgiveness”; (ii) forgiving the dead or unrepentant; (iii) self-forgiveness; (iv) God’s forgiveness; and perhaps even (v) forgiving God. These seem best understood as departures from and conceptually dependent upon the paradigm. For example, in (iii) the forgiver cannot easily be said to resent the candidate for forgiveness, or to expect contrition and amends tendered by the injuring party, if the injury for which one is forgiving oneself is an injury one has done oneself. In (iv) the party from whom one requests forgiveness (God) may be conceived as immune to injury; which raises the puzzling possibility that (iv) is a case of third-party forgiveness (we ask God to forgive us the wrongs we have done to *others*, and thus on behalf of others).⁶ In these non-paradigmatic cases, special problems arise due to the absence of one of the features of forgiveness.

Further, it is an important claim of this book that cases (i) through (iii) are *lacking* or imperfect relative to the paradigm, in the sense that were it possible for all of the conditions pertaining to the paradigm to be fulfilled, we would wish for them to be so. We nonetheless speak of forgiveness in these non-paradigmatic situations, and it would be arbitrary

⁵ I do not assume, however, that the parties involved in the scene of forgiveness had any personal relation to each other prior to the events that initiate the question of forgiveness.

⁶ A point trenchantly put by J. Gingell, “Forgiveness and Power,” *Analysis* 34 (1974): 180–183. See also M. Lewis, “On Forgiveness,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1980): 236–245.

to rule them illegitimate a priori. Our task is to understand the notion and its conceptual structure, not to revolutionize it. In what follows, I will discuss the first three of the non-paradigmatic cases I have mentioned, in the order given. Because my approach to the topic is secular I will not venture into the issues surrounding forgiveness of God.

Forgiveness and its modulations do not exhaust the meanings of the term, and for the sake of clarity it is essential to distinguish five of these other meanings. The first of them will receive considerable attention here, as it is one of my central themes. The other four are not my subject, but are easily and often confused with it. Forgiveness and the five other senses of forgiveness may usefully be thought of as bearing a Wittgensteinian “family resemblance” to one another.⁷ These siblings of forgiveness are:

1. *Political apology*: apology offered in a political context. This notion encompasses a cluster of phenomena, including apology (understood as the acknowledgment of fault and a request for the acceptance thereof) offered by the appropriate state official for wrongs committed by the state. Possibly the apology may be offered to the state. The exchange may or may not be accompanied by reparations. Such “state apologies” are becoming an established part of the political landscape. As well, political apology may take place when previously conflicting groups within the community (or within an envisioned, hoped-for community), as well as individuals within those groups, are publicly called upon to forgive one another in the name of civic reconciliation. The relevant institutions or organizations include corporations, churches, and other civic associations. In some contexts, political apology may shade into invitations to or encouragement of forgiveness, in which case it is tempting to speak of political forgiveness, always in relation to some political entity. Perhaps the most famous recent argument for the political role of forgiveness was articulated by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He did so in the context, of course, of the transition from apartheid to a democratic state in South Africa, through his

⁷ Wittgenstein remarks that understanding the different meanings of a term is a matter of grasping “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail.” *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell’s, 2001, par. 66). I should add that there are yet other senses of “forgive,” as when one says “forgive me” after having accidentally bumped into someone; there it just means “excuse me.” These relatively trivial senses are not my focus here.

writings, and his position as chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.⁸ Chapter 4 is devoted to political apology.

2. *Economic forgiveness*: the forgiveness of debts. We also speak of “pardoning” a debt; the debtor is released from the obligation of repayment.
3. *Political pardon*: this encompasses a cluster of phenomena, including prominently the pardon that a duly recognized member of a non-judicial branch of government may grant (in the American system, an “executive pardon” issued by the President or a Governor); the granting of amnesty;⁹ the decision by the victorious state or its leader not to punish the defeated, for any of a number of reasons including strategic or political advantage, or from a sense of humanity (this last easily shades into “mercy”).¹⁰ Executive pardon

⁸ See D. Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (New York: Random House, 1999). As already noted, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (hereafter, “TRC”) also included a committee that granted amnesty, but I am not here referring to that part of the process. For some of the historical background, see D. Shea, *The South African Truth Commission: The Politics of Reconciliation* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000). The discussion of the political role of forgiveness is terminologically unsettled and confusing for that reason among others. As the title of Digeser’s *Political Forgiveness* suggests, elements of what I am calling political pardon and political apology have been seen as species of forgiveness. Digeser writes that “political forgiveness is not about clearing the victim’s heart of resentment. Rather, it entails clearing a debt that the transgressor or debtor owes to the victim or the creditor. . . . Political forgiveness can be understood as an action that forgives a debt, reconciles the past, and invites the restoration of the civil and moral equality of transgressors and their victims or the restoration of a relationship between creditors and debtors to the status quo ante” (p. 28). In Ch. 4, I explain my choice of terminology and my objections to Digeser’s approach.

⁹ The amnesty can be extended individual by individual, as was the case recently in South Africa under the auspices of the Amnesty Committee of the TRC; or to an entire group, as, for example, to the defeated Athenian oligarchs and their supporters in 403 BCE (the amnesty included the provision that no mention could be made in a court of law that a person had collaborated with the oligarchy). There are numerous contemporary examples of amnesty being granted to classes of people, often wrong-doers and their collaborators who are no longer in power. In the context of debates about illegal immigration, by contrast, amnesty has come to mean something like immunity from prosecution, or pardon.

¹⁰ For example, Julius Caesar famously granted “clemency” (*clementia Caesaris*) to some he conquered in war. Whether or not he did so for political reasons, this species of pardon is certainly to be distinguished from forgiveness in the sense discussed in the present chapter. See Seneca, *De Clementia* 2.3, for his definitions thereof, and his defense of the view that *clementia* is a virtue. He sees clemency as leniency in the administration of due punishment, and distinguishes it from pity as well as pardon (i.e., pardon of a judicial nature).

may amount to a grant of immunity, without necessarily implying guilt or that a set punishment is suspended.¹¹

4. *Judicial pardon*: the exercise of mercy or clemency by a court of law in the penalty phase of a trial, in view of extenuating circumstances, such as the suffering already undergone by the guilty party, or of similar sorts of reasons. Normally this would come to obviating the expected, or already determined, punishment. As in (3), the pardoner must have recognized standing to issue the pardon, and the pardoned has, at least in some cases of (3) and in all of (4), committed offences as defined by the law of the land.

Neither in (3) nor in (4) is the individual *forgiven* for his or her wrongdoing. Normally, in those cases, the pardoner will not be the person who was injured, or at least not have been intentionally singled out to be wronged. In none of (2), (3), or (4) is there a necessary tie to any particular sentiment; in particular, pardon does not require the giving up of resentment.¹²

5. *Metaphysical forgiveness*: this may be characterized as the effort to give up *ressentiment* caused by the manifold imperfections of the world. It comes to forgiving the world for being the sort of place that brings with it a spectrum of natural and moral evils, from death, illness, physical decay, and the unstoppable flow of the future into the past, to our limited control over fortune, to the brute fact of the all too familiar range of wrongs people do to each other and to themselves.¹³ I use “ressentiment” here because its connotations are broader than “resentment,” including as it does malice, desire for revenge, envy (admittedly not apt to this context), but also anxiety, suspicion, the holding of a grudge, a hatred of whatever or whoever one feels has called one’s standing into question, a

¹¹ President Ford’s executive pardon of President Nixon led to a debate about whether pardon implies guilt. See K. D. Moore, *Pardons: Justice, Mercy, and the Public Interest* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 193–196; and P. E. Digeser’s *Political Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2001), pp. 125–130.

¹² Further, “I pardon you,” in both (3) and (4), is a performative utterance, as is pointed out by R. S. Downie, “Forgiveness,” *Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1965), p. 132.

¹³ D. Konstan refers to this as “existential resentment”; see his “Ressentiment Ancien et Ressentiment Moderne,” in P. Ansart, ed., *Le ressentiment* (Brussels: Bruylant, 2002), p. 266. He there cites M. Scheler and R. Solomon as carving out a place for this type of resentment.

feeling of powerlessness, a loss of self-respect, and (especially as Nietzsche describes it) a generalized sense that the world is unfair. It suggests frustrated and repressed anger. This sense of the term seems to have been coined by Nietzsche. I do not, however, want to saddle “metaphysical resentment” with all of the connotations of Nietzschean “ressentiment.” Perhaps what Nietzsche himself called the “spirit of revenge” (*Zarathustra*, Part II, “On Revenge”) is closer to the target. Forgiveness is an intriguing candidate for curing the “spirit of revenge,” because it allows for a certain willing of the past through re-interpretation and re-framing. Giving up metaphysical resentment could mean many things other than forgiveness. One would be the “happiness” in the recognition of the absurd that Camus attributes to Sisyphus.¹⁴

To repeat, the last four of these siblings of forgiveness are not the primary focus of this book. I devote a chapter to the first of my list of five – political apology – because it is naturally confused with giving and receiving of forgiveness, because understanding clearly why that is both a conceptual and political mistake is so helpful to grasping the character of forgiveness, and because it joins with forgiveness in aiming at reconciliation (albeit of a different sort).

A moment’s reflection on the nature of forgiveness raises multiple questions, including these:

- Is forgiveness (or, the disposition to forgive) a virtue?
- Is the wrong-doer or the deed the focus of forgiveness?
- What, if anything, ought the candidate for forgiveness say or do or feel to warrant forgiveness, and what the victim truly to forgive?
- Are you morally obligated to forgive when the offender has taken the appropriate steps, or is forgiveness a “gift”?
- How is forgiveness related to apology, mercy, pity, compassion, excuse, contrition, and condonation?
- How is it related to justice (especially retributive justice, and the issue of punishment)?

¹⁴ Editions of the French dictionaries of the Académie Française from the seventeenth century on define “ressentiment” primarily as what we would call resentment (see <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/efts/ARTFL/projects/encyc/>). For the citation from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part II, “On Revenge,” see p. 252 of the W. Kaufman trans. in his *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin, 1976). I return to Nietzsche in Ch. 1. For the reference to Camus see his *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. J. O’Brien (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 91.

- Is there such a thing as “the unforgivable”?
- Is forgiveness necessary to moral and spiritual growth, and to what ideals does it aspire?
- How is forgiveness related to reconciliation?
- Can one person forgive (or ask for forgiveness) on behalf of another?
- Can one forgive (or be forgiven by) the dead, or forgive the unrepentant?
- How is self-forgiveness to be understood?
- Does forgiveness have a political role to play?

In the course of this book I shall offer answers to these much disputed questions, among others.

I begin Chapter 1 by discussing a number of classical perfectionist views in which forgiveness has little or no place. (I also comment very briefly on a contrasting modern perfectionist view, that of Nietzsche.) My objective is in part to disentangle forgiveness from various notions with which it has long been clustered, such as “excuse” and “pardon,” to begin to draw its connections to other notions intuitively connected with it (such as sympathy, the recognition of common humanity and fallibility, and the lowering of anger), and to better understand the conditions under which forgiveness is a virtue. I seek to show that a certain type of perfectionist outlook – a well-established and perpetually attractive one – is inhospitable to seeing forgiveness as a virtue. I sketch the ways in which forgiveness does meet criteria of virtue theory as classically understood. The attempt is to understand forgiveness against the backdrop of perfectionist and non-perfectionist moral theory, and to argue that it is at home in a certain kind of non-perfectionist theory.

We habitually think of forgiveness in relation to the emotion of resentment. Is this justified? What is resentment, how does it differ from hatred and other forms of anger, in what way is it cognitive, and how are we to understand its infamously retributive tendency? What are we to make of its famous propensity to tell a justificatory story about itself? How are forgiveness, revenge, and the administration of justice related? These and related questions are also taken up in Chapter 1 by means of an examination of a seminal eighteenth-century analysis. We owe the linkage of forgiveness and resentment to Bishop Joseph Butler’s acute and seminal sermons, and they set the stage for all subsequent discussions of the topic (even though, as I shall show, one of his key points is regularly misquoted in a revealing way). Understanding the merits as well as shortcomings of his analyses of resentment and forgiveness is extremely helpful to

working out a theory of forgiveness. Butler begins both his sermons by noting the imperfection of the world and implicitly, the problem of reconciliation with it. This brief examination of several of the most important philosophers in the ancient tradition, and of two moderns (Butler and Nietzsche), serves the purposes of conceptual clarification and of determining the geography, as it were, of our topic.

In Chapter 2, I build on the results and set out a theory of forgiveness. I analyze the “paradigm case” in which injured and injuring parties are both present as well as willing and able to communicate with each other. I also discuss the criteria or norms that each party must meet if forgiveness is to be fully expressed, as well as the question as to whether forgiveness is “conditional,” supererogatory, and analogous to the canceling of a debt. The related issues of self-respect, regret, the “moral monster,” the relevance of notions of shared humanity, pity, and sympathy (with Homer’s masterful depiction of Achilles’ encounter with Priam as touchstone), the reasons for which giving and receiving forgiveness is desirable, the vexed question of “the unforgivable,” are examined in detail. Because the offender and victim develop narratives as part of requesting and granting forgiveness – narratives of self as well as of the relationship of self to other – I sketch the basics of a theory of narrative and show how it illuminates forgiveness. I examine the ideals underlying the narrative, and conclude by returning to the broader issue of the relation between forgiveness, the aspiration to perfection, and reconciliation.

Both paradigmatic and non-paradigmatic species of forgiveness depend on the capacity for sympathy in something like the sense of putting oneself in the situation of another, and seeing things from that perspective. They also depend on our capacity to correct for distorted perspective, by adopting something like the standpoint of “the moral community” or (in Adam Smith’s phrase) the “impartial spectator.” An entire book could easily be written on those topics alone, and my discussion of them in Chapter 2 is strictly limited by my present purpose.

In Chapter 3, I also turn to the three non-standard or non-paradigmatic cases of forgiveness already mentioned, viz. third-party forgiveness (forgiving or asking for forgiveness on behalf of another), forgiveness of the dead and unrepentant, and self-forgiveness. Each presents puzzles of its own – beginning with whether they count as instances of forgiveness at all. I argue that they can, but imperfectly. It is not inappropriate that a virtue that responds to certain imperfections of human life – above all, our all too well-established propensity to injure one another – itself reflects something of the context from which it arises. We very often find

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