# Wrongdoing and Forgiveness

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To forgive a person for a wrong he has done has often been valued as morally good and as indicative of a benevolent and merciful character. But while forgiveness has been recognized as valuable its nature as a moral response has largely been ignored by modern moral philosophers who work outside the confines of a religious context.[1] Where it has been discussed, forgiveness has been thought particularly difficult to define, and some have thought the forgiving response paradoxical or even impossible. I shall discuss some of these difficulties and suggest firstly that the value of forgiveness lies in the fact that it essentially requires a recognition of the wrongdoer's responsibility for his action, and secondly that forgiveness typically involves an *effort* on the part of the one wronged: a conscious attempt to improve *oneself* in relation to the wrongdoer.

Most of the great moral philosophers of the past have recognized the intrinsic worth of retribution as a response to wrongdoing. Kant tied retribution into the framework of the moral law by arguing that the desire for retribution arises from the perception that one's rights have been violated by the wrongdoer, and these rights, in Kant's view, belong to us in virtue of our rational nature. As a consequence we *ought* to punish the wrongdoer for his wilful disregard for us as ends in ourselves. In Hegel we find the view that the criminal has freely chosen violence and pain as the maxim of his action, and therefore has a 'right' to be punished. Punishment is an act of respect for the wrongdoer.

Neither Kant nor Hegel gives a coherent account of forgiveness, however. For both of them, forgiveness involves a wiping out of the crime, a making undone what has been done, and Kant adds to this the thought that forgiveness always involves the forgoing of punishment. It is not therefore surprising to find Kant and Hegel regarding forgiveness and retribution as in conflict, for on this view the extending of forgiveness to the wrongdoer is a matter of relinquishing the demands of justice, and perhaps even condoning the crime.

In fact, Kant regards forgiveness not merely as problematic but as literally impossible: for once wrong has been done it cannot be undone

[1] Two notable exceptions are Aurel Kolnai's 'Forgiveness', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1973–4, and R. S. Downie's 'Forgiveness' in *Philosophical Quarterly*, **15**, No. 59, 1965.



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even by God. God is a Divine Judge against whose law the wrongdoer has consciously and wilfully trangressed. The moral law, and hence the punishments that are incurred by wrongdoing, share the necessity and eternity of the divine nature. God, in His capacity as judge, cannot be moved by our pleadings and prayers for forgiveness: we cannot affect God's nature in this way and somehow 'change His mind' as to our moral deserts. Kant's account offers no hope to those who try to escape punishment by appealing to God's mercy. We will receive our just deserts with or without our prayers. Our only hope lies in our positive endeavours to make amends for our sins and in our decision to act rightly in future. Kant seems to think that through such a positive change of heart a person can become a 'new man'. The sinful person he once was will be punished while the new person he has become will not.

This ingenious solution creates many problems of personal identity, and makes forgiveness redundant. If I repent, and in so doing, become a new man, asking for forgiveness seems to be a matter of asking for a response aimed at a person who no longer exists. But if this is really so, then there can be no point in asking for forgiveness, and the person who is asked for forgiveness can only aim his response at a metaphysical shadow.

If forgiveness is to be coherent we should reject this account of repentance. The person who repents fully recognizes that the crime committed was his own, and that his responsibility for it continues over time, just as he does. In asking for forgiveness he wants this very same person to be forgiven, and the forgiver is required to recognize him as such. When we do speak of a person as 'becoming a new man' through his repentance we must remember that this phrase is used metaphorically, suggesting a spiritual transformation from bad to good, but not implying his literal re-creation.

Kant's problem, however, is slightly different. For him, forgiveness is impossible not because the person who once committed a crime no longer exists but because he views forgiveness as a literal wiping out of sins, and as a reversal in a supposedly irreversible process of crime and punishment. I suggest that far from removing the fact of wrongdoing, forgiveness actually relies upon the recognition of this fact for its very possibility. What is annulled in the act of forgiveness is not the crime itself but the distorting effect that this wrong has upon one's relations with the wrongdoer and perhaps with others. If this is correct then forgiveness is possible even for God. He may still accept the wrongdoer back into His all-embracing love and set to rights the damage which the wrongdoer has done to his personal relation with Him. This does not exclude the possibility of God punishing him also. Indeed, for most Christians God's forgiveness does not exclude retribution: it is a matter

of God's 'raising us up' from the position into which we have fallen through sin, and restoring us to His love.

Consider the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son. The son takes his share of the inheritance and spends it in debauchery and riotous living. Cast down by his resultant poverty and suffering he resolves to return to his father, to confess his sins, and to admit his unworthiness to be called his son. Upon his return his father is filled with compassion and joy; he gives him the best garments to wear, puts shoes upon his feet and orders the fatted calf to be killed and prepared, saying 'For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost and is found'.[2] The son returns in humility, brought down in his own estimation and conscious of his unworthiness. The father's love and compassion, however, heal the breach between them and restore the son to his original position of dignity within the household. The act of forgiveness has brought the son back from a state of 'death' or sin to one of 'life' or goodness. From being 'lost' (both to his father and his home, and, by analogy, to God) the son is 'found', that is, he is returned to his rightful place, redeemed by his own repentance and his father's love.

It is true that the son is not punished upon his return, but the point of the parable is that the suffering and poverty he has experienced previously were themselves a punishment for his wrongdoing. The punishment due to us may be of this kind or perhaps of some other, meted out to us after death. But in neither case does the fact of punishment preclude our being forgiven subsequently. There are, no doubt, other problems with the notion of God's forgiveness,[3] but Kant's problem, at least, can be solved by rejecting the view of forgiveness as a literal wiping out of sins, and as essentially involving a forgoing of retribution.

In the human realm, forgiveness may involve a forgoing of punishment, but that does not constitute forgiveness as such. We have to look in each case for the reason why the wrongdoer is not punished. There may be many reasons for this, and not all of them have the moral significance possessed by forgiveness. One may, for example, simply choose to 'turn a blind eye' to the wrongdoing, not wanting to contemplate its existence. One might also forgo retribution out of a desire not to seem intolerant or a 'moral bore' in the eyes of others, or out of a desire to fit in with other people who themselves do not see the action as wrong. But blindness to wrong and particularly wilful blindness is not forgiveness; indeed, it may be said to indicate moral weakness or some other personal defect of character.

[2] St Luke, 15, xxiv.

[3] Anne C. Minas deals with some of these in her article 'God and Forgiveness', *Philosophical Quarterly*, **25,** No. 99, 1975.

Forgiveness is also misunderstood if it is taken to involve an 'excusing' of the wronged party. To some extent this misunderstanding is encouraged by our ordinary usage. We often say, for example, 'you should forgive him—you know he is very young' or even 'forgive him, he doesn't know what he is doing'. But although the attempts that we make as a result of these statements to overcome our anger and hostile feelings share many similarities with the true forgiving response, I do not believe that in these cases we can be said to be trying to forgive. The implication of the first statement is that the youth or inexperience of the wrongdoer is in some way a mitigating circumstance for his action, and that as a result he cannot be said to be fully responsible for it. We are being asked to excuse the action by endeavouring to see it as less wrong or less reprehensible than it first appeared, and to overcome our feelings because they are not appropriate to the situation. In the second case, similarly, the wrongdoer's ignorance of his crime is taken to be an excuse for him, perhaps with the implication that if he *had* known he would not have done wrong. His lack of awareness of other people, and perhaps even his lack of moral sense, are treated as things which remove him from the realm of reward and punishment, praise and blame. His responsibility for his action is thought to be lessened by his ignorance. Once again our feelings of anger and hostility are thought to be inappropriate to the facts of the matter.

Forgiveness is quite another matter. If we are to forgive, our resentment is to be overcome not by denying ourselves the right to that resentment, but by endeavouring to view the wrongdoer with compassion, benevolence and love while recognizing that he has wilfully abandoned his right to them.

There are many ways of excusing a person's bad behaviour, but such explanations remove him some distance from the moral arena, and the language of morality, involving as it does the notions of responsibility, merit and blame, is replaced by a discourse which speaks of influences, mitigating circumstances, determination by forces and drives. We then no longer see the person as responsible for his action, and once this point is reached the appropriate response to him is not retribution, but treatment or deterrence. There is no point in seeing that justice be done when there has been, not an act of *in*justice, but a happening over which the person had no control.

But now if retribution is inappropriate so too is forgiveness: one cannot forgive when no wrong has been done, for there is no breach to be healed and no repentance is necessary or possible. Forgiveness requires that a wrong not be disregarded, overlooked or dismissed.

Let us now look at the results of wrongdoing and the nature of forgiveness itself. Typically an act of wrongdoing brings about a distancing of the wrongdoer from the one he has harmed. This distancing

involves a forfeiting of the right to the wronged party's sympathy, affection or trust, and is felt as a breakdown or a distortion in the personal relations between the parties. The distortion may also affect their relations with other people who are not directly involved. For example, a man who cannot forgive his son's rudeness or disrespect may have bitter feelings which affect also his relationship with his wife and other children.

Initially, the breakdown effected by wrongdoing may be felt more or less painfully only by the wronged party. But it may be that the wrongdoer feels a similar anguish almost immediately. Consider a bitter argument in which one party deliberately utters something harsh and cruel to the other. On perceiving the hurt in the other's face, or perhaps even as he says the words, he regrets his remark, inwardly recoils from his own words and begs for forgiveness and reconciliation even before the other has had a chance to respond.

Forgiveness is a way of healing the damage done to one's relations with the wrongdoer, or at least a first step towards a full reconciliation. The repentance of the wrongdoer, his recognition of and regret for his action, and his willingness to make amends, although not essential preconditions of forgiveness, no doubt facilitate its progress. Retribution, again not essential, may also be helpful, for it may play a part in the wrongdoer's path towards repentance and it may also help to ease the wronged party's sense of outrage and hostility.

In most cases of forgiveness there are two aspects to consider. The first is that internal 'change of heart' which leads naturally to certain gestures or outward actions towards the wrongdoer, which express the wronged party's desire to make good the relations between them. The second aspect is the effect of these gestures on the wrongdoer and on the relations between him and the wronged party. In typical cases the two parties still come into contact with one another, although their contact is strained. Forgiveness, when offered and accepted, enables them to resume harmonious comunication. But there are other cases in which the wrongdoer is no longer present and where forgiveness cannot be accepted. We may forgive those who are absent or dead. In such cases the change of heart which is the essence of forgiveness may or may not lead to any external gestures or outward indications. But even in these cases there is an implicit connection between forgiveness and outward action, for if I forgive someone who is no longer present it is true that if I were to see him again I *would* behave towards him in a different way than if I had not forgiven him.

Let us consider two examples. Take the case of a woman who has had an adulterous affair, and whose husband refuses to allow her back into the home when she regrets her action and wishes to return. The

husband is angry and coldly turns her away when she comes to their door.

Time passes and the wife makes repeated attempts to return home; she acknowledges her guilt and suffers both from the recognition of her wrongdoing and from their estrangement. She begs her husband for forgiveness, expresses her sorrow, and declares her readiness to be faithful in future. The suffering is not all on her side, however. The husband has naturally been hurt by her affair but he also suffers from their estrangement; we may suppose that he is not unmoved by her pleas, and he comes to realize that her remorse is sincere.

It is not always easy to recognize the existence of sincere repentance and remorse. Nor, for that matter, is it always easy to recognize when one has been forgiven. The reason is the same in each case. Repentance and forgiveness are changes of feeling and perception, and while they typically express themselves externally they are not constituted by outward display. A person may be an exceedingly good actor and may pretend to regret his action or to forgive another with such skilful words and gestures that we are completely taken in by him. There are, however, at least some factors one or more of which will enable a person to judge whether repentance is sincere. One might take past conduct and character into account, in order to assess a person's sincerity and honesty in this particular case. Or one might also assess the intensity and frequency of his requests for forgiveness as indications of his repentance. In the example we are considering the wife does make *repeated* attempts to gain her husband's forgiveness. Another factor might be the extent to which the wrongdoer is already trying to make amends for his actions—the wife has ended her affair—and one might even test the wrongdoer's willingness to comply with one's requests and respect one's wishes.

Let us return to the story. The man now decides that his wife is truly sorry for her action and that she genuinely wants to be reunited with him. He is ready to try to forgive her. At least one thing must occur if he is to do so: he must allow her to come home. But this external gesture is not sufficient. Suppose that he re-admits her and yet thereafter keeps a diligent watch on all her movements, treats her with suspicion, and opens her mail in case there is some communication between her and the other man. It is clear that in this case he has not yet forgiven her.

Without a 'change of heart', without a change in the wronged party's emotional perception and reactions towards the wrongdoer, the outward gestures which he may perform—the smiles, the promise never to mention the matter again, the re-admittance into the family home—will remain, and probably appear, what they really are, namely, empty gestures only. Having said that, I think it is worth noting that forgiveness may *begin* with such gestures and may even help to bring about the

emotional change which itself takes place at a later date. Just as the traditional stages of mourning may help the bereaved feel their grief at the appropriate time and in appropriate degrees, so too may outward gestures and spoken words enable the victim of wrongdoing to feel love and affection in the place of resentment and bitterness. Forgiveness need not, perhaps even cannot, be instantaneous, for it takes time to heal the wounds of estrangement and to restore the free-flowing trust and affection which once existed. But a response that is initially hesitant and reserved may gain momentum and strength through outward movements and rituals (indeed this is one of the functions of ritual).

Genuine forgiveness is thus more than an outward show of good-heartedness or generosity. Indeed the person who asks for forgiveness is not asking merely to be allowed home or to appear to the outside world to be reunited with the other. He wants to be *really* accepted and restored. Only if a change in the wronged party's emotional outlook lies behind his gestures can this be so. Without it all outward gestures will remain hollow, and for the penitent who realizes their emptiness they will be an ever-constant reminder of his unworthiness and humiliation.

It is not easy to forgive another. Forgiveness requires that a wrong not be disregarded or overlooked, but it also requires that the wrong not be allowed permanently to damage and distort one's personal relations. We are required to accept back into our heart a person who is responsible for having hurt and damaged us. If I am to forgive I must risk extending my trust and affection, with no guarantee that they will not be flung back in my face or forfeited again in the future. One might even say that forgiveness is an unconditional response to the wrongdoer, for there is something *un*forgiving in the demand for guarantees.

I said earlier that retribution and repentance often make forgiveness easier to achieve, but that neither is strictly necessary. To see this take a case of two people who used to be close friends. For years they have visited one another, had many interesting and amusing conversations, gone to films and parties together, and shared their joys and sorrows. Then one of them hears of an excellent opportunity abroad and goes to live in another country without first telling his friend. The one who is left behind hears that he has gone and why, and although pleased for his friend's good fortune he is hurt that he was not told of it personally. He writes to his friend but the letters are never answered. He realizes that he has been 'dropped', abandoned for greater and more amusing things. Naturally he feels betrayed by this turn of events, and is angry and resentful. But he has no way of knowing whether the other knows of his feelings, nor can he tell whether the other feels sorry for having abandoned him.

In such a situation there is no possibility of retribution and no knowledge of repentance. But forgiveness may still be possible.

Forgiveness in such a case will not result in a renewal of the friendship but it will enable the man to overcome his bitterness and resentment. He may, in short, undergo the same emotional re-acceptance of his friend in his thoughts, so that he may come to contemplate him without hatred or anger, and once again be able to enjoy the memories of their close association.

This change of heart may be accomplished in a number of ways, which help to alleviate the soreness he feels. For example, he may refuse to dwell upon the thought of his friend's rude departure, and the unanswered letters. This is not to say that he forgets them, but when the thought of them occurs he does not dwell upon them. He will turn his mind to other things and take steps to avoid nursing and nurturing his resentment. We all know how a small stinging wound may be coaxed to grow out of all proportion by reverting to it in one's thoughts, feeding and nourishing it by recalling many other slights and careless remarks that have happened in the past. Although it is less easy it is surely possible to reverse this process by replacing bad thoughts with good, unpleasant memories with pleasant associations. If the man tries to think of his friend's good points, of his amusing wit and charm, of his courage, strength and adventurous spirit, he may eventually manage to expel his resentment and anger, and regain his original affection and compassion for his friend even while he recognizes his faults. In this way he manages to forgive his friend, and the wrong that has been done ceases to distort and sour his thoughts—he has accepted him back into his heart.

Forgiveness, through such active mental and emotional endeavour, is therefore possible even in the absence of repentance and retribution. It is essentially an internal change of heart that is appropriately described in terms such as 're-acceptance', 're-admittance', and 'overcoming'. The example I have just given also suggests that forgiveness is a matter of a *willed* change of heart—the successful result of an active endeavour to replace bad thoughts with good, bitterness and anger with compassion and affection. It is as the result of an active endeavour that forgiveness is of value. One might say that it involves a kind of deliberate *self*-improvement. Simply ceasing to be angry as the result of a good night's sleep or a tranquillizer, or merely through boredom or the passage of time, cannot be called forgiveness. Harmonious personal relations may be restored through such methods but this result cannot be said to be of any moral worth. It is this thought which explains the intuition that apparently 'instantaneous' forgiveness is really moral weakness or a defect in moral character, suggesting the wronged party's inability to appreciate the wrong that has been done to him or his overwillingness not to let the wrong upset him too deeply. The Christian religion does, it is true, hold out as an ideal the development of a

forgiving 'character' or disposition which enables a person to extend forgiveness without hesitation or reserve. Some, like Nietzsche, have conceived Christianity as a religion of weakness as a result. But it is surely no coincidence that such people also criticize human love and affection on the same grounds. The forgiving character is one which is achievable only after a hard-fought battle, and should not be confused with timidity or moral feebleness.

Thus forgiveness may be seen as a morally valuable response to wrongdoing in three respects. Firstly, forgiveness, like retribution, can only begin from the recognition or belief that wrong has been done. Any account which denies the existence of wrong or which describes an act in terms outside the arena of moral discourse is one which leaves no room either for retribution or for forgiveness. Both require that moral vision in which the human agent occupies a central place, and in which praise and blame are allotted in full recognition of his nature as a responsible being.

Secondly, the act of forgiveness is a way of restoring the damage done to one's personal relations through an active endeavour to change oneself and one's emotional reactions to the wrongdoer. The forgiver is, in a sense, in a position of moral superiority: the wrongdoer has, through his action, removed himself from the realm of the (relatively) guiltless, and has 'cast himself down' in the eyes of the wronged party. However, the latter would be foolish and morally at fault if he proudly and loudly proclaimed his superiority over the wrongdoer. Indeed, to do so would in effect threaten the response as a case of genuine forgiveness, since it would humiliate the wrongdoer still further, and negate with one hand the affection and trust that are being offered with the other. So although the forgiver *is* morally superior, at least in this instance, and although this fact is recognized by the wrongdoer in the very act of asking for forgiveness, the knowledge should be implicitly shared and not openly displayed. Indeed, if the wrongdoer is to be 'lifted up' and 'raised' to his original position it is made easier if the wronged party goes some way to meet him, by 'lowering' himself in modesty and humility. As we saw in the example of the Prodigal Son it is part of the act of forgiveness itself that the son is treated with honour and respect by the very person who surpasses him in moral worth.

The terms used here to describe forgiveness—'restoration', 'overcoming', 'acceptance' and so on—all suggest the third sense in which forgiveness is of moral worth. I have spoken of forgiveness as restoring the wrongdoer to his proper place in our affection, of healing the damage done to one's personal relations, of overcoming estrangement, and of accepting the wrongdoer once more into his original place in our esteem. The idea that lies behind all these phrases is that of harmonious ties of trust, affection and mutual sympathy which are the fundamental

bonds between human individuals. If it is right to say that these bonds are the foundations of a natural moral vision it becomes clear just how forgiveness may be regarded as of wider moral significance. In being an act whereby such personal ties are enhanced forgiveness may be seen as upholding and furthering the fundamental human values which themselves lie at the heart of moral rules and principles. Forgiveness is the natural completion of a process of restoring and healing the relations which the wrongdoer has, for a time, suspended: the relations of affection and regard that form the basis of harmonious moral and social life.

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