



What Should “Forgiveness” Mean?

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Most people find anger more difficult to control than sadness, anxiety, or any other emotion.¹ This inability creates unfortunate and sometimes tragic consequences. In individuals, uncontrolled anger can end in battery, rape, and murder. In societies, uncontrolled anger can end in international conflict, ethnic cleansing, and war. In at least some contexts, therefore, it is very important that we be able to control our anger. Moral agents who develop virtues such as compassion, gratitude, and patience may have an easier time doing this, but arguably the most important virtue for controlling anger is forgiveness. A forgiving individual is able to let go of anger once it arises.

What else “forgiveness” might mean, however, is a matter of dispute. Contemporary philosophers argue that forgiveness is only possible when an agent does not forget, when he has been responsibly wronged, and when he has the appropriate motivation. As we will see, however, this understanding of “forgiveness” can undermine our attempts to defuse problematic anger. We could use this finding to argue that forgiveness is a vice, but it would be more plausible for us to accept an alternative understanding of “forgiveness.” Some Buddhists depict forgiveness as merely letting go of anger. Individuals will do a better job of controlling problematic anger when they employ this understanding of “forgiveness” than when they employ the contemporary philosophical analysis. As a result it is what we should mean by “forgiveness.”

1. Common Themes

Contemporary philosophers argue that we should understand “forgiveness” more precisely than we commonly use the term. While contemporary philosophers disagree about the best analysis of forgiveness, they seem to agree on four important points. Contemporary philosophers argue that we do not forgive if we forget. We cannot forgive innocent or justified acts. We cannot forgive excused acts. We do not forgive unless we have the appropriate motivation.

Contemporary philosophers argue that forgiveness is separate from, and perhaps incompatible with, forgetting. Paul Hughes states the position clearly,

“Forgetting is, however, a completely passive phenomenon, in the sense at issue, and so fails to be a case of overcoming anything at all.”² Jeffrie Murphy endorses Bishop Butler’s use of this distinction: “By his emphasis on the forswearing of resentment, Butler indicates that he quite properly wants to draw a distinction between forgiveness (which may be a virtue and morally commanded) and forgetting (which may just happen). Forgiveness is the sort of thing that one does for a reason, and where there are reasons there is a distinction between good ones and bad ones.”³ Trudy Govier endorses the same conclusion: “Forgiving and forgetting are often associated (and people are often advised to ‘forgive and forget’), but this common association can be seriously misleading.”⁴ Aurel Kolnai states the position strongly: “Forgiving is not only not ‘forgetting’ – in spite of the popular use of that metaphor carrying a cheap appeal of picturesque banality – but incompatible with forgetting.”⁵

Contemporary philosophers also claim that we cannot forgive an innocent individual or an individual who performs a justified act. In explaining this requirement, they maintain that individuals cannot forgive unless they have been wronged, and any use of the term “forgiveness” in other cases is mistaken. Kolnai states this condition clearly: “[Forgiveness] presupposes an affront, injury, transgression, trespassing or offence committed by one person against the other and consequently the other’s readiness or refusal to ‘forgive’ him.”⁶ Margaret Holmgren makes the same point in reference to self-forgiveness, “there must be an element of objective fault or wrongdoing on the part of the offender, who must have a just sense of the wrong.”⁷ Joanna North states the point bluntly, “one cannot forgive when no wrong has been done, for there is no breach to be healed and no repentance is necessary or possible.”⁸ Most other philosophers who write on forgiveness also accept this condition, so it is generally believed that we cannot forgive individuals if they are innocent or justified.

As well, contemporary philosophers claim that we cannot forgive someone who has a legitimate excuse. We cannot forgive all wrongs, only responsible wrongdoings. Murphy, for example, argues that it is impossible to forgive an excused act for the same reasons that it is impossible to forgive a justified act: “we may forgive only what it is initially proper to resent; and, if a person has done nothing wrong or was not responsible for what he did, there is *nothing to resent* (though perhaps much to be sad about). Resentment – and thus forgiveness – is directed toward *responsible* wrongdoing. Therefore, if forgiveness and resentment are to have an arena, it must be where such wrongdoing remains intact, i.e., neither excused nor justified.”⁹ Holmgren argues similarly: “[T]here must be an element of fault or wrongdoing on the part of the offender.”¹⁰ Robert Roberts, Norvin Richards, Cheshire Calhoun, Paul Hughes, and Joanna North each support a similar conclusion.¹¹

Finally, contemporary philosophers focus on the motive that agents have for letting go of anger, and claim that only some reasons constitute forgiveness. Murphy, for example, refines Bishop Butler's definition of "forgiveness" because he believes that Butler's definition is too broad. Butler defines "forgiveness" as the forswearing of resentment, but Murphy argues that forgiveness must be the forswearing of resentment for moral reasons. If we did not make this restriction, Murphy argues, we would have to call cases where individuals overcame their anger for "selfish" reasons like their "peace of mind" cases of forgiveness.¹² Holmgren agrees with Murphy's position and Richards makes a similar argument in cases where agents overcome negative feelings for self-absorbed reasons.¹³

Roberts also argues that forgiveness requires moral motivation, but he goes farther and specifies the kind of moral motivation. Roberts argues that we only forgive when we want to reestablish benevolent and harmonious fellowship. He argues, "Consideration of the significance of repentance and excuses . . . has suggested that a basic aspect of forgivingness is a concern for benevolent, harmonious fellowship with others. The relevance of compassion to forgiveness—a disposition to care about others in their adversity—seems to point in the same direction."¹⁴ Hence, Roberts concludes, "A dispositional concern to be in benevolent, harmonious relationship with others is basic to forgiveness."¹⁵

Calhoun proposes yet another specific moral reason. She states: "Among changes of heart achieved by various routes, some seem genuine cases of forgiveness, what I call 'aspirational forgiveness.' Here, the individual changes her heart while retaining a clear sense of the other's culpability and her own entitlement to resentment. Other changes of heart, though commonly called forgiveness, look on closer inspection like something else: excusings, or overlookings, or giving what is due."¹⁶ Individuals who genuinely forgive recognize moral flaws but do not demand improvement. She states, "One may still put the person on moral trial and find her wanting. But aspirational forgiveness is the choice not to demand that she improve. It is the choice to place respecting another's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards."¹⁷ Hence, according to Calhoun, someone who overcomes his anger but does not recognize moral flaws without demanding improvement does not forgive.

Murphy, Richards, Roberts, and Calhoun each suggest that to forgive, individuals must be moved by specific moral reasons. They differ only on which moral reasons forgiveness requires. In general, we can conclude that while contemporary philosophers find much to dispute when they discuss forgiveness, they agree that "forgiveness" has a more limited or narrow meaning than we commonly think. For ease of discussion, we can call this position complex forgiveness, alluding to the contemporary philosophical claim that the concept of forgiveness is more complex than commonly thought.

2. Simple Forgiveness

To determine the plausibility of complex forgiveness it will be helpful to examine a case that does not meet its requirements. Sharon Salzberg, an American Buddhist meditation instructor, teaches a meditation on forgiveness. She instructs the meditator to silently repeat the phrase “If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask their forgiveness,” and then visualize specific instances where the meditator might have hurt or harmed someone. After asking for forgiveness, the meditator offers it to others. He silently repeats the phrase “If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive them.” Finally, the meditator extends forgiveness to himself using the words, “For all the ways I have hurt or harmed myself, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer forgiveness.”¹⁸

From the perspective of someone granting complex forgiveness, this meditation appears confused. The meditator might forgive in a way that violates each of the four restrictions forwarded by the contemporary philosophical analysis. Once the meditator forgives, he might forget about the incident. The meditator might forgive an innocent individual who the meditator mistakenly believes has hurt or harmed him. The meditator might forgive an individual who was justified in hurting or harming him. Likewise a meditator might forgive an individual who had a legitimate excuse for causing hurt or harm. In addition, the meditator might be moved to forgive for any number of reasons that do not meet contemporary philosophical specifications. The meditator might, for example, seek peace of mind.

The meaning of “forgiveness” implicit in the meditation is not more restricted than common usage. The meaning is, however, clear: forgiveness is letting go of anger. Anger, for Salzberg, is “the mind-state that dislikes what is happening and strikes out against it.”¹⁹ When we let go of this mind-state we forgive. A conversation with one of Salzberg’s students underlines the difference between complex forgiveness and Salzberg’s understanding. After doing the forgiveness meditation, the student, who had been seriously injured in a terrorist attack, stated: “I don’t know if it is possible to learn to forgive. However, I do know that it is possible, and in fact essential, to learn to stop hating.” To which Salzberg commented, “On hearing that, I wondered if stopping hating and learning to forgive were not really the same thing.”²⁰ While Salzberg understands forgiveness simply as letting go of anger her student assumes that it is more complex.

Because this Buddhist understanding of forgiveness makes the virtue less complicated than we might believe, we can call it simple forgiveness. We can talk of simple forgiveness as an act, as a process, as something we grant, or as a virtue. As an act, forgiveness is an instance of letting go of anger. Hence, someone who does the forgiveness meditation performs acts of forgiveness. As a process, forgiveness is a series of forgiving acts that culminate in over-

coming anger. Once anger does not arise anymore, the individual completes the process of forgiveness. When forgiveness is granted, someone declares to the object of his anger that he will undertake the process of forgiveness. Thus, it is possible to forgive a person without publically granting that individual forgiveness. Simple forgiveness keeps these acts distinct. As a virtue, forgiveness is the disposition to let go of anger. The forgiving person is a person disposed to let go of his anger.

3. Choosing Between Meanings

When we analyze a term or phrase, however, we typically try to determine what it does mean rather than what it should mean. Is it a mistake to try to determine what “forgiveness” should mean? We could claim that all analyses are normative. We could claim that anytime we try to determine what a term means that we must either explicitly or implicitly assess how we should use language. But whether or not all analyses have some normative component, some features of the term “forgiveness” make it impossible for us to avoid normative issues.

Three characteristics of the term “forgiveness” jointly suggest that we must try to determine what it should mean. First, “forgiveness” has more than one conflicting popular use. Sometimes people use “forgiveness” to mean complex forgiveness, but on other occasions it means simple forgiveness. Jesus, for example, uses “forgiveness” to mean simple forgiveness when he says “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.” Jesus claims that his persecutors are not responsible but ignorant. Since complex forgiveness suggests that forgiveness is only possible when someone commits a responsible wrong, this is a case where complex forgiveness is impossible. Murphy realizes this. He corrects Jesus and suggests that the phrase “would go better as ‘Father *excuse* them for they know not what they do.’ ”²¹ Murphy’s suggestion is not, however, the only conclusion that we have available. We need not conclude that Jesus did not understand what “forgiveness” really means. Instead, we could conclude that “forgiveness” is not always used to mean complex forgiveness. Common usage does not point us to a single understanding. At a minimum, “forgiveness” is also sometimes used to mean simple forgiveness. This first characteristic of forgiveness suggests that when we analyze forgiveness we have a choice. If we want to give an analysis of the virtue of forgiveness, then common usage does not limit our options to a single understanding.

Second, as we will see, understanding “forgiveness” as complex forgiveness creates negative consequences. It is better when individuals have the disposition to practice simple forgiveness than when individuals have the disposition to practice complex forgiveness. The first characteristic of forgive-

ness suggested that when we analyze forgiveness we face a choice. The second characteristic suggests that the choice is morally significant. Our description of the virtue may affect what dispositions moral agents try to cultivate. We want moral agents to cultivate the best dispositions possible, and our choice of how we analyze the virtue of forgiveness would seem to affect that outcome.

Finally, forgiveness is widely believed to be a virtue. This last characteristic suggests that we should accept an alternative to complex forgiveness before we conclude that forgiveness is a vice. Usually when we find that a supposed virtue produces bad consequences we have reason to believe that the supposed virtue is actually a vice. Thus, if we find that complex forgiveness produces bad consequences we might be tempted to conclude that it is a vice. Nietzsche argued along these lines.²² However, with forgiveness we have another option. We could abandon our belief that “forgiveness” means complex forgiveness rather than abandoning our belief that forgiveness is a virtue. Moreover, if we want our finding to cohere with what most people believe, it would be better to abandon complex forgiveness before we abandon the belief that forgiveness is a virtue. People more strongly believe that forgiveness is a virtue than they believe that complex forgiveness is the correct meaning of “forgiveness.”

When we analyze forgiveness it seems that must try to determine what “forgiveness” should mean rather than merely what forgiveness does mean. Are contemporary philosophical analyses answers to what “forgiveness” should mean or do they instead represent an attempt to determine what it does mean? Contemporary philosophical analyses seem to include the normative claim that we should understand “forgiveness” as something more narrow than it is commonly used to mean. Some people, however, might think that contemporary philosophical analyses do not include this normative claim and instead are aimed at depicting how “forgiveness” is commonly used. The concern might be that attempting to determine what “forgiveness” should mean would misfire because it would be an attempt to answer a different question.

If complex forgiveness is meant to be an analysis of what “forgiveness” does mean, then it has some serious problems. Complex forgiveness is a very poor analysis of how we actually use the term. Both dictionaries and discourses commonly fail to make the distinctions involved in complex forgiveness. We commonly use “forgiveness” to mean forgetting, excusing, and overlooking. We have already discussed one example where Jesus uses “forgiveness” in a way that cannot mean complex forgiveness. To take just more one example, consider the recent public debate over whether the American people should have forgiven President Clinton for lying about his affair with Monica Lewinski. Complex forgiveness does not give us an accurate representation of how the term was used in this debate. Consider what Calhoun’s analysis would require.

According to her theory forgiveness is "the choice not to demand that [an agent] improve. It is the choice to place respecting another's way of making sense of her life before resentfully enforcing moral standards."²³ Thus, according to Calhoun's theory of complex forgiveness, those who favored forgiveness for Clinton chose to refrain from demanding that he improve. Instead of demanding improvement, they chose to advance respecting how Clinton made sense of his life over resentfully enforcing moral standards. This analysis is such a poor representation of how forgiveness was used in the political debate that it is comical. The call to forgive Clinton was a call to overlook Clinton's transgression and not impeach him. It did not center on his moral improvement or how he made sense of his life.

If advocates of complex forgiveness were trying to give an account of what "forgiveness" means in common discourse, then they did a very poor job. But they were probably not trying to give such an account. A more charitable reading of complex forgiveness would allow contemporary philosophical analyses to include normative claims. The normative claims in the analysis of complex forgiveness, however, seem to be restricted to a single type. They are claims that we should make distinctions between "forgiving," "forgetting," "excusing," and "pardoning" because the terms can be used to describe morally distinct types of reactions. The analyses of complex forgiveness are moved by a normative concern for clarity. They are not analyses of how "forgiveness" is used, but of how it should be used so that we can be as clear as possible and avoid conflating morally distinct meanings.

Thus, a more charitable interpretation of complex forgiveness would allow us to say that "forgiveness" should mean complex forgiveness because other definitions may conflate distinct ideas. When we apply this interpretation to the Lewinski scandal we get a much more plausible claim. The advocate of complex forgiveness would argue that the American people should have debated whether to overlook Clinton's transgressions not whether to forgive them, because framing the debate in this way would have better avoided confusion.

Once we see the normative claim implicit in the analysis of complex forgiveness, however, it is not clear how we could avoid other normative concerns. If we are moved by normative concerns for clarity how could we justify ignoring concerns about the consequences of use? Suppose complex forgiveness does allow us to make a clear distinction between "forgiveness" and other moral terms, but agents who understand forgiveness as complex forgiveness consistently make moral mistakes that have tragic moral consequences. Is it still the case that we should understand "forgiveness" as complex forgiveness? We could only draw this conclusion if we believed that given a choice between clarity and tragic consequences we should choose clarity. But this is an implausible claim. We cannot restrict our normative concerns to questions of clarity.

4. Moral Problems with Complex Forgiveness

Complex forgiveness is hard to reconcile with moral guidance. It has us draw lines between what forgiveness is and what it is not in a way that creates obstacles for moral agents and impedes efforts to deal with anger. Complex forgiveness impedes virtuous forgetting, at times exacerbates anger, at other times encourages agents to overcome anger in ways that are arrogant, insulting, or unjust, and encourages a fetishistic concern for the causes of our virtue.

Philosophers reject forgetting as a virtue because they regard it as passive. Forgetting may just happen. But it is common for people to claim that forgetting is an appropriate response to anger, that we should, as the saying goes, “forgive and forget.” What do people mean when they advocate forgetting? Sometimes forgetting means to be unable to remember, but no one intends this meaning when they use the phrase “forgive and forget.” If we become intensely angry at something, it would be strange if we forgave the incident and then later could not remember that it had occurred. “So last week I was angry at you for having an extra-marital affair? . . . Really? I simply cannot recall.” Strong emotions imprint clear memories, so it would be ridiculous to tell someone “forgive and then become unable to remember why you were angry.” This is not what people mean when they say “forgive and forget,” and if this is the position philosophers are responding to then they are knocking down a strawman. What could the phrase mean? Sometimes, forgetting means an instance of failing to recall. We say “I forgot my keys,” “I forgot the appointment,” or “I had forgotten all about that” not because we were unable to remember the keys, the appointment, or the incident, but merely because we did not remember them. Here, forgetting implies a local rather than universal absence of memory. When someone says, “Forget about it,” they are suggesting something like, “Don’t dwell on it.” They do not mean, “Wipe your memory clear.”

After we give forgetting a charitable, or perhaps merely reasonable, interpretation we can see that it is compatible with forgiveness. It is part of the process of cooling down and therefore part of a common method of forgiving. To cool down, we must move our attention away from angry thoughts long enough for our acute physiological arousal to subside. When individuals are angry, they often read, watch television, drive, walk, or use some other means of moving their attention away from angry thoughts. This is an attempt to forget about an anger-provoking event while the individual is still in a state of physiological arousal. These methods of forgetting are indispensable for managing anger. In this sense, forgetting may be part of the forgiving process.

Forgetting also appears to be the typical culmination of the process of forgiveness. An act of simple forgiveness is an act of letting go of anger. If we do this whenever anger arises in our minds, then eventually the anger will burn itself out. If we forgive enough, then eventually we will be able to for-

get. This sense of forgetting is not passive. It is the consequence of a habitual response. Even when forgetting is not intentional, though, we can still see it as virtuous. The agent who forgets without intending to forget, still has refrained from nursing her grudge. She did not constantly recall the provoking incident and rehearse how she was wronged. We can praise individuals for not dwelling on it. We can praise forgetting because it does not just happen but happens to individuals who come to grips with their anger in a virtuous way.

Some people, however, might think that we should not forget. By remembering an incident, we can become sensitive to the lesson it teaches. This is often claimed in cases of great injustice, such as the cry to remember the Holocaust "Never Again!" and at times when people want us to believe that there has been a great injustice, such as "Remember the Maine!" Even in cases of great injustice, however, we certainly do not want the victims to remember their ordeals at all times. Indeed, a common psychological problem faced by traumatized individuals is that they remember their trauma too much. Their memories are painful and sometimes debilitating. It might not be good for a victim to forget their trauma completely, to never recall it or be unable to recall it. But short of inducing brain damage, how could a victim ever purposely bring this about? Agents who try to forget a great injustice may be able to limit the time they devote to remembering their trauma, but they cannot expunge it from their memory. It does seem virtuous for individuals to come to grips with traumas in a way that promotes forgetting.

If we move away from great injustices and consider cases of minor transgressions, then the case for forgetting seems even stronger. Indeed, if we remembered with some frequency all the times we felt anger, we could never give our attention to anything else. Forgetting seems virtuous in these cases also. Forgetting, in the sense of not dwelling, is necessary for us to live fully in the present, and it should be seen as the culmination of the virtue of forgiveness.

For Aristotle, a virtue is a character trait or disposition that enables individuals to move toward their ultimate end. Virtues enable individuals to achieve *eudaimonia*. If we look at virtues in this way, then it is possible for a disposition that we believe to be virtuous to be self-defeating. We might believe that a disposition promotes some aspect of *eudaimonia* but discover that individuals who have the disposition are, on the whole, frustrated in their attempts to achieve that aspect of it. When a disposition frustrates the attempts of individuals to achieve the very aspect of *eudaimonia* that we thought the disposition promoted, we can call the disposition self-defeating.

To see how complex forgiveness might be self-defeating we must first ask what the advocates of complex forgiveness think the disposition helps us achieve. Because advocates of complex forgiveness may give different answers to this question, it might be helpful to begin with a discussion of a sin-

gle author. Robert Roberts suggests that complex forgiveness leads us to reestablish benevolent and harmonious fellowship. Thus, we might see benevolent and harmonious fellowship as an aspect of the human good, and we might see the disposition to complexly forgive as a way of reestablishing the bonds when they are broken. If we accept Robert's account, then complex forgiveness would be self-defeating, if individuals who are disposed to complexly forgive do a poorer job, on the whole, of promoting benevolent and harmonious fellowship than those who do not have the disposition to complexly forgive. There are good reasons to believe this is the case.

What is an individual disposed to do if an individual is disposed to complexly forgive? Suppose that Jerry notices that he is angry with his friend Paul. He asks himself, "Should I forgive Paul?" According to complex forgiveness, this would only be possible if Paul wronged Jerry and Paul was responsible. This would only be possible if Paul's actions were not justified and Paul did not have an excuse. When Jerry notices his anger, he is not sure whether he can forgive. What should he do? It seems that he should ask himself two questions: "Was Paul justified?" and "Did Paul have an excuse?" When individuals who are disposed to complexly forgive are angry, they are disposed to review the reasons they have for being angry to determine whether forgiveness is appropriate. There is more to the disposition than this, but this is where the agent must begin.

This disposition often has unfortunate consequences. Rehearsing the reasons to be angry often prolongs and intensifies anger. Psychologists Dianne Tice and Roy Baumeister describe the relationship between rehearsing reasons to be angry and the escalation of anger in terms of associative networks. They state: "By ruminating on a grievance, one may discover additional implications, find links to past grievances, or reframe the event in a broader context of offense and injustice, and all of these may prolong and increase the anger."²⁴ When we ask ourselves whether our anger is justified, we may make associations with other instances where we think we have been wronged.

For the practical purpose of managing our anger, Tice and Baumeister do not suggest that we should review reasons why the action was wrong and why another agent is responsible, but instead suggest that we distract ourselves from angry thoughts as quickly as possible. In fact, psychological studies show that the practical guidance of complex forgiveness is actually the primary method used by individuals who intentionally try to prolong their anger.²⁵ When agents want to continue being angry, they purposefully review reasons why they believe they were the victims of responsible wrongdoing. Thus, if we are disposed to complexly forgive we will begin by avoiding the measures most effective for management of the mood, and instead take measures that may initially intensify and prolong anger.

Most people would find it strange to learn that individuals who are disposed to forgive will initially be more likely to be angry than individuals who

are not disposed to forgive. Some people, however, might suggest that this is not a serious problem. Advocates of complex forgiveness do not claim that anger is always bad. Such individuals are angry at responsible wrongdoing, and we might think that initially it is right to be angry at responsible wrongdoing. In addition, the individuals who are disposed to forgive would be disposed to let go of the anger at a later time. Thus, even though individuals who are disposed to forgive may have more initial anger, we might not consider that a problem if they reestablish benevolent and harmonious fellowship in the end.

But there are several reasons why we should see short run effects of complex forgiveness on anger as a serious problem. If the process of forgiveness intensifies anger, then the job of letting go of anger will be more difficult, and we would expect some cases where individuals will fail. There will be some cases where individuals would have been able to let go of their anger if they had controlled it in its early stages, but in trying to achieve complex forgiveness, they will undergo a process that escalates anger beyond their control. By initially causing anger to intensify, complex forgiveness may sometimes overwhelm moral agents and leave them lost within their anger. Tice and Baumeister mention this as a serious possibility if during reflection the agent should associate a current grievance with past ones. They state: "The core issue is how the person responds to an anger-provoking stimulus. If the person confines his or her reactions to that stimulus, it may be relatively easy to control. In contrast, if the person quickly begins to think about other anger-producing events such as past grievances, the anger state may spiral out of control and persist indefinitely."²⁶ Unfortunately, this is exactly what people often do when they reflect on whether they have been responsibly wronged. Consequently, the process of complex forgiveness will cause some individuals to become so angry that they will be unable to let go of their negative feelings.

Even if an agent can overcome his anger with the process of complex forgiveness, the fact that complex forgiveness will prolong and intensify his initial anger is an independent problem. Anger causes problems with health and relationships. It may lead individuals to perform violent acts. The problems may occur in the span of time in which complex forgiveness prolongs anger and may be long. Sometimes people report that the process of forgiveness takes years or even decades. A strategy that prolongs or intensifies the process may have serious negative consequences, even if complex forgiveness should work as its advocates envision.

Individuals are likely to make poor judgments of having been responsibly wronged. We are bad judges in cases where we believe we have been wronged, and complex forgiveness requires us to become judges in our own case. Complex forgiveness requires us to determine whether or not we have been victims of responsible wrongdoing before we can forgive, and that requires us to judge how badly we have been treated and whether someone else is responsi-

ble for our suffering. Moreover, the problem of bias is accentuated in the case of complex forgiveness, because it requires us to be judges in our own case when we are angry. The physiological arousal associated with anger is cognitively debilitating. Horace conveyed this idea when he said “anger is short-lived madness,” and modern psychologists have made similar conclusions.²⁷ Dolf Zillmann, for example, argues that extreme anger results in a “cognitive deficit” and concludes that “constructive resolutions of conflict cannot be achieved with individuals who seethe with anger.”²⁸ Moreover, even when we are not caught in extreme anger our judgment may be affected. Studies show that minor levels of physiological arousal can significantly affect retaliatory behavior.²⁹ Complex forgiveness requires us to make biased judgments. The bias is tilted toward the conclusion that we have been wronged. Consequently, complex forgiveness would have us engage in a process that often leads to a biased conclusion that we have been victimized.

The likelihood that individuals will draw biased conclusions of having been responsibly wronged has significant implications. It suggests that the process of complex forgiveness will lead individuals to either hold on to the worst kind of anger or to let go of anger in a way that has negative side effects. When individuals ask themselves if they can forgive, they will often incorrectly conclude that they have been responsibly wronged. There are two possibilities at this point. The agent may decide not to forgive, even though he now knows that he can. In this case, he decides to hold on to his anger at someone who is not responsible for doing him any wrong. This is a tragic case of anger, both for the person who is angry and the object of his anger. Besides the psychological harms involved, a case like this could easily lead to aggressive reprisals.

Alternatively, the agent may decide to forgive. This kind of forgiveness, however, produces some serious negative consequences. The agent has decided to let go of anger at someone that she incorrectly holds responsible for wronging her. When we look at this kind of case, it is easy to see why forgiveness is sometimes thought to be arrogant, insulting, and unjust. The agent appears arrogant for making the judgment of wrongdoing, and the act of forgiveness in this case includes an inaccurate, insulting, and unjust message of moral wrongdoing. This problem does not come from the agent letting go of her anger, but from the requirements that complex forgiveness places on the agent in order for her to determine whether or not she can forgive. It would not be arrogant, insulting, or unjust for the agent to let go of anger toward someone who has not responsibly wronged her. There would be no problem with her practicing simple forgiveness. It is only arrogant, insulting and unjust when she forgives in a manner that insinuates the other person’s guilt. We know that if individuals follow the counsels of complex forgiveness, they will often incorrectly attribute responsibility. Complex forgiveness, therefore, allows agents to try to overcome their anger in a way that will often be arrogant, insulting, and unjust.

These implications give us good reason to think that the individual who is disposed to complexly forgive has a disposition that will work against benevolent and harmonious fellowship. Thus, if we accept Robert’s account of the aims of forgiveness we should consider it self-defeating. Other accounts of the aims of forgiveness would probably have the same implication, but we need not look at them individually. Even if the implications were somehow consistent with the aims of complex forgiveness, they would remain serious negative side effects. Either way we have good reason to reject complex forgiveness as an account of the virtue of forgiveness.

The last claim concerning complex forgiveness is that forgiveness only occurs if individuals let go of anger for specific reasons. The broadest example of this is Murphy’s claim that forgiveness only occurs when individuals let go of resentment for moral reasons. He gives the following example to intuitively support his conclusion:

You have wronged me deeply, and I deeply resent you for it. The resentment eats away at my peace of mind – I lose sleep, snap at my friends, become less effective at my work, and so on. In short, my resentment so dominates my mental life that I am being made miserable. In order to regain my peace of mind, I go to a behavior-modification therapist to have my resentment extinguished. (Let us suppose there are such techniques.) Have I forgiven you? Surely not – at least not in any sense where forgiveness is supposed to be a moral virtue. For my motivation here was not moral at all; it was purely *selfish*: the desire to promote my own mental health.³⁰

Murphy seems wrong when he claims that concerns for our own mental health are not moral motivations. They appear to be moral in the sense that they are aimed at the best consequences, in the sense that they are part of human flourishing, and in the sense that they would have us treat humanity in ourselves with due respect. But for the purpose of argument, let us assume that Murphy is correct when he claims that his motivation for overcoming his resentment in this case is not moral.

Should we be concerned with Murphy’s motivation for beginning his therapy? Consider a slightly different case than the one described by Murphy. Imagine that my peace of mind is also plagued by resentment and that I seek therapy to extinguish it. Instead of using behavior modification to overcome my resentment, however, the therapist more realistically helps me to develop compassion and benevolence for the object of my resentment. Should we call this forgiveness? My motive to begin the therapy was not moral, but through the process of therapy I developed moral intentions toward the individual I resented. Does our concern about moral motivation extend to what began the process of overcoming resentment, or are we merely worried about what motivations I have in the end?

In Murphy's example he does not talk about what motivations he has after he overcomes his resentment, only the motives that cause him to try to overcome it. Consequently, it would seem that Murphy would deny that my overcoming resentment was a matter of forgiveness. We should, however, reject this position. There is no good reason to judge a motive in reference to previous motives that may have caused it to arise. Imagine a Kantian example. Charlie decides not to lie to his mother because he believes it fails to respect her humanity. He believes that lying fails to respect her humanity because he was convinced by Kant's arguments. He read Kant in order to get an A in his introduction to ethics class. He wanted to get an A because he thought that it would help him get a good job and make a lot of money. From a Kantian perspective, Charlie's decision to read Kant was not morally praiseworthy, but that would not detract from the moral worth of his decision not to lie.

Compare Charlie's case to Dan's. Dan also decided not to lie to his mother after reading Kant, but he studied Kant because he wanted to perfect his talents. From a Kantian perspective, Dan's decision to study Kant is more praiseworthy than Charlie's, but Charlie's decision not to lie is just as praiseworthy as Dan's. Charlie's self-centered motivation to read Kant will not infect all future decisions that have some causal connection to it. Consequently, we should not judge a motive by considering some previous motive that may have caused it.

If benevolence and compassion are praiseworthy motives, then any case where an individual lets go of her anger by cultivating benevolence would be a case where an individual lets go of her anger by cultivating a moral motivation. This is significant, since the process of letting anger go will typically employ compassion or benevolence as a means. We will have a difficult time letting go of anger unless we try to cultivate compassion toward the object of our anger. Therefore, we can conclude that at least most cases of letting anger go involve a moral motive.

We still, however, have to answer Murphy's original case. He does not mention what motivation he has after he overcomes his resentment. Instead of feeling benevolent toward you, he might feel neutral. Despite this possibility, there is good reason to believe that his mere overcoming of resentment is enough to morally improve his motivation. By overcoming resentment, Murphy has overcome his negative feeling toward you. This alone suggests that the movement away from resentment is a movement toward benevolence. A neutral regard is better than a negative regard. Second, by overcoming resentment, Murphy will be more benevolent toward others. When we are angry our bodies release the hormone glucocorticoid which puts us in a state of readiness for retaliation.³¹ We are more likely to view the actions of others as a threat, and thus view them less benevolently. Murphy implicitly recognizes this process in his case. When he describes the problems he has with resentment, he says "I . . . snap at my friends."³² Overcoming his anger toward you

will help him stop snapping at friends and be more benevolent toward them. This is not a unique feature of Murphy’s hypothetical case. The physiological arousal associated with anger makes it more likely that we will see the actions of others as threats. Anger impedes benevolence. Consequently, any case of letting go of anger ends in an improvement of moral motivation. Even an individual who begins a process of forgiveness for selfish reasons will end up with an improvement in how she regards others. The process of simple forgiveness necessarily changes our motivations for the better.

Advocates of complex forgiveness other than Murphy are vulnerable to similar criticisms. When we let go of anger, we end up morally improving our motivation. Any attempt to restrict forgiveness to letting go of anger for specific reasons will ignore morally significant cases. Consequently, forgiveness should be viewed as letting go of anger, regardless of the reason an agent has for doing so. It is often right for us to show concern about intentions, but there is no purpose to judging why agents begin a process that is designed to improve, and succeeds in improving, their intentions. Our only concern in the process of forgiveness should be with what works.

5. Conclusion

Anger is a difficult but important emotion to control, and forgiveness is the most obvious virtue to help us control it. The analysis of forgiveness advocated by contemporary philosophers, however, has a host of problems. It mischaracterizes and undervalues forgetting. It encourages moral agents to think in a way that will impede their attempts to control anger. It causes agents to let go of anger in a way that is arrogant, insulting, and unjust. The contemporary philosophical analysis of forgiveness must be rethought. If people who employ the concept are led into a variety of moral failings, then we need to either question what we mean by “forgiveness” or determine if we think it is a virtue. Since most people believe that forgiveness is a virtue more strongly than they believe that complex forgiveness is the correct account of forgiveness, we should abandon complex forgiveness. Thus, we are led to an alternative analysis of forgiveness as simple forgiveness. Simple forgiveness allows us to claim that any act of letting anger go is an act of forgiveness. This analysis, implicit in some Buddhist writings, may be the most helpful way of thinking about the virtue of forgiveness, and hence what we should mean by the term “forgiveness.”³³

Notes

1. Dianne Tice and Roy Baumeister, “Controlling Anger: Self-Induced Emotion Change,” in Daniel Wegner and James Pennebaker eds., *Handbook of Mental Control* 5 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1993), p. 397.

2. Paul Hughes, "What is Involved in Forgiving?" *Journal of Value Inquiry* 27 (1993), p. 333.
3. Jeffrie Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 15.
4. Trudy Govier, "Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 36 (January, 1999), p. 60.
5. Aurel Kolnai, *Ethics, Value and Reality* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978), p. 219.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
7. Margaret Holmgren, "Self-Forgiveness and Responsible Moral Agency," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 32 (1998), p. 75.
8. Joanna North, "Wrongdoing and Forgiveness," *Philosophy* 62 (1987), p. 502.
9. Murphy and Hampton, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
10. Margaret Holmgren, "Forgiveness and the Intrinsic Value of Persons," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (October, 1993), p. 341.
11. Robert Roberts, "Forgivingness," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32 (October, 1995), p. 296; Norvin Richards, "Forgiveness," *Ethics* 99 (1988), p. 84; Cheshire Calhoun, "Changing One's Heart," *Ethics* 103 (October, 1992), p. 90; Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 335; North, *op. cit.*, p. 502.
12. Murphy and Hampton, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
13. Richards, *op. cit.*, p. 79.
14. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 297.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 303.
16. Calhoun, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
18. Sharon Salzberg, *Loving Kindness* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), pp. 76 & 77.
19. Sharon Salzberg, *A Heart as Wide as the World* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), p. 49.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 161.
21. Murphy and Hampton, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967).
23. Calhoun, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
24. Tice and Baumeister, *op. cit.*, p. 405.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 402.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 404 & 405.
27. Horace, in Augustus Wilkins, ed., *The Epistles of Horace* (London: MacMillan, 1929), p. 105.
28. Zillmann, *op. cit.*, p. 385.
29. See, Dolf Zillmann, Aaron Katcher, and Barry Milavsky, "Excitation Transfer from Physical Exercise to Subsequent Aggressive Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 8 (1972); John Ramirez, Jennings Bryant, and Dolf Zillmann, "Effects of Erotica on Retaliatory Behavior as a Function of Level of Prior Provocation," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 43 (1982); and Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, "Effect of Intensification of Annoyance through Unrelated Residual Excitation on Substantially Delayed Hostile Behavior," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 15 (1979).
30. Murphy and Hampton, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
31. Dolf Zillmann, "Mental Control of Angry Aggression," in Daniel Wegner and James Pennebaker eds., *Handbook of Mental Control* 5 (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1993), p. 373.
32. Murphy and Hampton, *op. cit.*, p. 23.
33. I would like to thank Miriam Boleyn-Fitzgerald, Jon Cogburn, and John Whittaker for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.