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FORGIVENESS, REVENGE, AND THE SHAPE OF A LIFE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

This dissertation explores forgiveness and revenge within a narrative conception of human lives. In Chapter One, I lay out an account of human life stories and argue for its advantages in understanding the value of redemption. In particular, I suggest that the goods we care about in our lives depend on their integration into the way we see ourselves as persons who exist through time. Forgiveness and revenge can recontextualize moments from our past and infuse them with a new meaning. Building on Peter Goldie's work, I identify unity, purpose, direction, and truth as qualities of life stories toward which forgiveness contributes. I examine some of the psychological literature to understand the role our internal narrative plays in making sense of the world (and the lack of sense when that narrative fails). I conclude by defending against a well-known objection from Galen Strawson against narrative analysis.

In Chapter Two I take up a qualified defense of the rationality of revenge. My motivation in doing so is a link in the logic between revenge and forgiveness. If revenge is always straightforwardly irrational, forgiveness is undermined. My defense of revenge begins with a taxonomy characterizing different kinds in order to pick out its most justifiable form. I argue that revenge at its best is a form of caring about one's past, or the past of a loved one. I defend this form of revenge against various objections, especially that it is pointless or involves a rational error about one's own untouchable value as a person. I argue that the point of revenge is to 'change the ending' of the offender and victim's relationship. I also argue that focus on objective value misses the point: what is threatened is not the victim's objective value as a person, but the value of a life story worth having.

In Chapter Three I lay out my own account of forgiveness. I first provide several characteristic features of forgiveness, and then describe two camps in the literature that disagree about whether forgiveness is primarily a private matter of the heart or a public matter of

treatment. I then argue for what I call ‘inaugurated forgiveness’ as a synthesis between these emotional and behavioral views. I suggest that forgiveness begins with a commitment toward the offender, but takes time to come to its emotional culmination. The nature of that commitment is a second-order endorsement of the desires of love over the desires of resentment. I also highlight the importance of hope as the operative forward-looking virtue rather than trust. Forgiveness involves committing oneself to openness to eventual redemption and reconciliation, but does not require the unjustified trust that the offender can be redeemed or reconciled at the moment of forgiveness.

In Chapter Four I examine the underlying reasons for forgiving and avenging. I argue that personal reasons have a legitimate role to play in these practices, rather than merely impersonal considerations. Impersonal reasons, such as generic respect for personhood, or desert, play a dominant role in the literature where a major concern is to find a justification of forgiveness within a moral justice conception. Personal reasons are tied to the basic cares and commitments of a life, and these projects are what the life is about as a whole. There is thus an important connection between the narrative direction of a life and its ground projects. Forgiving for personal reasons is a way of giving appropriate weight to the particular life one has. I argue that personal reasons give us a way of understanding how forgiveness is elective and generous. They also explain the connection between integrity and the narrative conception of self. I conclude by discussing the way the decision to forgive is unusually dependent on the story of the forgiver’s life; what reasons she has depends uniquely on who she is. For this reason, bringing someone to choose forgiveness over revenge will likely involve showing her its goodness through narrative.

Chapter One

Life Stories and the Narrative Sense of Self

I. Introduction

This dissertation is a philosophical investigation of forgiveness and revenge and their role within a person's moral-emotional life. I defend the coherence of these practices as flowing from our basic conceptions of ourselves; forgiveness and revenge make sense for creatures such as us. If, as I argue in the final chapter, others want to raise objections, they must do so on other grounds than have so far been offered.

To begin this argument, we need a discussion of the part of human nature which produces the need for forgiveness and revenge. Accordingly, this chapter provides a narrative perspective on lives—the way in which we understand ourselves and others as protagonists in our own life stories. We each have reason to want a worthwhile story, and thus there are human values only understandable through their contribution to a person's narrative arc. This narrative analysis will serve as a backdrop for my discussion of forgiveness and revenge throughout the rest of the dissertation, in several ways.

First, narrativism provides an especially holistic view of forgiveness and revenge. A common way of looking at these practices, for example, is in terms of pragmatic, forward-looking consequences—what benefits would an act of forgiveness or revenge produce for oneself and one's community? Consequently, it has become familiar to hear the importance of forgiveness in terms of the need for 'letting go' to prevent negative feelings from festering. The therapeutic effects of forgiveness have been touted in strong, often prosaic terms, resulting in overly strong claims. One proponent of forgiveness writes,

> As we come to understand the nature and benefits of genuine forgiveness more fully, we will be no more inclined to view forgiveness as a duty than we will be inclined to say that we have a duty to take a vacation.[1]

An overly consequence-oriented view of forgiveness enables such odd claims, making forgiveness out to be a panacea. A narrative analysis, on the other hand, is not constrained to justify forgiveness only by its outcomes—though it certainly includes pragmatic value as well. The narrative value of forgiveness and revenge will be cashed out by appeal to past, present, future, and the way they are interrelated. When we think of the motive behind forgiveness and revenge as a desire to recontextualize or reinterpret past episodes of our lives, we will see those who forgive and avenge in a more realistic and sympathetic light, for we can recognize the value they strive for even if that value is not present in a specific outcome. Nevertheless, the narrativist perspective I defend is not exclusivist. There is room for pluralism about the dimensions of a thriving life, and one of those dimensions is surely pragmatic wellbeing. Rather, I am only arguing that narrativism is especially well equipped to highlight the value in forgiveness and revenge that is not captured by, for example, purely prudential or ethical considerations.

A narrative approach also avoids the pitfalls of *atomistic* accounts of human thriving. On such accounts, the best way to calculate the flourishing of a life is by tallying up the bits of wellbeing at each moment; each instant is seen as a discrete, irreducible value "atom."[2] The atomistic assumptions of some authors lead them to make claims against forgiveness and revenge which demonstrate a too narrow field of view. The past, they believe, is untouchable; the

[1] Margaret R. Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 53.

[2] For discussions of atomism about well-being, see Jason Raibley, "The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being," in *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Well-Being*, ed. Guy Fletcher (London New York: Routledge, 2017), 342–54; Johan Brännmark, "Good Lives: Parts and Wholes," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2001): 221–31; for a critique of holism, see chapter six in Ben Bradley, *Well-Being*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2015); for a defense of holism, see J. David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (1991): 48–77.

value there has already been tallied, and it is up to us to live in the present. We ought to refuse to make decisions based on morally objectionable baggage, or give room to the irrational impulses of the sunk-cost fallacy. The narrative view is inherently wider in its focus. With narrativism, human life stories are subject to revision in meaning as they unfold. The past is not beyond our reach, in the specific sense that it is always able to be recontextualized by later events.

Third, narrative analysis highlights the way practices of forgiveness and revenge are inescapably *particular*. As psychologist Jerome Bruner remarks, this is on display with special clarity in the great ancient works where "envy, loyalty, [and] jealousy are woven into the acts of Iago, Othello, Desdemona, and Everyman with a fierce particularity and localness that, in Joyce's words, yield an 'epiphany of the ordinary.'"[3] Human stories draw our gaze to the significance of particular persons and particular moments. For this reason, narrative analysis naturally resists the abstraction and universalization which, as I argue in later chapters, distort the logic and purpose of personal forgiveness and revenge.

This project therefore employs a narrative framework which I explicate throughout this chapter. To begin, I briefly lay out how we ought to think of forgiveness and revenge as acts aimed at redemption. These acts, in different ways, seek to address and make good on the past. In forgiving and avenging, we are trying to revise the story of the offense, thereby changing the meaning of the past. Next, I discuss the wider context of the story in which redemption must take place. I explain what it means for an individual to have a "life story" and why maintaining that story requires redemptive acts; I also contrast my form of narrativism with other narrative views. I then draw on some of the psychological literature to explain how our narrative conception of ourselves forms, and the importance of this process to one's understanding oneself and others.

[3] Jerome Bruner, "Life as Narrative," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2004): 17.

Finally, after making a case for what counts as a good life story—the conditions and characteristic elements of a thriving life with regards to one's narrative—I address the most well-known critique of narrativism, presented by Galen Strawson.

II. Redemption and Changing the Past

Redemption presumes the relevance of the past. It is a way of addressing what has happened to bring its resolution. We commonly speak of one's need to 'redeem oneself' for a past shortcoming, assuming that, unaddressed, the past failure continues to make one, in the present, somehow worse off. In this general sense, redemption need not have a moral connotation: it may be as simple as my wanting the coach to put me back in for a chance to make up for my earlier fumble.[4] Yet redemption also has moral and religious connotations. Repentant wrongdoers can be ground down by an unsatisfiable desire to make amends or to atone for what they've done. In the theological domain, many have seen God's primary relationship to humanity as the one who redeems sinners.

There is therefore a spectrum of redemptive categories united by the basic desire to repair something wrong about the past. On this understanding of redemption, forgiveness and revenge qualify as redemptive acts when they are aimed back at what has been done and seek to take present action to redress it. In the case of forgiveness, this is accomplished, for example, by attempting to move the offender and his offense into a new light, bringing resolution to his wrongdoing. Revenge qualifies as redemptive when past wrongdoing is refigured by ensuring that the offense ends in retribution, so that, going forward, the victim knows that the offender has lost with regards to the offense.

[4] Nancy E. Snow, "Self-Forgiveness," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (1993): 76.

If forgiveness and revenge can be species of redemption, and redemption is intrinsically backward looking, the first order of business for our wider project must be to make sense of the very possibility of redemption. Can the unchangeable past really be 'addressed' in any meaningful way? If not, then it seems forgiveness and revenge have irrational aims. What is needed is a foundation for understanding how redemption is accomplished—how our present actions can change our relationship to the past for the better.

Here is one objection to the backward-looking component of redemption: Practical rationality demands us to be forward-looking. Jon Elster writes in this connection that "Rational action is concerned with outcomes. Rationality says: If you want Y, do X"[5] and further, "Rational individuals follow the principles of letting bygones be bygones, cutting their losses and ignoring sunk costs."[6] From this perspective, the way to make sense of the football player's request for a second chance involves noticing the future benefits to him. Perhaps he is asking for a chance to show that his failure does not reflect who he really is. He wants to address his mistake by a new action that will supersede it and cause others to change their opinion of him in light of spectacular success. The player wants the respect of onlookers, and he can only attain it by a second chance, so his behavior is indeed explicable in purely forward-looking terms.

While it is true that redemptive actions sometimes serve a forward-looking function, I argue that they are not reducible to that function. If the player does not redeem himself, there will be negative consequences for his future, but from this fact it does not follow that he must be motivated *only* by such considerations. Commonly, when we want a second attempt after an initial failure, what we desire is to 'make up' for the earlier failure. There are a number of phrases we use to represent this sentiment. We want to blot out, overrule, undermine, or defeat

[5] Jon Elster, "Norms of Revenge," *Ethics* 100, no. 4 (1990): 863.
[6] Elster, 862.

our failing. We want to show that the failing is, somehow, not a permanent mark. This is clearer in moral failings. In the case of a repentant criminal who wishes to make restitution for her crime, it would undermine the purity of her repentance if her offer of restitution were motivated by purely instrumental considerations (e.g. that others will think she has reformed).[7] For her offer to be sincere, she must make it in part simply because it is an appropriate response to the past. She takes her past wrongdoing seriously, and recognizes that it merits a serious movement on her part in the opposite direction—and so she does what she can to undo, ameliorate, or revise the past. It therefore seems right to insist that redemption is not purely forwarding-looking; there is something about the past which redemption seeks to address for its own sake.

The question remains, however, of *how* the past is addressed. If it cannot literally be changed, are would-be redeemers irrationally hung up on the past, as Elster suggests? This is a point we need to be clear on from the very beginning: What is it about the past that warrants a response now? If we can provide an answer to this question, we can begin to give a clear account of the redemptive roles of forgiveness and revenge.

My contention is that redemption is rational as a way of changing the past. I do not mean that the literal, physical facts about the past can be altered. Rather, as Linda Radzik puts it, "the *meaning* of the past is subject to revision."[8] Mundane examples illustrate this point. Here are a few:

<u>Promises</u>

When I make a promise, I am putting myself in an indeterminate position. Until the opportunity arises to fulfill my promise, I am neither a promise-keeper nor promise-breaker. But

[7] For a discussion of this point, see Jon Elster, "Redemption for Wrongdoing: The Fate of Collaborators after 1945," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50, no. 3 (June 1, 2006): 324–38, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002706286953.
[8] Linda Radzik, *Making Amends: Atonement in Morality, Law, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 60.

at the future moment of choice, I am made either faithful or false on account of my prior promise. If I fail to uphold my word, my actions now change the nature of the commitment I made into a falsehood. If, on the other hand, I am faithful to my promise, then I and others can see that my past words were true. Perhaps before the promise was kept *I* did not know whether I intended to keep it; perhaps I was not wholehearted and vacillated between intentions. If I keep the promise, I find out not only who I am, but who I was in giving my word: I was right to make the promise, for it turns out that, despite a timid spirit, I would indeed keep it.

Thus, if I renege on my promise, my original commitment is made fraudulent; if I uphold it, that commitment is vindicated. But of course actions are not truly separate from persons, and so it is I who am made to have been fraudulent or true. What I've done in the present changes the fact of who I was in the past. I make my past self into a liar or not.

One might reply, in the atomist vein, that the moment at which I made the promise is fully independent of what might happen in the future. The value of my promise is discrete, and therefore unable to be influenced or revised by later events. On this view, my failure to keep my promise does not make my earlier self a liar. Such a response, however, is at odds with how we behave toward our own promises and decisions. If someone makes a promise which she later realizes she cannot keep, she is likely to say that promise was a mistake; she should not have given her word after all. She may even recognize that, given what she knew when she made the promise, she cannot be blamed for making it. Yet, her failure to keep her promise remains regrettable. Whether it was a good promise does not depend merely on the state of her knowledge and intentions at the time of its making, but also how the future would actually play

out. Our concern for our own integrity as promise-makers is a concern for how we relate to the world, and as humans that relation is diachronic.[9]

Hypocrisy

Some character traits are inherently historically anchored. To call someone a hypocrite is not only to make a claim about who he is, but also who he has been. His behavior now is inconsistent with what he said or did at earlier occasions. This inconsistency causes us to see his earlier behavior in a new light. If a politician urges for greater accountability for government officials, we may approve of his anti-corruption rhetoric. But if we later discover he has been embezzling from the public for years, we will revise our evaluation of his earlier words. Rather than approval, we now view them with condemnation for his duplicity. This would be the case even if his embezzlement had not been concurrent with his calls for oversight, for it is not merely deception that is at issue in hypocrisy. Rather, the crux is his inconsistency across time. His later corruption negatively transforms his prior calls for reform.

Overcoming

Even our evaluation of the badness of pain is subject to revision. Consider Sarah, climbing to be the first to summit a vast mountain. As she nears the peak, she badly and painfully injures her leg. Here her story splits. In one story, she is forced to call for emergency help; she drags herself downward and is rescued. Her injury will never allow her to climb again. Her accident has defeated her, and she remains bitter ever after at her failure to achieve the victory she so deeply desired. But in another possible story, Sarah persists. Working through the pain,

[9] I take up this point directly in Chapter Four; it is a central point of discussion in Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in *Moral Luck*, 1st Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 20–39.

she is able to drag herself to the summit, becoming the first human to do so. Triumphant, she manages to make it to waiting help. She will never climb again, but she does not mind too much; she already has her heart's desire. In telling her story, the injury only adds to her glory, for it has become the obstacle that could not stop her. By overcoming her pain, she has transformed her story into something even greater than if there had been no pain at all.[10] Our evaluation of the injury in each story, therefore, must depend on what happened next. The ending makes all the difference.

Each of these examples shows how an event's meaning can be revised in light of future events and information. But a crucial question remains. Revision of an event—a reinterpretation—presupposes a meaningful framework within which the revision takes place. In each of the above examples, some minimal story needed to be told, and only within that story was reinterpretation intelligible.

Redemption changes the meaning of the past by revising a specific narrative. Forgiveness, for example, casts a new light on the offense; without denying that the offense occurred, the forgiver positively revises the position of the offender within the story of their relationship. The offense has been addressed and put away; it is no longer described purely as 'an act of cruelty,' but from then on as, 'an act of cruelty that was forgiven.' Under this revision, the repentant offender can take solace that his wrongdoing was not indelible. Conversely, the forgiver can continue on knowing the offender's wrong was not the final word on the matter. She is strengthened by her forgiveness to resist a description merely as victim. By forgiving, she has exercised the power to revise and control her story and the story of the offender.

[10] It is important to see this transformation as an accomplishment which is by no means guaranteed. I discuss cases where suffering is not redeemed in §VI.

Just as any story shifts as later moments and episodes produce new context, so the previous moments and chapters of a person's life may take on a different meaning with what comes after. And this kind of reinterpretation is precisely what is realized through acts of redemption. When a person is redeemed, he is able to see himself in a new light, not just as he is, but as he was; he can now, looking back, see that his failure would be overcome. The story of the offense has been revised, and his story with it.

Redemption is not, therefore, desirable exclusively for future-oriented reasons, such as peace of mind or reconciliation. Though it frequently does lead to important therapeutic outcomes, such outcomes do not exhaust what is valuable about redemption. Revising one's story, including the past, is valuable because of its capacity to bring unity to a life.

But more needs to be said. So far, we have been considering a person's story as the story she tells *herself* about who she is. The story comes from a very specific perspective. But aren't there others? How are we to navigate competing perspectives, and the different narratives they produce? In order to answer these questions, we must first give a much clearer account of what a life story *is*. This is the task to which we now turn.

III. What is a Life Story?

A life story, at its most general description, is the organization of the discrete events of a person's life into a meaningful whole. Peter Goldie points out that this sharply distinguishes stories from annals which simply list sequences of events chronologically.[11] A story is instead "a representation of those events which is shaped, organized, and coloured."[12] Stories are wholes which bring together disparate parts and make those parts about something further; they reveal to

[11] Peter Goldie, *The Mess Inside*, Reprint edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.
[12] Goldie, 2.

us a unity to the events that we might otherwise have overlooked. Likewise, a life story describes who a person is across time in a way that makes sense of him as a temporal creature; it gathers together and gives unity, coherence, and, finally, meaning to the events of his life. Or, at least, this is the aim. I examine these points in further detail below.

Stories as Wholes

Goldie's contrast with annals is a particularly helpful starting point for understanding narrative. An annal is no more than a chronology; it lists dates and what happened then. It is an ordered sequence of facts. This is not a story in the sense I am using. Stories, by their arrangement, tell us something about their constitutive events that is not reducible to those events. Stories arrange and emphasize the series so as to give direction, to help us see particular relationships between moments, and to sort out what is inessential. Stories turn events into wholes.

The story of the Battle of Trafalgar, for example, is distinct from its chronology. In recounting the narrative of Lord Nelson's astonishing victory over Napoleon's fleet, the historian draws us through the action, beginning by showing the stakes of the looming battle, the solemn mood of the sailors and marines as enemy warships drew near, the great last speech of Admiral Nelson, and then finally the deafening burst of canons as the opponents' fleets crashed in among one another—leading us, finally, to both Nelson's end and the end of the French dream of invading England. One way to think of the historian's work in organizing the details of the battle toward a point is that she is giving us a kind of explanation of the events of the battle that

"renders them intelligible."[13] In understanding what the historian is aiming to tell us, we can see why she curated the story as she has. She perhaps leaves out the names of the Spanish officers among France's vassalized ships; in doing so, she communicates that Trafalgar was most centrally a clash between France and England, and not their allies. Leaving aside extraneous details and emphasizing what is important are key marks of good storytelling.

Yet, this presupposes that the story is indeed *about* something; the events are organized toward some end. How well the author's story realizes that end is one way of evaluating the narrative. If an author includes all sorts of trivial details, such as the price of grain in Prussia at the time of the battle, something has gone wrong. A story's excellence aims toward fulfilling its teleological structure.

But if this is so, if good stories in general are aimed at some teleological end, is the same true more specifically of life stories? Must each person's story have an ultimate end around which her life is organized?

IV. Narrative and Teleology

Some commentators have gone quite far in emphasizing the importance of having final ends around which a life is oriented. These fall under what Marya Schectman identifies as "strong narrative views."[14] Harry Frankfurt and Alasdair MacIntyre, members of this camp, have argued that a life story, and therefore its coherence, depends on a person's having (and understanding themselves as having) final ends. If a life lacks coherence, it is either because it has no consistent final ends or it is not moving toward them. Frankfurt argues, on this point, that

[13] J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 1 (2003): 1.
[14] Marya Schechtman, "Stories, Lives, and Basic Survival: A Refinement and Defense of the Narrative View," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 60 (May 2007): 159–60, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246107000082.

we cannot even engage in purposeful activity without final ends.[15] Final ends give a structure to our lives, so that we move, via instrumental ends, towards those goods we find terminal value in. A person without final ends cannot move in any direction at all without a final end to move toward. Nothing could interest him, and "the result would be a fragmentation of life, passivity, and boredom."[16] Such a life would be fragmented in the sense that nothing would bind together its constitutive parts; there is no goal towards which one moves from moment to moment. In that case each moment represents only passivity, for, having no desire toward any end, he can only move by being acted upon from without. There is a sense, on this view, in which such a being is no longer an agent at all.

A lack of meaning in a life story can likewise be connected to a lack of a final good toward which the life aims. MacIntyre argues that final ends order a life and render it intelligible.[17] He suggests that "intelligibility is a property of actions in their relationship to the sequences within which they occur" and that therefore any given action we perform can only be understood in relation to the context of our lives and their direction.[18] The sequence of a human life is assumed to be aimed at the good, and the path to it makes clear the meaning of a person's actions as she moves toward that goal. For analogy: My destination on a road trip renders my stopping at a gas station intelligible, and my letting the air out of my tires unintelligible. It is for this reason that MacIntyre has argued that every life ought to take the form of a quest with all a person's actions and decisions moving her closer and closer to her final goal.

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[15] Harry Frankfurt, "On the Usefulness of Final Ends," *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly / עיון: רבעון פילוסופי* 41 (1992): 19–3.
[16] Frankfurt, 11.
[17] Alasdair Macintyre, "The Intelligibility of Action," in *Rationality, Relativism and the Human Sciences*, ed. J. Margolis, M. Krausz, and R. M. Burian, Studies of the Greater Philadelphia Philosophy Consortium (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 1986), 63–80.
[18] Macintyre, 64.

It seems to me that Frankfurt's and MacIntyre's strong accounts go too far. While it is true that stories generally—and life stories more specifically—do need a teleological structure for intelligibility and purpose, it is not clear to me that a person's final ends need to be readily apparent to him in the way Frankfurt and MacIntyre seem to suggest. For some people—especially the young who have not yet 'found their calling'—it may be that they do not feel that they have a final end around which to organize their lives.

Nevertheless, I do not see any way of understanding life stories if we wholly jettison final ends. A life narrative cannot be *about* anything without them. So, rather than rejecting Frankfurt's and MacIntyre's views, I suggest some moderate revisions.

The first amendment is to point out that, for the idea of a life story to have any plausibility, we must allow for 'chapters.' We have a natural tendency to see periods of our lives as discrete episodes of varying length and importance, and these have narrative arcs of their own. For my own part, I tend to think of my years as an undergraduate as a formative chapter which ended when I entered graduate school. Likewise, I tend to see relationships with my family, though overlapping chronologically with that period of education, as a distinct and parallel story within my life. Together these smaller stories, as chapters and episodes, provide the natural buildings blocks of a larger, life story. It seems far more likely to me that we *do* have final ends in mind within these chapters; as an undergraduate perhaps everything I did, qua undergraduate, was intelligible by reference to my goal of obtaining a degree. My degree, at that time, may have had no instrumental value to me; I could not see beyond it. In this way, I valued it in itself. On this way of thinking, we need not require that every person have, at every moment, a grand, life-spanning final end which they are intentionally questing to accomplish. Moments may instead be steered by proximate ends which come in more mundane forms relative to particular periods of

time; these later become instrumental ends as we gain a better sense of the arc of our lives as a whole, or even just what the next chapter holds.

Yet one might wonder: If there is no ultimate, life-spanning final end, what gives value to the smaller, chapter-relative ends? For the sake of what did I want my bachelor's degree? Mustn't there be something above it all which I value terminally? Without a final answer, it seems the pursuit of proximate ends becomes unintelligible. Further, what is it that makes these disparate chapters part of the same story, if not a unifying final end? Why not think these chapters are actually just distinct narratives altogether?

In response, I suggest, as a second amendment, that the narrativist ought to take an *aspirational* view of life-spanning final ends. To the extent we have some cause or goal that informs and organizes everything else in our lives, our story is likely to be more purposive and coherent. But humans are creatures consigned to see as through the glass dimly. A great cause to quest and fight for is hard to grasp, and harder still to seize wholeheartedly. And yet the desire for just such a cause seems inevitable if we are to be persons who care about who we are, who we want to become, and what we might do to act more effectually in the world. We ought to aspire to have a final end which can bring unity to all our others. And, in fact, there is a sense in which this aspiration is itself a kind of final end—the pursuit of something which makes one's life meaningful as a whole. This accords with Aristotle's insistence that humans pursue happiness "in a complete life."[19] The universal desire for a happy life must involve, however inchoately, the desire to find a purpose which binds the life together. Thus, the proximate ends of a life's chapters are bound together—even if, in some cases, bound badly—by the desire for a good life.

[19] Aristotle, "Nicomachean Ethics," in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. W.D. Ross and Richard McKeon, 1941, 943.

It's worth observing, in this connection, that there is a kind of human suffering that comes from feeling that one is adrift, purposeless. Such persons can see no path before them and so no direction seems worth pursuing. It is not that they are idle, but that the activities they engage in do not seem headed anywhere or culminating in anything. And this can happen to persons for reasons wholly out of their control. A student may aspire to a life devoted to teaching, only to be forced to drop out of school for lack of resources. Another might take great joy in motherhood, only to have a child taken by illness. Heartbreak of this kind runs so deep because it becomes difficult to see any way up out of it; it is not just teaching or motherhood that has been lost, but also the hope of a life oriented around those goods. Without that hope, it is oneself that has become lost, and, for a time, all that may remain is a drifting self. If, on the other hand, one is given that rare opportunity to devote a life unwaveringly to one end of singular importance, then there is a chance for true wholeheartedness within a fully coherent self. Rather than stumbling through a series of false starts, such an individual may press forward continuously, each chapter of her life building on the next, culminating in the kind of life story that is powerfully about her greatest and highest love. Such a person knows herself—and is known by others—by clear reference to the end she pursues.

It is for this reason that consistent final ends are worth aspiring toward. They are the mark of the wholehearted life. Conversely, it is difficult for a life story to have substantial unity if one is ever-vacillating in one's ultimate commitments. Because no person can fail to feel the pain of a drifting, vacillating, pointless life, because everyone is motivated to find wholeheartedness, everyone already possesses a piece of the narrative life. This aspiration gives common purpose to even disparate chapters of their narratives.

V. Narrative Perspectives

A person's life story is what brings together the events—the bare facts—that constitute an individual's life into an intelligible, meaningful whole. And, as I have suggested, that narrative is coherent insofar as it binds together the events with regard to a set of values, or final ends.

A new difficulty arises, however, for we have been discussing a life story purely from the perspective of the person whose narrative it is. But there are, in fact, three distinct kinds of life story. The first kind—the kind we've assumed in our discussion so far— is autobiographical; it is the internal story I tell myself about who I am, where I've been, and how others fit into the story of my life. When speaking of a life story in this sense, the author and protagonist are one and the same.

A second way of looking at life stories is from a social perspective. On this way of looking at a narrative, there is a socially constructed set of facts about the direction and coherence of a life that may be outside the protagonist's perception. The social perspective of one's narrative is in mind through a person's concern for how she will be remembered after her death. There are many different social narratives of the same person's life, and they may be overlapping and contradictory. The social narrative of historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson, for example, has changed enormously over the centuries.

The third narrative perspective is external to both the individual and to the community—it is the omniscient view of the life. A life story from this perspective is the most true story. It is the perspective that has all the facts straight and which sees correctly how the events connect together to form a whole, colored with the right values. This omniscient perspective is required if there are to be narratives which are closer or farther from the truth; the ideal narrative provides an objective standard. If, however, as seems true, stories are inherently by and for persons, the

omniscient perspective cannot exist apart from a person. Stories do not exist in the view from nowhere. A life story as seen from the omniscient perspective would thus necessitate an omniscient storyteller. God would be the clearest candidate for such a being. For a theoretical route more amenable to atheism, we could alternatively take an idealized path with parallels in metaethics. Defending moral realism, Peter Railton appeals to what an omniscient, fully rational version of each person would choose as the basis for what she ought to choose.[20] That no person actually has such cognitive capacities is not seen as a problem. Likewise, to maintain the possibility of objective life narratives without appeal to God, one might appeal to how the person whose life it is would understand it under cognitively maximal conditions.[21]

To see how the internal and social perspectives produce different kinds of stories, consider an example discussed by Eleonore Stump concerning Victor Klemperer.[22] Klemperer was a German Jew and French Literature scholar during the Nazi rise to power. His heart's desire was to write a lasting contribution to French literary scholarship, but this possibility was crushed by Nazi rule. The result in Klemperer was heartbreak; the chance to write a *magnum opus* was unjustly wrenched from his hands. His response was to record his pain and horror at Nazi rule in a lengthy memoir (1,700 pages) which shows the mundane kindnesses and breathtaking cruelties of Nazi Dresden—all despite being convinced that he was shortly going to be killed. Commentator Peter Gay notes Klemperer's resolve: " 'I continue to write,' he was to

[20] Peter Railton, "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95, no. 2 (1986): 173, https://doi.org/10.2307/2185589.
[21] Though, Williams raises an objection here: "If a particular and significant narrative structure can plausibly be applied to a life retrospectively and from outside, and yet the person whose life it was could not, typically, have lived it with the aim of its embodying that structure, where does the plausibility, the fit, come from? It seems like magic"; he goes on to worry that what is lost by imposing an idealized narrative from without are "the considerations that shape one's life in the disorderly state that is natural to them." Bernard Williams, "Life as Narrative," *European Journal of Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 312, 313, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0378.2007.00275.x.
[22] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative And The Problem Of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2012), 12.

note in May 1942. 'This is my heroics. I want to bear witness, precise witness, to the very end.' He exploited his flaws—his pedantry, obstinacy, self-involvement—to make a masterpiece."[23] Klemperer's faithful memoirs were his *magnum opus*, perhaps the greatest work of any German diarist.[24] Many decades later they would become bestsellers, with abridged versions used in schools; Germans felt Klemperer's word could offer them some hope of coming to terms with their identity as inheritors of atrocity.

Part of the tragedy of Klemperer's story is that he would never know of his ultimate success. He would not live to realize what he had accomplished, and so from his perspective his story—at least with regards to his heart's literary desire—ended in the triumph of the Nazis over him. And yet from the social perspective, *our* perspective, Klemperer's story ends in victory. He did indeed write the *magnum opus* he thought had been denied him. From our external perspective, the success of his memoir imbues his writing of it with new meaning. He did not suffer pointlessly in his oppression at the hands of the Nazis. His response to his heartbrokenness would, in the end, be redemptive, for it took the meaning of his story out of the control of his oppressors.

As initially positioned, the internal and social perspectives may seem to sharply contrast. But in fact there is both tension and ambiguity between them. What stories like Klemperer's allow us to see is that at no point in our lives is our whole story visible to us. We can only see from where we stand. But the value of a meaningful life story does not consist wholly in my experience of it. Klemperer's ultimate triumph gives a measure of redemption to his suffering that casts it in a wholly new light to those who would come after him. Crucially, this redemption

[23] Peter Gay, "Inside the Third Reich," *The New York Times*, November 22, 1998, sec. Books, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/22/books/inside-the-third-reich.html.
[24] Gay.

seen from without is grounded in the internal perspective. It is not that Klemperer's suffering would later produce some great good (as in a consequentialist analysis), which would outweigh and therefore justify his suffering. On the contrary, it is only because of Klemperer's internal view that the later exultation of his work can be considered part of his narrative at all. If Klemperer did not care about literature, or about his legacy, then it is hard to see what difference it would make to our estimation what happened to his memoirs after his death. The social story of Klemperer is thus bound up with his own narrative conception.

The relationship between the internal and social perspective of a narrative will become particularly relevant in our discussion of revenge in Chapter Two. It is important to note before proceeding, however, that throughout my discussion of the narrative life I will usually have in mind the internal perspective; for this reason, I will always make explicit when I am referring to a life story as conceived from the social or omniscient perspectives.

VI. How Do We Form Life Stories?

It will be helpful at this point to say more about the method by which persons form their life story. The previous section was devoted to saying what such stories are; but how do we come to have them?

Our narrative sense of ourselves throughout our lives necessarily depends on our sense of ourselves across time. The narrative life assumes what psychologists have called mental time travel, the "the cognitive system that allows individuals to project backward and forward in time."[25] The backward- and forward-looking elements of this capacity appear to be interrelated;

[25] Endel Tulving, "Memory and Consciousness," *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne* 26, no. 1 (1985): 5, https://doi.org/10.1037/h0080017; Francesco Ferretti et al., "Time and Narrative: An Investigation of Storytelling Abilities in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 3, https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00944.

researchers found, for example, that a profound amnesiac could only think of himself in the future with total "blankness."[26] These cognitive systems are both required for the projection of the self out of the present. Usually, this capacity develops between the ages of three and five (though there is evidence development tends to differ for individuals with autism).[27]

A narrative sense of the self is founded on, but not reducible to, mental time travel. To detail how self-narratives are successfully formed from the ability to temporally project, let us begin from the opposite side of things—cases where individuals understand themselves as existing through a past period yet do not have full, coherent senses of themselves across that timespan. Two kinds of cases are of particular interest. The first involves acute trauma. Tuly Flint and Yoni Elkins examine this subject in their study of individuals who were brought into therapy after very recent traumatic experiences related to combat shock (between hours or a day prior).[28] The goal of the study is to give therapists guidance on how to care for clients in a similar position. Something distinctive is that, for these victims, "there is still no episodic narrative, not even a maladaptive one. This is because it has not yet been constructed."[29] The events are a jumble and no coherent sense can be made of the raw, uninterpreted data. The aim of the therapist, for such individuals, involves gradually "building a coherent narrative with the patient" in a safe environment that does not needlessly cause distress.[30] To that end, they suggest that therapists walk through a series of steps with their clients designed to gradually and unobtrusively gather the events together into a narrative. At first, due to shock, clients frequently

[26] Tulving, "Memory and Consciousness," 4.
[27] Cristina M. Atance and Andrew N. Meltzoff, "My Future Self: Young Children's Ability to Anticipate and Explain Future States," *Cognitive Development* 20, no. 3 (2005): 341–61, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cogdev.2005.05.001; Ferretti et al., "Time and Narrative."
[28] Tuly Flint and Yoni Elkins, "F-TEP: Fragmented Traumatic Episode Protocol," *Practice Innovations* 6, no. 1 (2021): 17, https://doi.org/10.1037/pri0000135.
[29] Flint and Elkins, 20.
[30] Flint and Elkins, 18.

miss pieces of the event altogether, and the chronology is out of order.[31] The work of the therapist is to help the client then take these pieces and arrange them, eventually, into something cohesive and true. If this process does not take place, Flint and Elkins write,

> Clients may suffer from a state of stress due to the lack of coherent and sequential narrative, which may be accompanied by a feeling of lack of control, purposelessness and disconnection from reality…. Brain research theories explain that when there is no access to a clear and coherent narrative, the organizational, administrative functions of the brain are limited as well as the ability to connect to others. The "internal storyteller" … is not functioning, and the processing mechanisms are not able to help the person to cope.[32]

What cases of acute trauma reveal is the disruption of a process we tend to take for granted. The ability to craft a narrative about oneself is a sign of a properly functioning mind. Creating the narrative conception of ourselves comes instinctively, automatically, and usually remains under the radar. It would be surprising if it were otherwise; at the end of a day, when invited to tell 'what happened' we naturally slip into the mode of the storyteller. Stories are the mundane currency of personal communication.

Acute trauma and shock can lead to incoherence in one's narrative understanding with regard to a relatively short period of time (in the case study, for example, the instigating event was surviving a barrage of mortar fire). But there is a second kind of incoherence that extends beyond episodes, or even chapters, and into one's whole life story. Psychiatrist Thomas Fuchs has argued that Borderline Personality Disorder is a mental illness which is best understood as the "fragmentation of the narrative self."[33] Fuchs describes several consequences of this

[31] Flint and Elkins, 21.
[32] Flint and Elkins, 17, 19.
[33] Thomas Fuchs, "Fragmented Selves: Temporality and Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder," *Psychopathology* 40, no. 6 (2007): 381, https://doi.org/10.1159/000106468.

fragmentation, but we will confine ourselves to a few of special relevance. First, Fuchs describes that it is common for those with BPD to exist

> Switching from one present to the next and being totally identified with their momentary state of affect. This results in a temporal splitting of the self that tends to exclude past and future as dimensions of object constancy, commitment, responsibility and identity.[34]

The unimportance of what is outside the present leads to considerable difficulty in making decisions as a temporally extended agent. It is difficult to see oneself as that same agent in the future, or to make sense of the path that has led to the present moment. This leads, in turn, to a more general problem in authoring *oneself*. Drawing on Frankfurt's work on first and second order volitions, Fuchs writes of a patient with BPD:

> Wishes and impulses flare up and vanish again, driving the patients forward, but without coalescing to form a long-term, resolved and overarching will. In other words: borderline individuals lack the capacity to form enduring second-order volitions in the light of which present impulses could be evaluated and selected. As a result, the patients are unable to draw on the experiences of the past in order to determine their own future by reflected decisions. They miss the experience of agency or authorship of their life. One could say that instead of projecting themselves into the future, they just stumble into it.[35]

Second-order volitions require in the first place that one cares about who one will become; they presuppose one's first-order desires must be shaped and fought with over time. Without a care about the direction of one's life—about growing from something less into a greater fullness—it is hard to see how to care about one's habits or character. This leads to an absence of the kind of final ends we discussed in §III; echoing Frankfurt's description of those without final ends, Fuchs writes that those with BPD, "often describe lasting feelings of emptiness and boredom, since their transitory present has no depth."[36] In this connection, Schmidt and Fuchs elsewhere present the heartbreaking words of patient Topher Edwards:

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[34] Fuchs, 381.
[35] Fuchs, 381.
[36] Philipp Schmidt and Thomas Fuchs, "The Unbearable Dispersal of Being: Narrativity and Personal Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2021): 381, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-020-09712-z.

> "[Misery] follows me everywhere. Bad luck clings to me, and everyone I get close to seems to end up wanting nothing to do with me. It's obvious that the common denominator is me." Moreover, his [accounts] are replete with statements reflecting a deep puzzlement about himself: "I feel, for the most part, that I am only just existing. I am part of a continuum but no more, potentially less."[37]

It is difficult to see how to navigate one's life without first knowing how to make sense of oneself. And it is also difficult to see how one could experience this lack as anything other than suffering.

Finally, the lack of a coherent self-narrative leads Fuchs to additionally describe BPD as a "disorder of intersubjectivity."[38] When I take up the work of conceiving of myself within a narrative, I am telling a story that is necessarily for persons—both myself and others. Fuchs, summarizing studies of BPD patients, describes "a failure of [such] patients to develop a full understanding and take the perspective of others."[39] Conceiving my own life story requires that I be able to present and interpret myself in terms of my intentions and past experiences; if I cannot do this with myself, then this will hinder my ability to do so with others. The ability to give and receive our stories, therefore, provides vital life to our intersubjective connections.

Again, from the pathological we may receive some illumination of the workings of narrative in the ordinary case. Whereas shock and trauma produced narrative incoherence over short periods, BPD threatens an entire life narrative. It does so by crippling its victims' ability to care about the future, to build a self over one's whole history, and by inhibiting the natural storytelling that allows us to give ourselves as knowable subjects to others. The work of the non-pathological individual is to take up these tasks as best as we are able. In caring about the future, we give guidance and goals to ourselves in the present. By reflection on our past we begin to see

[37] Schmidt and Fuchs, 321.
[38] Fuchs, "Fragmented Selves," 383.
[39] Fuchs, 381.

the arc of our life and what adjustments must be made, or should already have been made, to reach the right ending to our story. And amid this project, we are constantly at work with others. The meaning of our lives is bound up with the stories of those around us and so the narrative self will never, and could never, be a self unto itself.

VII. What Is a Good Life Story?

We've discussed a life story as the narrative whole which binds together events; it has a teleological structure, and it can be seen from different perspectives (internal, social, and omniscient). So far, this amounts only to a descriptive claim about the intelligibility of human lives through narrative analysis. But our ultimate concern in this project is with redemption, a decidedly normative concept. If the notion of a life story is to be useful in understanding redemption in forgiveness and revenge, we need to have an idea of what a *good* life story is. From that position, we will be able to see whether and how forgiveness and revenge can contribute to the value of a person's narrative.

The elements of a good life story are, in fact, latent in its descriptive components. A life narrative is a whole; unity is therefore a narrative value. Because life stories have, or aim for, a teleological structure, the good life narrative will be purposeful, with direction, expressing the values one cares about most deeply. And finally, life stories ought to be true. One's narrative conception ought to line up with who one is in reality.

Unity and Purpose

Because unity and purpose within a story are bound up with one another, we cannot treat them separately. On the one hand, a life's unity is linked with its having a direction; on the other, the fulfillment of a life's purpose is most visible when the life is taken as a unified whole.

Consider Charles Taylor's striking and oft-quoted passage:

> We want our lives to have meaning, or weight, or substance, or to grow towards some fullness, or however the concern is formulated… But this means our *whole* lives. If necessary, we want the future to "redeem" the past, to make it part of a life story which has sense or purpose, to take it up in a meaningful unity…. [When the past is redeemed] all the "wasted" time now has meaning… To repudiate my childhood as unredeemable in this sense is to accept a kind of mutilation as a person; it is to fail to meet the full challenge involved in making sense of my life.[40]

When I examine myself across time—when I consider the events of my life from the beginning—I am both discovering who I have been and, through the process of storytelling, crafting an identity for myself. My self-conception depends on bringing together the events of my life in a way that is intelligible. Constructing a narrative about my life is a way of knowing myself.

It is also a way of being known. When wanting to get to the core of another, it is common to ask questions about their past—to understand their story. Todd May, in this connection, recounts a new colleague's entrance into his philosophy department, and how the disparate facts about him slowly coalesced around questions May had about his colleague's life. He writes:

> Over the run of the past several years, some of these questions have been answered for me. And as they have been answered I have felt that I have come to understand, to a certain extent at least, who my friend is. A narrative of his life has taken shape for me, and that narrative seems to answer to my curiosity about him. This is not to say that I know everything about him. Nor is it to say that he is reducible to the plot of his life that I can now recount. Rather, in coming to possess a narrative account of his life, I feel that I have developed a sense of who he is.[41]

Through the story we come to understand the person.[42]

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[40] Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 50–51.
[41] Todd May, *A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 64.
[42] See also Stump's discussion of the connection between narrative and second personal knowledge, Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 2012, 64–81.

The importance of coherent stories for knowing ourselves and others leads to another, darker conclusion. If one's story is incoherent, then it will be difficult to be understood either by oneself or others. A life story may become incoherent in two ways. The first is that the trajectory of our lives may swerve with radical incongruity. As our horizons change and we navigate towards newly discovered or recognized ends, instability arises. When a person realizes that everything he has fought for up till now is worthless, he may take up a new and better cause in hopes that he might redirect his entrenched zeal, redeeming it. Or, lacking a way forward, he may lose hope.

Another way for disunity to fracture a life story is by external circumstances. A person may be on exactly the right path, stable in her orientation towards the good, and yet be wrenched away by outside forces. A child that endures abuse for many years has little control over her pursuit of happiness. Yet, when she is grown, she may take up the task of making sense of and redeeming her suffering. We might suppose she devotes herself to the helpless, giving them protection and healing. In that light, the suffering of her childhood, though still cruel and painful, is no longer pointless. She has woven it into the rest of her story, reinterpreting it completely as what she has used, what she has taken up as her cause, as 'that which I overcame.' She is no longer forced to passively accept another's control over her life story. But this is all too often not the path of those who suffer. Too often no sense can be made of trauma and brokenness. That part of the life will therefore be cauterized rather than healed. The victim will attempt to mitigate its corrosive effects by putting it from her mind. The story she tells herself glosses over the painful events, or expunges them altogether. This creates a conflict in her storytelling, for there is a sense in which her self-conception can no longer be fully true. Yet it may nevertheless be that

this is the best the sufferer can do. In such cases, the responsibility for this rending lies with the offender, for he has forced the victim to choose fragmentation.

The task of unifying one's life story must always be imperfect, yet also a way of striving to know oneself and to be known. If a person cannot redeem his past, cannot make sense of it given who he is now, then that piece of the past was wasted. That part of his life becomes so discontinuous and incoherent with his new story and new horizons that he can make no good thing from it. It is as if he had been another person, alien to who he is now. And so his life story becomes fragmented, something he cannot hold together all at once.

It is therefore almost inconceivable for a person not to care about the unity of her life, for her relationship to herself and others depends upon it. The best life stories will be woven tightly together, the events connected to one another in a way that is coherent to oneself and others.

Direction

In addition to the unity of a life story, we must also take into account *direction*. Consider the following example from Michael Slote.[43] There are two men who want political power. The first attains power young, accomplishes much, but then falls out of favor. He spends the rest of his life fruitlessly pursuing control again. The second man spends his whole life trying to gain power, but succeeds only once he is an old man. He accomplishes much (as much as the first) and then dies while still at the reins. Both lives have equal happiness in them, and both lives are unified around an overarching purpose. But there is something better and more satisfying about the second life story. His life has moved forward, progressed, and grown.

[43] Michael Slote, *Goods and Virtues*, First Edition (Oxford : New York: Clarendon Pr, 1983).

We may relate this again to Frankfurt's second-order volitions. In caring about the direction of the events of our lives, we care about the kind of person we were and will become. I do not particularly want my life to be haphazardly filled with moments of weakness and strength, even if I am able to bring those events into some greater whole after the fact. I want to have a life story that is not only coherent but building toward culmination. This may explain why, despite the polarized and fractured moral common ground society shares, there is something universally pitiable about one who, like the tabloid celebrity, divorces a multitude of times. Even if a person saw some point to eight marriages, some journey that allowed him to grow with each divorce, the task of marriage is one aimed at permanence. To marry, minimally, involves committing oneself to a long-term project with another. When one is constantly giving up on such projects, it is hard to see this is anything other than wandering or drifting.

Another way of making this point about the importance of direction in our lives is through what Bruner has called "turning points" in a person's narrative self-conception. These are formative, key moments in a person's life which mark a decisive shift. Crucially, these moments do not just happen, but are the result of an intentional move by the agent to change direction. Bruner writes:

> By "turning points" I mean those episodes in which, as if to underline the power of the agent's intentional states, the narrator attributes a crucial change or stance in the protagonist's story to a belief, a conviction, a thought. This I see as crucial to the effort to *individualize* a life…. [Turning points] represent a way in which people free themselves in their self-consciousness from their history, their banal destiny, their conventionality.[44]

Turning points signify the ability of a person to take control of their own narrative self-conception. It is expressed in that literary trope, 'At the last moment I couldn't go through with it; I knew I could never live with myself if I did.' These moments are rejections of passivity and

[44] Jerome Bruner, "Self-Making and World-Making," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25, no. 1 (1991): 73, 74, https://doi.org/10.2307/3333092.

the denial that my story only 'happens' to me. We want to move forward and upward. Drifting without direction will not do.

The notion of turning points leads to a further observation. Just as some moments are full of import for the course of a life, so others lack extended significance. Waiting for a ride, doing the dishes, filling out a timesheet—these are usually uneventful moments which act as 'filler.' There is nothing wrong with these mundane moments; in fact, as I suggest in later chapters, they provide space for small wrongs and pains to fall through unrecorded. They also lessen the burden of the extraordinary. Turning points would be exhausting in large quantity; it is better to sometimes have quiet moments which need not lead anywhere grand.

Truth

Finally, a thriving life story should be true. The narrative I tell myself and others is accountable to reality. But how are we to make sense of this? If a life story can be true or false, that makes it seem as though there is exactly one real story about a person's life, and the story a person tells herself must correspond to that singular story. That might be plausible from the omniscient perspective, but that is a perspective we do not have access to. So, how are we to justify the relevance of truth to human narratives?

Stories exist through a series of emphases and perspectives; the same set of facts may be, without contradiction, arranged into subtly different narratives. Yet, the different narratives of a set of events are still *about* those events, and the facts of the events themselves need not be grounded in any perspective. Thus, a life story can be counted as true within a general range so long as the facts remain accurate. For example, I may see the story of my education as a chapter of my life characterized by struggle or by indulged curiosity. Both accounts are compatible with the facts of the events which, indeed, contained both difficulty and happy learning.

Further, storytelling necessitates judgments of moral truths. Who are the saints, villains, and victims of my life story? As we construct the narrative of our lives, we will inevitably assign roles to those around us which reflect our judgments. These can be true or false. My pride may lead me to disdain a peer at one point in my life, only to revise my judgment later in light of greater maturity. This can only be accomplished by recognizing that my prior narrative contained a moral falsehood.

Narrative revision takes two forms. The first kind of revision has to do with intentional, reflective consideration of the story one has accepted about oneself and the world. Revisions of this sort express our (limited) ability to directly construct our own narrative. It is in this capacity as reflective editors and autobiographers that we have an obligation to judge truly. We sometimes communicate this through the accusation that someone is 'living in a fantasy world' or has a 'victim complex'; we mean to indicate that such a person has fallen short in the task of truthfully judging his place in his story.

The second kind of revision is not the result of intentionally revisiting and reconsidering past judgments, but is rather the automatic addition of new information that comes simply by continuing to live. For example, a business trip that ends in nothing but wasted time will instinctively cause me to view with regret my initial decision to undertake it. As I see how the story ends for the project, its beginning takes on a new, lamentable meaning.

VIII. Defending the Narrative View

Before concluding this chapter, let us examine two forms of objection to narrative analysis. The first, presented by opponents of Marya Schectman, ends up being inapplicable to our own project. The second, maintained by Galen Strawson, requires a more substantive response.

Marya Schectman

Given that the most well-known narrativist, Schectman, has made her name in the metaphysics of the self, I want to quickly forestall a potential confusion that might arise by association with her work. On Schectman's view, narrative is the best way of understanding the existential continuity of persons. She argues that a continuous narrative—one's empathetic access to one's past—is what allows a person to persist through time. If a narrative is broken, a new person comes into existence.[45]

In speaking of a "narrative self" I do not mean metaphysical selfhood. It is true, to use Goldie's phrase, that from the internal perspective we have a "narrative sense" of ourselves as the protagonist of our life story.[46] But that sense is not constitutive of selfhood. A metaphysical self's existence from times A to B does not depend on that self being able to tell a continuous story at B connecting it back to A. Indeed, it is precisely the inability to tell such a story that causes the trauma victims we've discussed to suffer. If selves were metaphysically dependent on continuous stories, then such victims would not now be victims at all, for they are not numerically identical to the selves that originally endured the narrative-breaking trauma. So, to the extent that I make any implicit claims about the conditions for continued selfhood—and I hope to make as few as possible—I am opposed to Schectman's account. This project thus remains unburdened by the attacks made against her stronger, metaphysically laden version of narrativism.

Galen Strawson

[45] Marya Schechtman, "Empathic Access: The Missing Ingredient in Personal Identity," *Philosophical Explorations* 4, no. 2 (May 1, 2001): 95–111, https://doi.org/10.1080/10002001058538710.
[46] Goldie, *The Mess Inside*, 118.

Unlike Schectman, who emphasizes narrative even more strongly than I do, Strawson lies at the opposite end of the spectrum, denying the value of narrative at all to understanding a human life.[47] Strawson has become the specter of anti-narrativism, the adversary to which all narrativists must give a response; he has recently coined the term "narrababble" to express his disdain for their work.[48] His most prominent argument depends on an appeal to his own personal experience, combined with a claim of the moral sufficiency of the non-narrative life.

Strawson's argument begins with the claim that he has no narrative understanding of himself. He writes,

> I have absolutely no sense of my life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none. Nor do I have any great or special interest in my past. Nor do I have a great deal of concern for my future.[49]

Strawson does not think of his life as having a direction, nor indeed does he think much about the past or future. He goes so far as to say that he does not think of his experiential self as having existed in the past. To the extent that narrativism depends on a descriptive claim about how human lives are psychologically structured, his experience represents a counterexample. Further, since Strawson seems to be a functioning member of the moral community, he is likewise a counterexample to the normative claim that narrative thinking is essential to the full moral life.

Let us examine Strawson's descriptive claim, and its relevance, first. Narrativists commonly accept Strawson's report as a legitimate counterexample. Schectman and Todd, for example, have altered their accounts to accommodate his case.[50] This is unsurprising. If a

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[47] Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," in *Narrative, Philosophy and Life*, ed. Allen Speight, Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion and Public Life (Springer Netherlands, 2015), 11–31, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9349-0.
[48] Galen Strawson, "On the Use of the Notion of Narrative in Ethics and Psychology," in *The Natural Method: Essays on Mind, Ethics, and Self in Honor of Owen Flanagan*, ed. Wenqing Zhao, Eddy Nahmias, and Thomas Polger (MIT Press, 2020), 141.
[49] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 433.
[50] Todd May, *A Significant Life: Human Meaning in a Silent Universe / Todd May.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

narrative understanding of oneself is supposed to be a necessary condition of metaphysical personhood, then the strong narrativists would have to deny Strawson's personhood or his self-report to maintain their position. Yet, there are even some outside the philosophical literature who've taken interest in Strawson's case. They wonder whether Strawson's report is grounds for revising our general understanding of a normal human psychology. Take, for example, Philipp Schmidt and Thomas Fuchs on the one hand and Natalie Gold and Michalis Kyratsous on the other; both groups have argued at length over the role of narrative in understanding BPD, with Strawson's report playing a central role as potential evidence for the possibility of a person who completely lacks a narrative sense and yet is non-pathological. Despite the centrality of Strawson's report, both groups include in their argument the following disclaimers: "Granting that the kind of episodic life Strawson describes can be found even in the non-clinical population…"[51] and "if Strawson is right that the nonclinical population can be nonnarrative…"[52] Both in the philosophical and non-philosophical literature, Strawson's solitary description of his internal life is carrying quite a bit of weight; we do not actually have any evidence to think there are others who match his experience, and even those sympathetic to Strawson are not claiming otherwise. I see no problem, therefore, with maintaining that the narrative conception of ourselves is a paradigmatic feature of the human life. There may be extreme outliers, such as Strawson, who do not experience life this way, but they are not characteristic of the common experience.

One might respond on Strawson's behalf by appealing to potential allies among those who deny the existence of the persistent self. Buddhism, for example, represents a vast religious

[51] Schmidt and Fuchs, "The Unbearable Dispersal of Being," 324.
[52] N. Gold and M. Kyratsous, "Self and Identity in Borderline Personality Disorder: Agency and Mental Time Travel," *Journal of Evaluation in Clinical Practice* 23 (2017): 1024.

and philosophical tradition which holds that the self is illusory and would certainly reject metaphysical narrativist claims. Thus, perhaps Strawson is not so alone in his report, as there exists outside of Western spheres a large group who would stand with him. But in fact, the opposite is true. The view that the persistent self is an illusion is itself at odds with Strawson's experience. Strawson doesn't report experiencing an illusion, he reports experiencing nothing at all with regards to a narrative self-conception. Compare this with Miri Albahari's explication of a Buddhist philosophy of the self, where he describes the difficult work required for an individual to hypothetically wake up from the illusion of the self:

> The general idea is that meditation would work, at least in part, by 'reprogramming' our usual patterns of attention so that the attention would no longer be compulsively captured in the content of those 'story lines' needed to preserve the sense of a bounded self… While enslaved [to a sense of self], the attention is repeatedly drawn into thoughts and story lines whose content implicitly depicts the self as protagonist of recalled or imagined scenarios in the past and future.[53]

The default human position, on this view, is one "compulsively" drawn into a narrative self-conception. This is why careful practices must be habituated, such as meditation, to break the hold of a powerful illusion. Albahari is sensitive to psychology on this point, voicing concern that depersonalization in other cases (i.e. through non-meditative practice) is highly pathological.[54] For Albahari the removal of the persistent self, a protagonist who exists through time, is not something that happens—even in positive cases—easily or naturally. Thus, the Buddhist position, as well as other self-as-illusion views, actually sides with narrativists rather than Strawson as far as the descriptive phenomenology is concerned.

[53] M. Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self*, 2006th edition (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 208.
[54] Albahari, 206-208. See also Chapter Eight.

What about Strawson's normative claim? Here, he argues that a narrative self-conception, or lack thereof, makes "no systematic quantitative difference in the warmth, completeness and depth" of one's relationships.[55] The "richly moral and emotional life" and the "right feeling and right desire" that go with it are unaffected by whether one sees oneself as having existed in a life story that extends into the past and future.[56] Strawson's goal in this argument seems to be non-revisionary; he is not amending his conception of the morally flourishing life to let in non-narrative persons, he is showing how they already fit into that life. He thinks the standard Western moral theories—Kantianism, consequentialism, and virtue ethics—can all accommodate the non-narrative self.

Strawson's argument against a need for narrative in the moral life works by analyzing historically oriented emotions, desires, and practices, and showing how they fit into the non-narrative life. A central problem he attempts to address is that, seemingly, one must see one's life as continuous with the past to make sense of gratitude, revenge, faithfulness, or forgiveness.

In my view, Strawson's analysis fits human life poorly, especially his discussions of friendship and forgiveness. Take his claim that the past need not play a role in friendships: "A gift for friendship doesn't require any ability to recall past shared experiences, nor any tendency to value them. It is shown in how one is in the present."[57] Surely this is a desiccated view of friendship. The best friendships grow, mature, and eventually come to find nourishment through difficult times from their own past. Shared remembering can bind together two who have drifted apart by giving them motivation to continue on together. Further, knowing another's past is essential for love. If love includes the desire for closeness, then a loving friendship must include

[55] Galen Strawson, "Episodic Ethics," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 60 (March 2007): 88, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246100009620.
[56] Strawson, "Against Narrativity," 90.
[57] Strawson, "Episodic Ethics," March 2007, 109.

a desire to know and be known. Love thus pushes us to furnish a unified picture of ourselves to another, and in turn to try to make sense of the other as one whole; and this requires making sense of a history held in common. Christopher Moore and Samuel Frederick write in this connection:

> Even if two people unbeknownst to one another care for each other and engage in parallel activities, they do not count as friends until they acknowledge their sharing, somehow, in a life. This acknowledgement takes more than a sensitivity to another's affection or regard. It requires a narrative accounting of that sharing in a life.[58]

Coming together in friendship requires an accounting; saying that a friendship "just is" isn't enough. How can one love a friend if she does not know him beyond the present, or, if she does know, does not care?

Further concerns arise about Strawson's view of forgiveness. One might wonder: If Strawson believes that there is a sense in which he did not exist in the past, how can he forgive past wrongs against himself, which are, to him, against somebody else? He responds that this is no problem, since we can forgive on behalf of others—including earlier versions of ourselves. But what if the wrongdoer deeply desires forgiveness from Strawson *now*, and does not want it on behalf of some other version of him? He responds simply that the wrongdoers "already have [forgiveness] in sufficient measure, for [the victims] no longer feel wronged, although they remember what happened, and that is forgiveness."[59] He concludes by insisting that desiring anything further from the forgiver is selfish and perverse.

There are two points to make here. First, there is no account of forgiveness on which to "no longer feel wronged" is a sufficient condition for forgiveness. In fact, practically every

[58] Christopher Moore and Samuel Frederick, "Narrative Constitution of Friendship," *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Review / Revue Canadienne de Philosophie* 56, no. 1 (March 2017): 114, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0012217317000129.
[59] Strawson, "Episodic Ethics," March 2007, 111.

account *explicitly denies* this claim because it would count condoning or excusing as forgiveness. More importantly, however, is that this view of forgiveness reflects Strawson's belief that "guilt adds nothing—nothing good—to moral being."[60] It is easy to see why Strawson's account would require this; guilt tells a story. And yet we do feel guilt—we feel it because we cannot live as though our past happened to another. Like Aquinas's "stain on the soul," we continue to feel guilt for what we've done in the past, and we worry that our guilt will overcome us.[61] And this is why, as Jean Hampton evocatively writes,

> Perhaps the greatest good forgiveness can bring is the liberation of the wrongdoer from the effects of the victim's moral hatred. If the wrongdoer fears that the victim is right to see him as cloaked in evil, or as infected with moral rot, these fears can engender moral hatred of himself. Such self loathing is the feeling that he is, entirely or in part, morally hideous, unclean, infected. It can be directed at his character or dispositions or, more dangerously, towards everything that he is, so that he comes to believe that there is nothing good or decent in him… [this] can lead to self-destruction.[62]

Forgiveness is something victims offer in order to heal the sepsis of guilt even when—perhaps especially when—that guilt is well-deserved. Stripping forgiveness of its connection to guilt, and calling the wrongdoer selfish for yearning for its tonic warps forgiveness beyond recognition.

If this is how Strawson's non-narrative experience causes him to see himself, his friendships, guilt, and forgiveness, then it seems that something important is missing from his life. Further, if he believes that they are outside of his ability to attain given his psychological constitution, that seems like a permanent loss of desires, emotions, and practices which are part of a fully thriving life. But we need not appeal only to theoretical considerations for this conclusion. Strawson believes his life to be paradigmatic of a life which is both non-narrative yet

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[60] Strawson, 93.
[61] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd Edition (Kevin Knight, 1920), II–I, Q86.
[62] Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 86.

fully flourishing, but when he gets into the details, the self-conception he presents is startling. He writes:

> If I consider myself, I find that my self-biography is just a chronology, a list of dates. It's a filing cabinet (mostly empty). It doesn't in any way represent progression. It involves no narrative flow, although I can of course report certain causal sequences (but I am bad at this)…. What about my self-concept, my self-conception? When I try to summon it, I have a sense of complete blankness… My sense is that all that I am is here now and that what I am is fundamentally unclear to me. It's a profoundly nonnarrative experience. If I try to think further about myself—if I try to bring a self-conception to mind—initial thoughts about character traits are met with blankness.[63]

Strawson goes on to say that he can think of individual facts about himself, such as his tendencies and preferences, and that

> Such facts—bits and pieces—may be important. Some of them may be profoundly diagnostic of identity, Proustian keys, keys to identity... To take them for what they are—bits and pieces—and not to try to assemble them in any discursive fashion, may be the beginning of wisdom, and perhaps also the end of it, in any project of self-understanding.[64]

Strawson seemingly has almost no sense of himself. He is fragmented and does not care. He appears to be stumbling about without knowing who it is who wanders. If his experience is the best counterexample to the importance of narrative to a flourishing life, I do not think the narrativist has much to fear.

IX. Conclusion

The narrative perspective I've taken up in this chapter is not the only way of examining human life, and perhaps there are cases where other kinds of analysis would prove more fruitful. But for thinking about redemption, narrative is an invaluable resource. In the chapters that follow, I use this perspective to highlight the meaning of forgiveness and revenge. These

[63] Strawson, "On the Use of the Notion of Narrative in Ethics and Psychology," 141.
[64] Strawson, 142.

responses to wrongdoing, I contend, are best understood as ways of taking seriously the task of unifying one's life.

Chapter Two

A Qualified Defense of Revenge

I. Introduction

One finds among philosophers a dim view of revenge. This is perhaps unsurprising. What *is* surprising is *why* many commentators think vengeance is so distasteful. A common objection is that revenge involves bad thinking: though revenge is morally objectionable because it involves vicious motives like malice and spite, the more fundamental problem is that, though costly, it fails to achieve anything of value. The avenger accomplishes nothing.[65] If he were just to think matters over clearly, he would see that revenge is irrational. In fact, there is usually nothing worthwhile about even the resentment behind revenge. At best, the vindictive feeling arises to buttress flagging self-esteem.

I believe the common perspective is too dismissive and fails to give vengeance a fair hearing. Though I will ultimately side with forgiveness over revenge, I believe first setting up vengeance at its strongest is important for a project on forgiveness. This is because forgiveness is symmetrical with revenge; the two share a common underlying logic. If several of the current arguments against revenge are successful, they also threaten the legitimacy and value of forgiveness. So, we must first provide a preliminary justification of revenge.

I should note early that this chapter explores revenge, not retributive punishment carried out by the state—the most salient difference between the two being that revenge is personal and partial, while judicial punishment is (in theory) impersonal and impartial.[66] Nevertheless, the

[65] 'Avenger' usually connotes one who takes revenge on behalf of another. Throughout this work I use it more generally to refer to anyone taking revenge, whether on behalf of oneself or another.

[66] Robert Nozick takes up these distinctions in detail in Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 366–70, https://openlibrary.org/books/OL4255984M.

literature on retributive punishment provides a distinction useful for clarifying the task of justifying revenge. Examining retributive punishment, David Dolinko writes that there are two senses in which we could ask for justification:

> One concerns what could be called the "rational justification" of the practice of punishment: *why*—for what reason or reasons—do we punish wrongdoers? The second question asks, rather, for the "moral justification" of punishment: why is it morally permissible to engage in this particular practice? The demand for a rational justification asks what makes a particular social practice sensible, or valuable, or worth engaging in, while the demand for a moral justification asks what makes it morally legitimate. Loosely, the distinction is that between, "For what reason" and, "By what right?"[67]

The difference between moral and rational justification is helpful to our own discussion because it allows a more precise articulation of the kind of defense of revenge I'm giving. I aim to show that there is a form of revenge which is rationally justifiable, as is resentment, its motivation. In other words, I argue that there are cases where resentment is a valuable emotion and that revenge has the capacity of being a successful strategy for achieving what resentment desires. Although the question of moral justification is always nearby, I do not take it up directly.

My objective in this chapter is thus quite narrow. I am not giving a defense of revenge or retribution generally, nor am I taking up questions of moral justification. Rather, I am arguing that there are some forms of revenge which are at least sometimes rationally justifiable. I do so by defending revenge against a pair of objections to its rationality. To that end, I begin with a characterization of revenge to get clear on what concept is under discussion, and then detail the two objections. Finally, I address them by situating wrongdoing and redemption within a narrative context to show how revenge might accomplish the redemption of the victim's suffering.

[67] David Dolinko, "Some Thoughts About Retributivism," *Ethics* 101, no. 3 (1991): 539–40.

II. What is Revenge?

Revenge has a varied conceptual range. To begin, therefore, in this section I lay out the different kinds and dimensions of revenge. I begin by identifying some central, general characteristics of revenge, then move on to the details that make for so much variety. I conclude by proposing four categories of revenge and proceed with only the most justifiable version of revenge.

An Initial Characterization

Revenge is characterized by four interlinked features. First, it involves retaliation. The avenger strikes back at an offender by causing a negative state for her, such as inconvenience, humiliation, pain, or suffering. The avenger understands his attack as a response to the offender's wrongdoing, and his revenge is comprehensible only within that context.

Second, revenge is motivated by resentment. The emotion of resentment is a central part of the literature on forgiveness, and Brandon Warmke and Michael Mckenna point out that there are subtle disagreements about precisely what the emotion entails.[68] Nevertheless, I think Thomas Brudholm provides a starting place which is both succinct and ecumenical: "Resentment is an accusing anger."[69] The one who resents is angry at a blameworthy wrongdoer. He can be angered by pain caused by an inanimate object, but he cannot blame it and therefore cannot resent it. The victim turns to vengeance because resentment urges him to resist his mistreatment through retaliation; he must not stand idly by and receive the claim, implicit in his mistreatment,

[68] Brandon Warmke, Dana Kay Nelkin, and Michael McKenna, eds., *Forgiveness and Its Moral Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 9, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190602147.001.0001.
[69] Thomas Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue: Jean Amery and the Refusal to Forgive* (Philadelphia, Pa: Temple University Press, 2009), 10.

that he ought to have been treated thus. This is not to say, however, that revenge is only the province of the victim. We can feel resentment for the mistreatment of those close to us, or those with whom we identify. Yet after a certain relational distance from the victim, one might instead feel a more impersonal anger that is spurred on by outrage over the offense in general rather than on behalf of this victim in particular. Hampton uses 'indignation' to distinguish this kind of reactive anger from resentment, a distinction which has since become standard.[70] (In my own discussion, I focus on revenge which is motivated by personal resentment rather than impersonal indignation.)[71]

Third, to count as revenge, the avenger's resentment and retaliation must be tied together in the right way. It not enough merely to desire that something bad happen to the offender. Adam Smith argues that this would be common malice or hatred.[72] He writes that, if someone who killed a family member were to die soon after from illness or executed for a different crime, "though it might sooth our hatred, it would not fully gratify our resentment."[73] The one who desires vengeance wants something bad to happen to the offender *because* of the offense—and preferably that the offender (and onlookers) understands the causal connection.

Finally, revenge is conceptually tied to justification and therefore proportionality. Robert Solomon suggests in this connection that the common understanding of revenge assumes "the difference between justified and unjustified revenge."[74] Revenge, whether in desire or practice, is

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[70] Hampton also helpfully notices that when directed at a person, 'resentment' can have the sense of envy. I never use it in this sense in my own discussion. Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 60.
[71] In critique of Robert Nozick's distinction between retribution and revenge, Peter French argues that no personal emotional connection is necessary for vengeance. Peter A. French, *The Virtues of Vengeance* (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 68–69.
[72] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 8th edition. In two volumes (London: printed for A. Strahan; and T. Cadell jun. and W. Davies (successors to Mr. Cadell) in the Strand; and W. Creech, and J. Bell & Co. at Edinburgh, 1797), 68–69.
[73] Smith, 69.
[74] Robert C. Solomon, *A Passion for Justice: Emotions and the Origins of the Social Contract / Robert C. Solomon.* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley PubCo, 1990), 275, https://openlibrary.org/books/OL26320207M.

subject to demands for justification; there must be a reason (again, distinct from hatred) which makes retaliation a recognizably appropriate response. Greater severity in retaliation calls for greater justification. If the retaliation is completely out of proportion to the offense (e.g. burning a gossip's house down and committing to a life of war against him), we may not even accept that the act counts as an act of revenge. We will instead think it is merely unjustified hostility.

III. Difficulties for a General Definition

Some philosophers begin discussions of revenge with a general definition. Their definitions, however, have been a poor fit, as I believe any definition of revenge must be. Articulating why this is so, however, helps in understanding the diversity in the practice of vengeance. Elster and Suzanne Uniacke, for example, have (respectively) offered definitions of revenge as "the attempt, at some cost or risk to oneself, to impose suffering upon those who have made one suffer, because they have made one suffer"[75] and "a form of retaliation which seeks the satisfaction of returning a perceived humiliation, insult, or injury."[76] These definitions are far too narrow. If we look at historical examples of revenge as a practice, we find that it diverges along several dimensions which these definitions lose in the gloss.

First, the intensity of revenge may vary from petty to homicidal. At low intensity, an avenger may, for example, see that a stranger has parked her car too close to his own, making it difficult to maneuver his vehicle out. He puts a scratch in her paint with his key and leaves. At high intensity we find the stuff of novels and plays: a child avenging the death of his parents, the oppressed paying back at gun point years of cruelty. Elster's and Uniacke's definitions, requiring

[75] Jon Elster, "Norms of Revenge," *Ethics* 100, no. 4 (1990): 862.
[76] Suzanne Uniacke, "Why Is Revenge Wrong?," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2000): 62, https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004778229751.

suffering, humiliation, insult, or injury, nicely capture the higher intensities of revenge, but not the lower. The minor inconvenience of a stranger parking too close to my car is not in any sense suffering, injury, or insult. Any universal definition of revenge would need to span the distance between acts of minor and major revenge.

Second, the object of revenge ranges from one individual, to a group of individuals, to causes. The object, contrary to Elster's definition, need not be the actual offender, nor even an accomplice to the offender. The law of the 18th century Cherokee, for example, allowed for clans to avenge an interclan killing by taking any one life from the offending clan.[77] No requirement was made that the actual killer be killed. Likewise, in the honor cultures of medieval Iceland and 19th century northern Albania we find vengeance committed to undo the shame of victimhood; this could be accomplished by harming an associate of the offender.[78] Revenge against the offender himself was preferred, but not required.

Third, one may have standing to take revenge in one of two ways. Most obviously, one may be the victim of an offense, as Elster's definition suggests. Enduring wrongdoing is the foundational grounds for standing to avenge. Yet, alternatively, one may take revenge on behalf of the victim, usually by virtue of a close personal connection. Some honor cultures have strict norms regulating which relations provide standing to take revenge on behalf of another. Northern Albanian culture required, for example, that the avenger be a close relation; anyone else who attacked the offender started a new, separate feud without giving satisfaction to the first victim or his family.[79] In the absence of organized norms, standing comes in degrees, proportionate to

[77] John Phillip Reid, *A Law of Blood: The Primitive Law of the Cherokee Nation*, Second edition (DeKalb, Ill: Northern Illinois University Press, 2006), 73–84.
[78] William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*, New edition (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1997); Jacob-Black Michaud, *Cohesive Force: Feud in the Mediterranean*, 1st edition (St. Martin's Press/Macmillan, 1975).
[79] Michaud, *Cohesive Force*, 41–42.

one's closeness to the victim. A general definition would need to include the condition that revenge requires standing; but it would also need to avoid glossing over the difference between avenging on behalf of another versus avenging on one's own behalf.

Fourth, norms which establish standing to avenge also shape the organization of revenge. In honor cultures, standing establishes duty. In such societies, those who had standing to avenge were shamed if they did not act. The Icelandic sagas depict a mother reminding the men of her family of their duty to avenge, declaring, "your manhood will suffer unless you repay [the offenders]";[80] the northern Albanians openly challenged and then ostracized as cowards those with outstanding obligations to vengeance.[81] Since whole families and clans had standing to avenge an offense, the victim (or nearest male relative if the victim was dead) had a right to gather their support in taking vengeance. In such cases, revenge was enacted as a group. Conversely, in cultures without organizing norms, revenge can be enacted by a single individual, or individuals working in parallel. This is typified in the infamous feud in West Virginia between the Hatfields and McCoys. The background cultural norms resisted the feud and the government actively tried to stifle it.[82] The cycle of retaliation was therefore characterized by furtive, disorganized attacks, more frequently the result of individual opportunism than planning. Revenge governed by the norms of honor cultures are a completely different beast than revenge in, say, American culture.

Solomon, a defender of revenge, complains that discussions of revenge almost always take the most extreme and indefensible forms of vengeance as representative of the class.[83] Using

[80] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 196.
[81] Michaud, *Cohesive Force*, 79.
[82] Lisa Alther, *Blood Feud: The Hatfields And The Mccoys: The Epic Story Of Murder And Vengeance*, First Edition (Guilford, Conn: Lyons Press, 2012).
[83] Solomon, *A Passion for Justice*, 272–76.

bloody, disproportionate instances of revenge as exemplary obscures the variety in practice and makes condemnation a foregone conclusion. Yet, compare the social, impersonal, and duty-bound revenge of the Cherokee with the secretive, hateful, and illegal revenge of the Hatfields and McCoys—then compare them both to cutting off another driver for tailgating. The three cases have practically nothing in common except the bare fact of retaliation. Any discussion of revenge that attempts to unify such disparate cases under a single definition must be too general. It will be much harder to dismiss revenge if we set aside extreme cases from the outset and delimit our discussion to the varieties of revenge which are more *prima facie* justifiable.

IV. Four Kinds of Revenge

Rather than providing a universal definition, I propose to discuss four general categories of revenge. Separating different kinds of vengeance into different classes will allow us to focus our discussion on revenge at its strongest.

The first category is what I will call instinctual revenge, the result of what the Albanian law once referred to as "boiling blood."[84] If a victim of an offense took revenge against an offender within the first twenty-four hours of an offense, the avenger's fresh anger was considered a serious legal excuse, and much more leeway was granted in the kind and degree of retaliation. Instinctual revenge lashes out quickly, as Joseph Butler puts it, "to resist and defeat, sudden force, violence and opposition."[85] This vengeance intermixes rage and the instinct for protecting oneself and one's own.

[84] Elster, "Norms of Revenge," 1990.
[85] David McNaughton, ed., *Joseph Butler: Fifteen Sermons and Other Writings on Ethics*, 1st edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 70.

The second category is hateful revenge. Although animosity is a feature of all forms of vengeance, this kind is distinguished by the primary place it gives to malice and, conversely, by its tendency to respond disproportionately. The Hatfields and McCoys feud is paradigmatic of hateful revenge: Bill Staton was infamously killed attempting to murder Paris McCoy over an ownership dispute of a single hog.[86] The feud lurched about without direction, causing indiscriminate violence between the families, frequently without prior planning. Feudists would kill each other not necessarily out of a desire to get even for some earlier, specific offense, but because they hated the other family as their enemy.

The third category is transactional revenge. This kind of vengeance is typified in honor societies with what Elster calls "revenge norms."[87] The Cherokee and northern Albanians fall into this category, but the purest example comes from medieval Iceland—my description of which comes from William Miller's meticulous analysis of Icelandic sagas.[88] The culture of the Icelanders depended on revenge to enact its laws, as there was no executive branch to enforce what the councils legislated. Detailed codes existed that allowed for victims to take revenge on their offenders, but only within generally circumscribed limits and contexts: Revenge must not be taken at the annual nationwide political gathering; revenge may be exacted on the offender's brother, but not on one of his neighbors; revenge for the life of a slave should not result in the death of a free man. The Icelandic norms of revenge allowed for settlements for lost life—a victim's family might be paid off with an amount of silver proportionate to the status of the victim. Revenge was meant to be proportional and to bring satisfaction to the victim or, if the victim was dead, the victim's family. Further, once revenge was dealt, the avenger was not to

[86] Alther, *Blood Feud*, 49–50.
[87] Elster, "Norms of Revenge," 1990.
[88] Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*.

pile on. The avenger, by taking revenge, satisfied his honor. But because the one receiving vengeance was highly unlikely to agree that it was fairly dealt, the roles of victim and offender were inverted. This resulted in a back-and-forth, with each party taking turns at being the victim, retaliating, and then taking the defensive position again as they awaited reprisal. The central reason I call this kind of revenge "transactional" is that it is based on a system of desert and social status. Miller writes: "Wrongs done to someone, like gifts given to him, unilaterally make the recipient a debtor, someone who owes requital. But in the world of feud, unlike the world of gift-exchange, the debts are debts of blood."[89] Victims' honor demands that they bring vengeance on the offender, for, until they do, the offender has not received what he deserves. Conversely, taking revenge removes honor from the offender and transfers it back to the avenger. The transactional nature of Icelandic revenge must seem alien to those, such as ourselves, who live in a culture without established revenge norms. The idea of being paid off for the death of a loved one, or of seeing revenge as something we coolly "take turns" at, seems very odd. But I suspect this is because, lacking norms of revenge, we are more accustomed to instinctual revenge and hateful revenge, which are driven by wrath. Wrath, we think, cannot be coolly reasoned with.

The final category of vengeance I will call steadfast revenge, and it is the category that requires the most attention. The best description I know of this kind of vengeance comes from Michael Ignatieff, an international reporter and writer. Attempting to explain the determination with which radical militant groups in the Middle East have continued to fight despite their losses, he writes:

> Revenge—morally considered—is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honor their memory by taking up their cause where they left off. Revenge keeps faith between

[89] Miller, 182.

> generations; the violence it engenders is a ritual form of respect for the community's dead—therein lies its legitimacy.[90]

This kind of revenge is not powered exclusively by wrath in the manner of instinctual or hateful revenge—though anger must certainly play a part. Nor does it consist purely in balancing scales, as with transactional revenge. Steadfast revenge is distinctive in that its motivating resentment flows directly from a considered care for the victim. This avenger sees vengeance as a defense of the victim's value, an insistence that the victim must not be overlooked or ignored. Consider the following passage from Palestinian psychiatrist Eyad Sarraj, who describes the mindset of suicide bombers in his *Time* article, "Why We Blow Ourselves Up":

> What propels people into such action is a long history of humiliation and a desire for revenge that every Arab harbors. Since the establishment of Israel in 1948 and the resultant uprooting of Palestinians, a deep-seated feeling of shame has taken root in the Arab psyche. Shame is the most painful emotion in the Arab culture, producing the feeling that one is unworthy to live. The honorable Arab is the one who refuses to suffer shame and dies in dignity.[91]

Those Sarraj describes have aligned their hearts with their people, place, and culture; they understand themselves in light of their loss. Sarraj goes on to recount an interview with a Palestinian man seeking martyrdom. He writes that the man "was burning with a desire for revenge. He was a tearful witness, at the age of six, to his father's beating by Israeli soldiers. He would never forget seeing his father taken away, bleeding from the nose."[92] The connection between the son's love for his father and his father's suffering are vital to understanding what revenge *means* to the son. What he wants to achieve through revenge is something for his father. He wants to bring new meaning to what he endured by causally connecting it to the offenders' destruction. This of course does not include undoing his father's suffering; the son cannot change

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[90] Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor*, Reprint edition (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1998), 188.
[91] Eyad Sarraj, "Why We Blow Ourselves Up," *Time*, April 8, 2002, http://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,1002161,00.html.
[92] Sarraj.

the past. But like the mountaineer who overcame her injury and in doing so integrated it into a story with greater triumph, so the son wishes to defeat what his father endured by transforming it within a greater context.

Though perhaps clearest when taken on behalf of another, this is not essential to steadfast revenge as I conceive of it. The steadfast avenger is filled with anger because the offender's destruction has brutalized something she loved. Whether against her community, her family, or herself, the offense calls for an answer. Failure to respond communicates passivity and, worse, a lack of care for what or who was damaged. In this way the victim's proper love for her own life may cause her to retaliate in steadfast revenge, refusing to stand silent in the face of grievous mistreatment. Her revenge aims to vindicate in the face of mistreatment and, in that way, bring a measure of redemption to her loss.

For the rest of this project, when I discuss revenge, I am referring only to steadfast revenge and only for grievous offenses (a category I introduce later on). I will set aside instinctual, hateful, and transactional revenge from the discussion completely. There are several reasons for excluding these other varieties. Instinctual revenge, *ex hypothesi*, does not stem from a reflective, intentional state of mind. Though understandable to the extent that its motivating rage is understandable, instinctual revenge nevertheless is not the result of considered judgments. For this reason, it is questionable whether, when inflicting instinctual revenge, a person is acting rationally rather than on impulse. (This is precisely what makes "boiling blood" a form of extenuating circumstances.) Because the avenger's agency is in a diminished state, instinctual revenge is particularly murky, and might not even count as vengeance in every case. As the most interesting defense of revenge would defend a fully intentional avenger, we may set instinctual revenge aside.

Hateful revenge may be excluded for a different reason: it's too difficult to defend. Those involved in hateful revenge want to hurt an enemy without much regard for proportionality, or even the expectation that the vengeance will be worth the cost. The avenger likely knows that his actions are wrong, and his community casts shame on his behavior. Malice drives this avenger, rather than a sense of justice or a desire for reparations. Hateful vengeance is not seriously defensible even by the lights of the one enacting it, so, I will not attempt a defense, excluding it from further discussion.

We can likewise, and finally, leave aside transactional vengeance. The problem with transactional revenge is that it is perhaps *too easy* to justify. When we look at the culture of medieval Icelanders, can there be any doubt that they had every reason to take vengeance? The Icelander would be shamed, bullied, and defenseless without revenge. He cannot conceive of himself with respect knowing that he has allowed his dignity to be diminished. This is the shape of honor cultures; forgiveness for serious offenses is not within the horizons of those who inhabit them. This is why even Nussbaum, a vocal opponent of revenge, admits that revenge could make practical sense when it aims to return or retain status.[93] Transactional revenge has a lot going for it. Yet, the trouble is that what makes transactional revenge seem so reasonable has the potential to be external to its practice.[94] The Icelander will be sanctioned by his community if he fails to take revenge; therefore, when he takes revenge, is he taking it because he cares about the aims of vengeance, or because he wants to avoid sanction? Alternatively, suppose he wants honor and does not particularly care about revenge. He retaliates only as a means to an end. By some accounts, this does not even count as revenge. Uniacke suggests, for example, that revenge

[93] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, and Justice* (New York: OUP USA, 2016), 31.
[94] I borrow this phrasing from Chapter 13 of Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

"derives satisfaction from another person's suffering, not for any instrumental value of the suffering, but just for the sake of the suffering."[95] This condition is too restrictive, but something in its ballpark is surely true. Taking revenge for purely mercenary reasons is no longer to take revenge; as French remarks, bounty hunters are not avengers.[96] Thus, to the extent external factors make transactional revenge reasonable, to that extent it might not be revenge. What we want to keep our focus on is revenge which is unmuddied by external considerations. To stay at the heart of vengeance and its motivations, therefore, we will set aside transactional revenge as well.[97]

There is an exception, however. Suppose we consider a case of transactional revenge where the revenge norms of the society have been wholly internalized. In such a case, the avenger does not take revenge in order to procure the desired outcome of honor, but rather sees revenge as constitutive of honor. For him there is no pulling apart the two. He values being an honorable man intrinsically, and since, for him, honor includes taking revenge on those who deserve it, this means he intrinsically values revenge. Thus, his motivations for taking revenge are not external to the logic of revenge; he desires to take revenge as an expression of a form of life. So, perhaps we ought to include this specific form of transactional revenge in our considerations. But in fact, this kind of revenge is another way of describing what I've called steadfast revenge. It is revenge which acts not merely out of wrath, hatred, or gain, but also from a sincere desire to preserve something which the avenger sees as good. Acknowledging that the

[95] Uniacke, "Why Is Revenge Wrong?," 64.
[96] French, *The Virtues of Vengeance*, 80.
[97] Setting aside transactional revenge forestalls worries about "uninteresting" defenses of revenge. See Elster, "Norms of Revenge," 1990, 872; Alan Hamlin, "Rational Revenge," *Ethics* 101 (January 1, 1991): 378, https://doi.org/10.1086/293294.

boundaries I've erected by taxonomy are porous, let us proceed to objections against revenge conceived only as the steadfast variety.

V. Two Objections against Revenge

Steadfast revenge is the only kind of vengeance remaining in our discussion (I drop the 'steadfast' onward for ease of discourse). Revenge of this kind, recall, is intentional, measured, and flows from anger on behalf of whom or what the avenger loves. It involves believing that the offense has damaged the victim in an unignorable way, and that therefore vengeance is called for. This is the revenge I aim to show has the possibility of being justified.[98]

With a more focused view of revenge, I will spend time presenting the two objections I mentioned in this chapter's introduction more fully. The first argument condemns revenge on the basis of the *avenger's* impotence, the other critiques resentment on the basis of the *offender's* impotence. After providing an initial summary of both objections as they appear in the literature, I explicate them by examining and rejecting potential avenues of response.

Objection One: The Uselessness of Backward-Looking Behavior

The first, simpler argument against revenge parallels a familiar objection to retributive judicial punishment. On this line of thought, there is purpose only in punishing criminals for forward-looking reasons like deterrence, restraint, and reform. The wrongdoer's suffering should bring about concrete outcomes that benefit society. But punishment purely for the sake of retribution has no such benefits, or at least, has them only incidentally. It is punishment for

[98] It is worth emphasizing the categorical nature of objections to revenge: all forms of revenge are unjustified. Noticing the universality forestalls an accusation of equivocation. Because opponents of revenge make no substantive distinction between varieties of revenge, one might worry that I've unfairly substituted their general meaning of revenge with my own, very specific meaning (steadfast revenge). But because these writers' claim against revenge is universal in scope—they claim that all forms of revenge are unjustified—there is no problem of equivocation.

punishment's sake. Those who advocate purely retributive punishments based on desert seek to balance the scales of justice, thinking retributive punishment makes things 'even.' But this, critics argue, is bad thinking. Past wrongs cannot be made right by new cruelty toward the offender. Call this rough critique the Uselessness Objection.

Opponents of judicial retribution on the grounds of the Uselessness Objection are, understandably, even more opposed to retribution in extra-judicial contexts. If retribution is pointless when carried out by the government, where it has the best chance of being impartial and restrained, it is all the more so in the context of personal vengeance. For this reason, writers condemn revenge in harshly critical terms. Nussbaum demands of the would-be avenger, "Why would an intelligent person think that inflicting pain on the offender assuages or cancels her own pain? There seems to be some type of magical thinking going on."[99] She argues that we must recognize our satisfaction at 'just deserts' is a regrettable product of our evolutionary pre-history rather than rational thinking.[100] Citing Nussbaum, Paul Hughes agrees that revenge must involve irrational beliefs.[101] He writes:

> Anger that aims at revenge, vengeance, or "getting even" is irrational, because anger thus directed merely creates more, not less, pain and suffering… Thinking that retaliatory anger somehow rights previous wrongs is… wishful thinking that ignores the very logic of retaliation.[102]

Revenge and its motivations involve the error of believing that vengeance, which is destructive, could lead to good. Further, even though it is logically conceivable for revenge to happen to lead to a good outcome, Kit Christenson argues that vengeance, in practice, is so pointlessly damaging that we can say in advance that no one is ever epistemically justified in believing

[99] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 24.
[100] Nussbaum, 24–25.
[101] Paul M. Hughes, "Two Cheers for Forgiveness (and Even Fewer for Revenge)," *Philosophia* 44, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 379, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-015-9671-x.
[102] Hughes, 379.

vengeance will ever produce more good than alternative choices—and so revenge is "always rationally indefensible."[103]

Elster suggests that there is something irrational more broadly about sacrificing for the past, arguing that the fully rational agent is "not moved by backward-looking considerations."[104] He writes:

> People can act in a rational, outcome-oriented manner, choosing the best means to achieve their ends. Prima facie, this motivation is incompatible with revenge behavior… [Revenge] involves only costs and risks, no benefits. Rational individuals follow the principles of letting bygones be bygones, cutting their losses and ignoring sunk costs, whereas the avenger typically refuses to forget an affront or harm to which he has been exposed.[105]

If Elster is right, the entire idea of acting for the sake of past losses is always irrational, and doubly so when such behavior exposes oneself to great risks, as may be in the case in revenge. This position has parallels in Nussbaum's account. For example, in her view gratitude involves irrational payback motivations similar to revenge. However, unlike revenge, the payback of gratitude results in a good consequence, so she suggests that "Even if the [grateful] person benefited others because of some incoherent fantasy, we should probably say 'So much the better.'"[106] Nussbaum goes on to further justify gratitude by appeal to its useful "forward-looking function" in building reciprocal intimate relationships.[107] Elsewhere, she argues that gratitude does not necessarily commit one to the "magical thinking" of payback because the grateful person "usually thinks either that [expressing her gratitude] will promote future goods or that it is

[103] Kit R. Christensen, *Revenge and Social Conflict*, 1st edition (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 164.
[104] Elster, "Norms of Revenge," 1990, 874.
[105] Elster, 862.
[106] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 113.
[107] Nussbaum, 113.

just a nice thing to do."[108] Even when it would produce altruistic behavior, our reasons are justified by appeal to the future, not the past.

Notice that the Uselessness Objection cuts more deeply than the claim that revenge is immoral. Rather, its advocates are claiming that revenge is stupid. It costs much, accomplishes nothing, and commits the avenger to the magical mindset that one's present behavior can influence the past.

Objection Two: The Untouchability of Human Value

The second objection goes like this. When an offender harms her victim, the victim feels that this mistreatment diminishes his value as a person. His resentment, accusing anger, serves to protest the mistreatment and reaffirm his own value. The victim's resentment might manifest in taking revenge against the offender, making her suffer for what she did to him. This, the avenger might believe, vindicates him and restores his value as a person. But in reality, the value of a person is objective and absolute; it cannot be diminished by mistreatment. Thus, the motivation behind revenge rests on a mistake about human value. If the would-be avenger recognized his mistake, he would realize vengeance is useless for his aims. Indeed, if he were fully confident in the untouchability of his own value, the victim likely would not have reason to even resent the offender.

Call this reasoning the Untouchability Objection. Numerous authors give arguments like it, or otherwise endorse its premises.[109] Hampton, for instance, suggests that "resentment is… an

[108] Nussbaum, 161. Though I do not address this claim directly later, I find it perplexingly out of line with ordinary practice. If I save a friend's life and he cannot give me any reason for expressing gratitude other than 'I thought it would be good for our relationship' or 'I just thought it would be nice,' then I will think he is either playing games or else lacks the capacity for thankfulness. Gratitude finds its justification in the past, not the future.
[109] See also Nussbaum, 26.

emotion which betrays weakness. Resenters mount a defense against a challenge to their value and rank to which they are in danger of succumbing."[110] If the victim really knew her absolute value, she would not feel in any way threatened by mistreatment, and therefore would have no need to mount a defense using resentment. This is why Michele Moody-Adams suggests that forgiveness, which involves addressing resentment, involves the difficult task of detaching "one's sense of worth as a person from the wrong that one has endured."[111] Holmgren agrees: "If [the victim] truly respects herself, she will be secure in these judgments and will not feel threatened by the wrongdoer's confused attitudes."[112] Marilyn McCord Adams gives a Christian version of this argument, suggesting that the confident believer has no need for resentment, hatred, or anger because the offender's "false claims are decisively refuted for the victim now by his/her experience of Divine love."[113] Resentment is a defense mechanism for the victim's sense of self-worth which is replaced in the spiritually mature by a clearer, objective view of one's absolute value.

Importantly, no defender of the Untouchability Objections claims that resentment is always wrong. It is usual to give the qualifier that, despite the weakness of resentment, it has its uses in non-ideal cases. Trudy Govier, for example, suggests it is better for a victim with low self-esteem to feel resentment than to feel that the offense was deserved.[114] Nevertheless, we should all aspire to be the sort of confident individuals who have no need for resentment. In this

[110] Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 148.
[111] Michele Moody-Adams, "The Enigma of Forgiveness," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 49, no. 1–2 (2015): 168, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-014-9467-4.
[112] Margaret R. Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 67.
[113] Marilyn Adams, "Forgiveness: A Christian Model," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 1991): 297, https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19918319.
[114] Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 53–54; Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 2014, 67; Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 60; Adams, "Forgiveness," July 1, 1991, 297.

vein, Charles Griswold identifies Hampton's version of the Untouchability Objection with a historical lineage he calls perfectionism.[115] Perfectionism, he argues, has as its adherents Aristotle, the Stoics, and, more recently, Nietzsche; each saw resentment as a vice.[116] The great-souled man, the sage, and the superman, are impervious to the threat of insult. Their confidence in their own status does not allow for any vulnerabilities at the hands of others. This seems to be what advocates of the Untouchability Objection have in mind as their ideal. Resentment may be necessary in non-ideal cases, but we should aim to become the sort of exemplary, perfected agents who either do not act on resentment or lack the emotion altogether.

VI. Clarifying the Avenue of Response

These two objections against revenge are related in their rejection of resentment. According to the Uselessness Objection, the fully rational agent lacks purely backward-looking motivations, and thus she will see no point in engaging in resentment or revenge. On the Untouchability Objection, the fully rational agent cannot have her value threatened by offenses. She therefore has no need to bolster her self-esteem through resentment. Since resentment is the motivation for vengeance, she likewise has no use for revenge. Thus, both arguments find nothing worthwhile in resentment and revenge for those who live fully rational lives.

There are several responses one could give to this pair of objections that are in some ways compelling, but which I will not endorse. These responses are worth discussing, however, as doing so clarifies what's most centrally at issue and highlights what a successful response should look like.

Identify Incidental Benefits of Revenge

[115] Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.
[116] Griswold, 1–19.

The first defense one might make is to point to potential positive outcomes of revenge. For example, one might argue that revenge has a deterring effect on future offenses. If those around the victim know he is likely to retaliate if they wrong him or his, they may be less likely to risk offending him. In this way, revenge might serve an important social function.

The problem with this line of thought is that it undermines the centrality of resentment as the motivation behind revenge by identifying a good which is not internal to the logic of vengeance. If the victim retaliates for money, or to improve society, or because she wants to deter future offenses, then she is, to that extent, not motivated by resentment. This kind of retaliation muddies the waters by counting as a form of transactional revenge, which we set aside in §IV. As I noted there, revenge motivated by incidental goods might not count as revenge at all. Thus, we can set aside the 'incidental benefits' response. A fully satisfying defense should explain the point of resentment as a motivation for revenge, not show how a person exhibiting retaliatory behavior might sometimes have motivations which are mutually exclusive with revenge.

Reject the Rationality Requirement

Murphy is among those who defend resentment-motivated revenge directly. He suggests that the satisfaction of vindicating the victim's self-respect is the point of revenge.[117] He writes:

> The vindictive person wants to get revenge and no doubt will often feel much better (having asserted and protected the value of the self) when such revenge is realized. That just is its point. To say it is pointless only because it does not have a point of which the critic of vindictiveness would approve is to the beg the question at issue.[118]

I do not dispute that avengers "often feel much better" after taking revenge (though this is open to empirical critique). But if we want to understand the point of revenge, this isn't enough.

[117] Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 22–23.
[118] Jeffrie Murphy, "Two Cheers for Vindictiveness," *Punishment & Society* 2, no. 2 (April 1, 2000): 133.

Emotions are subject to rational evaluation, and thus a full explanation of revenge should involve not just the observation that revenge produces a positive feeling, but also whether it is reasonable for a person to have *that* feeling associated with *that* behavior.[119] If an adult flees in fear from a fly, he does not fully explain himself by saying, "Reducing my fear just is the point of running away." There seems to be nothing to fear whether close or distant to the creature, so describing his feelings doesn't explain why he has them. Likewise, we should wonder whether there is a point to feeling satisfaction over revenge.

Is the vindicated satisfaction of the victim irrational? Proponents of the Untouchability Objection seem to think so: self-respect ought to reflect one's value as a person, and one's value as a person cannot be influenced by mistreatment. Vengeful satisfaction, on this view, can only accomplish something where the victim has already made a mistake about the source of his value. The victim's satisfaction ends up looking like the entomophobic adult. Yes, given that fear makes him unhappy, we can identify the reduction of unhappiness as a useful outcome of fleeing from a bug. But were he more rational in the first place, there would be no link between his happiness and proximity to insects. Similarly, opponents of revenge argue, vengeful satisfaction assumes within the victim a prior, irrational link between his treatment and his self-respect.

French responds in Murphy's favor by denying that the emotions behind revenge must have a rational basis.[120] He argues that the feeling of vindication, of restored self-respect and honor, is a basic part of our moral-emotional perspective as human beings. Thus, "it is constitutive of who we are that we react with anger, hatred, disdain, disapprobation, and hostility to what we regard as wrongful harm-causing."[121] We cannot get back behind these reactive

[119] I am committed by this position to cognitivism about emotions, though space prevents a defense.
[120] French, *The Virtues of Vengeance*, 82–101.
[121] French, 96.

attitudes, French presses, because their conceptual basis is given to us by our nature rather than discovered by the intellect. There is no need, therefore, to rationalize the link between satisfaction and vengeance—we must take it as given.

I doubt opponents of revenge will find French's Humean strategy very convincing. The fact that these writers are able to condemn the hostile emotions he considers so basic perhaps calls into question their conceptual fundamentality. At any rate, regardless of whether French is correct in his defense, I will assume for the sake of non-partisanship that he is not. I thus set aside defenses which consider retributive emotions too fundamental for analysis. A defense of revenge would be most widely acceptable if it could illuminate a rational basis for the logic of vengeance, not explain away the need for one.

Defend Non-Ideal Living

Finally, one might question whether the Untouchability Objection really is a problem for those of us living in the non-ideal world. As I've pointed out, advocates of the objection already make clear that they see no problem with resentment in cases where it is needed to maintain the victim's self-esteem. It is true, they argue, that offenses can never in fact lower a person's value, but most of us are not fully rational agents who can totally resist the error of believing our value depends on our treatment. Perhaps the error is psychologically ineliminable, and the best humans can do is resist and reduce it. Either way, even if the ideal agent would not resent, resentment is no special evil for the rest of us.

This way of receiving the Untouchability Objection concedes much. It defends resentment by turning it into a crutch for those with self-esteem problems, or a psychological weakness some may have no way to remove. If we accept it, our ideal exemplars must look very different. Consider Tibetan monk Lopon-la, whom Holmgren discusses as providing an ideal

response to wrongdoing. Lopon-la was unjustly imprisoned and tortured for 18 years, yet "never lost his compassion and never held an attitude of resentment toward his offenders."[122] This ideal suggests that we each should be trying to become the sort of persons who never resent because we are each so secure in the knowledge of our untouchable value. We should aim to become people for whom resentment is absent or impotent, and thus for whom revenge is useless.

If this counts as a justification of resentment and revenge, it is a fairly minimal one. It would be a much stronger defense to find a place for anger that is not a concession to imperfection. The justification I attempt, therefore, will aim to give a home to resentment even in the life of fully rational exemplars. [123]

Sketching a Formal Solution

In order to identify the most compelling kind of defense against the Uselessness and Untouchability Arguments, I've ruled out a number of responses which either concede too much or are too partisan. Using these constraints, we can sketch a formal solution.

A satisfying defense against the Uselessness Objection must show how resentment and revenge pair rational means with rational aims. To do this, the defense should identify some goal that can be accomplished by revenge which is internal to the logic of vengeance. It must also illuminate how the avenger can rationally value the achievement of that goal. Finally, it should show, contra the Untouchability Objection, how even a fully rational human has at least *prima facie* reason to resent and take revenge.

VII. Responding to the Uselessness Objection

[122] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 2014, 32.

[123] This is not to say that, if my defense is successful, we should find nothing admirable about someone like Lopon-la; he exhibited tremendous commitment to his faith and self-control over his emotions. Nevertheless, one can commend his virtues without believing that, overall, his response to wrongdoing is the ideal toward which we ought to aspire.

The rest of this chapter is a response to the two objections presented in the previous section. In brief, I argue that the Uselessness Objection can be answered through a narrative conception of suffering and redemption, and the Untouchability Objection can be met by analyzing the narrative structure of resentment and other historical emotions.

Horrendous Evils

I stated previously that my discussion will be limited to revenge for grievous offenses. My rationale is that I want to examine revenge at its most justifiable, and our narratives are generally resistant to petty wrongdoing. Daily annoyances and minor slights come with living, and we are fortunately resilient against letting them spoil the episodes of our lives. Provided that my life is going minimally well, the mundanely negative parts need not make it into my internal narrative (in fact it's likely virtuous that they do not). Small evils, like a rude comment from a stranger, are therefore less able to cause our stories to fray or unravel. There's not, in that case, as much point in revenge.

Grievous wrongdoing cannot be overlooked or ignored. Evils of this kind are catastrophic to the victim's life, and have the potential to be a defining moment in their story. Marilyn McCord Adams lists in this class physical torture, intentional psychological disintegration, sexual violence, and betrayal by one's closest loyalties.[124] She writes:

> Horrendous evils seem prima facie, not only to balance off but to engulf any positive value in the participant's life with which they are not organically connected. In most (if not all cases) their destructive power reaches beyond their concrete disvalue (such as the pain and material deprivation they involve), into the deep structure of the person's framework of meaning-making, seemingly to defeat the individual's value as a person, to degrade him/her to subhuman status.[125]

[124] Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Cornell Paperbacks First Printing edition (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 26.
[125] Adams, 27.

Grievous evil is horrifying because it ruins a life. The victim is torn away from the good by which he oriented himself; his life can no longer grow to the fullness he had hoped for. The offense reaches destructively into the victim's story in two directions. For the past, it makes his striving pointless. His aspirations failed to come to fruition. As he looks to the future, it will be difficult to have hope. He will limp on without the form of life he loved, remembering his loss.

We find something like this in the story of Jean Améry, a Jewish intellectual who suffered horrifically under the Nazi regime. Routinely tortured and abused, he was held at multiple concentration camps, including Auschwitz. After the war he published several works on his trauma and anger; Améry's work is a primary subject of *Resentment's Virtue*, Brudholm's defense of the refusal to forgive.[126] In his reflections on resentment, Améry writes that

> It nails every one of us onto the cross of his ruined past. Absurdly, it demands that the irreversible be turned around, that the event be undone. [It] blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future. I know that the time-sense of the person trapped in it is twisted around, dis-ordered, if you wish, for it desires two impossible things: regression into the past and nullification of what happened…[127]

Améry describes himself as caught in a backward-looking, but ultimately futile stance of wishing to redeem his past. He cannot look to the future while his anger remains, and his anger remains because he cannot see any way to move on, heal, or forget without giving the wrongdoing he endured a legitimate place in his life.[128] From his perspective, his story is broken and absurd. And so he writes of clarity about his suffering: "I do not have it today, and I hope that I never will. Clarification would amount to disposal, settlement of the case… Nothing is resolved, no conflict

[126] Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, xiii.
[127] Brudholm, 128. Améry actually discusses "*resentiments*" rather than 'resentment,' the significance of which features in Brudholm's exposition (82-103); the distinction does not make a difference to our present discussion.
[128] Brudholm, 151.

is settled."[129] His life was forcibly oriented around the cruelty and malice he received, and it would never again have the right shape.

I am suggesting that it is a whole life that is threatened by grievous wrongs. To use G.E. Moore's language, the life is threatened not on the whole but *as a whole*.[130] We cannot merely identify different moments of time at which the victim suffers because of the offense. We crave, as Taylor argues, to fulfill our aspirations, to mold ourselves into a form of life we see as good and beautiful—even if we know only partially what that life looks like.[131] When someone feels that this has all been ripped away, what is left of him? He cannot form a narrative of his life that orders it and gives it direction for the future. He cannot, therefore, understand himself within the structure of a meaningful life story.

Horrendous Wrongs and Social Meaning

There is more to the picture of suffering. The kind of disintegrating, distorting evil I've been discussing might occur apart from wrongdoing; nature and accident can rob just as savagely as people. Yet, agential evils are worse. There is something distinctively odious about wrongdoing, as distinguished from natural evil, because it asserts power over human self-conception.

Every human being is vulnerable to grievous wrongs, and this vulnerability stems not only from being embodied, but also from being social, narrative creatures. Life stories are never

[129] Brudholm, 72.
[130] George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethics* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1922), Chapter One.
[131] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992), 41–52.

fully independent autobiographies, "none of us are ever more than coauthors of our own lives."[132] Our internal narrative is constructed within the horizons of our community. The meaning of social roles and their proper fulfillment is provided and delimited by how they are modeled in one's community. We use these roles to understand ourselves, or, more deeply, to assemble ourselves. Explicating a Confucian account of identity in relation to one's family, Amy Olberding writes: "Personal identity is an achievement of processes that embed an individual in a nexus of care and companionship with others. Who I am confesses its origins in who I am with and to others: a daughter, a friend, a neighbor."[133] Our roles within our community receive intelligibility and direction socially, and these are essential building blocks for understanding ourselves. Olberding goes further to suggest, that therefore "bereavement will register not simply as a loss of another but as a loss of self."[134] If we understand ourselves in and through relations with others, their loss will lead to a sense of dislocation. I presently know who I am as a son to my father and mother, and I do not know who I will be without them; that parentless son will have to navigate self-understanding without their landmarks. Olberding concludes, therefore, that a loss of someone fundamental to our view of our place in the world can produce a "rupture in self-understanding."[135]

Though it is up to us how we will navigate within the horizons set for us by and with others, we depend on our community's concepts and values to make sense of ourselves and our life stories. The medieval Icelander cannot consider himself anything other than weak and shameful if he fails to take revenge, for what it means to be a good father, husband, and citizen is

[132] Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Intelligibility of Action," in *Rationality, Relativism, and the Human Sciences*, ed. Joseph Margolis, Michael Krausz, and Richard M. Burian (M. Nijhoff, 1986), 75.
[133] Amy Olberding, "I Know Not 'Seems': Grief for Parents in the Analects," in *Mortality in Traditional Chinese Thought*, ed. Philip J. Ivanhoe and Amy Olberding (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 163, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/1906.
[134] Olberding, "I Know Not 'Seems': Grief for Parents in the Analects."
[135] Olberding, 168.

to repay wrongs with violence. The internal narrative is necessarily shaped within the context of social narratives. There is no possibility of excusing oneself from the influence of social meaning without exiting human community.

Further, there is, within the individual, a desire for parity between the internal narrative and the surrounding social narratives concerning her; she desires for her view of the world and herself to be accepted by others. This desire is fused to the desire for real friendship. We want to be known as we believe we are, in our historical fullness. When there is a clash between narratives, there is potential for great pain. This is nowhere truer than in victimhood. When Améry began publishing essays describing his refusal to forgive or forget in the aftermath of the war, he was met with public hostility.[136] From his perspective, cheap forgiveness and pragmatic reconciliation were being used to allow German society to move on from the Holocaust with as little disruption as possible. As Améry describes it, the German citizenry just wanted to forget the sins of the Nazis, and this made him and his unforgiveness an irritation. Améry insists that the man of resentment like him "cannot join in the unisonous peace chorus all around him, which cheerfully proposes: not backward let us look but forward, to a better, common future!"[137] Society's dismissal was excruciating. His story was about the past and the evil it contained, while the country's story was forgiveness and progress; within their narrative, Améry was a disturber of the peace.

Community shapes the meaning of an offense and how the victim understands himself in the aftermath. This helps to explain the feeling that there is something more noble about resentment and revenge on behalf of another than on behalf of oneself (a point underdiscussed by opponents of vengeance). Resentment on behalf of another communicates to the victim that he

[136] Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 69–78.
[137] Brudholm, 104.

has not been left behind or disregarded; his story matters to those who care for him. Likewise, an avenger for another, usually at some risk, aligns herself with the victim, insisting that his anger reflects the right way of seeing the world. In fighting for a close victim, there is a sense in which the avenger fights for herself. By pursuing vengeance, she acknowledges that her relationship with the victim is an important part of who she is. Their stories are intertwined, rising and falling together.

Redeeming Evil in One's Life Story

In the philosophical literature on the problem of evil, Roderick Chisholm proposes a defeating requirement for any viable defense.[138] The idea is that, for God to address the suffering endured by a creature, redemption cannot come by the addition of some greater, unrelated consequence that outweighs the bad. Instead, the good which God has in mind should transform the creature's suffering so that its evilness is defeated *for that creature*. Adams, following Chisholm, suggests that this kind of transformation depends on integrating the suffering into the whole in a way that gives it new meaning.[139] Eleonore Stump argues, along this line, that God intends that all suffering bring that creature closer to God, and, since God is the true fulfillment of all of a creature's desires, God intends the creature's suffering to become a path to what she cares about most.[140] For such philosophers, evil is defeated by connecting in the right way to what the sufferer values.

This insight into the connection between redemption and defeating evil applies to human lives: We redeem grievous evils through integration, not compensation. Truly defeating an evil

[138] Roderick M. Chisholm, "The Defeat of Good and Evil," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 42 (1968): 21–38, https://doi.org/10.2307/3130021.
[139] Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*.
[140] Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative And The Problem Of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2012).

in one's past requires transforming it. For example, suppose a young adult is thrown out by parents on whom she was financially dependent, making her destitute. She spends years diligently working low wage jobs, eventually becoming a successful businesswoman. She now has far more resources at her disposal than she ever did in her parents' home. Nevertheless, she remains emotionally wounded by their abandonment. Will it do any good to point out that she has much greater material wealth as a result of their abandonment? Likely not. The causal connection between the abandonment and the wealth is not the right kind to bring about redemption. It is not enough that she has incidentally gained some great goods (security, wealth, independence), or even that their wrongdoing was in a sense the cause of her gaining those goods. What is needed, rather than compensation, is an integration of the past evil into a greater whole which transforms it. For example, if she later comes to see her previous struggle as a necessary component of her journey back to reconciliation with her parents, then the period of loneliness may be subsumed into a wider story which she values.

Transformations of this kind are at home in a narrative account of human lives. C.I. Lewis argues that experiences in our life require the context of the whole, and that attempting to evaluate single moments apart from the whole, apart from the direction of the life, would be no more fruitful than evaluating "a piece of music from hearing it played backwards."[141] Context is transformative. It is for this reason that "struggle can be blessed with the foretaste of achievement, and the good we set our hearts on can be sweeter because they have been won."[142] What had been a bitter, toiling experience at one point may be transformed into triumph when it

[141] Clarence Irving Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation, by Clarence Irving Lewis.*, Paul Carus Lectures 7 (La Salle, Ill.: The Open court publishing company, 1950), 496.
[142] Lewis, 498.

is overcome. In the best cases, no regret or unhappiness remains at the pain endured—it is now only good.

Because of the social connectedness of our narratives, transformations of this kind can occur through the actions of others. Suppose a father was not able to pursue higher education, and this motivates him to work hard so that college is a financially viable option for his daughter. When she completes her schooling, he will feel satisfaction that she has achieved the education denied him. There is more to the story of his own education than we find in the bare facts of his life; his story finds its conclusion in his daughter's. Why should this be? Why should what happens to somebody else have any implication for the meaning of one's own life? It is because, in this case, their lives provide mutually informing context. We cannot fully understand the father without the daughter, nor the daughter without the father. Because the daughter's story is part of her father's, her achievements can address his past. Perhaps some regret will remain, but if he identifies with his daughter's achievement, it will not have the same sting as before. His prior disappointment has been integrated into his life in a new way; he understands himself within the context of this new ending. This illustrates the way in which our vulnerability to others creates the possibility of redemption through their lives. Sometimes this means something positive for both parties, as in the case of the first-generation college student. In other cases, like vengeance, redemption is harsh and costly. Revenge seeks to redeem the victim's life by integrating his suffering into a wider story; a story in which the offender is made to feel regret and pain for what he did.

Changing the Past

I've argued that evil can influence the meaning of a life story beyond the moments it occurs in, and that redemption aims to counteract evil through transformative integration.

Together, these elements provide the tools to address the Uselessness Objection. Giving commentary on David Velleman's work on the connection between death and a narrative life, John Fischer writes:

> Death can be bad for a person insofar as it deprives him of past goods as well as future goods: it cuts off the accumulation of momentary well-being, and it can prevent us from writing a better ending to our story (and thus vindicating our pasts).[143]

The possibility of achieving "past goods" is right at home in a narrative conception of human lives. Recall that we identified two requirements for a satisfying defense against objections to revenge: (i) we must show what revenge accomplishes, and (ii) why it is reasonable for the avenger to value that accomplishment. If our lives are rightly understood as narratives, then we are able to change the meaning of the past through recontextualization, satisfying (i). A victim might suffer over a past wrong because the offender got away with it, but once she is punished he may feel that the offense is transformed through integration into a new story. Her past suffering is not merely balanced off by some new good, such as spiteful satisfaction, but may actually be defeated by no longer counting as an evil for her. She may, like the mountaineer who prevails over injury, come to see what she suffered as merely adding to triumph. The good, therefore, that revenge aims to accomplish, is redemption of the past.

What of condition (ii)? Is it reasonable to desire redemption? If redemption is a way of acquiring past goods, then it is hard to see why these should be treated any differently, in our evaluation of reasons, than future goods. Perhaps one might object that there is no reason for our present happiness to be linked to what happened in the past, so the desire for redemption is irrational. But this is just to reject a narrative conception of human lives and evil. When suffering

[143] John Martin Fischer, *Our Stories: Essays on Life, Death, and Free Will*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 152; J. David Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72, no. 1 (1991): 48–77, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0114.1991.tb00410.x.

reaches into the past, why wouldn't we care about healing it? Caring about past goods is another way of caring about the coherence of one's story—and that is another way of caring about oneself as a person.

VIII. Responding to the Untouchability Objection

Suppose opponents of revenge find the previous section's response to the Uselessness Objection convincing. The Untouchability Objection still looms. Doesn't the very need for redemption demonstrate the victim's weakness? Wouldn't the fully rational agent take comfort in her absolute value as a person rather than in the particulars of her story? In this section, I respond that the Untouchability Objection rests on unsatisfactory assumptions about the importance of universality, impartiality, and victims. I argue that resentment and revenge fit coherently within the framework of historical emotions, and that each accomplishes the important task of tending loyally to the victim's story. I show, in line with the requirements of our formal solution, how even the fully rational human has *prima facie* reason to feel resentment and want revenge.

The Particularity of Victims

My central contention is that proponents of the Untouchability Objection give the wrong kind of attention to the victim. Though they affirm that we ought to extend all sorts of future-oriented protections to him, their failure to see how the past matters ends up making the victim dispensable from their considerations.

Consider: If resentment and revenge are mistakes, how do opponents of revenge suggest we respond to grievous mistreatment, whether directed toward ourselves or those near to us? They enjoin us to respond with future-oriented, productive behavior. Govier, for instance,

suggests that rejecting revenge does not mean embracing passivity; a rape victim might, for example, "help raise funds for a women's shelter, try to get her case before the courts, or campaign for better lighting in unsafe areas."[144] It is telling that judicial justice appears in the midst of Govier's list of action items merely as one item among many. This is a natural implication of rejecting resentment and vengeance as worthwhile motivations. After all, what should the victim, or the victim's friends, aim to accomplish by taking the offender to court? Not punishment for its own sake, for that would constitute using the state to enact revenge. Not public vindication of the victim's value, for she should know that her value can't be altered either by the offender or by a court's ruling. Perhaps they are motivated to restrain the offender so that he cannot harm the victim again? In some cases, certainly, but not in those where protecting the victim is no longer an issue because, for example, the offender has moved to another state. In that case, the only legitimate motivations remaining for taking the rapist to court would be those aimed at prevention of future offenses against others. The court could restrain and reform the offender so that he doesn't offend again. And that aim *does* belong unceremoniously on a list with "help raise money for a women's shelter" and "campaign for better lighting in unsafe areas" because they are all equally unfocused on the rapist's victim, instead aiming to manage potential future offenses.

By dismissing resentment and revenge as backward-looking and endorsing only productive, forward-looking responses to wrongdoing, it seems that all essential reference to the victim has fallen out of their response.[145] Certainly there will be some cases where the forward-looking response has something to say about the victim; theft should be undone, for instance, and

[144] Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 2002, 12.
[145] French makes a parallel complaint against deontological moral theories, arguing that such frameworks tend to make victims "morally immaterial" by identifying immorality with a violation of duty rather than the violation of another. French, *The Virtues of Vengeance*, 184–85.

offenders removed from close proximity to the victim. But in many cases restitution will not be possible and there is no danger of a repeat offense.[146] Reference to the victim, in such cases, becomes nonessential to our response to wrongdoing.

We come now to the crux of the matter. Nussbaum suggests that

> If [a would-be avenger] cares about rationality, she will soon see little point in payback, and she will shift, very likely, to… focusing on creating future welfare. This will be so whether she focuses on the particular offense and offender or whether, as often happens, she focuses on the class of similar offenses. For a corollary of taking [this path] is likely to be a tendency to focus on the general rather the particular.[147]

A clear-headed, productive response to wrongdoing, in Nussbaum's view, leads toward abstracting away from the actual case of wrongdoing before us. This particular offense against this particular victim begins to drop out of view; rather than focusing on the victim, the central concern becomes dispassionate management of the offender.

Something has gone amiss. However we respond to wrongdoing, surely the victim ought to have an indispensable position in it. This can be true only in an account which is open to backward-looking considerations, insisting that what was done to the victim in the past needs to be addressed, and even changed.

Historical Emotions

In a tantalizingly brief passage, French writes

> We hear a great deal these days about an ethics of care. Care ethics typically makes the virtue of care sound like it has everything to do with forgiveness and mercy and nothing

[146] A recent judicial case of this kind recently made national headlines: During a traffic stop, white police officer Kim Potter mistakenly fired her pistol instead of a taser at black motorist Daunte Wright, killing him. That Potter drew the wrong weapon unintentionally was undisputed by the prosecution. In her deliberations, Judge Regina Chu pointed out that, since Potter's discharge was accidental, there could be no forward-looking worries about restraint, rehabilitation, or deterrence, and therefore there was little reason to give a harsh sentence. Nevertheless, Chu believed considerations of retribution could not be completely ignored, and Potter was sentenced to two years in prison. Wright's family considered the light sentence an expression of outrageous indifference toward his death. See Steve Karnowski, "Family: Judge in Potter Case Swayed by 'White Woman Tears,'" *AP News*, accessed March 10, 2022, https://apnews.com/article/death-of-daunte-wright-death-of-george-floyd-george-floyd-minneapolis-race-and-ethnicity-a77f1be272e8cb63ff412f1e4ba3023a.

[147] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 29–30.

> whatsoever to do with preserving the moral community by acting with hostility toward the evil people who invade it. I would like to think of the virtues of vengeance as an essential part, albeit not the soft side, of a care ethics.[148]

In my view, French's connection of vengeance to care strikes at the core of the problem I've been outlining. The more vengeance and resentment are pushed aside, the more generality is added to our response to wrongdoing. But, as care theorists have argued, particularity is an essential element of caring relations. Love requires sensitivity to the details and idiosyncrasies of the beloved. This is why resentment on behalf of a victim one cares about cannot exist as an abstract, generalized response to wrongdoing, for as William Young writes, "Resentment does not speak to an equal appreciation of all moral wrongs. It reserves its sense of moral outrage for the interests of particular individuals. One, in effect, resents unmerited ill-will directed only towards those whom one cares deeply about."[149] Resentment draws our attention to specific wrongs against specific victims. Any resentment-motivated response to wrongdoing will be therefore simply incoherent if it does not put consideration of the victim at its center.

Resentment has a historical orientation; it cares about what happened in the past to the victim. And it is in good company. If there were no point in responding to the past *per se*, then there would also be no point in the backward-looking positive reactions such as gratitude. J.L. Mackie suggests these two classes of response are symmetrical.[150] In parallel with Nussbaum, Mackie wonders of gratitude, "Why should previous good actions be in themselves a reason for doing good to these agents in particular"?[151] Visiting good on those who have done good, just because of what they did, is the core of gratitude's expression, just as resentment wishes to

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[148] French, *The Virtues of Vengeance*, 111.
[149] William E. Young, "Resentment and Impartiality," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 1998): 108.
[150] J. L. Mackie, "Morality and the Retributive Emotions," *Criminal Justice Ethics* 1, no. 1 (1982): 3–10, https://doi.org/10.1080/0731129X.1982.9991689.
[151] Mackie, 7.

harshly resist wrongs just because they are wrong. This is what led Smith to observe that "there are some other passions, besides gratitude and resentment, which interest us in the happiness or misery of others; but there are none which so directly excite us to be the instruments of either."[152] Resentment and gratitude do not produce a general desire for good or harm, but rather that *I* should be the one to cause that good or harm for *this* person. In both cases, the justification for my emotion is a past fact about the one who harmed or helped me. Resentment and gratitude prevent us from overlooking or forgetting our history with those around us.

Another way we might put the point is that these emotions guide our narrative attention. Nearing the end of a long novel, a reader may become concerned at the number of outstanding loose ends. He wonders: How will the author conclude the myriad arcs of the protagonist and her supporting cast? Will the villain be given a satisfying conclusion? Where is this all going? The reader expects the story to wrap up cleanly, for the end to make good on the beginning and to give it an overarching point. Proximity to the ending brings such concerns to the reader's attention; he doesn't want to have wasted his time. Analogously, though we only rarely know how close we are to the conclusion of our life stories, we have frequent reason to look back at the autobiography we've made. We can't help but reflect on the past: our attention naturally shifts in that direction to make sense of the present. Resentment and gratitude remind us of incomplete arcs; they point with blame or praise at the actors in previous chapters. Likewise, guilt, shame, and grief are all forms of suffering over one's history. Each calls for a way up out of the past.

Historical emotions are one of the avenues that provide teleological structure to our life stories. They direct us to 'wrap up' or give closure to the ongoing arcs originating in our past. There is nothing special about resentment in this respect. Resentment refuses to look away from

[152] Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 68.

how the victim was harmed; something must be done to address the offender's offense. The avenger hopes to come to the victim's aid—her own aid, if she is the victim—and correct the course of her story.

The Mistake of Generalized Value

We are nearly in a position to see what has gone wrong in the Untouchability Objection. Its proponents suggest that resentment betrays weakness, and that victims would, ideally, find repose in their own value as persons rather than resist the false claims made by the offender. But I do not see why one's objective value should be much comfort. P.F. Strawson influentially distinguished between two kinds of attitudes we take with one another: objective attitudes and participant attitudes.[153] In the objective stance we view others as objects to be managed rather than blamed or praised; this is the level at which we tend to view groups of people when formulating public policies. When thinking in the objective mode, appeal to intrinsic human value is appropriate, for value is what establishes individuals' rights. Policy is correctly guided by concerns about human value in general, ignoring particular cases. But because objective value belongs to every person, this is precisely why it is not central to our participant attitudes. In the participant stance, we view others not as objects to be managed impersonally, but as distinct persons with distinct lives and interests. In this realm, appeal to human value is generally inappropriate as our primary motivation. Opponents of Kantianism have commonly argued this point. When I am treated generously by a family member, I would be disappointed if she explained that she only acted warmly toward me, 'because of your intrinsic value as a person.' That value is inherent in anyone, and so the implication is that my loved one would have done

[153] Peter Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48 (1962): 187–211, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.48.1.1.

the same for anyone. Appealing only to the universal as an explanation for my treatment makes the particulars of our relationship nonessential to her motivations. Conversely, when a victim is wronged, he might be told, 'Your value is untouched, you cannot be hurt that way,' yet this is beside the point. The concern of the victim's resentment is the particulars of his case. Appealing to his value as a person focuses on what is most general. This is wrongly to suggest that victims should think, "An injury is not wrong because it is *my* injury. A harm constitutes a wrong because it violates some moral requirement, regardless of who has been wronged."[154] Human value belongs primarily to the realm of objective attitudes and fits jarringly with resentment, a member of the participant attitudes. This is what led Améry to decry:

> Whoever submerges his individuality in society and is able to comprehend himself only as a function of the social, that is, the insensitive and indifferent person, really does forgive. He calmly allows what happened to remain what it was…. As a deindividualized, interchangeable part of the social mechanism he lives with it consentingly."[155]

The Untouchability Objection rests on a mistake. Resentment is not merely a victim's attempt to convince herself of her general human value—it is not a crutch for those with low self-esteem. Rather, it is the insistence that *her* story is worth caring about. The grievous offender ruined the life to which she aspired. She could appeal to her objective value to justify her story's value, but if that is her only response, what an unhappy retort it would be. It would amount to saying that her life is worth caring about only in the generic sense that any life is worth caring about. On the contrary, she wishes for a story worth having distinctly, and this is precisely what she has been robbed of. Resentment pushes her to redemptively transform the narrative. The chapter of her life characterized by victimization calls for a different conclusion.

[154] Young, "Resentment and Impartiality," February 1, 1998, 109.
[155] Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 129.

If, as I argued in §VII, revenge aims at narrative redemption, then the past is not wholly beyond our influence. The meaning of the past changes as new chapters are added to the whole. Our historical emotions, such as gratitude, guilt, shame, repentance, and grief, make us emotionally responsive to our diachronic selves. They also alert us to ways in which the direction of our life story has gone astray. Among these emotions, resentment's special concern is with the way wrongs change the course of the victim's particular story. Resentment admonishes the would-be avenger against passively allowing the victim's life to go unredeemed. There is nothing in this description of resentment which makes it weak or a concession to low esteem. A fully rational victim would have reason to resent grievous wrongs just so long as he has reason to care about his particular life. As all have reason to care about the meaning and course of their lives, it follows that even the fully rational agent has reason to resent.

IX. Conclusion

Revenge, at its best, cannot be easily dismissed. The steadfast avenger is committed to the essential place of the victim in her response to wrongdoing. She seeks to give him a new story with new meaning. This is not to suggest that all forms of revenge are of the steadfast variety, or even that steadfast revenge is always successful in overcoming past evil. Rather, it is to suggest that revenge has the capacity to express care for another, or oneself. This is revenge at its strongest.

In the next two chapters I present my account and defense of an alternative to revenge: forgiveness. We will see that the value of forgiveness rests on some of the same underpinnings as revenge, linking them together. Then, in Chapter Four, I focus on this shared basis and use it to discuss how we might begin to argue against revenge.

Chapter Three

Inaugurated Forgiveness

I. Introduction

This chapter gives my account of forgiveness, which I call 'inaugurated forgiveness.' My project aims not merely to describe forgiveness, but to also give a satisfying explanation of its underlying logic. I do not suppose that everyone who practices forgiveness does so with this logic in mind—the account is too cognitive to expect that. Rather, I am trying to illuminate a coherent foundation that explains the practice even if those involved in the practice are not explicitly aware of its rules.

To begin, I provide an initial description of forgiveness in general terms, noting the ways it can vary in practice. I then move on to discuss two conflicting camps, one which views forgiveness as primarily a private matter of the heart, the other as a matter of behavior. I then proceed to give my own account of inaugurated forgiveness, synthesizing and harmonizing the accounts of the previous section.

II. Introducing Forgiveness

As with revenge (and for similar reasons), I am not concerned to give a catch-all definition of forgiveness We do need, however, a general description to work with. To that end, in this section I discuss the basic features of the concept of forgiveness and then note its variety in practice along a number of dimensions.

An Initial Characterization

We can begin our discussion by focusing on six distinguishing features of forgiveness. Some of these features parallel the conceptual structure of revenge; this is because forgiveness, like revenge, presupposes resentment.

First, forgiveness is a response to culpable failure, whether moral or non-moral.[156] When the failure is moral, the evil involved is typically wrong behavior, but may also be an intention or character trait. In the case of non-moral failure, such as a co-owner sinking her small business through poor organizational skills, forgiveness seems more properly aimed at behavior than character—failure to possess the proper skills is not as easily blamable as a failure to have the right character traits. Whether moral or non-moral, however, forgiveness presupposes a failure which the forgiven could reasonably have expected to avoid and for which he is responsible. A sick child who vomits on his bed should have his 'failure' overlooked rather than forgiven; he should not be held responsible for the mess, in large part because he could not reasonably have avoided it.

Second, the wrong must be personal to the victim. Merely recognizing that someone has acted badly does not produce an opportunity for forgiveness. We are capable of indignation over all sorts of evils that have nothing to do with us, whether elsewhere in the world, in the past, or even in fiction. Yet, though impersonal indignation at times needs to be overcome, it is not overcome through forgiveness. Forgiveness reacts to evil that is personally relevant to oneself. This is why a friend's tardiness is a candidate for forgiveness while his inattentiveness toward his mother is not; the former is personally relevant to me, while the latter isn't. One strong evidence for the importance of a personal connection stems from what would happen if I told my

[156] To my knowledge, Snow is the first to point out the possibility of forgiveness for non-moral offenses. Snow, "Self-Forgiveness," 76.

friend I forgave him for his treatment of his mother. He'd likely ask, "What does that have to do with you?" or "What business is it of yours?"[157] In giving this kind of response, my friend invites an explanation of my claim, implicit in expressing forgiveness, to be personally involved in the mistreatment. The boundaries of the personal condition are, of course, imprecise; this vagueness has led to an enthusiastic sub-literature on the standing to forgive. I am happy to avoid that debate by leaving the matter vague: a personal connection is needed, but the closeness of the connection may vary.

Third, forgiveness benefits the offender in some way, or at least aims to benefit the offender. One way to see this point is to consider the norms of requesting and accepting forgiveness. When asking for forgiveness, it is wholly inappropriate for the offender to be demanding. When accepting forgiveness, the natural reaction is gratitude. The best explanation for these norms is that the forgiver is extending something good to the offender which she does not, *qua* offender, deserve. If instead forgiveness aimed at the good of the *forgiver*, as the popular therapeutic view holds, we would expect completely different norms; the offender would have no reason to be grateful if the victim were forgiving her just for the victim's own sake. The precise nature of the benefit forgiveness aims at for the offender is a topic of I address in more detail later, but at minimum we can point out that when forgiveness is communicated to the offender it changes the "norms of interaction" so that the offender can expect, and even claim, a right to better standing with the victim.[158] Another way of putting this is that the relationship between the offender and victim cannot remain the same after forgiveness has been shared. One cannot at the same time both forgive and take revenge or bring up the offense in a weaponized

[157] Brandon Warmke, "God's Standing to Forgive," *Faith and Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2017): 397.
[158] Brandon Warmke, "The Normative Significance of Forgiveness," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94, no. 4 (October 1, 2016): 688, https://doi.org/10.1080/00048402.2015.1126850.

way. The forgiven has a right to protest such behavior simply by reminding, "you said you forgave me." Failure to act on the new norms within the relationship after forgiveness opens the putative forgiver to the charge of inconsistency.

Fourth, forgiveness is usually a form of generosity. When the victim responds to the offender with forgiveness, she is doing something that the offender does not deserve and cannot demand. She is, in some sense, entitled to withhold forgiveness and retain more hostile norms in the relationship. This is compatible with the possibility of obligations to forgive; all things considered, I have an obligation to forgive a sibling for a minor offense rather than end or diminish the relationship. If the offense is trivial enough, forgiveness may not even count as generosity. Nevertheless, for most of the spectrum of offenses, the decision to forgive is a matter of discretion left underdetermined by one's obligations.[159] The greater the offense, the smaller the obligation to forgive, and therefore the greater the generosity. These observations lead us to conclude that the species of generosity involved in forgiveness is grace. Explicating Seneca's account, Pettigrove describes grace minimally as, "an intentional act of unmerited favor."[160] Grace is more specific than generosity because it tends to respond to negative states of affairs, especially wrongdoing. For example, giving a large sum to a politician is an act of generosity, but not an act of grace; paying for a stranger's bail is an act of grace (and therefore an act of generosity).

Fifth, forgiveness cannot include a reversal in judgment about the wrongness of the offense to which it is responding. Forgiveness responds to wrongdoing; if the victim no longer

[159] Unless the victim has voluntarily taken upon herself a universal obligation to forgive, as is the case in Christian ethics. In such cases, the victim waives the right to withhold forgiveness. Christian forgiveness, however, would still be a form generosity, as the obligation to forgive on the part of the victim does not automatically create a right to be forgiven on the part of the offender. See Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (New York, NY: OUP Oxford, 2018), 439n54.
[160] Glen Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 2016, 127.

believes himself to have been wronged, he no longer has anything to respond to. For example, if the offender gives an explanation which sheds new light on his actions, the victim may excuse, justify, or condone what he did. But excusing, justifying, and condoning are incompatible with forgiving. One cannot condone behavior and forgive it, because condoning leaves no wrong behavior to forgive.

Finally, forgiveness must have motivations which are appropriately related to the relationship. There is some debate about which motivations will do. I discuss the nature of these motivations in more detail below, but the general point to make here parallels last chapter's claim that one cannot take revenge for money ("bounty hunters aren't avengers"). It is not possible to forgive someone for purely selfish or pragmatic reasons; it is possible to show them all sorts of other merciful and generous responses, but without the proper motivations it is not conceptually possible to forgive them. Relatedly, forgetting is not the same thing as forgiving. One reason for this is that forgetting can happen accidentally. Another is that "forgetting requires inattentiveness to the wrong done one while forgiveness requires… consciousness of the felt wrong."[161] Forgiveness, as a response to wrongdoing, requires awareness of the wrong in a way that conflicts with mere forgetting.[162]

Further Dimensions of Forgiveness

We have, so far, the most general features of forgiveness. To get more detail, we will have to look at different dimensions along which specific acts of forgiveness differ. I leave open for now how such variance relates to conceptual legitimacy, (e.g. whether forgiveness of the

[161] Herbert Morris, "Murphy on Forgiveness," *Criminal Justice Ethics* 7, no. 2 (June 1, 1988): 18, https://doi.org/10.1080/0731129X.1988.9991836.
[162] Though this is compatible with believing that forgetting is sometimes appropriate *after* forgiveness has been accomplished.

unrepentant counts as ‘real’ forgiveness). Unlike revenge, I do not taxonomize forgiveness into named groups; the greater complexity of forgiveness does not usefully allow it.

Most obviously, forgiveness varies along the dimension of severity. At the lower end, there are trivial offenses like interrupting a friend out of too much enthusiasm or bumping into a stranger on the sidewalk. At such a low level such offenses mean little, are usually not worth the emotional energy of resentment, nor practically worth making an issue over. It is usually better to overlook trivial offenses by acting, usually instinctively and automatically, as though there is nothing offensive in them. (The matter is complicated by cases where trivial offenses form a pattern or habit.) For the sake of clarity, I will assume throughout my discussion, as I did with revenge, that the offenses in question are not trivial. The range of severity I have in mind runs from those which are serious (e.g. a trust-breaking lie told by a friend) to grievous (e.g. murder). Forgiveness for these kinds of offenses is almost never automatic, usually requiring consideration.

A second dimension of forgiveness lies in the attitude of the one receiving it. On one hand we find offenders who express full contrition by repenting, giving an apology, and making restitution. Such an offender has done everything in her power to distance herself from her offense. On the other hand, we find offenders so unrepentant that they would commit the offense again given the opportunity, or, worse, are still in the midst of the offense.

This leads to the third dimension, the communication of forgiveness. Stereotypically, forgiveness will be communicated to the offender through words like “I forgive you,” “It’s okay,” or “Don’t worry about it.” Sometimes forgiveness is understood to have occurred without explicit communication. Other times, such as when the offender is unrepentant, and because forgiveness necessarily presumes a belief in the offender’s guilt, the offender would reject any

forgiveness offered. The forgiver may therefore decline to communicate forgiveness altogether, instead choosing to forgive in his heart.

A fourth dimension of forgiveness lies in its recipient. Most frequently, forgiveness is extended to specific persons. Usually that person is still within the community of the victim, but not necessarily; she may be geographically distant, a stranger, or dead. Forgiveness is also sometimes extended to small groups of people, such as a family, or to more abstract wholes, such as a people group or nation.

The final dimension is the subject of forgiveness. As with revenge, we talk both of individual forgivers and of groups of forgivers. Relatives of the victims of the Charleston Church massacre, for example, openly expressed forgiveness in court to the shooter. Reverend Anthony Thompson, whose wife was killed, said to the offender, "You know, I forgive you. My family forgives you."[163] Those with a personal connection to the offense were many, and so forgiveness was able to extend from many.

III. Which Emotions? What Behaviors?

In initially characterizing forgiveness I remained intentionally vague on two questions: What are the necessary motivations for forgiveness? And what norms of interaction, other than the preclusion of revenge, must change? These questions lie at the heart of any account of forgiveness. Answering them requires moving beyond merely describing a concept to making normative claims about how forgiveness ought to be practiced.

[163] Rachel Martin, "Documentary About Charleston Church Shooting Explores Forgiveness," *NPR*, June 17, 2019, sec. Movie Interviews, https://www.npr.org/2019/06/17/733317652/documentary-about-2015-charleston-church-shooting-explores-forgiveness.

Solomon Schimmel distinguishes between two kinds of forgiveness: private and interpersonal.[164] Private forgiveness takes place within the victim; it is a matter of her feelings and beliefs alone. Interpersonal forgiveness, on the other hand, is a matter of how she treats the offender, especially in her communication of forgiveness to him. Schimmel's terms track with a general divide between two types of account of forgiveness which are dominant in the philosophical literature. While Schimmel treats the private and interpersonal as distinct yet equal kinds of forgiveness, these authors have tended to give accounts which privilege one or the other as paradigmatic. In some ways the two categories are artificial; few writers totally exclude internal or external elements of forgiveness. What unites them is the way their emphasis shapes their direction of explanation. For example, I place Haber in the interpersonal camp because he begins from the interpersonal to understand the meaning of forgiveness, then uses interpersonal forgiveness to explain private forgiveness.[165] Below, I survey and critique both accounts, suggesting that one underemphasizes the behavior of forgiveness while the other underemphasizes the emotions.

Private Theories

Private theories describe forgiveness as an internal matter. Many in this camp refer to the "attitude of forgiveness," identifying forgiveness as a change of heart.[166] The change is a reversal in the victim's feelings toward the offender. Prior to forgiveness, the victim possesses hostile feelings; he resents or even hates the offender. These feelings may lead as far as the desire for vengeance, and at minimum the emotions influence the victim's experience of the offender. His

[9] Solomon Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time: The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 43. Adams prefers to call these "modalities" and labels them "forgiveness from the heart" and "performative forgiveness"; see Adams, "A Christian Model of Forgiveness," 294.
[165] Joram Graf Haber, *Forgiveness: A Philosopical Study* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 1991), 29–57.
[166] Radzik, *Making Amends*, 117; Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 2014, 32.

feelings cause him to see the offender in an angry, accusing way. Hampton argues that the offense puts a "moral stain" on the offender, and thus forgiveness "drops the perspective from which he looks… morally rotten."[167] Forgiveness brings the offender into a new light, from the victim's perspective. So long as hostile emotions remain to a significant degree, this perspectival shift has not occurred and therefore forgiveness has not yet taken place. As Garrard and McNaughton put the matter, "One has only forgiven if one not merely ceases to express, but also ceases to feel, hostility toward the wrongdoer."[168] Govier puts this point in a way that explicitly rules out a performative view of forgiveness. She writes:

> When a person says, in a suitable context and serious tone of voice, "I promise," the very fact of saying means that she does promise. What she says amounts to, or constitutes, a promise. But forgiveness is not performative in this way. Simply to say "I forgive you" is not to forgive—not even if it is said in just the right setting and with just the right tone of voice…. Forgiveness is a matter of working over, amending, and overcoming attitudes, and it is a process, not an event.[169]

The last sentence underscores the way private theories tend to describe forgiveness as something over which the victim lacks direct control. Since forgiveness is a matter of feelings and attitudes of the heart, and we cannot immediately change these simply by choosing to, forgiveness becomes something that we indirectly cultivate over time. It is certainly not accomplished just by saying "I forgive you." Govier pushes this point even farther by suggesting, "One can respond to an apology by saying one forgives; what this means, effectively, is that one will try to forgive."[170]

The emphasis on internal change within private theories is so strong that some deny forgiveness is even possible without prior hostile feelings. Griswold argues that "The intuitive tie between forgiveness and the moral anger… is unbreakable. If one felt *no* resentment in response

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[167] Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 85.
[168] Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103 (2003): 42.
[169] Trudy Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 1st edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 43.
[170] Govier, 175, Footnote #12.

to someone's injurious action against oneself, it would make no sense to forgive them for their deed."[171] Because forgiveness is defined in terms of the transition away from hostile feelings, forgiveness is conceptually impossible in victims with non-hostile attitudes.

For the private theorist, eliminating one's hostile attitudes does not automatically count as forgiveness. Forgiveness occurs only when emotions are transformed for *moral reasons*; forgetting or excusing the offense, as previously mentioned, would not count, but neither would morally charged motivations like pity. Pamela Hieronymi, in her influential essay, places special emphasis on repentance as the grounds for forgiveness which does not compromise the victim's integrity.[172] In her view, repentance explicitly distances the offender from her offense, thereby removing its threat and siding with her victim. Schimmel goes further, arguing that the offender's repentance is the *only* appropriate justification for forgiveness.[173] Though repentance is the most commonly cited moral reason for forgiving, there are others such as the offender's suffering; Murphy believes the class of proper moral reasons for forgiveness "represent ways in which an agent can be divorced from his evil act, [and thus] represent grounds for forgiveness that are compatible with self-respect and respect for the rules of the moral order."[174]

Call the requirement for appropriate moral reasons the 'Right Reasons Constraint.' The Constraint reflects private forgiveness theorists' concern to distinguish, both conceptually and morally, between forgiving and condoning. By restricting the concept of forgiveness to those practices which stem from certain, appropriate reasons, they aim to carve out a distinguishing boundary. Condoning, excusing, or justifying misbehavior are all marked by a failure to take

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[171] Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 39–40.
[172] Pamela Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 62, no. 3 (2001): 529–55.
[173] Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time*, ff69.
[174] Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Getting Even: Forgiveness and Its Limits*, 1st edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 25.

wrongdoing seriously. Forgiveness, if it is to be any different, must begin with the uncompromising assumption that the offense was *wrong*. Once this is established, there can be no question of ignoring or excusing it. Nor can there be an easy removal of hostile emotions. If the victim is right to view the offender's actions as wrong, and the offender still identifies with his wrongdoing, then the victim must likewise continue to identify him with his offense by holding it against him. Until the victim is given reasons that meet the Right Reasons Constraint, the private forgiveness theorist argues, the offender cannot be separated from his evil and therefore he may not be forgiven.

In my view, private theories of forgiveness get right important internal facts that must go on for forgiveness to be fully accomplished. The would-be forgiver must address his hostile feelings and he must do so in ways that take the wrong seriously. Yet, there are reasons to be dissatisfied with the private theory. First, it seems to muddle the way in which forgiveness is an action. Pettigrove presses this point, arguing that "'Forgiveness,' does not merely denote a state in which we might find ourselves. It also refers to something we do."[175] If forgiveness is about the victim getting her feelings in order, and her feelings are not always directly controllable, then there is an extent to which the victim is passive in her forgiving.

The second concern is that private theories' focus on correct reasons stands in tension with the idea that forgiveness involves grace. If forgiveness is a form of grace, the Right Reasons Constraint turns it into a very peculiar sort of grace. This is because, as with generosity more generally, grace grows inversely to desert. The more undeserved the favor, the greater the grace; providing a home for an estranged sibling is more gracious than providing a meal. Likewise, the less the offender deserves to be forgiven, the greater the victim's grace in extending forgiveness.

[175] Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 9.

It seems, however, that forgiving the wholly undeserving offender is exactly what the Right Reasons Constraint aims to restrict.[176] According to proponents of the Constraint, the victim must have reasons which disassociate the offender from his offense or else forgiveness must involve compromise. There is thus a tension between the inherent graciousness of forgiveness and the requirement not to forgive except when appropriate. A passage from Griswold gives an especially stark representation:

> Forgiveness does not attempt to get rid of warranted resentment. Rather, it follows from the recognition that the resentment is no longer warranted. And what would provide the warrant can be nothing other than the right reasons. These specific conditions the offending party should meet to qualify for forgiveness.[177]

If Griswold is correct, it is hard to see how forgiveness, when appropriate, is particularly gracious. It is appropriate precisely because it is warranted given the behavior of the offender. And that sounds curiously close to saying that the offender merits forgiveness.[178]

The third reason for dissatisfaction with private theories is that they have difficulty capturing what is incomplete about uncommunicated forgiveness. Griswold, for example, takes communication of forgiveness to be part of paradigmatic forgiveness, but the reasons he provides do not make clear why this might be the case. On his view, paradigmatic forgiveness is in response to conditions met by the offender, including the offender's asking for forgiveness and the victim internally forgiving. At this point, Griswold suggests that expressing forgiveness will "presumably help both parties accomplish the ethical goals involved – such as overcoming guilt and lingering resentment."[179] The problem with this response is that it does not keep the offender

[176] This point is a central topic of discussion in Chapter Four.
[177] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 48.
[178] Warmke argues that a nearby line of reasoning leads to the unacceptable conclusion that offenders can "rationally obligate" victims to forgive them. See Brandon Warmke, "Articulate Forgiveness and Normative Constraints," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 4 (2015): 503–6, https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2015.1101305.
[179] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 58. Griswold also points out that expressing forgiveness helps the victim to know that she has in fact forgiven.

at the center of the logic of forgiveness. As argued previously, forgiveness is primarily for the benefit of the offender, not the victim. Those benefits remain incomplete without communication. Expressing forgiveness to the offender is therefore vital to the aim of forgiveness. It is not merely that some goods accrue to the relationship if forgiveness is communicated, but that forgiveness does not come to its fullest culmination so long as the victim does not express it to the offender.

Interpersonal Theories of Forgiveness

A general way of distinguishing interpersonal theories from private theories is that interpersonal forgiveness focuses on forgiveness not as a process, but as an act—forgiveness is a matter of how the victim behaves toward the offender. The emphasis on such accounts, therefore, rests not on the emotions of the forgiver, but on the treatment of the offender and the way forgiveness shifts the norms governing the relationship. For this reason, the act of communicating forgiveness holds a primary place in understanding forgiveness. For example, Haber argues that "I forgive you" conveys the most central form of forgiveness, and William Neblett suggests that "in some instances merely saying, 'I forgive you,' *does* constitute forgiveness."[180] Sincerely communicating forgiveness is an action which accomplishes something all on its own, independent of what follows. Communicating forgiveness immediately alters the normative landscape between victim and offender.[181]

[180] Haber, *Forgiveness*, 4–7; William R. Neblett, "Forgiveness and Ideals," *Mind* 83, no. 330 (1974): 269, https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/LXXXIII.330.269.
[181] Warmke, "The Normative Significance of Forgiveness," 688–92.

Writers have used several metaphors for characterizing the normative shift after communicating forgiveness.[182] These descriptions are not mutually exclusive, and each shares the presupposition that forgiveness is expressed interpersonally. The motivation for emphasizing the interpersonal side of forgiveness is voiced by Warmke, who argues that the shift in shared norms—the new rights the victim extends to the offender—are a central part of our understanding of forgiveness.[183] If forgiveness is not communicated to the offender, he has no way of knowing that he has been given new standing (e.g. not to be the target of revenge). Since privately overcoming negative attitudes only changes the victim's perspective on the offense, it cannot establish new relational norms to which she may be held accountable by the offender and others. Something must therefore be incomplete with private accounts of forgiveness, at least in any case where we would expect forgiveness to influence the rules of engagement in the relationship.

The first way of understanding the normative shift of forgiveness is by analogy to pardon. Hannah Arendt, in this vein, suggests that the forgiven are "released from the consequences of what we have done."[184] Just as a government official can remove the threat of punishment from a criminal by pardoning her, so a victim removes the threat of revenge or punishment from the offender by expressing forgiveness to her.[185] Importantly, pardon is an essentially communicative act; a shift in one's inner life is insufficient to affect a pardon. Once a pardon is actually communicated (by someone with appropriate authority), the norms of treatment toward the

[182] Warmke, "Articulate Forgiveness and Normative Constraints," 2015; Brandon Warmke, Dana Kay Nelkin, and Michael McKenna, eds., *Forgiveness and Its Moral Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), chap. one, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190602147.001.0001; Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, sec. 1.2-1.3.
[183] Warmke, "The Normative Significance of Forgiveness," 692.
[184] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition.*, Charles R. Walgreen Foundation Lectures (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 237.
[185] Twambley argues that the model of criminal justice brought to mind by "pardon" is misleading, and that civil court is more apt. P. Twambley, "Mercy and Forgiveness," *Analysis* 36, no. 2 (1976): 88–89, https://doi.org/10.2307/3327099.

offender radically change. If, thereafter, a member of the justice system went to exact punishment for the offense, the offender would rightly protest this as a violation of how she ought to be treated. Considering the pardon, she must be treated (by the state, at least) without hostility for the crime. In an analogous way, communicating forgiveness binds the victim not to harm or punish the offender. If he does take revenge after communicating forgiveness, she is entitled to legitimate protest. Adams points out that the pardon-forgiveness analogy works most fully in non-intimate contexts. Expressing forgiveness to a stranger for blundering into oneself does seem to amount to nothing more than declining to retaliate; merely foreswearing retaliation against offending family members, on the other hand, without any change in feeling toward them, falls short of all we want out of forgiveness in close relationships.

A second way to understand the normative shift of forgiveness is the economic analogy. As with pardons, the communication of debt forgiveness (e.g. "You don't have to pay me back") entitles the forgiven to be treated under new, debt-free norms, and to protest the violation of those norms. If the debt-collector were to show up the next day demanding money, the forgiven would rightly believe himself wronged. Debt forgiveness differs from pardon in a few ways, most saliently that pardon requires relinquishing harm by a judicial authority, whereas debt-forgiveness can be accomplished by private citizens and doesn't necessarily involve remitting harm. P. Twambley, rejecting the pardon analogy in favor of the economic view, writes, "by offending you a man, as it were, incurs a debt (hence we talk of owing recompense, reparation and apology). You are within your rights to resent his action. In forgiving him, you relinquish that right."[186] Victims deserve to be paid back by their offenders, and not just in the sense of material reparation for material damage. There is, as Warmke puts it, "a moral debt" owed to the

[186] Twambley, 89.

victim, and on the basis of that debt the victim can blame, denounce, and censure the offender until the debt is paid.[187] When victims extend interpersonal forgiveness, they are cancelling a moral debt, and with it the right to engage in such hostile blaming behaviors.

The final way to understand how forgiveness works to transform the norms of the victim and offender's relationship is by analogy with promise-making. When we give promises, we make ourselves beholden while entitling others. Promises bind us to specific courses of action or inaction, leveraging our integrity to give others confidence in our commitment. On what Pettigrove refers to as a commissive model of forgiveness, forgiveness is much like a promise.[188] Two parallels especially lend credence to the comparison. First, forgiveness, like promises, is paradigmatically elective. It's up to us when to forgive and when to make promises. Second, neither can be unilaterally retracted. Scarre writes that "The commitment involved in forgiving is a strong one, amounting to a promise to let bygones be bygones, and like any promise, it should be able to be trusted."[189] Thus, he argues, forgiveness, like promises, can be annulled when made in error or ignorance, but never retracted outright.[190]

Interpersonal views of forgiveness have straightforward solutions to the problems posed for private theories. On interpersonal theories, forgiveness is not something passive that happens to our emotions; it is an action that we perform toward others. Whether or not to forgive is therefore, rightly, characterized as something that is up to us. By emphasizing action and deemphasizing internal feelings and motivations, interpersonal theories also seem to create less tension with forgiveness as a form of grace. To count as forgiving, the forgiver need not possess

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[187] Warmke, "The Normative Significance of Forgiveness," 575.
[188] Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 12.
[20] Geoffrey Scarre, "On Taking Back Forgiveness," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 19, no. 4 (2016): 936, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-015-9651-z See also; Monique Wonderly, "Can We Un-Forgive?," *Philosophers' Imprint* 21, no. 6 (2021).
[190] Scarre, "On Taking Back Forgiveness," 940–41.

very particular reasons; so long as the act sincerely communicates forgiveness, it is forgiveness. Finally, it should be apparent that interpersonal theories can articulate clearly why forgiveness is incomplete when left uncommunicated. As forgiveness is most essentially an action toward another person, leaving it uncommunicated is to leave out something vital.

Nevertheless, the interpersonal view of forgiveness has several weaknesses corresponding to areas of strength for the private account. Most prominently, interpersonal views seem to deemphasize the crucial fact that forgiveness usually involves a change of heart toward the offender, especially in intimate relationships. In requesting forgiveness from a family member, I am not merely asking to be treated differently, or to be allowed to live under new norms, but also to be viewed in a new, better light. Relatedly, the interpersonal view doesn't easily accommodate the way in which forgiveness can be a struggle. History and literature are filled with accounts of those who have had to put great effort into extending forgiveness to those who have mistreated them. This would not be so if forgiveness were as easily accomplished as making a promise. Finally, there seem to be cases where forgiveness has occurred in the heart of a victim, yet she rightly does not communicate it. This might happen for a number of reasons, but most important among them is because expressing forgiveness would encourage an ongoing offense, or because the offender is no longer available to the forgiver.

The Conflict within Forgiveness

The prospects for a unified account of forgiveness may seem dim. A description that makes easy sense of every instance of forgiveness, a lowest common denominator account, would simply be stretched too thin.[191] There is more hope, however, for what Pettigrove calls a "highest manifestation" account—an explanation of forgiveness in its fullest, most complete

[191] Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 2.

form. To get at what such an account would look like, Pettigrove considers the two kinds of forgiveness we have surveyed, observing that

> According to the first, "forgiveness is a matter of how I *feel* about you (not how I treat you)." The second account is, in many ways, the contrary of the first. According to it, forgiveness is primarily a matter of what I do to you…. We can see that forgiveness, in its highest manifestation, involves the defining characteristics of both of these accounts by thinking about the kind of forgiveness that we might hope to receive when we are in the position of the penitent wrongdoer who is seeking forgiveness.[192]

I find the notion of "the forgiveness for which we hope" a promising method for understanding forgiveness. In my view, this is where forgiveness is clearest. By examining forgiveness at its fullest, we can get a grasp of its logic and apply it to less clear cases. Let us briefly consider, therefore, what features a unified account should have which draws together the various pieces of forgiveness and identifies all the forgiven could hope for.

The crux of the conflict between private forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, as I see it, stems from a thorny tension within the concept of forgiveness itself. On the one hand, forgiveness aims at benefiting the offender. On the other, something needs to motivate the victim to forgive. In other words, if, within the relational logic of forgiveness, the offender is defined in opposition to the victim, and yet nevertheless it is the offender who benefits, what reason could the victim have to forgive? One way to navigate this tension, as we've seen, is to locate forgiveness internally. There, all sorts of constraints can be placed on the reasons for which the victim should forgive; these constraints protect the victim's self-respect, ensuring that forgiveness is not given at cost. And by characterizing forgiveness in a fundamentally internal way, the victim is protected from the demands of potentially harmful behavior, such as reconciliation with a belligerent offender. From this safe position, the victim may find motivation to benefit the offender. But the more focus is placed on the heart of the victim and

[192] Pettigrove, 17–18.

insulating her from harm while forgiving, the more the benefit to the offender falls out of focus. Conversely, if we emphasize the external elements of forgiveness, no such problem arises: the benefit to the offender is apparent in the new behaviors and norms which govern the relationship. Yet, if forgiveness is primarily about giving something to the offender, it is hard to see what could motivate a victim to forgive—it's all risk and no gain. Further, what the offender wants out of forgiveness, frequently, is a change of heart within the victim, not just a change of behavior. In such cases, the victim cannot give the offender what he wants from forgiveness without herself wanting to give the offender what he wants.

What is needed for an account of forgiveness in its fullest form—the forgiveness for which we hope—is a way of weaving together the strengths of both private and interpersonal forgiveness into a unified account. To be clear, despite my artificial taxonomy, writers in each camp have seen the importance of the other side. Griswold, for example, though providing an account which emphasizes the private side of forgiveness, includes saying, "I forgive you" as part of paradigmatic forgiveness.[193] The problem is that this addition is purely descriptive; he is describing what, in fact, our paradigmatic concept of forgiveness entails. He does not have an account which explains how expressing forgiveness is the natural fulfillment of an internal logic. What we want for is a unified, cohesive explanation that shows how both private and interpersonal forgiveness are intertwined features of the same practice. In other words, why does paradigmatic forgiveness have the features it does? Describing and defending such an account will be my goal for the remainder of this chapter.

A Caveat on Trivial Offenses and Trivial Forgiveness

[193] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 58.

I must make one qualification before proceeding, however. When describing the way offenses vary in intensity, I said that I would be setting aside forgiveness for minor offenses from my discussion. But this might strike some as arbitrary deck-stacking. What makes it so difficult to give a full account of forgiveness is precisely the fact that forgiveness comes in so many forms. If my account works to explain forgiveness only when we aren't considering the full range, how can I claim that I've really given a full account? My approach needs a justification, and clarity about what exactly the range of explanation is supposed to be.

Two ways to justify delimiting the scope of discussion are to give either a revisionary or pluralist account. On a revisionary account, we might insist that our discussion does actually explain all the varieties of forgiveness, it's just that some practices which go by the name of forgiveness, such as forgiving trivial offenses, are not really forgiveness. On a pluralist account, we might argue that there is no unified category of forgiveness, and so each kind of forgiveness requires a different account. Forgiveness for severe offenses might require a completely different explanation than forgiveness for trivial offenses. In that case, we could justify delimiting our scope because we are focusing narrowly on one kind of forgiveness and not another. I am not taking either the revisionary or pluralist approach. The problem with revisionary accounts is that they erode the concept's connection with common language and practice. The (lesser) problem with pluralist accounts is that they give up too easily; we should give up on a unified explanation only where we are confident that we are not dealing with a unified phenomenon. I remain optimistic that a unified, underlying logic for forgiveness can be described.

If not the revisionary or pluralist rationales, what justification is left to us for setting aside forgiveness for trivial offenses? My reasoning is that minor forgiveness, though real forgiveness, has a logically dependent connection to more serious forgiveness, and that we will skew our

understanding of the concept of forgiveness if we give both the trivial and serious cases equal weight. By analogy, consider a foreigner who sees a fire department in action for the first time, observing them putting out first a stove fire at one location and house fire at another. She might infer from her observation that the purpose of the fire department is to put out any uncontained fires. While this conclusion is correct, it is a little misleading. Fire departments exist to combat house fires, and only derivatively to combat minor uncontained fires. If stove fires could not turn into house fires, instead snuffing themselves out before growing any larger, there would be no need for the fire department's involvement. To understand the purpose of the fire department, therefore, we need to attend most centrally to large, dangerous fires rather than minor ones. Likewise, the purpose of forgiveness, in my view, is to prevent uncontained resentment from burning destructively. We have a great capacity for resentment because we live in a world with a great capacity for wrongdoing, and we need anger as a weapon to resist injustice. The practice of forgiveness ensures that resentment remains contained and productive, rather than spiraling out of control. Thus, we forgive great offenses which our resentment might otherwise be inclined to fight over. We also forgive small offenses because we recognize their potential to grow more serious. In close relationships, minor offenses can ferment into bitterness; among strangers, hot tempers can escalate a situation to a murderous intensity. Nevertheless, we should not think that forgiveness exists equally to control resentment over small and great offenses. If we were psychologically incapable of hurting one another (or being hurt) above the level of trivial offenses, there would be no need for the practice of forgiveness with all its complicated emotions and norms. The explanatory priority ought to therefore stay with forgiveness for serious offenses. This is how we can justify focusing on greater offenses without denying that forgiveness for minor offenses is equally real forgiveness.

Thus, in the discussion that follows, much of what I have to say about forgiveness will more comfortably characterize forgiveness for serious offenses than minor ones. Though minor forgiveness may not follow all the details that explain major forgiveness, it does follow its form (much as, say, little league baseball follows the form but not details of professional baseball).[194] Since my account is not aimed at providing necessary and sufficient conditions for forgiveness, but rather to characterize and explain its underlying logic, this is enough for my purposes.

IV. Inaugurated Forgiveness

Forgiveness is, in my view, best understood principally neither as an internal practice for getting the victim's emotions in order, nor only as a reconciliatory practice which restores the offender's relational status and entitles him to better treatment. Rather, forgiveness is a redemptive practice. The offer of forgiveness is an offer to address the past by inaugurating a new relational narrative, one in which the offense is given a new meaning for both forgiver and forgiven. Within this framework the internal and interpersonal components of forgiveness find a natural home.

Previously, I referred to forgiveness as the complement of revenge. Together, forgiveness and revenge represent an opposing range of positive responses a victim may give to her resentment. I qualify with "positive" because there are negative responses which reject resentment as inappropriate, whether because it is unwarranted in a specific case, or because of the belief that it is always inappropriate, as Nussbaum advocates. There are also neutral responses, such as indifference or forgetting. Forgiveness and revenge are complementary paths from the perspective of the victim who sees her resentment as justified and wishes to act on that

[194] For another approach, see Griswold, Chapter Three.

judgment. Not every victim who enters one of these paths follows it to the end—some will stop short of full revenge, for example, choosing instead only a heart of malice. This is an incomplete response, however, because justified resentment drives the victim to act, not just feel. Revenge and forgiveness have the potential to quench resentment because they are practices which reject passivity about the past.

As I argued in Chapter Two, resentment is best understood as a historical, narrative emotion which cares about and defends the value of the victim in the face of mistreatment. Resentment dwells on the past because human stories include the past; the victim can have a better story if her past is not left unredeemed. Revenge, I suggested, seeks to change the past by recontextualizing it within a new ending: the meaning of the offense is transformed by connecting it to the downfall of the offender. Now, if forgiveness is the complement to revenge, how does forgiveness accomplish the redemptive aim of resentment?

Repurposing a term from Christian eschatology, I propose a view of forgiveness as inaugurating a new stance toward the offender. "Inaugurate" reflects that, when the decision to forgive is made, forgiveness is an immediate reality which promises future, full fulfillment. I will argue that inaugurated forgiveness represents the best of private forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness, and gives a clear way of explaining the redemption forgiveness offers.[195]

The Perspectives of Love and Resentment

We are in a position to state, in a general form, inaugurated forgiveness: *A victim inaugurates forgiveness by making a commitment to see the offender through the perspective of*

[195] As with "private forgiveness" and "interpersonal forgiveness," I use "inaugurated forgiveness" throughout as a shorthand for a kind of account of forgiveness, not a separate practice—I take each of these accounts to be attempting to describe the same practice.

love rather than through the perspective of resentment. This statement requires significant unpacking, beginning with the nature of love.

In a discussion of atonement, Stump argues that love is a necessary and sufficient condition for forgiveness.[196] If a victim loves the offender, she has already forgiven him; if she forgives him, that is a species of love. There are reasons to think this claim is too strong.[197] Nevertheless, I believe Stump is correct in identifying an important connection between forgiveness and love, and her work serves as the starting point for my own view. On Stump's Thomistic account, love consists in a pair of desires: the desire for the good of the beloved and the desire for union with the beloved.[198] These desires are jointly necessary and sufficient for love. If I want what is good for another, but want nothing to do with him, I may be beneficent, but not loving. Nor am I loving if I want to be in community with another, but am indifferent toward his wellbeing. The desires of love are also governed by offices, on Stump's view.[199] The offices of love are the particular and myriad relational roles we find ourselves in. A woman's desire for union with her children, for example, rightly differs from her desire for union with her co-workers. Love is thus always particular, always adapting to the actual persons we find ourselves in relationship with. (In this respect, it shares a deep similarity with the particularity inherent to resentment.) The offices of love, Stump points out, vary in their level voluntariness.[200] The office of son or daughter is not one we choose to enter into, while the office of co-worker is; one forms naturally from human nature, while the other is up to our discretion.

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[196] Stump, *Atonement*, 81.
[197] Brandon Warmke, "Stump's Forgiveness," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 11, no. 1 (2019): 145–63, https://doi.org/10.24204/ejpr.v11i1.2570.
[198] Eleonore Stump, "Love, by All Accounts," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 80, no. 2 (2006): 25–43.
[199] Stump, 31–32.
[200] Stump, 31.

To strengthen Stump's account of love we can add to it Robert Roberts's explanation of emotions as "concern-based construals."[201] On Roberts's view, we have emotions on the basis of concerns such as desires, and they give us a certain perception of the world.[202] Feeling disgust toward an object is not merely a matter of having certain beliefs (say, about its aesthetic disvalue), but also a matter of seeing the object in a certain light. With regards to anger at moral offenses, Roberts writes,

> In the anger-construal the moral offense is synthetically locked onto the offender so that he looks offensive, alien, and unwelcome; he looks guilty and deserving of suffering (punishment); he has decidedly *not* the look of a friend (even if he is a friend), and in the extreme case he has the look of an enemy.[203]

Resentment (or, as Roberts prefers, anger) does not merely move the victim to belief or action, but also alters his perceptual experience of the offender.

Applied to Stump's account, we can add to the desires of love the lover's emotional perception of the beloved. Strictly speaking, Roberts does not consider love an emotion because love gives rise to no specific response; a lover can aptly feel fear or joy depending on whether the beloved is in danger or succeeding.[204] Rather than giving rise to a perception of the beloved as generically lovable, love disposes the lover to feel an array of emotions depending on which of its concerns are salient.[205] The desires of love provide a background against which it is possible to feel for the beloved perceptions of joy and fear.

We return now to forgiveness. I described forgiveness as involving "seeing the offender through the perspective of love." In the context of the foregoing discussion, this means seeing the offender in light of desires for her good and for a shared community with her. When the

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[201] Robert Roberts, "Forgivingness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (January 1, 1995): 290.
[202] Roberts, 290.
[203] Roberts, 292.
[204] Robert C. Roberts, "What an Emotion Is: A Sketch," *The Philosophical Review* 97, no. 2 (1988): 203, https://doi.org/10.2307/2185261.
[205] Roberts, 203.

offender's wellbeing and membership in community are threatened, the forgiver who sees the offender through love will experience this as a threat to something he cares about. Love does not continue to construe the offender as one to be alienated.

Nevertheless, victims have excellent reason to see the offender as unappealing and offensive—the offender's behavior has signaled to the victim that he believes she is not worthy of better treatment, and in doing so communicates that he stands outside and in opposition to the standards of the moral community. She thus resents the offender and desires that he be punished and put at a distance from herself and the community she inhabits.

So long as the victim continues to occupy this stance toward the offender, she sees him as morally stained. She is insulted and angry at the damage he has caused, and the onus is on the offender to make things right, if he can. But of course, he may very well have no ability to undo what he has done, or, worse, no interest. The stain will grow as the victim continues to remember and endure the effects of the offense. Over time the offender becomes more and more closely identified with his wrongdoing, until the victim sees him as "cloaked in evil, or as infected with moral rot."[206] From the perspective of such resentment, the offender is a creature to be fought and pushed away.

We thus have two competing lights in which to cast the offender. In the light of love, she remains a person whose flourishing and closeness remain concerns, and for whom the forgiver feels happiness or anxiety as those concerns are fulfilled or threatened. In the light of resentment, the offender is an offensive presence. The victim's concern is for his own value and he will accordingly feel fear and hatred toward the offender. Of course, these are the extremes, and love and resentment will come in greater and lesser degrees.

[206] Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 86.

The Commitment

Forgiveness requires a choice by the victim to identify with the perspective of love toward the offender rather than resentment. No longer will the victim be, to use Roberts's language, synthetically locked to his offense, viewable only in terms of his wrongdoing. Instead, the victim commits to seeing the offender from the perspective of what is lovable about him. Troy Jollimore writes, in this connection, that "Loving… is in large part a matter of opening one's eyes to the beloved... Yet at the same time, love requires us *not* to see, notice, dwell on, or be moved by certain aspects of the world."[207] A commitment to love causes the forgiver to dwell on what is good about and good for the offender, freeing him from his identity *as* offender.

To clarify: I am not suggesting forgiveness requires the victim to actually feel love toward the offender, or to cease feeling resentment toward her. That would lead us afoul of one of the problems that beset private forgiveness—namely, making forgivers passively dependent on emotional states. Rather, I have in mind a Frankfurtian second-order volition in which the forgiver identifies with one desire over another.[208] Examining his first-order desires of resentment and love, the forgiver wills effectively for his desires of love to win out. Love represents who he wills to become. This is perfectly compatible with feeling resentment at that time and even continuing to feel resentment in the future. The forgiver is not choosing to eliminate hostile feelings toward the offender. Despite the legitimacy of his resentment, in choosing forgiveness he has removed his endorsement of them. They no longer represent the light in which he wills to see the offender. We find this kind of stance taken by, for example, a reassuring yet reproachful person who says to her friend, 'I am hurt and angry, I resent what you did, and I expect you to hear me out; but I want you first to know that I have already forgiven you.' There is no

[207] Troy Jollimore, *Love's Vision* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 25.
[208] Harry Frankfurt, "Identification and Wholeheartedness," in *The Importance of What We Care About: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 159–76.

contradiction between insisting on the fact and legitimacy of her resentment while assuring her friend that she is nevertheless committed to ultimately seeing him as one whom she loves. Forgiveness, therefore, requires neither the elimination of resentment, nor the foreswearing of resentment, nor even the moderation of resentment to an accurate level. Rather, when transformed by forgiveness, resentment becomes *instrumentalized*, becoming a tool ordered within the ends of love. The forgiver allows his anger to continue to exist only insofar as it supports the possibility of continued relationship and the wellbeing of the forgiven; for example, he will maintain his anger where it is necessary to resist further abuse which is destructive to the relationship and corrupting to the abuser.

The commitment of forgiveness represents a new direction for the forgiver's story. As I argued in Chapter One, life stories have, as one of their important features, direction. A life's coherence depends in part on having a goal toward which it is moving. A narrative sense of oneself is an organizing principle which includes second-order desires insofar as we care about what kind of story is worth having. As I also argued, it is not enough to have any goal at any particular time; one's ultimate goals must also be consistent. If one is constantly taking up and dropping new projects, it becomes difficult to see past paths as anything other than pointless. It is for this reason that a commitment to forgive should not be made frivolously. Choosing forgiveness means choosing *full* forgiveness, for "it is part of the logic of the term 'forgiveness,' then, that to forgive is to forgive permanently."[209] There is no such thing as committing to partially forgive an offense. A commitment to forgive represents not only the person one wills to be, but also the direction one wishes one's life story to take. In this regard, extending forgiveness is indeed like making a promise; through commitments we have the ability to actively shape who

[209] H. J. N. Horsbrugh, "Forgiveness," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (1974): 279.

we are and will be. Playwright Robert Bolt remarks of this feature of being human: "When a man takes an oath… he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then – he needn't hope to find himself again."[210]

Inaugurating a New Narrative

Like revenge, forgiveness changes the meaning of the past by recontextualizing the offense within a new story where the victim endorses love rather than resentment. Within this new narrative, it is the victim rather than the offender who has the last word; the forgiver passes judgment on the offense by insisting that the offender needs forgiveness. Yet, unlike revenge, which elevates the victim at the offender's expense, forgiveness offers redemption to victim and offender alike. Rather than using the weapons of vengeance to vindicate herself, the forgiver offers the possibility that the offender be liberated from his own evil if he is willing to accept her offer of grace. This is not what the offender is due. It is the victim's life that was pulled apart by his actions, and it is her prerogative how she will put it back together—whether by means of revenge or forgiveness.

We spent the previous chapter discussing what happens should the victim choose revenge. If, on the other hand, she chooses forgiveness, then she inaugurates a new, redemptive story for their relationship. By choosing to endorse the desires of love for the offender and perceiving him within its light, the forgiver gives the offender a conclusion to the story of his wrongdoing, one where his wrongdoing did not remain a permanent stain. The victim did not permit his offense to overtake her view of him or their relationship. In this way the offense receives a transformation in meaning. A failure that inspires me to redouble my efforts and leads to my success has a wholly different meaning in my life story than the same failure that leads to

[210] Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons*, 1960.

discouragement and finally defeat. Likewise, when a victim forgives her grievous offender, she changes the direction of *his* story from one of pointless, irremediable evil to one where he is generously brought back into the human community despite his wickedness. The act he committed could not be undone, but it could have its meaning transformed through forgiveness. In this way, it is not merely the offense that is changed, but the offender as well.

Forgiveness also brings redemption to the victim. By forgiving, the victim refuses to forget or overlook the offense; she necessarily insists that there is something to forgive. The logic of forgiveness presupposes the legitimacy of resentment, of the victim's accusing anger. Nussbaum objects, for this reason, that forgiveness inherently requires that the victim stand in an inappropriate position of judgment over the offender. I agree that forgiveness requires such a position but deny that it is inappropriate. Within the new narrative of forgiveness, the victim stands explicitly on a moral high ground over the offender, extending grace to the wrongdoer in order to pull him back up to her level. It is precisely this position which vindicates her. Thus, Miroslav Volf, a survivor of the Balkan Wars, writes, "Forgiveness is not a substitute for justice…. On the contrary: every act of forgiveness enthrones justice; it draws attention to its violation precisely by offering to forego its claims."[211] Forgiveness moves the victim from a position defined in terms of vulnerability to a position of power and authority. The original offense is overcome not by humiliating the offender, but by raising up the forgiver.

The dual aim of redemption for forgiver and forgiven is crucial to understanding the logic of forgiveness. It explains the benefit of forgiveness to the forgiven, and why the victim has reason to forgive. It also explains the importance of communicating forgiveness to the offender, as love's desire for union is furthered by the two members of the relationship sharing a common

[211] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*, 1st ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 123.

narrative. An expression of forgiveness itself tells a story by narrating the events of the offense and its effects; the offender is given the opportunity to accept this story as true, thereby agreeing to see his offense as the victim does. By expressing forgiveness to the offender, the forgiver makes possible that they should each recognize, in the same way, the meaning of the offense and of the grace extended.[212] The victim and offender can more easily live in the same community where they also understand themselves within the same narrative. Further, in accordance with the other desire of love, the forgiver contributes to the wellbeing of the offender by communicating to him his release, in her eyes, from his moral stains.

Until a common narrative is entered into by both parties, total reconciliation will be difficult. Even in the case of smaller offenses where an "agree to disagree" mentality might be feasible, the offense may remain a sore subject even where they would otherwise desire closeness. At larger scale, things are even worse. Wolf painfully observes, for example, how the impossibility of reconciling historical narratives in the Balkans has led to an interminable cycle of ethnic hatred.[213] Understanding the past by shared lights allows us to walk forward on the same path.

V. Unifying Private and Interpersonal Forgiveness

An inaugural account of forgiveness possesses the flexibility to affirm what is strong about private and interpersonal accounts while avoiding their weakness. Recall that for the private view the difficulties were properly understanding forgiveness as an action, articulating the role of grace, and explaining the incompleteness in unshared forgiveness. For the

[212] I believe this way of thinking about forgiveness addresses concerns about epistemic injustice raised by Miranda Fricker. See Miranda Fricker, "Ambivalence About Forgiveness," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements* 84 (November 2018): 161–85.
[213] Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 225–29.

interpersonal view, I raised concerns about the overlooked importance of a change in heart, the familiar idea that forgiveness is a struggle, and the potential value in withholding communication of forgiveness. Below, I address each of these in turn.

Forgiveness as Action and the Struggle of Forgiveness

Forgiveness contains both an action and a process, though it is not identical to an action or a process. Consider an analogy with marriage.[214] Marriage begins with the action of vows at the wedding, but marriage is neither the saying of vows nor the wedding. Further, marriages are maintained over time and require ongoing work to uphold one's vow, yet it is not correct to say that marriage is the process of upholding vows. Analogously, the decision to forgive is a commitment which begins a new relationship—but we should not confuse the inaugurating event with forgiveness any more than we should conflate a wedding with a marriage. Likewise, though forgiveness requires ongoing effort after the commitment, we should not think of forgiveness as partial until it has accomplished its goal any more than we should think that marriage is partial as long as the process of upholding its vows continues. Forgiveness is neither a process, as in private accounts, nor an action, as in interpersonal accounts. Yet, as the inauguration of a new relational reality, it does involve both an action and a process.

Forgiveness, therefore, is something we choose, not merely something that happens to our emotions over time. By deciding to forgive, the victim endorses the desires and perspective of love. When he says, "I forgive you," he is not merely reporting the feelings he happens to have, but rather the stance he is committed to taking toward the offender. He may still be fuming with anger, but he no longer identifies with his anger and will not feed it more fuel. This explains

[214] Much later after the time of writing this passage, I discovered a nearly identical use of the analogy of marriage in Rebecca DeYoung's discussion of acedia. See Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung, *Glittering Vices: A New Look at the Seven Deadly Sins and Their Remedies*, 1st edition (Grand Rapids, Mich: Brazos Press, 2009), 94–97.

one of the similarities forgiveness has with promises, that we neither make promises to promise nor promises to forgive: We do not make promises to forgive because forgiveness already promises a new future for the offender.

The process of forgiveness lies in a successful change in heart. If the victim commits to love, and this is sufficient to inaugurate forgiveness, it matters whether he actually succeeds in achieving a change of heart with regards to his first-order desires. In particular, the way resentment perceptually construes the offender will have to be brought under the control of the desires of love. For serious offenses, this is not something that happens immediately. If resentment is not appropriate to the aims of love, the offender will have to refrain from stoking his anger while choosing to focus on what is worth loving about the offender. And while his resentment does last, he will have to be vigilant that it remains controlled. Nevertheless, we should not think someone exhibits merely partial forgiveness because he is still trying to eliminate his anger toward the offender (or first-order malice, spite, disgust, or other negative emotions). The commitment to forgive establishes a new direction for the forgiver. Inaugurated forgiveness has already ushered in a new reality even though it is not yet fully realized.

The Role of Reconciliation

Sometimes it is appropriate to communicate forgiveness to the offender, and sometimes it is not. When it is not appropriate, something seems to have gone wrong; forgiveness in its fullest manifestation involves not just a new internal reality, but a new shared reality in which both persons "intertwine their narratives" in understanding.[215] Indeed, the question of communicating forgiveness extends from the more fundamental question that neither private nor interpersonal

[215] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 110.

forgiveness gives a definite answer to: What is the role of reconciliation in forgiveness? For some writers reconciliation is central to forgiveness, while for others it does not.

One kind of case puts a boundary on reconciliation: the case of the belligerent, unrepentant offender. Communicating forgiveness, let alone reconciling, in the face of an ongoing offense, Snow argues, is "an affront to the victim's dignity and self-worth."[216] If Snow is right, and even communicating forgiveness would be self-abasing, how much worse is reconciliation which seems to actively enable further mistreatment?

Another kind of case cuts in the opposite direction: some forgiveness seem to clearly require reconciliation. If my sister, with whom I have long had a close and happy friendship, were to steal from me out of desperation, what would it look like to fully forgive her? It seems odd to say to her that she is forgiven, but that I refuse to ever see her again. Given that she is my sister, and that she poses no ongoing threat, it does not seem a discretionary matter whether I reconcile when forgiving; to forgive her fully requires reconciliation.

The key to navigating these cases lies in applying Stump's notions of the offices of love. Recall that an office of love is the particular kind of relationship between two people, such as friend, mother, or business partner. The office one holds dictates what kind of relationship is appropriately pursued by one's loving desire for union, and offices vary in the degree to which their existence is up to us. Within this framework, we can understand reconciliation as the return, after an offense, to the same office of love. In my view, there are two principles for determining when forgiveness requires reconciliation:

(a) When an offense occurs within an office that exists involuntarily, such as a family relationship, forgiveness requires a desire to return to the level of union normally appropriate to that office.

[216] Snow, "Self-Forgiveness," 77.

(b) When an offense occurs within an office that exists voluntarily, such as friendship, it is compatible with forgiveness to desire to leave that office so long as it is in favor of the next closest relation which is compatible with the wellbeing of oneself and the forgiven.

Both (a) and (b) require clarification, but together they provide a great deal of flexibility to explain the diversity of cases and provide a clear answer on shared forgiveness and reconciliation.

The strength of (a) is that it reflects the fact that some relationships cannot be destroyed by wrongdoing. Even if I am estranged from my father, he remains my father, and that is what gives weight and meaning to our estrangement. Since the office of love I occupy with regards to my father is permanent, the desire for union with him must be a desire for union as his son. Of course, I might not love my father. In that case, there would be no desire for union to regulate. But given, *ex hypothesi*, that forgiveness requires endorsing the desires of love, it follows that if I forgive my father I must endorse a desire for union with him. Crucially, (a) requires a *desire* to return to union, not necessarily actual union or geographical proximity. It may be that the offender is dangerous to be around, in which case his behavior makes closeness, whether relational or spatial, incompatible with the desires of love. If an offender is allowed to continue in his abuse, his abuse will ultimately destroy relational unity, while also harming the wellbeing of both offender and victim. The desire to return to union, in the case of unrepentance, is thus first a desire that the offender become the kind of person with whom it is possible to have a mutually loving relationship. In cases where the offender's character does not threaten the health of the relationship or its members, the desire for union can lead more directly to actual union.

Matters are a little different for (b). Offices are elective where it is a matter of my choice whether I choose to be part of the relationship at all. When a salesman lies to me, it is up to my discretion whether to continue my relationship with him as a customer. Forgiving him for his lie

does not require continuing to use his services, nor even to desire to one day be his customer again. Nevertheless, it is incompatible with forgiveness to hate him and hope that others hate him too. Loving him does not require that I desire a return to the same office of love, but it does require that I not desire to retreat too far. When moving to a new, more distant office, there is always a final backstop: the office of common humanity. This office is held by all in addition to whatever other offices we hold. It is an involuntary office everyone qualifies for and automatically enters into simply by meeting one another. Whatever distance the victim chooses to move from the offender, he cannot, consistent with love, refuse to desire that he return to human community. What (b) thus shows us is that there is a sense in which even forgiving strangers involves a form of reconciliation.

We now have an answer to the question of reconciliation. Forgivers ought to pursue reconciliation, and the communication of forgiveness, where it is consistent with the desires of love. Where the offender is repentant, communicating forgiveness allows both forgiver and offender to share in the new reality, to have a common narrative. This fulfills both the desire for the good of the beloved and the desire for union. On the other hand, where the offender is unrepentant and perhaps even in the midst of her offense, communicating forgiveness may be an obstacle to the desires of love—it may embolden her wrongdoing. (Though, not necessarily: if the victim has reason to think communicating forgiveness will chagrin the offender, this may be a reason not to wait for repentance.)

The Role of Hope

It is helpful to point out that on my account, contrary to a number of other writers, the operative forward-looking virtue for forgiveness is hope rather than trust.[217] Forgiveness does not require reestablishment of trust, nor does it even require a desire to trust. In many cases, the victim's inability to trust the offender is part of the offense's harm; she has shown that she cannot be counted on to act for his good in the relevant situations. If a friend is repeatedly caught stealing money for a gambling habit, the re-establishment of trust in that domain is neither possible nor desirable. The question of whether others ought to, say, entrust her with their possessions, is a separate question from whether they have forgiven her. In fact, if they have forgiven her, they may have extra reason not to put trust in her: because they love her, they avoid tempting her by pretending she has moral strength where she does not.

Yet, forgiveness does require a *hopeful* stance toward the offender. The virtue of hope, Snow argues, makes its possessors "resilient and cognitively savvy."[218] Hope helps us to keep on with our goals and commitments in the face of adversity, urging us to hold fast to the distant end which requires patient endurance. In this way hope opposes despair.[219] Hope, when it is not wishful, also recognizes its limits, declining to desire the impossible. Thus, the forgiver hopes that the offender will become the sort of person who can be trusted, who can be in a healthy, mutual relationship. For this reason, Garrard and McNaughton rightly suggest that forgiveness precludes refusing attempts from the offender at atonement.[220] The forgiver will never desire for the offender to be consumed by her evil, nor despair for her reconciliation, instead hoping for a day when she is whole. Because we can never have certainty that a person is irredeemable, as

[217] Cf. Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 57, 70–71; Govier, *Forgiveness and Revenge*, 2002, 46–47; Haber, *Forgiveness*, 110.
[218] Nancy Snow, "Is Hope a Moral Virtue?," in *The Moral Psychology of Hope*, ed. Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 182.
[219] For more on hope versus despair, see Ariel Meirav, "The Nature of Hope," *Ratio* 22, no. 2 (2009): 216–33.
[220] Garrard and McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness," 44.

Kant staunchly affirmed, the forgiver's hope need not amount to wishful thinking.[221] There is always room, however small, for justified hope that the offender will be reformed.

The Role of Grace

The account I've presented gives us a way to understand how forgiveness is a form of grace. Given the legitimacy of resentment, the victim has legitimate reason not to forgive. She has been wronged and it is reasonable for her to address her grievances at cost to the guilty party. Yet, she is not required to pursue the vindictive route. She may instead choose to see the offender in light of what is lovable about him, to grant "approval of him as a person despite what he has done to her."[222] By electively committing to view him this way, the forgiver chooses a restorative path that includes the offender in its redemption. This, I've argued, is forgiveness. We can see, therefore, that the language of pardon and gift giving is wholly appropriate. Like a pardon, the offender does not receive the punitive anger the victim was entitled to mete out. Like a gift, the victim acts generously by giving beyond what is required. The forgiver intentionally provides unmerited favor to the offender—which is to say she shows him grace.

Further, an understanding of the degrees of grace falls neatly into place. Depending on the circumstances and the relationship, victims have reasons to resent and love which vary in strength. If my mother is unpunctual to our outing, I have very weak reasons to resent and overwhelming reasons to love. In fact, given how lopsided her love toward me has been historically, I cannot seriously hesitate in immediately and automatically forgiving. This forgiveness is barely to my credit. It is basic decency. Yet, when a grievous victim forgives, she

[221] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Book One.
[222] Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 59. There is an important asymmetry between love and resentment: It is possible for a person not to be worthy of resentment in any way, but impossible not to be worth of love in any way. There is always something loveable, however minimally, about every person.

does so in the face of monumental reasons to side with her resentment. If she nevertheless forgives, she displays a correspondingly monumental amount of grace.

VI. Conclusion

Forgiveness affords victims an active alternative to revenge which graciously draws the offender into a newly inaugurated, redeemed narrative. His forgiveness is found not in specific emotions nor behaviors, but in the decision to see her as one who remains lovable despite her offense. In the final chapter of this project, I will pick up some of these strands in greater detail, using them to answer a question I've left to the side here: Who has reason to forgive?

Chapter Four

Forgiving for One's Own Reasons

I. Introduction

In this final chapter, I want to draw together different strands from the previous three to show what it could mean to have reasons to forgive (or take revenge). This requires looking more closely at resentment, as well as examining a mistake I believe is prevalent in theories of forgiveness. I hope to show the way the decision to forgive is unusually dependent on the story of the forgiver's life; what reasons she has depends uniquely on who she is.

Let us begin with an introduction to the error I am criticizing. It is commonly presupposed in the philosophical forgiveness literature that to justify forgiveness, we must make sense of it in terms of certain impersonal principles, especially those related to desert and fairness. Consider Aurel Kolnai's remark that, for a victim not to resent mistreatment may be "not only undignified and self-soiling but also unfair in so far as it may reveal that Fred is ready to put up with a starkly offending Ralph while being perhaps mercilessly hard on a far more lightly offending and possibly even repentant Robert."[223] It is a matter of fairness that different offenders be given impartial treatment, with ultimate consideration given to what is deserved rather than which relationships are involved. Other writers frequently invoke the need for mentally and emotionally disassociating the offender from the offense for forgiveness to be rationally justifiable—we should, they argue, withhold forgiveness from those who deserve ongoing resentment. This view makes *impersonal* considerations the proper grounds for deciding to forgive. It requires victims to act for reasons which do not reflect their specific values and

[223] Aurel Kolnai, "Forgiveness," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 74 (1973): 96.

commitments. I suggest what is needed, if we are to make full sense of the decision to forgiveness, is a privileged place for *personal* sources of reason. These kinds of reason stem from our specific relationships, commitments, causes, and projects. They flow from what is least generic about as us as persons.

In my view, purely impersonal justifications will never give a satisfying explanation of forgiveness because forgiveness occupies an intrinsically personal domain. The two sources of reason must be drawn from together; when they are, personal considerations are usually decisive. Acknowledging the role of personal reasons provides us with the theoretical resources to address several thorny problems in the literature. First, it shows us another way of seeing how forgiveness can be elective and generous rather than an obligation; since our personal reasons are extensions of our personal commitments, and our commitments are up to us, there is a sense in which the decision to forgive is also up to us. Second, it allows us to explain the connection between forgiveness and self-respect, as a decision to forgive for personal reasons may express respect for one's own form of life. Relatedly, it explains the possibility that a victim's forgiveness may be given in the face of the offense without servility. It is possible, as I will argue, for such forgiveness to communicate self-respect; it can be a way of affirming that one's basic commitments are worth preserving.

In what follows, I support my contention that the philosophical literature has overly emphasized impersonal reasons for forgiving by surveying some prominent writers' accounts and applying their reasoning to the case of a belligerent, unrepentant offender. I then discuss the distinction between personal and impersonal kinds of reasons, depending especially on the work of Bernard Williams and Thomas Nagel. I argue that, though impersonal considerations have a role to play in the decision to forgive, they are usually subordinate to forgiving for one's own

reasons. Demonstrating the connection between personal reasons and forgiveness will allow us to also see the relation between integrity and the narrative self. In thinking of our lives from a narrative perspective, we inevitably commit ourselves to a point of view with orienting commitments which allow for the existence of integrity.

II. Forgiveness within the Bounds of Moral Justice Alone

The decision to forgive, (whether on the interpersonal or private theories of forgiveness) is standardly viewed as a matter of moral justification. Forgiveness is constrained by what the victim and wrongdoer are each owed as persons. Using a label coined by Miranda Fricker, call this the "Moral Justice" conception of forgiveness.[224] This view of forgiveness is championed by Kolnai.[225] He presents a puzzle that has been called the paradox of forgiveness. The problem starts with the view that forgiveness requires overcoming resentment. Kolnai observes that when we resent someone for a perceived wrong, our resentment is either justified or unjustified. Since resentment is justified by being wronged (much as fear is justified by being in danger), victims of wrongdoing are perfectly justified in resenting their offenders. But if a victim's resentment is justified, that can only mean she is not justified in overcoming her resentment by forgiving. On the other hand, if her resentment is directed toward someone who is not an appropriate target—say, because he was excused in his actions—then her resentment is unjustified. She should cease to resent simply because her resentment is unreasonable. But if that's the case, forgiveness is an unnecessary additional step. Kolani worries that, left unanswered, this dilemma forces us to conclude that "forgiveness is either unjustified or pointless."[226]

[224] Miranda Fricker, "Forgiveness–An Ordered Pluralism," *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3, no. 3 (2019): 241, https://doi.org/10.1080/24740500.2020.1859230.
[225] Kolnai, "Forgiveness."
[226] Kolnai, 99.

Writers after Kolnai have followed his lead in making the justification of forgiveness a central issue. As Kolnai makes clear, however, any strategy for justifying forgiveness must not do so by undermining the rationality of resentment—or else there is nothing for forgiveness to overcome. In this vein, writers such as Jeffrie Murphy, Jean Hampton, Pamela Hieronymi, and Solomon Schimmel have worked to identify reasons which justify disassociating the offender from her offense without undermining forgiveness.[227] Hieronymi provides an important example of such a project. She argues that an offender's sincere apology amounts to renouncing the threatening claim, implicit in the offense, that the victim is worthy of low treatment. The victim may then revise his judgment about the offender as a threat to his dignity, which in turn gives reason to revise his resentful emotions. Essential to this approach is that the victim's resentment is not ignored, forgotten, or undermined; rather, it is revised for good reasons. Good reasons for revision are not solely dependent on the offender's repentance, however. Murphy argues that a victim may rationally forgive "for old time's sake," because focusing on who the offender used to be is another way of disassociating her from her offense.[228] The general strategy is the same, however: forgiveness is justified when the victim revises his resentment in light of reasons which acknowledge the offender's blameworthiness yet justifies seeing her in a different light.

A minority strategy is to take up a less cognitive view of forgiveness. Robert Roberts, David Sussman, and Lucy Allais all take up versions of this position.[229] Roberts articulates the core of this approach with his remark that there is "a certain looseness of fit between the

[227] Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988; Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007; Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness"; Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time*.
[228] Jeffrie G. Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," *Midwest Studies In Philosophy* 7, no. 1 (1982): 508.
[229] Roberts, "Forgivingness"; David Sussman, "Kantian Forgiveness" 96, no. 1 (March 15, 2005): 85–107, https://doi.org/10.1515/kant.2005.96.1.85; Lucy Allais, "Elective Forgiveness," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21, no. 5 (2013): 637–53, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2013.767525; Lucy Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2008): 33–68, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2008.00123.x.

judgments that constitute the cognitive content of an emotion, and the emotion itself."[230] The idea here is that our reasons underdetermine which emotions we ought to have, and so the victim has some discretion available in how she may justifiably feel about the offender. The belief that the offender is to blame does not, therefore, rationally necessitate resentment. Allais neatly concludes, "wrongdoing *entitles* us to resent, but this does not mean that it *obliges* us to resent; we can therefore choose to give up resentment without making a moral or epistemic mistake."[231] The leeway between beliefs and feelings allows victims to revise their resentment without undermining the belief in the victim's guilt or blameworthiness. Nevertheless, it is important to see that even on this view, victims are not free to give up resentful feelings while they remain apt; emotions are under-determined, not un-determined by the victim's reasons. If the victim's evidence is utterly conclusive that the offender still associates with his offense, she may not forgive him.[232]

Even the few writers with the most permissive accounts of forgiveness—accounts where forgiveness is explicitly supposed to be a free gift which is always permissible to extend—there are implicit concessions to the Moral Justice model.[233] Margaret Holmgren, for example, argues that offenders should *never* be identified with their offenses.[234] Everyone ought to forgive unilaterally and unconditionally because the justification for disassociating offender from offense

[230] Roberts, "Forgivingness," 289.
[231] Allais, "Elective Forgiveness," 647.
[232] Even Sussman, who suggests there is no fact of the matter about whether someone deserves to be forgiven, takes forgiveness to involve self-deception if the forgiver has no reason to think the offender will reform. Allais might be interpreted as claiming un-determination, though, if this is the right reading, Per-Erik Miliam argues convincingly that that position is untenable. Sussman, "Kantian Forgiveness," 105; Per-Erik Milam, "Against Elective Forgiveness," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 21, no. 3 (June 1, 2018): 569–84, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-018-9899-1.
[233] Michele Moody-Adam is a notable exception to this trend, as she argues for a fully elective, unilateral view of forgiveness that doesn't require disassociating the victim from his offense. Her account however advocates forgiveness from the objective "view from nowhere" which is detached from one's own emotions and perspective. As will become evident, I do not think abstracting away from one's particularity is a helpful way of approaching the problem. Moody-Adams, "The Enigma of Forgiveness," 170.
[234] Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 2014, 86–103.

is always already complete. Far from diverging from the Moral Justice view, Holmgren presupposes it and simply adds a premise.

As we have seen, on the common view, whether a victim is justified in forgiving depends upon whether continued resentment is what the offender deserves, and what the offender deserves will depend on the degree to which he is still identifiable with his wrongdoing. In the following section, I use the case of the belligerent offender to highlight how the Moral Justice conception of forgiveness sees the decision to forgive as essentially determined by considerations of respect. In failing to continue to resent when it is appropriate, the victim fails to properly respect either herself or the offender.

III. The Case against Forgiving a Belligerent Offender

Offenders who remain openly belligerent in their offense (whether verbally, or by repeating the wrong), are commonly thought to be unforgivable. Murphy sets out three moral values that are threatened by such unjustified forgiveness. These are "self-respect, self-defense,"[235] and "respect for others as moral agents."[236] These values are the primary reasons against forgiving too easily. They represent Hieronymi's concern that giving up anger against a belligerent offender "is indistinguishable from giving up on him, on myself, or on the wrongness of his actions."[237] Let us consider each value in turn.

The first value to consider is self-respect. Following Stephen Darwall's distinctions concerning different kinds of respect, I understand the relevant sense here to be recognition respect.[238] Recognition respect is the judgment that the fact that a person "is a person places

[235] Murphy, *Getting Even*, 19.
[236] Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," 508.
[237] Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 541.
[238] Glen Pettigrove draws attention to the need to make this distinction. Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 115.

moral constraints on our behavior."[239] If a person lacks self-respect in this sense, it means that he does not fully realize how being a person entitles him to be taken into the considerations of others. Writers are highly critical of easy forgiveness on the grounds that it likely means the victim lacks this kind of respect for himself. Nancy Snow, for example, writes that such forgiveness is "an affront to the victim's own dignity and self-worth."[240] One reason writers on forgiveness believe recognition respect is threatened by unjustified forgiveness is their commitment to the emotional requirements of moral seriousness. Recognition self-respect involves "experiencing the appropriate sentiment (anger or resentment) that expresses one's regard for self as one-not-to-be-treated-in-this-manner."[241] The victim is required not just to believe his mistreatment is wrong, but also feel it *as* wrongdoing. Failure to resent represents a failure to care, in the appropriate way, about oneself; and this lack of emotional concern constitutes a lack of recognition about the respect that is owed to oneself as a person.

The second value threatened by forgiving the belligerent is self-defense. If a victim gives up her anger against a belligerent, she gives up a psychological tool for preventing further abuse.[242] This is why Joseph Butler argues that the purpose of resentment is as "a weapon, put into our hands by nature, against injury, injustice, and cruelty."[243] Someone with no capacity for resentment would be ill-equipped to resist evil; likewise, someone who too willingly gives up resentment may be passive before wrongdoing.

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[239] See Stephen Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," *Ethics* 88, no. 1 (1977): 36–49, https://doi.org/10.1086/292054.
[240] Snow, "Self-Forgiveness," 77.
[241] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 65; see also Haber, *Forgiveness*, 89; Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," 505.
[242] For a discussion of this point as it pertains to literal domestic abuse, see Judith A. Boss, "Throwing Pearls to the Swine: Women, Forgiveness, and the Unrepentant Abuser," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Power and Domination* (Brill, 1997), 235–47, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004458956_025.
[243] Joseph Butler, *Joseph Butler: Fifteen Sermons and Other Writings on Ethics*, ed. David McNaughton, 1st edition (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2017), 71.

Third, giving up on resentment without justification potentially communicates something disrespectful about the offender. Solomon Schimmel argues, on this point, that "To give [the belligerent offender] the gift of love, notwithstanding his insistence on identifying with evil, is equivalent to not holding him responsible and accountable for what he has done, and thus to treat him as less than a morally autonomous human being."[244] We recognize that resentment is unjustified when its object is small children; they do not have the kind of autonomy necessary for responsibility. The concern is that, by forgiving the belligerent offender, the victim treats him like a child—as one who is not really responsible for his behavior. This constitutes a failure to respect him.

The Essential Case

Now that we have the general case against forgiving a belligerent offender, I want to draw our focus to its most essential elements to highlight the features that are supposed to make such forgiveness impermissible in *every* case. The following story is constructed to help highlight the answer to this question. Though the example is fictional, I take it to represent recognizably human behavior:

> Sarah and Peter are old friends. Over time, however, Sarah notices arrogance creeping into Peter's character—and with it, a quick temper. As time passes, Peter's character becomes so shabby that Sarah is one of the few left willing to tolerate him. Her commitment to Peter's flourishing drives her to speak plainly to him over coffee about who he has become. Despite winsome entreaties, Peter flies into a rage and throws a cup at her, badly damaging her face. Sarah is hospitalized, permanently blind in one eye; Peter is convicted and jailed. Upon recovery, Sarah immediately visits and, behind strong glass, speaks with him indignantly about what happened. Peter makes clear that he is unrepentant, he blames her for his current residence, and, were he free, he'd blind her other eye as well.
>
> Leaving, Sarah carefully reflects on what has happened and decides to forgive Peter. She will not tell him this, as she believes it would inflame his self-destructive rage. Nevertheless, she *does* forgive him. She recognizes that what Peter did was a moral outrage, that it was degrading to her as a person, and that there could be no excuse or justification for the damage he did to her. She also recognizes that, in forgiving, she must overcome her

[244] Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time*, 89.

resentment toward him, even if that means undermining her own vindicating anger. With this decision she determines to regularly visit Peter in jail.

Let us suppose Sarah forgives for what we can call personal reasons. For example, for a

> Relational Reason: Peter is her brother, and she believes her anger will undermine her ability to love him if left unaddressed; or
>
> Religious Reason: Sarah believes that extending forgiveness to others, even the unrepentant, reflects the beauty of God's grace; or
>
> Humanitarian Reason: Sarah pities Peter and believes that if she embraces her anger, as he deserves, there would truly be no one left capable of caring about his flourishing or even his life.

Whichever of these is her reason, Sarah understands herself to be acting for Peter's sake by choosing to forgive on the basis of her deep commitments.

Sarah's forgiveness would not meet the necessary moral conditions we've surveyed. Griswold remarks of the very idea of such a case as this: "I find [it] psychologically implausible and morally baffling; *why* forswear resentment under such conditions?"[245] As to the psychological question, I take relational, religious, and humanitarian reasons to be realistic; Sarah has guiding values which lead her, in tandem with her accurate moral judgments, to desire to overcome her resentment. The moral question is more difficult. How would the values outlined in the previous section apply to this specific case?

Given the particulars of the case, we can set concerns for self-defense back from the foreground. Though self-defense is usually a significant consideration, Peter is fully restrained, and Sarah is careful not to expose herself to another attack. Further, our goal is to discern what is most essential to the argument against forgiving a belligerent, and we can see that in many cases self-defense is not a live concern. The context in which an offense occurs may make the tool of anger unnecessary. For example, if the offender is in a distant country from which he will never

[245] Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 65.

return, but made clear upon departing that he stands by his offense, forgiveness is a live issue while self-defense is not. Another case may be when the victim stands above the offender in a vastly unequal power dynamic; there is no danger to the victim's safety whether she is angry or not. Thus, though there are many cases in which concern for self-defense is vital, it is a nonessential part of the categorical argument against forgiving belligerents.

This leaves us with what I take to be the basic, essential argument: Sarah is wrong to forgive Peter because she is violating the requirements of respect for herself and respect for him.[246] Even if Sarah is in no danger from Peter, and even if she believes that what he did was wrong, she is not justified in giving up her resentment. It is always wrong to forgive a belligerent offender because it is degrading to the victim, who deserves to be fought for, and it is degrading to the offender, who deserves to be treated as an autonomous person by being opposed.

Problems for the Moral Justice Conception of Forgiveness

The basic argument against forgiving belligerents reveals that, at core, those who take the Moral Justice view of forgiveness consider respect decisive: they condemn unilateral forgiveness because it is incompatible with how persons deserve to be treated. This line of reasoning has surprising conclusions, as may be seen from Brandon Warmke's critique of Hieronymi's response to the paradox of forgiveness.[247] Recall that Hieronymi's solution is to use the offender's apology as the rational basis for disassociating the offender from his offense. Warmke argues that, if this correct, then, at least sometimes, an offender's sincere apology undermines the

[246] Some might press that there is also a concern that forgiving a belligerent offender counts as condonation of the offense. Several authors raise objections to this idea. See Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 112–17; Oliver Hallich, "Can the Paradox of Forgiveness Be Dissolved?," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16, no. 5 (2013): 110; Cheshire Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," *Ethics* 103, no. 1 (1992): 85.
[247] Brandon Warmke, "Articulate Forgiveness and Normative Constraints," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 4 (2015): 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2015.1101305.

victim's justification for viewing the offender as a threat.[248] In that case, since the judgment which undergirds resentment has been removed, the victim ought to revise his resentment. Offenders thus sometimes have "the power to *rationally obligate* victims to forgive" by giving an apology.[249] In such cases, it is not just unforgiveness that may be determined by the victim's behavior, but forgiveness too. As long as the offender still associates with her offense, then it would be disrespectful to personhood to forgive her, because that is not what she or the victim deserves. Conversely, if the offender can make it sufficiently unreasonable to identify her with her offense, then the victim is obligated to forgive her because that is what she deserves. There is a sense, therefore, in which the victim's justification to forgive is in the hands of the offender; *the offender*'s behavior determines when forgiveness is forbidden or required by respect for persons.[250] It does not matter whether the victim has commitments of the kind we attributed to Sarah, such as an important relationship with the offender, religious convictions, or humanitarian values. The appropriateness of her moral emotions is settled not by these personal reasons, but by respect for personhood itself. This seems to me an unacceptable conclusion. If a victim were actually to think about forgiveness this way, believing her feelings of resentment must be justified only by what each person deserves, it would be hard not to conclude that she has been alienated from her moral emotions.

There is another problem for Moral Justice accounts, articulated by Cheshire Calhoun. She writes:

> Those [writers] who find repentance important do so because sincere repentance makes forgiveness both risk free and rational. In undergoing a repentant change of heart, the

[248] Warmke, 503–6.
[249] Warmke, 503.
[250] The ability of the offender to obligate the victim to forgive is an explicit feature the accounts of Schimmel and Gamlund, and ambiguous in Griswold where forgiveness is described as sometimes "what the offender is due." Schimmel, *Wounds Not Healed by Time*, 46, 72; Espen Gamlund, "Supererogatory Forgiveness," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 53, no. 6 (2010): 544, https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2010.526320; Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 2007, 69.

> wrongdoer makes herself someone who will not injure us this way again. In breaking the connection between her wrongdoing and her true self, the reformed person ceases to be an appropriate object of resentment.[251]

Calhoun argues that the safety of this sanitized version of forgiveness undermines our commonsense belief that forgiveness is an act of generosity.[252] Even more critically, this kind of forgiveness "dodges the hard task of forgiving while keeping the injury's inescapable connection to the agent in full view."[253] The deepest forgiveness, she suggests, is extended even when the offender's "true self meant it and will not retract what she did. [When] she would do it again."[254] Forgiveness is unambiguously a gift when there is no disassociating the offender from her wrongdoing—when the forgiver has no assurances which undermine her resentment. In other words, when the offender is *still an enemy*. Yet this is precisely when forgiveness is ruled out by the Moral Justice framework.

IV. Impersonal and Personal Reasons

My central contention is that the Moral Justice conception of forgiveness has gone awry by allowing only impersonal kinds of reasons as legitimate grounds for deciding to forgive. What is needed is room for personal reasons to be given consideration over impersonal notions of respect.

Personal Commitments as Sources of Values

As an initial characterization of personal and impersonal reasons, there is no better start than the work of Bernard Williams. The difference between these two sources is especially well-

[251] Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," 81.
[252] Calhoun, 82.
[253] Calhoun, 76.
[254] Calhoun, 95.

illustrated within the context of his famous integrity objection to act-utilitarianism.[255] Williams argues that utilitarianism threatens a person's integrity, where 'integrity' does not mean the usual sense of honesty or avoiding hypocrisy, but something closer to its sense in the phrase 'structural integrity.' A person has integrity insofar as she is distinct from the world around her as an autonomous agent; she comes to the world with her own views, her own projects, and her own commitments. To illustrate how integrity is incompatible with utilitarianism, Williams presents a now well-known thought experiment.[256] In the example, Jim, a foreigner, is given the following choice by an officer of a totalitarian regime: either Jim can execute one innocent person, or the officer will execute twenty innocents. Williams argues that, if Jim is a fully rational utilitarian, he should obviously choose to kill the single innocent; if he doesn't want to be the one to pull the trigger, that is only because he is being squeamish. Williams finds this conclusion unacceptable—though, as commentators are quick to point out, *not* because he thinks it would be the wrong decision for Jim to pull the trigger.[257] Rather, Williams's objection is that the universal, impersonal reasons of utilitarianism crowd out all other values, including Jim's own commitments not to kill innocent people. Jim, if he is a good utilitarian, gives no more weight to his commitments and moral feelings than he would to *any* one person's feelings. He should, at all times, pull those causal levers available to him which maximize utility, even where this would make him an extension of someone else's agency, such as the totalitarian captain. If someone were really to think this way, Williams argues, it would mean the loss of "a sense of one's moral

[255] J. J. C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For and Against* (Cambridge [Eng.]: University Press, 1973), 93–117.
[256] Smart and Williams, 87–98.
[257] Smart and Williams, 98; For more on Williams on integrity, see Sophie Grace Chappell, "Integrity and Demandingness," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 10, no. 3 (2007): 255–65, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-007-9073-7; Daniel D. Moseley, "Revisiting Williams on Integrity," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 48, no. 1 (March 1, 2014): 53–68, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-013-9402-0.

identity; to lose, in the most literal way, one's integrity. At this point utilitarianism alienates one from one's moral feelings."[258]

The idea at the center of Williams's argument is the notion that each person, as a person, inhabits a particular life, and that life is rightly oriented around specific goals, commitments, and relationships. We must see that each person is "identified with his actions as flowing from projects and attitudes which in some cases he takes seriously at the deepest level, as what his life is about."[259] Williams's objection is that utilitarianism requires every person to justify their personal commitments by appeal to impartial, impersonal principles, and this requires, impossibly, attaching no special significance to one's deepest values.

According to Williams, the utilitarian picture of human life is too homogeneous. Missing is recognition of what Thomas Nagel calls the different sources of reason.[260] There are, Nagel argues, several incommensurable categories of value from which we draw to make decisions, and the differences in these categories provide different kinds of reasons.[261] Though types of value can be divided several ways, a central divide lies between those values which are personal and those which are impersonal. The value we attach to the rights of those we've never met, for example, are impersonal; these depend on nothing specific to a given individual, but are instead "completely general."[262] On the other hand, commitment "to one's own projects and undertakings," such as a chosen career path, one's parents, or the decision to learn an instrument, are completely personal.[263] Nagel points out that these different categories explain a fundamental divide between how a person thinks about himself and how he thinks of other persons. Our

[258] Smart and Williams, *Utilitarianism*, 104.
[259] Smart and Williams, 116.
[260] Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge [Eng.] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 128–41.
[261] Nagel, 133.
[262] Nagel, 129.
[263] Nagel, 131.

reason for thinking it would be good for strangers we have never met to care for their children and keep their promises is that "it would be a good thing, impartially considered."[264] In your own case, however, you do not care for your loved ones and keep your promises purely out of impartial approval of their value, but because these relationships and commitments matter to you personally. Though we do recognize the value of impersonal reasons such as general utility, they are rarely our motivating reasons in the personal realm. Rather, in the personal realm we see our specific obligations and projects as bearing special relevance to each of us in particular. Susan Wolf remarks that, never acting from one's own, specific reasons, instead always acting from impersonal desires for the objective moral best "seems to require either the lack or the denial of the existence of an identifiable, personal self."[265] It is a hallmark of human persons that we each take up different projects and relationships by committing to, for example, causes, institutions, careers, families, friends, or hobbies. We see our lives, as Williams puts it, as being about these commitments. It makes no sense, therefore, to ask someone to make a decision within a personal domain of human activity while barring these basic commitments from consideration.

In speaking of a "domain" of human activity, I mean to highlight a point made by Nagel about how our sources of reason become live depending on the relevant human activity. Sometimes, only one source of reason is live. A criminal court, for example, is interested only in impartial desert, setting aside personal, relational values or considerations of universal welfare.[266] At other times, more than one source of value is in play, and we must make a judgement as best as we are able using practical wisdom. Such complications arise because humans are fundamentally "complex creatures who can view the world from many perspectives—individual,

[264] Nagel, 132.
[265] Susan Wolf, "Moral Saints," *The Journal of Philosophy* 79, no. 8 (1982): 424, https://doi.org/10.2307/2026228.
[266] Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, 136.

relational, impersonal, ideal, etc.—and each perspective presents a different set of claims."[267] If we attempt to reduce these perspectives by appealing to a potentially deeper, unifying value, distortion occurs. The rule-utilitarian, for example, might suggest that the relational values and values of commitment which a person places on her family are reducible to the value of utility because, as a rule, family-oriented behavior promotes universal welfare; but this theoretical justification, as Williams famously remarked, "provides the agent with one thought too many."[268] Instead, we ought to resist the reductionist urge and allow that different domains of human life call for different sources of value.

Our task, then, lies in discerning which values are relevant to the decision to forgive. This helps to greatly narrow the scope of our argument. We need not wade into the wider debates about impartialism in ethics; it is enough merely to show that forgiveness, in particular, is the kind of human domain in which personal reasons have primacy.

The Primacy of Personal Reasons to Forgive

The conceptual nature of resentment requires personal reasons to play a central role in victims' considerations. In his compelling essay, "Forgiveness and Impartiality," William Young argues that philosophers will always struggle to integrate the concept of forgiveness into impartial ethics like utilitarianism and Kantianism because forgiveness responds to resentment and resentment is intrinsically partial.[269] He argues:

> One resents an injury because it is an injury to *one's* interest, not because someone has been injured. *Resentment* does not speak to an equal appreciation of all moral wrongs. It reserves its sense of moral outrage for the interests of particular individuals…. An impartial ethic looks only to morally relevant differences to justify differences in moral treatment, concern, interest….The morally significant abstracts from the particular concerns of the

[267] Nagel, 134.
[268] Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1st Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 18.
[269] William E. Young, "Resentment and Impartiality," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 1998): 103–30.

> individual, focusing on some general feature, property, or principle, under which she appears as one among many. [270]

The victim's resentment, her "accusing anger," is an intrinsically personal emotion, directed toward her particular life and relationships.[271] Universal respect may produce anger for the sake of a distant stranger, but it will not produce resentment. Because forgiveness responds most centrally to resentment, the decision to forgive must likewise involve considerations which are personal. Otherwise, the framing of forgiveness becomes unintelligibly warped. Instead of being a decision about *you* forgiving *me*, it becomes a decision about *someone* forgiving *someone*. If forgiveness were impersonal in this way, any two people in the same situation who respect persons ought to make the same decision to forgive or not. But this is not the nature of forgiveness, as Sussman observes. There is no implicit claim in Sarah's forgiveness of Peter which calls on all other likewise offended victims to forgive.[272] A victim's judgment that she ought to forgive extends only to her own case; it does not universalize. This is because her judgment stems from considerations of her own commitments, and these are inherently specific to her.[273]

The particularity of forgiveness reveals what has gone wrong in the essential argument against forgiving a belligerent offender: it rests on a mistake about the role of respect in a deeply

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[270] Young, 108.
[271] This ecumenical description of resentment is taken from Brudholm, *Resentment's Virtue*, 10. Further evidence for Young's claims about the intrinsic particularity of resentment comes from Martha Nussbaum. In her critique of anger (and forgiveness), she suggests approvingly that, for those who refuse to live under the irrationality of resentment, there "is likely to be a tendency to focus on the general rather the particular." Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 29–30.
[272] Sussman, "Kantian Forgiveness," 104.
[273] There are parallels here with Williams's argument that the "Kantian emphasis on moral impartiality… [provides] ultimately too slim a sense in which any projects are mine at all." Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1982, 12. Note that for some writers, though they take resentment to be the paradigm emotion addressed by forgiveness, they allow that other hard feelings might be in play instead, such as sadness or loathing. So long as these emotions maintain an accusing element, I do not think they change the element of personal particularity needed for my argument. For a discussion of the different emotions relevant in the literature, see Warmke, Nelkin, and McKenna, *Forgiveness and Its Moral Dimensions*, 2021, 10.

personal domain. The sort of recognition self-respect the essential argument depends on is utterly impersonal. Robin Dillon describes this impersonal conception of respect, writing:

> A person, insofar as it is worthy of respect, is an exceedingly thin being wholly constituted by the possession of moral rights, or by the capacity for rationally autonomous moral agency, or by self-consciousness…. The striking feature of the standard conception is that in viewing us as worthy of respect it abstracts from all particularities, regarding the details of ourselves as irrelevant to our intrinsic moral worth. The morally significant feature of persons is something abstract and generic, not what distinguishes one individual from another…. What one is to respect is… a generalized self.[274]

Impersonal reasons can universally obligate precisely because they depend on nothing particular about individuals. Thus, in appealing to self-respect as the grounds for forbidding forgiveness of a belligerent, writers implicitly draw on a de-personalized version of self-respect. Though I agree that self-respect is vital in the decision to forgive, I do not agree with self-respect of this impersonal sort. Rather, self-respect of a personal variety is what especially maters here. As Dillon writes,

> One cannot be a person without being some particular person, and among one's responsibilities as [a] person is to live a life of one's own. An individual with *personal recognition self-respect* strives to live according to a conception of a life that is worthwhile for *her*, a 'self-ideal' that gives expression not only to the fact that she is a person but also to the ideals, aspirations, commitments, and 'points of no return' that define her as the particular person she is.[275]

In contrast to the generic value of *impersonal* self-respect, *personal* self-respect is a recognition of the value of one's own commitments. Forgiving a belligerent may be in tension with impersonal self-respect, but it is fully consistent with personal self-respect (given the right personal values). Sarah's resentment toward Peter's wrongdoing exists not because he hurt 'a person,' but because he hurt *her*. In forgiving Peter because of her deep commitments to

[274] Citations removed; brackets in original. Robin S. Dillon, "Toward a Feminist Conception of Self-Respect," *Hypatia* 7, no. 1 (1992): 57.
[275] Robin S. Dillon, "How to Lose Your Self-Respect," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1992): 134.

relational, religious, or humanitarian values, Sarah affirms that these, her "ground projects," have the final say, not his offense.[276] Forgiving for her own reasons expresses respect for the ideals that shape her life—in sharp contrast to the offender's message of disregard.

The concept of personal respect also gives us a response to the suggestion that forgiving a belligerent is disrespectful to the offender. The argument is that Peter is actively associating himself with his offense, so failing to identify him with his offense amounts to a failure to respect his autonomy. In response, we can point out that, from the standpoint of personal reasons, Sarah's forgiveness depends on what matters to her, not on her ability to undermine the legitimacy of her resentment. When she forgives for a personal reason—because she does not want Peter to be forsaken—she is not even attempting to disassociate Peter from his wrongdoing. His ongoing, isolating endorsement of evil, is, in fact, part of what convinces her to forgive. She forgives him while he is still an enemy *because* he is still an enemy. His autonomous choice is what makes forgiveness so pressing, and so there is nothing patronizing about her choice.

I want to emphasize, however, that though Sarah's decision to forgive does not violate her self-respect, her decision to forgive is not cheap. Peter can no longer harm her physically, but she may still endure verbal insults and humiliation. Yet, it is her prerogative to shoulder these costs. As Michael Slote observes, there is a profound "self-other symmetry" in our moral commonsense; there are many cases where what is wrong to do to others is permissible and even sometimes admirable to do to ourselves.[277] I may not push another in front of a trolley to save five lives, yet I may jump myself; I may get much more pleasure out of a dessert than my wife, yet I'm free to give it away to her. Where self-sacrifice is concerned, our happiness, within

[276] Williams's preferred term. See especially Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1982, Chapter One.
[277] Michael Slote, "Morality and Self-Other Asymmetry," *Journal of Philosophy* 81, no. 4 (1984): 183, https://doi.org/10.2307/2026119.

limits, is ours to dispense with. Thus, even where forgiveness is costly, it is the victim's freedom to extend.

The Role of Impersonal Reasons

Despite the primacy of personal reasons, it is important to see that there remains an indispensable role for impersonal reasons to play in understanding victims' moral emotions. For, suppose there is a person who is victim to a minor offense—say, carelessly knocking a hot beverage over—and he responds with utter rage, sustained over several weeks. Clearly the level of the victim's anger is unwarranted; it is completely out of proportion to the offense. Likely the victim has too high a view of himself, or too low a view of the perpetrator to take such offense. But this is just to say that the victim's anger is undeserved, and isn't desert exactly the kind of impersonal category I've been arguing ought to take a subordinate role in forgiving?[278]

On the contrary, what such cases show is that impersonal reasons play a moderating role over our moral emotions. The victim of beverage spilling ought to moderate his anger because its current level is undeserved. But moderating one's resentment is not the same thing as forgiving. If the victim is unreasonably angered, he may withdraw to compose himself and to lower his anger down to an appropriate level; when he returns, however, he may still confront the offender, and forgiveness may still be needed. Impersonal concerns for desert thus require proper emotional moderation, and thereby potentially make way for forgiveness, by that moderation is not itself forgiveness.

In addition to this moderating role, impersonal reasons also come into play as a backstop in the decision to forgive. Impersonal reasons are a motivation of last resort in the decision to forgive, because they tend to represent the bare minimum in our treatment of others. By analogy,

[278] I am thankful to Nancy Snow for raising this objection in conversation.

though I treat my parents well for personal reasons of affection, the impersonal values of utility and justice remain legitimate constraints in the absence of affection: I ought to treat my parents well *at least* because of utility and justice. Likewise, impersonal considerations have a role in setting minimum constraints on forgiveness. One can adopt, for example, Murphy's suggestion that the fact that all people need forgiveness at some point in their lives establishes an imperfect duty to forgive: everyone ought to forgive at least some offenses, though it is up to us which ones.[279] Such a duty is utterly generic, completely universal, and serves as a backstop, requiring forgiveness 'if for no other reason' by disassociating offender from offense. It says nothing about the particular victim or offender. This impersonal duty therefore leaves room for personal reasons to guide decisions to forgive in specific cases.

Thus, though there is a place for impersonal reasons in the decision to forgive, they serve only a secondary function. Yet, as we saw from the essential case, the Moral Justice conception of forgiveness does not allow for impersonal reasons to play such a minimal role. It positively rules out forgiving, as a universal requirement, in cases where the offender deserves not to be forgiven. As I have argued, this is exactly where the view has gone wrong. Forgiveness is not the right kind of domain of human behavior for impersonal reasons to have a dominant role.

The Upshot

To summarize so far: I have been arguing that there are two legitimate pools of reasons that can justify forgiveness. Reasons drawn from personal commitments and projects ought to be added to impersonal considerations of respect. Further, although impersonal considerations serve as a backstop as a reason to forgive, they are usually subordinate to personal reasons. Sarah's decision to overcome her resentment toward Peter is defensible because it flows from her

[279] Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 1988, 32.

commitments. It may not be what Peter deserves—nor what Sarah deserves—but she is not, in this domain, bound to act only as each deserves. Her moral emotions need not be hostage to Peter's cooperation. Rather, they are free to flow from what she most importantly cares about.

Before proceeding, there is a pair of implications of the account I'm proposing that should be made explicit. First, we have an explanation of why it is so tricky to critique someone for forgiving. If I may forgive an offender just because I value preserving the relationship, it becomes difficult for someone outside that relationship to discern whether I have chosen correctly. It is almost surely something that we won't know in advance or in principle. Those such as a siblings or close friends might understand me and my projects profoundly enough to interject themselves (they may know me better than I know myself), but for others, my own reasons to forgive may be opaque.[280]

Second, an account of forgiveness which considers both impersonal and personal reasons can better explain how forgiveness is elective. Unlike generic respect for persons, which does not vary, the source of a victim's personal reasons will change depending on what commitments and ideals she possesses. Though some of her own values are not directly voluntary, they are, nevertheless, her own to integrate into a life. Insofar as she is free to choose how to integrate or endorse her commitments, it is up to her which personal reasons she is willing to act on when deciding whether to forgive.

V. Implications for the Narrative Self

The notion of integrity, in William's sense, shows why personal reasons which reflect one's own commitments are so important: Acting from one's particular ideals enforces

[280] In his discussion of moral luck, Williams argues for a nearby point, suggesting that it is possible to for a person to have justification for a decision which cannot not justify him to others. Williams, *Moral Luck*, 1982, 23.

boundaries between oneself and the world. What I want to show now is how this leads naturally back to our wider discussion of narrative. To see this, we must notice that for a person to have the capacity to care about his integrity, she must first see herself as living through time with a degree of stability in her basic commitments. These include, at the extreme, what she takes to be most forbidden.

Josiah Royce argues that a person, in considering his commitments and the direction of his life, must naturally determine what his boundaries of behavior are; these borders are set in relation to the ideals which give his life meaning and direction.[281] If he violates a final boundary—or, to reuse Dillion's language, passes one of his "points of no return"—he is committing a kind of suicide: "a deliberate wrecking of what makes life, for himself, morally worthwhile."[282] Eleonore Stump likewise suggests that the grievous wrongdoer is stained by a kind of "moral elasticity," and he must live on knowing that he lacks unbreachable limits in his commitments.[283] It is not just that the wrongdoer in such cases will go on feeling guilty for violating morality, but that he has violated himself. He is a traitor to his ideals. A person's final boundaries provide the rest of his actions with "resoluteness and clearness" because he orients himself against those hard limits.[284] Conversely, the self-traitor must live knowing that he has relinquished guiding landmarks, that he has the capacity to override what he thought was absolute, that he cannot be counted on to be loyal even to himself. If he cannot know himself faithful even in the clearest case, what confidence can he have in any of his smaller commitments?

[281] Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (New York (State): Macmillan, 1913), 246, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.b3315710.
[282] Royce, 244.
[283] Stump, *Atonement*, 58.
[284] Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 247.

Suppose, however, that the self-traitor sees the act he is about to commit and also that it would violate his deepest commitments. Could he, to avoid hypocrisy, simply change his ideals prior to committing the act? If he sets aside that ideal, then at the time of committing the act there would be no contradiction between his behavior and commitments. But, of course, this is not really an option. Our basic commitments can provide orientation amidst shifting changes precisely because they are the sort of things that cannot be easily uprooted. Abruptly rejecting allegiance to a basic idea is itself a betrayal of constancy; it expresses a failure to take up one's ideals as rooted parts of oneself which cannot not be integrated or amputated at will.

The extreme case of the self-traitor illuminates something about the essential nature of integrity. Integrity is necessarily a matter of one's *sustained* commitments. To care about one's integrity requires caring about one's ideals not at any given moment, but over time. If there is to be a change in a person's ideals, it is important that she finds continuity in the transition, so that the old commitments are transformed rather than abandoned. Integrity has no home in the sort of person who is constantly choosing directions, beliefs, and projects which are new and contradictory to the old. Such a person is too elastic, too conforming to whims and fads to have a firm sense of herself. To have clear distinctions between herself and the world, as integrity requires, she must first have an identifiable self with fixed ideals and boundaries which give distinctive shape to her life.

It is essential to integrity, therefore, that a person has a perspective which is both backward and forward looking. She must understand what her stable ideals have been and who she will be in light of them. This perspective necessarily involves giving weight to her past actions and judgments as bearing on herself now; she must take responsibility for her own history. Integrity entails not just seeing her present viewpoint and commitments as distinctively

her own, but also seeing her life, as a whole, as something in which she is uniquely invested and for which she is uniquely responsible.

It follows that integrity opens each person up to a form of disappointment which is not available to spectators (what Williams calls "agent-regret.")[285] A spectator to misfortune can see its badness, objectively speaking, but only a participant in misfortune can feel that it is also bad for *him.* Williams illustrates the difference through an example of a truck driver with a passenger riding in the front seat.[286] Through no fault of his own, the driver strikes and kills a child. Though the driver and passenger are equally blameless, only one can regret the misfortunate as his own. Williams remarks that "there is something special about [the driver's] relation to this happening, something which cannot merely be eliminated by the consideration that it was not his fault."[287] Indeed, he argues, if the driver were not bothered by the accident merely because he was blameless, we should consider this not just callous, but a failure to take full responsibility for himself.[288] The driver's regret expresses that he cares about having a good life, and that he is rightly dismayed when he is moved, even involuntarily, away from that ideal.

Regret emotionally expresses concern for one's own integrity; it affirms a person's special responsibility to herself. There is a robust connection between this stance and narrative thinking. While not reducible to narrative analysis, we weigh regret and integrity within a narrative backdrop. One way to see this is by returning to Galen Strawson's work to see how these concepts are rejected by the great opponent of narrative thinking.

[285] Williams, "Moral Luck," 1982, 27.
[286] Williams, 28.
[287] Williams, 28.
[288] Williams, 28.

Consider, for example, guilt as a form of regret. Strawson writes that such feelings are "essentially superficial, essentially self-indulgent… and above all petty."[289] The unpleasantness of such feelings might occasionally motivate some to avoid wrongdoing, he argues, but that is irrelevant. In a particularly bold passage, Strawson states:

> As for the supposed instrumental value of guilt—the belief that one has done something wrong can motivate one to act without any trace of the feeling of guilt, and I would back clear belief over guilt any day, if there is any hope of the wrongdoer making things better. And consider dear Lucy, who has, regrettably, performed some action A. Suppose that she is thinking that A-ing is wrong, and suppose she has acquired a particularly vivid sense that A-ing is wrong specifically because she herself has A-d in the past. This can be so without her being in any way disposed to fix on or give special weight or attention to the fact that she herself has A-d.[290]

Strawson is suggesting that one's own past connection to evil should be no matter of special concern in the moral life. There is no need after committing evil to think of oneself as tainted or corrupted, and in fact such thinking is actually self-indulgent. Strawson holds that it is better to always feel regret as a spectator rather than as the acting agent—better to feel, impersonally, that *someone's* behavior was regrettable rather than *one's own* behavior.

Strawson's analysis makes evil utterly discrete. An evil happens at a specific time, caused by a specific person, but that is no reason, he thinks, to view it as bearing especially on the present moments of any future persons—not even the perpetrator. There is nothing holistic in this analysis, nothing that sees offenses (or other behaviors) as being bound up organically in the greater whole of a life. Within such a context-free framework, it is hard to see space for integrity because such concerns are about a person's commitments and actions as they appear within a greater story.

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[289] Galen Strawson, "Episodic Ethics," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 60 (2007): 93, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1358246107000057.
[290] Strawson, 97.

In contrast to Strawson's view of guilt, Williams insists that "it would a kind of insanity never to experience sentiments of this kind towards anyone, and it would be an insane concept of rationality which insisted that a rational person never would."[291] Guilt, and its accompanying desire to 'make things right,' need not be justified only by appeal to future instrumental value. It can be justified by its value in giving coherence to one's life. This point is pressed in a different context by David Velleman in his discussion of learning from one's misfortunes.[292] Part of the purpose of learning from one's mistakes, he argues, is to learn from them *as* one's own mistakes. By integrating the mistake into a life and learning from it, one confers upon it instrumental value which "alters its meaning, its significance in the story of one's life."[293] If we held Strawson's view of the matter, and took one's own connection to past misfortune to be irrelevant, then we might conclude instead that the point of learning from one's mistakes is just to produce more future value. But if that were true, then reforming myself should bear no more significance to me than reforming any one person; preventing a group of troubled youth from committing the same mistake might be less self-indulgent than tending to my own character. On the contrary, the desire to give new meaning to *his* misfortune is at the heart of the truck driver's misery. The accident seems pointless; there is nothing to learn, no way to imbue the child's death with new meaning. His regret, therefore, is not just about learning to have better control in the future, but also about finding some way to bring resolution to the past, and thereby turn that misfortune in his story into something meaningful.

At stake is not only responsibility for one's own life, but also the stakes others have in that life. Strawson seems to suggest that the truck driver ought, from the beginning, to take a

[291] Williams, "Moral Luck," 1982, 29.
[292] Velleman, "Well-Being and Time," 1991, 150.
[293] Velleman, 151.

spectator's stance toward the accident rather than a participant's. Between these two stances there is a hybrid. The truck diver's mother, for example, may feel anguish over the accident because she sees the way it has damaged her son's life. There is a sense in which she is both an observer and participant in his feelings of guilt, which is possible because, unlike a stranger, she has a special stake in his life. On Strawson's view, if the driver's guilty feelings are "petty," then how much more hers, when she is not even the perpetrator? But surely this is incorrect—surely Strawson's view would amount to denying that the driver and his mother are justified in caring about his life in particular.

The notion that one ought to take a detached perspective toward one's own past, or that of a loved one, is form of the mistake I have been arguing against throughout this chapter. The error lies in thinking that a person, if she is rational, must feel impersonally toward her own life as one among many.

The narrative view of a life avoids this mistake by being irreducibly personal. A life story is indispensably about a particular person and life; in conceiving of myself through the lens of narrative, I cannot take on a universal, objective perspective. I must necessarily take up a perspective which is my own. From that vantage point, I see the goods which guide and orient my life; I know who I am by taking stock of my proximity to what I care about most deeply. And what I care about will be informed by my history. Some landmarks which provide orientation were laid in the past: experiencing my mother's gracious generosity as a child set down for me a marker of who I must become to have a full, vibrant character. Other landmarks orient us from our future. I see my present labor for a doctoral degree as heading toward, and finding significance in, its final completion. Still other landmarks tend to occupy especially present concerns: sating hunger and thirst, relieving sudden pain, enjoying the company of a dear friend.

It is in relation to these kinds of goods that I come to see my life as moral or immoral, drifting or progressing, growing or decaying, miserable or happy, and, ultimately, pointless or worthwhile. They are the landmarks of a particular life, and they crumble away when pulled out and considered atomistically, without context or roots. What it means for *me* to be like my mother is not the same as what it means for a person to have a character like the one my mother has. My concern is not to embody an abstract ideal, but to become who she has been, as she is in relationship with me. That is a guiding light which can orient no other life.[294] Such landmarks tell a person what his particular life is about, what kind of story he, and no other, inhabits.

Guilt, gratitude, resentment, regret, and other historical emotions are bound up with our guiding values, and are therefore expressions of integrity. They represent a commitment to seeing oneself as a person with a whole life rather than an impersonal object happening to exist at this moment. They require having a perspective of a life not merely as a disinterested spectator, but as a participant with the highest stake there could be. Likewise, forgiveness and revenge, practices which act on these emotions, work to repair a life. These recontextualize an offense by adding to it endings of reconciliation, justice, penance, triumph, or satisfaction. In this way, forgiveness and revenge are tangible practices of narrative redemption.

VI. Choosing Forgiveness over Revenge

One way to summarize what I have been trying to show throughout this dissertation is that forgiveness and revenge are somewhat peculiar moral practices. When we survey the vast field of vicious behaviors, such as cowardice, envy, or cruelty, we can evaluate them straightforwardly as wrong actions. We don't need to know the context of cowardly behavior to

[294] Save, perhaps, my siblings'.

know it is bad. But if I am correct in my characterization of forgiveness and revenge, then they are not like this. When we evaluate a specific act of forgiveness and revenge we have to first know the story in which it takes place, the life and values which give it shape and meaning. This peculiarity arises because the victim's decision is made from a position of judgment over the offender: she has been wronged and so it is up to her how she will respond. We do not properly judge specific acts of forgiveness or revenge, but rather the specific forgiver or avenger herself.

Examples are helpful here. Consider the case, mentioned earlier by Snow, of a victim of abuse by his romantic partner. He loves her, and so he forgives her despite her abuse; this is, as I've argued, a perfectly apt reason to forgive. But this does not prevent us from judging that his (romantic) love is misplaced. Given that he loves her it makes sense that he forgives her, but he should not love her. Likewise, the medieval Icelander's revenge is utterly coherent: his care for his loved ones by preserving their honor is an appropriate reason to take vengeance. Yet the value his society assigns to honor is misplaced. In both cases, the proper level at which to aim our disapproval is not at the level of practice, but at the level of the victim's particular commitments.

This is why, despite my insistence on the personal nature of the decision to forgive, forgiveness is nevertheless, in many cases, a strong obligation. To give a commonly discussed example, those in the Christian faith are thought to have a duty to forgive.[295] This duty stems from a basic commitment to a life which imitates God's love; as Paul Lauritzen puts it, for the Christian "a transvaluation of values takes place… the believer redefines his interests in relation to God."[296] This ordering of values before God leads to giving up the right to construe offenders

[295] Cf. Mat. 6:14-15, 18:21-22; Mk 11:25; Lk. 6:37; Col 3:13; Ep 4:23
[296] Paul Lauritzen, "Forgiveness: Moral Prerogative or Religious Duty?," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 15, no. 2 (1987): 152.

as permanently alienated or offensive, instead pursuing "personal intimacy with God [by] sharing of view-points… [committing] to see as God sees and loving as God loves."[297] Given that the Christian's religious commitment is public, he gives others the right to call him to account—those in his community have the right to expect forgiveness of his enemies. Such a person has freely relinquished what is elective about forgiveness.

I am suggesting that when we evaluate forgiveness and revenge, commitments are more pertinent than behavior. Showing the wrongness of revenge, for example, requires knowing the story in which it occurs. That there exist divergent narrative frameworks which shape life narratives is not an insurmountable barrier. For, if vengeance is wrong for human creatures, then there ought to be at least some shared grounds for objecting to it which appeal to the basic commitments of a victim. Johan Brännmark writes, in this connection, that holistic explanations of a life, such as narrativism,

> will have an inherent tendency toward at least a modest relativism since the "kinds of life" that are available to us will be tied to the narrative resources that are culturally given to us. We do, however, share a common biology and it can therefore still make sense to speak of something like "the human condition."[298]

Given the cultural horizons of the medieval Icelander, he has narrative resources to see himself only as dishonorable if he does not take vengeance. A decision to forgive would likely be arbitrary or cowardly, unintegrated into a life which sees no value in loving an enemy. As Brännmark suggests, this does not mean the Icelander is fully outside our own community of reason. No two human groups could be. So long as we share in common a human life, informed

[297] Marilyn Adams, "Forgiveness: A Christian Model," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 8, no. 3 (July 1, 1991): 292, https://doi.org/10.5840/faithphil19918319.
[298] Brännmark, "Good Lives," 226.

by the biological and psychological facts of human nature, we will have purchase on one another with at least some of our reasons.[299]

Arguing against revenge thus requires something difficult. It first means taking up the hard task of really understanding another person's commitments. If this empathetic work is successful, then we might move on to the delicate work of shifting those commitments. This entails not a destructive denial of the ideals which shape his life, but rather (to use Augustinian language) a shift toward re-ordered loves. The motivating love beneath the Icelander's desire for steadfast revenge is, by all lights, good. What he requires is to see that love vindicated through better means than vengeance, so that his commitment to his loved ones is elevated and his commitment to social honor diminished.

It is difficult to know, without significant sociological knowledge, how such a conversion would take place in the extreme case of the Icelander. Fortunately, for most people the task of conversion takes place between people sharing largely overlapping frameworks of meaning. For these more common cases, there is useful advice to be found in the work of Linda Zagzebski. She argues that our admiration of exemplars provides the foundation for our conception of a good life.[300] Though we begin only by encountering exemplars in person, she suggests that our encounters with them in narrative, both historical and fictional, play an invaluable role as well.[301] Through narrative, we see and admire goodness directly.

Applied to the present case of forgiveness and revenge, we have stories available of exemplary forgivers. Consider figures like the priest Hugh O'Flaherty who spent World War II

[299] For further discussion of disagreements across traditions, see especially Chapter Ten in Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).
[300] Linda Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), chap. one, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190655846.001.0001.
[301] Zagzebski, chap. three.

hiding and protecting thousands of potential victims of the Nazis in Rome.[302] Upon Rome's liberation, the Nazi general who tried many times to have O'Flaherty and his wards killed was imprisoned for war crimes. In response, O'Flaherty not only rescued the general's family, but was his lone visitor for years, eventually baptizing him in his cell. For a more recent narrative, we have the story of the survivors and family of the victims of the Charlestown Church racial shooting.[303] They came to the shooter's trial and freely extended their forgiveness, urging him to repent his wrongdoing, wishing his good. For both stories, it is hard for me to see who could possibly deny the goodness of such forgivers. It is telling that even Martha Nussbaum, avowed enemy of forgiveness, felt the need to address and attempt to disarm the Charlestown exemplars by suggesting that they might fit into her account "in its spirit."[304] Even she feels the weight of admiration above the demands of theory. Augustine and Aquinas agreed that the proper word for a person's goodness, experienced in full clarity, is "glory."[305] I can think of no better word for these great forgivers. Their stories, despite involving grievous suffering, gives a rare glimpse of pure goodness. Is, likewise, revenge "the greatest delight and glory," as Milovan Djilas says?[306] I do not believe so, not even in the great Icelandic sagas. There is always a murkiness to revenge, a fear of being found out, of being brought low in return. Revenge spreads around suffering but rarely resolves it.

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[302] "The Work Continues," Monsignor Hugh O'Flaherty, accessed December 1, 2022, http://msgrhughoflaherty.50webs.com/chapter11.html.
[303] Martin, "Documentary About Charleston Church Shooting Explores Forgiveness"; Nikita Stewart and Richard Pérez-Peña, "In Charleston, Raw Emotion at Hearing for Suspect in Church Shooting," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2015, sec. U.S., https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/20/us/charleston-shooting-dylann-storm-roof.html.
[304] Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*, 78.
[305] Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiæ of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd Edition (Kevin Knight, 1920), PII-II, Q132, A1; Augustine of Hippo, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, ed. Kevin Knight, trans. John Gibb, vol. 7, Nicea and Post-Nicene Fathers (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.), Tractate 100, accessed December 12, 2022, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701100.htm.
[306] Quoted in Elster, "Norms of Revenge," 1990, 870–71.

Narrative not only gives us the context for understanding what forgiveness and revenge are, but also the path for bringing a person to see the goodness of one over the other.[307] In coming to desire 'a life like that,' a person's framework of meaning shifts, so that her commitments give her new reasons in her pursuit of redemption.

VII. Conclusion

I have aimed to describe forgiveness and revenge in a realistic light. They are complicated, difficult, and, above all, deeply human practices. They reflect the peculiar, particular creatures we are; they highlight our narrative, social lives, and our need for wholeness in suffering. No explanation of forgiveness and revenge can be successful which turns a blind eye to these facts—or, worse, acknowledges them only as defects to be fought. Only once we acknowledge the human context of these practices can we begin to evaluate them.

Though I have only gestured at my own evaluation in favor of forgiveness, I have worked to demonstrate how forgiveness and revenge flow from a person's basic commitments, and that therefore forgiveness and revenge are each suited to some forms of life and not others. Convincing others to choose forgiveness over revenge thus begins with pointing to those life stories which move us to emulate their shape. By this means, a person can be brought to pursue a life with room for forgiveness.

[307] For an illuminating discussion of the relation between the desirable and admirable life, see Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, chap. six.

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