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PART I

THE TERRITORY PHILOSOPHICALLY CONSIDERED

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1

What Is Forgiveness?

Adam Morton

CONCEPTS VERSUS TERRITORIES

What counts as forgiveness? Suppose that a person says that she forgives you but she clearly feels great hostility to you. Is she misusing the word? Suppose that a word in some text from another civilization is translated as "forgiveness" although the text describes the execution of "forgiven" people. Is this a mistranslation? One way to approach such questions would be to make a theory of forgiveness, laying out the conditions that have to be met for one person to forgive another. Then, if a person or a text uses a word in a way that violates these conditions, we would take it that forgiveness is not really the topic.

That is the procedure suggested by standard analytical philosophy. It is well suited for debunking, and there is always a lot of bunk around. But, for all its attractiveness, I think it is not the best approach here, for two reasons.

The first reason is a doubt about philosophical analysis that is common among analytic philosophers. To put it in terms of an extreme case, suppose that the text is by a philosopher. He has observed practices of people in his city, many of which we would classify as forgiveness, even if we do not know why. And he has worked out a complex, exotic, perhaps bizarre theory of what lies behind these practices. It may be that the theory is right and ours is wrong, however much of a jolt it would be to accept it. Or it may be that the philosopher is overambitious, misguided, or confused, as we philosophers usually are. In either case, his theory is about forgiveness, even if it denies what seem to us basic characteristics of the process. The same would hold true of a contemporary thinker making strange assertions about who has forgiven whom. So we should hesitate before saying, "Don't translate that word as 'forgiveness,'" just because the claims that would result are bizarre.

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The point is that reference and sense have some degree of independence.[1] One can talk about something while being very wrong about it. This can clearly happen when the object is a familiar physical object: in the fog, you can think that a tree is a moose. And it can happen when the object is something more abstract. A philosopher can be dealing with justice, truth, or rationality – trying to explain what seems evident about it, trying to make sense of related practices – while mischaracterizing it completely. It is controversial what she has to do for it to be really justice, truth, or rationality that she is talking about, rather than some other concept of her own invention, but trying to explain the facts and adducing the cases that for us are the everyday home of the concept must play an important role. So too it must be with nonphilosophical discourse on abstract matters. Politicians are still talking about freedom and democracy when they invoke them in absurd ways. Lexicographers are no safer. (An Australian philosopher once told me that when students try to fix a fact with "the dictionary says," he tells them to look up "summer.") So, to complement the conclusion of the previous paragraph, any analysis we produce to gather all the things we say about forgiveness and our diverse practices of forgiving is making a hypothesis rather than describing what is evident. It might be as wrong as the crazed exotic theory. A better first step is to focus on the sayings and the practices themselves.

The second reason might make us worry less about the first. Consistency with a theory is a yes/no business. But we are often interested in conceptual closeness rather than conceptual identity. It might be important to know whether something could responsibly or helpfully be called forgiveness-like, without having to settle whether it is exactly "our" concept of forgiveness. Concepts are usually vague, and their penumbras can vary. "City" as used by many young North Americans includes what older British speakers of English would place under "town"; "rock" for some includes what others count as mere stones. But if two cultures or two dialects have ways of subdividing village/town/city/metropolis and pebble/stone/rock/boulder, then it is significant that they both focus on the same continuous range, even if they divide it differently, and it is interesting to try to see where the differences in the divisions lie, and what their origins might be. Of course, it is more interesting when the territory is more important, as it is with forgiveness/reconciliation/pardon/clemency/reinstatement. The obvious primary topic is not the concept of forgiveness but the forgiveness territory: the bundle of mutually sustaining practices, ideas, and theories that center on people doing something roughly like forgiving one another

[1] A theme of 1970s philosophy of language, particularly in the work of Kripke and Putnam, as in, for example, Kripke, "Naming and Necessity," in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. Davidson and Harman (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), pp. 253–355, and Putnam, *Mind, Language and Reality, Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

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for wrongs. We want to know the resemblances between the forgiveness territory in one culture at one time, or perhaps part of one culture at one time, and that territory in another at another. Before that, we may need to ask whether we can isolate anything that seems to constitute a forgiveness territory at all.

This is a collection on ancient forgiveness. So we are dealing with a range of times and places and of social complexes at those times and places, with varying ideas and customs. Classicists standardly compare such things as kingship, manhood, sexuality, honor, and citizenship across these various cultures and measure them against our versions. It hardly needs saying that the label in English one uses to describe any such project is treacherous, luring us into assuming that the people we are discussing thought or acted as we do, when that is one of the main questions we should be trying to settle. A dramatic example is homosexuality: when ancient writers discuss sex between people of the same gender, are they using anything like our twenty-first-century concept? Forgiveness is not in principle different. We want to make as few assumptions as possible, in order to see similarities and differences between various ancient forgiveness territories and ours. In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the general shape that the forgiveness territory has at our time among most people whom authors and readers of this collection will engage with.

EMOTIONS AND LINKAGES

What is an emotion? Central examples are fear, anger, sadness, and joy. These combine several elements. We have (a) a standard way of reacting to a standard situation or, at any rate, to a situation thought of as being of a standard type. Ronald de Sousa calls these "paradigm scenarios."[2] For example, in fear one tries to get away from something dangerous: in the primal case, one runs away from a physical threat. In less central cases, the threat and the evasion may be more abstract, and one may simply think of the situation as a threat rather than believing, let alone knowing, that it is dangerous. These standard reactions are probably hardwired into mammalian brains, most likely in the limbic system. (So one of the bases of the standard emotions is biological: just one of them.) We also have (b) feelings characteristic of particular emotions, affects. An angry person feels angry. As a lot of psychology shows, these feelings are not as specific as we tend to think, and a person's confidence that it is, for example, anger rather than excitement that she is feeling is based as much on her knowledge of her situation as on introspection. At the heart of many such affects are the bodily responses appropriate to the paradigm scenarios. Still, we might hesitate to call something an emotion if it was never associated

[2] De Sousa, *The Rationality of the Emotions* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 181.

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with people feeling some characteristic way. And third we have (c) effects on belief and motivation characteristic of particular emotions. A fearful person wants to get away, imagines escapes, and has beliefs about which escapes will and will not succeed. There is a characteristic pressure on imagination and thought. Very often we also have a fourth feature, (d) objects or situations that are specific targets of the emotion. One is afraid *of* a spider or afraid *that* a spider will appear. When (d) is absent, as in objectless generalized fear, what we have is a less central case of emotion. Depression is very different from sadness.[3]

The category of emotion may be very specific to our culture. At other times, people have spoken of passions and sentiments in ways that distinguish them from what we would call emotions.[4] Other cultures may be right to neglect the category in this respect: deciding whether a state – for example, regret – is an emotion may not be an important question. The answer may not tell us much about what is happening when someone is in the state.

Is forgiveness an emotion? Often when one person forgives another, she has strong feelings, and indeed there is a cathartic sense of escape from the burden of hatred that marks dramatic cases of forgiveness. Moreover, forgiveness usually has an object: one forgives a particular person for a particular act or history. And, to add to the similarity, there are standard effects on the thinking of the forgiver. She will begin to think of the forgiven person as more in the category of ally than of enemy, and she will be more receptive to considerations of the admirable qualities ("redeeming features") of the forgiven.

There are differences, though. Forgiveness has emotion-like features in terms of (b), (c), and (d). However, (a) is more subtle. The situations that evoke forgiveness are essentially many-person situations, in which there are roles for both forgiver and forgiven. I don't want to be too definite about what is essential to the paradigm scenarios for forgiveness. Those are just the details that we should take slowly here. But forgiveness involves a forgiver, a forgiven, an issue between them, and emotions that both must feel. It helps to compare forgiveness not to emotions but to another category of things, for which we do not have a common label, but which I propose to call "linkages." Other linkages are courtship, seduction, punishment, abasement, and the tango. It takes at least two, and you need the right feelings. Courtship, for example, is not an emotion. One person courts another, and typically knows that that is what they are doing, and each person usually has

[3] For a survey of contemporary work on the philosophy and psychology of the emotions, see Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). I find de Sousa's *Rationality of the Emotions* still a rich source of ideas, particularly in trying to connect the biological and the cognitive sides of emotion.

[4] See, for example, Rorty, "From Passions to Emotions and Sentiments," *Philosophy* 57 (1982): 159–72.

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feelings that fit the situation. (A milder version of courtship is befriending, a linkage that involves friendly emotions.) Punishment, like courtship, is something that one person does to another and, as the term is sometimes used, may require appropriate feelings from the participants. It is not really punishment if it is not for some misdeed, if the punisher does not have some retributive feeling, and if the punished does not feel bad. What distinguishes linkages from emotions is primarily that a linkage is something that actually happens between the participants. It cannot just consist in events in their minds. The linkage involves a disposition of the participants to feel emotions that fit the situation and to think in corresponding ways.

Many words are ambiguous between linkages and emotions (just as many words are ambiguous between emotions, traits of character, and virtues). Consider "love." We have the linkage between people when one loves another. When it is reciprocal, the two are lovers, but even when it is one-sided, one can be a suitor or a devotee. Different from this is the emotion that can exist just in the mind of one person, creating no difference in their objective relationship.

Forgiveness has this ambiguity. Sometimes it is just something that happens between people, and any emotions are incidental. One person performs an act of forgiving another for something. Think of the pardons that U.S. presidents are empowered to bestow: the pardon may be given out of pure political calculation, with none of the cathartic feeling that may happen when one reconciles with an enemy.[5] Sometimes also forgiveness is an emotion that is private to the forgiver. I have long resented something that you have done, though I have taken no action against you, and now I find myself getting beyond the resentment and accepting you as a decent person. All this may create no ripples in the way we interact.

In the typical case there is an emotional background, involving resentment, blame, or some similar emotion directed by one person at another in connection with some action of the other. Then there is an emotion of overcoming that background. But in the typical case there is also a relationship between the two people that changes at the moment of forgiveness. This is something that does not consist in the emotions of either person. The relationship changes so that, while the offender was unforgiven, now an act of forgiveness has occurred. We sometimes use the forgiveness label when either the linkage or the emotions are involved, and we are most comfortable doing so when both are.

The territory of forgiveness, if this is right, involves a family of emotions, resentment-like emotions of the forgiver, abasement-like or repentance-like emotions of the forgiven, and a process of transition joining them, in the

[5] Is this a central case of forgiveness? It certainly would not be on the account in Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). That is not the question at this point.

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course of which reconciliation-like emotions can occur on both sides. That is not to say that any of these are required or, in the other direction, that even if we have all of these, any combination will result in forgiveness. But it is in combinations of these emotions and this linkage that the territory of forgiveness is found. Which combinations?

CENTRAL AND PERIPHERAL

Consider three contrasting paradigmatic cases. One of two friends, Alicia, is on a committee that is considering the other, Bruno, for a job (e.g., a high-paying but high-pressure job that involves a lot of traveling). Alicia prefers her cousin Cristin for the job and does not tell the committee that Bruno is her friend or that Cristin is her cousin. In the meeting she argues strongly against Bruno, exaggerating his weak points, so that Cristin is appointed. Bruno finds out and is outraged. The two are not on speaking terms for years. When Alicia attends the funeral of Bruno's wife and tells him how much she had always admired her, she reveals that she was against his candidacy for the job in part because she thought it would be bad for their marriage. Bruno reveals that he is in fact glad he didn't get the job. They embrace and cautiously resume their friendship.

In the second case, a revolutionary leader demands the cooperation of a lawyer in forging some documents. The lawyer refuses and leaves the country to avoid reprisals. Years later when the leader has become president, the lawyer has retired and wants to live his last years in his native town. He writes to the president apologizing for his past failure and affirming his support for the revolution. The president replies that since the lawyer did nothing actually to harm the cause and since he is a member of a prominent family that is unusual in its sympathy for the revolution, he may return without fear.

In the third case, an addict kills a teenaged clerk in a store in the course of a botched robbery. The addict is caught and convicted. In that jurisdiction the death penalty can be imposed at the discretion of the judge, who hears testimony for and against. The mother of the murdered clerk is asked to testify for death and refuses, testifying instead for clemency. She argues that no one is beyond redemption and that the addict was as much a victim of circumstances as her daughter. Years later when the murderer is released from jail, the mother offers her help in finding a job and a place to live, partly in the hope of making some sense out of her daughter's short life.

These cases have in common that there was tension between two people and the tension was overcome deliberately by one of them. They are different in important ways, though. The first case is personal. It is not clear that Alice has done anything wrong or that Bruno thinks she has. Their *reconciliation* centers on Bruno deciding not to hold her past actions against her. He is suspending blame, but the blame may never have been moral.

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The second case involves authority, at the beginning that of a political leader and at the end that of a head of state. The authority gives the power to punish, which is restrained in an act of *clemency* that may be motivated in part by political calculation. The third case involves an indisputably immoral act, and a person who has every right to condemn it – as she does, intellectually, but without some of the animus that often accompanies condemnation. We might think of the particular element of this case as *redemption*.

I take it that these are good examples of forgiveness, as we use the word now. There can be cases of reconciliation, clemency, or redemption that are not forgiveness. Reconciliation without forgiveness could occur when there is no specific act that someone is forgiven for, as when friends who have ceased to feel warmly get over a vague raft of differences. Clemency without forgiveness can come when there is no change in judgment, no wiping out of thoughts of betrayal, disloyalty, or disobedience, but punishment is suspended for some reason. Redemption without forgiveness can occur when there is no condemnation, as when members of historically antagonistic groups reach out to one another.

The factor that makes our three cases count as forgiveness, while similar cases do not, seems to be the presence of blame, responsibility, or excuse. Forgiveness overlaps with excusing, though the connections between them are not obvious, and to accept someone's excuse is in some cases to say that there is nothing to forgive. These are themselves vague and tricky concepts that are often waved around in a loose rhetorical way. At a minimum, responsibility requires that someone perform an intentional act that causes or allows an event to occur.[6] If this resulting event is then the object of anger, moral disapproval, or another similar emotion, the person who is angry or disapproving can suspend or overcome her emotion to return to something like the attitude she had before. If this is to be a linkage and not only an emotion, the relationship between the two must change at this point. One way that it can change is for the offender to petition the potential forgiver, as in the second case, and for the petition to be successful. Another way is for the forgiver to acknowledge some change in attitude of the offender, something like coming over to the offender's side. Yet another way is for the forgiver to act in some dramatic way that marks an attitude different from past or expected behavior.

We can vary the central cases in many ways to get controversial or problem cases. There are cases in which the forgiven act is right or even admirable, cases in which the forgiver has not been injured or offended, and cases in which the forgiven person does not accept the change of state. Some of these might be unproblematic cases on some common concept at some other time or place. From the perspective of some such time, some

[6] Eshleman, "Moral Responsibility," in *Stanford Online Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Zalta (2001 [rev. 2009]), available at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-responsibility.

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cases that are unproblematic for us might seem deviant, perhaps because what is going on in them cannot be easily labeled or because the motivations of the people involved would be hard to understand.

JUDGES

The way we think of forgiveness is complicated by its connections with two rather different ideas. First there is the idea of judicial or legal punishment and pardon. If a person is found guilty of a crime and a penalty is imposed, then that penalty can be lifted if the person is pardoned. Pardon is a linkage that shares basic features with forgiveness, but there are differences between pardon and what we would take to be paradigmatic forgiveness. The judge or other authority does not always have to give a reason for his pardon, and his attitude to the offender does not have to change. (Often, in fact, a change in attitude, frequently induced by a change in the offender, is either a cause or a justification of the pardon. But this is not usually formally required.) There can be a pardon for a penalty imposed as a result of an act that neither offender nor pardoner thought was wrong; there can be a pardon where the pardoner continues to think of the pardoned as an awful criminal.

The second complicating connection is with divine mercy. In monotheistic religion, God gives us instructions, which we often break, and he is then entitled to punish us. He can, however, suspend punishment. Suspension usually occurs as a result of our repentance, which consists in our wanting to submit to God's will and our realization that what we have done is wrong. An essential emotion, remorse, combines condemnation of oneself with resolve to change. Presumably, moral individualists, who submit to divine authority to escape hellfire but reserve the right to their own opinions about whether the commands are just, do not qualify for mercy. Both emotion and moral judgment are essential here.[7]

Although legal pardon and divine mercy differ in essential respects, they also have something in common. They both involve authority, breach of rules, and the suspension of a legitimate power to punish. Each can be seen as a metaphor for the other. Divine judgment can be seen as if God were an earthly judge administering a set of laws, with a list of standard minimum sentences. And legal punishment can be seen as if the judge is substituting an earthly punishment for things that God will eventually deal with. Both are combined in a medieval picture of divine authority percolating down through layers of earthly rulers, ending with the authority of husbands and fathers over their families.

[7] In *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 159–73 (chap. 9: "Varieties of Forgiveness") and pp. 174–86 (chap. 10: "Afterthoughts"), Bash wrestles with the issue of reconciling the judging and forgiving sides of the Christian God and with that of our limited human capacities to forgive.

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