



# How Is Forgiveness Always a Gift?

Miranda Fricker

*The Graduate Center, CUNY*

*Presidential address delivered at the one hundred  
eighteenth annual Eastern Division meeting of the  
American Philosophical Association*

© 2022 The American Philosophical Association

---

---

# How Is Forgiveness Always a Gift?

Miranda Fricker  
THE GRADUATE CENTER, CUNY



*Presidential Address delivered at the one hundred eighteenth Eastern Division meeting of the American Philosophical Association on January 7, 2022.*

*A long time ago—so long that he had forgotten the author’s name—he read some memorable lines in a story about a man who is trying to translate another story, by a much more famous author. In these lines—which, my neighbour said, he still remembers to this day—the translator says that a sentence is born into this world neither good nor bad, and that to establish its character is a question of the subtlest possible adjustments, a process of intuition to which exaggeration and force are fatal. Those lines concerned the art of writing, but looking around himself in early middle age my neighbour began to see that they applied just as much to the art of living.*

– Rachel Cusk, *Outline*

In recent years the topic of forgiveness has seen a striking increase in philosophical attention. Rightly so, not merely because it had for so long been relatively neglected, but more positively because from a moral-social point of view it is an essential phenomenon. For human beings who must find ways of living together, inevitably doing each other sometimes slight, sometimes grievous wrongs, there are few moral-social needs more basic than the need for practices through which we can responsibly make peace, restore relationship, and generally get back to normal so that the ruptures of the past may stay largely in the past, and not rumble on in the form of destructive moral aftershocks.

I don’t say that forgiving is the only way to achieve this containment in the past, for there are surely other modes of response to wrongdoing that can achieve it too. A salient alternative is *just forgetting about it*, which

is sometimes genuinely possible, and sometimes perfectly sufficient—indeed it might sometimes represent all the moral-emotional attention the situation merits. Sometimes just forgetting about it is a way of quickly resuming normality by carrying on as if nothing bad has happened; and sometimes it is a way of ethically disengaging altogether—just not “going there,” even in judgment, whether as a prelude to disengaging from the relationship itself, or alternatively as a way of enabling the relationship to continue. I believe that just forgetting about it plays an important role in ethical life, because our moral-emotional energies are finite, and need expending wisely. And many of the minor wrongs in life, though ethical wrongs, are not really worth the effort of explicit moral address. As Nietzsche says of what he calls “active forgetfulness”: “The man in whom this apparatus of repression is damaged and ceases to function properly may be compared . . . with a dyspeptic—he cannot ‘have done’ with anything.”<sup>1</sup> However, when it comes to responding to a wrongdoing in a relationship where it’s really not an option to carry on as if the wrong never happened, or where it is impossible or undesirable to disengage from the relationship altogether, then a policy of just forgetting about it—though still a valuable response for small let-downs or stubborn minor flaws of character—will tend to be of limited value. For one thing, in just forgetting about it we do not work towards any increased mutual understanding of what has gone on between us, and so we make no moral progress together, and will be no better prepared either to avoid repetition in the future, or to make better sense of the problem next time it comes around. And for another, we run the risk of defaulting to just forgetting about it as an easy but ultimately cowardly option that merely postpones a difficult moral conversation.

Besides just forgetting about it, another alternative to forgiveness—and one that is especially valuable after grievous wrongdoing—is to focus on rebuilding trust as a goal in itself without any further objective of achieving the change of heart that is distinctive of forgiveness. Margaret Urban Walker, among others, has emphasized this point in her work on moral repair.<sup>2</sup> Simply drawing a line, and looking to the future in an effort to rebuild trusting relations, step by step, day by day, may be the best and sometimes the only viable option in situations where the wrongs have been too bewilderingly grievous, or widespread and structural in nature for forgiveness to seem like a reasonable psycho-social aim. When it comes to responding to wrongdoing, then, the ethical importance of forgiveness is not that it is the only or necessarily the best way to get past wrongdoing in any given case; but rather, it is a distinctively *transformative* kind of response that can sometimes draw from our deepest well of human generosity. Forgiving someone demands a fine-grained moral attention to *them*, to what they’ve done, to what it means

that they did it, and to whether or how it may be possible to get past it and resume relationship. The work of forgiveness, then, is exigent on our moral cognitive and emotional resources, which is why it need not be for every occasion; and why, among the possible responses to wrongdoing, it is special.

## THE ELECTIVITY QUESTION

One of the questions I find particularly fascinating in our philosophical discussions of forgiveness is the question—let’s call it the Electivity Question—of whether all forgiveness should be conceived of as a *gift*, and if so, how we should understand this idea. There is an easy answer to one version of the Electivity Question, which involves pointing out that there are two broad kinds of forgiveness, often labeled *conditional* and *unconditional*. The normativity of conditional forgiveness is such that one forgives appropriately only after sufficient apology; and the normativity of unconditional forgiveness is such that one can forgive appropriately regardless of whether there has been any apology at all. The answer to this version of the Electivity Question, then, would be that whereas conditional forgiveness is clearly *not* gift-like, on account of the fact that it is “earned” or rendered “due” to the wrongdoer through the performance of a sufficient apology, by contrast unconditional forgiveness is marked out precisely by its being offered as a distinctly unearned moral gratuity, and so is clearly and explicitly a moral gift. This answer is perfectly true so far as it goes; but the more difficult version of the Electivity Question that I want to address is the question whether beneath this contrast between conditional and unconditional forms of forgiving there is a unifying feature that renders *all* forgiving intrinsically gift-like, even when it is earned through apology and so modeled as “due” to the wrongdoer.

I share a positive Electivity Intuition with writers who have asserted the idea that all forgiveness has something fundamentally gift-like about it; but I find that in respect of conditional forgiveness this is far from being a philosophically straightforward task. To preview for a moment the argument that I shall be offering, my affirmative answer to the Electivity Question will involve arguing that both kinds of forgiving display what I will call the *Normativity of the Gift*. Moreover, I will argue that the particular way that forgiving someone displays the normativity of the gift involves a propensity to *pragmatic self-defeat* whenever the gift is asked for in the wrong spirit. Quite what this “wrong spirit” *is* will of course be my burden to explain.

Lucy Allais is one philosopher who has long affirmed a version of what I am calling the Electivity Intuition. In a discussion of Pamela Hieronymi's and Charles Griswold's views, Allais notes in particular that Griswold's conception of the ideally apologetic wrongdoer as *due* forgiveness stands in some tension with the fact that it does not ever seem appropriate to *demand* to be forgiven. Allais presses the issue:

Griswold says that "Under the conditions stipulated, forgiveness is commendable because it is what the offender is due" (2007: p. 69). But why is what the offender is due not something she is entitled to ask for? Why should the victim have so much discretion with respect to giving the offender what is her due?<sup>3</sup>

Allais's purpose is to put pressure on the idea that an apologetic wrongdoer might ever properly count as "due" forgiveness by pointing to the universally felt moral discomfort at the idea of a wrongdoer being entitled to *ask for forgiveness as their due*. She finds these two ideas to be irrevocably in tension, and the implication is that any account that defines forgiving as a response to some number of jointly sufficient apologetic elements will automatically generate an obligation to forgive that cannot be retrofitted to accommodate the essentially discretionary, gift-like character of forgiving.

Allais is not alone in feeling the tension. Philosophers who actively defend the idea of an obligation to forgive in conditional cases feel it too. Hieronymi regards conditional forgiveness as generating a "rational requirement" to forgive after apology has lifted the "moral threat" that is the expressive legacy of the misdeed.<sup>4</sup> And she too is sensitive to the tension, briefly flagging it in the course of her argument in order to set the puzzling tension aside. Indeed, this puzzle—let's call it the Electivity Puzzle—may seem to apply to *any* view that generates an obligation to forgive, and not only one articulated in the commanding terms of a rational requirement.

In order to get a closer look at the Electivity Intuition, we can draw on a more recent paper by Allais. Comparing the plainly gift-like nature of unconditional forgiveness with the superficially not-so-gift-like nature of the conditional form, she says of the latter,

[the forgiver] still . . . goes beyond what the wrongdoer is able to prove they deserve, so conditional forgiveness retains something gifted about it. Despite acknowledgement of fault [they are] still entitled to

let the wrongdoing inform their (affective, evaluative) view of the wrongdoer, and they are still giving the wrongdoer something that goes beyond what is their due in choosing not to do this.<sup>5</sup>

Michele Moody-Adams makes a similar point in the course of defending unconditional<sup>6</sup> forgiveness and the idea that forgiveness cannot be “rationally or morally compelled.” Moody-Adams says, “There is always room for reasonable doubt about whether a wrongdoer who gives assurances of repentance has really repented, or whether (with or without assurances) a wrongdoer will in fact be turned toward moral renewal and change.”<sup>7</sup>

I agree with both Allais and Moody-Adams that a forgiver forgives on the basis of something “unproven,” where there will always remain “room for reasonable doubt.” But as regards our Electivity Puzzle, I would suggest that the defender of the idea that sometimes an apologizer can become “due” forgiveness is quite able to concede this epistemic point. The inevitable unprovenness of an apologizer’s apparent psychological state cannot in fact tell us anything specifically about forgiveness *per se*, since a lack of provenness is not special to judging whether or not someone is truly and sufficiently apologetic. Rather, it is a feature of judging other minds quite generally. If someone takes umbrage at another’s stingingly sarcastic comment, then they ground their umbrage in something inevitably unproven; if they take pleasure in another’s expression of gratitude at being invited to their housewarming party, the pleasure is grounded in something inevitably unproven. We should therefore resist the idea that we can draw any conclusions about the special gift-like nature of forgiveness from the quite general epistemic opacity of a wrongdoer’s psychology. If there is a leap of faith at stake here as regards their state of mind, then it is a leap we make every time we respond to others on the basis of what they seem to be feeling and thinking.

However, the related claim that, in forgiving, a forgiver always gives something that goes beyond what the wrongdoer is “due” gives expression to a powerful and independent line of thought. Its power consists in our vivid sense that there is something ethically infelicitous about even the most perfectly apologetic wrongdoer demanding forgiveness *in a manner that represents the forgiveness as their due*. I think we can vindicate this sense of infelicity, but without accepting the (to my mind) unconvincing claim that a forgiver necessarily goes *beyond* what any apologetic wrongdoer *is* in fact due. In doing this I hope I honor the substance of Allais’s and Moody-Adams’s insights as regards

the Electivity Intuition—namely, that there is an essential “giftiness” or electivity at the heart of all forgiving—while still conserving our everyday deontologically infused ways of thinking and talking about conditional forgiveness in particular.

Where, then, might we locate the gift-like element in the business of forgiving? I mentioned that Hieronymi briefly flags the Electivity Puzzle, and she does so by helpfully listing some possibilities:

[T]he claim that forgiveness must be “elective” might mean that forgiveness *can’t be required or demanded by others*, that it is *supererogatory*, not something we owe to another but rather something we *freely give*. And in some sense this must be right. On the other hand, there is certainly a sense in which being “unforgiving” rightly draws blame, in which we do owe one another forgiveness. Much ink has been spilt over this issue. I won’t address the problem here, but will simply suggest why I think it so difficult. . . .<sup>8</sup>

Are any of the listed candidates promising for present purposes? I find myself attracted to none of them as potential vindications of the Electivity Intuition. First, surely forgiveness *can* sometimes be demanded by third parties—as when, weary of a destructive family feud, someone says “You *must* forgive them, or the family will be torn apart!” Second, it is very hard to characterize forgiveness as *always* supererogatory, for unless we were prepared to ditch the whole idea of conditional forgiveness, there are overwhelming reasons to think we at least sometimes incur an obligation to forgive. And, lastly, when there is such an obligation, it seems to me entirely natural to talk of *owing* it to someone to forgive them (for instance, when the condition of conditional forgiveness is satisfied). But if none of these things is the key to the fundamental giftiness of forgiving, where else should we look?

## EXTERNAL PRESSURES

Perhaps we can start to home in on the gift-like aspect of forgiveness by stepping back for a moment to scrutinize what kinds of *normative pressures* on a forgiver are clearly inappropriate because destructive of the proper spirit of forgiving. First, we should reflect on inappropriate third-party ethical pressures that are brought to bear on a potential forgiver from outside the intrinsic normativity of forgiveness itself. Many writers on forgiveness observe that it is generally wrong for third

parties to pressurize potential forgivers into forgiving, no matter how much reason to forgive has been generated by the apology. I agree that pressure is always inappropriate, though I intend this thought as compatible with the ordinary idea that third parties can sometimes quite reasonably point out reasons to forgive, even urge them, perhaps allowing their tone to become somewhat demanding towards someone who is destructively holding out on forgiveness (as in the case of the imagined family feud). One factor that can tip a reasonable form of third-party forceful exhortation to forgive into an inappropriate or bullying moral pressure is a social context of unequal power. This creates special reasons to be on the lookout for inappropriate third-party pressures, as they are decidedly real and especially pernicious in contexts of oppression.

Kathryn Norlock (2009) and Alice MacLachlan (2009) have each independently warned of the gendered ideals of forgiveness, and the consequent gendered division of moral labor. And Claudia Card, who makes a fascinating psychological observation connecting lack of social power with a risky appetite for exerting the moral power of forgiveness:

Because [forgiveness] is a power, those who are in other ways disempowered may be tempted to exercise it too freely. Victims of exploitation may be further exploited by oppressors who take advantage of this vulnerability by encouraging feelings of virtue for the readiness to forgive. Women often find themselves in this position in sexist relationships, where there is often much to forgive and women are praised for being 'understanding.'<sup>9</sup>

A related warning is issued from a specifically Christian feminist perspective by Pamela Sue Anderson, in relation to the aftermath of sexual misconduct. Anderson warns that

justice comes apart from forgiveness in socially and materially problematic ways due to our sexually specific locatedness within religious and other cultural traditions. I have in mind traditions . . . which have been deeply shaped by a denigration of women as the result of a projection of sinful behaviour onto mothers, wives, partners, mistresses, lovers. . . .<sup>10</sup>

Bringing a psychotherapeutic perspective to these issues, Sharon Lamb has argued that advocating forgiveness as a therapeutic healing mechanism carries real risks:



Concerning women, and particularly women who have been abused, the idea of offering forgiveness toward unrepentant perpetrators in an effort to help a woman free herself from anger is dangerous and plays into deep stereotypes of women's "essential" nature, stereotypes that have been harmful to women in the past.<sup>11</sup>

Most recently, Myisha Cherry has particularly emphasized the risks inherent in a moral exemplar style of ethical thought under conditions of social inequality, since holding up an admired exemplar of *forgiveness* in such a context can place undue pressure on those who already have an unjustly muffled voice with which to protest wrongful treatment, effectively disempowering them and bypassing their own powers of moral rationality. Cherry says: "I reject the appeal to exemplars of forgiveness on the part of those in positions of power in order to persuade those with less (or members of minorities that can be muscled by majorities) to forgive."<sup>12</sup>

Sometimes a powerful cocktail of different sorts of external pressure can become concentrated within a particular set of personal relationships, such as those within a family, to produce a maximal interpersonal moral coercion to forgive. In Tara Westover's personal life story entitled *Educated: A Memoir*, she recounts her abusive older brother Shawn's habitual violence against her, barely concealed from their parents who actively neglect to see it. At one point we learn too that her older sister, Audrey, had grown up under the same curse of control and physical abuse at his hands. Each sister, separately, makes an attempt to confront their parents with the truth of this pattern of violent behavior, but to no avail. Indeed, not merely to no avail, but incurring vengeful counterattacks of one or another form, including a death threat from her brother. After Tara has once again returned to her studies abroad, their father apparently gets to Audrey, making her take sides against her younger sister. Tara is now mainly living and studying in Cambridge in the UK, at vast geographical and cultural remove from the isolated family home in Buck's Peak, Idaho, yet all the while carrying its unhinging torments within her as she tries to pursue her studies. That summer—now studying in Paris for a spell—she receives an email from her parallel universe:

There was a message from my sister.

My father had visited her—this I understood immediately—but I had to read the message several times before I understood what exactly had taken place.

Our father had testified to her that Shawn had been cleansed by the Atonement of Christ, that he was a new man. Dad had warned Audrey that if she ever again brought up the past, it would destroy our entire family. It was God's will that Audrey and I forgive Shawn, Dad said. If we did not, ours would be the greater sin.

I could easily imagine this meeting, the gravity of my father as he sat across from my sister, the reverence and power in his words.<sup>13</sup>

External pressures to forgive may be extreme and explicitly coercive, as they are in this case, or again they may be more subtle and genuinely grounded in ethical thinking. But even the most coercive can be mediated by residually shared social, ethical, or religious norms of various kinds, as is surely the case for Audrey, and for Tara too, though less so on account of her living at a greater distance from their father's authority. The pressurizing power of such residual norms may make itself felt without a third party actively advocating that one should forgive—the norms might simply be working within the reluctant forgiver herself because they are generated by moral ideas that still have a residual claim on her conscience, even if she also harbors substantial doubts. But no matter what form they take, these sorts of external pressures (external, that is, to any core normativity of forgiveness itself) are a hazard we must acknowledge as endemic in our socially situated practices of forgiving, and hazards to which we must therefore remain perpetually alert. I consider these hazards here, however, in order to emphasize their importance before setting them aside; for they are independent of how we might come to resolve our Electivity Puzzle. This puzzle is not created by an awareness of external ethical pressures that can be improperly placed on potential forgivers, but rather from attention to the force of the *internal* pressures generated by the core normativity of conditional forgiveness. So let us now leave the question of inappropriate external pressures to one side, and instead look inwards to explore the contours of our puzzle.

## **INTERNAL PRESSURES AND THE ELECTIVITY PUZZLE**

I said earlier that our Electivity Puzzle can seem to arise as soon as we countenance an obligation to forgive. But we should note that some kinds of obligation—namely, those embodied in imperfect duties or virtues—are not in any direct tension with the Electivity Intuition. The idea that forgiving someone always has something gift-like at the heart

of it is comfortably compatible with the idea that one's obligation is to be generally forgiving enough in the long run. If forgiveness is considered as an imperfect duty or virtue, then exactly when, how, and how often to be forgiving in order to qualify as sufficiently forgiving over a lifetime remains up to you. There is substantial discretion, then, of just the kind required by the Electivity Intuition. On the assumption that this discretion would entail that there were no instances in which the obligation to forgive manifested itself as a directed obligation to a particular apologetic wrongdoer considered "due" or "owed" forgiveness on that occasion, then no Electivity Puzzle would be generated.<sup>14</sup>

It might therefore be tempting to try to solve our Electivity Puzzle by simply bypassing it, and declaring the obligation to forgive as never directed in form but always *non-directed*. This would mean that no wronged party would ever owe *it to* a particular wrongdoer to forgive them—at least not on account of the internal normativity of forgiving.<sup>15</sup> If the obligation to forgive were only occasioned at the discretion of the forgiver in this way, then forgiveness would always be received as something significantly elective and gift-like, something they "didn't have to do," as we say. Forgiving would always be a meretricious act of moral benevolence rather than an apt response to interpersonal moral requirement.

What should we make of this tempting line of thought that bypasses the Electivity Puzzle? There certainly can seem to be a bad odor around the very idea of a morally wounded party coming to have a directed obligation *to the wrongdoer* to forgive them. Worse still, one incurs this directed obligation to them because of something they seem to possess a unilateral power to bring about, namely, the satisfaction of the condition of conditional forgiveness. This can seem to put too much normative power in the hands of the wrongdoer—specifically, a moral power to generate an obligation upon the very person they have wronged.<sup>16</sup> This certainly does appear a prime candidate for the sort of inappropriate internal normative pressure on the wronged party that we are seeking.<sup>17</sup> The wrongdoer seems to be able to wrong you, and then take normative matters into their own hands by apologizing, thereby exercising a moral power to oblige you to forgive them! Imagine an acquaintance has lied to you about something important. Imagine too that they give you (let us stipulate) a sufficient apology, so that they have effectively fed you your line—the stage direction reads *Now you forgive them*. Thus the unstoppable tick-tock of the *narrative* of forgiveness: first wrongdoing, and blame, then apology, and next . . . forgiveness.<sup>18</sup> Surely, one might object, the wronged party has more discretion than that? What if they don't like this script?

This is a substantial concern, and a renewed, compelling statement of the Electivity Puzzle. But we should not try to appease the concern by pretending all obligations to forgive are non-directed obligations. For if we look and see what many everyday apologies as cues-to-forgive are actually like, we will see that it is plainly not true that they create non-directed obligations. On the contrary, there is a whole region of our moral interpersonal lives in which the completely ordinary everyday moves of moral accountability are undeniably directed in structure. Imagine again the acquaintance who has told you a lie but apologized sufficiently so as to meet the condition of conditional forgiveness. If there is any obligation attending this personal ethical interaction, then, other things equal, it is such that you have incurred an obligation to *them* to forgive. This is manifestly an everyday forgiveness scenario, and the obligation is plainly directed in kind. Recourse to the idea that the obligations of forgiveness are always non-directed, then, looks to be no way of solving the Electivity Puzzle.

But before we renew our quest for the giftiness at the base of forgiveness, there is a further feature of directed obligation that we should examine for fit in relation to forgiving. It is a feature brought out by R. Jay Wallace's characterization of directed (or what he calls "relational") obligations, and it is a matter of the *symmetry of reasons* they display. He explains as follows: "The very things that give us reasons to do . . . X also give another party a claim against us that we should do X, and a privileged basis for objecting if we should fail so to act."<sup>19</sup> Promising is an obvious central case of a directed obligation: I promise you that I will attend your wedding, and the fact that I have made the promise is both a reason for me to attend and, equally, a reason why you have a personal justification for objecting, and perhaps blaming me, if I fail to show up without excuse. It is this symmetry of reasons, and what Wallace terms the "privileged basis for objecting" in the event of a transgression, that is distinctive of directed obligations.

Now some might see this symmetry of reasons as a worrying misfit for the case of forgiving. It can seem a positively offensive idea that someone who has apologized to us, albeit sufficiently, might have a "privileged basis for objecting" if we should not forgive them. I certainly recognize that some writers see things this way, and I feel an initial pull of the intuition myself; but I contend that there is in fact no misfit here. In a case where someone really has offered an apology that is sufficient—an apology that fulfills the condition of conditional forgiveness—then if you hold out on them and fail to even try to forgive, then surely they *do* have a privileged basis on which to object to your unforgiving stance. The reason they have a privileged basis on which to make the complaint

is simply that *they're* the one who has fulfilled an obligation *to you* by apologizing, and in a case where the apology is indeed sufficient, then other things equal *you* now have a reciprocal obligation *to them* to forgive. In interpersonal moral address where there are obligations the default deontology is unmistakably directed in both directions. (What happens if we cannot forgive? Since changes of the heart can so often escape our self-disciplinary efforts, so long as we put a proper emotional and moral-cognitive effort into the commitment to forgive, on those occasions when we find ourselves ultimately incapable, then we have an excusing condition. This kind of failure to forgive will not be blameworthy, then, even while it is a failure to meet a moral obligation.)

The intrinsically directed nature of the narrative of apology and forgiveness moreover explains a distinctive feature of the phenomenology of being forgiven. The friend who told you a lie might feel disappointingly left in the wings of the moral drama if you were to construe your situation exclusively in terms of an opportunity to realize a non-directed obligation to be forgiving. While she may feel grateful to have fallen under your forgiving *de dicto* attitude, still she may equally feel that *personally* she has been morally shortchanged. She was hoping for something more *de re* that perhaps drew its rationale from the specific character of her apology, not to say the specific value to you of your friendship with her.<sup>20</sup> It is *her* relationship with you that needs patching up, after all; not merely her (or your) abstract relation to the notional moral community. Such a non-directed obligation to forgive is entirely coherent—indeed, we surely do have a standing obligation to be sufficiently forgiving in life. But it cannot be the whole picture, because it is unsatisfactorily oblique when applied to interpersonal cases. Only the normativity of directed obligation can deliver a sufficiently focused interpersonal forgiveness, and focused interpersonal forgiveness is central to our moral lives.

Despite an initial concern to the contrary, then, Wallace's observation about the symmetry of the reasons involved in a directed obligation in fact displays an excellent fit for the normativity of conditional forgiveness, and for capturing what has gone wrong in cases of *unforgiveness*. I conclude that the obligation to forgive that is generated by a sufficient apology is every inch the directed obligation it appears to be—an obligation *to* a particular person that displays the characteristic symmetry of reasons and privileged grounds for potential moral objection. Our initially tempting line of thought, then, is confirmed as no good, and there is no bypassing the Electivity Puzzle. The narrative tick-tock of the sufficient-apologies-given-and-forgiveness-becoming-owed is normatively real; in which case the Electivity Puzzle cannot be solved by any attempt to deny it. Before we pronounce ourselves wholly

satisfied with this conclusion, however, we should return to the concern raised earlier about this tick-tock of apology and forgiveness seemingly leaving too little room for the forgiver's discretion. We asked, what if the potential forgiver doesn't like this script? If we take a closer look at the normative mechanism that actually generates the directed obligation to forgive, however, I believe we can appease the worry by bringing into view the significant degree of normative discretion that is subtly built in. In particular, if we scrutinize what is involved in an apology's coming to count as "sufficient," we will be able to discern the important sense in which the apologizer's exercise of a moral power through which the directed obligation is generated is not the bluntly unilateral power it appears to be, but rather takes the perspective of *both* parties to make it successful.

The philosophical habit of stipulating that a given condition has been met (which I have been expressing in the label "sufficient apology") tends to disguise the highly substantive and itself significantly discretionary question of whether the apology is to count as sufficient in any particular case. The point here is not that only the wronged party has standing to evaluate the apology—which would be a seriously undermotivated claim, not least since wronged parties are hardly infallible. Rather, my point is that the very judgment of what constitutes a "sufficient" apology should be conceived of as containing an irreducibly subjective element. Evaluating an apology is not a matter of seeing whether it matches up to some single universal standard. Rather, when someone apologizes to us, we need to discern in them and in ourselves how far their apology is good enough *for us*.

What does this irreducibly subjective aspect really consist in? First, a generic point. All ethical judgment, let us allow, tends generally to have a subjective element and to permit some constrained pluralism. That is what recommends the term "judgment"—to signal that there can often be more than one reasonable way of evaluating a situation. But beyond this there is, in addition, an apology-specific subjective element to the judgment of whether an apology counts as sufficient. For interpersonal wrongdoings are, among other things, *personal*, and accordingly what may properly count as a sufficient apology in any given case will tend to have a *personally perspectival* element. One determinant of perspective is one's *personal history*. If the wrong took place in the context of an ongoing friendship, then the particular experience of that friendship, including its place in a history and network of other such relationships, will be part of what it takes for the apology to be sufficient under the circumstances. For example, when you discover your friend has lied to you about something important, and if you have been hurt by others

who have lied to you in the past, then the experience may hit a raw nerve so that you need more by way of apology than the next person might—more contrition perhaps, or more reassurance that they will not do it again, or simply more emotional emphasis. In this way personal history can be an integrated yet highly perspectival proper part of the judgment.

A second determinant of perspective in our evaluations of apology is a matter of our personal priorities regarding shared values. Different people prioritize differently the values they need their nearest and dearest to share, with the result that they will tend also to differ in how far a sufficient apology should reflect and perhaps explicitly express a *fine-grained moral appreciation* of the value transgressed, as opposed to only a rough comprehension of it. One potential forgiver may be perfectly satisfied with an apology that displays little more than an oblique remorseful awareness of having caused offense in relation, for instance, to snobbery or homophobia. But another potential forgiver may reasonably require far more—perhaps an explicit expression of a nuanced understanding of the wider moral significance of whatever it was that they did or said or presumed.

The overall point here is that there is an irreducibly subjective-because-perspectival element in how someone may properly evaluate an apology so that what is required for *sufficiency* will modulate across individuals, relationships, and social contexts. This is an important, though somewhat covert, respect in which conditional forgiveness has a bonus gift-like element all of its own. The normative script effectively calls upon the wronged party to come to an irreducibly personal determination as to the status of the apology. This means that the exercise of the moral power on the part of an apologizer to generate an obligation is not well understood as a *unilateral* moral power at all, for we have seen that sufficiency is to a significant degree in the eye of the wronged. Only they can settle the substantial ambiguity of an apology's status. Within reason, it is their call.

It remains true that in a case where the wronged party fails or refuses to recognize an apology as sufficient when they should—that is to say, they are being unreasonable from their own perspective—then they figure as having an obligation to forgive, which they are failing to meet. This is what the fault of unforgiveness looks like, and it is something any theory of forgiveness needs to leave room for. But if we add that not only is there an irreducibly subjective element in the judgment, but also that this entails a substantial epistemic opacity from the point of view of the apologizer, then we can see that for the most part the

apologizer should recognize that they are inevitably in a peculiarly poor position to judge when the other party really ought to deem their apology sufficient.<sup>21</sup> These two elements go a long way to explaining why it is typically unseemly for an apologizer to be confident they have done enough for forgiveness to be due to them: such confidence is very likely to be epistemically presumptuous in relation to what the wronged party's personal judgment should be.

## **AN OBLIGATION WITHOUT A CORRELATIVE RIGHT**

So, where are we? I have argued that, though initially tempting, we should not try to solve the Electivity Puzzle by bypassing it and denying that conditional forgiveness involves a directed obligation to forgive. Simply put, conditional forgiveness *does* involve a directed obligation, and so it can only be a losing game to try to deny it. However, I have also argued that this is not as threatening to the Electivity Intuition as it may at first seem, since if we scrutinize the judgment that a given apology is to count as sufficient, we find this judgment to have an irreducibly personal subjective element, which in itself constitutes a substantial moment of electivity. In addition, I have argued that the apologizer's "privileged basis for objecting" to a holdout non-forgiver is not in fact misplaced, for we do need a way of capturing the fault of being unforgiving; but importantly, the scenario of conditional forgiving is such that the apologizer should typically presume they are in a poor position to judge if and when their apology may count as sufficient from the wronged party's perspective.

We have made some progress, then; but clearly, our Electivity Puzzle is far from solved, for having established that conditional forgiveness delivers directed obligations, we now confront the fact that according to a certain orthodox deontological picture, a directed obligation is always twinned with a moral right. Stephen Darwall is one exponent of this view, arguing that directed obligations (or, in his terminology, "bipolar" obligations) are always paired with a "claim right" on the part of the person to whom the obligation is owed.<sup>22</sup> More recently, Margaret Gilbert has elaborated a theory of moral rights according to which directed obligations always come with what she terms "demand rights."<sup>23</sup> If we were to adopt any similarly juridical conception of directed obligations as always correlating with rights, we would be forced to say that in cases of conditional forgiveness, wherever the condition is met, the sufficiently apologetic wrongdoer has a claimable right, against the person they have wronged, to be forgiven. Here is where we must surely find a way to draw the line, if we are to conserve the Electivity Intuition.



In order to find this line, we will need to avert our eyes from any juridical conception of obligation, and look instead to an alternative, not currently orthodox deontological tradition. There has long been an alternative deontological approach that resisted the juridical conception, and it is saliently exemplified in the work of Onora O'Neill (though one can naturally find similarly conducive approaches elsewhere too, for instance, in the work of Claudia Card, Frances Kamm, Adrienne Martin, Eleonore Stump, R. Jay Wallace, among other thinkers).<sup>24</sup> This non-juridical tradition of thought does not delimit deontic space to the dikaiological space of potential rights claims or demands, and it is within this non-juridical conception of obligations that I believe we will ultimately find our satisfactory account of the gift-like normativity inherent in all forgiveness.

The misfit for forgiveness in the idea that all directed obligations correlate with rights consists in something that has found repeated articulation in the forgiveness literature, since most people have a strong moral intuition that there is something very *off* about the idea of a right to be forgiven. Jeffrie Murphy, for instance, favorably entertains the idea that "Just as charity requires that I sometimes ought to assist those having no right to my assistance, so does forgiveness require that I sometimes ought to forgive those having no right to my forgiveness";<sup>25</sup> and Charles Griswold observes, "forgiveness may not be demanded or compelled: nobody has an (enforceable) 'right' to forgiveness."<sup>26</sup> Griswold himself sees this as stemming from the fact that forgiveness involves a change of heart, which must be 'honest and sincere,' or else it becomes "at best morally empty, at worst disrespectful of the other party."<sup>27</sup> He is surely quite right about this. It is true that the heart does not generally respond well to demands for change, but rather needs to find its own path; and an insincere expression of a change of heart is no use to anyone who had hoped to command the real thing. Demanding one's alleged right to be forgiven, then, is not likely to work. (This is one of the many ways in which forgiving differs from central cases of directed obligations such as promising, since an insincere promise is still a promise, while an insincere expression of forgiveness is not forgiveness.)

A qualification I would make, though, in relation to Griswold's observation, is that it is clearly not *impossible* that my demanding your forgiveness as of right might contingently persuade you to forgive me. (Who knows what you think? Maybe you think there *is* such a thing as a right to be forgiven, and if you do, then you might regard me as offering you a persuasive argument for you to try for the change of heart, and—again, who knows?—you may succeed in summoning up that change of heart.) Furthermore, while Griswold's point about changes of heart

being necessarily sincere does explain one likely source of frustration for attempts at acquiring forgiveness on demand, still it does not ultimately reveal anything that is a distinctive problem for rights claims. It is simply a fact of life that sometimes morality requires certain emotional attitudes or reactions from us, and we may or may not be capable of them. Think of the specific on-the-spot requirements of the heart that morality may occasion, such as a directed obligation of compassion to one's friend who is being selfish, or of good will to a neighbor who is being impossible, or of loving kindness to one's toddler who is testing one's patience to the limit. The fact that we are not in full control of these emotional-attitudinal states does not affect the intelligibility or the reality of the moral demand, and it is not at all clear that the demand's taking the form of a rights claim rather than a directed obligation would make the slightest difference. If there were such a thing as a right to be forgiven, then the sincere change of heart factor would just be a moral-emotional obstacle to be surmounted, or alternatively foundered on, just as it is to be surmounted or foundered on in relation to the *obligation* to forgive. Both require the requisite change of heart. I conclude that the question of voluntary control over one's moral-emotional attitudes is not any kind of special problem for rights claims, and so I do not propose to make use of it in relation to my own argument here against the existence of a claimable right to be forgiven. The natural resources for my argument will have to be mined from elsewhere, and we shall need our non-juridical deontological landscape more fully mapped out if we are going to capture them.

What kind of directed obligation correlates with no claimable right? In her 1996 book, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, O'Neill offers some background:

Many of the social virtues have been taken seriously in part because they were thought of as *required*, although they were not thought of as reflected in counterpart rights against those on whom the requirement falls. . . . Some obligations without corresponding rights could be embedded in special relationships: [such] *special obligations without rights* . . . would constitute elements of certain roles, relationships and ways of life. . . : the attentiveness of a parent, the patience of someone working with handicapped adults, the trustworthiness of an accountant.<sup>28</sup>

In the course of her discussion, O'Neill offers a four-way taxonomy of obligations, illustrated by the moral relations of parents and children. First, perfect obligations come in both "universal" and "special" forms.

There are all the *universal perfect obligations* of impersonal morality (such as the obligation not to injure or abuse others in general); and there are also *special perfect obligations* which are owed to particular others such as parents' own children (for instance, distinctively parental levels of care and support). Second, imperfect obligations also come in "universal" and "special" forms. There are *universal imperfect obligations* (such as the obligation to show sufficient common courtesy and concern to others in general); but, in addition, and crucially for present purposes, there are also *special imperfect obligations*, which O'Neill characterizes in a manner that makes them vitally different from the general idea of an imperfect duty of forgivingness that we rejected earlier as too oblique and inadequately personally focused. O'Neill illustrates special imperfect obligations with the following words: "Finally, good parents will take it that they owe their children certain sorts of love, attention and support which they do not owe to all, which are quite specific to the relationship to the child, but to which their children have no right."<sup>29</sup>

Characterized here, then, is just what we are looking for: a normative sphere of directed obligation without correlative rights. Thus O'Neill provides us with a deontological map on which we can readily locate conditional forgiveness, effecting the "directedness" by way of the fact that the obligations in question are themselves intrinsically relational, or, as she puts it, "special" as opposed to "universal."

Another philosopher who has more recently explored this domain of directed obligations without correlative rights is Adrienne Martin. She styles these obligations as "personal bonds."<sup>30</sup> Like O'Neill, Martin draws central examples from everyday obligations to friends, colleagues, and family:

I should go to my five-year-old's ballet recital; . . . my partner should lend ungrudging help with covering the kids' needs when I travel for work; my colleagues and I should step up and share service burdens; our employers should appreciate my and my colleagues' informal and non-contractual contributions to the College. These are "bonds," because they tie particular people together in the context of personal relationships.<sup>31</sup>

I believe both Martin and O'Neill are quite correct that human ethical relations incorporate this essential sphere of obligation without correlative rights, albeit a sphere that philosophy keeps having to uncover anew after repeated shroudings by more juridically minded orthodoxies.<sup>32</sup> But while this kind of directed obligation is surely

characteristic of the personal sphere and existing role relationships, I contend that it applies equally to more fleetingly formed interpersonal relations, as when a new acquaintance lies to you, then subsequently offers a heartfelt apology which you reasonably find sufficient, so that you incur a directed obligation to them to forgive—and yet they do not thereby acquire a right against you.

In other words, I propose we recognize the sphere of directed obligations without correlative rights as extending somewhat beyond canonical personal relationships like parent and child, employer and employee, friend and friend, expanding our non-judicial conception of requirement to the sort of relationship that might be swiftly formed on the hoof between two strangers.

O'Neill's category of a *special* (and so personally directed) yet *imperfect* obligation is especially conducive to our concern to vindicate the Electivity Intuition. It achieves the requisite directedness while maintaining the idea that the potential forgiver enjoys a substantial latitude of discretion about exactly when and how to forgive. This is a perfect fit for the model of conditional forgiveness we are working with. You apologize to me, I recognize your apology as sufficient—but it may take me a while to do so, and it may take me a while thereafter to find it in myself, emotionally speaking, to actually forgive you. On this model, there is plenty of scope for me to meet my directed obligation to you in my own way and in my own time. This scope for personal pathways to forgiving is an essential part of what needs vindicating in any defense of the Electivity Intuition, and in this respect, O'Neill's deontic category of the *special imperfect* obligation is just what we need.<sup>33</sup>

Now that we have our deontological map with X marking the spot of special imperfect obligation, it is time to come up with a targeted argument to show that there is no right to forgiveness. What I have done so far is to make deontological space for the Electivity Intuition by casting it in terms of there being no right to forgiveness, where this can be understood in the context of a non-judicial deontology that conserves an area for directed imperfect obligations without rights. But this is merely to have elaborated a cogent philosophical possibility. Someone with a more judicial turn of mind might still quite reasonably press the question: "But *why* doesn't the sufficient apologizer obtain a right? What's stopping someone from declaring they have a right to that which they are owed?"

Luke Maring has recently pressed these sorts of questions, himself making the case for a right to be forgiven, albeit while simultaneously

emphasizing his uneasy sense of moral ambiguity over the kind of undue pressure this risks placing on a potential forgiver.<sup>34</sup> Part of Maring's purpose, as I read him, is effectively to throw down the gauntlet to fellow philosophers of forgiveness, challenging them to come up with a new and persuasive argument showing there cannot be any such right. I believe we are now well positioned to meet this challenge, and I propose to do so by taking the idea of forgiveness as a gift entirely literally. Forgiveness displays what I will call the Normativity of the Gift. In using this rather grand phrase, I indulge myself in an evocative but self-consciously superficial allusion to the canonical work of the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss, famously entitled *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*.<sup>35</sup> Superficial because the allusion must be taken with a large pinch of salt in relation to what I myself plan to say concerning the normativity of the Gift.

Mauss's work showed how, in a number of societies studied, there were what he called "systems of total services" comprised of gift-exchange that carried many dimensions of meaning, notably that of honor, beholdenness, and social or religious status. It was often characterized by a kind of competitive magnanimity between different social agents, but, most importantly, it involved a certain collective subterfuge. Mauss tells us that "these total services and counter-services are committed to in a somewhat voluntary form by presents and gifts, although in the final analysis they are strictly compulsory, on pain of private or public warfare."<sup>36</sup> In the societies studied, maneuvers in the economy of gift-giving are displays and exercises of power that underpin now trade, now potential war.

While a light-fingered allusion to Mauss's economy of gift-exchange is useful in the present connection as a powerful reminder of the deep human social precedent for gifts given as a matter of directed obligation, for me it primarily serves as a warning regarding how easily a system of gift-exchange becomes co-opted by other interests, and indeed corrupted. For, happily, in the domain of human relations that moral philosophy is in the business of exploring, there are other kinds of gift-giving that have very little to do with the economy of power and status, implicit deal-making, and threats of revenge or humiliation. I do firmly believe that it should remain perennially part of our philosophical picture that our moral interactions are seriously porous in relation to these less pleasant aspects of human relations, but this porousness precisely results in regrettable deteriorations in our moral relations, rather than serving to reveal them in their proper form. Indeed, it is just one such curious deterioration of the gift of forgiveness that I will be

exploring here in relation to the spurious idea of a claimable right to be forgiven.

### **PRAGMATIC SELF-DEFEAT: A GIFT CAN ONLY BE RECEIVED, NEVER TAKEN**

How, then, does conditional forgiveness display the Normativity of the Gift? First, let me start with a generic observation about the giving and receiving of gifts (*pace* Marcel Mauss), which applies even in situations where the giving is governed by directed obligations, such as when it is a friend's birthday with whom you always exchange birthday presents. The thing about gifts is that they feature naturally in deontic relations (we often owe each other gifts), but they are spoiled if they are taken or seized—a gift can only survive in symbolically undeteriorated form if it is *received*. A gift grabbed is a gift spoiled: even if you do not physically rip it in the taking, it is symbolically spoiled. The spirit of generosity is a delicate thing, which is why there is a performative decorum and ritual around the giving and receiving of gifts, even when the generous gesture is infused with a keen sense of interpersonal obligation.

Imagine one Mother's Day a devoted, hard-working single parent of three is hoping and expecting the carefully chosen bunch of flowers she normally receives every year from her fast-maturing teenage children, as a symbol of their loving gratitude for all that she does for them. This annual gift has become a meaningful, tender tradition in their family, and it is affectionately anticipated, indeed expected. And yet this year . . . no flowers. She tries to be patient, understanding, unresentful, and generally to keep things in perspective; but through the day her disappointment turns to bitter indignation at her thoughtless, ungrateful kids so that she winds up marching them off to the shops and demanding her right to her customary token of that hoped-for loving gratitude and appreciation. They do as they are told, perhaps shamefacedly, and she duly gets her bunch of flowers; but now in her grasp it somehow wilts into the saddest bunch of flowers imaginable. A spoiled gift, symbolically deteriorated under the pressures of interpersonal requirement made explicit. Such a gift—albeit a perfectly nice bunch of flowers—can be far worse than no gift at all. Instead of a symbol of loving appreciation, it is now, if anything, a symbol of the opposite—perhaps with an added wince of shame at her own behavior. This imagined example illustrates an entirely general feature of gift giving and receiving: gifts do not symbolically survive well if demanded under the idea of interpersonal requirement. They become drained of their original hoped-for meaning, and come to symbolize something else instead—generally something

sadly inverse. This, I contend, is a distinctive basic tendency in the performed normativity of the gift.

Now, what I want to say about forgiveness, and what I hope to reveal as the *pragmatically self-defeating nature* of demanding to be forgiven as of right, is best understood as a forgiveness-specific version of this quite general point about gifts. Let us imagine a case of someone who has apologized for a bad act; and let us stipulate too that their apology counts as sufficient. The best way to theoretically model what happens in this circumstance, I propose, is that the apologizer is switching *moral stances* in a manner that undoes an essential feature of their apology, thereby undermining the grounds on which their right might *per impossibile* have been asserted. In order to elaborate the proposed picture, I will make free use of two closely related ideas that form part of the distinct accounts of apology advanced by Jeffrey Helmreich and Luc Bovens,<sup>37</sup> respectively.

First, I will draw on Helmreich's highly suggestive idea of "the apologetic stance." Helmreich describes his concept of "stance-taking" as follows:

[Apologies belong] to a distinctive kind of speech act—a kind to which thanking, absolving, and taking responsibility also belong—which I call "stance-taking." Stance-taking, in the typical case, involves performing a speech act that both acts on and commits oneself to act on a normative claim one has accepted.<sup>38</sup>

In taking up Helmreich's apologetic stance one performs a commissive speech act that is itself a way of *acting apologetically*. Accordingly, it is an example of what he calls a "self-realizing" stance. For instance: "I'm so sorry for what I did!"

I should note that in Helmreich's account of apology, the apologetic stance is tied to his claim that no apology can ever fully make up for a wrong done. But I will not be following him in this. I quite agree of course that, given we cannot change the past, no apology could ever literally undo a wrong; and I would also agree that in cases of serious wrongs an apology will rarely suffice. If, for example, I drive recklessly and permanently injure you, then, surely, no apology could ever be sufficient, even one substantially practically augmented by an enduring effort to make amends. In such a case, the model proposed by Helmreich would be entirely apt: the reckless driver can only wait in hope that she might be met halfway by the generosity of the forgiver. But if, by contrast, in a fleeting moment of emotional cowardice I tell a stupid

though inconsequential lie to a friend, leaving her feeling let down and bewildered when she finds out, then it would seem unnecessarily harsh to insist, against the grain of common practice, that there is no apology I could possibly muster that she might reasonably find sufficient to make up for my idiotic lapse of judgment.<sup>39</sup> On the contrary, it is natural to say that a proper apology really can make up for it, and even render it as nothing in the context of our long and trusting friendship. So, while I will borrow and adapt Helmreich's pregnant idea of an apologetic stance, I will not be straying from the picture of apology that I have so far been presenting, which represents everyday apology for small wrongs as often capable of sufficiency, and so able to generate a directed obligation to forgive.

In order to adapt a minimalist version of Helmreich's apologetic stance for present purposes, I need only include one idea from Bovens concerning how *humility* is essential in apology. Observing that "Genuine apologies are made in a humble manner,"<sup>40</sup> Bovens advances the claim that one of its functions is to deliver a symbolic performance of *excess respect* towards the person wronged as a means of making up for the *deficit of respect* that was inherent in the wrongdoing.<sup>41</sup> I think that is exactly right, and moreover the everyday theatricality of a makeup performance of respect is just what we should expect to find in a moral practice that is structured by the normativity of the gift. Equipped with a synthesis of these two ideas—that is, an apologetic stance characterized by a performed humility of symbolically compensatory respect—we already have all we need for a minimalist adaptation of Helmreich's Apologetic Stance. Let's formulate it succinctly: One counts as taking up this Apologetic Stance only if one gives *commissive practical expression* (perhaps verbal, perhaps gestural) to a symbolically compensatory attitude of humility towards the person wronged, in relation to one's wrongdoing. Sometimes the deficit of respect can be fully made up for; though the more egregious the wrongdoing, the lesser the chance of the apology reaching sufficiency.

Thus our minimalist Apologetic Stance. Now let us consider, by contrast, what stance would be involved in claiming a moral right to something. Since it is plainly a stance of *entitlement*, we may call it the Entitlement Stance: One counts as taking up this stance only if one gives *commissive practical expression* (perhaps verbal, perhaps gestural) to an attitude of presumed in-principle moral authority to *take*, directly or indirectly, that which one is owed. In the specific case of forgiveness, the Entitlement Stance will perform an attitude towards the potential forgiver, in relation to the apology one has made, such that one has in-principle moral authority to *take*, directly or indirectly, the forgiveness one considers



them to owe. The presumed moral authority to take that which one is owed must be understood as an “in principle” authority only, because the stance of entitlement can properly be taken up in relation to items owed that cannot in fact be taken. Perhaps it cannot be taken because to do so one would need to use proper institutionalized channels when there are nonesuch, or perhaps the proper channels exist but one does not have access to them, or perhaps—as in the case of forgiveness, as noted by Griswold—the item in question involves a change of heart, which simply may not be summonable. All these mark different sorts of frustration that can be in store for someone claiming a moral right to something, even if they are owed it.

But if we are concerned to reveal something that shows there *cannot* be a right to forgiveness, even when it is owed, then we are not looking at these sorts of contingent practical frustrations, which are quite normal for rights claims in general. Instead, I propose we examine what happens when someone moves from the Apologetic Stance to the Entitlement Stance. What happens is that the Entitlement Stance cancels the Apologetic Stance, because it necessarily destroys its essential humility. In taking up the Entitlement Stance towards you, my attitude in relation to the wrong I did you becomes one of presumed authority to take what I am owed—and that brings the curtain down on any humility I had previously performed. Therefore, a person who has sufficiently apologized, but who next moves to a stance of entitlement is no longer in the Apologetic Stance towards the person they have wronged. And so, in moving to take up the Entitlement Stance they *destroy the grounds* on which they were seeking to claim their right to be forgiven. They performatively negate the proposition that their apology has rendered forgiveness due to them.

This is reminiscent of at least one other case of a performatively self-refuting claim or thought: *I doubt that I exist*. Descartes’s sceptical doubter, in doubting that they exist, performatively refutes the implied proposition that they do not exist. The performative self-refutation interpretation of the *cogito* emphasizes the fact that entertaining doubt performs that one exists as a thinking thing, and so performatively refutes the sceptical proposition.<sup>42</sup> As Bernard Williams puts it, “The denials of ‘I am thinking’ and ‘I exist’ are not logical falsehoods, but pragmatically self-defeating or self-falsifying—we might compare someone’s saying ‘I am absent’ in a roll-call.”<sup>43</sup> I hope that bringing into view the incompatible stances that are necessary for apology on the one hand, and the claiming of a right to forgiveness on the other, brings out this essentially confounding feature of any attempt to claim a right to be forgiven: the attempt itself *undoes* the sufficiency of the apology, and

thus destroys the ground on which the right might *per impossibile* have been claimed.

We can now see, then, that any appropriately apologetic wrongdoer who oversteps the mark by demanding forgiveness under the idea of a right adopts a stance that negates the grounds for their claim-right before it can finish being made. Thus the very *idea* of a right to be forgiven is performatively self-defeating; and so our proposal that wherever there is a directed obligation to forgive, what we have is a directed obligation with *no claimable correlative right* is at last confirmed. The attempt to claim a right to forgiveness is to make a grab for a gift that will not survive the seizing, because it stops being your due the moment you try to claim it as of right. My suggestion is that this is the specific and distinctive way that forgiveness displays the generic normativity of the gift.

Should we also draw the stronger conclusion that there is no right to be forgiven, rather than merely no claimable right?<sup>44</sup> Even when, moreover, there is presumably conceptual room for the idea of rights that only third parties could claim on one's behalf? I believe so. I have already noted that there are many occasions on which someone possesses a right, which for contingent reasons cannot be claimed. One may lack the resources to set the requisite institutional mechanisms in motion; or one may be subject to intimidation; or one may lack the know-how; or one may lack the moral standing because of a track record of hypocrisy; or indeed one may simply lack the social power to get the relevant parties to pay proper attention, or take one's claim as credible. But the idea of a right which is possessed even though it is *necessarily* unclaimable by the bearer, since attempts to claim it could only entangle them in pragmatic self-defeat . . . this looks to be a "right" in name only. It is unclaimable for intrinsic reasons. I conclude that the radical pragmatic self-defeat in the business of claiming a right to be forgiven strongly suggests a picture in which there *is* no right to be forgiven, period.

To summarize the line of thought I have pursued in order to show how forgiveness is always a gift: I have tried to resolve the tension in the idea that there can be a directed obligation to forgive even while all forgiveness contains something gift-like at its heart (the tension we called the Electivity Puzzle); and I have done so by revealing that the performed normativity of forgiveness *is* a form of the normativity of the Gift. Forgiveness is not to be understood merely *metaphorically* as gift-like, since normatively speaking, it behaves like a gift, and a default to the best explanation advises that it *is* a gift. Contrary to an assumption often made, it is a commonplace to have an obligation to give a gift. However, I have observed that in general, the normativity of the Gift is

such that if you presume an in-principle entitlement to seize the gift as of right, then insofar as you may in fact succeed in seizing anything at all—perhaps by making the other party say the words “I forgive you” or some equivalent—you thereby spoil the significance. Under the pressures of the Entitlement Stance, the gift of forgiveness will typically deteriorate, possibly into something whose symbolism is the very opposite of what you had hoped to command, so that all you wind up with is painfully empty words—like the miserable Mother’s Day bunch of flowers.

The particular form that this generic normativity of the Gift assumes in the specific case of conditional forgiveness has been modeled by way of a conflict between two performative stances towards the potential forgiver in relation to the wrong done. The humble Apologetic Stance and the distinctly non-humble Entitlement Stance, which expresses a presumed moral authority, in principle, to *take* what one is owed. That the second stance destroys the first means that the attempt to claim a right to be forgiven is destructive of its own grounds, and founders in pragmatic self-defeat. And so, there *is* no claimable right to be forgiven; and moreover, no right, period. Like other kinds of gift, forgiveness is something we quite commonly owe to another person; but it is never something they can proactively take from us, even if it is their due. Any entreaties, arguments, pleas, or exhortations they may make in favor of their being forgiven must carefully, restrainedly, artfully, avoid deterioration into the Entitlement Stance. And so the apologetic wrongdoer who hopes, wants, needs, deserves to be forgiven must always—to echo at last our opening epigraph—rely on “the subtlest possible adjustments” in their translation of the deeply personal, moral emotions experienced by the wronged party to whom they have now apologized, and bow to the fact that any expressions of hope or need or desert with regard to their being forgiven must involve “a process of intuition to which exaggeration and force are fatal.”

This conclusion I find reassuring. For it places limits on the performance of moral powers, in a manner that fully transcends the presence or absence of other kinds of social power. While a person of social status inevitably has an easier time of performatively bringing off the second-personal stance, as Vanessa Carbonell has argued;<sup>45</sup> or of having the quality of their will recognized, as Michael McKenna has argued;<sup>46</sup> or of having a particular moral grievance hermeneutically grasped, and afforded moral credibility, in ways that in previous work I have cast in terms of hermeneutical and testimonial injustice; or in being forced to have recourse to truncating and adapting their moral message in the manner in which Kristie Dotson has identified as “testimonial smothering”<sup>47</sup> . . . still, in the midst of all such subtle and interlocking

ways in which inequalities of social power may unfairly boost or hinder intersectionally situated moral subjects' capacities to exercise moral powers, it remains immovably, gloriously the case that no matter who they are, or what power they may have over you, the person who has wronged you *cannot*—literally, cannot—exercise a moral power to take your forgiveness from you as of right, or even to claim it as such, even while you have a directed obligation to give it to them. Forgiveness is just not that sort of thing; for it is a gift, and gifts, though they may be owed, can only be given, never taken. What this means for the person who has been wronged is that—no matter how disadvantaged they may be as a protagonist in the theater of moral powers—their forgiveness is always, and quite literally, in their gift.

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Material relating to this Address, delivered at the January 2022 APA Eastern Division Meeting, was presented in a number of places, online or in person, and I am immensely grateful for the very helpful discussions on those occasions: Dorothy Emmet Memorial Lecture, University of Manchester; 2021 KTS Center Lecture, University of California, Irvine; Philosophy Today Public Lecture, University of Alabama; Rutgers Philosophy Colloquium; L'Institut Jean Nicod Colloquium, and as one of my Shearman Lectures at UCL. For invaluable email exchanges or conversation after the fact, I would particularly like to thank Eugene Chislenko, Jeff Helmreich, Frances Kamm, Ernest Sosa, and Bob Stern.

### NOTES

1. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 58.
2. See Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing*. See also Carse and Tirrell, "Forgiving Grave Wrongs," for a view of forgiveness as "emergent" from these practices of rebuilding trust and moral relations after atrocity. For an elaboration of repair as a widespread and deep-set human practice—a practice of *Homo Reparans*—see Spelman, *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*.
3. Allais, "Elective Forgiveness," 7.
4. Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 551–52.
5. Allais, "The Priority of Gifted Forgiveness: A Response to Fricker," 271.
6. Moody-Adams's term is "unilateral" forgiveness.
7. Moody-Adams, "The Enigma of Forgiveness," 176.
8. Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 551–52; italics added.
9. Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*, 174.
10. Anderson, "When Justice and Forgiveness Come Apart: A Feminist Perspective on Restorative Justice and Intimate Violence," 124.
11. Lamb, "Women, Abuse, and Forgiveness: A Special Case," 156.
12. Cherry, "Forgiveness, Exemplars, and the Oppressed," 55.

13. Westover, *Educated: A Memoir*, 292–93.
14. I take the idea of a directed obligation to be equivalent to “relational” and “bipolar” obligations. At least, these are roughly equivalent ideas, though of course different theorists’ competing treatments will lend different inflections. See, for instance, Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*; Darwall, “Bipolar Obligation”; Wallace, “Duties of Love”; Wallace, *The Moral Nexus*.
15. There would remain the possibility of second-order obligations to forgive a particular person on a particular occasion, even if the obligation to forgive were itself imperfect. For instance, you might be confronted with an option to forgive someone who has forgiven you for similar things in the past, so that there is a fair-play consideration in favor of making this opportunity to show forgivingness an opportunity you actually take up. I thank Jeff Helmreich for emphasizing the significance of this point.
16. For a discussion of forgiveness itself as a “normative power,” see Owens, *Shaping the Normative Landscape*, chapter 2, section 10, “Wrongs and Forgiveness”; and Bennett, “The Alteration Thesis: Forgiveness As A Normative Power.”
17. This formed part of my response to Allais that I gave in “The Practices of Forgiving: Replies,” but I have subsequently come to think it misguided.
18. I allude to David Velleman, “Narrative Explanation”; as he notes, the “tick-tock” is originally from lectures by Frank Kermode. I thank an anonymous reviewer for Oxford University Press (who kindly read related material that is part of a book manuscript) for the idea that forgiveness-as-a-proper-response-to-apology seems to display narrative form in Velleman’s sense.
19. Wallace, “Duties of Love,” 194; bold added.
20. I allude to the use of the de dicto/de re distinction made by Michael Smith (Smith, *The Moral Problem*); see also Nomy Arpaly’s discussion (Arpaly, “Huckleberry Finn Revisited: Inverse Akrasia and Moral Ignorance”).
21. I thank Kirstine La Cour for bringing out this point in discussion.
22. Darwall, “Bipolar Obligation,” 9 and passim. Darwall himself is of the view that an important case of ethical life is not captured in the domain of the “bipolar” as he construes it, and therefore identifies an adjacent area in second-personal space to accommodate the relevant attitudes. But if one does not insist that the deontic necessarily involves correlative rights, then one does not need to cordon off a special adjacent area for “attitudes of the heart” (Darwall, “Trust as a Second-Personal Attitude of the Heart”).
23. Gilbert, *Rights and Demands: A Foundational Inquiry*.
24. Card, “Gratitude and Obligation,” especially section 2; Kamm, “Rights Beyond Interests”; O’Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning*; Stump, “The Sunflower: Guilt, Forgiveness and Reconciliation”; Wallace, *The Moral Nexus*, especially section 6.2.
25. Hampton and Murphy, *Forgiveness and Mercy*, 29.
26. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, 69; bold added. See also Bovens on apology and their acceptance (which I agree with Bovens is not the same as forgiving, since one can accept an apology without committing to the forgiving change of heart—see Bovens, “Apologies,” 234): “The offender does not have a claim right that the victim accept her apologies, though, at least in some cases, the victim really ought to accept the offender’s apologies” (Bovens, “Apologies,” 233).

27. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, 68.
28. O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 136–37.
29. O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue*, 151.
30. Martin, "Personal Bonds: Directed Obligations without Rights."
31. Martin, "Personal Bonds: Directed Obligations without Rights," 65.
32. They are of course not alone, as previously noted. Another thinker, coming this time from a Christian perspective, who makes a point of arguing that there can be obligations—for instance the obligation to love and forgive—is Eleanore Stump: "Given the connection between love and forgiveness, it follows that forgiveness is also obligatory in the same way and to the same extent. It does *not* follow that any given person Jerome has a right to forgiveness from any person Paula whom he has wronged. On this account of love and forgiveness (as also on many contemporary accounts), rights and obligations are not correlative" (Stump, "The Sunflower: Guilt, Forgiveness and Reconciliation," 184).
33. I therefore differ from Moody-Adams when she says that forgiveness as such is a *non-obligatory* and *non-deserved* gift: "Genuine forgiveness is an extraordinary non-obligatory gift, not a way of meeting an obligation to give the wrongdoer something that he could ever deserve" (Moody-Adams, "The Enigma of Forgiveness," 177). I hope I can agree that it is a gift, while maintaining that it is a gift we can sometimes have an obligation to give to those whose apology means they deserve it.
34. Maring, "Is There a Right to Be Forgiven?"
35. I thank Julian Bacharach for emphasizing the connection with Mauss's famous work.
36. Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 5
37. Bovens's own argument for why "the offender does not have a claim right on the victim's forgiveness or acceptance of apologies" is that "such a claim right would be inconsistent with the restoration of the balance of respect" (Bovens, "Must I Be Forgiven?" 232–33). I do not make use of this specific idea, though nothing I say will be incompatible with it—indeed I would like to think my position provides explanatory support for it.
38. Helmreich, "The Apologetic Stance," 76; bold added.
39. Helmreich's reason for insisting is that treating someone as if one's apology totally makes up for the wrong done is necessarily a way of "acting towards her as though the wrong is acceptable" (Helmreich, "The Apologetic Stance," 90). But I would dispute this—I believe it depends on the attitude behind the apology.
40. Bovens, "Apologies," 236.
41. Bovens proposes the requisite humility has three aspects. The first is that "I may bow my head in shame for serious wrongs"; and the third is that "I relinquish power to you to restore my moral stature" (236). These points I take to be not uncontroversial, and so I depend only on the aspect of excess respect.
42. The performative interpretation is primarily due to Hintikka, "Cogito, Ergo Sum: Inference or Performance?"
43. Williams, *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*, 60.
44. For differently oriented discussions of the idea that rights have certain claimability conditions, see Susan James's discussion of rights as enforceable claims

(James, "Rights as Enforceable Claims"), and Derrick Darby's case for a social recognitional account of moral rights (Darby, *Rights, Race, and Recognition*). For an influential affirmative statement of the case for regarding moral rights talk as socially important even in circumstances in which they (contingently) cannot be claimed, see Feinberg, "The Social Importance of Moral Rights." I take my view here to be entirely specific to the peculiarities of demanding that a (purported) right to forgiveness be fulfilled, and therefore neutral with regard to this more general debate.

45. Carbonell, "Social Constraints on Moral Address."
46. McKenna, "Power, Social Inequalities, and the Conversational Theory of Moral Responsibility."
47. Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allais, Lucy. "The Priority of Gifted Forgiveness: A Response to Fricker." *Australasian Philosophical Review* 3, no. 3 (2019): 261–73.

———. "Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 36, no. 1 (2008): 33–68.

———. "Elective Forgiveness." *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 21, no. 5 (2013): 1–17.

Anderson, Pamela Sue. "When Justice and Forgiveness Come Apart: A Feminist Perspective on Restorative Justice and Intimate Violence." *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 5, no. 1 (2016): 113–34.

Arpaly, Nomy. "Huckleberry Finn Revisited: Inverse Akrasia and Moral Ignorance." In *The Nature of Moral Responsibility*, edited by R. Clark, M. McKenna, A. Smith, 141–56. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Bennett, Christopher. "The Alteration Thesis: Forgiveness as a Normative Power." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 46, no. 2 (2018): 207–33.

Bovens, Luc. "Apologies." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* CVIII, Pt. 3 (2008): 219–39.

———. "Must I Be Forgiven?" *Analysis* 69, no. 2 (2009): 233–39.

Carbonell, Vanessa. "Social Constraints on Moral Address." *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* 98, no. 1 (2019): 167–89.

Card, Claudia. "Gratitude and Obligation." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (1988): 115–27.

———. *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Carse, Alisa L., and Lynne Tirrell. "Forgiving Grave Wrongs." In *Forgiveness In Perspective*, edited by Christopher R. Allers and Marieke Smits. Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2010.

Cherry, Myisha. "Forgiveness, Exemplars, and the Oppressed." In *The Moral Psychology of Forgiveness*, edited by Kathryn J. Norlock, chapter 4. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

Coates, D. Justin, and Neal A. Tognazzini. *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Cusk, Rachel. *Outline*. London: Faber & Faber, 2014.

- Darby, Derrick. *Rights, Race, and Recognition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Darwall, Stephen. *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- . “Bipolar Obligation.” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, Vol. 7, edited by Russ Shafer-Landau, 337–67. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- . “Trust as a Second-Personal Attitude of the Heart.” *The Philosophy of Trust*, edited by Paul Faulkner and Thomas Simpson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Dotson, Kristie. “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing.” *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236–57.
- Feinberg, Joel. “The Social Importance of Moral Rights.” *Philosophical Perspectives* 6 Ethics (1992): 175–98.
- Fricker, Miranda. “The Practices of Forgiving: Replies.” *Australian Philosophical Review* 3, no. 3 (2019): 336–45.
- Gilbert, Margaret. *Rights and Demands: A Foundational Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Griswold, Charles L. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Helmreich, Jeffrey S. “The Apologetic Stance.” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 43, no. 2 (2015): 75–108.
- Hieronymi, Pamela. “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* LXII, no. 3 (May 2021): 529–55.
- Hintikka, Jaakko. “*Cogito, Ergo Sum*: Inference or Performance?” *Philosophical Review* LXXI (1962): 3–32.
- James, Susan. “Rights as Enforceable Claims.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103 (2003): 133–47.
- Kamm, Frances M. “Rights Beyond Interests.” In *Intricate Ethics: Rights, Responsibilities, and Permissible Harm*, ch. 8. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Kitcher, Philip. *The Ethical Project*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Lamb, Sharon. “Women, Abuse, and Forgiveness: A Special Case.” In *Before Forgiving: Cautionary Views of Forgiveness in Psychotherapy*, edited by S. Lamb and J. G. Murphy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- MacLachlan, Alice. “Practicing Imperfect Forgiveness.” In *Feminist Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy: Theorizing the Non-Ideal*, edited by Lisa Tessman, 185–204. Dordrecht: Springer, 2009.
- Maring, Luke. “Is There a Right to Be Forgiven?” *Philosophia* 48 (2020): 1101–15.
- Martin, Adrienne M. “Obligations of Gratitude: Directedness without Rights.” In *The Moral Psychology of Gratitude*, edited by Robert Roberts and Daniel Telech, 59–82. London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd., 2019.
- . “Personal Bonds: Directed Obligations without Rights.” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* CII, no. 1 (2021): 65–86.
- Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Translated by W. D. Halls. London: Routledge, 1990. Originally published as *Essai sur le Don*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1950.



- McCullough, Michael. *Beyond Revenge: The Evolution of the Forgiveness Instinct*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.
- McCullough, Michael, Robert Kurzban, and Benjamin A. Tabak. "Cognitive Systems for Revenge and Forgiveness." *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 36 (2013): 1–58.
- McKenna, Michael, and Brandon Warmke. "Moral Responsibility, Forgiveness and Conversation." In *Free Will and Moral Responsibility*, edited by Ishtiyaque Haji and Justin Caouette. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- McKenna, Michael. "Power, Social Inequalities, and the Conversational Theory of Moral Responsibility." In *Social Dimensions of Moral Responsibility*, edited by Katrina Hutchison, Catriona Mackenzie, and Marina Oshana, 38–58. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Moody-Adams, Michele. "The Enigma of Forgiveness." *Journal of Value Inquiry* 49 (2015): 161–80.
- Hampton, Jean, and Jeffrie G. Murphy. *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Holingdale. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.
- Norlock, Kathryn. *Forgiveness from a Feminist Perspective*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- O'Neill, Onora. *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- Owens, David. *Shaping the Normative Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Pereboom, Derk. "Free Will Skepticism, Blame, and Obligation." In *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, edited by D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini, 189–206. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Petersen, Michael Bang, Aaron Sell, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides. "Evolutionary Psychology and Criminal Justice: A Recalibrational Theory of Punishment and Reconciliation." In *Human Morality and Sociality: Evolutionary & Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Henrik Hogh-Oleson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Pettigrove, Glen. *Forgiveness and Love*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Roberts, Robert C. "Forgivingness." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (1995): 289–306.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. London: Penguin Books, 2009. Originally published in 1759.
- Smith, Michael. *The Moral Problem*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1994.
- Spelman, Elizabeth V. *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- Strawson, P. F. "Social Morality and Individual Ideal." *Philosophy* 36, no. 136 (1961): 1–17.
- . "Freedom and Resentment." In *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays*. London: Methuen, 1974.

Stump, Eleanore. "The Sunflower: Guilt, Forgiveness and Reconciliation." In *Forgiveness and Its Moral Dimensions*, edited by Brandon Warmke, Dana Kay Nelkin, and Michael McKenna, 172–96. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Velleman, David. "Narrative Explanation." *The Philosophical Review* 112, no. 1 (2003): 1–25.

Walker, Margaret Urban. *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations After Wrongdoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Wallace, R. Jay. "Duties of Love." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supp.* 6 (2012): 175–98.

———. *The Moral Nexus*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Westover, Tara. *Educated: A Memoir*. New York: Random House, 2018.

Williams, Bernard. *Descartes: The Project of Pure Inquiry*. Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978.