HOW IS SELF-FORGIVENESS POSSIBLE?

BY

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Abstract: The idea of self-forgiveness poses a serious challenge to any philosopher interested in giving a general account of forgiveness. On the one hand, it is an uncontroversial part of our common psychological and moral discourse. On the other, any account of self-forgiveness is inconsistent with any general account of forgiveness which implies that only the victim of an offense can forgive. To avoid this conclusion, one must either challenge the particular claims that preclude self-forgiveness or offer an independently plausible account of self-forgiveness. I deploy both strategies in this article, explaining what self-forgiveness is and how it is possible.

Introduction

The idea of self-forgiveness poses a serious challenge to any philosopher interested in giving a general account of forgiveness. On the one hand, it is an uncontroversial part of our common psychological and moral discourse. We describe people as forgiving themselves, we exhort them to do so (or not to), and we empirically investigate the purported benefits of having done it. On the other hand, however, any account of self-forgiveness is inconsistent with any general account of forgiveness according to which only the victim of an offense can forgive. If only the victim of an offense can forgive, then the offender cannot forgive himself for wronging her.[1] And, as a matter of fact, many philosophical views of forgiveness are committed, either directly or indirectly, to the claim that only victims can forgive – call these 'victim-only-views'.[2] For example, Dana Nelkin suggests that only a victim has the standing to truly forgive because only the victim is in a position to release the offender from the obligations to the victim created by his offense (2011, pp. 47–9). Hence the challenge posed by self-forgiveness. There is a

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phenomenon that is commonly and reliably identified as self-forgiveness. These identifications are the basis of an increasing interest in explicating the concept. And the different conceptions support both moral assessments and empirical investigations of the process and effects of self-forgiveness. However, to offer an account of self-forgiveness assumes that it is possible to forgive oneself and, by extension, assumes that all victim-only-views are false.

The aim of this article is just that – to offer an account of self-forgiveness and to suggest by implication and by argument that victim-only-views are mistaken. My view is not unique in this regard, for, as I said, any account of self-forgiveness has this implication.[3] Nonetheless, the fact that otherwise plausible theories deny that it is possible places a burden on any account of self-forgiveness. In order to discharge this burden, the proponent of self-forgiveness has two options. She can challenge the particular claims about forgiveness that preclude self-forgiveness – e.g. that only victims have the standing to forgive. Or she can undermine the plausibility of victim-only-views either by offering an independently plausible account of self-forgiveness or a competing general account of forgiveness that is consistent with self-forgiveness.

I deploy both strategies in this article. In the next three sections, I develop an account of self-forgiveness that is coherent and explanatorily powerful. I show that the idea has currency in our ordinary psychological and moral discourse. I show that it is sufficiently robust that we can distinguish it from other similar phenomena. And I offer a precisely delineated conception of it in terms of four conditions. The plausibility of this account speaks against the plausibility of victim-only-views. However, while many prominent accounts of forgiveness are either compatible or not strictly incompatible with self-forgiveness,[4] I do not offer or endorse a competing general account of forgiveness. Then, in the last section, I consider the case for the impossibility of self-forgiveness and argue that it is inadequate. I conclude that the plausibility of my account of self-forgiveness shifts the burden of proof to those who claim it is impossible and that this burden is not discharged by those whose positions imply its impossibility – particularly in light of the fact that few of those positions explicitly argue that self-forgiveness is impossible and instead merely accept this implication without comment.

In Section 1, I illustrate the ubiquity of the idea of self-forgiveness in our social, psychological, and moral discourse. In Section 2, I introduce and criticize existing accounts of self-forgiveness, focusing on views that understand the phenomenon in terms of its relation to self-reconciliation and self-respect. In Section 3, I propose an account of self-forgiveness in the form of four necessary and jointly sufficient conditions.[5] Finally, in Section 4, I consider and reject reasons for thinking that the idea of self-forgiveness is confused because only victims can forgive.

1. *Identifying self-forgiveness*

Consider the following three stories.

> *Unfaithful Partner*. Ollie chooses to cheat on his wife Veronica. Soon after doing so, however, he feels guilty about his infidelity and comes to believe that he has betrayed her trust out of negligent indifference. He repents to himself and internally repudiates both the desires and the indifference that led him to cheat. He admits his offense to Veronica and sincerely apologizes to her. Then, having reflected on his offense, his guilt, and his repentance, Ollie forgives himself.
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> *Embezzlement*. Always in need of money, Candace began to steal from work. She transferred small amounts from different accounts and, over the course of a year, stole over $3500. Though her boss did not notice the missing funds, Candace began to feel increasingly anxious and eventually admitted her embezzlement to her boss. Surprisingly, he was lenient and offered not to prosecute or even fire her, so long as she paid back the money over time. This response prompted Candace to reflect on her actions and motives. Having done so, she came to understand her wrongdoing, took responsibility for it, and began to feel genuine remorse. Candace now views herself as a person capable of doing wrong, but believes she can forgive herself for her offense.[6]
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> *Bonnie Garland*. Richard killed his girlfriend, Bonnie, after she broke up with him. The night after she ended their relationship, while staying in her family's home, he intentionally and brutally beat her to death with a hammer. In the days following the murder, while in jail, Richard appeared remorseful about his actions. He went to confession and, both at the time and later in prison, he received Catholic counseling about the need for self-forgiveness. However, even some of the Christian Brothers who counseled him were unsure whether he was truly repentant. Nonetheless, he soon appeared to have overcome his guilt and forgiven himself. Indeed, after a few years in prison he became bitter about the severity of his sentence – he was convicted of 'heat of passion' manslaughter and sentenced to 8 to 25 years. In an interview given after three years in prison, he expressed the belief that it would be unfair for him to serve even the minimum remainder of his sentence.[7]

Unfaithful Partner is an imagined case, but I suspect most would agree that it describes a type of scenario that can and does occur. *Embezzlement* is an actual case of a person who is trying to forgive herself. I suspect that the story, including the characterization of Candace's mental life, is one that most of us would accept as coherent. *Bonnie Garland* is a true story of a person

who forgave himself for a brutal crime. I suspect that many will find Richard's lack of continued guilt and the fact that he has forgiven himself to be morally objectionable. Michael Moore, for example, describes Richard's attitude as 'easily obtained self-absolution for a horrifying violation' (1987, p. 214) and Jeffrie Murphy echoes his condemnation of Richard's attitude (2003, p. 70).

Our acceptance of these cases as cases of self-forgiveness and the fact that they are generalizable supports three claims: there are phenomena that we reliably identify as self-forgiveness; describing these phenomena as instances of self-forgiveness is consistent with and comprehensible in terms of our everyday psychological discourse; and moral judgments about offenders who forgive themselves are coherent. In addition, whatever it is that Ollie, Candace, and Richard have done, the practice, process, and effects of doing it are being studied systematically by psychologists and psychiatrists (e.g. Thompson *et al*., 2005; Wenzel, Woodyatt and Hendrick, 2012).

If we can provide an account of self-forgiveness that captures most of our intuitive cases and illuminates those it excludes, then we have good reason to believe that self-forgiveness is possible that many people do forgive themselves. And, if we can undermine the arguments made for victim-only-views, then we have no reason to deny that such forgiveness is possible and that what we commonly call self-forgiveness is just that. In what follows, I develop an account of self-forgiveness that attempts to do both of these things. I conclude that self-forgiveness can be given an analysis that allows us both to investigate it empirically and to deploy the concept in our moral discourse, where it is already (and increasingly) common.

2. *Self-forgiveness as self-reconciliation*

In this section, I examine three conceptions of self-forgiveness as self-reconciliation that are plausible and instructive, but ultimately inadequate. Each of the views considered is either too narrow and thereby fails to cover cases that intuitively it ought, or it is too broad and thereby identifies as self-forgiveness similar but conceptually distinct phenomena.

Many philosophers understand self-forgiveness as a form of self-reconciliation (Horsbrugh, 1974; Snow, 1993; Holmgren, 1998 and 2012; Dillon, 2001; Griswold, 2007; and Norlock, 2009). The intuition driving this view is that one experiences self-alienation, an internal fracture between two sides of oneself, when one recognizes and reproaches oneself for the fact that one has willfully wronged another. Self-forgiveness, then, is the reconciliation of these two sides of oneself. For example, Ollie feels guilt about cheating on Veronica. The very feeling of guilt indicates a disconnect between one side of himself (that which was unfaithful) and another side (that which is committed to Veronica and which now feels

remorse). If he had not been unfaithful, Ollie would not feel alienated in this way. Similarly, if he had been unfaithful but felt no remorse, he would not feel alienated in this way. In neither case would self-forgiveness even be an option because in neither case would there be an internal fracture to heal. But Ollie does feel guilt and in order to forgive himself he must reconcile these two sides of himself, presumably by renouncing the motives of one and reaffirming the commitments of the other.

This view captures an important intuition about self-forgiveness, namely, that self-reproach involves a degree of internal alienation and therefore requires some manner of self-reconciliation. Self-reproach implies recognition of one's own wrongdoing. And for those who eschew wrongdoing, self-forgiveness requires one to renounce one's action and the beliefs, motives, and attitudes that prompted that action as well as to reconcile the offending self with the forgiving self. However, this phenomenon is not unique to self-forgiveness. It is common to both self-excusing and self-justifying, either of which may be prompted by alienating self-reproach and either of which may lead to the reconciliation of the offending self with the excusing or justifying self.

Thus, while self-reconciliation is a feature of self-forgiveness, it is not a unique characteristic of it. Moreover, proponents of self-reconciliation views typically make stronger claims than this minimal conceptual point. They do not claim merely that all self-reproach entails a degree of self-alienation that must be overcome for self-forgiveness to occur. Rather, they claim that alienation prompted by self-reproach in the face of recognized wrongdoing manifests itself in the breakdown of one's agency (Snow, 1993), denial of one's self-worth (Holmgren, 1998),[8] or loss of/damage to one's self-respect (Dillon, 2001).

Nancy Snow claims that self-forgiveness is a process of self-reconciliation undertaken by an offender in response to wrongdoing the recognition of which undermines her ability to function as an agent (1993, pp. 75–6). Paul Hughes correctly notes, however, that only some forgivable offenses cause the sort of internal fracture that Snow describes and that, in less severe cases, self-forgiveness cannot properly be understood as self-reconciliation (Hughes, 1994, p. 558). Trivial offenses can be suffered and forgiven without reconciliation and, for some offenders, reflection on their willful wrongdoing will prompt negative attitudes, but not the kind of agency-undermining reproach that Snow imagines.

Another self-reconciliation view claims that self-forgiveness is driven by an offender's recognition of her own intrinsic moral worth and of the fact that her worth is independent of the aggregate moral value (or disvalue) of her actions. Margaret Holmgren writes, 'To forgive herself, she must simply accept herself as a valuable human being, which she remains in spite of her wrongdoing' (1998, p. 76). However, here Holmgren makes a similar mistake to Snow. She overestimates the typical severity of self-reproach in response to wrongdoing and ignores much of the range of forgivable

offenses. It is unlikely that most forgivable offenses will lead the offender to deny or even doubt her intrinsic self-worth. For example, choosing to catch up on recently published literature in my field rather than spending time with my partner might cause me to feel guilty, but it will not (by itself) cause me to doubt my self-worth, even if I believe that my decision was wrong. There are many possible examples of self-forgiveness in which the offender neither overcomes self-alienation nor reestablishes her sense of intrinsic self-worth. These positions focus too narrowly on the effects of relatively severe wrongdoing and, as a result, describe only a portion of the phenomenon.

Finally, some seek to explain self-forgiveness in terms of the restoration or preservation of self-respect. In perhaps the most comprehensive and subtle treatment of self-forgiveness to date, Robin Dillon develops a self-reconciliation view of this sort. She describes two types of forgiveness: 'transformative self-forgiveness' is needed when self-reproach has significantly damaged one's self-respect (2001, p. 63), when one experiences the sort alienation Snow and Holmgren describe; however, 'preservative self-forgiveness' is sufficient when one's self-respect is secure either because one's self-reproach is weak or because one's confidence in one's own virtue is strong (2001, p. 72). In positing preservative self-forgiveness, Dillon recognizes what Snow and Holmgren did not, namely, that self-forgiveness does not always require that we reconcile a fractured self. However, she still conceives of preservative self-forgiveness on the model of its transformative counterpart. She claims that an offender's change of attitude stems from the belief that her wrongdoing is not the sole determinant of her worth or predictor of her future actions and that forgiving oneself means 'not being in bondage' to the self-alienating influence of (perhaps still warranted) self-reproach (2001, p. 89). Here she seems to view not being in bondage as a necessary condition on self-forgiveness and to follow the self-reconciliation model defended by Snow and Holmgren without significant revision.

I think that this type of self-reconciliation view is wrong to place self-respect in a central position. One worry about this approach is that, despite the connection described by Dillon and others, self-respect is neither necessary nor sufficient for self-forgiveness. Some basic level of self-respect might be necessary for basic agency and thus for self-forgiveness – e.g. a person who truly believed that she and her interests were intrinsically morally worthless might be unable to function as a member of the moral community – but this basic self-respect is not unique to self-forgiveness and thus does not help us distinguish self-forgiveness from related phenomena like self-excuse and self-pardoning.

Moreover, one can have self-respect (above the basic necessary level) and not forgive. For example, Sally may respect herself sufficiently in virtue of, for example, no longer having any malicious intentions toward her victim but still believe that she does not yet deserve forgiveness or self-forgiveness. And she may withhold forgiveness from herself until she has made what she

believes to be appropriate reparation for her offense. Further, one can lack self-respect (but be above the basic necessary level) and still forgive oneself so long as one perceives a sufficient improvement in one's attitude toward the one harmed. For example, Ollie may judge himself to be a vicious person – possessed of vicious desires and with insufficient resolve to resist them – but, with regard to his particular act of infidelity, sincerely renounce the disregard he showed for Veronica and feel confident that he will not hurt her again. And Ollie might forgive himself on these grounds, despite continuing to believe that he is vicious and undeserving of more than basic self-respect.

I conclude from the above considerations that understanding self-forgiveness in terms of self-reconciliation – whether restored agency, a restored sense of self-worth, or restored self-respect – inevitably yields an incomplete account of self-forgiveness. In the following section, I propose an alternative analysis of the phenomenon.

3. Four conditions

Previous accounts of self-forgiveness have focused primarily on paradigmatic cases. Analysis of these cases has helped to identify important features of the concept, but has yielded a rough and sometimes mistaken delineation of its boundaries. Or so I have argued. My aim is to map these boundaries more precisely. I identify features of self-forgiveness that distinguish it from similar but distinct processes like excusing and reassessing the wrongness of an action. I then apply the insights gained from self-reconciliation views – particularly the idea that both guilt and self-forgiveness require a reassessment of how one conceives of oneself – to more nuanced but nonetheless intuitive cases of self-forgiveness. I propose an account according to which self-forgiveness requires a change in the attitude one takes toward oneself about an offense and I demonstrate some virtues of the account. I show that it reinforces key distinctions between forgiveness and other phenomena, captures the insights about self-reconciliation mentioned above, is consistent with plausible accounts of interpersonal forgiveness, and explains subtle intuitions about self-forgiveness, including intuitions about trivial wrongs.

I will show that the following four conditions are necessary and jointly sufficient for self-forgiveness (in the qualified sense described in n. 5).

> *The wrongness condition*. The putative offender (i.e. oneself) must believe and continue to believe that she has wronged herself or another.
>
> *The responsibility condition*. The putative offender must believe and continue to believe that she is morally responsible for her offense.

The attitude condition. The putative offender must be the target of a self-directed negative attitude like guilt, shame, or regret. This attitude must be a response to a perceived offense and to the perceived quality of will of the offender evidenced by the offense.

The change condition. The putative offender must be the target of an improvement in the self-directed negative attitude. This improvement must be a response to perceiving a relevant change in the quality of will behind the initial offense.

The wrongness and responsibility conditions are in a sense preconditions on the attitude and change conditions. They describe the objects of the self-directed attitude required by the attitude condition. Together they say that the kind of self-directed attitude necessary for self-forgiveness is about an action that the agent perceives to be wrong and for which she perceives herself to be responsible. Then, at the core of our basic conception of self-forgiveness, there is the intuition that it involves a change in how the offender views herself. The attitude and change conditions describe the nature of this change in self-assessment and further specify the proper object of the self-directed attitude.[9]

3.1. THE WRONGNESS CONDITION

The wrongness condition requires that an offender believe and continue to believe that she has wronged herself or another. Self-forgiveness is a potential response to any of three kinds of offense. One can forgive oneself for wronging another, for wronging oneself, or for doing both. Just as a spouse may forgive his partner for being unfaithful, so may the partner forgive himself for the same offense. Likewise, just as a student may resent and forgive a tutor that failed to prepare him for an exam, so he may reproach and forgive himself for wasting the opportunities he was given to succeed. Finally, it is possible to wrong oneself and another simultaneously, as when one wrongs oneself *by* wronging another.

The wrongness condition distinguishes forgiveness from moral reassessment. An agent who believes that she has done wrong but then ceases to have that belief does not thereby forgive; she simply revises her judgment about the wrongness of her action. Her revised judgment is that guilt was not justified in the first place. For example, if Ollie comes to believe that it is not wrong to cheat on Veronica so long as she does not discover his infidelity, perhaps because he is a utilitarian and believes that secretly cheating will produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number, then he cannot coherently forgive himself.[10] For in his mind he has nothing to forgive!

Further, because wrongness is a scalar concept, and one can be more or less wrong, a person may reassess her action by judging that it was less wrong than she previously thought. She may also both forgive and reassess the same action by judging not only that the offense is less wrong and thus less blameworthy than she initially thought, but also that it is nonetheless wrong and that some measure of guilt is appropriate prior to her sincere repentance.

The distinction between forgiving and reassessing wrongness is intuitive and easily delineated. However, because both are often responses to the same type of attitude, like guilt, it is easy to ignore or elide this distinction. It is tempting to view overcoming guilt (or shame, or regret) as the defining feature of self-forgiveness. But this is a mistake.

One might accept the above characterization of forgiving and reassessment but object that the wrongness condition is inconsistent with my aim of providing an account of self-forgiveness that applies to self-harms as well as other-harms. One might claim that it is impossible to wrong oneself, that even acting against one's clear interests does not constitute a moral wrong. If this is so, then a view that employs the concept of a self-inflicted wrong is untenable. But it is not so. Self-inflicted wrongs are possible. It seems clear, and clear independently of a particular normative ethics, that various self-abnegating behaviors are wrong and wrong in virtue of their effects on the agent rather than their effects on other maleficiaries. Severely self-abnegating actions violate the respect one ought to have for oneself; they have unjustifiable harmful outcomes; and they can be slavish and cowardly, as well as imprudent.

Consider the following case.[11] Sophie is a wife and mother. She believes in a rigid division of labor between men and women. She considers it her duty to perform those tasks associated with her spousal and parental roles regardless of circumstances. She wakes up early to prepare breakfast for her husband and children, she works throughout the day cleaning house and doing domestic chores, she spends every evening cooking dinner and preparing lunches for the following day, and she stays up late doing whatever small tasks accumulated between dinner and the children's bedtime. Moreover, her understanding of what her chosen roles require leads Sophie to perform not only those duties that might reasonably be thought to come with being a wife and mother, but also to sacrifice her own important interests in order to satisfy the trivial interests of her husband and children. Her workload does not permit Sophie to pursue any personal activities that might contribute to her flourishing as an independent person. She cooks her son's favorite meals despite being severely allergic to some of the ingredients; she attends her husband's company parties despite anxiety in crowds; and she keeps alcohol in the house at his request despite her own history of alcohol abuse. Sophie maintains these self-abnegating practices despite the realization that they are taking a clear mental and physical toll. She loses weight, is often ill, is physically and mentally exhausted, and suffers occasional severe depression.

Assuming that she is responsible for her choices, I suggest that Sophie's self-abnegating behavior is wrong and that it is wrong, in part, in virtue of its effects on Sophie. This is perhaps a severe case of self-abnegating behavior, but it is an example the elements of which can each be generalized so as to produce myriad examples of self-wrongs. If this is so, then the case demonstrates that one can wrong oneself and that the wrongness condition applies coherently not only to other-wrongs, but also to self-wrongs.

3.2. THE RESPONSIBILITY CONDITION

The responsibility condition states that, in order to forgive herself, an offender must believe and continue to believe that she is responsible for her offense. This condition distinguishes forgiveness from excusing. An agent who believes that she has responsibly done wrong but then ceases to believe that she was responsible does not thereby forgive, but rather excuses, her action. For example, if Ollie comes to believe that he acted unfaithfully under duress or under the hypnotic suggestion of a manipulative antagonist, then he will excuse rather than forgive himself.[12]

Charles Griswold appears to defend an exception or qualification to the responsibility condition – that is, he appears to allow that, in at least some cases, a person can forgive herself even if she does not believe that she was responsible for her offense. He describes a case in which captured soldiers give information to the enemy after undergoing torture. By all accounts, these soldiers acted wrongly, but did so under duress and with the belief that they were not responsible. On my account, they are candidates for excuse not forgiveness, but Griswold suggests that their actions cannot be adequately described under the labels 'excusing' or 'pardoning' (2007, pp. 129–30). However, I think Griswold's justification betrays a mistaken conception of self-forgiveness. He says that these other labels, '[do] not do credit to the sentiment of guilt one is likely to feel, or to the sense in which one *takes* responsibility' (p. 130).[13] While I understand the view that self-forgiveness is often the only concept that seems to capture the depth of one's experience, I think that the problem here is a failure to consider the full complexity of excuse rather than a failure of those concepts to capture the phenomenon in question. In particular, I think that this view reflects the understandable but mistaken connotation of excuse as a morally questionable evasion of responsibility.

These two conditions provide the foundation for the attitude condition. They delineate what the required attitude must be about, namely, responsible wrongdoing. In the following two subsections, I further elaborate the attitude condition and use it to explain the intuition that self-forgiveness is a change in how an offender views herself.

3.3. THE ATTITUDE CONDITION

The attitude condition requires that an offender is the target of a negative self-directed attitude, that this attitude is a response to an instance of responsible wrongdoing, and that, in particular, it is a response to the quality of will evidenced by her responsible wrongdoing. Consider the case of Ollie and Veronica. Ollie feels guilty about his infidelity and his betrayal of Veronica's trust. His guilt is a response, not merely to the fact that the act was wrong and that he did it knowingly and willingly, but to the objectionable disregard for Veronica that the act demonstrates. Such attitudes involve both a negative feeling on the part of the offender about the quality of will which motivated his action and a negative judgment about his quality of will, namely, that it was wrong or blameworthy or otherwise objectionable. Both the feeling (affect) and the judgment (appraisal) are necessary components of the attitude/emotion (Kalat and Shiota, 2007, pp. 14–19).

By quality of will, I mean an internal state of the offender that is a morally relevant element of the offense. The following examples should make sufficiently clear both my conception of quality of will and its role in offense and forgiveness.[14] The most obvious example of an objectionable quality of will is malice. Malice is typically understood in terms of the intention behind the action. If Sally stabs Jessie with malice, she stabs her in order to hurt her. But one's quality of will can be objectionable without being malicious. For example, Jessie may steal from Raphael, not because she wishes to harm him, but because she (wrongly) views satisfying her own desires as weightier than his right to his property. Different still, one's quality of will might be objectionable not in virtue of how one views another, but in virtue of how one fails to view another. For example, Sally, Jessie, and Raphael may converse loudly in the library, thereby demonstrating an objectionable lack of consideration for other library patrons. In this case the objectionable quality of will is the objectionable absence of proper regard. Sally has reason to feel guilty about her malice; Jessie has reason to feel guilty about weighting her trivial desires more heavily than another's property rights; and Sally, Jessie, and Raphael all have reason to feel guilty about inconsiderately disrupting others' studying.

At the core of our basic conception of self-forgiveness is the intuition that it involves a change in how the offender views herself. Understanding what self-forgiveness is thus requires understanding the nature of that change and the reason it occurs. The intuition enshrined in the attitude and change conditions is that self-forgiveness necessarily involves a change in the offender's attitude toward herself. Self-forgiveness only arises as an option for offenders who believe that they have done something wrong. However, the attitude condition requires more than just this belief. The offender must also experience a negative self-directed attitude, like guilt.

In order to see why such an attitude is necessary rather than the mere belief that one has done wrong or the bad feeling associated with having done so,

consider the following two points. First, while self-forgiveness involves a change in how the offender views herself, an offender who comes to believe that she has not done wrong is not a candidate for self-forgiveness because in her mind she has nothing to forgive. Are there other belief changes that might better characterize self-forgiveness than a change in attitude? Perhaps self-forgiveness does not require a change in attitude but merely a change in whether one believes oneself to be a bad person. But this cannot be right either. For one can forgive oneself for a particular action without judging oneself to be a good person. And one can believe oneself to be a good person without thinking that one deserves forgiveness in a particular case. The view of self-forgiveness as a mere change in belief does not fit our intuitive sense of the phenomenon at all.

Second, the necessary change is not merely a change in feeling. We can see this by considering the distinction between self-forgiveness, on the one hand, and forgetting, distraction, and self-manipulation, on the other. There are various ways in which one might cease to experience the feelings associated with guilt, shame, or regret. Some are intentional and others are not. For example, if Ollie simply forgets that he has reason to feel guilty for cheating on Veronica or is distracted by some more pressing affair and, as a result, feels less guilty, he has not thereby forgiven himself. The same reasoning underlies our intuitions in a variety of cases, both science-fictional and commonplace. I undergo a procedure to have my memories erased. I take a pill that replaces my guilt with low-level euphoria. I suffer a severe head injury resulting in partial amnesia. I distract myself by going for a run. Intuitively, none of these is an example of self-forgiveness.

Independently of these considerations, the attitude condition, as stated, explains the intuitive pull of a severity condition on forgiveness. Many philosophers writing on forgiveness have claimed that forgivable offenses must meet a severity threshold (Novitz, 1998; Hieronymi, 2001). They suggest that one cannot forgive another for trivial wrongs like cutting in line at the movies. I think that this cannot be a necessary condition on forgiveness. After all, a wrong is a wrong and some people take serious offense at seemingly trivial wrongs. If people are sensitive enough to resent or feel guilty about such wrongs, how can we say that those victims cannot forgive their offenders? What motivates a severity condition is the recognition that people do not *typically* feel guilty or resentful about trivial events and so forgiveness seems odd in such circumstances. However, if a person does feel guilt, then it is possible that she will overcome that guilt and forgive herself. That it explains our plausible severity intuition without entailing an implausible severity condition is further support for the attitude condition as an account of what it is that changes when we forgive ourselves.

3.4. THE CHANGE CONDITION

The change condition requires that the offender's self-directed attitude improve and that it improve in response to a perceived change in quality of will.[15] This means that the offender must, first, perceive a change in her quality of will toward the victim of her offense from, say, malice to appropriate regard. Second, improvement in a self-directed attitude means feeling less of it or feeling it less strongly than before. Thus, the offender must that come to feel less guilt (or none at all) or to feel guilt less strongly. Third, her change in attitude must be a response to her perception of her own quality of will toward the victim.

The condition is not met if the offender's attitude changes, but does not improve. For example, we would not judge Ollie to have forgiven himself if he plunges into even deeper guilt. Nor is the condition met if the improvement is a response to irrelevant factors. The change must be a response to a change in quality of will. If the offender ceases to feel guilt because she drinks heavily every night, she has not thereby met the change condition and has not begun the process of self-forgiveness. Likewise, a person does not meet the change condition if her guilt diminishes in response to an improvement in self-esteem or self-respect prompted by a professional accomplishment. In these cases, the change in attitude is not about the right thing. The offender feels better about her accomplishment, not about her quality of will toward the person she wronged.

However, while the change in attitude requires an improvement in the self-directed negative attitudes of the offender, it does not require that an offender completely eliminate the negative attitude, only that the attitude becomes sufficiently less negative. Many philosophers hold that that forgiveness is consistent with a degree of continued resentment (Butler, 1900, p. 113).[16] For example, it may be psychologically impossible for a person whose child is murdered to completely cease feeling resentment toward the killer. Nonetheless, he may come to genuinely forgive the offender and his forgiveness will necessarily be accompanied by diminished resentment. I suggest that the same is true for self-forgiveness; it is a threshold concept. In order to forgive oneself, one must meet a threshold of diminished guilt, but beyond that point self-forgiveness is consistent with a degree of continued self-reproach. And having met the minimum threshold, one may forgive oneself to a greater or lesser degree.

I conclude this section by highlighting an important distinction between the nature of the attitude change involved in excusing and moral reassessment and the nature of the change involved in self-forgiveness. I suggested that an offender forgives herself only if she perceives an improvement in the previously objectionable quality of will behind her offense and forswears guilt for her responsible wrongdoing in light of this perceived change. This sort of change of attitude differs from the kind of change involved in

excusing and moral reassessment not just because the offender's beliefs about her own responsibility and wrongness persist, but also because it requires that she believe that her quality of will has actually changed. Excusing and moral reassessment both involve new beliefs held by the offender about her previous quality of will. An excusing agent's *belief* about her quality of will changes, but she need not believe that her quality of will *itself* has changed. Cases of duress, coercion, and incapacitation typically lack an objectionable quality of will. Likewise, offenses that are not really wrong, like breaking an unjust law or choosing the lesser of two evils, demonstrate good will, if anything. By contrast, self-forgiveness occurs when an offender acknowledges her previous ill will, sees that it no longer exists, and, as a result, ceases to feel guilt (or as much guilt) – as in the case of Ollie and Veronica.

Self-forgiveness is a change in how an offender views herself. In this section, I have proposed and defended an analysis of (at least one conception of) self-forgiveness. The wrongdoing and responsibility conditions delineate what guilt and self-forgiveness are about, while the attitude and change conditions further explicate the role of the self-directed attitude that precedes self-forgiveness and the nature of the change in that attitude. This view of self-forgiveness explains our intuitions about self-forgiveness and does so in a way that parallels popular and plausible accounts of interpersonal forgiveness. The plausibility of this account speaks against the plausibility of victim-only-views of forgiveness. However, I have not yet directly assessed the case for the impossibility of self-forgiveness, so I turn to that task now.

4. The standing problem

Victim-only-views argue that self-forgiveness is impossible because only a victim can forgive, because only a victim has the privileged standing required for forgiveness. In this final section, I consider three versions of the standing problem, each of which explains victims' privileged standing in a different way.[17]

However, before I address the standing problem, let me make three points relevant to the nature and scope of its threat. First, remember that the problem threatens all accounts of self-forgiveness equally. It undermines not just the details of the account offered above, but also the very coherence of such a view. Second, victim-only-views do not necessarily threaten the possibility of self-forgiveness for wronging oneself. Many such views would require further argument to establish this stronger conclusion. Third, even if we concede that a person cannot forgive herself for wronging another, it is still the case that a person can do what I have been describing as self-forgiveness for wronging others. The objection does not deny that one can make wrongness judgments, hold oneself responsible, or perceive changes in one's own

quality of will. Nor does it deny that my account usefully describes the shape of a concept that is in regular use among both philosophers and the folk.

The charge, then, is that self-forgiveness for wronging others is impossible because only victims have the privileged standing required to forgive. And the question is how to understand this special standing.

Suppose that victims' privileged standing is fundamentally a type of moral standing. On this view, to say that only a victim has the standing to forgive is to say that it would be wrong for anyone but the victim to forgive. For example, it is wrong for Ollie to forgive himself for cheating on Veronica. This claim might be thought of as analogous to the claim that only family members have the moral standing to make end of life decisions for a person. However, if the standing objection is fundamentally a matter of moral standing, and the problem of self-forgiveness fundamentally a moral problem, then it does not really establish impossibility. I have made no claim about whether and when one ought or ought not forgive oneself. Indeed, I agree with the claim that victims have a special moral prerogative to forgive and suspect that this idea undergirds many common intuitions about the morality of self-forgiveness – e.g. that one ought not forgive oneself until one's victim has done so, and that one may forgive oneself for wrongs done to those who are incapable of forgiving (e.g. animals, the dead, or the irrationally resentful). Thus, far from undermining the possibility of self-forgiveness, the notion of privileged moral standing to forgive takes its possibility for granted. Understanding the victims' privileged standing to forgive in a way that renders self-forgiveness impossible or incoherent cannot explain these intuitions.

Suppose, as is more natural, that victims' privileged standing is a fundamentally a conceptual matter. This appears to be the basis of a famous version of the standing objection raised by Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt writes,

> But the fact that the same *who*, revealed in action and speech, remains also the subject of forgiving is the deepest reason why nobody can forgive himself; here, as in action and speech generally, we are dependent upon others, to whom we appear in a distinctness which we ourselves are unable to perceive. Closed within ourselves, we would never be able to forgive ourselves any failing or transgression *because we would lack the experience of the person for the sake of whom one can forgive* (1998, p. 243; my emphasis).

Arendt's objection turns on particular conceptions both of what respect is and of its role in forgiveness. On her account, forgiveness requires respect and respect is, 'a regard for the person *from the distance which the space of the world puts between us*, and this regard is independent of qualities which we may admire or of achievements which we highly esteem' (p. 243; my emphasis). Forgiveness, then, is a kind of action that requires a distance between the victim and offender that derives from the victim's ability to view the offender in a way that the offender cannot view herself.[18]

I find this formulation of the standing objection implausible for a number of reasons. First, forgiveness does not require respect. It is possible that Sally has good and sufficient reason to forgive Jessie for some offense but also independent reasons for not respecting her generally. Second, even if we agree that respect is required, Arendt assumes an overly narrow conception of respect. For, while I agree that there is a type of basic respect that we have for others simply in virtue of the fact that they are persons, this is not the only type of respect, nor is it the only type relevant to forgiveness. We sometimes forgive because an offender has demonstrated that she has qualities that we admire and think make her deserving of forgiveness, such as sincere remorse or a willingness to apologize and make reparation. Third, Arendt ignores – and indeed implicitly denies – the possibility of self-respect, which, while also not required for self-forgiveness, is often an important element in forgiving oneself. Finally, the distinct perspective that a victim has on an offender in virtue of being other than the offender is important but not necessary for forgiveness. This perspective is important not because it is distinct, but because it is unique. Only the victim knows what it is like *for her* to have suffered the wrong. However, relevantly similar information is available to others, including the offender.

A more promising version of the conceptual standing objection holds that forgiving is analogous to other activities that appear to have conceptual restrictions on who the parties can be. For example, one might argue that forgiving a wrong, like promising, forgiving a debt, or absolving a sin, can only be done by a person with the proper standing, namely, the person accepting the promissory obligation, the creditor, or God, respectively. Let us focus first on the case of promising. On this account, just as it is conceptually impossible to promise for another, so it is conceptually impossible to forgive for another (Gingell, 1974). However, one can accept this analogy but deny that the purported conceptual restrictions exist in either case. For example, it seems entirely possible for Sally to promise that Jessie will attend Raphael's party. Indeed, if Sally and Jessie have a relationship wherein Sally's promise gives Jessie a reason to attend the party and supports Raphael in the reasonable expectation of Jessie's attendance, then both Raphael and Jessie may recognize an obligation created by Sally's promise.

A similar story can be told about forgiving debts and absolving sins. While it is generally the case that only creditors can forgive debts and only God can absolve sins, in practice these prerogatives can be and are granted to others. Creditors can give permission to lawyers to forgive debts in their name and God can grant priests the power to absolve sins in His name. The fact that such permissions can be granted implies that lacking privileged standing is more a political or social matter than a matter of genuine impossibility.

I contend that none of these formulations of the standing objection succeeds. If we wish to understand the self-directed nature of self-forgiveness, I propose that we employ a more straightforward paradigm. Self-forgiveness is an action, albeit a complicated one, that one does to oneself using the tools

one has at one's disposal, namely, moral commitments, beliefs, and other desires. This may seem glib, but it is consistent with much of what we think about self-forgiveness and it fits within a framework for understanding self-directed actions. (Equally important, it is consistent with a number of general accounts of forgiveness. So abandoning victim-only-views does not necessarily impoverish our understanding of forgiveness generally.) On my view, self-forgiveness is a straightforwardly self-directed action like many others. Just as I can wash myself by using some parts of my body (my hands) to wash the other parts, so I can forgive myself by using one set of mental states (my reaffirmed moral judgments and commitments to act) to criticize, renounce, and endorse the absence of another set of mental states (the beliefs and motives that led me to act wrongly).

Conclusion

In this article, I have offered what I take to be a plausible account of (at least one conception of) self-forgiveness. On my view, self-forgiveness occurs when a moral agent, in response to her offense, believes herself to be responsible and to have done wrong; she experiences a negative self-directed attitude like guilt, shame, or regret; and she forswears this attitude because she perceives that she no longer possesses the objectionable quality of will that was behind her initial offense. In elaborating and defending this analysis, I have tried to demonstrate its intuitive force, its explanatory power, and its flexibility in accommodating non-paradigmatic cases. I have also tried to show that, while it is inconsistent with victim-only-views of forgiveness, this inconsistency places the burden of proof on those views rather than on my account of self-forgiveness. That said, I do not pretend to have offered a complete account of self-forgiveness and I happily acknowledge that there is much more to be said in defense of my view and to elaborate its implications for how we conceive of forgiveness generally. Nonetheless, these tasks require separate treatment and I hope that my analysis will prompt others to pursue these projects. The subject deserves no less.[19]

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NOTES

[1] This is not strictly true. If we grant that a person can wrong herself, then even 'victim-only-views' allow that one may forgive oneself for having wronged oneself. I consider this issue in more detail in Section 3.1.

[2] Bishop Butler (1900) famously holds that forgiveness requires that the victim foreswear the resentment she feels toward her offender. Because resentment is an essentially other-directed

emotion, this view and its intellectual descendants deny the possibility of self-forgiveness on conceptual grounds (Murphy, 1982). Those who, on similar grounds, claim that third parties cannot forgive are also committed to the impossibility of self-forgiveness (Pettigrove, 2009). Finally, Hannah Arendt (1998) and Dana Nelkin (2011) are committed to the impossibility of self-forgiveness on grounds that are independent of the essential other-directedness of resentment.

[3] See, for example, the accounts of self-forgiveness developed by Nancy Snow (1993), Margaret Holmgren (1998), Robin Dillon (2001), Kathryn Norlock (2009), and Peter Goldie (2011).

[4] Even Jeffrie Murphy, who might seem to be the staunchest advocate of the Butlerian view that forgiveness requires essentially other-directed resentment, has stated that he believes the incoherence of self-forgiveness on such a view is merely apparent. He writes, 'It is more illuminating – more loyal to the actual texture of our moral lives – to think of forgiveness as overcoming a variety of negative feelings that one might have toward a wrongdoer' (1998, p. 217). This also seems to be the view of, among others, Jean Hampton (1988), Pamela Hieronymi (2001), and Charles Griswold (2007).

[5] I use the phrase 'necessary and jointly sufficient' with some hesitation. On the one hand, I am confident, for the reasons given below, that the four conditions I describe are necessary and jointly sufficient for a phenomenon commonly identified as self-forgiveness. On the other hand, however, I do not wish to rule out pluralism about self-forgiveness – i.e. that what my account describes is just *one of many* phenomena each with equally good claim to the label 'self-forgiveness.' Nelkin says of forgiveness generally that, 'It may be that there are really a variety of phenomena that all go by the name "forgiveness", and it may be that there is no neat set of necessary and sufficient conditions that map out a single notion' (2011, p. 47). I allow that the same may be true of self-forgiveness. In what follows, I allow that there may be other phenomena that are not mapped out by my conditions, but which are nonetheless plausibly understood as self-forgiveness. However, assessing the plausibility of this pluralist hypothesis is a task for another paper and, in the meantime, I offer my four conditions as individually necessary and jointly sufficient *for one conception of self-forgiveness*.

[6] This is a summary of true story told by Beverly Flanigan in her book, *Forgiving Yourself* (1996; for the full story see pp. 60–61, 79, and 150–151). It is one of over one hundred stories collected by the author and used to illustrate her view of the different elements and varieties of self-forgiveness.

[7] This account is summarized from the story of Richard Herrin's murder of Bonnie Garland discussed by Willard Gaylin (1983), Michael Moore (1987), and Jeffrie Murphy (2003).

[8] For Holmgren, an integrated attitude of self-forgiveness requires 'true internal resolution' of the conflict between the offender and his victim created by his wrongdoing (2012, p. 110; Holmgren, 1998, p. 90).

[9] My conditions are explicitly act-focused. They require that the offender have committed or omitted an act he believes to be blameworthy. As such, they imply that one cannot forgive oneself for having had a negative character trait. However, while this is the standard view, it is not uncontested. Macalester Bell (2008 and 2013) and Glen Pettigrove (2012) argue that we can forgive people for who they are and not only for what they do. If this is true, then perhaps a person can forgive herself for having had some vice (e.g. greed). A full discussion of this debate must await another occasion, but let me briefly give one reason why I hesitate to accept this broader account of self-forgiveness. I am not sure that the cases described by its proponents successfully establish that a character trait is ever the best explanation of one's negative attitude or of one's forgiveness. Even in the most compelling cases described by Bell and Pettigrove – including the examples of Camille and Paul (Bell, 2008, p. 635) and of Hamish and Finley (Pettigrove, 2012, pp. 47–48) – it seems just as plausible, if not more so, to view the victims' contempt as a response to the action and the quality of will it manifests and to view their forgiveness as a response to a perceived change in the quality of will behind the offense rather than as a response

to the elimination of the offending trait. I take such worries to be good, albeit not decisive, reasons for rejecting the character-focused view. But I may be mistaken. However, if I am wrong that we only forgive ourselves for what we do, my conditions can easily be modified to accommodate self-forgiveness for the traits we have. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this debate and encouraging me to think more about my commitments to an act-focused account.

[10] This account of the wrongness condition becomes more complicated if we allow that a person can be blameworthy for an action that was not wrong. Julia Driver (1992), Michael McKenna (2012), and Justin Capes (2012) all argue that there are permissible actions for which a person is blameworthy. For example, a person who chooses to mow her lawn early on a weekend morning, thereby waking her neighbors, seems blameworthy despite the fact that doing so is intuitively permissible. Likewise, a person seems blameworthy for refusing to donate a kidney to his brother despite there being no moral requirement that he do so (Driver, 1992, pp. 287–288). If we grant that such offenses are both permissible and forgivable, then we must revise or abandon the wrongness condition as stated. I cannot defend a position on this debate here, but I will make two assertions. First, I accept that such offenses are forgivable, but I am not convinced that they are permissible. My intuition is that it is indeed wrong to refuse my brother a kidney or to unnecessarily annoy my neighbors by mowing my lawn early in the morning. Second, even if blameworthiness does not imply wrongness, my account of self-forgiveness would not be undermined by accepting a blameworthiness rather than a wrongness condition.

[11] I follow Jean Hampton (1993), Kathryn Norlock (2009), and Margaret Holmgren (2012), in the view that some cases of self-harm are cases of self-wrong. The following case is adapted from one described by Hampton.

[12] The responsibility condition on forgiveness is widely accepted by philosophers and psychologists. However, the distinction it captures is often ignored by those who investigate forgiveness empirically. For example, Thompson *et al.* (2005) attempt to study forgiveness of situations like fate or the fact of having an illness, despite the widely accepted conceptual claim that a person cannot forgive an inanimate object or process (Enright *et al.* 1998, p. 47). Wenzel *et al.* (2012) have argued that common empirical measures of self-forgiveness are unable to distinguish self-forgiveness from pseudo-self-forgiveness. They argue that because self-forgiveness is typically measured in terms of outcomes, especially restored self-regard, the standard measures (e.g. the State Self-Forgiveness Scale) cannot distinguish between self-regard that is restored by denying responsibility for one's action and self-regard that is restored by accepting responsibility and reaffirming the values one violated.

[13] Here Griswold claims that, in some cases, it is enough to 'take responsibility' for an action, suggesting that the agent in question does not think she was actually responsible. Indeed, his explication in the subsequent footnote makes clear that 'taking responsibility' is a forward-looking practice (2007, p. 130 n.10), while the sort of responsibility typically thought to be necessary for self-forgiveness seems essentially backward-looking.

[14] P.F. Strawson (1962) introduced the concept of quality of will. Matthew Talbert (2012) and Michael McKenna (2012) each give a helpful account of how they understand Strawson's concept. By 'quality of will' McKenna means, 'the regard or concern one has toward others (or oneself), and toward the relevance of moral considerations, as manifested in one's conduct' (2012, p. 59). Talbert says, 'I shall assume that when the actions of a morally competent agent issue from an unjustified failure to take others' welfare as reason-generating, these actions often convey a quality of will that licenses blaming attitudes like resentment' (2012, p. 94). I take both of these views to be consistent with my use of the term.

[15] Understanding self-forgiveness in this way parallels prominent conceptions of interpersonal forgiveness as the elimination or diminution of resentment (Strawson, 1962). Pamela Hieronymi defends a view of forgiveness according to which the victim must judge that the offense no longer conveys its initial objectionable meaning (2001, pp. 546–8). Charles Griswold

makes the similar argument that interpersonal forgiveness requires a reinterpretation of the offense and the offender (2007, p. 51). Both of these views are consistent with self-forgiveness.

[16] Others disagree and argue that one must completely cease to feel hostility toward the wrongdoer (Garrard and McNaughton, 2003, p. 42).

[17] See Glen Pettigrove (2009) for an analysis of the common forms of the standing argument.

[18] The specter of this sort of incoherence sits over any view of forgiveness that treats the social aspect of forgiveness as essential. Griswold, for example, writes that, 'The dyadic character of the [forgiveness] process permeates it from start to finish' (2007, p. 48). He ascribes this same dyadic character to self-forgiveness (for harms to others) and models his account on third-party forgiveness, wherein, in order to forgive an offender, one must imaginatively occupy the perspective of the victim.

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