Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy
vol. 25, no. 1 · july 2023
https://doi.org/10.26556/jesp.v25i1.1478
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GIVING UP ON SOMEONE

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It is a striking practice how we often give up on people we find morally (or otherwise) criticizable. We judge the person as having some characteristic we are averse to and, as a result, no longer consider that person to be worth our time and concern. This behavior is not only common, it is also seen as morally admirable. There is something virtuous, it might be argued, in not being willing to engage with people one finds morally noxious. And even were the person to be only *somewhat* objectionable, we still tend to think that giving up is nonetheless acceptable. Not only can we choose our friends and associates, the argument might continue, we are entitled to decide who we want to avoid entirely or lessen our exposure to.

Yet my deep concern is that these quick justifications of our practices of giving up on morally criticizable people are flawed. In this paper, I ask: When, if ever, is giving up on someone as a person morally justified? My chief aim will be to defend the interest and importance of this question, but I also will tentatively identify several considerations that count against giving up as a moral practice. To focus our attention further, I will be discussing only cases of giving up on a person we have a direct relationship with, rather than giving up on someone (such as a public figure) we do not or cannot interact with in any meaningful way.

Section 1 of this paper will offer a conceptual analysis of the phenomenon of giving up and set out some distinct varieties of how we do so. In section 2 and section 3, I will then turn to the normative considerations involved in giving up on a person. Section 2 details the most radical manner in which one can give up on a person, and argues that doing so is morally impermissible (or, at the very least, morally inappropriate). Section 3 details the normative considerations for a less radical version of giving up on the person: I present an argument for three considerations that must be met in order to meet an obligation of due care before giving up. The last of these considerations is that we must consider the broader implications of our choice on the remainder of the community. Section 4 reviews and responds to some possible objections to the arguments of section 2 and 3.

1. What Is "Giving Up"?

We use the language of "giving up on someone" in a multivocal way. Sometimes we speak of giving up on someone for reasons that are *benign*—perhaps I simply may not connect socially or emotionally with the person, our interests or activities do not align, or geographical distance from each other has caused us to drift apart. This paper is focused on a different kind of giving up: when one gives up on someone due to an *aversion* to some aspect of a person or their behavior.[1] In this section, I will detail two features of aversive cases: the force of the reasons one has for giving up and the scope of one's giving up.

In aversive cases of giving up, we generally respond to something we think of as a fault: a pattern of misbehavior or disliked behavior, or a single egregious instance of misbehavior or disliked behavior, which leads us to think they are worth giving up on.[2] For example, I might give up on a friend who is flaky, or a sibling who broke their promise to repay a loan. We also see cases in which a person gives up on someone due to their aversion to the other's membership (or perceived membership) in a social group or some other feature of their identity—for example, giving up on someone who has political or religious views one disapproves of, or disowning a loved one because they are queer. We can further distinguish between aversive cases involving moral aversion and those involving nonmoral aversion. We might, for example, give up on someone because we find them to be socially annoying or irksome, but not because of moral wrongdoing.

The reasons one has for giving up have some degree of force. That force is measured by the severity or regularity of the behavior, or the "badness" of the characteristic in question. Cases of moral aversion often, though not always, carry more force than nonmoral aversion.[3] A profound wrong is ascribed much

1 While I will not be focused on benign cases of giving up in this paper, there is surely more to say about ways in which we can mistakenly confuse benign and aversive cases, and whether or not there are normative constraints on giving up for benign reasons. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for their helpful classification of benign reasons for giving up.

2 There is a secondary form of aversive giving up in which I judge *myself* to be the person who has the fault, and I give up on the other person because of how they cast my fault into relief. For example, consider a person who gives up on a successful friend they feel has a perfect life because they feel bad by comparison when around them (even though they think the friend has done nothing morally or otherwise wrong).

3 I suspect that while generally we do—and should—consider moral reasons to be qualitatively stronger than nonmoral reasons, this may not always be the case. We might be somewhat averse to finding out a person has told a one-off lie that has done some minor harm, and be even more averse to a person who is constantly and irritatingly late. I also note that we may also have difficulty in disambiguating moral from nonmoral cases, even

more weight as a reason for giving up than a behavior we would describe as profoundly unlikeable but not wrongful.

As a result, giving up on someone can be more or less radical in scope—generally, in proportion to the force of one's reasons. I suggest that we first draw a distinction between giving up on the *relationship* versus giving up on the *person*. If I give up on the relationship, I withdraw from the person while remaining (in some sense) open to them.[4] Giving up on the relationship does not require a certain outcome: I could end the relationship (or let it end) *or* change to a less-engaged or less-intimate relationship, or a less-involved *kind* of relationship—e.g., a former romantic partner becomes a friend, or a friend becomes an acquaintance. Giving up on a relationship involves no longer engaging with the person as much as previously, or perhaps entrusting a different or restricted set of things I care about to them.

In contrast, if I give up on the person *as a person*, I close all future possibilities of interacting with the person that would leave myself or others vulnerable to them, so far as is under my control.[5] When I give up on a person in this sense, I think of them as hopeless or have a standing disposition of suspicion toward

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though the distinction can be a useful heuristic. The latter, such as the constantly late person, are sometimes read as giving us information about one's considerateness of other people (or other moral attitudes). Note, of course, that disambiguation is even more complicated insofar as phenomena such as punctuality are culturally relative social practices.

4 The kind of openness might vary, but could include such features as being open to hearing about their lives from those who we socially have in common, being willing to act on new information that might change my attitudes or behaviors toward them, or being willing to re-engage in some sort of relationship or a more engaged form of relationship with them in the future.

5 I use the term "vulnerability" in a broad sense. The term most obviously tracks the ways in which we can be susceptible to those who have, institutionally or relationally, some power over us. Yet it seems like I could give up on a person who does not seem to hold such power over me—perhaps (1) because their actions are constrained so they cannot directly harm me (perhaps because of imprisonment or death), (2) because they meant so little to me that nothing they say or do could bother me, or (3) because I am the person who holds the institutional or relational power. In each case, however, I suspect there is a sense in which we are vulnerable. For 1: even if I am insulated from their actions (which may not genuinely be the case), I still might be *indirectly* vulnerable to them because what they do impacts others who remain in my life, or even because they still imaginatively or emotionally affect me (I suspect this is what we mean by the idiom that a person is living rent-free in our heads). For 2: the fact that they mean so little may be an indication that I have already given up on the person, but it could also mean that I am choosing not to care about the ways in which they can harm me, or people or projects I care about—even though I am genuinely vulnerable. For 3: the person in power might describe their time, effort, or consideration as things that are vulnerable to the person they have power over. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer and Josh Kissel for pressing this point.

them. I may not think of myself as being "in community" with them and avoid engaging in joint activities with them.[6] I might also recommend to or exhort others to do the same. However it is accomplished, giving up on a person is a radical form of shutting down engagement with the person in question.[7]

Even after having given up on the person as a person—and remaining closed to them—I may nonetheless still have to concern myself with what the person has done or will do or spend time around them. For example, I could give up on a badly behaved colleague as a person, yet know I cannot distance myself from interacting with them unless one of us leaves our job. However, I will, by one measure or another, place myself in the best position to no longer be vulnerable to that person from here on out.

There are at least two different ways in which we give up on someone as a person. One of the most philosophically interesting ways to do so—and which will be the focus of section 2—is when we no longer give a damn about them: we hold an ongoing objective attitude toward them (in Strawson's sense).

Ordinarily, we hold reactive attitudes and intentions toward others—attitudes such as gratitude, resentment, forgiveness, love, and hurt feelings.[8] These reactive attitudes are those that demonstrate involvement or participation in a relationship.[9] However, I might alternatively hold an objective attitude toward the person, which is to see that person "as an object of social policy; as a subject for what, in a wide range of sense, might be called treatment; as something certainly to be taken account, perhaps precautionary account, of; to be managed or handled or cured or trained; perhaps simply to be avoided."[10]

As Strawson pointed out, we characteristically suspend or modify our reactive attitudes toward those agents who are set apart in some way, as abnormal or immature. So I might suspend my annoyance toward a child because I reflect on their cognitive development and think they're doing *exactly* what an eight-year-old characteristically does at this age. We also rely on objective attitudes as a resource for dealing with otherwise ordinary agents. I could think about

6 What we seem to mean by the phrase "not 'in community' with them" is that we deny affiliation with them—perhaps that we do not belong to each other in some shared sense, lack shared objectives, or do not hold special obligations toward each other.

7 Note that sometimes we say, "I give up on that person," and mean something like, "I no longer expect this person to be capable of changing themselves or their behaviors," or, "I will no longer try whatever I was previously trying to do when I interacted with that person." As a result, those turns of phrase can sometimes indicate only that we are giving up on a relationship—not that we are necessarily giving up on them *as a person.*

8 Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 75.

9 Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 79.

10 Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 79.

a person's ordinarily enraging behavior in a different light if I temporarily suspend my reactive attitudes toward them. I then might be able to gain insight into why they are behaving in such a way, or avoid the effort of being involved with the person.

I give up on a person in the first sense when I hold a *permanent* objective attitude toward them. This means that rather than engaging with them, I at most aim to manage their behavior (insofar as I interact with them at all).[11] I would consider them no longer worth my time and concern *as an agent*, and would treat them as such. Consider this case study:

> Person *A* has behaved egregiously, but due to circumstances outside my control I will still have to interact with them regularly. I was originally hurt or angered by their misbehavior, but now I have a cool and objective attitude toward them: nothing they do really bothers me anymore, because I expect continuing bad behavior from them (and perhaps have taken other preventative measures to mitigate harm). When I do have to interact with them, I treat the experience like an anthropologist or scientist: I am observing what this creature does in their native habitat. Those who know me well would say that I no longer get angry at Person *A*, and are a bit bemused by my objectivity toward them.

The protective mechanism, in this case, is to no longer regard them *as* a person—instead, I regard them as something to be managed or controlled. My guard is up, and I am not susceptible to anger or resentment or similar reactive attitudes from their future misbehavior as a result.

The second way of giving up on someone as a person is to continue to hold the reactive attitudes toward the person but to act to protect ourselves from the person to the greatest degree that we can. Characteristically, my behavior would incorporate the defensive reactive attitudes (those "spikier" reactive attitudes that serve to keep the wrongdoer away or on their guard, like anger, disgust, or contempt). We may also guard ourselves against them by cutting off contact, refusing to engage in joint activities, and closing off the possibility of reconciliation. This kind of giving up on a person will be the focus of section 3.

11 On Strawson's analysis of the objective attitude, he says that we cannot hold an objective attitude toward an ordinary person for very long; he asserts that, at some point, we must "sever" the relationship. See Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 79–80. I disagree with Strawson's point: it *is* possible to hold an objective attitude for an extended period of time, though, of course, doing so no longer could be described as a relationship in the ordinary social sense. It is just not possible to do so while retaining one's recognition of the person *as* a person.

Giving up on a *person* is a much more serious action than giving up on a relationship—and as I will argue in sections 2 and 3, there are moral considerations that weigh against giving up on persons as persons.

2. Giving Up on a Person, Type 1

The normative claims in this paper are motivated by a broadly Kantian story about what we owe to ourselves and other people. While I will offer an account of when we may (and when we may not) give up on others for aversive reasons on those grounds, I also suggest that those who are not Kantians could agree with similar (even if not as stringent) conclusions. In this section, I will lay out our obligation to regard moral agents *as* agents, and then suggest that, on those grounds, the first type of giving up on a person is impermissible (or at the very least, morally inappropriate).

The familiar Kantian claim is that we must treat every person as someone with the capacity for choice, and we should never treat them as mere "things."[12] Their personhood gives us a duty to recognize them as an agent—that is, someone who is morally responsible for what they do. As Stephen Darwall puts it when characterizing this respect for someone as a person, one is owed such respect by virtue of *being a person*—not whether or not they are a *good* person.[13] There are no exceptions to this obligation—even those who are blameworthy or otherwise objectionable are persons, and ought to be regarded as such. In fact, regarding someone as accountable for their wrongdoing is part of what it is to recognize them as a person—and engaging in a process of accountability demonstrates this same kind of recognition.[14]

12 Kant, *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals,* 4:428; *Metaphysics of Morals,* 6:380.

13 The "recognition respect" Darwall discusses in his paper—the respect we owe to persons *because* they are persons—is the form of respect Kantians argue we have a duty to have for all rational agents. We must recognize that all persons should be treated as having equal moral standing. This is in contrast to what Darwall calls "appraisal respect" for a person, in which we think the person has a good or worthy character (which can be a matter of degree). Recognition respect is not a matter of degree—I either recognize a person as a person, a fact that places moral constraints on our behavior, or I do not. I can think a person is a bad person (that is, have a low degree of appraisal respect for them), but recognize that they are a person and must be treated as such. See Darwall, "Two Kinds of Respect," 46–47.

14 Importantly, an obligation to regard a person as a person may not require that we engage in a *process of accountability* with those who are blameworthy or are otherwise objectionable. While such a process is a way of showing wrongdoers that we are engaging with them as responsible agents, engaging in such a process to hold others responsible for what they do is a defeasible obligation. Sometimes it is overridden when such a process would put us into harm's way to a degree that it breaches an obligation that we have to ourselves. Sometimes prudential considerations may matter (e.g., if what I alone could do to hold the

Not everyone, of course, is motivated by the Kantian view that we have a duty to respect persons because they are persons. However, I would suggest those with other views should be convinced by a similar but weaker version of the claim: persons are the kinds of beings where it is *appropriate* to regard them as having agency. We owe it to people to regard them as having the capacity to make choices and be responsible for what they do. This is part of what is required to treat people with respect (or some equivalent: perhaps the emphasis is instead on how to consider their interests in a way that is responsive to their moral standing *as* a responsible agent).

With those general points in mind, let us begin by discussing the case of giving up on someone as a person in which we permanently suspend the reactive attitudes toward the person. I suspect this method is extremely tempting. We may or may not be able to avoid the person in question, but we can still protect ourselves by studying their bad behaviors, constraining the person when and how we can, and pushing whatever causal levers might cause their behavior to be less egregious.

Holding such a permanent objective attitude is a much more common way of responding to others than I suspect we like to think.[15] We see this when we subject elders who harm others to this kind of treatment (due to, often, implicit or explicit ageism) where we say, "Oh, they're stuck in their ways and are never going to change," and then try to manage them into doing less harm. We do this as well with those who have (or we believe have) a mental illness. We may look like we are engaging the person, but we are not really doing so—it is a minimalistic pretense in which we have deliberately muted the person *as* a person.[16]

Yet despite this temptation, a permanent or even semi-permanent objective attitude toward someone—the first kind of giving up on a person—is morally impermissible on Kantian grounds. Even for those not motivated by Kantian claims, I argue that giving up on a person in this way is morally inappropriate.

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person responsible or to change their behavior would backfire). When prudential reasons have sufficient weight, our obligation to hold others responsible can be fairly minimal—sometimes this involves simply recognizing the person as a person who is responsible for what they have done.

15 Elinor Mason writes that it "takes a lot for us to permanently give up on [other agents] as agents"—and we might think that such cases are rare and exceptional as a result (*Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 147). But I do not think that threshold is as high in practice as we like to think—it is quite tempting to dehumanize those we do not consider to be paradigmatic agents, and we similarly do so to those we disagree with or dislike. I explore Mason's account further in section 4.

16 We also may recognize this same or a similar phenomenon in unjust social behaviors that manage members of oppressed groups rather than granting them autonomy or full engagement.

I will first lay out the Kantian argument, and then a broader argument, for these claims.

Though it may be tempting to settle into a permanent or semi-permanent objective attitude toward any person for self-protection, this kind of giving up is impermissible. The wide variety of reactive attitudes we have toward other people demonstrates that we are still involved with them as agents in full. In contrast, it would fail to treat others as autonomous moral agents if we try to merely manipulate or manage the people in question, as is characteristic of the objective attitude.[17] We may still continue to criticize a wrongdoer's behavior *as* wrongful, and to treat them as responsible for what they have done in a variety of ways (which can include constraining their behavior). I ought to take those alternatives instead.[18]

I suggest that even non-Kantians should consider it to be morally inappropriate to hold a permanent objective attitude toward wrongdoers. The objective attitude is incompatible with regard for persons, no matter the normative ground for that regard. For example, we might take ourselves to have an interest in being treated as a full moral agent or treated as responsible for what we do, or that a caring regard for a person would see them in such a light. It would then be morally inappropriate to hold this permanent objective attitude toward others, on such a view, even if it is ultimately permissible to do so because of the weight of other interests, or due to normative claims at play in yet other theories. The objective attitude also dulls the ways in which we think about and respond to the badness of their wrongdoings. We might not, due to that objective stance, respond to the person in a way that communicates their fault (even when doing so is warranted and would help to change their behaviors). Holding a permanently objective attitude toward wrongdoers might sometimes have prudential or moral benefits. However, the *prima facie* moral inappropriateness of a permanently objective stance toward a person may outweigh these benefits, especially the prudential ones.

There are some cases of wrongdoing that nonetheless pose a challenge to what I argue is a duty to avoid treating others as nonagents. Some kinds of

17 Similar points are made also by Holmgren, *Forgiveness and Retribution*, 7–8; and Langton, "Sexual Solipsism," 162–63.

18 An objector might ask if it is fair to characterize a permanent objective attitude as a "failure to treat a person as a person." After all, what if I am moving someone like Person *A* into the ranks of people who I recognize exist, but who I no longer engage with? There are billions of people I consider persons but who I neither engage with nor emotionally respond to. In response, it *is* indeed possible to think of a person as a person, but not have a relationship with them. To be at a remove is possible and permissible (the conditions for which will be discussed in section 3), but in that case I still would not be in a state of permanent suspension of all reactive attitudes toward them altogether.

wrongdoing are damaging to *one's own sense of agency*, such as trauma or abuse.[19] In such a case, the need to be able to maintain self-respect could be argued to take precedence over our obligation to refrain from giving up on others in this first sense. Suspending the reactive attitudes may be one's only or best method of ensuring that self-respect—we would want, in such cases, to defer to the recommendations of those with expertise in healthy coping mechanisms for trauma and abuse.

For those non-Kantians who would claim that giving up in this first sense is morally inappropriate (rather than impermissible), the way to assess the normative considerations in such cases is comparatively straightforward—there would be some threshold past which any obligations one has to the wrongdoer can be overridden by obligations one has to oneself. For those who do not think there are self-regarding duties, merely moral prerogatives, then this same normative claim holds insofar as we are entitled, morally speaking, to regularly prioritize our interests over the demands of others.

The Kantian account can make sense of how self-care is important for those who, given societal expectations and pressures, are asked to be self-effacing or to give too much of themselves in favor of others.[20] Yet these cases—in which a duty of self-care feels at odds with the duty to refrain from treating others as nonagents—pose a challenge for a Kantian account, as both are important kinds of obligations.

While giving up on the person under such conditions is certainly understandable because of the ways in which it allows one to maintain one's self-respect, I argue that on a Kantian account, this choice would be at most an *excusing condition* for those who give up on their wrongdoers in this way. It would be far better if, instead, the person could work toward eventually being able to see their wrongdoer again as a responsible agent. That is, perhaps one cannot right now engage with the wrongdoer as a person and must hold an objective stance toward them (and, if the situation requires, manage them). However, if granted time and removal from the dangers that the wrongdoer poses—and, even better, accountability and change on the part of the wrongdoer—one

19 This same point, I think, also applies for other kinds of trauma, including those from various kinds of oppression that are not centered on a particular actor's doings—it is instead sourced from a whole structure of oppressive institutions and norms, and also expressed in the actions of particular people who do harm. There may be a similar desire to cope with that trauma by permanently suspending the reactive attitudes toward those who behave in ways that express their approval of or commitment to that structure.

20 Carol Hay's discussion in *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Oppression* of the Kantian conception of self-respect and how it can serve as a tool to resist gendered and other kinds of oppression is particularly helpful here. See especially *Kantianism, Liberalism, and Oppression*, 68–78.

might be able to again recognize the person as a person. Nonetheless, in such cases, I suggest that the second kind of giving up would better allow the person to *both* recognize the person's agency and care for themselves.[21] Let us turn to that alternative now.

3. Giving Up on a Person, Type 2

I have argued that giving up on a person via a permanent objective stance is morally impermissible (or, at the very least, morally inappropriate), because it is not consistent with respecting a person as a person. We should also ask the same question about the second, less radical kind of giving up on a person—in which I have closed all future possibilities of interacting with the person that would leave myself or others vulnerable to them, yet still maintain the reactive attitudes toward the person.

Unlike the first type of giving up on someone, this second type of giving up on someone does not outright deny their personhood. However, I will argue that it remains a morally risky practice given the gravity of such closure. I contend that for any case of giving up on a person, we have an obligation of due care before we give up on them—that is, an obligation to "check our work" and ensure we have evaluated all considerations that matter before acting.[22] For example, we ought to assess whether we are making decisions based upon good information.[23] I take this epistemic component of due care for granted—and will focus this section on further features of what we must do in order to meet our obligation of due care.

21 Note that not all cases of taking the objective point of view constitute giving up. We might have reasons to *temporarily* take up the objective point of view. For example, an aging parent may require daily care despite holding views that are deeply objectionable (such as being racist or sexist)—and taking an objective point of view is what allows me to care for that parent in the right way. However, in such a case, if we do take up the objective point of view, we should do so in a circumscribed manner and with a specific goal in mind (a goal that the person can, at least hypothetically, share with us). Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for this example and pressing this point.

22 I suspect that a parallel set of due care considerations holds for how we ought to deliberate when giving up on a *relationship* as well as giving up on a *person*—however, further argument about the normative considerations involved in giving up on a relationship are outside the scope of this paper.

23 We are, of course, prone to error, deception, and self-deception. For example, a person could give up on someone after (without confirmation) taking hearsay about their behavior as fact. It is clear that we have an obligation of due care to confirm our facts before proceeding. In what follows, I will assume that we're proceeding as well as we can epistemically—that as far as is possible for us, we are accurately tracking the nature and severity of the disliked or wrongful behavior.

In particular, there are three further obligations of due care before giving up: (a) we must confirm that the choice to give up on someone is fitting for the situation, (b) we must confirm that we have given special obligations due to the nature of the relationship with the person their full weight, and (c) we have assessed whether we can continue to meet our obligations to the overall community if we are to give up on the person. I believe that the first two obligations are straightforward and can be quickly gestured at, and I provide an argument for the third. Again, while I would argue that it is a *duty* to engage with the due care considerations offered in sections 3.1–3.3 below, I think that those who do not share similar moral commitments should at least think that it is *appropriate* to do so.

3.1. Assuring "Fit"

The first obligation of due care for giving up on a person (in the second sense) is that we must confirm that our response is fitting for the severity of wrongdoing in question. After all, we surely can mistake our dislike or discomfort with a kind of behavior as something that warrants giving up on a person, even when doing so is wildly disproportionate. Consider a person who takes a coworker's mildly annoying behaviors as a reason to give up on them as a person, when, in fact, they are simply being uncompromisingly impatient with the coworker. Or consider a person who goes no contact with a sibling who said something unkind or inappropriate in the context of a generally good or workable sibling relationship.[24] Choosing to close off the relationship permanently, for aversive reasons that have little force, would be ill-fitting.[25]

What makes this assessment of fittingness before giving up on a person (in the second sense) so important is that giving up in this sense closes all future possibilities of interacting with the person, so far as is under my control.[26] If

24 I assume for this case that what is said was objectionable but would not be the kind of statement such that it—by and of itself—would warrant a correspondingly severe degree of response.

25 Some philosophers might even argue that we would be making an error of fit if I fail to accept if the person has done what they ought to deserve forgiveness or acceptance after having done something wrong. Margaret Holmgren argues, for example, that forgiveness is warranted when the wrongdoer has taken the appropriate response after their wrongdoing (*Forgiveness and Retribution*, 10). Holmgren's is obviously a contentious claim, which I do not defend here—merely offer as a possible position.

26 Here I follow Trudy Govier, who argues that there are only select cases of the unforgivable: when the wrongdoings in question are "enormities, appallingly wrong acts that violate profoundly important moral principles," *and* where they have neither acknowledged nor made restitution for what they have done ("Forgiveness and the Unforgivable," 68–72). In many ordinary cases of giving up, the wrongdoing in question does not meet the threshold

one gives up on the *relationship*, one is open to new and relevant facts about the person—for example, that they have changed or genuinely regret what they have done. The permanent closure of a relationship demands a certain kind of fit for the wrongdoing in question in order to be proportionate to the wrongdoing.[27] Note, of course, that we can also make the reverse mistake: we do *not* give up on a person, even when we have aversive responses to them (or their behaviors) that have a great deal of force—enough that one *ought* to close oneself off to the person. For example, a person might choose to stay with an abusive partner because the partner asked for yet another chance, even when doing so would fail to be responsive to a duty they have to themselves (or dependents they are responsible for). That would be another failure of due care with regard to fittingness.

3.2. *Special Obligations to the Person*

There is also a second, particular obligation of due care that, crucially, is to confirm the nature and weight of the obligations we have toward particular people and that are at least partially determined by the kind of relationship we stand in with them.

Special relationships of various kinds come with a requirement to assist the other person in their choice-making or self-improvement, especially if the person requests my assistance *or* if I have a special responsibility for them that emphasizes such assistance (as with one's children).[28] We are all flawed people. We often have off days and wobbles, and every one of us exhibits a character with features that we and others may not think are worthwhile or good for us to possess. We make mistakes (both moral and nonmoral), many times repeatedly, and we can be exceptionally bad at picking up on our mistakes. Luckily, many of us also are surrounded by people who help us identify what we are doing poorly,

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suggested by Govier: we give up on people when they have acted wrongly, yes, but are comparatively minor kinds of wrongdoing.

27 It may be possible, then, that a person should only be given up on *as a person* for moral reasons. Nonmoral reasons, such as finding the person's personality grating or annoying, would not qualify as a sufficient justification for giving up on the person. (They may, however, justify giving up *on the relationship*, up to and including ending the relationship.)

28 This is characteristically true of one's obligations to one's children and other educative relationships (students, mentees, etc.). It may also show up in other relationships—for example, many of us rely on those we are close to (friends, parents, older and adult children) or those who have special kinds of expertise (counselors, doctors) to assist us in making judgments about what we should do. We also discretionarily extend this kind of assistance to those we do not have a special relationship with, or a relationship where such assistance is not characteristic—as we do when we advise those we do not know personally or specially.

and who can help us put plans of action into place to make a better choice or to improve ourselves. Our relationships allow for assistance to each other in order to become morally better agents.

So, in such relationships, I may need to be willing to listen to the person in question, and take time to understand why they made the choices they did.[29] I might offer observations or suggestions (especially—but not only—when solicited) when those comments are true, necessary, and kind. It might also involve recognizing my own limitations in helping the person, and to instead help them work with a different person who might be better suited to help them improve themselves.[30] This is implicit in the way we raise our children, but the obligation also applies to others as well.[31] For those I have a special relationship with—and especially if I wield some kind of power in the relationship—it seems likely that I should give them an extra benefit of the doubt, and withdraw only in cases where I need to for my own self-protection (or the protection of someone else toward whom I have more pressing special responsibilities).[32] In many cases, this might include being open to reestablishing the relationship. As a result, *giving up on this specific kind of relationship* (as described in section 1) may be more appropriate than the closed nature of *giving up on the person* as *a person*.

There are certainly occasions in which someone with whom one has a special relationship has done something wrong with sufficient force that would justify giving up on them as a person. However, the general responsibility to assist those we have a special relationship with means we must give the decision a special kind of confirmation before doing so—we may wish to not move too quickly or conclusively in our decision to give up on them.

We also might ask if there are special relationships in which it is always morally impermissible to give up on the other person in any way—perhaps parental (or filial) relationships have this character of unconditional obligation.[33] Older and adult children, and certainly our parents, can be responsible for actions that

29 See Calhoun, "What Good is Commitment?" 619–20, and "Changing One's Heart," 95–96, for similar points.

30 For example, I might assist a loved one to get access to a therapist, when I realize that they need the objective positioning or extra skill set offered by such therapeutic relationships—and that our loving relationship allows only for other kinds of support or assistance.

31 These points are closely related to—and are intended to mirror—Ryan Preston-Roedder's view of the reason we ought to have faith in humanity: having faith in people's decency helps them to act rightly, treat them justly, and provide support for them ("Faith in Humanity," 666).

32 This point is similar to Barrett Emerick's, particularly insofar as he explores why disengagement is an inadequate response to those who hold objectionable positions in a loving relationship ("Love and Resistance," 8–9).

33 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for asking for further consideration of this point.

cause enough harm that there is sufficient reason to justify giving up on them as a person. For example, it would be deeply harmful to insist that a child who was abused by their parent has an unconditional obligation to reciprocally care for them in their old age. In such cases, I think, the unconditional-seeming filial obligation would be to give that decision to give up on the parent as a person a special weight of consideration. Due to the unique painfulness involved in giving up on a parent (or child), however, I suspect that such weight of consideration is almost always already part of the choice to give up.

3.3. *Obligations to the Community as a Whole*

Finally, someone may be right that they genuinely stand a risk of harm if they are to continue to engage with an unpleasant person, and want to close themselves off to avoid being vulnerable to that person. Yet I argue that we sometimes have a responsibility to not give up on others in this way, due to what we owe the remainder of our community. One of the faults in our conventional practices of giving up on people is that we often fail to consider the third parties who will continue to be exposed to the harms that person's unlikeable or morally wrongful behaviors might pose.[34] Instead, I argue we are morally required to ensure that the harm we would face is not less important than other possible harms to others in our community.[35]

Many cases of giving up on someone fail to meet this criterion of due care—a white person who wants to be an ally might withdraw from someone they know who says something racist; people who think of themselves as upstanding members of society may shun the addicted and those who have come out of prison.[36] To see why this is a problem, consider first that the most pressing concern is the harm many marginalized racial groups (particularly BIPOC) face from racism. White allies are right to be indignant about the racist beliefs or actions of their community members or willed blindness to institutional racism. Yet they may not be doing the targeted communities any favors by giving up on these community members: they are well-positioned

34 Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, seems to exhibit an example of this insensitivity to this concern. He says that if a friend who was once virtuous (but who has fallen into vice) can be morally improved, we ought to work to rescue his character. However, "if one friend stayed the same and the other became more decent and far excelled his friend in virtue, should the better person still treat the other as a friend? Surely he cannot" (1165b:21–25).

35 I use the term "community" as having a wide scope—not merely to indicate some kind of geographical proximity, but those persons who can impact and be mutually impacted by the choices and actions of others.

36 The assumption of "having been in prison" being a proxy for being morally problematic is itself problematic, as extensively discussed by figures such Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow.*

to challenge racist narratives and less harmed by the expressed views. If they withdraw from the person, it places the burden on others—and, most often, the members of the marginalized groups themselves—to contend with that person instead.[37] As such, it seems incumbent on white allies, even if they are disgusted by the expressed views of racists and those steeped in racist acculturation, to engage in the burden of trying to convince their community members of the wrongness of racism (with deference, of course, to the considered preferences of the harmed groups for how allies should proceed).

Similarly, with regard to offenders, the primary concern is to offer safety and support for victims (both primary and those who face secondary or tertiary harms, like their families or loved ones, or communities), and avoid future victimization through re-offense. We also know that the use of community support networks can help decrease recidivism amongst high-risk sexual offenders, and it seems plausible that the same is true for other kinds of criminal offense.[38] I may then have a responsibility to continue to engage with an offender, other things being equal. This might require me to refrain from giving up on the offender, and perhaps to serve as part of a community support network to reintegrate them with the community and support their rehabilitation or supervision.

We have a strong "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) tendency not only for prudential cases, but also moral cases. And like those ordinary NIMBY cases, these tendencies can exacerbate existing patterns of injustice.[39] So an important

37 I am characteristically thinking of white people on Facebook who, in the wake of Ferguson (and many other cases of anti-BIPOC racism), proudly announced that they have unfriended other white people who have posted racist things, or gone no contact with such family members. They take themselves to be good allies by not listening to the racist things their peers are saying. I take this, however, to leave a heavier burden on those non-white people the racist friends or family members will continue to interact with.

38 Lobanov-Rostovsky, "Sex Offender Management Strategies."

39 Of course, this argument by analogy to more typical NIMBY cases only goes so far. In the ordinary cases, NIMBY attitudes involve a public good that we all want, but comes with undesirable features—for example, a landfill (which is accompanied by undesirable smells) or a highway (which is accompanied by undesirable sounds). We do not want those undesirable features in *our* immediate vicinity, even if we want the public goods of a highway or landfill. What public good comes from having unpleasant people around? If the cases are not similar in the relevant ways, the attempt to pull an analogy will fail—and perhaps, so will my argument.

I agree that it is not easily possible to identify a public good that corresponds to the highway or landfill in the conventional case. Yet I resist the move to think about people in precisely the same way we should public goods and their accompanying local harms—after all, these are *people* we are thinking of. We can build a road or utility but cannot choose to bring other rational agents into or out of the world, or move them around, with the same kind of purely prudential reasoning. Nonetheless, I believe the analogy helps up to a certain point. The attitude remains deeply similar to the conventional NIMBY attitudes

component of the obligation of due care is that a person must ask if they *genuinely* face a special risk of harm (or other excusing conditions) that would allow them to appropriately close themselves off from the target person—and, correspondingly, whether giving up on that person would shift the burden of engagement onto others in ways that replicate overall patterns of injustice.[40] To fail to give sufficient care to this concern would be, perhaps, to promote injustice: after all, those who do not have the ability to or cannot afford to insulate themselves from morally (or otherwise) criticizable persons are those who are more vulnerable and with fewer resources.

One's own aversion to the person or their behaviors may not be more important than assessing what one can do while maintaining engagement with the offending person. If we are not a special target for that person's behaviors, and have the ability to intervene and address their behaviors while only taking on small harms, or the risk of small harms, then we ought to do so for the sake of the full community. However, we do not have to face the potentially threatening person alone: we may also choose to work together with other members in the community to limit the amount of harm that each still-engaged person faces.[41]

4. Further Objections and Responses

There are surely objections to the arguments made in the previous sections. In what follows, I set out four objections and their replies. The first and second apply generally to all forms of giving up on the person, and the third and fourth objections pertain to the second type of giving up.

(insofar as it is directed to unpleasantness in our locality), and the procedures for solving the problem seem to be the same (to try to move that unpleasantness as far away from *me* as possible). Similarly, it matches in how those who have undue power or privilege are better able to secure this effect.

40 Again, I am speaking of cases where the *same* threat is posed. This is why I may be able to give up on a romantic partner with a certain unpleasant or morally objectionable habit without falling afoul of being a "not in my backyard" objection in the same way I may not be able to give up on a coworker with the same bad habit. For similar reasons, a person with a history of trauma (e.g., of a particular kind of violence; from being harmed by racism) might be able to withdraw from a person exhibiting such behaviors, because their retraumatization is different from the harm the remainder of the moral community faces.

41 We may be even more obligated to consider the broader implications of our choices for common *nonmoral* reasons to give up on a person (for example, we find them annoying or boring). When many members of the community choose to give up on the person for such reasons, it is felt as unkindness and exclusion—the kinds of behaviors that if we saw our children exhibit, we would intervene. For this reason, the corresponding obligation of due care would be to determine whether the person is lonely or has friends; in the case of the former, we have more of an obligation to continue to engage with them.

First, an objector might ask whether giving up on a person is something we genuinely have control over. Sometimes, I realize I have given up on someone almost without meaning to—it's not a choice; I was just so averse to their behaviors that I *find* myself closed off from them in one or the other sense.

In such cases, I would suggest that we still want to do a careful assessment of the normative considerations that may hold, and perhaps take action accordingly. After all, we may not have *direct* control over our first-pass reactions to objectionable behavior, but we certainly have control over our deliberations and actions that follow. I can reflect on those reactions, and decide whether there are indeed reasons to be open to the person in the future—or at least to gather more information, at minimum. For the first kind of giving up on a person, we have *indirect* control of our anger or resentment and other reactive attitudes (and, I suspect, the lack thereof). I can use various tactics to help me decide whether my objective attitude toward the person is unwarranted, and recall that they are a person—not just something to be managed or constrained.

A second kind of objector might ask whether it is too stringent a claim that giving up on a person (in either sense) is impermissible. After all, it seems like such an action does us a certain kind of service, particularly for those who think that our interests in autonomy or self-determination allow us to generally choose who we interact with and how we do so.[42]

In response: I do think we have obligations to ourselves, but they do not go so far as allowing us complete flexibility to choose who to permanently close ourselves off from (though I note they *can* justify or excuse doing so in the special cases discussed in sections 2 and 3). We have an obligation to treat even objectionable persons as *persons*, and we have obligations to others that, in some cases, require us to stay open to the person or even continue to engage with them. I will note, however, that this obligation to not give up on others (in the manners and contexts described in sections 2 and 3) is not the kind of duty that is enforceable.[43] However, when we are personally considering what we ought to do, the considerations against giving up in those manners and contexts should shape how we proceed.

In order to understand the third kind of objection, we must first borrow some insights from Elinor Mason's description of "detached blame." In chapter 5 of her book *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, Mason describes a distinction between "ordinary" and "detached" blame.[44] Ordinary blame has the purpose of communicating

42 Thanks to an objector for suggesting this framing.

43 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this point.

44 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 102. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for the reference to Mason.

that someone has failed on a shared value system, and that the wrongdoer can come to recognize the problem with their behavior. Yet there are agents from whom we cannot expect a response—they have so dissimilar a value system, or no value system at all—and, as a result, she says, the communicative act of ordinary blame would not be apt.[45] In such cases, detached blame can be of use to the blam*er* insofar as it allows them to "let off steam, to signal disapproval to her peers, to manage and manoeuvre around the offending agent."[46]

Detached blame is not quite the same thing as giving up in the first sense—Mason claims that it is a position in between ordinary communicative blame and a truly objective stance.[47] (The latter is what I mean by the first type of giving up.) She believes that detached blame might involve reactive attitudes of a different kind—contempt or disdain, perhaps—and, as such, detached blame may be better described as an example of giving up in the *second* sense (if we remain closed to the person).[48] Mason gives us reasons to think it is felicitous to deploy detached blame in the cases she specifies. Detached blame can indeed serve to protect oneself and communicate with others who share our own values, and motivates the blamer to withdraw from or avoid what she cannot change.[49] As she puts it, "There is no point in trying to communicate with such people, but we are bound to react to their trampling on the values we hold dear."[50] Mason argues that those who are deeply morally ignorant are apt for detached blame.[51] So perhaps we should think that similar considerations do favor giving up on the person (in the second sense) in the cases in which we cannot expect communicative uptake from the blamee, due to their possessing too dissimilar or no value system.[52]

Yet in response to a Mason-style objection, I would make two points. First, I worry about the ways in which detached blame is susceptible to the kinds of concerns discussed in 3.3. We may fail to meet our obligations to other members of our community if we stop ourselves *at* detached blame (despite the goods it can secure) without due care, particularly if we do not consider what else might need to be done to protect those who might be otherwise harmed by the person. Second, she is right that we cannot expect communicative uptake from

45 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 103, 113.

46 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 116.

47 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 147, 121.

48 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 118.

49 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 142.

50 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 122.

51 Mason, *Ways to Be Blameworthy*, 149.

52 Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on my framing here.

all people we might encounter—particularly those who have an exceedingly dissimilar value system. At the same time, as C. Thi Nguyen discusses in "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," perhaps there are other kinds of goals we may have in mind for such persons who not only have a dissimilar value system, but also systematically discredit reasons to believe other than they do—that is, they are in an echo chamber.[53] (Nguyen gives an extended discussion of a person with neo-Nazi beliefs as one such case.) Even though we cannot directly communicate blame or otherwise engage in a process of moral accountability or moral improvement with such a person, perhaps the strategy is different—we should cultivate trust that could help the person reboot their thinking about any flaws in their commitments.[54] Nguyen recognizes that this kind of transformation is difficult to secure and surely taxing, but it is one method that has realistically been able to change those with such commitments.[55]

One final objection—in a strange result of the argument of section 3—is that it seems like it is more acceptable for me to give up on people if I am particularly bad at intervening with wrongdoers or eliciting moral improvement. After all, it would seem that I am not well-positioned to secure the desired good for the rest of the community, or to elicit moral improvement from the person in question. This point, however, is fairly straightforward to respond to: even if I am remarkably bad at helping others in their self-diagnoses or self-correction, I have a different kind of responsibility to *improve my skills*. A lack of skill at intervention, social protection, or moral education (depending on the features of the case) is not an excusing condition for not shouldering the obligations we have; it is simply an obligation to do the work involved in acquiring or improving those skills.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that giving up on a person is not a practice that should proceed merely on the basis of personal preference. One form of giving up on a person—in which we hold a permanent objective attitude toward the target person—is morally impermissible, or at the very least morally inappropriate, on the grounds that doing so would fail to treat the person in question *as* a person. Even for the second kind of giving up on the person—in which we continue to hold the reactive attitudes toward the target person, but use other methods to protect ourselves from them—such a choice should be

53 Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," 146.

54 Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," 158–59.

55 Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles," 158–59.

given due care, including considering (a) the fittingness of doing so, (b) any special obligations we have to the person, and (c) the broader implications of our choice for the community around us. In many common cases, we impermissibly weigh the harms to ourselves over the harms to the entire community. If I am capable of refraining from giving up on the person without significant harm to myself, and can do so in a way that will aid the other persons in the community, I may have an obligation to do so.

So what do we do when facing morally (and otherwise) criticizable persons? Many things, I think. We can be angry, we can shame them, we can tell them off, we can try to change their hearts, or we can ignore them until we have a chance to cool down. But what we should not do so easily—at least, not until we know we have sufficient *justification*—is give up on them as a person.[56]

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56 Work in philosophy is best recognized as a community endeavor, and I am grateful for the philosophers and other individuals who have allowed me to spend a great deal of time thinking with them about when it is permissible to give up on someone. A special thanks goes to two anonymous reviewers for the *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy*, whose excellent comments on the penultimate draft prompted me to deepen and sharpen the argument, and especially to Jordan MacKenzie, whose friendship and incisive advice helped me in how to do so. Other thanks go to Jen Kling, Josh Kissel, Rachel Murree, Ryan Ravanpak, Ryan Preston-Roedder, Doug MacLean, Tom Hill, Barry Maguire, Joshua Blanchard, Tamara Fakhoury, Lauren Townsend, Caleb Harrison, Larisa Svirsky, Roger Crisp, Carla Merino-Rajme, Russ Shafer-Landau, Camil Golub, and Eileen John, and audiences at the APA Eastern, University of Iowa, and University of North Carolina (and the organizing members of those conferences where I presented early versions of this paper). Thanks as well to many family members and friends who have been thoughtful interlocutors as well—particularly Meera Bhardwaj, Mary Bhardwaj, and Michael Boyle. A final thanks to Charles Mills, whose belief in this project will always be appreciated and remembered.

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