

CHAPTER I

Forgiveness and wrongdoing

This book is about one kind of response to evil and wrongdoing – the response called ‘forgiveness’. The aim of this book is to explore why, how and when a victim may forgive a wrongdoer for wrongdoing – in other words, what it means to forgive.

I stand within the Christian tradition. In writing this book, I have sought to engage with modern secular insights about forgiveness and to be in critical dialogue with those insights. I have also sought to look critically at the Christian traditions about forgiveness and restate some of them in the light of modern discourse.

In the following pages, I refer to someone who has been wronged as ‘the victim’ or less often (and only for stylistic reasons) as ‘the wronged person’ or words to that effect. The person who does the wrong I usually refer to as ‘the wrongdoer’. The wrong that the wrongdoer does to the victim I call ‘wrongdoing’. When I refer to ‘wrongdoing’ or use a similar word, I mean ‘a *morally* wrong act or omission’¹ in contrast to an act or omission that is wrong but not also morally wrong. Where there could be ambiguity, I make the meaning plain.²

I appreciate that words such as ‘victim’ and ‘wrongdoer’ may be read as words with emotive connotations. I do not intend them to be understood that way. I have been unable to find words that convey a more neutral sense. I have, in addition, sought to use gender-neutral language whenever possible to avoid, for example, suggesting that typically victims are women, wrongdoers men or that God is male.

¹ The root of this definition is Aristotelian: see *Rh.* i, 10, 1368b5–10 (in Barnes 1984). There, wrongdoing is defined as injury voluntarily inflicted contrary to the written laws that regulate particular communities or to unwritten and universally acknowledged general principles.

² Not all wrong acts are morally wrong. For example, the law may treat it as wrong to break a speed limit, but it is not morally wrong to do so when taking a seriously ill child to hospital, particularly if the child’s life is in danger.

POPULAR UNDERSTANDING

Ask anyone in the street if to forgive is good and worthwhile and the answer, almost certainly, would be 'yes'.

On a day-to-day basis, with the minor difficulties of life, it is not very difficult to forgive. If Jack lends Jill a book and Jill is careless and loses it, Jill may irritate Jack by her carelessness but, as they are siblings and as Jack wishes to retain a good relationship with Jill, Jack may well accept Jill's apology and then forget about the matter.³ Similarly, one friend may unwittingly say some hurtful things to another, but for the sake of friendship the offended friend will forgive and not allow the hurt to stand in the way of the friendship.

Most people would also affirm – at least in principle, if not by their own practice – that *not* to forgive is both foolish and misguided. Popular understanding is that bitterness often comes from being unforgiving. It is also that being unforgiving can be emotionally corrosive and harmful to health. It does not take an astute observer of human behaviour to see that the effect of not forgiving or of being unforgiven can be dehumanising and personally diminishing. Both wrongdoer and victim may also become trapped in a pattern of behaviour that is personally and communally destructive. This can be expressed in terms of the thought of Lévinas: to forgive is to recognise that we are part of a matrix of social relationships, that we have responsibilities towards others because we are part of that matrix and that our wholeness and freedom are best expressed in the context of relationships with others.⁴

Of course, when it comes to forgiveness, most people fail to live up to their own standards, and (if they were to think about it) they know that they do not live up to God's standards. Whatever the nature of an act of wrongdoing, there will be some who find they are unable to forgive, who will feel guilty about this, and who will also feel guilty about having disagreeable – or even brutish – feelings towards those who have mistreated them. For Christians in particular, this can present additional problems, because Christianity emphasises the ethical ideal to forgive. If truth be told, forgiving the way people believe that Jesus forgave (unconditionally, unilaterally and lavishly) is immensely difficult and few seem able to do

³ Here forgetting does have a moral basis: it is in response to the apology (which is often a covert appeal for forgiveness). One is unlikely to have forgiven if one simply forgets or buries the recollection of the wrong (Neu 2002: 31–3).

⁴ The thought of Lévinas does not contribute to normative ethics and the determination of the moral worth of conduct. Rather, Lévinas offers an 'ethic of ethics' that identifies the responsibility of the self to others but not the ethical *content* of that responsibility.

it.⁵ For some, revenge is an attractive alternative to forgiveness and they would rather retaliate than forgive.

Even if people fail to forgive, they still tend to hope that God will forgive them, either because God is merciful or because, if they try hard and intend to do well, God will show a sense of ‘fair play’ and forgive them. Alexander Pope expressed the relation between the human and divine conditions in this way: ‘To err is human, to forgive divine.’⁶ To put it unkindly, people think that God will forgive (because that is God’s role) but they often will not (because that, sadly, is the human condition).

In this book, we will examine views such as these, so that we can think both ethically and Christianly about what it means to forgive. We begin with some initial thoughts about what forgiveness is, although it will not be until chapter 9 that we draw together the discussion in this book and reach a firm conclusion – as best we can – about what forgiveness is.

REVISITING FORGIVENESS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

A straightforward, popular dictionary definition of forgiveness is that it is an action or process that results in a person ceasing to be angry or resentful towards someone for an offence, flaw or mistake.⁷

That forgiveness is an action or process is self-evident. In almost every other respect, I take issue with the definition or wish to qualify it. For example, one implication of the definition is that one may ‘forgive’ another person if one forgets about, denies or even blames oneself for the offence, flaw or mistake. I shall argue that doing these is not to forgive. Similarly, if by mistake I bought you red roses thinking that you liked them, when I should have remembered that it was yellow roses that you preferred, you may, as a result, be angry – perhaps even resentful – that I had forgotten what you liked, but that does not mean that I have done something for which you should forgive me or for which I should seek your forgiveness.

I take as the starting point for discussion that forgiveness (whatever else it may also be) is *a moral response to wrongdoing*.⁸ There are two elements to this starting point that need to be held in place: the first is that forgiveness

⁵ Jones (1995) ascribes the capacity to do this as coming from the Holy Spirit who presses and shapes people to embody and so practise divine forgiveness.

⁶ Alexander Pope (1688–1744), *An Essay on Criticism*, Part 2, line 525 in Audra and Williams 1961.

⁷ This definition is based on the definition in the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2nd edition (Pearsall and Hanks 2003).

⁸ See Lévinas 1969: 282f.: ‘Pardon in its immediate sense is connected with the moral phenomenon of fault.’ For Lévinas, ethics is not a matter of abstract principles or reason but the result of an encounter with something or someone other than oneself. The moral response becomes clear at the moment of the encounter.

is a moral response, and the second is that the response is to a morally wrong act.⁹

As for the first element (that forgiveness is a moral response), two observations may be made. First, not all moral responses to wrongdoing amount to forgiveness. For example, a victim who renews relations with a repentant wrongdoer in response to a moral principle (for example, that it is right to have relations with those who repudiate immoral behaviour) will not necessarily also have forgiven the wrongdoer (Hampton in Murphy and Hampton 1988: 41). Second, it does not necessarily follow that to forgive is always the right moral response to wrongdoing.¹⁰ This is what Murphy in Murphy and Hampton (1988) argues: he suggests, for example, that one should not forgive if to forgive would not necessarily serve the public good or would result in an undesirable outcome.

That forgiveness is a moral response also has an important corollary. It is this: if the response to wrongdoing is not moral, the response cannot be forgiveness. Thus, if a *victim* implicitly or explicitly denies that the act in question is wrong, the response of the victim will not – and cannot – be forgiveness. It may be ‘condonation’ (Kolnai 1973–4: 96), excusing, pardoning, exonerating and so on¹¹ – but it will not be (according to Kolnai 1973–4 and most other commentators – see Worthington 2005: 557) forgiveness.

We turn now to the second element of our starting point that forgiveness is a moral response to wrongdoing, namely, that forgiveness is a response to a morally wrong act.

MORALLY WRONG ACTS

Morally wrong acts range from what one might regard as relatively trivial (such as telling a lie to avoid embarrassment or breaking a promise) to acts – often referred to as ‘evil’ rather than ‘moral wrongs’ – of execrable

⁹ Some suggest that forgiveness can sometimes be a one-way process or act on the part of the victim, not dependent on anything the wrongdoer does or does not do, and may occur even if the wrongdoer does not acknowledge the forgiveness (Holmgreen 1993: 341; Garrard and McNaughton 2002: 51, 53–9; Kolnai 1973–4: 9). This view will be explored later in this book.

¹⁰ Lévinas (1969: 43) makes this point. What is right to do will depend on the situation and (in his view) will be the result of encounter (or a relationship) with something or someone other than oneself. He therefore rejects the idea of rigid or univocal moral principles and argues that the appropriate moral response in a situation is always the result of encounter. The result is more stringent and demanding than in any formal ethical code (Davis 1996: 54). The encounter produces the ethics, and not *vice versa*. Strictly speaking, therefore, Lévinas’s philosophy is not about the contents of ethics, the norms or standards of moral behaviour (he calls these ‘justice’), but about what is ethical.

¹¹ To pardon is to remit punishment rightly imposed on or due to a wrongdoer or to declare a person innocent of something of which the person has been pronounced guilty. See Horsbrugh 1974: 270 and Govier 2002: 54–61 further on the distinctions.

horror, cruelty and depravity, sometimes called ‘dehumanising evil’ (e.g., Wolfendale 2005).¹²

If an act is not morally wrong it is not forgivable (that is, ‘able-to-be-forgiven’) and forgiveness is not an appropriate response to such an act.¹³ Three scenarios may arise. First, an act of which I may not approve but which is not morally wrong is not forgivable. (For example, if I do not like to see men wear ear studs, I cannot forgive my friend if he chooses to wear an ear stud. To wear an ear stud is not morally wrong, and no right-thinking moral philosopher would hold that it was. In such a case, it is I – and my social tolerance – that need to change.) Also not forgivable are morally innocent acts that have unintended but harmful consequences for a ‘victim’,¹⁴ as in the case of a mistake or misfortune.¹⁵ Lastly, if the victim is not aware of the wrong, the ‘victim’ will have nothing to forgive. If Jack steals from Jill’s purse but Jill does not know, there will be nothing for her to forgive, even though Jack has done wrong. (Jack may consider that there is something to forgive, even though Jill does not know it, because, both in Jack’s mind and objectively, he has done wrong.) If Jack later admits what he has done, there will then be something for Jill to forgive.¹⁶

To establish whether an act is right or wrong from a moral viewpoint, the act has to be critically evaluated in the context of an overarching moral

¹² Wrongdoing is certainly more than ‘a breach of trust between two (or more) people’ (Wilson 1988: 534).

¹³ An act may also be unforgivable in two other circumstances: first, if there is no one to forgive it and second if there is no one to be forgiven. An example of the former is the case of murder: the victim will be dead and so cannot forgive. As to the latter, if a wrongdoer has died, there will be no one to receive the victim’s forgiveness. However, if the wrongdoer died contrite, there seems to be no reason why the person wronged, when able, should not posthumously forgive the wrongdoer. Although there will be no possibility of a restored relationship, there is the possibility of letting go of the hurt, of inner healing for the victim and of psychological restoration. The person wronged can retrospectively embrace the repentance of the wrongdoer and experience the renewal that that will bring.

¹⁴ Aristotle, *NE* iii, 1, 1110b30–1111a1 (in Rowe and Broadie 2002), calls this ‘ignorance at the level of particular things’ and so makes the action involuntary. See also *NE* v, 6, 1135a20–30 (in Rowe and Broadie 2002).

¹⁵ In *Rh.* i, 13, 1374b5–10 (in Barnes 1984), Aristotle defines a mistake as ‘an act . . . not due to turpitude, that has results that might have been expected’, and a misfortune as ‘an act, not due to wickedness, that has unexpected results’. In discussing what being wronged amounts to, Aristotle denies that such actions are unjust (and so actions for which people are morally responsible): see *Rh.* i, 13, 1373b1, 35 (in Barnes 1984). What is also important is how one interprets an action: a person may take something but the taking not amount to theft if, for example, the person believed they had a right to take the thing. In Aristotle’s words, ‘it happens that a man will admit an act, but will not admit the prosecutor’s label for the act nor the facts which the label implies’ (*Rh.* i, 13, 1373b35–40, in Barnes 1984).

¹⁶ If a ‘victim’ does not suffer harm from an act that was *intended* to harm the victim, the victim may forgive the wrongdoer’s wrongful intentions but not the act itself.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-14777-4 - Forgiveness and Christian Ethics

Anthony Bash

Excerpt

[More information](#)

framework.¹⁷ The framework may be derived from principles (whether from a supra-human moral being or power or from universally recognised social norms and laws) that underlie particular expressions of moral imperatives.¹⁸ Even when we make appeal to an overarching moral framework, legitimate disagreement may remain about whether a particular action is morally wrong: the discussion in 1 Corinthians 8:1–13 and 10:23–11:1 about eating meat that has been used in idol worship is a case in point. Well-known also are views that the cultural climate of a former time affirms and even sustains but which a later generation recognises to be wrong. It is hard to attribute blame when people act strictly according to their consciences. Scarre (2003: 108, 110) gives the example of Aztec human sacrifice: it may today be ‘morally repugnant, but it [is] hard to see it as wrong from [Aztec] viewpoint’. He also describes the persecution and murder of supposed witches in Europe in the middle ages. We may believe those who persecuted the witches to be wrong but they acted according to their understanding and with integrity of conscience for the supposed good of all. Those who adhered to and carried out Nazi political philosophy are, in my view, less excusable (*pace* Scarre 2003). As Milbank (2003: 2f.) says, many believed they were ‘fulfilling the goods of order, obedience, political stability and peace’ and ‘articulated their defective desires . . . in terms of the promotion of racial health and excellence of humanity’. Even the aim to liquidate the Jews was expressed in terms that could be described as ‘rational’ (though perverse and flawed) and not out of ‘the pursuit of evil for its own sake’. Even so, the moral and intellectual criteria of the time *could* have led people to condemn Nazi philosophy as odious and repugnant (as it did some) and there was a degree of culpable and wilful blindness by many who upheld Nazi philosophy.¹⁹

Given that there are degrees of evil in wrongdoing and (as we shall see below) even degrees of responsibility for wrongdoing, one might have expected that there would be degrees of difficulty for forgiving, and that it would be easier to forgive a peccadillo than an egregious wrong or evil. In many instances that is true, but not always. When it comes to forgiveness, it seems to be that it is not necessarily the nature of the *act* that determines

¹⁷ The question I am exploring is not ‘What is right?’ and ‘What is wrong?’ (and so I do not explore which expression of higher ethic we are following and whether we might agree that the act is moral or immoral) but ‘If we conclude that an act is morally wrong, *how* might we forgive it?’

¹⁸ According to Aristotle in *Rh.* i, 13, 1373b1–10 (in Barnes 1984) there are two kinds of law: particular law (community-enacted rules, whether written or unwritten) and universal law (norms that are universally recognised). The aetiology of ‘crimes against humanity’ is that wrongdoing is an offence against the moral order from whichever ethical standpoint that moral order is looked at.

¹⁹ See further on responsibility for actions, pp. 8–11 below.

whether people who have been wronged will find it difficult to forgive, but the nature of the *response* to the wrong. The initial, emotional response may be in proportion to the severity of the act, but not always. The response may be shaped by temperament, personal history, psychopathology, ethical outlook and social or cultural tradition. Wrongdoers take their victims as they find them, even if the victims have wafer-thin tolerance and are greatly wounded by the acts of wrongdoers.²⁰ It would not be right – tempting though it may be – for wrongdoers to say to their victims to buck up, get on and forgive. The victims may well believe they have much to forgive and find it hard to do so. There does come a point when to continue to harbour resentment about being wronged becomes excessive, misplaced and perhaps even obsessional – but that is for the victim to address, not the wrongdoer.

Wrongdoers with sensitive consciences will quickly realise that the effects of wrongdoing are not so contained and identifiable as they had hoped. Some wrongdoing *is* contained in its effects and forgiveness in such a context is about relations in an interpersonal context between a known wrongdoer and a known victim. In contrast, some wrongs will have consequences for the victim that the wrongdoer did not (and perhaps even could not) foresee, or the wrongs may affect many people besides the immediate victim. In the latter case, it is often not possible to identify all who have been affected by wrongdoing or how much they may have been affected. The consequences of wrongdoing may be, for example, social, cultural and political, and may affect more than one generation and in ways that have to do with loss of contingent possibilities. As Milbank (2003: 28; and see Derrida 2001a: 29f.) puts it: ‘since an evil deed is contagious, it is impossible to know how far the consequences of even the simplest and most minor of misdemeanours extends’. Consider, for example, the consequences if Herod had succeeded in killing Jesus when he was a baby (see Matthew 2:16–23) or if Pharaoh, through the massacre of Jewish male babies, had succeeded in killing Moses when a baby (Exodus 1:15–22).

Of course, many people who are remotely and contingently affected by another’s wrongdoing may not know that they have been affected in that way; but the wrongdoer – especially if the wrongdoer becomes contrite

²⁰ This is akin to the ‘eggshell skull’ principle in the law of tort, namely that, when it comes to compensation, a person (the tortfeasor) who is in breach of a duty of care to a victim must take the victim as the tortfeasor finds the victim, whether the victim is extraordinarily vulnerable or not. This principle, sometimes also known as the *talem qualem* principle, limits compensation to compensation for consequences that are reasonably foreseeable. For a review of the law, and the applicability of the principle to third parties, see White and Others *v.* Chief Constable of South Yorkshire and Others, 2 AC 455–511 (1999).

and penitent – may be all too aware. In the hypothetical examples above, who should forgive – and who can forgive? Those killed cannot forgive because they are dead; and many people will suffer contingent losses because someone has died. In the examples, those who have been affected by the wrongdoing – albeit indirectly – have something to forgive the wrongdoers but the wrongdoers may not be able to find those who can forgive them their wrongdoing.

Benn (1996: 378) raises the important question of how people can forgive if they are not directly victims of wrongdoing but are affected by it. The question is even more pressing if the victim has not, will not or cannot forgive the wrongdoer. Benn suggests that ‘quasi-forgiveness’ may be applicable here, that is when ‘third parties, whilst not [at] all condoning what was done, overcome the indignation they feel on behalf of those directly wronged’. So the parents of a murder victim may eventually be able to express quasi-forgiveness (since the only person able to forgive is the murder victim); the relatives of a victim of a violent crime may be able to express quasi-forgiveness of the wrongdoer in the course of time. Benn rightly points out that this can only occur where to express quasi-forgiveness would not be disloyal to the victim. He also limits this to cases where the wrongdoer repents. A moving example of this concerns David Rice whose brother, Andrew, died in the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York. David Rice tells of how he and certain other relatives of people killed were contacted by Madame al-Wafi, the mother of the surviving alleged hijacker, Zacharias Moussaoui. She wished to ask for forgiveness for her son’s actions.²¹ Mr Rice writes of how the meeting confirmed to him that to seek retribution was not an appropriate response to his loss; instead he sought to lay aside hatred and seek reconciliation.²²

WRONGDOERS

As for wrongdoers, there is a distinction, sometimes difficult to draw, between a person who is innately incapable of moral discernment (an obvious case is someone with a severe learning difficulty) and a person who may be hardened, naïve, self-deluded, unprincipled or morally incompetent. In the former case, the person is regarded as innocent (because not responsible

²¹ Madame al-Wafi was, strictly speaking, not able to ask for forgiveness for her son’s actions because, as I show in chapter 7, it is only wrongdoers who can ask their victims for forgiveness. Nevertheless, Benn makes a cogent case for ‘quasi-forgiveness’ and Madame al-Wafi’s actions should be regarded as a request for quasi-forgiveness.

²² Recounted in www.theforgivenessproject.com/stories/andrew-rice.

for his or her moral actions) and so not culpable; in the latter case, the person is immature but culpable.²³ Thus even when a person's moral reasoning may be overridden or even suppressed by weakness, indifference, selfishness and self-interest, greed or the refusal to engage, their culpability is not. In this category must be included those whose background, circumstances and personal histories predispose them to moral compromise. An example might be those from deprived and abusive backgrounds. The degree of culpability attributable to them may be diminished due to their circumstances, but they remain culpable nevertheless.

What of the responsibility of those who collude with wrongdoing that others commit? Obvious examples are the mistreatment of Jewish people before and during the Second World War and the oppression of black people in South Africa during the era of *apartheid*. In later years, when the wrongdoing had been exposed and recognised, the perpetrators tended to be portrayed as evil and unrepresentative – despite the fact that they had lived in and been supported by communities that knew – or could or should have known – of the acts of wrongdoing. Those who get on with the ordinary daily business and routine of living engage in collective self-deception that amounts to silent complicity. Such collusion does not exculpate them from a share in the guilt for the wrong. It amounts to moral blindness, founded on self-serving weakness and the desire for self-preservation. For it is all too easy to absorb society's justifying meta-narrative out of self-interest and to fail to respond critically to abuse of power and injustice. Such people are not innocent of moral fault.

Even the perpetrators of evil may come across as ordinary people who are as much colluding with the evil of others as themselves also perpetrating it. At his trial, Eichmann said that he did not personally have anything against the Jews and that he had not sought to be cruel. He appeared to be an ordinary person, little different from anyone else. His answer as to why he was one of the architects of Hitler's 'Final Solution' was that he was a soldier in a system that expected him to comply with its authority and that he was obeying orders. Arendt (1958: 49) observed that, the longer one listened to Eichmann, 'the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely linked to his inability to think, namely to think away from the standpoint of somebody else'. Scarre (2004: 6), in critical engagement with the subtitle of Arendt's book on Eichmann's trial, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1968), rightly describes Eichmann – not the evil he committed – as 'banal' and says that

²³ See Aristotle, *NE* iii, 1, 1110b25–30 (in Rowe and Broadie 2002).

he was ‘unimaginative, unreflective . . . with scant capacity for empathy’. In other words, Eichmann did not seem to think that what he had done was wrong, even though right-thinking people would think that it was.

It is easy to underestimate the power of a received ideology, and it takes a brave and intellectually unusual person to be critical and independent of the prevailing ideology. Those who collude remain morally culpable. As for Eichmann, possibly he was a child of his time, who had absorbed Nazi lies about the Jews. Even so, he was culpable – perhaps all the more so – because he vigorously carried out and initiated plans to implement the Final Solution and was one of the *architects* of the lies that others believed. He was not just an uncritical victim of the contemporary worldview. If he had reflected on the truth of what he believed and on the morality of his actions, he could *only* have realised that his actions were wrong. For these reasons, he was responsible for his actions and so culpable.²⁴

It is worth adding that, in the day-to-day pattern of human life, it is sometimes simplistic to say that all the ‘wrong’ rests with the wrongdoer and all the ‘right’ with the victim. There is often wrong on both sides, and people are sometimes both wrongdoer and victim in relation to the same set of events. Both wrongdoer and victim may have to search their own consciences about forgiveness: forgiveness may be a mutual, not a one-way, process for them and the categorisation of the people involved as ‘victim’ and ‘wrongdoer’ will become considerably more nuanced.²⁵

A wise observer of human beings will also recognise that people are capable of great evil.²⁶ Garrard (2003: 241) explores the fact that the innocent and guilty alike share a common nature and that people are ‘morally mixed, not in the sense that some of us are almost entirely good, and some entirely evil, but rather in the sense that most if not all of us are capable of both good and evil’. We might add that, in some senses, people share in the wrongdoing that others do without themselves being personally responsible for it. Garrard (2003: 241) suggests that ‘we are all inextricably implicated in, and shamed by, deeds of our fellow human beings [who are] the perpetrators [of wrongdoing], even though we do not endorse [the deeds] and are not responsible for them’.²⁷ (This latter point has been painfully illustrated by reports of abuses of human rights at the Abu Ghraib detention centre, abuses of a kind that many in the west assumed were – and could only

²⁴ See also Scarre 2004: 159–76. ²⁵ See Govier 2002: viii.

²⁶ The corollary to this is that *ordinary* people are capable of great evil: see Wolfendale 2005: 360f.

²⁷ Since only the perpetrators remain morally responsible, one wonders why she suggests that, since crimes against humanity are crimes against all humanity, they are, to some extent, forgivable by all humanity. See Garrard 2003: 232f., 239f.