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Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness

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I first pose a challenge which, it seems to me, any philosophical account of forgiveness must meet: the account must be articulate and it must allow for forgiveness that is uncompromising. I then examine an account of forgiveness (proposed by David Novitz in the June 1998 issue of this journal) which appears to meet this challenge. Upon closer examination we discover that this account actually fails to meet the challenge—but it fails in very instructive ways. The account takes two missteps which seem to be taken by almost everyone discussing forgiveness. At the end I sketch an alternative account of forgiveness, one which I think meets the challenge and avoids the missteps.

A small but sustained discussion of forgiveness stretches through the philosophic literature of the past several decades.¹ Despite periods of relative silence, the topic consistently resurfaces. As it should. Any account we give of our moral lives must accommodate forgiveness—or at least explain its absence. Yet accommodating forgiveness within moral philosophy proves a surprisingly difficult task.

1. *The challenge*

Most contributors to the discussion agree with Bishop Butler that forgiveness entails the forgoing of resentment.² In fact, all too often philosophers see forgiveness primarily as a matter of manipulating one's self out of this unpleasant and potentially destructive emotion. Yet if both resentment and forgiveness admit of justification, i.e., if one resents or forgives another person thinking one has good reason to, then forgiving will entail more than figuring out how to rid one's self of certain unfortunate affects. Ridding one's self of resentment by taking a specially-

¹ The following works are cited in this paper: Bishop Joseph Butler (1827). *Sermons*. Boston, Hilliard and Brown. R.S. Downie (1965). "Forgiveness." *Philosophical Quarterly* 15: 128-34. Aurel Kolnai (1973-74). "Forgiveness." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*: 91-106. Anne C. Minas (1975). "God and Forgiveness." *Philosophical Quarterly* 25: 139-150. Joanna North (1987). "Wrongdoing and Forgiveness." *Philosophy* 62: 499-508. Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton (1988). *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. Norvin Richards (1988). "Forgiveness." *Ethics* 99: 77-97. Cheshire Calhoun (1992). "Changing One's Heart." *Ethics* 103: 76-96. Robert C. Roberts (1995). "Forgivingness." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32(4): 289-306. David Novitz (1998). "Forgiveness and Self-Respect." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58(2): 209-315..

² Richards disagrees, wanting to allow that cases in which wrongdoing prompts sadness or disappointment rather than resentment can still be cases which call for forgiveness. I imagine that a general account of forgiveness would address the broad class of "feeling hurt" in response to a wrong. My account here will restrict itself to cases of feeling resentment. What I mean by "resentment" should become clear over the course of the discussion. (Roberts has a nice discussion of "The emotion that forgiveness overcomes" in his article.)

designed pill, for example, would not count as forgiveness. Genuine forgiveness must involve some revision in judgment or change in view. An account of genuine forgiveness must therefore *articulate* that revision in judgment or change in view. It must be an articulate account.³

Such an account faces a difficult problem, however. Any account of *genuine* forgiveness must articulate the revision in judgment or change in view in a way that allows the forgiver to hold fixed the following three (interrelated) judgments: (1) The act in question was wrong; it was a serious offense, worthy of moral attention. (2) The wrongdoer is a legitimate member of the moral community who can be expected not to do such things. As such, she is someone to be held responsible and she is worth being upset by. (3) You, as the one wronged, ought not to be wronged. This sort of treatment stands as an offense to your person.

When these judgments are warranted, our first response is, and ought to be, anger and resentment. To be angry and resentful is to be involved with and committed to these judgments in a way that goes beyond merely assenting to their truth. (I take the difference between merely assenting to these judgments and being angry or resentful to be the same sort of difference as that between agreeing that something is good and *wanting* it, or agreeing that something is dangerous and *fearing* it.) Resentment, I believe, should be understood as protest. In resentment the victim protests the trespass, affirming both its wrongfulness and the moral significance of both herself and the offender. The challenge for any account of forgiveness, as I see it, lies in articulating how we can maintain the three judgments listed and yet abandon the protest.

One must maintain the three judgments, because denying any one of them absolves the wrongdoer of culpability, and to absolve of culpability is to *excuse*, not to forgive. The three judgments thus correspond to three not-wholly-distinct strategies for *imitating* forgiveness—for acting as if one has forgiven: in light of the costs of sustained anger or the inconvenience of strained relations one might attempt to “forgive” by abandoning one’s commitment to one of the

³ Murphy makes the point that forgiveness “is the sort of thing one does for a reason.” (This feature distinguishes forgiveness, “which may be a virtue and morally commanded,” from simply forgetting, “which may just happen.”) He further notes, “where there are reasons there is a distinction between good ones and bad ones.” [p. 15] An articulate account would articulate the good reasons for forgiveness.

judgments and so ceasing to care either about right and wrong, or about the wrongdoer, or about one's self. While ceasing to care in this way might, if you can manage it, eliminate anger and resentment,⁴ it isn't forgiveness. To count as genuine forgiveness, the abandonment of resentment must not compromise one's commitment to the three judgments. Forgiveness must be *uncompromising*.

Consider the following examples. If you try to forgive by saying, "look, these things happen all the time," or "I just can't get upset by this," then you are giving up on either the seriousness of the wrong, saying it doesn't rate being worked up about, or the worth of the wrongdoer, by saying in effect that she is not worth the emotional difficulty. If you say to yourself, "you really can't expect any better of her," you are not *forgiving* the offender, but rather adjusting your expectations of her, lowering her moral standing. If you try to forgive by thinking "who am I to be angry about this; my hands are far from clean," then you are giving up on your own worth—saying that your past wrongdoings somehow either undermine your ability to protest such treatment or make legitimate the mistreatment you received, in effect forfeiting your claim against being wronged, and so, in some sense, condoning her action.

So while forgiveness requires the overcoming or forgoing of anger and resentment, not just any overcoming counts as forgiveness. An account of forgiveness must articulate the revision in judgment or change in view that allows us to overcome our anger or resentment without compromise. We need an articulate account of uncompromising forgiveness.

2. Novitz's apparent answer

David Novitz took on the topic of forgiveness in his Presidential Address to the Australasian Association of Philosophy.⁵ At first his account appears to meet the challenge. On his account, forgiveness is achieved by fostering in one's self an enduring form of pity (or, as he sometimes says, "compassion") which eliminates resentment. One might think that pity or compassion could eliminate resentment without requiring the revision of the three judgments. Thus such

⁴ more likely the attempt to stop caring will only subvert one's anger, turning it into bitterness

⁵ This address appeared in the June '98 issue of this journal under the title "Forgiveness and Self-Respect."

forgiveness might seem uncompromising. Further, one achieves this pity or compassion, according to Novitz, by gaining an empathetic understanding of the offender's point of view. The task of forgiveness is thus the task of achieving a *change in view* by identifying imaginatively with the other person's situation in order to understand it. Once the pity or compassion engendered by the change in view becomes "a secure part of one's emotional life" it will be "both conceptually and psychologically impossible to continue to feel resentment and anger." [p. 311] So, according to Novitz, a change in view evokes a pity which can eliminate anger or resentment, and thus deserve the name of forgiveness. And so his account appears to answer the challenge: Novitz articulates a change in view that eliminates anger without requiring a revision of any of the three judgments.⁶

I will argue that, while this account seems to answer the challenge, it actually falls short of being a fully articulate account, and, in so doing, it fails to capture uncompromising forgiveness. But it fails in very instructive ways. Though Novitz himself admirably and insightfully shows how various attempts at forgiveness amount to mere forgetting or distraction or capitulation to the crime, he nevertheless makes two very common missteps which lead him to his misleading conclusion.

Before examining the missteps, let's examine Novitz's view. He builds his account in the course of insightfully dismissing many interpersonal scenarios that one might have thought displayed forgiveness, showing how they do not actually embody that virtue. I will gather together the features of a scenario he believes to manifest true forgiveness.

⁶ Novitz's approach thus bears a close relation to both Cheshire Calhoun's and Robert Roberts' very insightful and instructive accounts. According to Calhoun, forgiveness becomes possible (though not required) when one can make an action intelligible as part of the biography of the wrongdoer. My response to Calhoun would parallel the first part of my response to Novitz, insofar as Calhoun, like Novitz, relies on one's ability to "understand the other side of the story." (I do not address Calhoun's view more directly, because addressing our disagreement would require a broader discussion about freedom and reason.) According to Roberts, forgiveness is achieved by a sort of *gestalt* switch which changes one's emotions without changing the judgments underlying them. My response to Roberts would parallel the second part my response to Novitz, insofar as he, like Novitz, does not adequately explain how the new emotional state causes a revision, not just an occlusion, of the old one. (I do not address Roberts more directly because addressing my disagreement with him would entail a broader discussion of the nature of emotions.)

Novitz starts with a sincere apology on the part of the offender, saying, “Suppose, then... you accept full responsibility for your actions and express your profound regret.” [p. 305] And suppose further that “I have reason to believe you have learned something about the suffering you have inflicted, about human vulnerability.” [p. 306] In hearing your apology, “I recognize your pain, see you are suffering, and... [not only] accept your apology, but [also] find, to my relief, that I am no longer resentful and angry.” [p. 307] He asks, “Would this amount to forgiving you?”

Novitz recognizes that this does not necessarily amount to forgiveness. One might instead find oneself relieved of resentment merely because the pain of remorse has satisfied one’s desire for retribution. “I have let your conscience exact the revenge I had earlier desired.” [p. 307]

“But,” he goes on to propose, “what if, instead of relief, your penitence and suffering brings me to pity you—or feel sorry for you—and that as a result I no longer wish you ill? Does this mean I have forgiven you?” [p. 308]

Again, he recognizes that even this does not necessarily amount to forgiveness, “for by pitying one may deliberately diminish and belittle a person, and to do this is not to forgive.” Further, pity may serve to merely “occlude rather than remove” my resentment. But resentment could just as well “be momentarily hidden by my joy at having won a game of tennis.” [p. 308]

“However,” Novitz concludes, “if my pity is appropriately derived and of a suitable form, and is so integrated into my emotional life that I cease altogether to harbour feelings of resentment, then, it does indeed seem appropriate to say that I have forgiven you.” [p. 308]⁷ Forgiveness is achieved when a sincere apology, believed to have been occasioned by the offender’s new understanding of the offense, elicits in the one to whom it is offered not satisfaction, but rather a pity or compassion which destabilizes and eventually reliably replaces his anger and resentment.

⁷ The surrounding text does not elucidate this sentence. I have gathered together, in the previous paragraphs, the features to which I believe it refers.

Novitz insists that, because our emotions are not under our immediate volitional control, “forgiveness does not consist in any one act that a person can perform at will.” [p. 308] Rather, he claims, forgiveness involves a task—the task of seeking understanding. In those with the requisite virtue undertaking this task ushers in forgiveness.

His account of the task contains an important ambiguity. In his first description of it, the task consists of seeking out “the other side of the story” in order to “undermine [one’s] grievance.” He notes that “by trying to see events from your point of view, I grasp, sometimes ‘from the inside’ what motivated you, what errors of judgment prevailed, and why they had such a grip on your imagination.” Novitz believes that “any such attempt to identify imaginatively with your situation... may help destabilize my attitudes toward you.” By trying to put myself in your shoes, I may “feel the urgency of your needs and so see differently why you acted as you did.” [p. 309] So in this first description, the task involves understanding the *motives* or point of view of the offensive action. Novitz goes so far as to claim that “one cannot forgive unless one tries to understand the other side of the story.” [p. 310]

However, Novitz recognizes that one might gain a correct empathetic understanding of the point of view of the action, and yet fail to forgive. In the course of identifying imaginatively with your point of view, “I may come... to understand just how selfish your behavior was, how cruel, and the extent to which you delight in... your malevolence... As a result, my feelings of resentment and anger might quite properly intensify.” [p. 311] Even if he understands your point of view, he may not be able to banish his negative feelings. They may instead intensify.

This is an interesting case because, on Novitz’s view, an empathetic understanding engenders compassion, and compassion eliminates resentment. But in the present case, empathetic understanding *exacerbates* resentment. Something has gone wrong. Novitz doesn’t tell us exactly what that something is. He simply says, “if I am angry and hurt, I may take pleasure in your discomfort.” [p. 311] So it looks as though, in this case, Novitz identifies the failure as a failure to achieve compassion. He appeals to the strength of one’s emotion to explain this failure: one’s anger and hurt somehow preclude compassion.

Novitz now suggests that, to achieve forgiveness, he must first notice “the sharp edge of your shame and remorse,” and then, rather than taking pleasure in your pain, instead “have compassion for you—where this involves the higher-order... attitude of concern or sadness on account of my empathetic grasp of your remorse and suffering.” [p. 311] In this second description the task of the one trying to forgive has shifted from understanding the offender’s *motives* at the time of action to empathizing with the *painfulness of his remorse* at the time of apology. Quite clearly in this second description, forgiveness is a form of pity.

In sum, on Novitz’s view forgiveness is a stable and well-integrated form of pity which arises (in those with the requisite virtue) either from an empathetic understanding of the point of view of the offensive action or from an empathetic grasp of the painfulness of remorse. Such pity follows an apology which is sincere and reasonably believed to have been occasioned by the offender’s newfound understanding of the suffering he inflicted. It counts as forgiveness because it serves to destabilize and eventually permanently eliminate one’s anger and resentment.

3. Failing the challenge, missing forgiveness

Once again, it might seem that Novitz has articulated a particular change in view, viz., a change to the *offender’s* point of view, which elicits a pity which eliminates one’s anger and resentment while leaving in place the three judgments mentioned earlier. And so it might seem that Novitz has provided an articulate account of uncompromising forgiveness. Yet, I will argue that Novitz not only falls short of a fully articulate account, but also, by so falling, captures something other than uncompromising forgiveness: Novitz replaces forgiveness with pity. He misses his target by making two very common missteps.

First, Novitz falls into the all-too-common habit of talking about resentment and anger as things to be manipulated—to be “banished,” “destabilized,” “dissipated,” “dispelled,” “vanquished,” “conquered,” or “removed”—rather than as attitudes sensitive to one’s judgments,

subject to rational *revision*.⁸ Though he admirably denies any suggestion that our emotions are subject to our immediate volitional control (we can't "just decide" to stop feeling them), he nonetheless, in the end, portrays them as objects of indirect manipulation (we can decide to do things to ourselves to make them go away). While Novitz's claims are right, as far as they go, he ultimately makes no use of the fact that our resentment and anger *are* sensitive to our judgments.⁹ We have them because we think we have reason to. If we come to see that they are unfounded, they will (in the well-functioning psyche) disappear. Like our beliefs, we can't "just decide" to have them, and, like our beliefs, we may be able to do things to ourselves that we can predict will make them go away. But, like our beliefs, these attitudes have judgments proper to them (e.g., someone worth caring about has disrespected us). Because Novitz makes no use of this feature of resentment (*viz.*, its judgment sensitivity) his account ultimately fails to be articulate. An articulate account must make use of the fact that emotions are subject to rational revision by articulating the revision in judgment or change in view that allows us to *revise* our resentment while maintaining the judgments that occasioned it.

To provide a model for an articulate account, consider the case of indignation and excuse: Indignation is grounded on a judgment about wrongdoing. We can, with reason, revise our indignation when someone provides us with a legitimate excuse for the action about which we were indignant. A good excuse gives us reason to revise the judgment on which the indignation was based: in light of the excuse, the act is no longer (as) morally offensive. The indignation thus loses (some of) its rational justification, and so, in a well-functioning person, disappears (or at least diminishes). If our indignation persists despite our revised judgment (*i.e.*, if we are less than well-functioning), we may be able to indirectly manipulate our feelings, to try to bring them into line with our judgments. But we only resort to such manipulations in the non-ideal cases. Further, such manipulations are simply our attempt to achieve self-consistency, to bring unity to

⁸ Murphy, again, provides the strongest counter example I've seen. He is explicitly concerned with the question of providing justifying reasons for abandoning one's resentment. Hampton, in her exchange with him, seems to pick up his concern, though not as consistently as he.

⁹ I owe the notion of "judgment sensitivity" to Thomas Scanlon. (See Thomas M. Scanlon (1998). *What We Owe to Each Other*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press., pp. 20-24.)

our own point of view. They do not describe what it is to excuse someone. Excusing involves a revision in judgment.

Following this model, an articulate account of forgiveness would explain what revision in judgment or change in view would serve to *rationally* undermine justified resentment in something like the way an excuse undermines indignation. But it must do so without excusing the offense, if the account is to capture forgiveness. That is to say, it must leave in place the three judgments mentioned earlier. Novitz's account leaves this task untouched. He never investigates either the rational *grounds* of anger or resentment nor does he suggest a revision in judgment or change in view that could therefore would rationally *undermine* them. By treating emotions less as judgment sensitive attitudes and more as forces to managed, Novitz neglects this task: by taking the first misstep Novitz falls short of a fully articulate account. Instead of looking for the conditions under which one can revise one's emotions, Novitz looks for ways to destabilize them.

One might, at this point, reasonably wonder why we need a *fully* articulate account—an account articulate in this very strong sense.¹⁰ I think there are many reasons to require full articulation, but rather than argue directly for this requirement, I will instead continue my examination of Novitz's view, to see whether he can provide a suitable account of forgiveness even short of providing a fully articulate account. In the process, we will see some of the reasons for requiring full articulation.

Novitz suggests two possible destabilizers for resentment: the change to the offender's point of view and the compassion thereby elicited. The first of these contains the ambiguity noted earlier: one might take up the offender's point of view by taking up either the point of view of action or the point of view of remorse. I will argue that we should not confuse with forgiveness

¹⁰ Roberts, in fact, argues that “acts of forgiveness... are possible because of a certain looseness of fit between the judgments that constitute the cognitive content of an emotion, and the emotion itself.” [p. 289]. So it seems that, for him, forgiveness is possible only insofar as we needn't give fully articulate accounts.

any “destabilization” that might occur because of either a change in view (whether to the point of view of action or to that of remorse) or the compassion thereby elicited.

First I will argue that we should not confuse with forgiveness any destabilization that occurs when one considers the point of view of action. Appeal to the point of view of the offensive action is illicit because the “other side of the story” is, by hypothesis, a story of wrongdoing, and so one cannot appeal to *it* in an effort to secure uncompromising forgiveness. Insofar as one’s resentment is justified, this change in view only emphasizes the resentment’s proper object. And so, insofar as one continues to care about the wrong of the doing, the wrongdoer, and one’s self, understanding the story of wrongdoing will not destabilize one’s resentment.

Two different forms of destabilization might arise from “empathetically understanding” the point of view of action, both of which must be distinguished from any change in view that might constitute forgiveness.

We are familiar with the first from the literature on responsibility and free will. Once we come to see a criminal as a product of his personal history, we might come to believe that, though his motives were despicable, in a sense he “couldn’t have done otherwise.” He was, in Susan Wolf’s phrase, “psychologically determined” to cruelty by forces which lie beyond his control. He has been, like the rest of us, subject to “moral luck.”¹¹ And yet we continue to resent his action. Both Thomas Nagel and Gary Watson have noted that the disharmony between the point of view of our resentment and the point of view which takes into account the contribution of a person’s unchosen history can serve to “infuse our reactive attitudes with a sense of irony.”¹²

Whatever we say about our responses to such biographical reflections, ironic detachment from one’s reactive attitudes should not be confused with forgiveness. Ironic detachment changes the nature of our relations with others. We no longer relate to them as people who can

¹¹ Claims about psychological determinism and moral luck are distinguishable, but the differences between them are not relevant here. A sympathy for either sort of argument will serve to destabilize one’s reactive attitudes. (See Thomas Nagel (1979). “Moral Luck”. *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 24-38. Susan Wolf (1980). “Asymmetrical Freedom.” *Journal of Philosophy* 77: 151-66..)

¹² Gary Watson (1993). “Responsibility and the Limits of Evil: Variations on a Strawsonian theme”. *Perspectives on Moral Responsibility*. John M. Fischer and Mark Ravizza. Ithaca, Cornell University Press: 119-148., pg. 139.

be held straightforwardly responsible for their behavior (for that matter, we no longer relate to ourselves that way). Without responsibility, there is no culpability. Without culpability, there can be no forgiveness.¹³

Second, forgiveness must not be confused with the destabilization that arises from trying to be two people at once. To make this argument, we must distinguish between possible senses of “understanding.” At a minimum, to say one understands an action is to say that one finds the action intelligible. One can ascribe reasons for it and so mark it out as an action rather than an involuntary movement or spasm. This degree of understanding, mere comprehension, is necessary for offense, necessary even to feel resentment (we don’t resent spasms, even if they somehow harm us). Of course the offender’s action can make sense—some twisted or truncated sort of sense—from “his” point of view, from the point of view of his action. If it didn’t, we wouldn’t be dealing with an action, and so we wouldn’t be dealing with anything for which one could be responsible or anything which another could resent. For any intelligible, culpable, resentable action, intelligible (though poor) reasons must be attributed to a piece of behavior. Merely having reactive attitudes (like resentment), requires *both* the ability to comprehend the other person’s reasons *and* the ability to remain in one’s own point of view. To be offended, I must both understand *and protest* your reasons. They misvalue my worth; they fail to accord me the respect I deserve. This minimal degree of understanding, mere comprehension, is in fact necessary for forgiveness—but only because it’s necessary for offense.

Novitz clearly has something more in mind. He argues for an *empathetic* understanding of the other’s point of view. In fact, he claims that one cannot forgive without an attempt to “imaginatively enter” the other side of the story.

But if you are an imaginative and empathetic person, it seems to me perfectly possible for you to *empathetically* understand another’s point of view and yet remain angry—so long as you

¹³ It is worth noting that this destabilizing point of view is not actually the *offender’s* point of view, i.e., not the point of view of the offensive action. The destabilization occurs from the tension between the point of view of our resentment and our “more informed” point of view from which we see the offender as a product of either his history or moral luck.

remember to return to your own station and continue being you. Forgiveness cannot be simply a matter of coming to imaginatively occupy the immoral point of view from which he committed the deed and finding that doing so “destabilizes” one’s own, presumably justified, resentment. If the action was indeed offensive, no such “destabilization” need occur. If one’s resentment unravels *merely* with an empathetic understanding of the offender’s point of view, then, assuming the offense genuine, one displays the sort of lack of self-esteem that Novitz takes great pains to distinguish from forgiveness. One’s supposed “forgiveness,” in this case, would not be uncompromising. (On the other hand, if understanding the motives of the offender lessens the *offense*, then one’s resentment was premature or overblown, and one should now *excuse*, rather than forgive, the offender. “But now I see that he didn’t really disregard my interests, he merely misunderstood; he thought that...”)

So understanding, in the sense of mere comprehension, is necessary even for offense. But even an *empathetic* understanding of the point of view of action does not necessarily destabilize anger, so long as one does not entirely abandon one’s own point of view. An empathetic understanding of the point of view of action is not sufficient for forgiveness, so long as forgiveness is uncompromising.

On the other hand, in certain cases an *empathetic* understanding of the offensive action seems unnecessary. Consider the apology given by an offender who has *himself* lost touch with the point of view of the offense: “I don’t know what I was thinking. I really can’t understand how I could have done that to you...” If circumstances are such that you can believe this apology genuine, then exercising your imagination to empathetically enter the point of view of the offense (to “feel the urgency of [his] needs and so see differently why [he] acted as [he] did”) seems uncalled-for, perhaps even a bit perverse. It seems one might forgive, straight-away. So an empathetic understanding of the point of view of the offense is neither necessary nor sufficient for forgiveness, although it might elicit compassion.¹⁴

¹⁴ I will suggest later why, on an articulate account, empathetic understanding might elicit compassion.

Recall that compassion also played the crucial role in Novitz's explanation of forgiveness based on empathy with the point of view of remorse. So neither empathetic understanding of the motives of the action nor empathetic understanding of the pain of remorse makes for forgiveness. Both require a stance of compassion towards the object of one's empathetic understanding. So I suggest that neither change to the offender's point of view can destabilize anger or resentment in a way that can be called forgiveness. Instead, "compassion" must do the crucial work of eliminating anger and resentment. Novitz can recommend empathetic understanding only as a way to elicit compassion. Perhaps compassion, though, will succeed in eliminating one's resentment in a way that can be called forgiveness.

Talk of compassion brings us to the second misstep. In giving his account Novitz misses a distinction that many others in this discussion also seem to miss: that between forgiveness and love, or compassion, or what might be called readiness-to-forgive. (Taking the first misstep, viz., thinking of emotions more as forces than as judgment sensitive attitudes, leads easily to this second one. Requiring a more articulate account would help avoid it.) Philosophers sometimes seem to think that "negative" reactive attitudes, like anger or resentment, are more or less blankly "bad," and that the compassionate and loving person—the person of "good-will"—will rid himself of them.¹⁵

But anger and love are compatible. We can be very angry with those we love—*while* loving them. If this sounds implausible, one is likely imagining something stronger than mere anger, something like malice or a desire to destroy or to triumph over the person. I do not deny that *some* states are incompatible with love; I only insist that the anger arising from the three judgments listed need not be one of them. In fact, the second of the three judgments requires that

¹⁵Murphy provides an exception. He emphasizes the way resentment betrays caring about things. But he also tends to talk about resentment as a more destructive emotion than I think necessary. Butler might appear a counter-example, since he actually says that "resentment is not inconsistent with good-will" [p.128]. But he also says that it "hath for its end the misery of our fellow creatures" [p.127]. I am not sure how he hopes to square these. He is, in the latter passage, unhelpfully eliding resentment and revenge. In the final sections of this paper I will consider more fully how resentment can be understood as compatible with good-will.

we attribute to the offender moral significance and count her as worth being upset by. If we could manage to simply discount her, we could avoid the emotional costs of anger. This suggests that the more we *care* about the offender, the more important she is to us, the more angry we are likely to be. But anger does not entail wanting her to suffer. We can be very angry with our family members, friends, and lovers over something they have done, without wanting to destroy them for it.

However, we can't be angry over something while claiming to have *forgiven* them for it. So while anger and *love* are compatible, anger and *forgiveness* are *not* compatible. Forgiveness and love are thus distinguished. If anger and love can coexist, then anger might also abide with lesser states of good-will, which we might be reluctant to grace with the name "love" but which we would perhaps call "compassion" or "concern" or, generally speaking, "readiness-to-forgive."

Any discussion of forgiveness must be sensitive to the distinction between forgiveness and readiness-to-forgive. In light of this distinction, we can see that the offended person might face two distinct tasks. She might first need to regain (or to achieve) a stance of love, or compassion, or good-will, or readiness-to-forgive. Such a stance remains compatible with anger, and therefore is not the same as forgiveness itself, which might constitute a second task. I will argue that, by appealing to "pity" or "compassion," Novitz gives us an inarticulate (though I think largely correct) account of the first task, but neglects the second—forgiveness-proper. (To his credit, Novitz has focused on the task which seems most urgent.) And so Novitz fails to meet the challenge not only because his account falls short of being fully articulate, but also because his less-than-fully articulate account captures something other than uncompromising forgiveness. Instead of an articulate account of uncompromising forgiveness, he provides a less-than-fully articulate account of compassion or pity.

Novitz takes this second misstep quite easily, not only because he takes the first misstep, but also because he assumes from the start of his analysis that forgiveness must follow an apology.¹⁶ It is in the absence of apology, however, that the difference between forgiveness and compassion appears most clearly.

Imagine that I have all the understanding, empathy, and compassion Novitz associates with forgiveness. I empathetically understand your motives, your pains and pleasures, and your needs and fears. Further, I have a stance of compassion toward my empathetic grasp of your situation: I feel pain, rather than pleasure, at your pain, and compassion for, rather than satisfaction at, your suffering. (I may even add that I care deeply about your dignity and your well-being.) Yet, in the absence of an apology, I may, for all that, fail to forgive you. Even genuine, empathetic, compassionate identification with you does not rule out anger over what you have done. Suppose my husband has been unfaithful, or, for a less dramatic example, suppose an old friend and coworker has shirked his responsibilities in a way that seriously compromises me. Suppose further that this person remains unrepentant and that those around us show reluctance to charge him with any serious wrongdoing. As his wife or friend, I may thoroughly understand his motives. Further, as he goes through various contortions to avoid confronting his own wrongdoing, I may recognize and empathize with the pain and havoc that I see his misdeed bringing into his life. His pain need not *please* me. Given my compassion for him, it may only add to mine. I may wish to high heaven that he would see his error, come make his apology, face the rest of his life and start to set things straight. But, if he continues to deny the

¹⁶ It's an interesting assumption. At least initially we have reason to want to preserve the possibility of unilateral forgiveness—forgiveness of the unrepentant. Without that possibility, victims might be trapped in their own justified anger and resentment, held hostage by their own emotions while awaiting the contrition that would allow them to forgive and so rid themselves of these. The possible death of an unrepentant offender further complicates the problem. Assuming that forgiveness must follow a sincere apology eliminates, without examination, the escape usually recommended in such cases: forgiveness. The assumption also eliminates another seemingly plausible possibility: cases in which forgiveness *evokes*, rather than follows, repentance.

It might be that neither of these common “possibilities” ultimately make sense. It might be the task of the victim to remain angry, without letting that anger embitter or disfigure her, and then to so enlarge her life that her anger does not consume it. It might be that, if we spoke carefully, we would say that *mercy* may evoke repentance, but forgiveness always follows it. Either of these conclusions deserves argument. I simply note the heavy consequences of the assumption that forgiveness always requires a sincere apology.

wrongdoing, I may remain quite unable to forgive him—for very good reason. In this case, I fail to forgive not because I take pleasure in his pain, nor because I wish him ill. To the contrary, my anger may be, at least in part, *fueled* by my compassion for him. An appeal to “compassion” does not allow me to forgive, any more than an appeal to “his side of the story,” because I *already* feel compassion, just as I *already* understand his side of the story. Both help to fuel my anger; neither gives me reason to revise it. I remain unable to forgive because, given his lack of remorse and the “public” reluctance to acknowledge the wrong, it looks to me as though abandoning my anger and so “forgiving” him would amount either to condoning the offense, giving up on him, or discounting myself. “Forgiveness,” in this case, would amount to compromise—an abandonment of things I cannot abandon. So long as this remains true, no amount of compassion, empathy, or understanding will enable me to forgive.

This example also illustrates how, in certain cases, espousing an inarticulate account exposes one to the charge of compromise: insofar as we are unable to explain *why* one can abandon one’s anger or resentment, ceasing to be angry or resentful is subject to interpretation as simply ceasing to care. I am unable to forgive my unrepentant husband (or coworker) because “letting go of” my anger is indistinguishable from giving up on him, on myself, or on the wrongness of his actions. Recommending to me either compassion or understanding will sound, to me, either like an unfair accusation (that I am lacking the compassion and understanding I do not lack) or like a more-or-less blank appeal to “let go” of my anger. Such a recommendation would not allow me to forgive uncompromisingly. We need an *articulate* account to avoid philosophically condoning compromise.¹⁷

¹⁷ I do not, of course, mean to imply that only those people able to provide an articulate account of their own forgiveness are able to forgive uncompromisingly. Surely people genuinely forgive without being able to give an adequate philosophical account of what they are doing, just as people genuinely trust, or love, or promise without being able to do so. If, in the above case, I received an adequate apology from the man in question, I might then very well forgive uncompromisingly, without being able to articulate why I can do so. I could, if asked, confirm for you that my forgiveness is uncompromising simply by telling you that it does not entail condoning the offense, giving up on the worth of the offender, or abandoning my own claim against wrongdoing. I needn’t be able to say *how* that can be the case, I only need to know that it *is* the case. The task of articulation falls on the philosopher.

If I've given an accurate description of this case, then I can conclude that neither a compassionate understanding of the point of view of the offense nor a compassionate empathy for the self-inflicted suffering brought about by another's misdeeds (nor even deep-seated, abiding love and concern) is simply the same as forgiveness, nor even sufficient for it. In the absence of an apology, compassion amounts merely to a readiness-to-forgive, not to forgiveness itself.¹⁸ Novitz has given us an account of the former, when he meant to give us an account of the latter.¹⁹

But perhaps I am concluding too quickly that Novitz has simply replaced forgiveness with compassion. While this last example has shown that, in the *absence* of an apology, compassion might amount to only readiness-to-forgive, perhaps in the *presence* of an apology compassion simply amounts to forgiveness. Novitz assumed apology from the beginning, and it does seem that compassion is what, in the presence of apology, drives out anger and resentment without undermining the judgments that occasioned them. That is to say, though Novitz's account remains less-than-articulate, perhaps he has nonetheless correctly identified what would call for a revision of our resentment, at least in the presence of apology.

Here we again encounter the dangers of the first misstep, viz., treating emotions more as forces than as judgment sensitive attitudes. We will now see how lacking an articulate account leaves the philosophical task incomplete.

In light of the last example, it seems that compassion and resentment are not, in any deep way, incompatible: compassion does not require one to *revise* one's resentment, any more than empathetic understanding did. Some emotions are deeply incompatible and do "drive out" one

¹⁸ Compassion seems to deserve the name "readiness-to-forgive" simply because it seems that, if my husband or co-worker does make a sincere apology adequate to the offense, I could not long continue in my anger and still claim compassion.

¹⁹ Though his account of compassion it is not an articulate account, I think it largely correct. Why should imaginatively entering into another's situation elicit compassion—where compassion is not just the same as imaginative entering, but carries some implication of concern or good-will? I will suggest in footnote 21 that an articulate account might argue that compassion comes with the recognition that another is "like you" in certain ways. This might start to articulate why compassion comes with empathetic understanding.

another in a way that allows for a more articulate account.²⁰ *Gratitude* would “drive out” resentment in a way we can articulate more deeply, because gratitude and resentment are founded on incompatible judgments. Gratitude toward a person arises when you believe that person has done you a good turn. Resentment arises when you believe someone has paid you disrespect. A change in view or revision in judgment that leads one to be *grateful* to a particular person for a particular deed will, at the same time, undermine any resentment toward that person about it.

But, as we have seen, compassion and resentment are not incompatible in this way.²¹ Compassion and resentment are incompatible in a much *weaker* way: they compete for one’s *attention*, but they do not compete with one another for *justification*. To use the distinction Novitz taught us, compassion might *occlude* rather than *remove* one’s anger, like a joyful game of tennis. Lacking an articulate account, Novitz has not fully explained what might rule out this possibility.²²

It looks as though, on Novitz’s view, one’s compassion or pity can be said to *remove* one’s resentment once it has become a permanent part of one’s mental life which *reliably* rules out any anger. Anger over the wrongdoing, then, is less undermined, dissolved, or dissipated than

²⁰ Metaphors of physical force do not necessarily mark the end of articulation. We say that beliefs “clash” or “undermine” or “stand in tension with” one another. Nevertheless, we can give an articulate account of this.

²¹ Though I haven’t a well worked view on this, I am inclined to say that compassion is sensitive to a judgment or recognition that another person is “like you” in some relevant way (if only in being another person). (Such an account would make articulate Novitz’s view that empathetic understanding engenders compassion.) Resentment, as I’ve said, is sensitive to the judgment that someone worth caring about has wronged you. A central theme of this paper maintains that, insofar as compassion involves seeing someone as like you in the sense of “worth caring about” and “morally responsible,” that component of compassion can *fuel*, rather than dispel, anger. So compassion, far from driving out anger, can contribute to it.

There is a strand of thought about forgiveness that says that forgiveness involves seeing the wrongdoer as “like you” in a particular way: like you in sinfulness or moral frailty, vulnerability, and need for forgiveness. By picking up on this strand, an account of forgiveness could start to be articulate about a way in which compassion and resentment might be incompatible. But such an account would use a very *particular* form of compassion, far more specific than the general sense invoked by Novitz. I won’t explore this sort of account further in this paper, though I think it worthy of exploration. Suffice to say, I think this kind of account will face the challenge of distinguishing forgiveness from condonation, or merely “winking at” wrongdoing. That’s not to say it couldn’t meet that challenge.

²² This would be my challenge to Roberts’ account, as well.

simply permanently displaced by a competing emotion. Occlusion becomes removal by dint of continuousness.

As will be clear by now, I find this unsatisfying. If we treat emotions as forces driven about by one another, we will not search for deeper, more articulate accounts. We require an articulate account not only as a way to help avoid missteps, and not only to guard against charges of compromise, but also because lacking such an account leaves the philosophical task incomplete by leaving the phenomena badly underexplained. In this case, it leaves badly underexplained the importance of *apologies*.

On our last interpretation of Novitz's view, compassion amounts to forgiveness in the presence of apology. But, given the distinction between forgiveness and readiness-to-forgive, this suggestion will be inadequate unless Novitz can explain why compassion should *become* forgiveness in the presence of apology. Why should an apology, in particular, transform compassion into forgiveness by making compassion and anger suddenly incompatible? Novitz focuses on the painfulness of apology and on the importance of having a stance of compassion (rather than satisfaction) towards one's empathetic grasp of that painfulness. But it seems odd to focus on the *painfulness* of, rather than the *fact* of, apology. It leaves one wondering why this particular form of painfulness achieves this effect. After all, not just any sharp edge of suffering will do. It must be the suffering occasioned by the sharp edge of *remorse*. Observing, even compassionately, the pain of someone squirming under the ill-effects of the public discovery of his wrongdoing will not necessarily lead to forgiveness, even if that pain prompts a quick-but-remorseless request for forgiveness. Further, the painful remorse of a misplaced apology (an apology for the wrong thing) could reasonably be met with an explanation of the misplacement rather than forgiveness. (Accepting a misplaced apology in order to relieve the offender of the pain of remorse is, precisely, an act of compassion, which might also be classified as an act of mercy, but not one of forgiveness.) So it seems that the pain in question needs to be the pain of remorse manifest in an apology adequate (in some sense) to the offense. But why must the

compassion that drives out resentment be in response to the pain of an adequate apology? This fact requires explanation.

A deeper way of understanding the matter makes the view currently under consideration seem backwards. On the current view, apology is a precondition, in the presence of which compassion drives out resentment. This view seems plausible when we assume that emotions can be driven out by other emotions. It seems unsatisfactory insofar as it leaves one wondering why apology should be such a precondition. But if one denies that compassion “drives out” resentment in any deep way, and if one further thinks emotions subject to rational revision, one might then reverse the view: some form of compassion (readiness-to-forgive) might involve a set of judgments which are themselves a precondition for a change in view or revision in judgment which can be brought about by an apology and which undermines resentment.²³

The question of course remains: just what *is* that change in view or revision in judgment? This was our original question, as we sought an articulate, uncompromising account of forgiveness.

4. An alternative account

So I will now turn to the much more difficult task of providing a constructive account of forgiveness that meets the requirements I have set. I will not come close to finishing this task within the confines of this paper. Instead, I will examine only the sort of forgiveness we have been considering: that in which an apology brings about a change in view or revision in judgment that allows one to forgo resentment. I will sketch the kind of account I envision in this case, as an example of the kind of account I think required generally. The account will remain very intuitive and metaphorical. It will, nonetheless, allow me to show the advantages gained by avoiding the two missteps.

First I will pause to highlight the difficulty we face. We can now see more clearly why an articulate account of uncompromising forgiveness proves so elusive. In explaining Novitz’s

²³ I don’t mean to imply that forgiveness which follows apology is the only form there is. (See footnote 16.) It is simply the sort we are considering.

missteps, I complained that he neglected to first consider what judgments rationally ground resentment and that therefore he could not articulate what would rationally undermine it. In our model case, we saw that indignation is grounded in a judgment about wrongdoing and that therefore an excuse rationally undermines indignation, by revising that judgment. But resentment, it would seem, is grounded in the *same* three judgments which forgiveness must leave standing. And so it's hard to see how forgiveness can be *both* articulate and uncompromising.

Nevertheless it seems that, at least on some occasions, an *apology* can undermine resentment. Does it do so rationally? To understand better how an apology might bring about a revision in judgment or change in view that could rationally undermine resentment, we need to do the work I claimed Novitz neglected: we need to delve more deeply into the attitude of resentment.

Most contributors to the discussion seem to think of resentment as some sort of a “fight response.” In his eighth Sermon, Butler describes resentment as a “weapon put into our hands by nature, against injury, injustice, and cruelty.” [p.116] We learn in the next Sermon that this weapon “has for its end the misery of our fellow creatures.” Indeed, “to do mischief, to be the author of misery, is the very thing which gratifies the passion.” [p.127] So resentment, which started as a means for defense and justice in Sermon VIII, becomes indistinguishable from and interchanged with “malice” and “revenge” in Sermon IX.²⁴ The language of “defense” and “fight” leads naturally to this elision. This elision, in turn, contributes to the confusion of forgiveness and readiness-to-forgive. (If resentment is confused with malice or ill-will, then overcoming resentment is easily confused with achieving good-will or love. But in fact resentment is not the same as malice, and so forgiveness not the same as love.)

As mentioned earlier, I think that resentment is best understood as a *protest*. More specifically, *resentment protests a past action that persists as a present threat*.²⁵ The level-

²⁴ Hampton follows the same route in her discussion, pp. 54-60.

²⁵ I am not addressing resentment for on-going (vs. past) wrongs, nor for wrongs that are not best described as actions. I think the account easily enough modified for these cases.

headed among us might now ask, how can a past action pose a present threat? I suggest that a past wrong against you, standing in your history without apology, atonement, retribution, punishment, restitution, condemnation, or anything else that might recognize it as a *wrong*, makes a claim. It says, in effect, that you can be treated in this way, and that such treatment is acceptable. That—that claim—is what you resent. It poses a threat. In resenting it, you challenge it. If there is nothing else which would mark out that event as wrong, there is at least your resentment. And so resentment can be understood as protest.²⁶

The level-headed among us might, at this point, lodge a protest themselves: haven't I merely re-located their question? Even if a claim can pose a threat (which might seem questionable), how can a past event make a claim? And how can a past claim pose a present threat?

An event can make a claim when it is authored, that is, when it is an action. An action carries meaning by revealing the evaluations of its author.²⁷ The event could not make a claim or carry meaning (positive or negative) if its perpetrator were not capable of making moral statements with his actions. The past event would not be a threat to your worth if it were not authored. We don't resent accidents, because they make no such claim. To resent natural injuries is to credit nature or Providence or "the world" with moral sensibility. The past act persists as a present threat so long as nothing succeeds in effectively marking it as a wrong.

²⁶ The language of "defense" also leads to another confusion in the literature. Several writers make resentment and anger to be a defense against *future* wrongdoing, so that, in forswearing one's resentment, one is left defenseless against future wrongs. They then run into difficulty in accounting for the efficacy of apologies, since apologies do not guarantee future trustworthiness. (See especially Richards, p. 87.) Understanding resentment as protest of past wrongdoing allows us to distinguish between forgiveness and trust. While some amount of trust is required in accepting an apology (because one must believe the apology to be sincere), accepting an apology as sincere need not involve trusting the one apologizing to *not repeat the offense*. To accept your apology as sincere, I need to believe that you do not, at the moment, *intend* to repeat the offense. But I don't need to believe that you won't *in fact* repeat the offense. And so I don't need to trust you, with regard to future offenses. If I believe you are sincere in your remorse over your past wrongdoing, I can forgive you for it, and that forgiveness can be worth something to you and can undermine my anger, without thereby committing me to entrust myself to you in similar matters in the future. My continued distrust of you, in this case, might grieve you, but it is now my *distrust* that grieves you, not my unforgiveness (assuming, of course, that I am genuinely without resentment).

²⁷ Murphy says, "[moral] injuries are also *messages*—symbolic communications. They are ways a wrongdoer has of saying to us, 'I count but you do not,' 'I can use you for my purposes,' or 'I am here up high and you are there down below.'" [p. 25]

To help understand how a past event might be “marked” as wrong, consider another case in which intervening history changes the significance of a past event: vows, we suppose, carry a certain significance, at least to certain people. However, the significance of a vow may change in light of subsequent events. If your spouse leaves you, your attitude toward your marriage vows will likely change dramatically. What is more, your attitude can change without requiring any revision in your understanding of your spouse’s intentions at the time. Analogously, various intervening events (apologies, restitutions, punishments) can change the significance of a wrongdoing. Further, it can do so without requiring any revision in one’s understanding of what the person who authored the event meant at the time.

Now we can see more clearly the way in which resentment and anger affirm the moral significance of the wrongdoer, the wrongful deed, and the victim. One could avoid the protest if one could denigrate the wrongdoer so that his claims are not threats. (We hear this in the advice we sometimes give to the resentful: “he isn’t worth the trouble” or “don’t give him so much credit.”) We rarely resent harms done to us by children or the psychologically infirm; their claims don’t carry enough weight. Nor would one need to protest if one could simply reconceptualize the event in a way that made it something other than a wrong. Finally, one could avoid the protest if one could simply concede that such treatment is perfectly fitting, i.e. if you could concede that you, in fact, deserve it.

If none of these options seems available or acceptable, and if nothing else marks the event as a wrong, then the event makes a claim which one is left to protest with one’s resentment. Resentment affirms what the act denies—its wrongness and the victim’s worth. And so, in a way, resentment *is* a fight response. It fights the meaning of the past event, affirming its wrongness and the moral significance of the victim and the wrongdoer.

I understand the object of the protest to be the *claim* made by the event rather than the *author* of the event for two reasons. First, I think it more accurate. If asked why we resent someone or something or some state of affairs, we typically answer with an explanation of how that person,

event, or state of affairs disrespects us, belittles us, or otherwise threatens our worth in a way that can only be understood in the form of a claim.

Second, if the object of resentment is the claim made by the event rather than its author, we can be clear that resentment is not and need not develop into malice or a desire for retribution (though, of course, it might so develop). Exacting retribution or taking revenge might be *one* way to “correct” the historical moral significance of the event, marking it as wrong.²⁸ But retribution or revenge are not the *only* ways to do so, and it doesn’t seem to me that protesting the meaning of the event commits one to desiring retribution.²⁹ I can resent what you’ve done without wanting you to suffer for it. I may rather want you to apologize.³⁰ The anger need not take the form of a desire to harm the wrongdoer.³¹

If we understand resentment in this (admittedly still very metaphorical) way, one can start to see how an apology might lead to a change in view or revision of judgment that would rationally undermine it. Once the offender *himself* renounces the deed, it may no longer stand as a threat to either the public understanding of right and wrong, to his worth, or to one’s own. It has been cut off from the source of its continued meaning. The author has retracted his statement, and anger loses its point. Continued resentment would now constitute mere vindictiveness, betraying a smallness of character or lack of self-esteem, rather than showing an admirable appreciation and defense of genuine goods.³²

²⁸ Hampton has an extensive discussion of how punishment can effect this change in chapter 4, “The retributive idea.”

²⁹ I mean to remain neutral on the question of retributive justice.

³⁰ Differing slightly from Murphy and Hampton, I don’t think apology should be understood as a form of punishment or humiliation, though it is humbling.

³¹ In light of helpful comments I have received from the anonymous reviewer of this paper, it seems worth emphasizing that the *present* threat of the past deed lies in the significance of the claim it makes, and that the claim gets its significance, at least in part, from the significance of the one who made it, which I, by maintaining the second of the three judgments, affirm. Thus I may continue to be “threatened” by the claim made by a past event, even if that claim doesn’t threaten any other, further harm to me, so long as I continue to consider the wrongdoer morally significant.

³² Harry Frankfurt asked me whether protest necessarily exhausts anger’s point. If not, then anger might not lose its point even in the face of an apology. It does seem to me that the broad class of “anger” can contain other “points” (though I think I’m committed to the view that resentment does not). One might be *frustrated* about a particular piece of wrongdoing, in addition to resentful about it. An apology need not undermine the frustration. So, need one abandon not only resentment, but also other forms of anger, like frustration, in order to forgive? I am inclined to simply say that, if so, then I only hope to address a particular sub-set of forgiveness in the current discussion.

So, a deeper account of resentment allows us to see how apology might bring about a revision in judgment or a change in view that undermines it. Resentment, we have now learned, is not founded on only three judgments. The three together imply (other things equal) a fourth: that the event in question makes a threatening claim.³³ This fourth judgment grounds resentment. An apology undermines that judgment. It changes the significance of the event. And so resentment loses its footing.

In spelling out such an account, one runs into further difficulties. First, I need to argue that the fourth judgment follows from the first three, other things equal. That is, I need to argue that being threatened by another's disregard does not betray a failing or weakness. As a first cut, I will suggest that, contrary to the advice we give school children, we ought to care about what other people think. To not care about what you think is to not care about you. To disregard your evaluation is to disregard you. Respect for you as a fellow human being commits me to caring about your evaluation. I may, in the end, think your evaluation mistaken and wrong. If it is importantly wrong, then, so long as you continue in your standing as moral peer, I will protest it. It fails to pose a threat only if it concerns an unimportant matter or if you fall from the status of moral peer.³⁴

Aurel Kolnai poses a second challenge for this kind of account. He wonders what, on a picture like this, remains for forgiveness to *do*. It now looks as if forgiveness amounts to merely

Earlier I remarked that Richards seems to think that forgiveness should cover the overcoming of *any* negative emotion caused by someone else's actions toward you: not only anger and resentment, but also grief or disappointment. And so perhaps a broader project awaits us.

³³ I am being deliberately vague about just what is being threatened: whether your worth, or the relationship, or something else.

³⁴ Hampton and Minas seem to disagree with this point. They both seem to think that being threatened betrays some form of weakness. I think this sort of view looks tempting for many reasons. Chief among those reasons, such a view allows us to aspire to a strength that would leave us impervious to one another's failings. Relatedly, it allows us to say how erring is human but forgiving divine: only God is strong enough to not care about what others think. But I think we should account for the divine nature of forgiveness in some other way. Imperviousness to disregard from those about whom one (supposedly) cares sounds like a contradiction. If one thinks that God cares about human beings (as Hampton does) then such a contradictory ability should not be attributed to God. (Can God make a stone God cannot lift?) Divine wrath, as surely as human anger, attributes importance to its object. And so I don't see why God can't find the claim made by disrespectful action threatening. The threat of a claim is not, after all, a physical threat.

acknowledging the truth of the moral situation: the offender has repented, and the offended must now acknowledge that fact. But why should this acknowledgment be given the lofty title of “forgiveness”? [pp. 98-99]

To venture a reply, I would suggest that at least two things remain for forgiveness to “do.” First, it is tempting to think that repentance alone makes for a “new man.”³⁵ On this view, once someone has a change of heart, he can then successfully separate himself from the past person who did the misdeed.³⁶ It is then left to the offended party merely to acknowledge this new moral fact. I have assumed something similar above, in saying that the offender can, with his apology and contrition, successfully cut off the source of the meaning of his misdeed, so anger loses its point. But both seem to me false. Both our identities and the meaning of our actions are more thoroughly social than these claims would suggest,³⁷ and this leaves something for forgiveness to do. Kolnai resolves the challenge he raises by invoking what he calls “the permanence of guilt.” He relies on the social nature of our identities to explain that the offender cannot, alone, absolve himself of guilt. I will add to Kolnai’s suggestion that not only the guilt of the offender but also the meaning of the misdeed, i.e. the threatening claim, persists in social space. With his remorse and apology, the offender merely joins the victim in repudiating the wrong: like the victim, he now feels present pain about the claim made by his past deed. In fact, pain over one’s past wrongdoing counts as remorse only if it takes as its object the same threatening claim that is the object of the offended’s resentment. And so remorse couldn’t, alone, nullify that claim. If the meaning of the event and his own moral standing were the sole property of the offender, we would be left without a way to understand either the pain of remorse or the desire to seek forgiveness. But if we understand the event as carrying broader, social meaning, and if we understand one’s identity as at least partially constituted by how one is

³⁵ Kolnai uses this idea to pose his question. Hampton takes it up. North explicitly rejects it on p. 500. Richards rejects it on pg. 87, though for odd reasons. Richards worries that repentance will not guard against future wrongdoing, but I think this is beside the point (see above, footnote 26.).

³⁶ Richard Moran develops some of the paradoxes arising from this view in Richard Moran (1993). “Impersonality, Character, and Moral Expressivism.” *The Journal of Philosophy*: 578-595..

³⁷ Murphy is good on this point. See especially pp. 93ff.

perceived by others, then we can both start to make sense of remorse and start to see why one's repentance and change in heart requires ratification by others. If the one offended trusts the sincerity of the offender's apology, he might now see it within his power to change the significance of the past event by joining forces with the offender. In accepting the apology, the offended in some way ratifies, or makes real, the offender's change in heart. (I prefer to talk about "ratifying the offender's change in heart" rather than the more common "disassociating the wrongdoer from his wrong deed" simply because I think it obvious that the wrongdoer did the wrong deed, and that true forgiveness requires a square acknowledgment of that fact.) If all goes well, the joint action of requesting and granting forgiveness will leave the original meaning of the event in the past.³⁸ This is the first thing forgiveness "does."

Second, and more sketchily, any wrongdoing leaves in its wake some amount of damage or cost, be it physical, financial, emotional, relational, or social. This is damage which the offender usually cannot repair ("you can't take it back," as children learn), and which the offended will, in any case, incur. The persistence of the damage threatens any attempt to leave the past in the past, insofar as the damage testifies to the deed. The persisting damage cannot be addressed in the same way as the persisting meaning or guilt. So here's a further thing left for forgiveness to do. With forgiveness, the offended agrees to bear in her own person the cost of the wrongdoing and to incorporate the injury into her own life without further protest and without demand for retribution. (In some cases forgiveness can be uncomfortably intimate: You must allow me to creatively incorporate the scars that bear your fingerprints into the permanent fabric of my life, and trust that I can do so.) This very important aspect of forgiveness has been largely overlooked in most accounts. It deserves much better explication than I have here given it.³⁹

³⁸ Of course the role of the surrounding community should not be overlooked. If the offended fails to accept the apology, the offender might be able to turn to the surrounding community for a recognition of his change of heart. On the other hand, in certain situations the repudiation of the misdeed by the offender might not be sufficient to remove its threat in the eyes of the victim. If the surrounding community still sees the victim as diminished, e.g., then (depending on a number of factors) the victim might reasonably require some sort of *public* acknowledgment of the wrong before he can forgive.

³⁹ It is interesting to me that even Christian writers like Hampton tend to focus on the Biblical metaphors of "covering over" or "washing away" sin and "letting go" of wrongdoing (as well as on the "new creation" or "new man" who emerges after forgiveness). I have yet to see, at least in what I have read, someone make much of the

Finally, *any* “articulate” account might run into problems with those, like Cheshire Calhoun, who insist that forgiveness be “elective.” Addressing this potential problem requires understanding what is meant by “elective.” It seems to mean that forgiveness should be something that one can elect not to do. And yet an articulate account articulates the reasons which call for (rationally require) forgiveness. So we quickly run into quite general problems about freedom and reason. Without delving deeply into those waters, I will simply state my view: when assessing a person’s freedom by asking whether she “could have done otherwise,” one should not include among the forces that impinge on freedom the reasons on which the person acts. That is to say, I don’t believe that simply taking yourself to have compelling reasons will, itself, impinge upon your freedom. If one thinks otherwise, *any* articulate account will prove unsatisfactory.⁴⁰

But the concern about election may not be so general. It might be instead a concern that one should be able to elect to not forgive without thereby incurring blame. That is to say, the 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 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. I think writers find themselves vexed in dealing with this question of whether one can be under obligation to forgive because of a curious feature of

idea that “without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.” (Heb. 9:22, which apparently refers to Lev. 17:11). In its Christian appropriation, in which Jesus as God incarnate provides his *own* blood as the blood of sacrifice, one might see this idea not as expressing the need for retribution (forgiveness is typically an *alternative* to retribution) but rather as expressing the fairly commonsensical view that when a wrong has been done *someone* will bear the cost of that wrong. In forgiveness, the one *wronged* absorbs the cost, without retribution. Forgiveness never comes cheaply. Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness. Sacrifice in the Old Testament would thus prefigure the sacrifice in the New, in which God makes manifest his willingness to bear that cost in his own person. (So runs my amateur understanding.) Forgiveness is not *simply* a revision in judgment or a change in view or a wiping clean or a washing away or a making new. Someone will bear the cost in his or her own person. The wrong is less “let go of” or washed away than it is digested or absorbed.

⁴⁰ Calhoun worries that the one electing to not forgive should not be therefore *irrational*. This leads me to think that Calhoun’s notion of “elective” requires that we avoid finding *compelling* reasons for forgiveness. (For a helpful discussion on charges of irrationality and unreasonableness, see Scanlon, pp. 25-33.)

morality pointed out by Robert Adams: “we ought in general to be treated better than we deserve.”⁴¹ Once we in some way acknowledge this tricky double-standard in our dealings with one another, this question should become somewhat less vexed (though no less complex).⁴² Whatever our final answer to this complicated question, I see no reason why an articulate account cannot accommodate this somewhat puzzling feature of forgiveness.⁴³

5. Concluding comparison

The forgoing has been a very rough, intuitive account of one scenario of forgiveness—that in which an apology brings about a change in view or revision in judgment which undermines resentment. I put it forward as an articulate account of an uncompromising forgiveness. The account articulates the judgment on which resentment is grounded and then articulates one condition under which it would be rationally undermined. Resentment is grounded not on the three judgments which must be maintained, but on a fourth judgment which, other things being equal, the three imply: that the event makes a threatening claim. This fourth judgment can be rationally undermined by an apology, without requiring the abandonment or revision of the other three. In accepting an adequate apology, one can believe the threat to be past and so abandon one’s protest without abandoning (nor ceasing to care about) one’s judgment that the act in question was wrong, that the wrongdoer should be expected not do such things, and that one ought not be so treated. And so this account articulates how, in response to an apology, forgiveness can be uncompromising.

One can start to see how the account might be extended to cases in which apologies are not offered. Perhaps unilateral forgiveness (forgiveness of the unrepentant) is possible in cases in

⁴¹Robert M. Adams (1985). “Involuntary Sins.” *The Philosophical Review* **XCIV**(1): 3-31., p. 24. Richards has a nice discussion of these issues on pages 95-96.

⁴²I think this aspect of our relations with others accounts for what Calhoun calls the “double vision” of accounts of forgiveness which rely on apology. I happily embrace this doubleness of vision.

⁴³In fleshing out more adequately this double-standard in forgiveness, I think a central role should be given to the forgiver’s agreement to absorb the “damage.” I would suggest that *this* aspect of forgiveness plays a large role in our sense that we cannot simply demand it. The persisting damage testifies against my change in heart. I might ask you to acknowledge my change of heart, and might feel some readiness to require or demand this of you, simply because the change is something real. But I am hardly in a position to ask you to take on the task of absorbing the damage I have caused.

which the one offended receives strong community support. If the one offended can somehow believe that (1) the wrong done will be acknowledged as wrong, even absent his resentment, (2) the wrongdoer will not slip from the status of one who should be expected not to do otherwise, and (3) he himself commands respectful treatment, this episode notwithstanding, then perhaps he can forgive uncompromisingly, even absent an apology. (The role of the surrounding community ought to be examined in far more detail, especially if we hope to understand forgiveness—and its lack—in the international arena.)

But in this paper I have not meant to address the topic of unilateral forgiveness, nor have I considered cases in which forgiveness might involve disappointment, sadness, or frustration rather than resentment, nor have I distinguished forgiveness and mercy, nor have I considered whether one can forgive one's self. I have only gestured at what I take to be the beginnings of an account of forgiveness. I present it simply to suggest the *kind* of account I think we require: one which is articulate and uncompromising. Even with this provisional sketch, I believe one can see the significant difference between this kind of account and any account which fails to meet the challenge.

Many accounts fail to meet the challenge by taking the second misstep: confusing forgiveness with other positive attitudes, like compassion, *agape*, love, or even Kantian respect for persons.⁴⁴ Novitz focused on compassion. I suggested that, insofar as compassion involves being concerned with another person or thinking her important, compassion can fuel, rather than dispel, one's anger. Other views focus on *agape* or love or respect. These views associate recognition of the dignity of a person with forgiving that person. But, again, I maintain that the recognition of a person's dignity *contributes to* our anger over the wrongdoing, and so is little

⁴⁴ Hampton ultimately relies on an idea of dignity. For her, one forgives by "overcoming" what she calls "the point of view of the other as 'the one who wronged me.'" She says, "This is the judgment the victim must 'let go of.'" [p.38] One overcomes this point of view by ceasing to see the offense as evidence for the "rotteness" of the wrongdoer's soul. One ceases to see the offense as evidence for this by ceasing to be threatened by it. I think this account problematic, for three reasons. First, Hampton has not articulated why I can "let go of" feeling threatened without compromising the wrongdoer. (Unlike Hampton, I believe that being threatened does not show weakness, but rather respect.) Second, the wrongdoer is, and will remain, "the one who wronged me," regardless of whether I feel threatened; forgiving cannot deny *that* judgment. Third, I think you can forgive someone while thinking that she is still, unfortunately, rotten of soul.

help in eliciting our forgiveness of it. It is the special moral dignity of the wrongdoer that makes the injury we sustained at her hand not simply an unfortunate harm, like a natural accident, but an offense against us. Anger does not deny the wrongdoer of dignity. Rather, denying the wrongdoer of dignity is one way to *avoid* anger. Thus forgiveness faces the challenge of overcoming this anger without denying what the anger implicitly affirms: the wrongdoer's dignity. Suggesting that one *abandon* one's anger to *affirm* the dignity of the wrongdoer doesn't yet make sense. The suggestion smacks of compromise. We need a more articulate account.

Confusing forgiveness with these other positive attitudes can also lead us badly astray in our interactions with people who are angry. An angry person is not necessarily a vindictive person. Anger sometimes marks a positive moral achievement—perhaps the overcoming of cynicism, the recognition of the moral significance of the offender, or the affirmation of one's own worth. Further, as mentioned earlier, the one wronged might face two distinct tasks: first, achieving the stance of readiness-to-forgive, and second, actually forgiving. Demanding the second before it's appropriate can prevent a person from achieving the first. Finally, eliding anger and ill-will can lead us to misunderstand the anger we find directed at our own failings. Anger does not always seek our harm. In the best cases, it seeks to set things right by demanding the recognition of a wrong.⁴⁵

This second misstep typically follows the first: failing to make use of the judgment sensitivity of emotions. This first misstep prevents the development of a fully articulate account and so leads to some very odd understandings of just what we are asking for when we request forgiveness, what we are granting when we grant it, and what we are recommending to others when we recommend it. If I ask for forgiveness, I am not asking you to understand why I did the deed, from my point of view. (I may no longer fully understand that myself. In any case, if I am properly repentant I surely don't recommend that point of view.) To ask you to understand

⁴⁵ Often we think that an expression of hurt or frustration or anger directed at us expresses ill will and calls us to attend to our own failings. It doesn't. It often expresses a sort of respect—a willingness to see us as important—and it calls us to attend to the one hurt, frustrated or angry. Someone else's reactive attitudes serve as a mirror, letting me see my own actions. But they are a mirror that asks for attention to be drawn to the glass, rather than the image.

things from my point of view is to hope for an excuse, not to ask for forgiveness. Nor, when I ask for forgiveness, am I asking for your pity or compassion in response to the pain of my remorse. Nor am I asking you to simply acknowledge the fact of my repentance and reform. I am instead asking you to believe me when I say that I no longer see what I did to you as acceptable, to recognize and so ratify my change of heart. I am also, importantly, asking you to willingly absorb the damage that I have done and which I cannot repair, both the damage in our relationship and the broader material or financial damage, which is an offense to you and which testifies against my change of heart. I don't want your pity. Not even your compassion will suffice. I need something at once more intimate and more costly—I need your forgiveness.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ I am very grateful for the helpful comments I received from Thomas Scanlon, Richard Moran, Christine Korsgaard, Harry Frankfurt, Rebecca Slayton, Christopher Callaway, Allen Speight, Susan Hahn, Sharon Street, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Annabelle Lever, an anonymous reviewer, and members of the Harvard Workshop on Moral and Political Philosophy. I would also like to thank the Harvard University Program in Ethics and the Professions for the financial, institutional, and “moral” support I received while working on this paper.