

Permission, Blame, and Forgiveness

Miranda Fricker has developed an ambitious theory of the nature of forgiveness. She offers a genealogical account of the practice, grounded in what she regards as its most basic function, that captures its plurality of forms in a single explanatory order. Moreover, she ties her view to her own parallel account of blame, thereby providing a unified account of both phenomena. Nonetheless, despite its valuable contribution to the forgiveness literature, I will suggest some problems for her view.

Fricker aims to understand why two very different practices are best understood as of a type: Moral Justice Forgiveness occurs when a victim forgives in response to an offender's apparent remorse. Gifted Forgiveness occurs when a victim forgives without evidence of the offender's remorse. Fricker argues that Gifted Forgiveness can be understood as a form of deconstructed Moral Justice Forgiveness. And Moral Justice Forgiveness can be constructed along either a temporal or a social dimension. I will discuss only temporally displaced forgiveness and will not engage with her account of socially displaced forgiveness.

I will suggest that the resulting view is too inclusive. It counts as forgiveness practices that are psychologically and normatively quite different. To use her own metaphor, just as some combinations of the required ingredients will not count even as a deconstructed Black Forest gateau, so some combinations of the requisite beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours will not count as forgiveness. I challenge her approach by providing examples of practices that recombine the necessary ingredients, but produce something other than forgiveness. By raising these challenges and considering how Fricker might respond to them, I will also make the case for an alternative account of forgiveness, one that explains forgiveness in terms of reasons to forswear blame. A reasons view claims that forgiving requires that one overcome blame for the right kind of reason. My preferred formulation of this view suggests that the right kind of reason is a perceived (or perhaps anticipated) change of heart on the part of the offender.

1. Gifted forgiveness, preemptive forgiveness, and granting permission

Fricker's account of proleptic Gifted Forgiveness as temporally displaced Moral Justice Forgiveness seems to allow for Preemptive Forgiveness. Her notion of forgiveness as "liberation from redundant blame feeling" [2019: 8] seems to apply equally well to forgiveness offered in anticipation of culpable wrongdoing, which would liberate one from (what would have been) redundant blame. On Fricker's view, a victim offers proleptic Gifted Forgiveness when they anticipate that blame will be redundant and one can forgive without ever having blamed [2019: 12]. Add to this that a person can forgive without having been wronged—e.g. if one justifiably but falsely believes one has been wronged—and the door is open for Preemptive Forgiveness as a form of proleptic Gifted Forgiveness—e.g. if one justifiably believes that one *will be* wronged. Adapting Fricker's central example from *Les Misérables*, imagine that the bishop anticipates that

Valjean will steal the basket silver and, believing blame to be redundant in this case, preemptively forgives him.

Now this implication is not itself a challenge to Fricker's view, though preemptive forgiveness is controversial. The problem is that preemptive forgiveness must be distinguished from granting permission, which is definitely not forgiveness [Cornell 2017]. Fricker could respond to this worry either by distinguishing Preemptive Forgiveness from granting permission or by showing that her account somehow precludes Preemptive Forgiveness and thus avoids the distinction problem. However, features of her account speak against both options.

Suppose Fricker wants to accept Preemptive Forgiveness but distinguish it from granting permission. She might argue that granting permission renders permissible an act that would normally be wrong, while Preemptive Forgiveness merely forswears blame for the anticipated wrongdoing. However, while plausible on its face, this strategy faces two problems.

First, the distinction itself requires further defense. Some accounts of wrongness preclude this move. For example, some claim that an act is wrong just in case blame is an appropriate response.¹ So, if the bishop forswears blame—thereby rendering blame inappropriate—then Valjean's decision to steal is not wrong and the distinction between Preemptive Forgiveness and granting permission collapses. The resemblance between the two is even more compelling when we note that both practices render only the token act blameless and do not change the moral status of other acts of the same type. And it is still more compelling if one understands forgiveness, like consent, to be the exercise of a normative power—e.g. as waiving one's claim to an apology or other reparative act [Nelkin 2013, Warmke 2016, Bennett 2018]—such that both Preemptive Forgiveness and granting permission render blame inappropriate by waiving a claim to blame.

Second, even if the distinction is coherent, it is not clear whether Fricker should find it meaningful. According to her account, to forgive is to liberate oneself from redundant blame. But granting permission and preemptively forgiving both seem to perform this function and in the same way. In both cases, the victim acknowledges moral alignment with the offender about an act that would otherwise be blameworthy and therefore takes blame to be redundant.² Thus, even if there is conceptual space between granting permission and preemptively forgiving—i.e. between making an action permissible and making blame inappropriate—it is not clear that the

¹ John Stuart Mill states that, “We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience” [1963: 472].

² The bishop actually tells the gendarme that Valjean took the silver with his permission. He may have said this because it was the most likely way of securing Valjean's release, but it highlights the shared primary aim of the two practices. Indeed, the bishop describes his response to Valjean as extracting a promise and buying his soul.

two are meaningfully different on an account of proleptic forgiveness as liberation from redundant blame. In both cases, the victim avoids moral conflict by fiat.

Alternatively, suppose that Fricker wants to reject Preemptive Forgiveness and thus avoid the problem of having to distinguish it from granting permission. She might embrace their similar aims to argue that Preemptive Forgiveness is not a form of forgiveness because forgiving, as a response to an offender, requires some initial misalignment between the two parties, while so-called Preemptive Forgiving presupposes that the parties are aligned—e.g. the bishop and Valjean agree that taking the silver doesn’t warrant blame. Indeed, Fricker says that proleptic Gifted Forgiveness treats the offender “as if they were already remorseful” [2019: 11], which suggests that remorse must be appropriate at some point in the wider process. But Preemptive Forgiveness and granting permission both render blame, including remorse, inappropriate. Thus, despite initial appearances, Gifted Forgiveness may not allow for Preemptive Forgiveness. However, Fricker also claims that Gifted Forgiveness does not demand remorse, so there is a tension in her view that needs to be resolved regarding the significance of remorse for forgiveness. Moreover, as we will see, this strategy highlights a related tension within Fricker’s account of proleptic Gifted Forgiveness, namely, the resemblance between blame and forgiveness. Depending on how she understands the gifting forgiver’s attitude regarding the offender’s remorse, it is not obvious that Gifted Forgiveness makes any weaker a demand for remorse than does Communicative Blame.

2. Gifted forgiveness and communicative blame

Blame and forgiveness are remarkably similar on Fricker’s account. In fact, proleptic Gifted Forgiveness is claimed to do the job of blame [Fricker 2019: 12]. Her paradigm of blame is Communicative Blame, whose role is “to bring the wrongdoer and the blamer into an aligned moral understanding of what has gone on between them, their understandings being naturally inflected with emotions appropriate to their role as either subject or object of the wrongdoing” [2019: 5]. But this is also an apt description of her exemplar of Gifted Forgiveness in *Les Misérables*. The bishop’s response to the gendarme serves to bring Valjean and the bishop into moral alignment —albeit only after the moral shock of being forgiven has passed—and their respective responses are both inflected with the emotions appropriate to their roles. The bishop’s pardon and kindness pricks Valjean’s conscience and thereby prompts remorse in him and initiates his reform.

Suppose a person acts in a way intended or expected to promote remorse and realignment in the offender. How could one discern whether they are engaged in Communicative Blame or Gifted Forgiveness? Uttering the phrase “I forgive you” is obviously insufficient, as Fricker herself recognises, but let us consider some other strategies.

One might object that Communicative Blame differs from forgiveness in that the former involves a reactive emotion like resentment while the latter forswears it. But this plausible

response is not available to Fricker because, on her view, blame need not involve resentment or any other reactive emotion [2016: 170]. Her view appears to be that blame demands remorse—or moral realignment generally—while foreswearing blame foreswears this demand. Or rather, Gifted Forgiveness does not make moral demands [2019: 11-13], treats remorse for the offence as “hoped for rather than demanded in the now” [2019: 13]. Meanwhile Moral Justice Forgiveness is “a stance of significant moral demand” [2019: 1], where the demand has been forsown because it has already been met. Again, we have a tension. Blame shares with forgiveness, albeit of different sorts, the feature of making moral demands and the feature of intending or expecting to prompt remorse.

Now Fricker is not unique in appealing to hope in order to understand Gifted Forgiveness. Heidi Giannini [2017] has argued that hope of reform is a reason to forgive unconditionally—i.e. for Gifted rather than Moral Justice Forgiveness. However, Fricker wants to explain Gifted Forgiveness in genetic and functional terms, not in terms of reasons. On her view, the distinction is made in terms of demanding or not demanding remorse, rather than what counts as a reason to forswear blame. But this strategy encounters a dilemma.

If proleptic Gifted Forgiveness is usually intended, desired, or expected to prompt remorse, then it looks more like a form of Communicative Blame than a form of forgiveness—even if it does not demand remorse.³ But if it does not—e.g. if one can forgive with no intention, desire, or expectation of prompting remorse—then proleptic Gifted Forgiveness no longer seems to be a derivative form of Moral Justice Forgiveness. Indeed, it cannot be understood as proleptic since it does not treat the offender as if they are remorseful, but merely hopes that they will be. Rather than an “ordered pluralism” of Moral Justice Forgiveness and its deconstructed variants, we would have two independent practices.⁴

3. Reasons to forgive

Thus far I have argued that Fricker’s account has difficulty excluding phenomena that function like forgiveness, but that we understand and experience differently. However, I have not

³ It also fails to account for purported examples of Gifted Forgiveness in which victims have no hope of prompting remorse—e.g. those who claimed to forgive an unrepentant and still hostile Dylann Roof [Ghansah 2017].

⁴ Cheshire Calhoun’s [1992] account of “aspirational forgiveness” takes precisely this view. Not only does the aspirational forgiver not demand remorse, she does not seek any change of heart. One forgives aspirationally, not by understanding the offender’s behaviour and character as weakness, ignorance, indifference, or vice separable from the offender’s true self, but by understanding it uncompromisingly as part of who she is. However, not only would such an account bear no relation to Moral Justice Forgiveness—as Calhoun recognises—but, as I argue elsewhere, it is better understood not as forgiveness but as acceptance of the wrongdoing [Milam 2017].

rejected any of her substantive claims about forgiveness: the importance of a unified account of blame and forgiveness, the need to explain the relationship between Moral Justice Forgiveness and Gifted Forgiveness, and the plausibility of an ordered pluralism. I have suggested, though, that Fricker's emphasis on the function and genealogy of the different forms of forgiveness preclude plausible responses to the difficulties I've raised.

I will conclude by sketching how an alternative account of forgiveness could capture the insights and achieve the ambitions of Fricker's theory, while avoiding those difficulties. According to my preferred formulation of a reasons-based account of forgiveness, forgiving requires that one overcome blame in response to a perceived (or perhaps anticipated) change of heart by the offender, whether through remorse, apology, repentance, or some movement in this direction.

Gifted forgiveness. Fricker's attempt to reconcile two seemingly independent—and, on some views, rival—accounts of forgiveness is admirable. Her solution is a genealogical explanation according to which Moral Justice Forgiveness is prior and Gifted Forgiveness is a derivative deconstructed form. However, an equally plausible explanation is that their respective reasons to forgive are related [Milam 2019]. Moral Justice Forgiveness forswears blame *in response to* apparent remorse, while Gifted Forgiveness forswears blame *in response to* the possibility of remorse [Giannini 2017]. Their compatibility is explained by the fact that both reasons are grounded in the significance of the offender's remorse.

Pluralism. Articulating an “ordered pluralism” is also a significant achievement. However, rather than an account of genetically prior and derivative forms of forgiveness, we might just as plausibly understand this plurality in terms of reasons to forgive. A reasons-based account can be plural insofar as it recognises that Moral Justice Forgiveness and Gifted Forgiveness are done for different but related reasons, namely, in response to apparent remorse and predicted (or hoped for) remorse, respectively.⁵ And, like Fricker's account, this is an ordered pluralism insofar as Moral Justice Forgiveness and Gifted Forgiveness are understood as responses to the same fundamental feature, namely, the offender's remorse.⁶

⁵ This is true of proleptic Gifted Forgiveness, but not necessarily of distributed Gifted Forgiveness [Fricker 2019: 14–15]. Cases of the latter may be excluded by (some versions of) the reason view. For example, even if support and solidarity in the face of wrongdoing is a *reason to trust* one's community and worry less about the social meaning of an offense, it is arguably not a *reason to forgive* the wrongdoer [Milam 2019; Brunning and Milam 2018]. That said, a reasons view could countenance proleptic forgiveness in the same cases where Fricker's ordered pluralism allows for distributed forgiveness, albeit not for the same reasons. After all, the support and solidarity of one's community is a reason to hope for reform and realignment.

⁶ Some might object that this account is not truly pluralist, insofar as all forgiveness is based on one's assessment of the strength of the evidence for remorse (possible, plausible, probable) and whether that evidence is about the offender now or in the future. However, the same is true of Fricker's account. She reduces one kind to another, in the sense that they have the same

Ambivalence. The reasons view can also explain our apparent ambivalence about forgiveness. Fricker notes that we seem torn between admiration and suspicion of forgiveness and forgivers [2019: 12, but also 2018]. She explains this ambivalence as stemming from susceptibility of Gifted Forgiveness to deformation and bad faith, which, in turn, is explained by the ease with which we can fail to recognise—whether through self-deception or just fallible introspection—that we have not foreshown blame. However, a very similar explanation is available to the reasons view of forgiveness. Gifted Forgiveness is susceptible to deformation because we can misunderstand the reasons we have and the reasons that actually motivate us. Our fallibility and capacity for self-deception thus make it hard to know, even in one’s own mind, whether one is trying to prompt remorse (i.e. blaming) or forgiving in the hope that the offender will feel remorse.

Genealogy. The reasons view is even consistent with Fricker’s genealogy of forgiveness. It may be that Moral Justice Forgiveness is conceptually and chronologically prior to Gifted Forgiveness. However, even if the genealogical story is true, it may not be explanatory. The relationship between the two forms—the fact that both are forms of forgiveness—is explained by the fact that the reasons a victim has to forswear blame in each case are related. To forgive is to forswear blame toward a culpable wrongdoer for a particular kind of reason, namely, one having to do with the offender’s remorse or change of heart.

Inclusiveness. Finally, the reasons view can avoid the tensions that arise for Fricker’s view in trying to distinguish proleptic Gifted Forgiveness from psychologically and normatively different practices. One forgives when one perceives or anticipates adequate remorse from the offender; and one blames when one perceives or anticipates inadequate remorse. Both Preemptive Forgiveness and granting permission render remorse inappropriate, so neither provides a reason either to blame or forswear blame.

4. References

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ingredients. But her pluralist account recognises that some of the conditions on Moral Justice Forgiveness are not conditions on Gifted Forgiveness. The same is true of the alternative account I am sketching here.

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