

Griswold's *Forgiveness*

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1. I am much appreciative of CG's emphasis on forgiveness as a virtue. I will turn to a treatment of the virtue below. But a central part of the book is less focused on the virtue, at least directly, than something like the act or process of forgiveness, forgiveness as a happening, so to speak. CG provides something like a classical philosophical analysis of forgiveness, something along the lines of necessary and sufficient conditions, or so I read him. A way CG puts it is this: he is providing "a theory of paradigmatic forgiveness—of what forgiveness would have to be in order to be perfectly accomplished. I find myself much appreciative of the meticulous care C provides concerning the subtle psychological and conceptual issues involved. But I am also hesitant on a number of points as I'll explain. And in the end, I'm not sure that CG's approach captures at least what I see as the relevant virtue.

2. Hesitation: C's emphasis on "moral," as in "moral anger," "moral hatred," etc. (note: my quick excursion through the literature on forgiveness suggests that CG is not alone here.)

- When one reflects on the range of actual cases in which forgiveness seems appropriate, it's really a subset of them that involve moral wrongdoing. When one thinks of the domestic context, e.g., where forgiveness, apology, and the like are very common, painfully common, much of what is at issue are not serious moral wrongs but rather slights, insensitivities like inappropriate tones of voice (sometimes even marginally so). Or consider philosopher's reactions to the slights involved in how their work is criticized or underappreciated. **The link between forgiveness and moral wrongs seems overstated in C's treatment (and perhaps more generally).**
- Another sort of example, interesting to me, in which forgiveness and moral wrongs seem to come apart: I behave entirely properly, but you feel very wronged by my action. I say to you, "I can't tell you that I

agree with your perception. But I am terribly sorry that you were hurt by my action, that an action of mine had such a consequence. I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me." This doesn't seem like a central case of forgiveness, and maybe it's worth putting aside for now, but arguably the person is asking for and maybe receiving forgiveness.

- I'm not sure about this (and this is probably a paradigm outsider's comment), but I feel that the notion of moral anger needs attention:
 - Even when the injury involves a moral breach, the resentment, anger, etc. is a psychologically complicated thing. I hurt; is that moral hurt? I can be upset by the breach of morality, but I'm also hurt—and this seems psychologically more to the point—personally. And the offended person often doesn't sort these things out. And apology and forgiveness don't seem specific to the moral aspect.
 - Indeed, I'm very suspicious of people who "moralize" their personal reactions to injury; it often bespeaks a kind of grandiosity: they are not just hurt; they are outraged, indignant at your breach of deep principles.
 - By contrast with cases of personal affront, etc., "moral anger" seems right on the mark in cases that are less personal. E.g. outrage at Hitler, outrage at terrorism, political occupation, etc.

3. Hesitation: "Resentment," C's use of this term as the inevitable consequence of personal injury, etc.

- C's use of the term "resentment" in this way, might have signaled that this term functions as a general label for whatever bad feelings may ensue in the situations under discussion, potentially a wide range of emotional or affective responses.
- Alternatively, and this seems more true of C's use of the term, "resentment" seems to function as the name of a specific affective response, indeed one that essentially involves the desire for revenge.
- My hesitation concerns my sense that there is no single, universal response: Sometimes we are infuriated and wish to strike out (verbally or bodily). Sometimes we are stunned, feel little, and afterwards just

- feel the pain. Perhaps we wish to avoid the person. Some people, and I'll discuss this more fully when we get to the virtue of forgiveness, may be able to absorb a greater range of such hurts. Of course, some do this out of a lack of self-respect, etc. as C and others point out. But not necessarily. One does not have to be a saint or a sage to at least occasionally refuse to take others' untoward behavior to heart.
- My hesitation extends to the idea that revenge is a universal response. Why suppose this? Even when I feel what seems very much to count as resentment, I don't always want to hurt back. This is not to deny that the desire for revenge is a deep feature of human responsiveness to injury. But a deep feature is not necessarily a universal feature. The desire for revenge seems very primitive (not meant altogether pejoratively).

4. Hesitation: Forgiveness, the central analysis

- C formulates six conditions with respect to the offender (I'll turn below to the offended.)
 - They seem very "dramatic," like "repudiation of the self" (shorthand formulation), and the necessity of a full narrative that reveals that the offense does not represent the "totality" of the person.
 - With respect to most real-world forgivable offenses, much of this seems not pertinent. On the countless occasions I apologize to my wife, were I to issue any such full narrative or self repudiation, I would likely be told to "lighten up."
 - I will turn in a moment to C's conception of these conditions as necessary only with respect to paradigm cases (and this might be seen as blunting my remarks so far about the conditions being extreme or dramatic), but I do want to register the sense that the conditions seem pertinent only to severe or even heinous moral offenses. And this might be seen as skewing any general analysis of forgiveness. Indeed, I guess I don't see why even if we are dealing with paradigm cases (in a sense to be explained in a minute) this should entail that the analysis be directed at the most heinous offenses.

5. Major issue: paradigm cases vs.

- It took me some time to see what C was after in his talk of paradigm, since I took that term to refer to classical or typical cases. One learns the meaning of terms, one might suppose in the spirit of Wittgenstein or psychologist Eleanor Rosch, by acquaintance with paradigms, typical cases. (The issue there is whether we learn by mastering definitions, or rather by familiarity with “paradigm cases.” And if one uses paradigm in this Wittgensteinian way, then what is C doing with his paradigms?)
- What C is doing is clear enough. It just took me some time (the beginning of chapter 3) that “paradigm” here derived not from Wittgenstein but from Plato, paradigm as perfect exemplar.
- BUT, and this is perhaps a very general question about such Plato-spirited analyses, since they don’t fit lots and lots of cases of what we call forgiveness, in what way do they illuminate the phenomenon of forgiveness? One offers a perfect exemplar that doesn’t have all that much to do with forgiveness as we know it and says that these real-world cases are dim reflections of the real thing. But here I certainly feel the power of Wittgenstein’s remark that we should “look; don’t think.” We want a story about forgiveness that illuminates the cases, and Wittgenstein’s advice is to make the cases focal and not an ideal construction.
- This leads me at least to the feeling that C’s meticulous and insightful discussion of the conditions illuminate something important but perhaps that is not the phenomenon of forgiveness. It’s rather the phenomenon of reconciling, reconstructing a relationship that’s been damaged or broken by a serious moral wrong. Then the conditions have powerful purchase.

6. Interlude—to be discussed time permitting: C’s discussion of the offender’s motives for seeking forgiveness.

- C mentions the desire to unburden oneself of guilt.
- Notice that this is self-oriented on the part of the offender.

- Another “ethical” level of motivation would be the desire to reconnect with the other party, and it’s there in C’s discussion. Not sure that it’s mentioned right on the spot, but it’s around.
- One thing not mentioned is still another ethical dimension, truly other-oriented: the offender wishes to lift the burden of pain he has placed on the other.

7. Turning to the offended party: the conditions

- C mentions these conditions:
 - Forswearing of revenge
 - Moderation of resentment
 - Commitment to letting go of all resentment (forgiveness is still “in progress” and not complete until all resentment is gone, sort of eradicated). In the end, to forgive is to forswear resentment.
 - These need to be done for “moral reasons,” that is, because it’s the right thing to do. C’s picture is that it’s not enough that resentment be gone (and C is surely correct about that). But then he proposes quite a specific modality, loosely speaking, for the eradication of the resentment. He says that the agent needs to moderate and eventually lose his resentment, **for moral reasons, because it’s the right thing to do**. C maintains that once the offender has fulfilled the conditions specified above, the victim’s resentment is no longer **warranted**, that the offended party is even **obligated** to forswear resentment. I don’t know if I have this exactly right, but surely that’s the tone, C’s general idea.
 - Final condition: the offender must reaccept the person— C sometimes describes it as a change in belief that one no longer thinks that the offender is a bad person with whom one should not consort.

8. Hesitations:

- much of what I said above about the conditions on the offender apply here, but I’m especially struck by the extreme nature of the final

condition. In most forgiveness circumstances, such a change in belief is hardly relevant. Indeed, except in the cases of very serious offenses, the presence of such a harsh judgment on the part of the offended person would bespeak an inappropriate judgmental character.

- Re: “forswear”: this is a very extreme word. To forgive (again, if we are speaking of real-world cases) is not, I think, to swear off all resentment, to commit to its eradication. (Moderation is another thing; Butler’s idea seems right.)
 - I may have really forgiven and yet various relatively minor break-outs of resentment may occur. Say I’m remembering a particularly painful episode, or I’m awakened by a dream that brings it to mind, or I’m watching a movie...
 - The original incident of injury may engender a kind of disposition to react rather strongly if it ever happens again, and this may be activated after sincere apology that is whole-heartedly accepted.
- “**For moral reasons**”:
 - C’s approach here seems both **overintellectualized** and **legalized**. Let me explain.
 - Overintellectualized: As Wittgenstein emphasized, it is an occupational hazard of philosophy to overintellectualize the subject matters under investigation, to make them more amenable to a kind of analytic treatment. Arguably in the present case, we are in the domain not so much of warrant, reasons, justification, and the like but of human responsiveness. When you apologize to me in a heartfelt way, I am **moved** to forgive, resentment recedes, I no longer have thoughts of revenge, etc. These things do not represent movements of the will—as in, “I have decided to forego resentment since I can see that it’s no longer warranted.” This is not to say that there are not special cases in which the will is implicated: I find myself resentful way beyond a point that’s reasonable. Perhaps the offense is one to which I’m very sensitive, etc. At a certain point, I make a conscious, deliberate effort to overcome my resentment. (Cf. “intentional action”

understood (I think misunderstood) as action caused by an act of will, an intention. To say this is a mistake is not to say that we never deliberate and then act based upon a momentary decision. Rather this is not the rule.)

- Legalized: in the way that Bernard Williams and others have complained about a kind of **scientism** in philosophy, the bringing to bear modes of thought and explanation germane in natural science that are not appropriate to philosophy, I worry about the imposition of legal categories in our thinking about ethical matters. Clearly this requires much more discussion than I can give it here, and it probably reflects my sense that some of the Aristotelian ways of approaching ethics feel more natural than later approaches that emphasize quasi-legal categories like obligation, warrant, and the like. But the presence of terms like **warrant, justification, standing to forgive**, seem both striking in C's treatment and, to me at least, not natural ones given my experience of the phenomena in question. One writer on forgiveness (P. Hieronymi, in a very insightful paper on the subject) speaks, for example, of the importance of resentment, of not forgiving it too soon or easily, as a form of **protest**. This seems like the importation of a political idea. There is one passage in which Charles speaks of the moral community as ceding to the injured party exclusive standing to grant forgiveness.

9. The virtue of forgiveness: I very much appreciate C's framing this subject in terms of virtue. One issue that this brings to the fore is the question of what it is to be a forgiving person. If I'm reading C correctly, much of the analysis seems a bit out of sync at least with my sense of the relevant virtue.

- A colleague of mine once commented that we would do well to forego some of our anger in favor of an increased sense of irony, a kind of

cosmic irony. I took this to be a remark in the spirit of Spinoza. He meant that if one has a refined sense of human limitation, and some ability to see things "under the aspect of eternity," then one will be less surprised and arguably less angry at the human foibles that come in one's direction. This is no matter of making excuses or condoning injurious behavior. One remains committed to being a certain sort of person, to teaching this to one's children, etc. But a person who has internalized a bit of this perspective seems to me on the road to becoming a more forgiving person.

- Let me indicate what seem like some of the characteristic features of a forgiving person. One context for focusing our thinking about this topic is that of domestic situations like marriage, domestic partnership, etc. in which something like proximity engenders the possibility of all sorts of frictions, and concerning which forgivingness seems a crucial virtue:
 - a forgiving person is likely to absorb more stings (for lack of a better word) than an unforgiving person, and not because of a lack of self-respect or anything of the sort.
 - She is also more apt to forget such stings as have occurred, at least the minor ones, and even not so minor ones, again not at the cost of self-respect, etc. Forgetting, in the right context, to the right extent, comes to seem like an important aspect of the virtue.
 - Crucially, she also knows the limits, at what point it's important not to hold one's tongue, to protest wrong, and the like. This is of course related to self-respect.
 - In contexts where apology is owed her, she is unlikely to require a full narrative of the sort discussed by C (major moral breaches aside of course).
 - Her interest in not humiliating the other similarly makes it entirely natural that she not be much interested in any repudiation of the self that did the damage (again major breaches aside).
 - In contexts where apology is owed her and done in the right spirit and to the right degree of detail, she finds herself spontaneously less angry. She does not **forego** her anger (since

it's no longer warranted), as one foregoes things one might still desire.

- She is not apt to reduce the other to less than he is, to one who is "just an offender" even while the offense still hangs in the air.
- I'm describing a virtue, and since no one achieves such things perfectly, there will be all sorts of variations in actual cases. A person who is virtuous in the respect in question, if very sensitive on a certain topic, may indeed have to forego her desire to hurt back. She may have to work at letting go of her anger because it's no longer fair, etc. But this is due not to the nature of forgiveness, but to special circumstances.

10. C makes the point that he is approaching this from a purely secular point of view. My own stance is quite different. I occupy a religious point of view, albeit without the M&E usually taken to be definitive of a religious position." It's the religious life in which I'm interested and in which I'm a participant, but this is a long story and threatens to take us too far afield. (A quick statement of my view would make it look too much like anti-realism about God.) In any case, I see the religious outlook as providing a deeper grounding for the virtue of forgiveness and for the various aspects described. The topic deserves a book, but here is a sketch.

- It is characteristic of the Jewish religious sensibility (and some of the prophetic literature) to see God and the people as bound together in something that is almost like a domestic partnership, with mutual needs, etc. Thus the love for God, and God's love for us, are conceptualized more on the model of real relationships than say in various strains of Christianity, where person's love for God is something like the worship or adoration of perfection, and his love for persons is a matter of undeserved grace. This makes the Jewish model both a reflection of and useful for the understanding of real relationships where forgiveness, mutually, is important. This point deserves much attention, much more than I can give it here of course.
- So God and the people are, as it were, living as if they were bound by marriage, with many frictions engendered and no one on either side does it perfectly. God is angry and vengeful at times, and we mess up

in countless ways some of which are described in harsh terms as amounting to infidelity.

- At the same time, some of the Biblical literature paints God in almost perfect terms. Think here of one's description of the virtues of the person one loves. To paint a picture of what is wonderful about the person is not to deny that there is another side.
- Forgiveness is an important part of what, according to the literature, God does well. How so? The description fits well with the virtue picture: God is long-suffering (absorbs many stings), quick to (stands ready to) forgive, does not let his anger consume (it consumes neither him nor us). We are also told—for God is also a teacher—to be like him in these ways, and further (like him) not to always hold our tongue but in the right context to rebuke one another for wrongdoing. This, among the commandments, is one of the most difficult to get right since it amounts to pointing out the foibles and wrongdoings of another with appropriate love and sensitivity, and without any touch of condescension. "Appropriate" here is important, since sometime the wrongdoing is such as makes appropriate anger and the like.
- One thing suggested by the religious case is that forgiveness is importantly related to love, something that does not emerge from modern treatments like C's. God's readiness to forgive, even his willingness to absorb many stings en route, the way he rebukes, all of these are closely connected to the fact that the relationship is a love relationship.
- One might try to play that out in talk of forgiveness more generally. It's interesting to try it on a vaguely Aristotelian model that sees the family as the primary community (with love and connection as binding forces), the local community, the nation, all of humanity—these are like concentric circles and in each of them it's our connections to these people (with love on one extreme, and a kind of more diffuse love for humanity on the other) that grounds the forgiveness.
- I have the sense that this would lead to a less legalized way of thinking about forgiveness more generally. I mean to offer no proofs of anything here, but it seems to me that in my sketch above of the virtue, and in my further sketch of the religious perspective on all of this, it was no accident that talk of warrant, standing, and the rest

seemed distant. I have the sense that we would do better to construe forgiveness in more personal and less legalistic terms. But something like that is my prejudice generally about the ethical domain.

1. Asking forgiveness from God: what's this all about. One thing that it's not about for me is the feeling that we are miserable, unworthy creatures, stained by sin. Perhaps it's like this: I've long had the feeling that there are intrinsically valuable things we can add to the universe. The universe is a more amazing place because of love, because of the presence of generosity.... (cf. Woody Allen's soliloquy at the end of *Manhattan* about what makes life worthwhile. His answer included Cezanne's apples (if I remember right), a certain movement of Mozart's Jupiter Symphony, Tracy's face....) In a parallel fashion we "sin" against the universe when we hurt one another, when we treat one another, or treat nature with a lack of respect. And so for anyone like me, there is plenty for which to ask forgiveness.

2. A personal incident: the attempt to forgive a dead parent. There are a number of respects in which my own experience just doesn't fit the Griswold picture, and some of these are significant beyond the particular sort of case

- This is the sort of case—forgiving the deceased—that is arguably not a central case of forgiveness. Griswold says that it's a case of imperfect forgiveness. What this seems to mean is that it's not really about forgiveness at all, but a kind of derivative matter, what would be forgiveness if the person were still here and we could have the following interaction (that meets C's criteria). Or maybe it's real but derivative forgiveness, a kind of degenerate case: I can "forgive" in that if she were here, I can imagine having this conversation, the possibility of which is indeed suggested by some of what she said.
- But I have sought to forgive a deceased parent, and it feels like real forgiveness I'm trying to achieve, and it's not based upon anything she said. Indeed, if she were to return more or less intact, there is very little chance it would be much different. My attempt to forgive is in any case not predicated on any such subjective assumption.
- Such forgiveness is very difficult. If the subjunctive stuff was in place, it would be much easier. But on C's account, it's not just difficult, it's conceptually impossible. This seems quite wrong.
- What is my motivation for wishing to forgive? No doubt, in the inevitably mixed motivation is my desire to unburden myself of the awful feelings. And the psychological and social consequences of some

of the damage done. That is, there is the sense—right or wrong—that I would do better with certain real world matters if I could make peace with my parent and let the wounds heal. But this is surely not all of it. Another piece, much less self-directed, is the desire to make peace with my parent, albeit in absentia. The field of our relationships is not limited to the living....