

FORGIVENESS AND NEGATIVE PARTIALITY

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PARTIALITY AND FORGIVENESS are both characteristically *personal* dimensions of morality. Forgiveness requires having the relevant standing as victim (or being closely connected to the victim), and reasons of partiality are agent relative, being derived from an agent's relationships or histories of interaction. I argue that an integral connection between these phenomena emerges once an expansive concept of partiality is adopted—one that includes the negative analogue of intrinsically valuable relationships, such as friendship and family. While positive partiality involves the acquisition of special permissions or duties to promote another's interests, relationships of negative partiality involve the acquisition of special permissions or duties to discount interests. I argue that forgiveness should be conceptualized as a way of ending these negative relations.

In relationships of justified partiality, members are closer together in moral space, and justified negative partiality analogously reflects a kind of moral distance (strangers representing a midway point).¹ Forgiveness eliminates the moral distance within a negative relationship by altering the norms that it otherwise grounds.² This metaphor is made concrete in the proceeding analysis as the notion of negative partiality is clarified. But why accept this understanding of forgiveness? My approach draws from well-recognized considerations of theoretical adequacy developed in the literature: a theory of forgiveness should fit (and, ideally, explain) the personal nature of forgiveness and the normative significance of forgiveness, and it should distinguish forgiveness from related phenomena (e.g., excusing and justifying). Ideally, a complete theory of forgiveness will also capture nonparadigm cases of forgiveness, such as third-party forgiveness and self-forgiveness. The theory I present has this explanatory power.

- 1 This metaphor, first employed by Broad in "Self and Others," is discussed in further detail below.
- 2 As discussed below, Bennett and Warmke both endorse versions of the view that forgiveness alters moral norms. The contrast between our views will be explored in the second half of this paper.

I proceed by critiquing the prevailing view that forgiveness is exclusively a descriptive phenomenon (i.e., either a psychological process or a behavioral pattern). This discussion motivates a normative standard of theoretical adequacy for forgiveness, a condition that the framework of negative partiality fits and explains. The latter sections of the paper compare my view with related positions that understand forgiveness as a normative power, arguing that conceptualizing forgiveness in terms of negative partiality more plausibly delimits the scope of this power and avoids counterexamples faced by competing views. I conclude by considering some important ways in which descriptive and normative accounts of forgiveness may be related.

1. THEORETICAL ADEQUACY: INITIAL REMARKS

My view shares some common (though not entirely uncontroversial) propositions concerning forgiveness with existing accounts. First, forgiveness is a response to a wrongdoing: a homeowner might “forgive” the neighborhood children for breaking their window, but the possibility of forgiving is undercut if, in fact, the window was broken by a stick carried by a gust of wind. To forgive simultaneously construes an act *as* wrong and, in some sense, extinguishes the wrongdoing; a permissible act cannot be extinguished in the relevant sense. Second, forgiveness responds to the blameworthy. A driver who rear-ends another vehicle for a nonculpable reason (e.g., the driver suffered a heart attack) could be excused, but not forgiven. Third, I assume that forgiveness is a personal response to culpable wrongdoing. Only the victim (or sometimes a person closely connected to the victim) has standing to forgive. Presuming the neighborhood kids *did* break the window, the victimized homeowner (and not simply any person across town) can forgive. Relatedly, forgiveness is the prerogative of the individual who has this special standing: forgiveness *may* or *may not* be granted, but the decision is up to the victim with the relevant standing.³ Thus, the prerogative to forgive and the standing to forgive represent two distinct senses in which forgiveness is “up to” the victim.

In what follows, the conditions of theoretical adequacy are further developed by examining existing accounts in closer detail. I argue, following Warmke and Bennett, that forgiveness is normatively significant.⁴

3 Recognizing this prerogative presumes the *general* permissibility of forgiveness (there may be exceptions as discussed below).

4 Bennett, “The Alteration Thesis;” Warmke, “The Normative Significance of Forgiveness.”

2. THE NORMATIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORGIVENESS

The prevailing approach to forgiveness represents this phenomenon as an emotional process. These affective accounts typically cite Bishop Butler's idea that forgiveness is the "forswearing of resentment" as their point of departure, the forswearing of resentment understood as a descriptive psychological process.⁵ While forswearing amounts to ridding oneself of negative feelings directed toward the perpetrator of a wrongdoing, proponents of the affective view have plausibly argued that *merely* overcoming resentment is insufficient. One might simply *forget* a past wrongdoing and on this basis overcome resentment—but forgetting is not forgiving. One might also overcome resentment through behavior modification therapy, but this, too, is not forgiveness.⁶ More sophisticated affective accounts add conditions that explain *how* resentment must be overcome. Murphy's classical statement of this thought is that resentment must be overcome for moral reasons to qualify as forgiveness (e.g., because a perpetrator has apologized).⁷ Instead, it could be argued that forgiveness involves *seeing* the perpetrator as a decent person (one worthy of reconciliation).⁸ Alternatively, it could be argued that forgiveness involves a reevaluation of a person's character in a way that excises the particular wrongdoing for the purpose of assessment.⁹

In what follows, I draw attention to what is left out by a *solely* descriptive account of forgiveness.¹⁰ This critique requires the further observation that forgiveness changes the "moral standing" between the victim and the perpetrator of a wrong—i.e., their relationship departs from the baseline relation of equality that typically holds between persons. Here, I rely on the assumption that by *wronging* another, the perpetrator is, in some sense, a less worthy person (at

5 Butler himself may not have endorsed this psychological interpretation of forgiveness. See Newberry, "Joseph Butler on Forgiveness."

6 For relevant discussions, see Murphy, *Getting Even*; Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 529–55; Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean."

7 Murphy, *Getting Even*.

8 Murphy and Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy*.

9 Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean," 33–68.

10 In drawing attention to the idea that there are practices left out by solely descriptive accounts of forgiveness, I do not intend to draw the further conclusion that we must outright reject descriptive accounts of forgiveness. Descriptive theories have offered insight into the psychological dimension of forgiveness but, as argued in this section, do not fully capture a normative dimension of this practice. Insofar as the psychological and normative use cases of the concept of "forgiveness" come apart, we may need to be pluralistic with respect to the concept of forgiveness. This question is taken up further in the concluding section of the paper.

least from the vantage point of the victim). For this reason, the perpetrator has a good reason to want forgiveness, and there should be something that changes from the moral point of view once the victim has forgiven. My understanding of standing is clarified in the next section; however, to offer an example from a different context, we might say that by violating the law, a criminal has lowered their standing in the community—i.e., the community can punish them or owes them less. To imagine how an affective view would explain this idea, suppose that a victim forswears resentment because the perpetrator has apologized, and the victim now sees the perpetrator in a better light. This change must somehow explain why the moral standing of the perpetrator improves. However, if we appeal to the intrinsic features of forgiveness within the affective view, the explanation seems unsatisfying. After all, merely *being* resented does not make a person have lower moral standing with respect to another. One can resent a person, even if they have done nothing wrong; giving up this negative attitude cannot improve standing as there was no unequal standing to begin with.

The natural defense of the affective view that maintains an intrinsic connection between forgiveness and moral standing is to note the requirement that forgiveness responds to wrongdoing. Given this fact, the affective theorist could argue that it is not resentment, in general, that lowers a person's moral standing, but only resentment when based on a wrongdoing; in other words, they could argue that resentment does not have the power to alter a person's moral standing when there is *no reason* for resentment, but it can when appropriately grounded.

I do not believe this addendum resolves the issue. To illustrate why, consider the following case.

Wavering Wally: Wavering Wally was wronged by a former undergraduate colleague, Molly, but he has long since forgiven her for the past misdeeds. It has been years since Molly plagiarized Wally's term paper and their eventual reconciliation. However, Wally recently finds himself wavering in these feelings about the past: he experiences bouts of resentment followed by the dissolution of such feelings. After some time, the back-and-forth process shows no sign of letting up: currently, he resents her.

What should the affective account of forgiveness say about the case of Wavering Wally? Two possibilities suggest themselves, each seemingly problematic. It might be claimed that Wally really has forgiven Molly. This analysis is consistent with the fact that a long period of time passed during which Wally had given up his resentment. However, it is unclear how the affective view can make this

claim. After all, Wally has not fully overcome his resentment: he still presently resents her (on the basis of a wrongdoing). On the affective view, it further seems that Wally's wavering emotional state must cause Molly's moral standing to be lowered once again. This implication follows from the fact that it is *resentment* (based on wrongdoing) that is responsible for lowering Molly's standing. This implication seems problematic: Molly, who previously occupied a higher standing, has now been lowered merely in virtue of a change in Wally's emotional state. Why should forgiveness, on this view, be morally significant? Even declarations of the form "I forgive you" are subject to a revision in feelings.

On the other hand, one might argue that Wally never forgave Molly, and it is for this reason that her standing is still low when he later becomes resentful. However, this interpretation also seems implausible: if Wally has not forgiven Molly, it explains his current resentment, but it leaves the large gap of time when it *seemed* as if he had forgiven her incorrectly described. On this view, all apparent forgiveness was undermined by the fact that he later came to resent her (suppose it has been twenty years!). Should we say, following Aristotle on happiness, that a person cannot truly have forgiven until they are dead? On this interpretation, a declaration of forgiveness will, again, retroactively not count for anything given a revision in attitude. After all, the revision shows that there had been no forgiveness.¹¹

An alternative approach for affective accounts is to draw an indirect link between forgiveness and standing.¹² For example, it could be argued that forgiveness impacts a relationship, and it is the relationship that ultimately determines standing. Consider a case where resentment is a barrier to a friendship—the victimized party may wish to reconcile with the perpetrator but find themselves partly incapable of living up to the norms of the prior relationship (e.g., they may be unable to celebrate the success of the perpetrator). In a more extreme scenario, negative attitudes may completely undermine the relationship. A proponent of the affective model could plausibly argue that overcoming resentment (e.g., by reevaluating how a wrongdoing figures in the assessment

11 We might instead say that Wally *had* forgiven her, but no longer forgives. But on this reading, Wally's emotional wavering is still capable of altering Molly's moral standing. In the past, when Wally had forgiven Molly, her standing was higher, but now that he no longer forgives, her standing is lower.

Warmke draws from a related case to show that forgiveness has the normative effect of *obliging* the victim to treat the perpetrator according to altered norms (a conclusion I likewise endorse). I believe the modified scenario described above shows something further: purely affective accounts of forgiveness are unable to provide a complete theory of forgiveness insofar as they cannot diagnose cases of "wavering" emotional responses that take place over long periods of time.

12 This defense on behalf of the affective view was offered by an anonymous referee.

of a person's character) contributes to a normalization of a relationship, which in turn improves moral standing.

While affective shifts plausibly contribute to reconciliation, there remain difficulties with linking moral standing to the effects that forgiveness has on a relationship. A problematic implication of this view is that forgiveness remains contingently connected to moral standing. Suppose a (victimized) friend overcomes resentment yet makes the calculated decision to dissolve the friendship. We cannot appeal to the relational effects to explain any shift in moral standing (there will be no such effects). A second difficulty with an appeal to the significance of relational shifts is that forgiveness may take place outside of the context of a morally significant relationship. The victim of a pyramid scheme may come to forgive the perpetrator yet never have been in a morally significant relationship with them to begin with. Where there is no preexisting relationship, it is difficult to cite relational effects to explain an improvement in moral standing.¹³

The above considerations suggest that forgiveness does not merely track reactive attitudes. More generally, for any stipulated descriptive criteria of forgiveness, we can imagine a scenario where forgiveness has not “really” taken place because the victim alters their attitude or behavior; insofar as the perpetrator's standing is subject to revision, there is difficulty capturing the normative significance of forgiveness. The dilemma generated by this analysis motivates my endorsement of views that draw a connection between intrinsically normatively significant acts, such as promises and forgiveness. On these views, forgiveness should be understood as an act that alters the moral standing between parties by giving up certain rights that were previously possessed by the victim of the wrongdoing.¹⁴ If Molly has a legitimate complaint against

13 A potential response is that where there is no preexisting relationship, people are, by default, *open* to relationships with each other. The affective view may claim that resentment is a barrier to this openness, a situation that dissolves with forgiveness. While this model fits some cases, I worry that it will not capture the full scope of possibilities. Two people who share a workspace may have no desire to form a relationship—i.e., they may not be open to friendship from the outset of knowing each other. While a default attitude of openness might be common (or, perhaps, a virtue), a victim who started from a place of being closed off will have no way to improve the relationship with the perpetrator on the affective model. There may, in some cases, be good reasons for individuals to be closed to a relationship with each other (despite the fact that nothing wrong has occurred)—perhaps they know that they have nothing in common or simply find each other annoying. When forgiveness between such “incompatibles” occurs, I would be inclined to say that the relationship has improved, but only through changes in negative partiality (as outlined below).

14 Bennett terms this view the “alteration” thesis, and Warmke likewise endorses a version of it.

Wally *because* he resents her, we should conclude that he gave up the right to resent in his initial performative act of forgiveness.

3. MORAL ALTERATIONS AND NEGATIVE PARTIALITY

I argue that the moral alteration brought about by forgiveness should be understood in terms of partiality. To establish this view, I provide a sketch of how (positive) partiality should be understood, subsequently employing the negative analogue of this relation as a way of understanding forgiveness. Justified positive partiality involves a departure from the ordinary requirements of impartial morality: friends and family have special duties or permissions to promote each other's interests. For example, on most plausible moral theories, there is a *prima facie* duty of beneficence—i.e., the beneficial effects of an action provide a reason to perform the action; partiality can be thought of as strengthening this duty. In this form of partiality, all else being equal, there is a duty to promote the well-being of one's intimate rather than the equal well-being of a stranger. C. D. Broad pictured our moral relations as a series of concentric circles in moral space: an "innermost circle" of individuals representing those to whom we owe the most, with sequential circles representing decreasing degrees of intensity in our obligations.¹⁵ On Broad's picture, the outermost circle represents strangers, to whom we have the weakest obligations.

Broad's spatial metaphor is an attractive way to capture the idea that our duties have varying weights depending on the significance of a moral relation, but this picture should be expanded to include further variations of partiality. First, our partiality can be conceptualized in terms of *permissions* in addition to duties. If we assume a background normative theory that recognizes a *prima facie* duty of beneficence, partiality can be understood as a special permission that *allows* an individual to prefer the well-being of their intimates over strangers. On this view, an individual has a prerogative to promote the lesser well-being of their intimate over the greater well-being of a stranger.¹⁶ This form of partiality never *requires* that one prefers the interests of one's intimate. Therefore, underived special permissions and obligations represent two distinct dimensions of partiality (in contrast with the single dimension suggested by Broad).¹⁷

The second major modification to Broad's spatial metaphor targets the idea that the outermost circle is occupied by strangers. We conceptualize negative

15 Broad, "Self and Others."

16 Scheffler was an early proponent of this view. See Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*.

17 For an in-depth discussion of underived permissions, see Hurka and Schubert "Permissions to Do Less Than the Best."

partiality by supposing that moral distance goes beyond strangers. This relation can be explained in terms of negative analogues of the changes described above. Just as positive partiality can involve the baseline duty of beneficence strengthening, negative partiality can be thought of as this duty weakening. The negative relation can be understood in yet a stronger fashion if the initial duty of beneficence is “inverted”—i.e., the fact that an action benefits a negatively related individual counts as a reason *against* performing the action. Importantly, the weakened *prima facie* duty of beneficence does *not* imply a duty to harm, but rather a duty to prefer the lesser well-being of a stranger over the greater well-being of the individual who stands in a negative relation (the inverted duty likewise implies no duty to harm).¹⁸ And just as with the positive relation, we can conceptualize negative partiality in terms of a special permission to discount the interests of a particular person.

With a sketch of how negative partiality can be characterized, I return to the case of an individual victimized by plagiarism. I propose that forgiveness in this context should be understood to extinguish the relevant manifestation of negative partiality justified by the historical relationship between these parties. After the incidence of plagiarism, Molly and Wally might encounter each other in various contexts around campus. Wally plausibly has, in at least some cases, a special basis for discounting Molly’s well-being, thereby varying from the impartial requirements of morality. Suppose, for example, that Wally can assign his rent-controlled lease: it strikes me that he may choose, based on his past victimization, to ignore Molly’s application in favor of a stranger with whom he has no connection. In this case, negative partiality plausibly involves a permission to prefer the lesser good of the stranger over the negatively related individual (e.g., supposing that Molly stood to gain *more* from living in the apartment, Wally *still* seems permitted to prefer the well-being of the stranger). I would argue further that, within reason, Wally may discount well-being in *non-distributive* cases. Suppose, for example, that study groups regularly meet on campus and that Wally overhears a now-reforming Molly expressing a desperate need to somehow raise her grade. For any other student, it would strike me as a basic fulfillment of the duty of beneficence to offer information about the group, but Wally seems permitted to avoid volunteering this information. To be precise, I would not describe Wally as being *required* to avoid assisting Molly in the above ways: it is his prerogative to discount or not.¹⁹

18 Of course, negative partiality *can* be conceptualized as a permission or duty to harm, but these normative changes are not a *necessary* characterization of the relation.

19 A question at this stage regards the precise *scope* of the permission of negative partiality. For example, it does not seem like the victim of plagiarism can prefer to save a stranger over the perpetrator in a rescue scenario. My view is that where increasingly significant welfare

There are ways to be skeptical about negative partiality: some theories of desert hold that vice warrants impartial censure and proportionate suffering. It could plausibly be argued, for example, that insofar as Molly has victimized Wally, *everyone* has reasons to discount Molly's interests. Such a position challenges the idea that Wally has *special* reasons to discount Molly's well-being and, therefore, the broader thesis that Wally has acquired special standing to forgive. In response, it may be helpful to consider how analogous concerns could be raised with respect to the justification of *positive* partiality. For example, we often see a great friend as simultaneously a great person. But despite the legitimate sense in which a good friend (and a correspondingly good person) may be the more deserving recipient of benefit, friendship is plausibly characterized as a relationship of justified partiality. There is an explanation for this analysis: while good friends may have underlying virtuous dispositions, friends still benefit each other in ways that go above and *beyond* what is required by impartial desert. Suppose that *A* is friends with *B* and *Y* is friends with *Z*, and each individual is aptly characterized as a great friend. While each is (by stipulation) an equally deserving person, it still seems that *A* may prioritize the interests of *B* (over *Z* or *Y*), and *Z* may prioritize the interests of *Y* (over *A* or *B*).

Returning to the case of Molly and Wally, I would argue that even if Molly warrants less from the impartial point of view (i.e., we suppose that everyone may discount her interests), Wally still has special reasons for discounting. To test this hypothesis, we could imagine an idealized scenario that mirrors the pairs of friendships described above. Suppose, for example, that Wally is assigning his lease and must choose between either Molly or the perpetrator of a wrongdoing similar in degree (e.g., some *other* plagiarizer). Must he choose to distribute the benefit impartially, or can he prefer the stranger? Intuitively, I would argue that the stranger may be preferred. A more pedestrian example arises in cases of infidelity: while the victim of a breach of trust within a

is at stake, a more serious wrongdoing is required to justify corresponding negative partiality (i.e., only a serious wrongdoing could possibly justify discounting a person's welfare in a life-and-death scenario). Analogously, while union members plausibly have duties of *positive* partiality to each other, being members of the same union does not obviously allow for preferential treatment in a rescue scenario. See Dworkin, *Law's Empire*; Stroud, "Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency"; and Davis, "Scope Restrictions, National Partiality, and War." Similarly, scope restrictions on partiality apply in the context where an individual explicitly undertakes a role that requires distributing a good in an impartial fashion. For example, a physician may not seek to manipulate an organ-donation list to prioritize their loved one, nor may a judge seek to apply a reduced sentence for the sake of an old friendship. Likewise, the scope of negative partiality should be restricted to exclude encounters that take place where the victim undertakes a role that explicitly requires the application of impartial rules (e.g., where the victim is judging an athletic competition). See Cottingham, "Partiality, Favouritism and Morality," for a classical discussion.

relationship may have strong reasons for moral distancing (perhaps obligations for this response), it seems implausible (and overly punitive) to extend reasons of identical strength to all prospective romantic partners.

Further considerations support interpreting the case as one involving negative partiality, rather than a straightforward application of justice. While plagiarism warrants punishment, the correct office for fairly distributing it is most plausibly a university body; the happenstance interactions that transpire between victim and perpetrator hardly count as impartial justice. Moreover, we can stipulate for dialectical purposes that Molly's conduct is mitigated by the overall assessment of her character. Perhaps she has previously been an upstanding member of the university community, only driven to plagiarism by overstressing herself in service to student governance. While such mitigating factors could plausibly undermine third-party reasons for negative responses (i.e., how the general community of students should respond to Molly), they nonetheless seem unable to undermine the victim's special standing to discount interests.²⁰

While the above motivates the intuitive case for negative partiality, it may be further asked *why* such reasons for action are generated by a history of victimization. A full defense of the grounding of negative partiality is beyond the scope of this paper, but I hope to gesture at how the issue can be approached. Discussions of partiality have largely focused on how preferential treatment among friends, family, and other special relationships can be justified in light of the apparent impartial demands of traditional moral systems. Given, for example, the apparent equal significance of interests "from the point of view of the universe," impartialists ask why intimates may attach greater weight to each other's interests. On my view, understanding how partialists have replied to this challenge can inform the analogous relation of negative partiality, wherein less weight is attached to the interests of a perpetrator of a wrong.

20 *Mutatis mutandis*, the reasons of negative partiality possessed by Wally do not reduce to a collectively held right possessed by the university community to discount Molly's interests. While it is true that all members of the community may have a special reason to stand up against plagiarism (because they are members of the community impacted by the wrongdoing), Wally has stronger reasons for such responses. We can observe this difference in the two scenarios described above: Wally may discount the interests of the individual who plagiarized *his* work over some other individual who plagiarized, and Wally's reasons for discounting Molly's interests are not undermined by the fact that Molly has contributed to the university community (by contrast, the community's reasons for negative responses may significantly be diminished by such factors, even if not eliminated). I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

For a more developed discussion of negative partiality, see Brandt, "Negative Partiality" and Lange, "Other-Sacrificing Options."

Among the most prominent approaches to justifying positive partiality is appeal to an agent's projects (e.g., Stroud) and appeal to the value of special relationships (e.g., Scheffler).²¹ Stroud argues that a special permission to pursue one's projects is needed to push back against the excessive demands of consequentialist obligations, which are at odds with the nature of human agency. Since special relationships are a class of projects that *require* partiality, the special duties of partiality are justified indirectly through an agent's projects. Those who justify partiality by appeal to the *value* of such relationships argue that morality must make room for the intrinsic value of friendship, family, etc., and that such relationships can only exist if partiality itself is permitted. Again, partiality is indirectly justified, in this case by appeal to its role in bringing about intrinsic value.

If we are to move beyond appeal to the intuitive justification of negative partiality, we might deploy known justifications of partiality to the negative sphere. A victim of wrongdoing may very well transform their relationship with the perpetrator into a project of personal significance. Mirroring positive relationships, which require partiality, the project that a victim undertakes plausibly could require discounting the interests of the perpetrator (they may likewise take up the related project of standing up for themselves, which could also involve discounting the interests of the perpetrator). There will, of course, be outstanding questions for this approach; for example, where will projects of negative partiality be themselves justified? Moving to the second approach, while negative relationships are not traditional candidates for what people value, a victim can plausibly value their resistance and opposition to the perpetrator of a wrong. By resisting the perpetrator, the victim enters a kind of relationship worth valuing, one that involves negative partiality. We can, therefore, construct a mirror of another prominent grounding approach to positive partiality. Insofar as morality must make room for relationships that can reasonably be valued, and such relationships involve negative partiality, negative partiality will be justified.

Both approaches described above give rise to further questions and challenges, but general strategies for grounding negative partiality can draw from known resources. In arguing that forgiveness should be grounded by negative partiality, I do not take a particular stance with respect to *which* approach we should endorse, but I take it that a range of options is open and compatible with the analysis that follows.

A straightforward explanation of what forgiveness accomplishes and why it is normatively significant follows from the above framework. Morality recognizes victims by empowering them to discount the interests of the perpetrator.

21 Scheffler, *The Rejection of Consequentialism*; Stroud, "Permissible Partiality, Projects, and Plural Agency."

A victim who forgives surrenders this power to discount, and it is for this reason that Molly is entitled to complain when Wally “wavers” in his forgiveness. To explain the varieties of forgiveness, we should consider the further normative question of whether the victim needs a *reason* to forgive. The present framework addresses questions of justification (or reasons for forgiveness) by considering the specific nature of the normative change that results from a wrongdoing. As noted above, the victim of plagiarism plausibly acquires a *special permission* to discount the perpetrator’s well-being—i.e., a right to discount or not to discount. Insofar as the victim possesses a right of this kind, it may be abandoned at will. An analogy to promising seems fitting here. An individual who promises to ϕ surrenders their right to $\sim\phi$, and *insofar* as they are permitted to ϕ from the outset, they do not require a *reason* to promise to ϕ . A promise to meet someone for lunch thereby surrenders the right to do otherwise, but this promise does not require justification if the lunchtime meeting was permissible from the outset; likewise, forgiveness surrenders the right to discount a person’s well-being, and given a standing permission of negative partiality, no special reason is needed to give up the right.²²

It is nonetheless straightforwardly compatible with this framework that there can be good reasons to forgive. A person who, for example, apologizes or provides compensation may be worthy of forgiveness—however, these reasons are simply not required for and do not compel forgiveness. Consider again the analogy to promising. There can be better or worse reasons to promise to help your friend move: perhaps they have helped you in the past, or asked nicely, or desperately needed the help. Despite these good reasons to promise, the promise does not require them to gain normative force.

The victim-perpetrator relationship arising in the plagiarism case represents a paradigm instance of forgiveness that captures the prerogative of forgiveness. But the normative assessment of forgiveness might not be limited to this kind. Other varieties of negative partiality explain how we assess other cases of forgiveness. Consider, for example, the idea that forgiveness ought, in some cases, to be *conditioned*—i.e., it would be either impermissible or *impossible* to forgive an individual until certain conditions are met (repentance, apologies, reparations, etc.).²³ Conditional forgiveness is captured by the idea that the

22 For a contrasting view, see Milam, “Reasons to Forgive.” Milam argues that “accounts of forgiveness as cancelling a moral debt” (such as the views of Warmke, Bennett, and myself) do not distinguish between deciding not to blame and forgiving (246). After all, one may cancel a debt by deciding the perpetrator was not blameworthy *or* forgiving, and so it will be unclear how the two are distinct on the debt-cancellation view. I respond to this specific concern below.

23 For a defense of the view that forgiveness ought to be conditional, see Haber, *Forgiveness*.

victim is *obliged* to engage in distancing responses—i.e., they have duties of negative partiality conditional upon the performance of certain acts by the perpetrator (or certain circumstances being present, such as the suffering of the perpetrator). My purpose here is not to take a substantive position on the question of whether forgiveness is sometimes conditional or not, but to show that the framework of negative partiality has an explanation of this possibility. Those attracted to conditional forgiveness plausibly endorse the corresponding idea that victims are (conditionally) prohibited from engaging in certain forms of beneficence (e.g., in virtue of self-respect). Consider, for example, whether the former partner of an unrepentant philanderer charged with operating an online romance scam should contribute to their ex-partner's legal defense fund. In such a case, many people would be inclined to say that the victim not only *may* refrain from offering assistance but that they ought to refrain (perhaps reflected by the imperative to “stand up for yourself”). Clearly, however, such a prohibition cannot be an *impartial* prohibition as considerations of impartial justice generally *support* access to qualified legal assistance.

Negative partiality, therefore, has the resources to explain both cases of conditional and unconditional forgiveness, the former grounded by the prerogative of negative partiality and the latter being captured by a duty of negative partiality. Once the relevant conditions have been satisfied, the victim shifts from having a duty of negative partiality to possessing the prerogative, and the paradigm model of forgiveness will apply. The explanation might proceed as follows: insofar as the perpetrator has apologized, the victim will no longer be acting in a way that compromises their self-respect when they choose to no longer discount the interests of the perpetrator. The victim is nonetheless still *entitled* to discount the interests of the perpetrator. Importantly, this picture preserves the sense in which the victim has the prerogative to forgive in both conditional and unconditional cases of forgiveness: even when the victim is prohibited from forgiveness, it will ultimately be up to them (and not anyone else) to forgive.

Before moving to the theoretical virtues of this account of forgiveness, a final question concerns the application of this theory within friendship, family, and other relationships of positive partiality. Imagine, for example, a breach of trust in the context of an otherwise long-standing and great friendship (suppose that Andy violates the confidence of Lesley by carelessly revealing sensitive information about her marriage). It is implausible to suppose that such a breach *necessarily* justifies treating Andy as an individual who is owed less than a stranger—i.e., it is possible for a friendship to withstand such a wrong. We might ask the following: if forgiveness involves surrendering the right to *negative* partiality, how is forgiveness possible when a relationship ultimately remains a case of partiality? On my analysis, if friendship (and thus partiality) withstands a

wrongdoing, two factors are present in the relationship: a wrongdoing that generates a permission to attach less weight to the interests of the friend than would otherwise be permitted and a history (e.g., a shared history of mutual beneficence and intimacy) that grounds a stronger *prima facie* duty of partiality. On this picture, wrongdoing in the context of an intimate relationship does not transform the relationship into enmity but still generates “moral distance”—i.e., an agent-relative reason that justifies discounting the interests of the perpetrator.

While a relationship may remain a case of (overall) justified partiality, the *prima facie* permission generated by the wrongdoing still alters the norms of the relationship. In particular, the victim will now be allowed (but not required) to discount the well-being of the perpetrator when it would have otherwise not been permissible (this relation might be termed “relative negative” partiality since the moral distance is relative to the higher baseline of beneficence in the relationship). Suppose, for example, that shortly after the breach of trust, Andy asks Lesley for assistance with his *own* relationship difficulties. While offering a patient and sympathetic ear might have otherwise been the unquestioned requirement of their friendship, it is natural to see how the breach in trust allows Lesley to be distant; of course, the distance created by a wrongdoing may be more subtle: Lesley may simply now have a legitimate basis for being less responsive to the overall maintenance of the friendship (e.g., by withdrawing from shared projects and activities). Thus, while Lesley may still have “net” duties of partiality to Andy (e.g., she would be present for him in ways that she would not be for others), she simultaneously has a special basis for discounting his interests. In forgiving, Lesley surrenders this claim to discounting and thus eliminates the moral distance present in the relationship.

In sum, forgiveness within partial relationships is continuous with forgiveness in the context of other interpersonal relationships. In each case, the victim acquires a special claim against the perpetrator to discount their well-being and surrenders this claim in forgiving. The central difference between these cases is where the baseline duty of beneficence is set prior to the wrongdoing. Where individuals have no relationship, forgiveness surrenders the right to negative partiality (understood in the strict sense outlined at the outset of the paper), and where there is a positive relationship, forgiveness surrenders the rights to “relative” negative partiality (i.e., the right to ignore the stronger duty of beneficence that would otherwise be present in the relationship).

4. EXPLANATORY ADEQUACY

Having illustrated how negative partiality can model core cases of forgiveness, I turn to the theoretical virtues of this view. Consider, first, the well-established

notion that forgiveness is a *personal* relation—i.e., only certain individuals have the standing to forgive. The view that forgiveness involves surrendering the right to negative partiality captures this idea. After all, justified partiality is conceptualized in terms of agent-relative reasons for action—i.e., only individuals who stand in the relevant special relationship have reasons of partiality. Many accounts of forgiveness *stipulate* that only the victim of a wrongdoing may forgive, but the present view *explains* this fact: it is because the victim acquires the prerogative of negative partiality that they may forgive—individuals without this right cannot surrender it.

The present view also offers a natural explanation for why forgiveness responds to a blameworthy wrongdoing and is thereby distinct from acts of “justification” or “excusing.” The most plausible ground of negative partiality is culpable wrongdoing. By contrast, to discount someone’s interests for poor reasons (e.g., because of a person’s taste in music) does not thereby reflect genuine moral distance; one may *act* as if there is moral distance, but poor taste in music does not justify negative partiality. If a blameworthy wrong is a necessary condition of negative partiality, then we can explain why the neighbor who suffers from a broken window carried by a gust of wind is unable to forgive the neighborhood kids. Forgiveness surrenders the right to negative partiality, but no such right is present in this case. Likewise, an individual who overcomes a negative affective/behavioral disposition by recognizing that they were never wronged is not thereby surrendering any special rights of negative partiality.²⁴ It is for this reason that we say they are “justifying” the act, rather than forgiving. Similarly, excusing involves recognizing that an act *would* have generated reasons of negative partiality (but for some special consideration) and is, therefore, also distinct from forgiving.

The present account of the grounds of negative partiality could, of course, be questioned. One might reasonably argue, for example, that a permissibly inflicted harm generates reasons of negative partiality. Consider a family-operated flower shop that has been run for generations, only to face stiff competition from a new entrant; over the course of a few years, a price war ensues, and the entrant ultimately prevails. Some might be sympathetic to the idea that despite the permissibility of the new store’s conduct (assuming fair competition), the family has a legitimate basis for resentment and corresponding acts of negative

24 This addresses Milam’s concern that the debt-cancellation model of forgiveness does not distinguish between ceasing to blame and forgiving. The essence of my response is that one cannot successfully surrender a right (i.e., genuinely forgive) if by the very nature of “surrendering” the right, they deny having had the right in question. Insofar as ceasing to blame involves recognizing that an act was not culpably wrong, the person who ceases to blame makes no claim to having a right to negative partiality (or giving it up).

partiality. Perhaps they retaliate by deploying their vehicles in the most convenient loading zones of the entrant's storefront or lobby in support of Walmart's effort to have the area rezoned for an even bigger commercial enterprise. While I am unsympathetic toward the idea that these responses are permissible, let us grant a hypothetical interlocutor the case. Inasmuch as one endorses reasons for negative partiality in this case, I believe our interlocutor would *likewise* be inclined to endorse the idea that there *is* something to forgive in this scenario. If the now-impooverished family has a right to the aforementioned acts, they can presumably surrender the right in question through another act that would be characterized as forgiveness. Notably, this interpretation would force us to revise a widely held condition of forgiveness—i.e., forgiveness responds to a wrong. This brief dialectic supports the general idea that our understanding of forgiveness is *ultimately* informed by negative partiality: insofar as we expand the grounds of negative partiality, we likewise expand the cases where forgiveness is present. I believe this connection is theoretically significant. It is striking that the background conditions which render forgiveness possible are aligned with the grounds of negative partiality. A plausible inference is that forgiveness is to be explained in terms of negative partiality.

Before moving to nonparadigm instances of forgiveness (i.e., self-forgiveness and third-party forgiveness), there are two final explanatory considerations to consider. First, I propose that there is an attractive *disconnect* between the pursuit of justice and forgiveness on the view presently defended.²⁵ For example, it will be straightforwardly consistent with forgiveness to testify against the perpetrator of a crime, pursue them actively in court, and publicly affirm the appropriateness of punishment. These actions are compatible with forgiveness because in surrendering the right to negative partiality, the victim makes no statement regarding the appropriateness of impartial punishment. Of course, a judge may look to the fact that the victim has forgiven as a way of evaluating whether the perpetrator has sincerely felt guilt, made amends, and so on. Though, even this connection between forgiveness and justice must be qualified. An act of *unconditional* forgiveness will not be evidence of reformation in the perpetrator. By contrast, it *does* make sense to look at the reasons motivating forgiveness as evidence of the mitigating factors relevant to punishment.

And finally, the present view explains the sense in which forgiveness reestablishes moral equality between victim and perpetrator. Partiality represents a paradigmatic departure from equality. For this reason, positive partiality has historically requested justification: we must explain why parents, friends, and

25 Allais articulates important concerns with several views that fail to disconnect forgiveness from justice. See Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean"

other associates can treat the interests of their intimates with greater urgency than those of strangers. In the case of *negative* partiality, the justificatory ground begins with wrongdoing, and this explanation seems in keeping with the widely held view that the perpetrator of a wrong occupies a lower moral standing, albeit one that can be improved by forgiveness. The metaphorical language of “higher” and “lower” standing is made concrete by the idea that the victim possesses a special right to discount the interests of the perpetrator, and it improves the perpetrator’s standing by surrendering the right in question.

5. THIRD-PARTY FORGIVENESS AND SELF-FORGIVENESS

While it is widely acknowledged that forgiveness is not an *impersonal* phenomenon (i.e., a restricted class of individuals has standing to forgive), it has been plausibly argued that this standing should be expanded to include close relations of the victim. One interpretation of such forgiveness is that it is purely grounded on the indirect victimization of these relations themselves. For example, relatives of a victim may be harmed insofar as they are distressed by the suffering of their loved ones. Alternatively, some theories of well-being hold that individual welfare is intrinsically impacted by the happiness of one’s relations; it could be argued that the lives of parents go well, in part, to the extent that their children are happy. On this view, wrongfully harming a child indirectly victimizes the parents who then acquire the standing to forgive.²⁶

If third parties are, in fact, victims, then forgiveness will apply in the paradigmatic sense. However, as convincingly argued by Pettigrove, third parties who declare forgiveness are not necessarily taking themselves to be victims. Strong evidence for this claim is that intimates connected to a victim may state their inability to forgive a perpetrator for what they did to *the victim* rather than to themselves. Genuine third-party forgiveness is distinguished, therefore, by having an other-regarding basis: the permissibility (or impermissibility) of such forgiveness is not grounded in the forgiver, but in an other (i.e., the victim). Paradigmatic forgiveness, by contrast, has a self-regarding basis: it is grounded within the individual who is forgiving (this difference will have explanatory importance detailed below). While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to independently establish the plausibility of third-party forgiveness, I aim to show that such forgiveness can be accommodated within the framework of negative partiality. I subsequently show how this analysis extends to self-forgiveness, providing a unified account of nonparadigmatic cases of forgiveness.

26 For discussions, see Griswold, *Forgiveness*; Pettigrove, “The Standing to Forgive”; and Walker, “Third Parties and the Social Scaffolding of Forgiveness.”

Several concerns must be kept in view when developing an account of third-party forgiveness. First, there is the risk of it undermining the significance of the *primary* victim's forgiving. In seeking forgiveness from the parents of a victim of assault, we might worry that the perpetrator has purchased inner peace in a way that inappropriately bypasses the moral imperative of the victim.²⁷ Perhaps reflecting this concern, the endorsement of third-party forgiveness typically comes with the caveat that the intimates of a victim should defer to the victim before offering up their own forgiveness. As a result, third-party forgiveness is distinguished by the fact that third parties typically do not *default* to having a prerogative. Second, third-party forgiveness risks allowing individuals far too disconnected from the initial wrong to be capable of forgiving. A successful account should provide some mechanism for limiting the scope of nonvictim forgivers.

To show how the framework of negative partiality accommodates third-party forgiveness, we must consider how negative partiality manifests in cases where our intimates have been wronged. For example, suppose that a small-town arsonist sets fire to a home owned by a local resident, Emily. Lucas, a local restaurateur and Emily's close friend, happens to have a project of working with and reintegrating convicts into the community by offering them employment. While the restaurateur's policy seems permissible, even admirable, we might take pause regarding the prospective employment of the arsonist. It is virtuous to reintegrate former convicts, but those connected to victims of crime should reasonably resist playing this role. Most importantly, Emily can plausibly complain about her friend offering such assistance. On this assessment, Lucas has an agent-relative basis for discounting the arsonist's well-being (i.e., a reason of negative partiality).

If third parties acquire duties of negative partiality when their intimates have been wronged, then they have an obligation to discount the interests of the perpetrator. As with conditional forgiveness, this obligation weakens merely to a prerogative when our intimates have either themselves forgiven the perpetrator and/or when relevant conditions have been met (repentance, apologies, etc.). For this reason, third parties do not *simply* have the prerogative to forgive: the standing to forgive arises when their duty weakens by meeting the relevant conditions. This picture addresses our concerns about third-party forgiveness. We might wonder who has the standing to forgive when they are not the immediate victim of a wrongdoing. The answer is to be found by looking at where we intuitively believe there are obligations, based on a relationship with the victim, to discount the interests of a perpetrator. This view rules out random strangers who merely "feel" a sense of association with the victim. Such individuals lack

27 Dillon articulates a concern along these lines in "Self-Forgiveness and Self-Respect."

the standing to forgive insofar as they have no special duties of negative partiality. Second, this theory addresses the concern that third-party forgiveness will undermine the primary victim's forgiveness. Since victims and third parties have independent prerogatives of negative partiality, forgiveness by a third party does not undermine the primary victim's forgiveness. Third-party forgiveness, therefore, represents a second-best scenario when the primary victim is unwilling or cannot forgive. Such forgiveness reestablishes equality between the victim's relata and the perpetrator, even if it cannot establish equality among all relevant parties. Likewise, forgiveness by the primary victim does not *entail* forgiveness by one's intimates: it is still up to our relata to independently surrender their right to discount the interests of the perpetrator.

The explanation of why third-party forgiveness is distinct from paradigm forgiveness is that our intimates most plausibly have duties of negative partiality, rather than mere permissions. While this picture makes sense of third-party forgiveness, we could ask *why* duties of negative partiality arise in cases where our intimates have been victimized when our *own* victimization *typically* involves mere permissions. At this stage, I have offered several intuitive cases, but there is a deeper explanation for the pattern. It is to be found in the more primitive distinction between "self-regarding" reasons for action and "other-regarding" reasons for action. Common-sense morality recognizes a standing permission to discount our own interests *simply* because they are our own (self-sacrifice is *typically* meritorious and only invites moral criticism when at the expense of self-respect). For example, most people recognize a very weak duty to make *oneself* happy. By contrast, it is extremely uncommon to deny the *prima facie* obligation of beneficence.

The distinction between a self-regarding basis for action and an other-regarding basis helps to explain why third parties have duties of negative partiality, but primary victims (typically) do not. The *ground* of negative partiality when our intimates have been victimized is our intimate—i.e., the primary victim is the source of our reasons to be negatively partial to the perpetrator. Insofar as the ground of moral response is an other, negative partiality manifests as a duty; by contrast, our *own* victimization generally *permits* us to act with negative partiality, as the ground of this relation lies in ourselves (as with other cases of self-sacrifice, forgiveness will also often be supererogatory). When the primary victim offers *their* own forgiveness, they reestablish equality with the perpetrator; this act is one way of signaling to third parties that *their* forgiveness respects what is owed to the victim. However, the context of the initial forgiveness still matters: a primary victim who has forgiven but done so in a way that is inconsistent with self-respect does not provide a third party with an adequate basis for secondary forgiveness. Relatedly, a primary victim who

forgives but otherwise signals a need for others to censure the perpetrator may thereby undermine the permissibility of third-party forgiveness. In sum, the permissibility of third-party forgiveness rests (at least in part) on whether the practice is consistent with appropriate consideration for the primary victim.

The self/other distinction also allows us to extend the account of forgiveness to the phenomenon of *self-forgiveness*. As with third-party forgiveness, we should be concerned by unreflective (or hasty) self-forgiveness. After all, would an agent not always *desire* to profit from self-forgiveness if possible? This concern risks stripping away the normative significance of this phenomenon.²⁸ The problem dissolves if self-forgiveness is instead seen as a special case of third-party forgiveness that applies to the perpetrator. Much like the victim, the perpetrator has special reasons for discounting their *own* interests in response to having victimized another. There is an affective analogue of this response—i.e., feelings of guilt—but, clearly, there are also implications for the actions of the perpetrator. This requirement is not best characterized as self-punishment but rather as a duty to avoid deriving benefit from the victim of their actions. Should, for example, our reforming arsonist seek networking advice from their *victim* as a means of furthering their reintegration into society? Plausibly not, even though the perpetrator can otherwise attempt to reintegrate. The possibility of self-forgiveness will, then, parallel cases of conditional forgiveness and third-party forgiveness—i.e., the perpetrator *begins* by having a duty to refrain from benefiting from their victims (i.e., a duty of negative partiality directed at themselves) and acquires the prerogative in light of relevant conditions being met (forgiveness by the victim *or* having sufficiently repented, apologized, etc.). The *duty*, in this case, is explained by the fact that it is grounded by agency of an other (i.e., the victim); after all, it is the *victim* who may complain when the perpetrator readily asserts self-forgiveness.²⁹ Moreover, as with third-party forgiveness, self-forgiveness never undermines the victim's forgiveness since neither affects the victim's prerogative.

28 On Snow's view, self-forgiveness aims at "self-restoration." I endorse this idea in the sense that self-restoration can be understood as a *normative* phenomenon that allows one to have equal standing in the moral community. However, insofar as self-restoration is to be understood as a psychological/affective phenomenon, my view is distinct from Snow and others who understand self-forgiveness in these terms. For discussions, see Snow, "Self-Forgiveness"; Mills, "On Self-Forgiveness and Moral Self-Representation"; and Hughes, "On Forgiving Oneself."

29 As Hughes argues, we can also forgive ourselves for wrongs to oneself ("On Forgiving Oneself"). Self-forgiveness in *this* sense would be analyzed in a way that approximates the paradigmatic case of forgiveness (i.e., insofar as one has only wronged oneself, there will be a prerogative to forgive).

This rough picture of self-forgiveness is continuous with third-party forgiveness yet stands in stark contrast to the dominant view, which understands self-forgiveness in descriptive terms (e.g., resolving negative psychic states, such as guilt). These views face similar challenges to those of descriptive accounts of paradigm forgiveness. A case of “wavering” about inner guilt could illustrate the point: have I forgiven myself if I experience a resurgence of guilt twenty years after the fact? Suppose instead that I *no longer* feel guilt but correctly believe that I *ought* to feel guilt. On a purely descriptive account, I *would* have forgiven myself so long as I have no such feelings (or other inner psychic trouble), but this seems intuitively untrue. Likewise, if I correctly believe that I *ought* to avoid deriving benefit from the victim of my action, I hardly count as having self-forgiven. Descriptive views cannot easily explain these observations.

6. COMPETING PERFORMATIVE ACCOUNTS

Understanding forgiveness as a performative akin to a promise is reflected by what Christopher Bennett terms the “alteration thesis,” the idea that forgiveness *changes* a normative situation.³⁰ Bennett and Warmke have both recently argued that forgiveness waives obligations owed by the perpetrator to the victim, most notably the duty to compensate and apologize.³¹ Bennett argues further that forgiveness may involve a recognition by the victim that the perpetrator has fulfilled their obligations, along with a commitment to treat the perpetrator in a corresponding manner (he terms this “redemptive forgiveness” since it redeems or recognizes redemption in the perpetrator). I clearly endorse the alteration thesis, understanding it in terms of surrendering the right to negative partiality. However, this difference in how the alteration thesis should be understood is significant. As argued below, I believe forgiveness does not alter the norms in the perpetrator (e.g., the duty to apologize and compensate) but should instead solely focus on the norms of victim.

7. COMPENSATION, APOLOGIES, AND PROMISES

On Bennett’s view, one function of forgiveness is to abrogate the duties to compensate and apologize to the victim (or cancel other secondary obligations

30 Bennett, “The Alteration Thesis,” 207.

31 See Warmke, “The Normative Significance of Forgiveness.” Hughes also suggests that forgiveness can be a performative, although he does not articulate a view about the moral change brought about by forgiveness (“On Forgiving Oneself”). Pettigrove also offers an early articulation of this view in “The Forgiveness We Speak.”

acquired by the perpetrator in virtue of their wrongdoing).³² This analysis raises the question of what forgiveness accomplishes when the perpetrator no longer owes anything to the victim of a wrongdoing. A problem arises, for example, when the perpetrator has *already* apologized or *already* offered compensation for their wrong. Since the *perpetrator* may take actions to execute these obligations, the perpetrator risks undermining the prerogative of forgiveness; there will be nothing left to forgive once the perpetrator's obligations are fulfilled. Bennett offers a novel solution to this problem by arguing that forgiveness alters the normative situation by an act of "redemptive" forgiveness, which plays the role of "acknowledging" that the perpetrator has fulfilled their obligations and generates an obligation in the victim to (going forward) treat the perpetrator *as if* they have fulfilled these obligations.

To assess this approach, I first consider whether forgiveness abrogates the duty to apologize. This understanding of the moral alteration brought about by forgiveness is somewhat striking when considering that providing an apology (or at least reiterating an apology) is often *prompted* by forgiveness. Such a reaction is difficult to interpret on the view that forgiveness waives the right to an apology. To illustrate, consider how two friends might navigate another debt that has been waived. Suppose April and Sheldon share lunch, and Sheldon tells April to "forget about it," thereby abrogating the duty of repayment. One fitting response to such an exchange is gratitude, but suppose instead that April attempts to repay Sheldon. In this case, the repayment is clearly an attempt to *reject* the abrogated duty—April does not *want* the debt cancelled, and repayment both acknowledges this fact and rejects the attempted abrogation. If forgiveness abrogates the duty to apologize, apologizing *post-forgiveness* suggests a "rejection" of the forgiveness, but clearly this is not the case; apologizing coheres with and reaffirms the rapprochement generated by forgiveness.

Another way in which forgiveness could alter the moral situation, according to Bennett and Warmke, is by waiving the right to compensation. To assess this claim, several ways of conceptualizing compensation should be distinguished. In the straightforward case, such as negligent damage to a vehicle, compensation has a price—i.e., the damages can be quantified in relatively uncontroversial financial terms. Compensation is harder to quantify when damages are abstract. The approach in a case of personal injury will typically involve placing a value on the loss of a bodily function, and while this compensation is said to make a person "whole," it is clearly metaphorical. Other abstract wrongs that give rise to the duty of compensation include "unjust enrichment" where

32 See Twambly, "Mercy and Forgiveness," for another defense of the view that forgiveness involves waiving the right to compensation.

a perpetrator derives benefit from a person's property without permission or wrongs without any damages (e.g., harmless trespass). Notably, some serious affronts to a person are unlikely to be assessed primarily in terms of harm (e.g., the denial of the right to vote). In the aforementioned cases, a person is never literally made "whole" by compensation, and attaching a price to the transgression seems inherently contentious.

In the straightforward case where a person has suffered a loss with a *price*, I cannot see how forgiveness has any effect on the right to compensation. It seems perfectly consistent, for example, for a negligent driver to apologize and seek forgiveness, even if both parties recognize that the courts should assess and arbitrate an appropriate remedy for the accident. If forgiveness automatically gave up claims to compensation, forgiveness could only reasonably take place *after* a resolution of the case (or else these victims risk surrendering their claim). However, it is not extraordinary for the victims of such injuries to acknowledge forgiveness *and* seek restitution. Forgiveness may even be *predicated* on the expectation of restitution ("I know you're good for it"), implying a separation between the normative effects of forgiveness and requirements of restitution.

Claims of compensation can also be directed at wrongs with no corresponding price, such as the denial of political rights. Should forgiveness be understood to give up claims of reparations that result from these wrongs? This view seems at odds with the practice of reconciliation, which involves both forgiveness and forward-looking projects that attempt to redress wrongs. Consider, for example, the Truth and Reconciliation Report in Canada that simultaneously recognizes the right to reparations (and apology) for historical injustices and *seeks* forgiveness.³³ If the report ultimately led to what could be characterized as forgiveness, would the project of redress be abandoned? This conclusion is obviously against the spirit of the report. This idea goes back to much earlier discussions of reconciliation when Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) detailed a path from forgiveness to love to reconciliation, all arguably in a manner that fits the alteration thesis:

Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means, rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. It is the lifting of a burden or the canceling of a debt.³⁴

33 See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future."

34 King, *A Gift of Love*, 47.

The “cancellation” of a debt is clearly a notion friendly to the concept of forgiveness as a normative power akin to promising, but MLK never characterized this debt in terms of compensatory justice:

When white Americans tell the negro to lift himself by his own bootstraps they don't look over the legacy of slavery and segregation. I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps but it's a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps. And many negroes by the thousands and millions have been left bootless as a result of all of these years of oppression and as a result of a society that has deliberately made his color a stigma and something worthless and degrading.³⁵

MLK clearly called for forgiveness as a way of repairing a relationship shaped by historical wrong, but simultaneously pressed for claims of compensation. These concurrent claims should strike us as perfectly consistent, but they are incompatible with the claim that forgiveness gives up all claims that arise in virtue of a wrong.

The focus on compensation and apologies in competing articulations of the alteration thesis also raises difficulties for the interpretation of nonparadigm cases of forgiveness. First, I know of no attempt to advance the idea that an individual who wrongs another (or themselves) has a duty to apologize or compensate themselves. It will therefore be difficult to accommodate self-forgiveness within this framework. Second, while apologies might be owed to secondary victims in *extreme* cases of wrongdoing, it seems unlikely to arise in cases of moderate wrong (e.g., the plagiarism case or infidelity). In these cases, it is likewise difficult to see how Warmke or Bennett will capture third-party forgiveness.

8. REDEMPTIVE FORGIVENESS

Apart from waiving the right to compensation or an apology, Bennett offers the unique suggestion that forgiveness can take the form of “redemption,” which involves *recognizing* that the perpetrator has fulfilled their duty to apologize, compensate, etc., and committing to treat them as if these obligations have been fulfilled. This commitment is a “change of stance . . . thought of as “bracketing” at least some of the normative effects of that particular wrongdoing as a basis for one's relationship with the wrongdoer and making it the case that one will wrong him should one go back on one's undertaking and start to treat him as

35 King, interview by Sander Vanocur.

one who stands under those obligations of which he is now free.”³⁶ Redemptive forgiveness is susceptible to a range of problems that emerge when considering how we ought to respond to special obligations that have been fulfilled. Consider, again, the case of paying back a loan. April owes Sheldon twenty-five dollars for lunch, and April repays the loan in a timely fashion. Once April’s debt has been executed, it seems strange to say that Sheldon is in a position of choosing whether to grant an “acknowledgment” that the debt has been repaid. Sheldon need not *declare* “April’s debt has been repaid,” but Sheldon certainly cannot *deny* the repayment (if anybody asks), and Sheldon cannot do activities typically associated with being owed a debt. It would, for example, be impermissible for Sheldon to *demand* repayment. In broad terms, once a debt has been fulfilled, the former obligee must act as if the debt is fulfilled. Redemptive forgiveness, therefore, seems unable to make a normative difference of the kind needed: it cannot reestablish moral equality. Once the debt has been repaid, the parties are equal.

It is true that a further *commitment* to treat the perpetrator in the appropriate fashion changes the moral situation by introducing a *stronger* obligation to treat them with respect, but such a commitment is not a matter of reestablishing moral equality. We generally stand in a relation of moral equality *regardless* of our commitment to doing so. Insofar as we need an explanation of how forgiveness reestablishes moral equality and “raises” the standing of perpetrator, a commitment to respect them seems insufficient. This view stands in contrast to the position that forgiveness involves surrendering rights to negative partiality, which provides a concrete interpretation of how forgiveness elevates the moral standing of the perpetrator.

9. DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNTS REVISITED

Through an initial critique of descriptive accounts of forgiveness, I motivated the idea that forgiveness is normatively significant. With the positive view now tabled, it is worth revisiting how these different approaches may be related.³⁷ Must we view normative and descriptive accounts as mutually exclusive, and how (given a normative understanding of forgiveness) ought we to interpret the progress that has otherwise been made on the psychological and behavioral dimensions of forgiveness? Despite my claim that a purely descriptive account of forgiveness leaves out elements of this phenomenon, there is more harmony (or, at least, *potential* harmony) between descriptive and normative accounts

³⁶ Bennett, “The Alteration Thesis,” 219.

³⁷ I am grateful to several anonymous reviewers who raised questions/objections regarding the relationship between descriptive and normative theories explored below.

of forgiveness than may initially appear. In this brief section, I detail several ways that these views could be connected; given the complexity of this issue, I remain agnostic as to the connection we *ought* to embrace.

My central concern with descriptive accounts of forgiveness is that behavioral and psychological changes are insufficient to capture *some* practices surrounding forgiveness. This narrow claim does not eliminate the potential for psychological and behavioral changes (as discussed in the extant literature) to play a role in successful acts of forgiveness. One approach that connects these normative and descriptive views is deflationary and merely takes the descriptive changes in a subject to play a causal role in bringing about normative changes (these latter changes being identified as forgiveness proper). For example, overcoming resentment for a moral reason or coming to see the perpetrator in a better light may *motivate* the victim to surrender rights held against the perpetrator. Insofar as such psychological changes are neither necessary nor sufficient for altering the norms of the relationship with the perpetrator, this proposal would significantly diminish the significance of descriptive views.

A stronger and perhaps more plausible account takes there to be an intrinsic connection between psychological changes and the normative effects of forgiveness. To illustrate by analogy, consider the idea that promises surrender the right to refrain from acting in ways that are inconsistent with the content of the promise. While this normative effect may be central to promises, the conditions of a successful promise plausibly include descriptive conditions for the alteration to succeed. For example, it may be a requirement of a promise that the promisee hears, understands, and acknowledges the promise. It may likewise be the case that in order for forgiveness to succeed—i.e., a successful surrendering of the right to negative partiality—the victim must undergo certain psychological changes (some of which may be in line with what has been examined in the literature). It seems implausible that a victim can successfully surrender a right to negative partiality if they have forgotten the wrong; it is much more plausible that a victim can surrender rights through a process that involves a reevaluation of the perpetrator's character. If this reevaluation is *required* for forgiveness, then there will be an intrinsic link between descriptive and normative accounts of forgiveness. On this view, both descriptive and normative conditions may end up being necessary for forgiveness.

There are further ways of preserving descriptive and normative accounts of forgiveness through conceptual pluralism. If we conclude that both accounts provide necessary and sufficient conditions of forgiveness, we can retain consistency only by expanding the conceptual sphere and admitting that there is more than one sense in which a person can forgive. Such a move comes at the cost of parsimony but may ultimately be the most accurate way of dividing

up the class of activities that can legitimately be called “forgiveness.” A more parsimonious way of capturing the pluralistic sentiment might draw a distinction between a minimum threshold of forgiveness being met and the *ideals* of forgiveness. While an essential element of forgiveness could include surrendering the right to resent, the *actual* overcoming of resentment could be taken to represent an ideal of forgiveness. Many psychological/behavioral changes fit a similar bill, such as the resumption of normal relations with the offender or having goodwill toward the offender. These changes might be classified as the ideals of forgiveness rather than necessary elements of forgiveness.

Related to the issue of mutual exclusivity, it may be asked why my position cannot simply be reimagined as a new *descriptive* theory of forgiveness. After all, the view I have articulated may seem closely related to a candidate for a description of the psychosocial processes that, in fact, unfold when a person forgives—i.e., the victim at one point assigned less weight to the interests of the perpetrator and subsequently ceased to do so. Why could these factual changes not be understood to capture forgiveness, and if so, what is the appeal of adopting Bennett’s “alteration thesis”? To understand my concern with this position, consider a victim who declares their forgiveness. If the victim has altered their attitudes toward the perpetrator, the statement will reflect a genuine change that occurred, and if they have failed to do so, the statement will be either mistaken or dishonest. Now, suppose that going forward, the victim *continues* to discount the interests of the perpetrator. On a descriptive view, the victim has failed to accurately report their attitudes, but apart from this inaccurate (or dishonest) reporting, they have done nothing wrong. The problem with this position is that it fails to capture the sense in which the perpetrator can legitimately expect the victim to act differently. By *declaring* forgiveness and acting otherwise, the victim did not merely fail to report their attitudes, they failed to live up to an obligation that was incurred through their declaration. This is the sense in which forgiveness has a performative dimension that alters moral norms, one akin to how promises bind through declarations.

Yet, something may seem amiss in the above example: how can we say that a person has forgiven another individual if they continue to discount their interests? It may seem strange to say without hesitation that an individual who has performed an act of *revenge* against another can count as having forgiven that same person. Here, I believe two aspects of forgiveness are in tension. On the one hand, we tend to hold someone who forgives another *accountable* for the fact that they have forgiven and criticize them if they fail to act in accordance with a declaration of forgiveness. On the other hand, we may be reluctant to describe someone who fails to act in accordance with the norms of forgiveness as having *truly* forgiven. These uses are inconsistent. If forgiveness has genuinely

not occurred, there should be nothing to criticize about the person who acted inconsistently with the norms of forgiveness. Which of these two uses should prevail? To shed light on this issue, it may be worth comparing another practice that involves a similar duality in the use of a concept. Suppose that Justin's best friend Jess has failed to live up to a norm of friendship (e.g., suppose that Jess desperately needs a ride to a job interview and Justin refuses because he *never* skips leg day at the gym). Jess might very well assert that "she thought Justin was her friend," implying that he was not her friend. However, if Justin and Jess have what would otherwise be described as a long and intimate relationship, it would be more plausible to say that his act is impermissible *because* of their friendship. After all, without recognizing the existence of the friendship, it would be difficult to explain *why* anything problematic occurred (the phrase "you're no son of mine" likewise gives rise to this duality: the statement presupposes the relationship it seeks to undermine). When a person declares forgiveness and acts inconsistently with the declaration, we might very well say that they have not *truly* forgiven. I would read this case in one of two ways. We are either saying that they have failed to live up to the *norms* of forgiveness (much like the case of friendship), *or* we are recognizing that a further felicity condition of forgiveness (as described in the previous section) has not been met. On either reading, my position cannot be transformed into a purely descriptive view.

10. CONCLUSION

I have argued in the spirit of Bennett and Warmke that forgiveness brings about a moral alteration akin to a promise. In contrast with previously established views, the scope of the alteration brought about by forgiveness should focus on the class of actions that may be performed by the victim. The attraction of this view lies in its ability to capture the core elements of forgiveness, such as its personal nature, its distinction from excusing or justification, its normative significance, and its fit with varying types of forgiveness (conditional, unconditional, self, and third-party). This broad explanatory power derives from the simple proposition that negative partiality represents a relationship of moral distance, and forgiveness acts to eliminate this distance.³⁸

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