RaY

Research at the University of York St John

ON THE AMBIGUITY OF FORGIVENESS

Stuart Jesson

York St John University

Abstract

This article highlights some of the difficulties that accompany any attempt to articulate an understanding of forgiveness that is at once coherent, just and desirable. Through a close examination of Charles Griswold's book *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, I suggest that there are good reasons to think that forgiveness is intrinsically ambiguous, both conceptually and morally. I argue that there is an underlying tension between the concerns that shape the definition, and those that are invoked when affirming the good of forgiveness. Using Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, I then provide some commentary concerning this ambiguity and make some brief suggestions about how this ambiguity might be theologically fruitful.

Introduction

Over recent decades, the topic of forgiveness has become an important topic in a number of different areas, and for a variety of reasons. Firstly, a series of articles and books treating forgiveness as an explicit topic have been slowly accumulating within Anglophone moral philosophy. These include analytic examinations of the logical coherence of the concept (see e.g. Kolnai 1973-4; McGary 1989; Hieronymi 2001; Allais 2008), descriptions of forgiveness as a speech act (Haber 1991), as well as treatments influenced by the resurgence of virtue ethics (Smith 1997; Griswold 2007). Closely related to this is a recent surge of interest in the role of forgiveness in public life, prompted to some extent by the prominence of the language of forgiveness in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Here forgiveness is a crucial junction at which moral, political, social and religious concerns intersect, and a matter of interest for public intellectuals (e.g. Govier 2002; Holloway 2002; Murphy 2003). Equally important is the attention given to the subject by Jacques Derrida in two essays published towards the end of his life, as part of his exploration of themes such as gift, justice and responsibility, which have in turn been utilised by theological

thinkers in diverse ways (Derrida 2001; Milbank; Caputo 2006). Alongside these currents there has, more generally, been an increased theological focus upon forgiveness, as a number of theologians have taken the popular interest in forgiveness and related issues as an opportunity to demonstrate the relevance and coherence of theology in the public sphere. Whether it is through interaction - with economics (Bell 2007), psychology (Watts and Gulliford 2004), reconciliation and conflict resolution (Helmick and Peterson 2001) - or as a theological topic in its own right (Jones 2005; Bash 2007), the subject of forgiveness has become one way in which theology might play an active part in public discourse. This diverse and steadily accumulating body of work suggests that the notion occupies an important and perhaps problematic position in contemporary ethical reflection and public discourse.

Simply put, my interest here is with the way that forgiveness is ambiguous, both conceptually and morally. These two ambiguities are closely entwined, since any attempt to bring some conceptual order to the profusion of acts and attitudes that may go by the name "forgiveness" involves some level of moral judgement, as I hope to explain shortly. We might well distinguish between what is and is not forgiveness in part by judging whether the supposed "forgiveness" is really a veil over something more self-interested, cowardly or convenient, as the case may be. My interest in this article is with the significance of this ambiguity. Should it be regarded as the unfortunate consequence of a poorly defined concept, or might there be deeper significance hidden here? For the sake of clarity, I can state at the outset that my answers are "no" and "yes", respectively; forgiveness *is* ambiguous, and there is something important about this.

The following discussion is an attempt to justify this conclusion. I will try to show that a certain amount of moral ambiguity necessarily accompanies forgiveness, insofar as forgiveness involves trust, which is risky, and difficult to justify in advance. If it is the case that the trust expressed through forgiveness is part of what makes forgiveness a part of human flourishing, then it is also part of what makes forgiveness problematic. Firstly, through a close analysis of the contours and inner tensions of one particular treatment of forgiveness, I will explore the way in which the attempt to present forgiveness without moral ambiguity affects, adversely, the shape the concept takes. Although there are many attempts to provide a comprehensive or direct philosophical treatment of the subject, this chapter's restrictive focus on one particular thinker is deliberate, because the intention is to observe what happens in the attempt

to reason with forgiveness. The aim here is to witness the dynamics of the engagement, in the hope that this will shed some light on the particular challenge that forgiveness presents. Secondly, I will use Charles Taylor's recent book *A Secular Age* to explore the significance of the difficulties encountered in discussing the meaning and value of forgiveness publicly. Finally, I will make a few suggestions about how the ambiguity of forgiveness may be theologically significant.

Forgiveness and Moral Discernment

The problem that I am interested in can be illustrated through a fairly trivial example. Suppose I approach a co-worker and begin to complain about our boss. I accuse her of consistently unfair treatment of her employers, and suggest that together we approach her so as to voice our concerns. My co-worker is reluctant to participate in my indignant protest. He tells me that my boss is over-worked, under-paid, and under considerable pressure from her superiors, not to mention the stress of being a mother of four; he then adds that I should probably be "more forgiving". I suspect that my fellow-worker is either ambitious and eager for approval, or simply afraid of confrontation, and his affirmation of "forgiveness" to be either a tactic of self-advancement or else a veil for cowardice. Either way, I conclude that the term is in need of some clarification and care over its use if it is to be at all helpful. I decide that in this case we cannot, and should not, "forgive" our boss, because her behaviour has not been named and challenged; to simply "forgive" would, in fact, be a disservice to others who may be suffering as a result of our boss's behaviour. Whatever it is that is done apart from these steps would not be forgiveness, however piously the word may be invoked.

I would like to make two observations about the example above, which will be explored further in what follows. Firstly, in this case above, it is obvious that the task of conceptual clarification is motivated by moral concern: I only begin to sift through the ambiguities of the concept because it begins to seem as though in this situation it would be somehow wrong or morally weak to forgive, and this seems counter-intuitive; forgiveness is supposed to be good. More than this, my moral unease with my co-worker's affirmation of forgiveness helps to shape the process of refining the concept; I want a concept that cannot so easily be used in the way that my co-worker uses it, or, put differently, one that can be more easily defended against the various charges that may be put against it, in this case that it can too-easily be a veil for

cowardice or a tactic of calculating ambition. The second will only become clear in what follows, but can be briefly stated here. It seems that my reluctance to "forgive" our boss is motivated by a concern for truth, clarity, fair treatment, accountability, and so on. These concerns may well give me a reason to say that in certain situations forgiveness is inappropriate or inauthentic, but they do not really explain my belief that forgiveness should be affirmed in others. The words that my co-worker threw back at me pointed to the way that forgiveness expresses generosity of spirit and demonstrates an understanding of our human imperfection. I would probably not say, however, that I value forgiveness *because* I value truth, clarity, and fairness. It seems that through the process of discernment that the example above illustrates an important difference becomes visible between the sort of concerns that shape the process of defining forgiveness, and the sort of concerns that might lead one to affirm or value forgiveness in the first place. The question of how these concerns interact will be explored further below.

Charles Griswold: Resentment and the Conditions of Forgiveness

These issues will be explored further through an examination of Charles Griswold's book, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration,* which is perhaps the most thorough direct philosophical treatment of the topic to date.[1]

Like most philosophical discussions of the subject, Griswold's discussion begins with an attempt to establish exactly what forgiveness is.[2] For Griswold, the key question that needs to be addressed is of how forgiveness is related to resentment. Although one might initially suppose that forgiveness necessarily conflicts with resentment, on Griswold's account there is no necessary clash between the two: if one gets resentment right, one will find oneself able to forgive (when, that is, it would be appropriate to do so). For Griswold, the simplest way of describing forgiveness is as "the letting go of resentment for moral reasons" (Griswold 2007, 40).[3] This description qualifies forgiveness in two ways. Firstly, since resentment itself is explored very thoroughly, and defined clearly, it qualifies what kinds of emotion forgiveness can be thought to supersede or let go. Forgiveness is not concerned simply with the giving up of hostility or anger in general, since these may be felt regardless of whether there is any judgement associated with them. Rather, forgiveness is the letting go of resentment; an emotion that is specifically concerned

with judgement, and which, in its time and place, is both beneficial and justified. Secondly, and more importantly, to forgive is to let go of resentment for particular reasons, and under particular circumstances: "for moral reasons". One does not forgive if resentment is diminished or disappears for reasons that have little to do with one's judgement of a particular action; for example, if one simply ceases to regard someone as worthy of one's attention, or if - out of concern for one's own well-being - one is able to alter one's emotional state through therapy, or through constant distraction. These two conditions together mean that authentic forgiveness is the embodiment of a nuanced moral sensitivity which includes resentment *and* the letting-go of resentment: if one is initially resentful in the wrong way, one does not forgive; if one *gives up* one's resentment in the wrong way, one does not forgive.

Griswold begins with the understanding of resentment given in Bishop Butler's sermons: resentment is an "inward witness to virtue" (Griswold 2007, 19-37). It is a reaction aroused by the perception of unwarranted harm, one that includes a judgement concerning fairness, that is aimed at the author of an action, that instinctively protests and looks for some kind of due punishment or revenge (Griswold 2007, 39). Resentment is how a virtuous person feels and thinks when injured: to feel the right kind of anger for the right kinds of reason. Given this positive estimation, the crucial question for Griswold is why one's tendency to be resentful under certain circumstances should be tampered with. If resentment, when properly understood, and not subject to excess, is a moral response, why would there be a case for letting go of it? Griswold's answer is simple: "[f]orgiveness does not attempt to get rid of warranted resentment. Rather, it follows from the recognition that the resentment is no longer warranted. And what would provide the warrant can be nothing other than the right reasons" (Griswold 2007, 43). In other words, forgiveness comes into play when the work of resentment is done. On Griswold's account, one would be letting go of resentment for the right reasons only if the following conditions had been fulfilled by the wrongdoer: condemnation of their own behaviour; acceptance of responsibility for it; the experience and expression of regret; commitment – demonstrated through action if necessary – to become a different sort of person; demonstration that they understand the damage they have done; and provision of an account of how it was they came to do whatever it was that they did (Griswold 2007, 49-50).[4] To learn how to forgive, then, one would have to learn how to discern the presence of these criteria, and of course, this is not easy, since contrition

can be faked for the sake of convenience, and even the most genuine remorse may be mixed with a certain amount of self-centred regret (Griswold 2007, 59). More than this, one would have to have a disposition that includes the willingness to give forgiveness where these conditions are present, and the severity to withhold it where they are not.

Along with a set of conditions that would need to be met by the victim, these conditions make up "paradigmatic forgiveness"; a case of fully realised forgiveness (Griswold 2007, 113-7). Without a change of heart - however incomplete - as a prior condition, forgiveness cannot be distinguished from various morally suspect responses to wrongdoing - resignation, condonation, excuse, justification, etc. In fact, to "forgive" without any reference to a change of heart on the part of the wrongdoer is to neglect their potential, to fail "to hold him or her to his or her best self" (Griswold 2008, 306). Forgiveness has to pass through judgement, and since it is a fundamentally interpersonal affair, *both* parties must pass through.

So far, then, we can note a number of things. Firstly, Griswold, along with many others, is concerned to point out that resentment is an important part of the moral landscape, and a sign of our sensitivity to injustice. Secondly, this concern is linked to a suspicion that certain ways of affirming forgiveness put this insight in danger, insofar as if one were to encourage the giving up of resentment, one might appear to thereby judge the resentful person, or imply that resentment is not a proper moral response in the first place ("you should be more forgiving!"). The real danger, from this point of view, is not simply that in isolated instances forgiveness might imply an improper and perhaps damaging, surrender of resentment (the attempt to give up resentment before resentment has had chance to do its work, so to speak). The real danger is more that of an on-going commitment to forgive, or of a well-established affirmation that forgiveness is in general a good to be sought, because it is in this way that the value of resentment may gradually be lost sight of. Thirdly, it seems as though the concern to protect the insight concerning the intrinsic moral value of resentment plays a determining role in the process of forming the concept of forgiveness. Just as in the example above about the unfair boss, it seems that certain concerns about the possible implications of affirming forgiveness are dominant in shaping the account of forgiveness that is given. In this way, it seems that Griswold proposes a conception of forgiveness from which risk has been eliminated, and which is without any essential inner conflict. The assumption here seems to be that when

forgiveness is understood as "the giving up of (no longer warranted) resentment for moral reasons" its virtue should appear clearly, and without ambiguity. It is this assumption that I wish to challenge in what follows.

Affirming Forgiveness

I previously made two observations about the process of clarifying one's understanding of forgiveness. The first was that certain moral concerns both motivate and direct the process. The exposition above demonstrates the way in which this operates in Griswold's work. The second was that these concerns may be quite different in character from the reasons one has for affirming or valuing forgiveness in the first place. We need, then, to ask why Griswold holds forgiveness to be valuable. Another way of putting this question is to ask what it is that makes forgiveness worth all this philosophical labour? Given the way the concept is liable to slip off into morally dubious regions (lax tolerance on one side; irrelevance on the other), why should it be retained, let alone affirmed? For Griswold, the answer is found in the way that forgiveness expresses in particular circumstances a number of different but related virtues (Griswold 2007, 70). Forgiveness is underpinned by the ideals of "responsibility, respect, self-governance, truth, mutual accountability, friendship, and growth" (Griswold 2007, 213). As we have seen, forgiveness is in some sense actually an act of judgement, in that when one forgives one judges not only the wrongness of a particular act, but also the character of the wrongdoer's remorse, repentance, apology, etc. Part of the reason that it is good to forgive, then, is that to do so is to express morally nuanced understanding and judgement.

However, Griswold also gives other, very different, reasons for valuing forgiveness, which show that on his account there is still a sense in which forgiveness occupies its own unique place in our conceptual landscape, and so should be actively affirmed for its own sake. What do we gain, then, by speaking of forgiveness that we could not gain simply through speaking of justice, accuracy and the importance of responding appropriately? Although not clearly spelt out, the sense is that forgiveness expresses a level of compassion towards the frailty of "embodied, affective, and vulnerable creatures", a compassion that goes along with our reconciliation with imperfection (Griswold 2007, 19 and 110). The emphasis throughout the book on the dangers of perfectionistic modes of ethics, which tend to give rise to an aspiration to leave the realm of human interaction and openness (the "circle of sympathy"),

suggests that for Griswold, forgiveness is a part of our acceptance of our condition - an acceptance not always manifest in the formation and communication of ideals. Despite the moral concern that motivates and shapes the process of marking out an acceptable space for the concept, Griswold is also aware of the role of forgiveness in supporting aspects of human existence that exceed the moral horizon: friendships and intimate family relationships; the actual living of life, rather than any particular goal or duty.

Essentially, then, although forgiveness is defended and justified through a very careful process of definition, it is actively commended in a rather different way, and for different reasons. The continuing presence of resentment may damage one's capacity for love, compassion and sympathy for others. To forgive is also to exhibit the belief that a future of renewal and growth is possible (Griswold 2007, 70). In fact, Griswold has stated subsequently he wishes the link between forgiveness and the possibility for transformation was brought out more strongly in the book (Griswold 2008, 306). Despite these comments, the tone of the book, on the whole, is much more focused on the care with which the concept must be handled, the way that abuses must be foreseen and headed off, the sense that forgiveness needs to be very well hemmed in, and qualified, if it is to be of any use. The concern that shapes the account is the concern for security: how can we understand forgiveness so that the practice does not become corrupt or complicit with injustice, or a failure of nerve in the face of moral outrage? But the *appeal* of forgiveness, the thing that means we need forgiveness, rather than simply fairness, or nuanced understanding – and the reason, importantly, that one would want to be forgiven - is something to do with the way that it embodies trust and vulnerability, the willingness to hope, acceptance of the imperfect. What Griswold does not explore in any depth, though, is the way there may be conflict between the two, and whether there may be a more basic difficulty in reconciling - in life - the capacity for love, compassion and sympathy with an unyielding vigilance towards injustice. But this is, surely, a crucial question, especially with regard to the way that forgiveness expresses trust. At what point does our willingness to trust compromise our concern for justice? How do we measure the inevitable risk that we take whenever we trust another? Put differently, how do we deal with the danger that accompanies our virtues?

It is important to note here that although Griswold, when defining forgiveness, focuses primarily on a discrete act of forgiveness, the sense of caution that pervades

his book has more to do with the implications of an on-going commitment to forgiveness, and of the expression of this commitment in public: what does a "forgiving" life produce, encourage, or permit, in oneself or in the life of a community? Griswold states that forgiveness expresses a hopeful commitment to certain values:

> Forgiveness rests in part, I argued above, on trust that the projected narratives about the offender, as well as oneself, will become true. Forgiveness is, so to speak, a vote for the victory of such values as respect, growth and renewal, harmony of self and reconciliation, affection and love. ... Acting on the basis of these ideals may also have a constitutive character, such that treating oneself and the other as capable of ethical growth may in itself help to promote that growth. (Griswold 2007, 71)

However, what this statement also highlights is the way in which forgiveness necessarily eludes the kind of justification that Griswold attempts to provide through his careful definition. If forgiveness is a "vote" for certain values, and has a (potentially) constitutive character, then it is, by necessity, a very risky enterprise. This riskiness makes the conditions that are supposed to define the act of forgiveness far less clear-cut than Griswold seems to suppose, insofar as they all depend to some degree on a judgement about a possible future. The crucial distinction - between warranted and unwarranted resentment - is only visible after a judgement concerning the future. In order to assess the authenticity of another's remorse, resolve, understanding, commitment, etc., one must anticipate their future behaviour. Or rather, this is part of what one would actually be doing, if one was "judging" the authenticity of remorse, repentance, resolve, etc. If someone has betrayed me, then in testing the authenticity of their repentance, I am test how realistic it is to extrapolate from the present moment to a future scenario in which it *would* be wise to trust them. My resentment will only seem to be "no longer warranted" if their repentance seems to be genuine, but their resentment will only seem to be genuine if I am no longer compelled to imagine them repeating their hostility towards me, or if this possible future does not feel likely (see Sussman 2005, 85-107). If my betrayer's repentance does not seem to be genuine, it will – at least in part – be because it is too difficult for

me to anticipate or imagine a future in which they are loyal. But our capacity for this kind of anticipation, imagination or expectation is not, surely, a matter of simple assessment. In these kinds of situation our evaluation of another is intimately bound up, one way or another, with a much more basic sense of our own vulnerability, our on-going response to our continual exposure to others, and this sense will be inseparable from our own particular histories. In other words, the judgement we use to discern whether we should forgive is already intimately bound up with trust, but trust cannot be subject to the same kind of assessment that this attempt to define forgiveness aims seems to rest on. We cannot, surely, *know* whether treating oneself and the other as capable of growth will help to promote that growth, or whether our "vote" for respect and renewal will lead to victory or not. One may vote, in trust, for moral growth and yet produce further moral decline, just as one may vote for the Liberal Democrats, and find that one has helped to put the Conservatives in power.

What follows from all this is that the point at which resentment becomes "no longer warranted" is not a point that could be located objectively, but must be judged. And we do in fact tend to accuse each other of making these sorts of judgements badly: trusting those who should not have been trusted, giving second chances where they were not warranted, anticipating reform when we should have expected continued failure, and so on. The difficulty here seems to be that on Griswold's account, if one is to forgive well, one must know what to condemn and what to accept, as well as how to shift from condemnation and censure to acceptance and trust, and when. Very little is said, however, about the immense difficulty of doing this. One can, on the one hand, be too easily reconciled with imperfection and tolerate injustice; one can, on the other, demand, impossibly, that imperfection be eradicated and become intolerant of weakness as a result. It would seem that in order to assess the value of forgiveness one already has to know where to "draw the line" between those imperfections with which one might justly reconcile oneself, and the violations and shortcomings which should only be protested and changed. One has to already know which imperfections to accept and which to reject, or put differently, one has to already know how to identify "imperfection". But a large part of the difficulty of moral judgement and discourse stems from the fact that we do not "know" this; it is this that we are trying to get to know.

It would seem, then, that Griswold's forgiveness is a tool that only those who are at a fairly advanced stage of moral development would be able to use. Forgiveness

would seem to be a secondary moral exercise, only really appropriate for the well-practised. Although space does not permit a thorough discussion of this issue, there is an important point to be made here about the difference between the forgiveness that Griswold describes and the concept that emerges out of the disparate sayings and parables in the gospels. Although, as Gregory Jones notes, an important difference between secular philosophical and theological accounts of forgiveness is found in the way that, theologically, forgiveness is meaningful as part of a much broader narrative of transformation, involving concrete communal practices through which to "unlearn sin (Jones 1995, 207-225), it may be that the more important difference concerns the way that in the gospels, the command to forgive goes along with the sense that the gospel message is not for the righteous, but for sinners. The command to forgive is assumed to be the kind of command that sinful people can obey, rather than an exercise of morally confident judgement. In fact, this is one of the paradoxes of the Christian understanding of forgiveness: forgiveness is not just for sinners to receive, but for sinners to give (insofar as one's own need for forgiveness is one important reason to forgive), whilst at the same time it is claimed that to be generous to the unworthy is to *become* perfect as the Father is perfect.[5] The practice of forgiveness is somehow both a sign of our morally weakened condition and one aspect of the perfection towards which one strives. For Griswold, in contrast, forgiveness is defined so that it is only accessible to those who are already able to judge well: one could only possibly hope to forgive if one was already righteous.

Forgiveness and "the Maximal Demand"

I hope to have shown in the preceding analysis that there are important difficulties in the attempt to present a refined conceptual account of forgiveness in which the goodness of forgiveness is unambiguously apparent. I have also tried to show that there may be a discrepancy between the considerations that are undergone in coming to an understanding of what forgiveness is and is not, and the value that forgiveness is thought to possess. Through an appropriation of the conceptual framework introduced in Charles Taylor's *A secular age*, I would now like to comment on the difficulties highlighted above, and show why forgiveness may be better thought of as an *intrinsically* ambiguous part of the moral landscape, and how this ambiguity may itself be part of its value.

At the heart of the sweeping account of secular (post)modernity that Taylor

attempts is a description of an ineradicable tension within the Christian account of human life, a tension which exerts a greater and greater pressure as secularity advances and develops. On the one hand, there is the emphasis on ordinary human flourishing; to put it crudely, that God is in favour of everyday life and the rhythms, expectations and desires that uphold it (Taylor 2007, 772-4). On the other hand, although the Christian God is revealed to will ordinary human flourishing, there is nevertheless an equally strong sense that the fullest human desire (and calling) aims at something beyond this, so that for a Christian to pray "your will be done" is, somehow, not quite the same as simply saying "let humans flourish". In other words, there is something necessarily unstable in the Christian world-view: on the one hand, affirmation of ordinary human life and concerns; on the other, aspiration for the transcendent, which involves aiming beyond ordinary human life (Taylor 2007, 16-18). This picture leads Taylor to a particular characterisation of contemporary ethical reflection, and it is this characterisation which is of importance here. We are, according to Taylor, "cross-pressured" in a particular way. On Taylor's analysis, the tension just outlined is not removed in the modern, secular move towards a 'self-sufficing humanism"; rather, he claims that it remains in various mutated and frequently unrecognised forms (Taylor 2007, 618-75). The recognition that religious aspirations can damage or mutilate "ordinary human flourishing" is hugely important in the development of modernity, but this insight can lead in turn to another dilemma; how to retain a sense of the depth and mystery of human life – how to continue to aspire to the highest. It may be that religious aspirations can lead to denigration of the body, or go along with a "hatred and rage" towards ordinary human limitations, as Martha Nussbaum suggests (Nussbaum 1990, 365-92), but it may also be that the straightforward affirmation of the goodness of human life fails to capture some of the deeper dimensions of human desire (Taylor 2007, 637).

On Taylor's account we are "cross-pressured" by the need to affirm fully, on one hand, and the need to aim high enough on the other, and these pressures together make up what Taylor calls the "maximal demand": **"**how to define our spiritual or moral aspirations for human beings, while showing a path to the transformation involved which doesn't crush, mutilate or deny what is essential to our humanity?" Ethical discussion is frequently conducted in bad faith, because it is easy to recognise failure to achieve the "maximal demand" in a competing perspective or school of thought, but difficult to show how this demand *could* be met by one's own. Indeed, in

this sense, Taylor seems to want to introduce a note of tragic wisdom into ethics:

> We have to face the possibility that [satisfying the maximal demand] may not be
> realizable, that squaring our highest aspirations with an integral respect for the full
> range of human fulfilments may be a mission impossible. That, in other words,
> we have to scale down our moral aspirations in order to allow our ordinary human
> life to flourish; or we have to agree to sacrifice some of this ordinary flourishing to
> secure our higher goals. If we think of this as a dilemma, then perhaps we have to
> impale ourselves on one horn or the other. (Taylor 2007, 640)

Negatively, the point is that aspiration is dangerous but essential, and that no single
ethical insight or conceptual scheme really gets us out of this predicament. We have
no guaranteed way of purifying our ideals so that they no longer contain the risk of
being pursued in ways that mutilate ordinary patterns of life. More positively, his
contribution is to suggest that this predicament *is* the realm of ethics, and therefore
that simply pointing it out, again, cannot honestly serve as a substantive criticism of
any particular perspective. The challenge is not to escape these kinds of dilemmas;
"[r]ather it appears as a matter of who can respond most profoundly and convincingly
to what are ultimately commonly felt dilemmas" (Taylor 2007, 675). Ethics is not
simply the business of deciding what are the characteristics of human flourishing,
which aspirations are most in harmony with life's inherent potential, and then hoping
that these two tasks will turn out not to interfere with each other; it is also the "how"
of combining them, and of negotiating the risk that there may be significant losses (on
either side) in the process. The underlying sense here is that there is a moment of
difficult acceptance involved in any genuine ethical reflection, a moment of "counting
the cost", and the implication is that many forms of contemporary ethical reflection
fail to do this.

It seems to me that Taylor's analysis is particularly useful in understanding the
difficulty that recent discussions of forgiveness face, particularly in terms of the
burden of "the maximal demand". On the one hand, forgiveness can easily be seen as
an ethical aspiration that fails to accept ordinary human limitations by demanding too
much, so that people are damaged through an implied judgement of their own
instinctively resentful reactions, and the sometimes futile effort to banish them. Here
the problem is that any affirmation of the importance of forgiveness may also seem to

imply a judgement of the reactions that one thereby lets go of, and may therefore represent a failure to value ordinary human life. But then, forgiveness could equally be seen as a weakened tolerance through which we *accept* too much and aim for too little - a failure to hold others, and by implication ourselves, accountable to our highest aspirations or standards. In other words, forgiveness may be at once too difficult and too easy.

Charles Griswold's account, for all its subtlety, insight and scope, might be said to suffer from what in Taylor's terms is an unwillingness to be "impaled"; a desire for an unambiguous, cost-free progress, or for a perfectly affirming form of aspiration. His understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and resentment seems to be shaped by both sides of the cross-pressured affirmation/aspiration complex described above. Resentment is defended because it is at once natural and moral; it is that rarest of things – an "is" that ought to be. In this sense, an ethic of forgiveness might be seen to aim for something too far beyond our ordinary human context, and to be a failure to affirm the ordinary. But then, in some cases, forgiveness itself might sometimes be a natural movement that should be resisted for moral reasons (one may be quite eager to forgive those to whom one is closely connected, or those that one wishes to be in favour with). It is a rigorously moral vision that provokes some of the suspicion towards certain versions of forgiveness (those that emphasise the gratuitous or unilateral aspect of forgiveness, for example), and this suspicion implies a need for a tighter discipline in our responses to others. It may be, in a sense, more difficult, and more moral, to refuse forgiveness; perhaps, in forgiving we accept too much, and hope for too little. Another problem concerns the way in which there is a disjunction between the concerns expressed in his account of what forgiveness is (and ought to be), and his understanding of why forgiveness is good. Griswold asserts that forgiveness is a good because of the way in which it is a manifestation of trust, hope and acceptance. But this aspect of forgiveness is not brought into contact with the conditions that are laid out to determine what is and is not authentic forgiveness, and this leaves a vital question unanswered: how can forgiving be a *way* of cultivating the virtue of trust, if one only forgives when it has been established that it is safe to do so? There is no trust where there is no risk, but the whole impetus of the central philosophical aspect of Griswold's account is structured so as to show how forgiveness does not take morally dubious risks. Again, it is as though two sets of concerns are at work, but their conflict is never fully faced.

An obvious response here would be that all the comments above really do is simply to describe the process of consideration that lies behind a detailed presentation such as Griswold's. That is, this kind of negotiation of different concerns is simply what is involved in thinking something through to the best of one's ability. We consider possible responses to any particular way of expressing an idea, as well as its inner coherence, and both of these may include combining different kinds of concerns: how likely is a particular idea to be motivational, how plausible does it seem from a variety of perspectives, how acceptable are the main lines of interpretation it allows, etc. Griswold perceives, quite rightly, that forgiveness is tremendously ambiguous and open to both abuse and vacuity, and more than this, assumes that at present the balance has swung in one particular direction, so that there is a tendency towards an over-enthusiastic embrace of its virtues without consideration of its risks. As a result, he presents an account that substantially qualifies the concept, and aims to redress the balance to a certain extent. An awareness of the potentially "mutilating" nature of ethical aspirations - especially those that have religious overtones - may simply be a part of this process, and go along with a desire to present ideals and corresponding practices that combine rigour and hope as convincingly as possible. However, the suggestion that runs through Taylor's analysis is that these "cross-pressures" may adversely affect our capacity for ethical reflection (particularly when it comes to reacting to religious ideas), because it may mean that in the course of defending against certain accusations our assumptions shift, and if this is not owned or admitted to, it allows us to evade the possibility of confronting the real limitations and costs of ethical life. What seems to be missing from Griswold's account, then, is the sense that we evaluate forgiveness, and especially the costs of forgiveness, with a somewhat conflicted gaze. We interrogate the subject with concerns that do not easily cohere, and consideration of forgiveness is one of the ways in which this conflict, or lack of resolve, becomes obvious.

Conclusion: A Cross-Pressured Forgiveness

We may ask, then, what would an account look like if it was more willing to face its own internal tension? Perhaps we might say that to affirm forgiveness, that is, to encourage oneself or another to forgive in the face of wrongdoing is necessarily to encourage the embrace of risk, rather than to platitudinously affirm something unambiguously good. There is no space here for a clear outline of what this might

look like, but a brief suggestion will have to suffice as a conclusion. I want to suggest that the cases in which forgiveness appears most ambiguous or problematic are revealing of something essential, not merely accidental; namely, that forgiveness involves a reconsideration of limits, whether these limits concern what is possible, just, safe or fair.[6] For example, in many cases (although not all), to ask whether we can forgive another is to ask whether we can trust them, and this is to ask what kind of future we are capable of imagining. This, in turn, is to ask a rather vaguer, but perhaps fundamental question about what we think life is like: is life such that one should take the risk of forgiving. To affirm forgiveness really is, as Griswold suggests, to encourage the virtues of acceptance, trust and hope, in oneself or others, but to do so necessarily involves risk: we cannot, by definition, know whether our "vote" will have its intended effect.

More positively, it seems as though the inherent ambiguity of forgiveness also means that the struggle to "reason with forgiveness" may involve one in a circular process that could, perhaps, become a positive spiral. As we have seen, in order to know what is meant by forgiveness, I have to have some sense of what kind of thing forgiveness would have to be in order to be a human good (the forgiveness offered repeatedly by a disempowered victim to an unrepentant abuser is no good; therefore it is not really forgiveness). But equally, if forgiveness is, in some way, good, and therefore has its own unique place in the moral landscape, presumably it might well be the case that I learn more about the good by learning what forgiveness is (perhaps my resistance to forgiveness is itself, in some cases, something weak and reactive). Something similar could no doubt be shown to be at work in the formulation of any particular component of moral life, but, in the case of forgiveness, this problematic becomes particularly acute, because forgiveness *necessarily* concerns moral lapses, failures and shortcomings, as well as – if it stretches that far – moral outrages and violations. To make manifest the goodness of forgiveness, then, is not so straightforward, since it involves an assessment of how we should respond to our always-already compromised moral state. But in this way, I want to argue, the question of forgiveness actually reveals something about the real heart of moral discussion: the important questions are not simply to do with what forms of life are desirable and should therefore be affirmed, but of how we are to continue to desire and affirm these forms of life from within the midst of the varying degrees of evil in which we actually find ourselves. The question is not just "what is good?" but,

'starting from where we are, what is good?" In Taylor's terms, we can only think about forgiveness by noticing the near-impossibility not simply of meeting, but even of conceiving what it would be like to meet, "the maximal demand". My suggestion is that our understanding of forgiveness is one that is necessarily impaled on the horns of this dilemma. Ultimately, though, this dilemma, and the inner tension it testifies to, may not be too dissimilar to that which accompanies the practice of love, as expressed by St. Paul: how to bear all, yet still hope all; how to accept the worst whilst continuing to desire the best.

Works Cited

Allais, Lucy. 2008. "Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness". *Philosophy and Public Affairs.* 36 (1): 33-68.

Bash, Anthony. 2007. *Forgiveness and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Bell, Dan. 2007. "Forgiveness Exceeding Economy" in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 20 (3): 325-44.

Caputo, John D. 2006. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. London: Routledge.

————. 2001. "To Forgive: The Unforgiveable and the Imprescriptible". In *Questioning God.*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon. Indiana University Press. 22-51.

Holmgren, Margaret R. 2012. *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jones, L. Gregory. 1995. *Embodying Forgiveness: A Theological Analysis*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans.

Govier, Trudy. 2002. *Forgiveness and Revenge*. London: Routledge.

Griswold, Charles L. 2007. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

————. 2009. "Forgiveness, Secular and Religious: A Reply to my Critics" in *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association.* Volume 82: 303-313.

Haber, Joram Graf. 1991. *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Study*. Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Helmick, Raymond G., and Rodney Lawrence Petersen. 2001. *Forgiveness and Reconciliation Religion, Public Policy & Conflict Transformation*. Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press.

Hieronymi, Pamela. 2001. "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness". *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.* 62 (3): 529-555.

Holloway, Richard. 2002. *On Forgiveness: How Can we Forgive the Unforgivable?* Edinburgh: Canongate.

Kolnai, Aurel. 1973. "Forgiveness". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society.* 74: 91-106.

McGary, Howard. 1989. "Forgiveness". *American Philosophical Quarterly.* 26 (4): 343-351.

Milbank, John. 2003. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. London: Routledge.

Murphy, Jeffrie G. 2003. *Getting Even: Forgiveness and its Limits*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Nussbaum, Martha Craven. 1992. *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Smith, Tara. 1997. "Tolerance & Forgiveness: Virtues or Vices?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy.* 14 (1): 31.

Sussman, David. 2005. "Kantian Forgiveness". *Kant-Studien.* 96 (1): 85-107.

Watts, Fraser N., and Liz Gulliford. 2004. *Forgiveness in Context: Theology and Psychology in Creative Dialogue*. London: T & T Clark International.

Notes

1. Margaret Holmgren's *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing*, also promises to be a significant contribution to this area.

2. See Kolnai 1973, for a classic statement of the paradox here: forgiveness seems to be "either unjustified or pointless".

3. Compare with Jeffrie Murphy's nearly identical definition: "A person who has forgiven has overcome these vindictive attitudes and has overcome them for a morally credible motive" (Murphy 2003, 13).

4. Griswold also details conditions that would have to be satisfied by the victim, but I do not have the space to recount these here. See Griswold 2007, 53-9; 98-110.

5. See Matthew 5: 44 – 5

6. These suggestions are influenced by my engagement with Derrida's notion that forgiveness "lives by the unforgiveable". However, I do not have the space here to recount the reasons for my reluctance to embrace Derrida's approach in its entirety, since these would involve a fairly complex discussion of "the ethics of deconstruction" more generally.