

Forgiving and Ceasing to Blame

Dan Harmon was Megan Ganz's boss. He was a popular and respected TV writer. She was new in the industry, happy and proud to be writing for his show. One day he asked her out and she turned him down. After that he began treating her differently at work, using his authority to punish her and saying mean and hurtful things about her. Years later, reflecting on similar cases made public during the #metoo moment, Harmon publicly acknowledged that he too had mistreated female coworkers and recognised that systemic sexism is a serious problem. Ganz heard his announcement, but was not convinced that Harmon really understood how seriously he had hurt her and asked him to think more carefully about what he was apologising for. Harmon did and apologised for his conduct, identifying specific ways he had mistreated her and acknowledging how his conduct affected her, including how his position of authority amplified the harms. In response Ganz forgave him.

When we forgive, we do so for reasons. A complete account of forgiveness must therefore explain which reasons are reasons to forgive and which are not. The aim of this chapter is to offer such an explanation. The story of Ganz and Harmon illustrates how forgiveness is reason-guided. We must decide whether to forgive or not. In doing so, we may reflect on whether an offender has shown sufficient remorse, whether a better apology is necessary, and what the consequences of forgiving (or not) will be.¹

Giving an account of reasons to forgive might seem like a straightforward task, but complications arise in the attempt. One can cease to blame a wrongdoer without forgiving them. Sometimes we do so because we come to believe that the offence wasn't their fault (excuse) or that it wasn't actually wrong after all (justification). This already shows that there are reasons to cease blaming that are not reasons to forgive. However, one can also cease to blame culpable wrongdoers without forgiving them. I will argue that not all reasons in favor of forgiving are reasons to forgive, that some are the wrong kind of reason. Talk of wrong kinds of reasons is increasingly common in normative and metaethics and forgiveness seems to have many of the hallmarks that make the notion applicable. Just as a reason in favor of believing a proposition is not necessarily a reason to believe that the proposition is true, so a reason in favor of forgiving is not necessarily a reason to forgive. Of course, one might have a *bad* reason to forgive without it being a reason of the *wrong kind*, so an adequate account of reasons to forgive must explain this distinction, too.

Identifying reasons to forgive can help us to better understand the relationship between forgiveness and other phenomena that resemble and are mistaken for it. This is important because moral conflicts are common and we have a rich and varied repertoire of ways to address and resolve them. Our understanding of and facility with this moral-emotional repertoire—our literacy and fluency—can help us to respond to one another more effectively when conflicts inevitably arise. Not only can we gain insight into our own minds and express

¹ Jonah Engel Bromwich's (2018) interview with Ganz highlights many of these considerations.

ourselves with greater clarity and nuance, we can gain similar insight into others' minds and actions. Identifying reasons to forgive is a small but essential part of developing what Elise Springer (2013) has called "critical responsiveness".

This chapter offers an account of reasons to forgive and explains the significance of distinguishing them from other reasons to cease blaming.² First, I argue that we forgive for reasons. Second, I argue that forgiving requires the right kinds of reasons. I distinguish bad reasons from the wrong kind of reasons and discuss the role of reasons in forgiving. Third, I use my account to distinguish forgiving from letting go of blame and show how this distinction helps to solve some longstanding challenges faced by forgiveness theories. Fourth, I argue that many proposed reasons to forgive are the wrong kind of reason and that all reasons to forgive are instances of a more general reason, namely, an apparent change of heart on the part of the offender. Finally, I consider objections to my account of forgiving and ceasing to blame, focusing on different concerns about the conceptual framework I impose on our practices. Throughout, I try to show how my account can help us to navigate our inevitable moral conflicts.

1. We forgive for reasons

It's hard to imagine forgiving for no reason at all. The question of whether to forgive seems like an open question precisely because one has reasons for and against doing so. The same is true for other attitudes, like blame, trust, or admiration. A reason is a consideration that counts in favor of an act, including having an attitude (or changing one's attitude), by bearing on a question about what to do (Hieronymi 2005). So one has reason to admire a person if there is a consideration that counts in its favor and bears on the question, "Does their behavior warrant admiration?" For example, if her friends believe that Lindsay has succeeded at a difficult task or made a significant sacrifice, then they would seem to have reason to admire her.

A standard classification of reasons identifies two main types (see, e.g., Mantel 2014 and Lord 2018): a *normative reason* is a consideration that objectively favours or disfavors an attitude or action, while a *motivating reason* is a consideration that influences the agent to act—or that *would* influence them to act if they reflected on it. An agent *acts for a reason* when it is a normative reason and they are motivated by it, rather than by some other reason. On my view, what matters for forgiveness is not the reasons one actually has, but the reasons one takes to objectively favour or disfavour an attitude or action—we might call these *subjective normative reasons*. One can forgive a person whom one has no objective reason to forgive (e.g. an offender one mistakenly believes to have acted wrongly). Thus, I will use the phrase 'acting for a reason' to mean acting for a subjective normative reason.

² In doing so, I'm developing the position offered in Milam (2019).

Any potential forgiver has reason *not* to forgive simply in virtue of being the victim of another's culpable wrongdoing. Now one *could* cease blaming despite having a reason to blame and no reason not to. For example, Bill might cease to blame Alan because he forgets about Alan's offence. Perhaps he suffers an injury or maybe the rest of his life is simply going really well at the moment. But this is not what we mean when we say that someone has forgiven; it is a psychologically and normatively different phenomenon. Injury or good fortune may *explain why* Bill forgets and no longer blames Alan, but forgiving seems to require a *reason* to cease blaming.³ Nor is forgetting the only illustration of this problem. Suppose Bill takes a drug that allows him to remember Alan's offence, but causes him not to care about it anymore. He may cease blaming Alan, but we wouldn't necessarily call this forgiveness.⁴ Whether we would depends on *why* he took the drug, on his *reason* for taking it. If he took it on a whim, then he did not forgive. But if he took it because he wanted to forgive Alan, believed he had good reason to do so, but couldn't overcome the resentment he still felt toward him, then it seems he has forgiven (with the help of the drug).⁵

Even if we can't coherently imagine forgiving for no reason, we can try to imagine arbitrary forgiveness. Suppose Kim isn't sure whether to forgive Daniel and decides on the basis of a die roll—evens she forgives, odds she continues blaming him, and if she rolls a natural 20 she'll propose marriage on the spot. Something is wrong here. Even if Kim did stop blaming Daniel in response to the die roll, which seems unlikely, she did not decide in virtue of some fact about Daniel or his behavior. The deciding factor was unrelated to the question of whether to forgive. Of course, we could imagine a story where a die roll *did* give the right kind of reason. Perhaps, because of an unrelated theory of divination and the nature of the gods, Kim views the results of die rolls as evidence of a divine will and believes the divine will to be informed by infallible knowledge of Daniel's attitudes. Whatever we think of her theory, Kim's change of attitude begins to look like forgiveness. It is no longer arbitrary but appeals, albeit indirectly, to reasons.

³ We can say that the injury *causes* Bill to cease blaming, but, in order to be a reason, Bill must take it to be a reason. While an injury makes sense as a cause, it would be odd to endorse it as a reason for changing one's attitude—though Murphy rightly notes that forgetting is not always non-voluntary in this way (1988, 23 n.10). A similar confusion seems to explain Herbert Morris's (1988) claim that one can forgive for no reason. He actually means, I think, that one can forgive even if the reasons one accepts are insufficient to motivate one to overcome blame.

⁴ Just because some ways of overcoming blame are not forgiveness doesn't imply that they're not personally or socially valuable. Forgetting about an offence may sometimes be for the best. This is not to defend motivated forgetting about historical injustices, much less the kind of memory-erasing practice depicted in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*. It's merely to acknowledge that forgetting can bring peace of mind or allow one to give an offender a second chance that they sorely need.

⁵ Jeffrey Blustein explains how forms of forgetting can facilitate both recovery from an offence and forgiveness by helping victims to avoid and control rumination (2014, 110-114).

Finally, if forgiveness requires the right kind of reasons, then it probably requires reasons of some sort. In the next section, I defend a right reasons requirement on forgiving and we'll see that what's missing when one ceases to blame for the wrong kind of reason is also missing when one does so for no reason.

2. Not just any reason will do

I have already said that we sometimes cease to blame because we come to believe that the offender wasn't responsible for their offence or that the offence wasn't wrong. Ceasing to blame for these reasons is to excuse and justify, respectively. However, we can also overcome blame towards *culpable* wrongdoers without forgiving them. This is because forgiveness requires the right kind of reason.⁶

2.1. A right reasons requirement

We can see this most clearly by noting that we cannot blame and forgive for the same reason. Sam can blame Lindsay for teasing him and he can forgive her for teasing him, but he cannot blame Lindsay *because she teased him* and forgive her *because she teased him*. This is a reason to blame, but not a reason to forgive. If Sam stops blaming Lindsay solely for this reason, then he is doing something other than forgiving. This is one restriction on the set of reasons to forgive, but not the only restriction.

Consider the following reasons to stop blaming someone.

- Sam ceases to blame Daniel because he learns that Daniel also likes to play Dungeons and Dragons.
- Daniel ceases to blame Kim in order to spite her, knowing that doing so will upset her.
- Kim ceases to blame Lindsay so that Lindsay will help her cheat in English class.
- Lindsay ceases to blame her friends for using her because doing so will maximise total utility.
- Neal ceases to blame his dad for cheating on his mom because he comes to view his dad as beneath contempt.
- Harold ceases to blame Lindsay because he's read that forgiving improves cardiovascular health and his doctor has recently warned him to watch his blood pressure.

⁶ This paper assumes that forgiving involves overcoming blame. Some reject this starting point and conceive of forgiving in other terms. However, my arguments apply to these views, too. Whatever change is required to forgive—e.g. exercising a normative power (Nelkin 2013, Warmke 2016, Bennett 2018)—it must be done for the right kind of reasons.

Overcoming blame solely for any of these reasons is, to my mind, not to forgive them. All of them are good reasons to try to overcome blame—they concern personal or relationship benefits that the blamer has reason to value—but none of them seem to bear on factors relevant to forgiveness. For example, none of them refer to the quality of will behind the offence, to the offense itself, or to the offender’s subsequent response (or lack thereof) to being blamed.⁷

Take Harold and his daughter Lindsay. Suppose that Harold blames Lindsay for breaking her curfew and lying to him about where she’s been. Lindsay has nothing to say in her defense and admits as much. She knowingly broke curfew and lied because she knew that Harold disapproved of what she and her friends were doing. However, she has read about the cardiovascular benefits of forgiving (Larsen et al. 2012) and suggests to her dad that he should forgive her solely for this reason. Now I don’t think Lindsay has given him a reason to forgive. If anything, she appears to be suggesting that Harold stop blaming her *despite having no real reason to forgive*. Cardiovascular health is a reason for Harold to go vegan, jog more, and control his temper, but not to forgive. Similar arguments could be made about the other items on the list. If this is right, then the set of reasons to forgive can be narrowed even further.

Others philosophers are suspicious of such reasons, too. Many regard such phenomena as not forgiveness on similar grounds.⁸ Forgiveness is held to be distinct from ceasing to blame in order to “mak[e] the most of my life” (Morris 1988, 18), “for the sake of preserving harmony in the family” (Hampton 1988, 39), and for “purely selfish” reasons (McGary 1989, 345); as well as from “mental hygiene” (Richards 1988, 79), “taking a specially designed pill” (Hieronymi 2001, 530), “merely prudential...self-interest” (Bennett 2003, 140), “closure” or “putting [the issue] away” (Griswold 2007, 70), “therapeutic dispelling of retributive emotions” (Allais 2008, 43-44); and “merely getting over” blame (Pettigrove 2012, 97).⁹ My

⁷ We might also suspect that it is harder to get oneself to forgive solely on the basis of such reasons, than in response to remorse, repentance, or apology. Nathaniel Sharadin calls this the “motivational asymmetry” between right versus wrong kinds of reasons (2016, 374). For example, it may be difficult for Ken to admire the Bee Gees, even if Nick offers to pay him \$1000 to do so. And this may be so, even if \$1000 is easily enough money to get Ken to do any number of things that don’t require the right kind of reasons, like request that his local radio station play the Bees Gees, attend a Bee Gees concert, or even compete in a Bee Gees inspired danceathon.

⁸ Others disagree, though. Notably, Eva Kor, a survivor of Joseph Mengele’s experiments at Auschwitz, has said that, “Forgiveness is really nothing more than an act of self-healing and self-empowerment” (The Forgiveness Project). She even compares it to chemotherapy.

⁹ Dana Nelkin distinguishes forgiving from “moving on.” However, she also argues that one can forgive for any reason or no reason, so her distinction must be grounded in something other than a right reasons requirement (2013, 166). Her preferred explanation is that forgiving is active and other phenomena like forgetting or moving on are passive. I have argued against this view elsewhere and suggested that the active/passive distinction cannot explain the kinds of distinctions drawn above (Milam 2019, 242-243). Nonetheless, I have argued that

suggestion is that the best explanation of why these phenomena are not forgiveness is that they are done for the wrong kind of reason. More specifically, the victim's change of attitude is not about the offender or the offence.

Thus far, I've made an intuitive case for a right reasons requirement on forgiveness. One way to express this is that there is a reason R such that, if A ceases to blame B solely for reason R, then A has not forgiven B. Similar reasoning has been applied to other attitudes, including belief (Hieronymi 2005), trust (Hieronymi 2008), admiration (Sharadin 2016), and love (Smuts 2014). Moreover, these attitudes differ from others that do not have a right reasons requirement, like imagination (Sharadin 2016, 384-385). Nonetheless, an argument is needed to support these intuitions.

We can explain the plausibility of the right reasons requirement by comparing forgiveness with trust. Pamela Hieronymi has argued that many reasons in favor trusting a person are not reasons to trust.¹⁰ The problem is that many such reasons do not support a trusting belief (2008, 231-232). For example, suppose Lindsay is deliberating about whether to trust her mom with some personal information about her relationship with Nick. In particular she doesn't want her mom to discuss the matter with her dad, whom she does not trust to be supportive. On Hieronymi's view, we can distinguish reasons to trust from reasons in favor of trusting by recognising that they answer different questions. Reasons in favor of trusting answer the question, "Would it be good or valuable to trust my mom with my secret?" Reasons to trust answer the question, "Will my mom do what I ask and keep my secret?" It's a reason in favor of trusting that sharing her problem and asking for advice will make her mom happy and make their relationship closer. But this fact doesn't speak to whether her mom can be trusted to keep her secret. Forgiveness is similar. The fact that it will lower his blood pressure is a reason for Harold to think that ceasing to blame Lindsay would be good, but not a reason to believe that her lies and broken promises no longer warrant blame.

Moreover, if one could forgive for any reason, then one could forgive insincerely. But insincere forgiveness, like insincere trust or insincere admiration, seems impossible (Hieronymi 2008, 223 n.16). It's possible to *express* an attitude insincerely. Jean and Harold might falsely claim to trust Lindsay because they know that doing so will cause her to anticipate guilt at misbehaving and thereby make it less likely that she'll misbehave.

forgiveness is ceasing to blame for the right kind of reason and one might worry that these two elements are both passive, while forgiving seems to be a voluntary act. For example, perhaps forgiveness is not an emotional change but a decision to waive an obligation (e.g. the wrongdoer's duty to make amends). Arguably, one can decide to waive an obligation for any reason or no reason. This is an attractive view if we think forgiveness must be voluntary, which is reasonable if we think forgiveness is subject to moral norms and demands (Milam 2018). However, the reality seems more complicated; forgiveness has important voluntary and involuntary elements. For example, Herbert Morris compares forgiveness to cultivation. One can choose to sow the seeds, but one must also rely on the sun and the rain, which are out of our control (1988, 17-18).

¹⁰ Sharadin likewise distinguishes the "correctness" of a reason from its "utility" (2016, 388).

Likewise, Kim could claim to forgive Lindsay in order to deceive and manipulate Lindsay into acting on her behalf. But insincerity is the misrepresentation of one's actual attitudes, so an actual change of attitude cannot itself be insincere.

2.2. Bad reasons and wrong reasons

At this point, one might accept that some reasons are inadequate, but still be suspicious of the right reasons requirement. One might allow that there are *bad* reasons to forgive, but claim that distinguishing a further category of *wrong kinds* of reasons is unnecessary and unhelpful. Why is this additional distinction necessary?

It's certainly true that some reasons are bad reasons to forgive. Rush Limbaugh might say to Sandra Fluke, "You should forgive me. I said I was sorry." But this is not a good reason for her to forgive him because it's very unlikely that he meant what he said (McGregor 2012). Likewise, in the story at the beginning of this paper, Ganz did not think Harmon's first apology gave her a good enough reason to forgive. However, his second, more specific apology was satisfactory and she forgave him. Reasons to forgive *can* be good or bad, better or worse.

However, most philosophers seem to accept that at least some reasons are the wrong kind, and disagree mostly about which reasons are which. If one rejects this claim entirely, one must either explain the differences between various phenomena in terms of good and bad (or better and worse) reasons or deny that they are actually different. But, as the examples discussed above show, a reason can be a good reason in one sense but not in another. Improving one's physical or psychological health seems like a good reason to change one's emotional state, but not to change how one views an offender (Hampton 1988, Allais 2008). Likewise, a reason can be a bad reason in one sense but not in another. Suppose Daniel is a serial offender who treats apologies merely as currency, as a price he can pay to offset his misconduct. His apology for teasing Sam seems like the right kind of reason to forgive, but as unreliable evidence coming from him. It is hard to deny that, at the very least, there are multiple dimensions along which a reason can be good (or bad). And this is a big step toward my position.

Moreover, if one views the reasons I've identified as bad reasons rather than the wrong kind of reasons, then one must explain how they are bad. But this proves to be quite difficult. What I am calling wrong kinds of reasons need not be *morally* bad reasons. Ceasing to blame for the wrong kinds of reasons can be morally permissible (e.g. Ken ceasing to blame Alan for a transphobic remark because it's just not worth continuing to be angry about). And wrong kinds of reasons can be *prudentially* good reasons. They might favor ceasing to blame

for the blamer's own sake (e.g. Harold ceasing to blame in order to lower his blood pressure).¹¹

My view, on the other hand, does explain how wrong kinds of reasons are inadequate. Reasons of the wrong kind do not bear on the facts that prompted blame in the first place and acting on them is not a response to these facts. (This also explains why one cannot forgive for no reason.) Insofar as blame is a response to particular facts—the wrongness of the offence, the agency of the offender—ceasing to blame for reasons must respond to changes in these same facts. I have argued that many reasons to stop blaming do not respond to such changes and are therefore not reasons to forgive. This is presumably what Hieronymi means when she claims that the right kind of reason must be a coherent answer to the relevant question (2005, 438).¹² Thus, just as a reason to believe that P answers the question, “Is it true that P?” so a reason to forgive Daniel answers the question, “Is it still appropriate to blame Daniel for their culpable wrongdoing?” Any reason that refers to a fact that doesn't bear on the appropriateness (e.g. Daniel's love of D&D) or doesn't respond to a change (e.g. a fact that was known prior to the offence like the cardiovascular benefit of forgiving) is the wrong kind of reason. Thus, not only does my view *distinguish* recognisably different dimensions of badness, it also *explains* the dimension of badness that is being a wrong kind of reason.

2.3. Motivating and endorsed reasons

I've argued that forgiving requires the right kind of reason. In order to make this point, I've considered cases in which a person has only one reason to cease blaming and asked whether that reason seems like the right kind. Such cases are methodologically necessary, but not representative of our blaming and forgiving experience. Real life is more complicated and we often have multiple reasons for and against any given choice or action. One might come to believe that the offender's conduct was partially justified, partially excused, but still in need of forgiving. And one might have both right and wrong kinds of reasons. We must also ask what role reasons play in forgiving. According to one view, reasons to forgive must be motivating reasons; they must *motivate* the forgiver's change of heart (e.g. from angry to not angry). According to the other view, reasons to forgive need not actually motivate; one need only *endorse* the reasons one has and they need not have motivated a change of heart.

Elsewhere, I've implied that reasons to forgive must motivate (Milam 2019, 256). But Julian Schön herr's (2018) Endorsement View (EV) is a compelling alternative to this Motivation View (MV). First, if forgiving requires only that a person endorses (or would endorse if

¹¹ We could say something similar about trust or admiration. One might have reasons in favor of trusting or admiring that are morally or prudentially good, but nonetheless somehow inadequate.

¹² Their prudential value may also explain the “motivational asymmetry” of right and wrong kinds of reasons (Sharadin 2016) and the fact that wrong kinds of reasons are often not universal—e.g. a wrong kind of reason to forgive might be a strong reason for Nick, but no reason at all for Ken.

asked) a reason of the right kind, then a person who was motivated by the wrong reasons, or who doesn't know why they stopped blaming, could nonetheless be said to have forgiven—e.g. when presented with an apology long after blame has passed. Second, a person who has not yet overcome blame, but who no longer endorses their blame, can be said to have forgiven. Third, because it is easier to know whether one endorses a reason than whether one was motivated by that reason, a person can know with greater confidence whether she has forgiven. Thus, it seems as if EV is able to capture recognisable forms of forgiveness that MV cannot.

However, EV is not without problems. First, it seems too permissive. Suppose a person forgets entirely about an offense and, when reminded about it decades later by an apologetic offender, is not at all disposed to blame. It is odd to think of them as having just now forgiven even though the new reason did not generate or and does not explain their present attitude. Second, it's not clear how EV can distinguish committing to forgive from actually forgiving. One can commit to forgiving, but then find it too difficult to do so. However, committing to forgive would seem to entail endorsing reasons to forgive, which is already to forgive according to EV. Finally, it seems plausible that one might be uncertain or mistaken about whether one has forgiven, so the more permissive EV is not necessarily preferable on that account. For example, victims who publicly forgive their offenders sometimes admit that they were mistaken about whether they forgave and, in some cases, their explanation is that they didn't realize that they had just distracted themselves or mistook diminished blame for forgiveness.

I cannot settle the debate between EV and MV here. There is more to be said on both sides, but my account of reasons to forgive can be made compatible with both.

3. Forgiving, letting go, and condoning

Thus far, I've argued that we forgive for reasons and that not just any reasons will do. Before discussing which reasons *are* reasons to forgive, let's consider how my view fits into a broader picture of the nature of forgiveness. I contend that a right reasons account can explain a distinction to which many philosophers have appealed, but which few have explained, namely, the distinction between forgiving and what I'll call 'letting go'.

Suppose that Ken overhears Alan make an offensive remark about transgender people at party. Ken might react in many different ways, but imagine he reacts as follows: he's upset at first, but then sighs and thinks to himself, "Blaming this guy just isn't worth it. Our relationship isn't important enough to be worth the effort and discomfort it would take to confront him, get past his defensiveness at being called out, and resolve this conflict. It's just not worth continuing to be upset about." Ken no longer blames Alan, but he hasn't forgiven

him either.¹³ He has simply let the offence go and moved on. The conflict has been resolved in some sense, but the resolution was unilateral rather than mutual.

The distinction between forgiving and letting go seems to be widely recognized. It lurks behind the distinctions listed above (section 2.1), most of which echo objections I have raised against candidate reasons to forgive. For example, Kim's reason for no longer blaming Lindsay seems to be "purely selfish" in the sense that Howard McGary rejects as a wrong kind of reason (1989, 345). Moreover, as I have argued (section 2.2), these distinctions suggest that forgiving is a response to facts about the offender rather than the victim, and specifically to facts about offender *raised by their offense* and its sequelae—as opposed to the fact that the offender is likely to give preferential treatment to someone who stops blaming them. All of these cases describe something like what Ken did in response to Alan's hurtful comment, namely, letting go.¹⁴

My account complements and develops existing discussions of this phenomenon. In the original scenario, Ken might be described as taking refuge from the "strains of involvement" (Strawson 1962, 163). He doesn't have the energy or strength to address Alan at that moment—maybe he's had a hard day or has already encountered similar prejudice multiple times that week—so he avoids engagement and distracts himself in conversation with other friends. Ken also resembles Colleen Macnamara's bus passenger who, after weeks of inconsiderate treatment by her fellow riders, tries to avoid blaming them by ceasing to expect decent treatment from them (2011, 85-86). In this case, the bus passenger overcomes not only her occurrent blame but also her disposition to blame in this particular context.

I described Ken as letting go of his initial blame toward Alan. Some might find this response to Alan's disrespectful attitude and behavior objectionable. Has Ken done something wrong by letting go of blame? Not necessarily. Allies of trans people *do* have a duty to stand up for them, but other factors can override this duty. In a world where prejudice towards trans people remains widespread, it's reasonable for Ken to pick his battles and to spend his emotional energy on confrontations that he believes will be most useful. (The same is true of trans people themselves, though allies' duties are arguably more demanding to the extent that confrontation is less risky for them.) At the same time, people like Ken *can* act wrongly by not blaming or by letting go too quickly. Sometimes the circumstances or the blamer's reasons don't justify letting go. For example, if Ken chooses not to confront Alan and lets go

¹³ I'm stipulating that Ken ceases to blame Alan. We could imagine an alternative scenario, where Alan continues to blame but ignores it and doesn't act on it. Both are realistic cases—and neither is a case of forgiveness—but I'm interested in cases where a person plausibly ceases to blame without forgiving. See Rankine for similar cases (2014, 64-66 and 79).

¹⁴ 'Letting go' is not a common term, but it is used occasionally in the forgiveness literature. Jean Hampton describes forgiving as a particular kind of letting go and tries to explain forgiving in terms of what one lets go of (1988, 38). Marilyn McCord Adams (1991) uses the term in a similarly generic sense. Both appear to be following Aurel Kolnai (1973), who describes forgiving as letting go of resentment. I use it to refer to letting go of blame that is not forgiveness.

of blame merely in order to ingratiate himself with Alan as a way of furthering his career, then we should judge him more harshly than if he refrained because he knew Alan to be especially defensive or intransigent in his transphobia.

It should be clear by now that what we're considering here is the nature and ethics of condoning. A persistent problem for forgiveness theorists has been to explain the distinction between forgiving and condoning (Downie 1965, Hughes 1995). It is one horn of the dilemma that constitutes the so-called paradox of forgiveness (Kolnai 1973, Hampton 1988). Withholding or ceasing to blame when blame is warranted is not forgiving but condoning, but doing so when blame is unwarranted is not forgiving because one recognises nothing to forgive. Attempts to solve this problem by distinguishing forgiving and condoning have encountered a number of objections. Notably, Leo Zaibert has claimed that prominent attempts to distinguish condoning from forgiveness "reek of gratuitous stipulation" (2009, 377).

I claim that distinguishing forgiving and letting go on the basis of one's reasons for overcoming blame provides a principled account of condoning. Zaibert rejects many accounts of condoning on the grounds that they employ a familiar kind of definitional stop. Just as some punishment theorists avoid permitting the punishment of innocents by defining punishment as a response to guilty offenders, so condonation theorists ensure that forgiving is always virtuous by stipulating that impermissibly ceasing to blame is condoning rather than forgiving.¹⁵ This is an apt criticism, but these views are closer to the mark than Zaibert suggests. Condoning is not the evil twin of forgiving, but it is a sketchy cousin.

I suggest that the two practices are indeed different and that we should distinguish them by the reasons for which one stops blaming. My account of forgiving and letting go captures the intuitive distinction, already implicit in many accounts of forgiveness, between forgiving and various forms of prudential self-management. And it captures the sense of condoning as complicity in the offense insofar as the person desists from warranted or required blame for self-directed reasons. However, it does not simply stipulate that condoning is bad or wrongful forgiving. The ethics of forgiving and letting go is not determined by their nature; both can be permissible or impermissible. One can have reasons in favour or against either practice and, like any reason, those reasons can generate requirements or prohibitions; there is nothing special about forgiveness (or letting go) such that reasons to forgive (or let go) lack this significance (Milam 2018). But 'condoning' seems to be the label we use for impermissible letting go; it is ceasing to blame for self-directed reasons that do not justify this change of attitude (e.g. Ken's attempt to ingratiate himself with Alan by ceasing to blame him for his transphobic remark). At the same time, my view allows that something like letting go of blame can be permissible (e.g. in the face of oblivious or intransigent offenders) or even virtuous (e.g. in response to akratic lapses or trivial misdeeds) (Scarre 2014).

¹⁵ The same objection applies to Downie (1965, 130), Neblett (1974), and Hampton (1988, 40). Hughes (1995) distinguishes the two concepts by the type of moral anger they overcome.

Thus, my account of forgiveness as requiring the right kinds of reasons allows us to explain the accepted but under-theorised distinction between forgiving and letting go, which, in turn, provides the basis for a principled account of condoning as distinct from forgiving.

4. Right kinds of reasons

So what *are* the right kinds of reasons? The forgiveness literature suggests a number of candidates. Some suggest that reasons to forgive must be moral (Murphy 1988); others reject this claim (Nelkin 2013). Different theories have suggested that we forgive because we come to believe that the offender acted with good intentions (Murphy 1988, Richards 1988), because the threat implied by the offense has been repudiated (Hampton 1988, Hieronymi 2001), out of solidarity with other fallible beings (Garrard and McNaughton 2003), because the offender is remorseful (Griswold 2007, Fricker 2020), because God's love warrants it (Prusak 2009), or because one hopes that the offender will reform (Giannini 2017).¹⁶ And, of course, some claim that maintaining or promoting one's own well-being is a reason to forgive (Holmgren 1993). But I have already argued that this is the wrong kind of reason. I will argue that all of these candidates are either the wrong kind of reason or are instances of a single general reason of the right kind.

4.1. Change of heart

Often we forgive in response to an apology; to signs of remorse; to repudiations of misconduct; to acts of repentance, atonement, or penance; or to attempts to make amends. Griswold (2007) claims that these are separate reasons to forgive. It seems more accurate, though, to say that all of these attitudes and actions provide the same reason to cease blaming, namely, they all show a relevant change of heart on the part of the offender.¹⁷ A change of heart by the offender is reason to forgive because it speaks directly to one's reasons for blaming in the first place. A person is blameworthy if they are morally responsible for some wrongdoing, and moral responsibility—as opposed to mere causal responsibility—requires some a particular connection between the offender and the act. A change of heart—whether evidenced by remorse, repentance, or atonement—suggests that that connection no longer exists (Murphy and Hampton 1988, Swinburne 1989, Hieronymi 2001, Allais 2008). For

¹⁶ I have argued elsewhere, contra Murphy (1988) and Richards (1988), that an offender's good intentions can be a reason to justify or excuse, but not a reason to forgive (Milam 2019). I have also addressed Garrard and McNaughton's (2003) suggestion that solidarity with other fallible beings is a reason to forgive. Other candidate reasons have been suggested—see, especially Murphy 1988, 26-30—but love and hope seem the most plausible and so I focus on them.

¹⁷ Miranda Fricker defends a similar account according to which forgiveness is a response to moral realignment, especially the offender's remorse (2018 and 2020). However, she does not understand forgiving in terms of reasons to forswear blame.

example, Lindsay's friends might explicitly disavow the indifference they manifested by using her to get access to her parents' car and express remorse at having implied that they don't care about or appreciate her.

We can see that an apparent change of heart is the relevant factor common to these different phenomena by imagining an apology or act of repentance that does not show a change of heart, perhaps because it appears insincere or is required or encouraged by law (Cohen 2002). If Lindsay believed her friends' apology was completely insincere, she would not take it as a reason to forgive—she may even take it as a reason *not* to forgive. Sincere apologies and forthright expressions of remorse support the would-be forgiver's belief that the offender is no longer willing to act as they did, that they have respect for their victim's interests, that they withdraw the threat implied by their action, or that their wrongdoing no longer reflects their commitments, cares, or practical identity. We can also see that they are all instances of a more general type by noting that none is individually necessary. Lindsay's friends need not do penance for using her if an apology will suffice. Sometimes all that's necessary is that the offender show that they're ashamed of their behavior; no words or even gestures are needed, just a facial expression or a bit of eye contact can demonstrate sufficient regret.¹⁸

Some might object that if forgiving requires an apparent change of heart, then one cannot forgive in order to prompt a change of heart as many seem to do (Fricker 2018 and 2020). This is true, but not a compelling objection. While it's important to take seriously how people describe their own practices, it does not diminish or disparage the practice to say instead that trying to prompt a change of heart is a way of *enabling* forgiveness, but not a way of forgiving. Moreover, forgiving, like trust and admiration, seems to be a response to features of an offender, their offense, and their responses to blame. One doesn't admire by prompting another to act admirably or trust by prompting them to become trustworthy.

One might object that, if the right kind of reason is an apparent change of heart by the offender, then victims remain under the offender's influence because the offender can determine whether a victim has a reason to forgive. But many would contend that forgiving resists precisely this kind of power, and that the electivity of forgiveness makes it a source of power that cannot be infringed. Notice, though, that my view identifies in the offender a kind of power that we already recognise. No one would deny that an offender can control whether a victim sees them as repentant or that an offender makes it more difficult to overcome blame by remaining oblivious, intransigent, or hostile toward their victim. My view simply identifies that power as power over a victim's ability to forgive. Thus, a different question comes into view: is it problematic to conceive of forgiveness as another site of oppression

¹⁸ It is one thing to say that a change of heart by the offender is a reason to forgive and another to say that it generates an obligation to forgive. However, since reasons can generate obligations, it is natural to ask whether reasons to forgive can generate obligations to forgive. I address this question elsewhere (Milam 2018).

rather than as a mode of resistance? It seems likely to be both and my view is consistent with that conclusion.¹⁹

4.2. Love and hope

Other candidate reasons to forgive are the wrong kinds of reason. Some would argue that love is a reason to forgive. This suggestion takes different forms, both secular and religious, but it has problems too. First, love is a complex and varied phenomenon. If love is a reason to forgive, we must ask what it is about love that makes it so. Some features seem like the wrong kind of reason (e.g. sexual attraction). Other features seem like the right kind of reason, but fall within the class of apparent changes of heart (e.g. the trust and vulnerability expressed by spontaneous confession). Second, many kinds of love are compatible with both private and expressed blame. Kim might love Daniel despite blaming him for mistreating her. She might even love him continuously and unchangingly before, during, and after his mistreatment. In such cases it's hard to see love as a reason for a change in her attitude toward Daniel. (The same goes for parents, like Harold, who blame their children.) This point also bears on Garrard and McNaughton's (2010) suggestion that love is a reason to forgive rather than continue hating. This is a false dichotomy and one can stop hating without forgiving.

Bernard Prusak suggests that one might forgive because this is what God would do, because one sees the offender as part of His family, or for other "complex theological reasons" (2009, 292). However, these suggestions simply push the problem back. Why would God forgive a particular offender? And why would He recognise something other than a change of heart as a reason to forgive. In at least one place, Jesus suggests that one should forgive when (and whenever) an offender is repentant (Luke 17:3-4). People are motivated to overcome blame by reflecting on their religion's teachings and overcoming blame can be valuable when done for these reasons. However, more must be said to show that the reasons offered by such teachings speak to the question of whether one should view an offender differently than one did in blaming them.

Heidi Giannini addresses precisely this question, and does so in a way that avoids unnecessary theological complexities. Hope that the offender will reform is a reason to forgive; and hope only requires that one believe that reform is possible, not that one see

¹⁹ See Brunning and Milam (2018) for a further discussion of this view. For a concrete example, see Rachel Kaadzi Ghansah's (2017) discussion of Dylann Roof's murder of nine black parishioners in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015. Ghansah explains the power Roof and his ideology still exert over the family members of his victims, but also the attempt by some of them to resist and overcome their hatred. And see Carbonell (2019) for a general account of how oppression can be an obstacle to effective and felicitous moral address.

evidence of reform.²⁰ So long as one believes that an offender *can* reform, one has reason to forgive. On Giannini's view, belief in a benevolent and powerful God justifies the belief that *anyone* can reform and therefore justifies hope that they will reform (2017, 77). But, for those who do not believe in such a being, belief in the efficacy of rehabilitation can ground a similar, albeit narrower, hope. Indeed, this might be what Herbert Morris has in mind when he suggests that we understand forgiveness as an act or posture of love, generosity, or receptivity (1988, 18). Forgiving grounded in hope is generous in not asking for evidence of the hoped for change of heart.

Giannini doesn't make this point, but her position could even be thought to complement my own insofar as it implies that reform—or repentance, realignment, or change of heart—is the fundamental and only reason to forgive. On this interpretation, her view extends mine by claiming that evidence of actual reform is unnecessary and that the possibility of reform provides sufficient reason (of the right kind) to forgive.²¹

However, while hope grounds attitudes that hopelessness does not—like anticipation—it is not clear that it is a reason to forgive. Consider similar attitudes like admiration, pride, and praise. Hope that a person will become admirable is not reason to admire them, nor is hope of prideworthiness or praiseworthiness reason to be proud or to praise. It seems slightly more plausible to say that hope that a person will become trustworthy is a reason to trust them, but, as we saw above (section 2.1), this is better understood as a reason to entrust a person with a responsibility despite not (yet) trusting them. Generally, then, hope that a person will be a particular way is not a reason to take the relevant attitude toward them—even proleptically. If forgiveness is a response to an offender's attitude and behaviour in light of their offence and its sequelae, it's not clear how hope for reform bears on the question of whether one should forswear blame that one by hypothesis takes to be appropriate.

5. Objections

I've argued that we forgive for reasons, but that not just any reason will do. In order to forgive, one must overcome blame in response to an apparent change of heart on the part of the offender. I hope to have made a convincing case for my position, but there are a number

²⁰ More specifically, in order to hope that a state of affairs obtain, one must i) desire it, ii) believe that it is possible, iii) be prepared to justify dedicating thought and attention to it, and maintain a "hedged reliance" on it obtaining (Martin 2014, 24 quoted in Giannini 2017, 75).

²¹ Even if one accepts hope for a change of heart as a reason to forgive, if hope is one's only reason, then it would always be a bad reason to forgive. By definition hope is grounded in the mere possibility, not the plausibility, of reform. One can have hope of reform with no evidence that it is likely, and even with strong evidence that the offender will not reform. To deny that forgiving on the basis of hope alone is a bad reason would require an alternative to the account of forgiving for bad reasons offered above (section 2.2).

of objections to consider. In this final section, I consider a set of related concerns about how to classify different ways of overcoming blame.

5.1. Presumptuousness

One might object to imposing a revisionist vocabulary or conceptual scheme on people struggling with complicated moral conflicts and hard choices about whether and how to blame. According to this objection, it is presumptuous and perhaps even disrespectful to tell a person that, contrary to their own understanding, they have not forgiven but done something else instead.²²

This is an important worry. My view does imply that people can be mistaken about whether they have forgiven, and the ethics of correcting such people is fraught and one can do so in ways that are presumptuous, disrespectful, or wrong in other ways. However, one can avoid these moral mistakes by taking proper care when addressing others.

We know this from experience because we correct others about many similar practices. We correct those who act wrongly, but don't realize or deny its wrongness—e.g. a relative who makes an offensive joke. We correct those who mistakenly hold themselves responsible for some permissible act—e.g. a friend who fails to keep up a relationship after moving away. We correct those who mistakenly believe they have apologized—e.g. a coworker who offers a pro forma apology for their unwarranted and excessive anger. We even correct those who believe they have forgiven, when in fact they've excused—e.g. a friend who says that they forgave a teammate for failing to attend practice because they learned that the teammate had been given mistaken information about practice times and dates. All else equal, correcting people in these contexts seems unproblematic. One *could* do so in a presumptuous or disrespectful way, but one can usually avoid these pitfalls by being thoughtful, humble, and polite.

It's possible to correct others about having forgiven versus let go in the same way. One can take care to avoid questioning the person's experience and purpose in overcoming blame. One can ask why the person has ceased blaming the offender. One can listen as they explain the significance of overcoming blame in the way that they did. One can offer comparisons to other scenarios to provide context for their experience. One can respectfully suggest the significance of remorse and ask whether they would conceive of their change of attitude differently if the offender had been remorseful. And one can be sensitive to when this kind of critical responsiveness is making the person uncomfortable or upset and proceed accordingly.

Of course, whether correcting people is a good idea and how best to do it will depend on what one hopes to gain by it. This suggests a second worry.

²² This is different from objecting to the presumptuousness of those who criticise others' choices to forgive or not forgive (Murphy 1988, 92).

5.2. Artificiality

One might object that distinguishing forgiving from letting go and other ways of ceasing to blame culpable wrongdoers imposes an artificial order on what is in fact a messy practice. A misleadingly tidy description of our forgiveness practice cannot provide insight or guidance to victims and other would-be forgivers. Emphasizing the distinction may even be counterproductive if it obscures real ambiguity or ambivalence.

Real life *is* messy. Our responses to misconduct are often complicated. Blame may give way to different combinations of excuse, justification, forgiveness, and letting go. However, as with other phenomena, understanding complexity can still be valuable. For example, most events have many partial causes whose relations are complex and difficult to disentangle, but it can still be useful to identify distinct causal influences. Doing so allows one to track, measure, and influence those causal factors in order to, say, make effective policy. The same is true for understanding our attitudes and changes of attitude. Moreover, we should be cautious about how much significance we assign to our judgment that a distinction is artificial because this response might reflect an unwarranted bias toward a conception and practice of forgiveness that is itself the contingent result of a long process of conceptual development.

Nonetheless, an account like mine should explain its usefulness, and understanding forgiveness in terms of one's reasons for overcoming blame *is* useful. The distinction is simple and intuitive, and many already recognise the basic distinction and acknowledge its significance. Explaining why one takes an attitude toward an offender, whether blaming or overcoming blame, allows one to convey more clearly what one expects of them (e.g. in terms of making amends) and of oneself (e.g. in terms of maintaining one's self-respect as an individual or member of victimised group). It may also clarify to oneself how one views the offender and what it would take to view them differently. For example, reflecting on his reasons to forgive his father's infidelity could help Neal to understand his own blame (including his standing relative to his mother), his expectations of his father (as informed by Neal's norms of contrition and masculinity), and what it would take to forgive him.

The value of distinguishing ways of ceasing to blame can also be appreciated by considering other useful distinctions, including analogous legal distinctions. We distinguish forgiving an offender from reconciling with them. We say that one can reconcile without forgiving and vice versa. This too might be judged an artificial distinction, especially if most people do both and view most reasons to forgive as reasons to reconcile. However, the distinction is still useful precisely because one might have reasons to carry on with a relationship that has been damaged without necessarily having reasons to forgive—perhaps because one needs the relationship or because others' welfare depends on it. And, as I argued above (section 3), the distinction between forgiving and letting go can help us to understand the nature and ethics of condoning, a concept that is already widely recognized and applied in practice.

In the legal context, the distinction between justification and excuse is indispensable and the distinction between equity (*epieikeia*) and mercy (*clementia*), different values that provide reasons to punish in a distinct way—i.e. either to punish in a way that is appropriately responsive to context or to impose a lighter punishment than what is deserved—are essential to understanding the realities and ethics of punishment (Tasioulas 2003, 101). And related distinctions are essential to understanding and responding to interpersonal moral conflicts. Some have argued that there was a time before the concept of forgiveness was distinct from excuse in Western culture (Konstans 2010). Whether or not one finds this argument plausible—and I’m not sure I do—imagining the development of this distinction can illuminate how the development of such distinctions could be useful.

5.3. Pluralism

One might object that even if the arguments I have presented are successful, they support pluralism about forgiveness rather than a distinction between forgiving and not forgiving. For example, we might distinguish different *forms of forgiveness* by the reasons for which one ceases to blame—or by whether they require reasons at all. So, why should one favor my *restrictive monism*—a single account of forgiveness that excludes some phenomena that others call forgiveness—over *pluralism*?

I’m sympathetic to pluralism and much of what I have said is compatible with a pluralist account of the nature of forgiveness. For example, accepting Giannini’s suggestion that hope of reform is a reason to forgive would make my account pluralist by Fricker’s (2020) metric. In fact, it would capture the same kinds of cases as Fricker—e.g. moral justice forgiveness in response to repentance and gifted forgiveness in response to hope of repentance—but explain why they are best understood as forms of forgiveness by reference to their similar reasons to cease blaming rather than to the genealogical relations between them. Nonetheless, I’ll give some reasons for sticking with restrictive monism about forgiveness.

Notice first that the two positions are actually very similar. Both the pluralist and the restrictive monist accept that importantly different phenomena are described as forgiveness (Fricker 2020).²³ They also agree that the competing conceptions of forgiveness cannot be

²³ Forgiveness is unlike marriage in this way. Restrictive monism about marriage would refuse to recognise gay couples as married and pluralism would view them as psychologically and normatively different forms of the same practice. Neither of these characterisations is apt. Instead, we should be *inclusive monists* about marriage. Gay marriage and heterosexual marriage are not relevantly different; they are the same practice with the same norms. One could be a pluralist about marriage, though, by recognising forms of marriage that are psychologically and normatively different—e.g. open or polyamorous marriages might be viewed as normatively different in virtue of permitting non-monogamous romantic and sexual relationships.

reconciled within a single account since they involve inconsistent judgments (e.g. that an apparent change of heart is necessary versus not necessary).

Because both parties agree that the phenomena are real and distinct—e.g. some people stop blaming solely for therapeutic reasons, while others do so only in response to repentance—the question is how to classify these cases. If classification were merely a matter of labelling, and labelling was itself insignificant, then either the pluralist or I could happily concede to the other. But this is not the case. Labelling is significant if the phenomenon is important, has not been labeled, and has been neglected for lack of a label. For example, labelling particular behaviours as sexual harassment empowered people, especially women, mistreated in this way by combatting what Fricker calls “hermeneutical injustice” (2007, 158) and providing a basis for legal action. Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) makes a similar point about emotion terms. Different languages have untranslatable words to describe emotions and other dimensions of well-being—e.g. *han* (Korean) or *hygge* (Danish/Norwegian). Understanding and having a label for these terms can help non-native speakers of these languages to conceptualise and experience these emotions, thereby increasing their “emotional granularity” and enriching their repertoire of private and shared emotional experiences (2017, 104). I suggest that the same is true for the phenomenon of letting go. It has been assimilated to forgiveness in a way that hides and diminishes both its nature, value, and limitations.

Of course, pluralists could argue that these problems can be avoided by acknowledging the plural nature of forgiveness and labelling the different types as some have done (Adams 1991, Bennett 2003, Fricker 2020). This makes the concept available for reflective inquiry and application just as well as calling it by another name. This is true, but classification is not only a matter of labelling for easy identification and reference. (If it was, then the pluralist could equally well accept my proposal.)

Classification is also a matter of determining what work a concept like forgiveness is doing. One might argue that phenomena excluded from my account, like ceasing to blame for the wrong reasons, are still most at home in the category of forgiveness, so, in the absence of another home for them, they should continue to be understood as forms of forgiveness. However, I have argued previously that some candidate reasons to forgive are better understood as reasons to justify—e.g. recognition of the offender’s good intentions (Murphy 1988; cf. Milam 2019)—while others are better understood as reasons to accept—e.g. recognition that the offender’s moral failure is integral to their practical identity and not subject to any moral demand at all (Calhoun 1992; cf. Milam 2018). And I argued above that therapeutic ceasing to blame is better understood as letting go. These alternative concepts do different work in our moral economy.

Ceasing to blame because one hopes that the offender will reform seems like the most plausible grounds for pluralism about forgiveness. But it also seems as different from forgiving as the other responses just described. Indeed, hopeful ceasing to blame seems more different because it is not a response to the offender, the offence, or its sequelae, but rather to an unchanging possibility of reform. The conditions for hope are unlikely to change from the

point prior to the offence to the point at which one considers forgiving a seemingly unrepentant offender, so one should always have such hope. Moreover, hopeful letting go seems closer to hopeless letting go than it does to forgiving (as I have characterised it), which suggests that letting go is a fitting home for the practice. Finally, it is not clear that anything is lost by classifying this phenomenon as hopeful letting go rather than forgiveness. It can still be understood as admirable, generous, and magnanimous in many, albeit not all, cases.

Nevertheless, pluralism about forgiveness deserves more attention than I have given it here and more can and should be said. But that must be a task for another time.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that we forgive for reasons and that not just any reason is a reason to forgive. I have suggested that distinguishing between forgiving and ceasing to blame for the wrong kind of reasons helps to solve some perennial problems about forgiveness. And I have argued that the only reason to forgive is an apparent change of heart on the part of the offender about their offence and the quality of will behind it. That said, ceasing to blame for the wrong kind of reason is not necessarily a bad thing to do. No less than forgiving, it can be a valuable and important way of responding to the moral conflicts that shape our shared moral lives.

7. References

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