OPPRESSION, FORGIVENESS, AND CEASING TO BLAME

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Wrongdoing is an inescapable fact of life. We all do wrong and are wronged from time to time and in response we often blame one another. In the broadest sense, moral blame is a personal response to wrongdoing or wrongbeing, which can manifest in a variety of mental states—e.g., judgments, desires, dispositions, and emotions—as well as in behavior. We blame for a variety of wrongs, in a variety of ways, and with a variety of consequences: one expresses disappointment with an unfaithful partner who then apologizes, another rants about injustice thereby alienating part of her Facebook community, a third turns inward in frustration with a neglectful parent who in turn mistakes her withdrawal for indifference. Such conflicts are not the whole or even the greater part of our shared social existence, but they are a defining feature of it.

But if blame is a defining feature of our social lives, so is ceasing to blame. And we cease to blame in a variety of ways, too. Depending on the circumstances, we might excuse, justify, or forgive an offender, or we might simply let the offense go. Each of these ways of ceasing to blame is a social practice with characteristic norms, whether formal or informal, that influence when and how we do it, as well as how it is received. We are wary of those who let go too easily; we find it difficult to forgive an offender who has yet to show remorse; and sometimes learning more about the offender demands that we excuse their offense. In short:

Claim 1: Whether and how we cease to blame depends on a variety of circumstances, not all of which are under our control.

While not obvious, we think this point is plausible. However, it has some surprising implications. Like any norm-governed practice, one can cease to blame appropriately or inappropriately, successfully or unsuccessfully. Indeed, one can fail altogether to overcome blame. This suggests that:

Claim 2: Social and material circumstances can compromise one's ability to successfully cease to blame in the manner one would prefer.

Moreover, the possibility of failure implies that one may lack access to particular ceasing-to-blame practices, because one can be in a position to be regularly prevented from successfully overcoming blame. In order to participate in some practices, one's action must be done for the right reasons and secure uptake. This raises a further, political question: Does everyone have equal (or adequate) access to the various ceasing-to-blame practices? We will argue that they do not. In particular:

Claim 3: The circumstances of oppression can systematically undermine one's ability to successfully perform some ceasing-to-blame practices.

Our argument proceeds as follows. In section 1, we present a taxonomy of different ceasing-to-blame practices and describe their distinctive roles in our moral lives (*Claim 1*). We also explain the value of overcoming blame and, thereby, the harm of not being able to do so. Our subsequent discussion focuses on forgiveness, though our arguments also apply to other ways of ceasing to blame. We focus on forgiveness because it is a complex practice about which much has been written and because many regard forgiving as a matter of personal fiat, a way of ceasing to blame that is elective, unconditional, or otherwise independent of social circumstances. As such, our argument faces the strongest opposition and is most interesting in the case of forgiveness. In sections 2 and 3, we argue that circumstances can conspire to compromise an individual's ability or opportunity to forgive. We argue that forgiveness is reason guided and that lacking good reasons or the right kind of reason can undermine one's ability to forgive (*Claim 2*). In addition, circumstances can be such that victims' attempts to forgive are not recognized. We make the case that recognition—or "uptake"—is necessary for forgiveness. We note, however, that even if forgiving does not require uptake, communicating forgiveness does, and communicating forgiveness is itself an important social practice. In section 4, we argue that the circumstances of oppression systematically compromise the ability of oppressed people to forgive and that this deprivation constitutes a significant but neglected harm (*Claim 3*). In section 5, we address two particularly forceful objections to our view: that forgiveness is always open to the victim and that we overlook the ability of the oppressed to shape their own practices. Finally, in section 6, we explore an important implication of our account of ceasing to blame as a socially scaffolded set of moral practices.

1. BLAMING AND CEASING TO BLAME

1.1. Blame

How we understand ceasing to blame depends, of course, on what it means to blame. While everyone acknowledges and tries to capture a broad set of paradigmatic cases, there is significant disagreement about the nature of blame—i.e., the attitudes and activities involved in blaming.[1] On "cognitive" accounts blame consists in evaluations or judgments of the offender.[2] On "conative" accounts blaming requires a judgment, but also a change either in how one is disposed to feel and act toward an offender or how one perceives one's relationship with him.[3] Finally, on "affective" accounts blame requires, or is constituted by, a negative emotion or hard feeling.[4]

Whatever its nature, though, most accounts agree that the purpose of blame is, roughly, to communicate a response to mistreatment. How and what exactly blame communicates is disputed, but there appears to be broad agreement about the communicative view.[5] Ceasing to blame is an essential part of this communicative enterprise because it signals that blame's demand, whatever it was, has been met—or, in some cases, is no longer being pursued. Given the general agreement on the point and purpose of blame, the arguments of this paper do not depend on which particular account of blame is correct. They remain plausible on any account that captures the paradigmatic cases of blame.

1.2. Ceasing to Blame

People cease to blame in four main ways: by excusing, justifying, forgiving, and letting go.[6] They can be distinguished by the kinds of reasons they require. To

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1 For a helpful taxonomy, see Coates and Tognazzini, "The Nature and Ethics of Blame."

2 Hieronymi, "The Force and Fairness of Blame"; Smith, "Moral Blame and Moral Protest."

3 Sher, *In Praise of Blame*; Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*.

4 Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments* and "Dispassionate Opprobrium"; Wolf, "Blame, Italian Style."

5 Moral blame identifies and responds to wrongdoing (McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility*), protests mistreatment (Hieronymi, "The Force and Fairness of Blame"), and demands recognition of past mistreatment and better treatment in the future (Wallace, *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*; Walker, "Third Parties and the Social Scaffolding of Forgiveness"; Smith, "Moral Blame and Moral Protest"; Macnamara, "Blame, Communication, and Morally Responsible Agency"). There are criticisms of communicative accounts of blame—e.g., on the grounds that it cannot explain private blame (Driver, "Private Blame")—but also a number of replies, including Fricker, "What's the Point of Blame?" and McKenna, "Quality of Will, Private Blame and Conversation."

6 Murphy ("Forgiveness and Resentment") makes the same distinctions in his seminal treat-

track these differences, consider the following case. While at a party, Anna tells Boris a joke about recent migrants to their country. The joke seems crude and offensive, and Boris reasonably blames Anna for her remarks. Consider the different ways that Boris might cease to blame Anna.

Boris may excuse Anna. Although the joke is clearly offensive, Boris can excuse Anna if he judges that she is not fully responsible for what she said. For instance, he might realize that Anna lacked the background knowledge to see how her joke could be offensive, and that her ignorance was reasonable—perhaps she was unaware that the joke was a modern riff on one historically made at the expense of another despised group.

Boris may justify Anna's remarks. He might realize that Anna was using the structure of the joke to ridicule people who fear migrants unreasonably. He realizes, that is, that Anna was not doing wrong by making the joke.

Boris may forgive Anna. He might believe both that Anna reasonably could have known that it was offensive and that it was not justified. However, if Anna realizes how hurtful her comment was, expresses remorse, and resolves to refrain from such "humor" in the future, then Boris might decide that she lacks any deep ill will and forgive her, thereby relinquishing blame.

Finally, Boris can let go of his blame. For example, he may distract himself in the company of other friends. Alternatively, as a migrant himself, Boris may have been so browbeaten by such "jokes" in the past that it is no longer worth it to him to continue blaming, perhaps because blame is too emotionally fatiguing.[7]

Since this paper will focus primarily on forgiveness, let us clarify how we understand that concept. Our aim is not to argue for or challenge any particular account of the nature of forgiveness, at least not directly, but rather to identify and explain obstacles to forgiveness and other ceasing-to-blame practices that can arise in circumstances of oppression.

The arguments we develop below are compatible with many of the leading accounts of forgiveness.[8] Most accounts accept some version of the following

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ment of forgiveness.

7   Many philosophers distinguish forgiving from letting go, though the label itself is uncommon (Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 530; Griswold, *Forgiveness,* 70; Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean," 43–44, n26; and Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love,* 4, 97.) However, depending on how exactly the distinction is drawn, some would view them simply as different forms of forgiveness (e.g., Bennett, "Personal and Redemptive Forgiveness," or Nelkin, "Freedom and Forgiveness"). Whether and how one draws the distinction does not substantially affect our argument in this paper. On our view, both forgiveness and letting go can be compromised by the circumstances in which one ceases to blame. (We develop a full account of letting go in other work.)

8   See, for example, Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness"; Griswold, *For-*

conditions. In order to forgive one must: i) overcome one's negative attitude toward an offender, ii) about their offense, iii) for the right reasons. For example, Zora ceases to blame Toni for her betrayal because Toni apologizes.[9] We will argue that oppression can undermine one's ability to meet even these minimal conditions. Of course, our account is not compatible with every conception of forgiveness and some could argue that it is not forgiveness but something else that is compromised in the scenarios we describe.[10] However, the vulnerabilities we identify are not idiosyncratic features of our conception, but stem from widely held commitments about how forgiveness typically works.

The different ceasing-to-blame practices are similar but distinct. Justification requires that one cease to view the purported offense as wrong. Excuse requires that one cease to view the offense as one for which the offender is responsible. Forgiveness requires that one continue to view an offender as a culpable wrongdoer and is therefore incompatible with justification and excuse. Letting go is also a response to culpable wrongdoing, but in doing so one ceases to blame for different reasons.[11] These distinctions are used in ordinary discourse in roughly the way we have outlined and people seem to police their appropriate use. For example, people are wary of premature forgiveness and of those who appear to

giveness; Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean"; Garrard and McNaughton, *Forgiveness*; and Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*.

9   Different views may disagree about the details of these broad requirements. Some argue that a forgiver must cease to resent the offender (Garrard and McNaughton, "In Defence of Unconditional Forgiveness"), others that one must come to view the offender as better than their offense warrants (Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean"), and still others that one need only overcome excessive blame (Butler, *The Works of Bishop Butler*; Garcia, "Bishop Butler on Forgiveness and Resentment"). Nicolas Cornell ("The Possibility of Preemptive Forgiving") even argues that we can forgive preemptively and, in these cases, may never experience any negative attitude toward the offender. Likewise, there are more and less strict notions of what counts as a reason to forgive (Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment," and Nelkin, "Freedom and Forgiveness," respectively). We discuss reasons to forgive in section 2.

10   William Neblett ("Forgiveness and Ideals") suggests that one can forgive without a change of attitude toward the offender. Dana Nelkin ("Freedom and Forgiveness," 170, 182) suggests that one can forgive for any reason or no reason at all. Leo Zaibert's account of "pure forgiveness" ("The Paradox of Forgiveness") also lacks a right-reasons requirement, though such a condition is not strictly inconsistent with his view. The same is true of accounts according to which forgiveness is fundamentally an exercise of a normative power (Warmke, "The Economic Model of Forgiveness" and "The Normative Significance of Forgiveness"). The arguments of this paper do not dispute such accounts directly, though the internal plausibility of our account and its fit with other plausible conceptions of forgiveness may pose an indirect challenge to any view that cannot accept our conclusions.

11   Some offenses warrant partial excuse, justification, and forgiveness. Angie may realize that Bell's behavior was not *as bad* as she thought (justification), that she was not *entirely* responsible for what happened (excuse), but that there is nonetheless *something* to forgive (or let go).

lack self-respect.[12] They are also wary of people who are reluctant to forgive under seemingly ideal conditions (e.g., when someone has shown much remorse and made amends). This wariness suggests that forgiveness is not a *sui generis* type, but is best understood as one form of a broader practice of ceasing to blame.

1.3. The Value of Ceasing to Blame

This paper will argue that the circumstances of oppression can undermine a person's ability to cease blaming in the way she would prefer and that this constitutes a harm that has thus far been neglected in discussions of oppression. It is not the only harm imposed on oppressed persons—they are also more likely to be injured and disrespected in the first place—but it is a significant one. We will argue that offenders and bystanders can behave—whether purposefully, knowingly, or negligently—in ways that compromise victims' abilities and opportunities to forgive. Suppose for now that this is true. Our aim in this section is to show that overcoming blame can be good, that forgiving is sometimes preferable to other ways of overcoming blame, and that it is a harm to force a victim to choose between deficient alternatives. In order to understand this neglected harm, we must first explain the value of being able to overcome blame and of doing so in particular ways.

First, the ability to blame and overcome blame are part of our capabilities of emotion and affiliation.[13] Nussbaum only mentions blame (or "justified anger"), but the ability and opportunity to *overcome* blame is just as important to developing and maintaining attachments. Developing this dimension of our capability of emotion may also help cultivate moral agency.[14] Likewise, the ability to hold one another responsible is part of the capability of affiliation, understood as the ability to "engage in various forms of social interaction" and "having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation."[15] Holding ourselves and others responsible—e.g., through blame, apology, forgiveness, and other practices of moral address, accounting, and reconciliation—is how we maintain supportive, trusting, and cooperative relationships and communities. (The capability of emotion also contributes to this end.) Undermining a person's ability or op-

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12 Novitz, "Forgiveness and Self-Respect."

13 Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 79. Having a capability requires an ability and the opportunity to exercise it. For example, one must have both the right to vote and the opportunity to exercise that right, or the capacity for play and opportunities to engage in play. Undermining the capability in either respect harms the agent.

14 Vargas, *Building Better Beings*.

15 Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development*, 79–80.

portunity to overcome blame deprives them of valuable capabilities and of the benefits of exercising them.

Second, people often want to overcome blame because it feels bad. This is not always so—righteous anger may feel empowering—but it often is. It can be painful to blame those we love and care about, even when we think blame is appropriate. We want to reconcile with them and want to be able to overcome our blame for this reason. It can also be both painful and frustrating to blame someone who does not wish to reconcile or who continues to bear us ill will. Here, too, though for different reasons, we may want to overcome our blame and move on.

Third, all else being equal, ceasing to blame is good when blame is no longer fitting. Blame represents the world in a particular way and when it ceases to represent it accurately, it is good to cease blaming. Susan Wolf calls this the value of "living in accordance with the facts."[16] It is arguably one of the goods sacrificed by plugging into the Experience Machine. Moreover, by misrepresenting the world—the offender, the offense, or their relevant context—blame can cause injury and disrespect, and be unfair.

Such is the value of overcoming blame and the harm of not being able to do so. However, these points do not imply that it is good to be able to overcome blame *in a particular way*—e.g., that depriving one of the ability or opportunity to *forgive* harms that person. While blaming can be painful, there are different ways of avoiding it, so inability (or lack of opportunity) to forgive is a harm only if there are no other options or if the other options are themselves harmful or otherwise inadequate. Since we recognize other options—one can forgive a culpable wrongdoing or let go of blame without forgiving—we must explain why they are inadequate. Likewise, one might accept that the ability to overcome blame partly constitutes a valuable capability, but deny that this capability is undermined if there is another way to overcome blame. Thus, in order to show that a particular way of overcoming blame is valuable, we must explain why the alternatives are (sometimes) inadequate.[17] One way to do this is to compare victims and non-victims.

Consider Vicky and Imogen, both of whom believe that they have been betrayed by a close friend. Vicky actually has been betrayed, and her friend's behavior and subsequent attitude are making it difficult to forgive. Imogen, however, has not been betrayed. She is also finding it difficult to forgive, but this is because her friend, reasonably enough, has denied any wrongdoing and is questioning the legitimacy of her blame. Both Vicky and Imogen have been prompted to

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16   Wolf, "The Importance of Free Will," 399.

17   Another option would be to refrain from blaming in the first place. However, while it is sometimes possible to refrain from blaming others for their blameworthy behavior, it is not a genuine option. It is not always possible, often difficult, and rarely (if ever) a reasonable expectation.

blame, and let us suppose that both are burdened by their anger and the task of overcoming it. However, they have different claims against their supposed betrayers. We can see the value of being able (or having the opportunity) to forgive, in particular, by comparing the choices imposed on Vicky and Imogen.

Vicky's betrayer deprives her of the ability to forgive and burdens her with a hard choice, while Imogen's innocent friend does not. The former forces Vicky to choose between letting go of appropriate blame and bearing an unjustly imposed burden of continuing to blame. This forced choice is a harm insofar as both options impose burdens and Vicky has a reasonable claim not to be burdened in either way. Vicky could choose not to stand up for herself, which would threaten her self-respect and risk condoning the wrong (or appearing to others to do so). Or she could continue to blame and suffer the hardship of doing so. Things are different for Imogen. She bears a similar burden as a result of her misunderstanding, but it has not been imposed by the offender. Perhaps her friend should try to disabuse her of her mistaken belief since it is causing her to suffer, but Imogen has no more claim on his help than she does on anyone else who could explain her mistake. Vicky's friend has imposed a burden that only he can remove; Imogen's friend has not.[18]

This account explains why having the ability to forgive and the opportunity to do so is good for a victim. The victim can choose how to respond to an offense. When a victim cannot forgive in a particular case, as we will argue can happen, she is forced to choose between two unreasonable options. The offender imposes this hard choice; he deprives the would-be forgiver of the option to forgive by making it difficult or impossible—e.g., by lacking remorse, not apologizing, or demonstrating continuing disregard and lack of care. The ability to overcome blame by forgiving is a good and being deprived of it is a harm. We will argue that members of oppressed groups are particularly susceptible to this kind of harm, which can be imposed by individuals or by a society that fails to recognize their victimization.

2. THE RIGHT REASONS

Particular ceasing-to-blame practices require the right kinds of reasons. If one lacks the right kind of reason, one cannot perform the practice; it is not "on the table," so to speak. Philosophers defend right-reasons requirements for various

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18 This argument applies beyond the context of blame and forgiveness. A person you have to trust harms you by not giving you a reason to trust them. Vicky would be harmed by being put in the position of having to trust the friend who betrayed her because she has no other choice of confidante. Or, for example, a driver who offers a ride to a stranded motorist harms her by giving her no reason to entrust her safety to him.

practices, including love, trust, and forgiveness.[19] For example, one might make the following kind of argument about love: *R* is not a reason to love, so, if *A* has strong feelings for *B* solely for reason *R*, then *A* does not love *B*. Parallel claims can be made for trust or forgiveness. Such arguments are contested, but widely accepted. In this section, we argue that forgiveness has a right-reasons requirement.

First of all, some reasons just seem to be the wrong kind. One can cease to blame a culpable wrongdoer without having forgiven. At the very least, one cannot forgive for the same reason one blames. Boris can blame and forgive Anna for her betrayal, but he cannot blame her *because she betrayed him* and also forgive her *because she betrayed him*. This is the wrong kind of reason. But this is not the only restriction. The following are all reasons for Boris to cease blaming, but none seems like a reason to forgive: because Anna has the same favorite movie as him; because Anna is likely to promote him; or because doing so will contribute to slightly better cardiovascular health.[20] It seems wrong to describe what Boris has done in these cases as forgiving because he did not decide in virtue of some fact about Anna or her offense. Imagine that a coworker who has wronged you asks you to cease blaming him but can offer no reason to do so other than that he would recommend you for promotion. This case seems best described not as your coworker giving you a reason to forgive but rather your coworker suggesting a reason to cease blaming despite having *no reason* to forgive. If any of these restrictions is plausible, then the question to ask is not *whether* there is a right-reasons requirement on forgiveness, but *which* reasons are the right kind.

Most forgiveness theorists implicitly or explicitly accept a right-reasons requirement. Murphy explicitly argues that forgiveness must be done for particular moral reasons.[21] McGary defends a wider but still limited set of reasons.[22] The requirement appears to support Allais's distinction between forgiving and therapeutic self-management and Pettigrove's distinction between forgiving and just getting over it.[23] Even Garrard and McNaughton, who defend unconditional forgiveness, seem to accept a right-reasons requirement.[24] These accounts

19 Abramson and Leite, "Love as a Reactive Emotion"; Smuts, "Normative Reasons for Love, Part 1"; Hieronymi, "The Reasons of Trust"; Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment."

20 Larsen et al., "The Immediate and Delayed Cardiovascular Benefits of Forgiving."

21 Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment."

22 McGary, "Forgiveness."

23 Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean," 43n26; Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*, 97.

24 Garrard and McNaughton's view suggests an important clarification (*Forgiveness*, 114). The claim that forgiving requires the right kind of reason does not imply that forgiveness is not elective or unconditional, though it does propose limits on forgiving. Claims about electivity and conditionality are about the rational and/or moral permissibility of forgiving

are attempting to capture the intuition that one can cease to blame a culpable wrongdoer without forgiving.

The right-reasons requirement is not uncontested, though. To our knowledge, Dana Nelkin is the only philosopher to argue explicitly that one can forgive for any reason (or none at all).[25] On her view, to forgive is to release the offender from a moral debt. Other proponents of debt-release models of forgiveness may also reject a right-reasons requirement, though none does so explicitly.[26] However, these accounts seem incomplete without such a requirement. If one cancels a moral debt because one judges that amends have been made, then one seems to have forgiven. However, to do so because one views the wrongdoer or the offense as beneath one's notice does not seem to be forgiveness.[27] Again, it is not enough to explain how the forgiver changes when she forgives; one must also explain what prompts that change.

Further intuitive support for the right-reasons requirement comes from the need to distinguish between forgiving and condoning. One condones blameworthy behavior if one withdraws warranted censure in order to, for example, avoid social awkwardness or curry favor. But this too seems different from forgiving. To condone in this way is not merely to forgive for morally bad reasons; it is to cease blaming for the wrong kind of reason—namely, personal comfort or gain.

Finally, we can argue for a right-reasons requirement by drawing an analogy to trust. Pamela Hieronymi has argued that many of the reasons *in favor of trusting* are not reasons *to trust* because they do not support a trusting belief.[28] We can tell these reasons apart in virtue of the fact that they answer different questions. Reasons in favor of trusting answer the question, "Would it be good or valuable to trust Anna?" Reasons to trust answer the question, "Will Anna do what I ask?" It is a reason in favor of trusting Anna to keep his secret that he can relieve the stress of keeping it to himself. However, this fact does not bear on whether Anna can be counted on not to tell others. We claim that forgiveness is similar. Boris's cardiovascular health is a reason to think that ceasing to blame Anna would be good, but not a reason to believe that he should view Anna differently with respect to her misconduct.[29] Further, as with trust, if one

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when it is possible. Calhoun ("Changing One's Heart") and Allais ("Elective Forgiveness") defend elective forgiveness, and Milam ("Against Elective Forgiveness") rejects it without taking up right kinds of reasons.

25   Nelkin, "Freedom and Forgiveness."

26   Twambley, "Mercy and Forgiveness"; Warmke, "The Economic Model of Forgiveness."

27   Griswold, *Forgiveness*, 12–15.

28   Hieronymi, "The Reasons of Trust," 231–32.

29   Allais makes a similar point ("Wiping the Slate Clean," 39n12).

could forgive for any reason that spoke in its favor, then one could change one's attitude insincerely. But, while a person might express forgiveness insincerely, the attitudinal change itself cannot be insincere. This too suggests that there are limits on which reasons can count as reasons to forgive.

So what are the right kinds of reason? Philosophers disagree about this, but for our purposes it is sufficient to point to commonly identified reasons. One set of reasons includes indications of a change of heart on the part of the offender: apology, remorse, repudiation of the offense, making amends, confession, atonement, and repentance. For example, Boris might cease to blame Anna for her hurtful joke because Anna has shown remorse, sincerely repudiated her action, or tried to make amends for the slight. Murphy suggests that one may have reason to forgive if an offense was well-intentioned—e.g., if a colleague speaks down to you while attempting to clarify their argument.[30] And Garrard and McNaughton argue that solidarity with morally fallible offenders is a reason to forgive.[31] We believe that some of these are more plausibly counted as reasons to forgive than others, but we cannot enter that debate here.[32] Instead, we will simply note that the narrower the set of right reasons, the more likely it is that one could lack such a reason and be unable to forgive.

This is the upshot of our argument. If one lacks the right kind of reason, one might try to perform the practice but fail to do so. One might fail to do what one wants and intends and do something else instead. For example, Boris might cease to blame because he sees that Anna's offense was not her fault, without realizing he has actually excused rather than forgiven. Of course, despite the above argument, some may still reject the right-reasons requirement and deny that facts about an offender or society generally can render a victim unable to forgive by depriving her of the right kinds of reasons. However, this commitment is only one strand of our argument, one way in which the ability to forgive can be compromised. Even if there are no right kinds of reasons, there are better and worse reasons to forgive. So, even if forgiveness remains "on the table" despite lacking the right kind of reason, one may nonetheless be less able to forgive if one lacks a good reason.

3. THE RIGHT WAYS

In the previous section, we argued that some practices, including forgiveness, have a right-reasons requirement. This requirement is conceptual; it is a matter of which ceasing-to-blame practices are "on the table" so to speak. We showed

30   Murphy, "Forgiveness and Resentment."

31   Garrard and McNaughton, *Forgiveness*.

32   For one account, see Milam, "Reasons to Forgive."

that one's ability to overcome blame in the way one prefers can be compromised if one lacks the right kind of reason. This applies as much to forgiveness and excuse as it does to, say, love. However, even when the right kinds of reasons are available, participation in a practice can still be unsuccessful or inappropriate. In this section, we argue that the circumstances within which one attempts to overcome blame can undermine one's ability and complicate the morality of doing so. In particular, we will argue that one's ability to cease blaming in the way one prefers can be compromised if one does not receive the necessary recognition or uptake of one's attempt—e.g., of one's proffered forgiveness.

3.1. Three Ways to Fail

Even when one has the right kinds of reasons to forgive, one can be prevented from doing so in one of three ways. First, one might be psychologically unable to overcome one's blame and have a different attitude toward them. For example, you might want to forgive a friend who routinely behaves badly, but find your motivation is undercut by his obnoxious comments. Or one might be able to change one's attitude toward an offender, but not about the offense in question. For example, perhaps you grudgingly admire a colleague's professionalism after a personal conflict, despite still holding a grudge about your mistreatment. These are simple cases of recalcitrant attitudes, in which one struggles to forgive, and which result from contingent and uncontrollable psychological facts about oneself, the offender, or the context of the offense.

Second, one might overcome one's blame for the right reasons and have one's forgiveness recognized, only for it to fall flat—i.e., fail to have the desired and expected effect. This can happen in two ways. One's forgiveness may be recognized and accepted, but be ineffective or counterproductive. For example, while forgiving an unfaithful partner might typically lead to a change in their behavior, sometimes it may encourage further cheating. Something similar seems to have happened in the case of Ronald Carlson and Karla Faye Tucker. Tucker was convicted of murdering Carlson's sister and sentenced to death by the U.S. state of Texas. While in prison she claimed to have found God, repented, and repudiated her crime. Carlson responded by forgiving her. He seems to have hoped that, by forgiving Tucker for murdering his sister, the rest of his community would accept her claims to have repudiated her crime and committed herself to making amends. Unfortunately, his doing so may have merely drawn further indignation on himself. In these cases circumstances diminish or redirect the force of forgiveness, and we will argue that oppressive social norms can have this effect (section 4). Alternatively, one's forgiveness may be recognized but rejected, as one might reject a proffered apology. For example, an offender might reject for-

giveness because they believe themselves unworthy. Lee, the protagonist of the film *Manchester by the Sea*, is wracked with guilt after causing the deaths of his children and struggles to accept his wife's forgiveness. We typically expect people to accept forgiveness in cases in which we have reason to forgive—e.g., because they have expressed remorse or tried to make amends. Difficult cases arise when others act remorsefully and give one reasons to forgive and yet continue to reject one's forgiveness. This mismatch is part of the tragic aspect of Lee's situation in the film.

Third, social circumstances can prevent one from securing uptake altogether when one tries to forgive. The offender or third parties may simply fail to recognize one's overture *as forgiveness.* For example, members of a community might construe a victim's attempt to forgive as an act of condoning or a misplaced excuse. Or one's attempt to forgive might not be recognized at all. In this respect, attempts to forgive resemble attempts to refuse. One cannot successfully refuse an offer if one's refusal is not recognized. Imagine, for example, that when getting a haircut, the stylist asks whether you want your hair shampooed first. Responding with, "That's okay" is only a successful refusal if it is received as such, and not if it is interpreted as "Okay, go ahead." Likewise, one's attempt to forgive the hairdresser for causing your allergic reaction to the shampoo must be received as such. If it is instead received as an excuse—something like "It wasn't your fault, I said 'Okay'"—then, despite meeting the personal conditions on forgiving and having the right kind of reason, one's attempt has gone awry.[33]

3.2. Uptake: A Weak View and a Strong View

Failure to secure uptake of one's attempt to forgive is perhaps the most harmful of all failures canvassed above. However, the nature of this failure is contested. Two different views are possible, depending on whether one distinguishes between public expressions of forgiveness (or other ways of ceasing to blame) and private forms of forgiveness.

According to what we will call the weak view of this distinction, failures of uptake only undermine the expression of forgiveness, while one's ability to forgive is

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33 In addition to unsuccessfully ceasing to blame, one can do so successfully but inappropriately. One way to inappropriately cease blaming is to misunderstand what the circumstances give one reason to do. For example, one might fail to notice that a proffered apology is less a reason to forgive than a subtle attempt to justify the misconduct or avoid responsibility. This can happen through a mistake of perception or of interpretation. Another way to inappropriately cease blaming is to do so carelessly or for bad moral reasons. For example, some find it careless (or even reckless) to forgive immediately in the aftermath of a tragic event, like a bombing or shooting. Similarly, it seems impermissible to forgive out of a desire to belittle an offender.

unaffected. Alternatively, one may reject this distinction, holding instead that illocutionary uptake is a necessary condition on forgiveness itself. According to this strong view, forgiving someone requires recognition in the same way that warning, consenting, refusing, and, as Miranda Fricker has argued, blaming do.[34] Failure to secure uptake when one attempts to forgive prevents one from forgiving at all.

We can highlight the differences between these two views by considering attempts to forgive absent or dead offenders. Suppose that Pavel writes a letter telling Lin that he forgives her for some past offense. Some would say that he has successfully forgiven her before she ever receives the letter. (A similar case can be imagined for forgiving the dead.) This would be to endorse the weak view. However, others would say that such cases actually put pressure on the weak view. This is our position. Supposing that Pavel has overcome his blame about the offense and done so for the right reasons, there is nonetheless a sense in which the fact that Lin has not, may not, or cannot (if she is dead) recognize Pavel's attempt to forgive, means that he has not forgiven. Note also that the plausibility of the letter case depends in part on the assumption that our attempts to forgive will be received in roughly the way we intend them. Pavel's case looks different if we stipulate that, upon receiving his letter, Lin rejects his offer of forgiveness or fails to recognize it as such. Likewise, if we imagine that it could go either way—be recognized or not—we can see how plausible it is to claim that the attempt to forgive is not (yet) successful when the absent or dead offender cannot receive it. We think the strong view captures both the sense in which Pavel succeeds (he overcomes blame about the offense) and the sense in which he falls short (he does not receive the necessary uptake). Understanding forgiveness in this way also explains why attempts to forgive the absent and the dead are often unsatisfying or even tragic—we need the offender to acknowledge the legitimacy of our blame and to recognize our offer of forgiveness.

Moreover, even private forgiveness requires uptake of a sort. Imagine a would-be forgiver who is deeply ambivalent or conflicted in his attitude toward the offender. An employee in a dysfunctional and hostile workplace may harbor doubts about his own disposition to forgive that someone in a more supportive workplace might not experience. For example, he might wonder whether it is really appropriate for him to have forgiven his boss, even if only in his heart, or what his forgiveness says about his commitment to protesting the kinds of mistreatment he and others in his office have experienced.

However, our conclusion is significant whether one endorses the strong or the weak uptake condition. Even if it is only the ability to *express* forgiveness

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34 Fricker, "What's the Point of Blame?" 172.

that can be undermined, this ability is a valuable feature of our shared social and moral lives.

So, to summarize, one's ability to forgive can be compromised in a number of ways: one may lack the right kind of reason to forgive; one may have the right kind of reason, but be psychologically incapable of overcoming one's blame; one's forgiveness may fail to have the desired or intended effect; and, finally, one can fail to forgive by failing to secure uptake. In describing this phenomenon, we have focused on forgiving, but our conclusion plausibly generalizes to other ceasing-to-blame practices, like excuse, justification, and letting go.[35]

4. OPPRESSION AND CEASING TO BLAME

The argument thus far has had two stages. First, we argued that our ceasing-to-blame practices are sensitive to reasons (section 1). Next, we argued that an individual's ability to participate in these practices can be compromised if they lack access to the relevant reasons or if their attempt does not secure uptake (sections 2 and 3). In this sense, forgiving resembles other social practices, from proposing marriage to paying taxes, that are reason guided and require uptake to be successful.

The upshot of the previous section was that social life can be capricious and unpredictable. Anyone can find oneself in circumstances in which the proclivities of those around them impede their ability to blame and to cease to blame. For most people, these failures are local instances of pressure or manipulation, exceptions to the comparatively untroubled flow of social interaction. Others, however, may find that their ability to forgive is systematically undermined. In this section, we argue that members of oppressed groups often struggle to forgive successfully. This fact is a significant harm of oppression, but one that is not commonly recognized.

In section 1, we explained why the ability to overcome blame in the manner one prefers is good and being deprived of it is a harm. However, we have since focused on how the circumstances of oppression can undermine the ability to forgive. While those points also apply to forgiveness, in order for this particular inability to be a harm, the ability to forgive must have unique value that other forms of ceasing to blame do not. If the aim is only to avoid the unpleasantness of blaming, this can be done in many ways. However, one often desires both to overcome blame and relate to the wrongdoer in a particular way. For example, a victim may want to reconcile with a repentant offender who shows due respect and care for them. It may be unsatisfying, frustrating, or saddening to recognize

35   Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach."

that one's only option is to resign oneself to the offender's callous indifference and hope to avoid similar mistreatment in the future. Similarly, even when one has the option to forgive, it is painful, degrading, and unfair when the circumstances surrounding the offender and their offense—especially hatred, prejudice, or disregard—make forgiving difficult or require an extra sacrifice beyond the usual burden of overcoming reasonable blame.

The circumstances of oppression restrict the kinds of life one can lead and the opportunities for flourishing one has, and shape the development of one's character and agency. According to Iris Marion Young's influential analysis of oppression, "all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings," but there are many interlocking facets to this inhibition, and they affect different social groups in distinct ways.[36] For Young, oppression has five faces: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. Groups are exploited when they are isolated from what they produce in a way that benefits another social group.[37] Exploited people, whether sharecroppers in the post-Reconstruction American South or tobacco pickers in present-day Malawi, are typically materially disadvantaged and potentially desperate, or uninformed about better options, or both.[38]

Groups are marginalized when they are denied access to the public goods their society provides. Marginalization may be formal, as when a group is denied the right to vote, or the consequence of systematic disincentives, as when tuition costs deter potential university applicants from a particular group. It can manifest itself physically in terms of barriers, border policing, or racial/class segregation, or psychologically in the policing of language, fashion, or other norms.[39] It generates material deprivation, as when women are excluded from higher-paying jobs and fields, and prevents groups from exercising their capacities in "so-

36 We use Young's account, but our argument is broadly compatible with other influential analyses of oppression, including Frye, *The Politics of Reality*; Haslanger, "Oppressions"; and Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*. For Young ("Five Faces of Oppression," 55), oppression applies to groups, like lesbians or African Americans. Groups differ from agglomerations of individuals in that groups are sustained through processes of identification. For example, contrast a group of queer residents with an agglomeration of citizens of a particular legislative voting district.

37 This need not be a material product. Poor whites can be exploited to produce racial tension that helps maintain racial power structures that benefit rich whites. The United States and South Africa are notable examples, but not the only ones.

38 See Palitza, "Child Labour," for an account of tobacco companies' exploitation of child labor.

39 hooks, *Feminist Theory*, xviii.

cially defined and recognized ways," as when housing discrimination prevents members of some group from renting in a particular area.[40]

Groups are subject to cultural imperialism when their society refuses, or fails, to recognize their collective experiences, perspectives, and proclaimed identities. This may happen when a group is forced to assimilate into a dominant culture, when their traditional identities are stereotyped by those in privileged groups, or when the institutions within which they live and work deny their significance. For example, the fact that academic schedules in Western universities are structured around Christian holidays communicates lesser concern for Jews, Muslims, and members of other religions.[41] Similarly, enforcing norms of dress and appearance associated with a particular race or class can undermine other groups' ability to express themselves.[42]

Groups are powerless when they are dominated by other groups and their members lack social status and struggle to be autonomous.[43] Political disenfranchisement is an obvious example, but caste systems, poverty, and extensive managerial authority over workers can also create degrees of powerlessness.[44] Finally, groups are often subject to systematic violence, which is legitimized by prevailing norms and ideals, and sometimes even by public institutions. The legacy of racial violence in the United States, for example, includes the practice of slavery, the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan during Jim Crow, and (arguably) the routine use of excessive force by police against black suspects.[45]

This account captures the different dimensions of oppression, and lays the foundations for a nuanced analysis of how specific groups experience oppression. Each dimension of oppression can intersect with, and be strengthened or weakened by, the other dimensions.[46] It should also be clear that oppression does not simply impede access to resources or rights; the various dimensions of oppression can also influence one's beliefs, desires, and emotions as well as one's ability to communicate, express, and articulate them. This is demonstrated by

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40　Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," 63.

41　Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, 173–74.

42　Rhode, *The Beauty Bias*.

43　Lukes, *Power*; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

44　See, *inter alia*, Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" and *Private Government*.

45　These are examples from the United States, but members of oppressed groups around the world are subject to repressive violence—e.g., religious and ethnically motivated violence (e.g., against the Rohingya in Myanmar), violence against gay and trans people, intimate partner violence against women, and violence against indigenous populations.

46　Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex"; hooks, *Feminist Theory*.

the phenomenon of adaptive preference, and is visible in the internalization of racial hatred and anger.[47]

Oppression has many consequences. We examine several dimensions along which oppression compromises the ability and opportunity of those within oppressed groups to successfully forgive wrongdoers. We begin with a fictionalized example of wrongdoing. In doing so, we recognize that the extent to which specific groups are oppressed, and the dimensions along which they are oppressed, is subject to debate. Moreover, we acknowledge that the dynamics of oppression change over time; a group may accrue power while suffering under tightening forms of cultural imperialism or remain marginalized despite being less subject to violence. Finally, we recognize that members of dominant groups are also harmed by oppression, including stereotyping and testimonial injustice—e.g., through the enforcement of restrictive masculinity norms and the dismissal of men's experiences of sexual harassment.

Ceasing to blame can be seen as the final stage of a typical blame scenario. Following Michael McKenna's conversational model of blame, we conceive of such scenarios as typically having four stages.[48]

1. Offense (X wrongs Y)
2. Address (Y addresses X about their wrongdoing)
3. Account (X responds to Y's address and accounts for their behavior)
4. Response (Y responds to X's accounting)

These stages might extend over time and involve multiple encounters. Consider the following concrete case of wrongdoing.

> *Maria's Arrest*: Maria is black American woman. In recent months, several members of her community have died at the hands of the police, without provocation, often in highly publicized contexts. Along with others in her community, Maria participates in peaceful protests of their mistreatment by the police. During one protest she is arrested, purportedly for obstructing traffic. In the course of her arrest she is physically abused, insulted, and not informed of her rights as a suspect, despite her calm insistence to be treated respectfully like privileged citizens.

Maria has been severely wronged. The consequences of her arrest could unfold in various ways, some better than others. The following describes a best-case scenario.

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47   Stoljar, "Autonomy and Adaptive Preference Formation"; Lorde, "Eye to Eye," 147.

48   McKenna, *Conversation and Responsibility*, 89.

Best-Case Scenario: Maria's arrest and peaceful resistance were filmed and the videos are shown on the news and shared on social media. After her release, buoyed by the solidarity of her community, she publicly denounces her mistreatment and files legal charges against the arresting officer. With his case pending, the police officer contacts Maria via his lawyer. He has been following the media response to Maria's arrest and his actions, including the comments from members of her community, and he acknowledges that he acted wrongfully and shamefully. The officer offers a remorseful apology and makes clear that he accepts any legal consequences of his actions. Confident in his sincerity, Maria publicly forgives him and is lauded by her community.

We can describe the example in the vocabulary of McKenna's model:

1. Offense: Maria's arrest is injurious, disrespectful, and a violation of her rights.
2. Address: Maria denounces her treatment by the police officer and files charges.
3. Account: The officer accepts culpability, apologizes, and expresses remorse.
4. Response: Maria forgives the officer.

This best-case scenario seems unrealistic. The realities of oppression are likely to shape each of the scenario's four stages, producing outcomes markedly different from the best case. While our focus is on the ability of individuals to forgive—which takes place in the fourth stage—it is important to see how the different dimensions of oppression can shape how the whole episode unfolds. We will show that the ability to forgive can be compromised in various ways.

4.1. Offense

The circumstances of oppression affect the form and frequency of mistreatment that oppressed persons suffer. In turn, the nature of an offense can affect one's ability to forgive the offender. An oppressed person like Maria is more likely to suffer particular forms of wrongdoing in the first place. She is a member of a group that has historically been marginalized, exploited, culturally dominated, disempowered, and subjected to violence. The circumstances of oppression amplify the harm of such offenses—as when racial prejudice amplifies the harm of hostile or threatening speech.[49] Worse offenses are harder to forgive, especially when motivated by hatred or prejudice. We know that victims are less able or

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49   Lawrence et al., "Introduction."

less willing to forgive more severe offenses.[50] And Hieronymi reminds us that forgiveness does not come easily in the best of circumstances: "The wrong is less 'let go of' or washed away than it is digested and absorbed."[51] People like Maria must digest and absorb both the ill will behind the offense and the attitudes that sustain such ill will and that perpetuate the frequency and regularity of such offenses—whether disregard, contempt, or hatred. The psychological difficulty of this task can directly compromise the ability of oppressed persons to forgive.

4.2. Address

Oppression can affect one's ability to blame. An oppressive society is one in which one's response to victimization will itself be shaped by oppressive norms and the apparent inevitability of mistreatment. We imagined Maria publicly denouncing her treatment and bringing charges against the officer involved. Blame of this sort can be a powerful response. However, the circumstances of oppression can compromise one's ability and willingness to blame. It can do this in a number of ways, but most importantly by making blame difficult and by requiring a sacrifice from the would-be blamer.

The historical legacy of oppression—especially the fact that the oppressed are more likely to be victimized and more likely to be victimized in particular ways—informs and influences Maria's responsiveness to offense.[52] People like Maria may come to expect treatment that a more privileged person would find unacceptable and, as a result, may fail to register an offense or may interpret it differently from a privileged person in the same circumstances. In some cases it will be difficult or costly to express blame. As a member of an oppressed group, Maria might face obstacles to using the criminal justice system, risk reprisal and further harm by blaming publicly, or be forced to communicate her blame in less effective ways. For example, if her employment is precarious, taking time off to pursue justice through the courts or through public protest may require too great a sacrifice. And oppressed persons are more likely to have precarious employment, in part because they are more likely to be uneducated and to work in sectors in which labor is informal, unskilled, and replaceable.[53] Maria may have an incentive to avoid being regarded as a "troublemaker" in order to keep her job.

Expressing blame may also be ineffective. The object of her blame may be

50 Fehr et al., "The Road to Forgiveness."

51 Hieronymi, "Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness," 551n39.

52 Young, "Five Faces of Oppression."

53 Matthew Desmond (*Evicted*) documents the difficulty of poor black tenants in the United States to oppose unjust evictions in court and the obstacles he identifies could easily apply in other contexts.

unclear or uncertain, directed at the police generally, or privileged whites, or her oppressive society, rather than at the arresting officer in particular. If Maria does blame publicly, her tone and manner may be cautious or subdued. On the one hand, she may be aware that she risks being stereotyped—e.g., being perceived as oversensitive, emotional, aggressive, or "uppity."[54] On the other hand, if she tries to minimize being seen in these ways, perhaps through the projection of extreme calm, she may struggle to make the force of her blame felt. More generally, the marginalization of her cultural perspective, idiolect, and values can hinder her ability to articulate to a privileged audience the meaning and significance of the wrongdoing she suffers.[55] Thus, she may struggle to communicate her blame authentically because she faces a trade-off between blaming in a manner that truly expresses her attitudes and doing so in a way that is likely to secure uptake.[56] Such double binds are a central feature of oppression and of dissent under oppression in particular.[57]

But expressing blame is not the only problem. Maria's ability to blame may itself be compromised. For example, she may be so numbed by the routine violence experienced by members of her community that she is unsurprised at being arrested on spurious grounds. As a result, she may not blame at all, responding instead with resignation. She might even reject her inclination to blame as unwarranted. Individuals from oppressed groups often internalize prevalent stereotypes and Maria might doubt the appropriateness of her anger or the force with which she feels it, perhaps because she has internalized a conception of objectivity according to which anger, or emotion in general, indicates an unreliably subjective response to others' actions.[58] These psychosocial effects of oppression make blaming more difficult and require a greater sacrifice by the victim in virtue of their greater psychic toll. Thus, Maria's status as a marginalized and relatively powerless individual shapes her ability to successfully blame, her willingness to do so, and the form her blame will take.

These systematic constraints mean that Maria is less able to blame, even if she has good reasons for doing so. If she does blame, she may do so privately, expressing her views to supportive members of her community. Of course, inability to blame does not imply inability to forgive except in the trivial sense that forgiving, understood as ceasing to blame, requires blaming. However, the

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54   Banaji and Greenwald, *Blindspot*; McRae, "Anger and the Oppressed."

55   Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice.*

56   McRae, "Anger and the Oppressed," 109.

57   Frye, *The Politics of Reality*; McGowan, "Responding to Harmful Speech."

58   Lorde, "Eye to Eye"; Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi*; Banaji and Greenwald, *Blindspot*; Lugones, "Hard-to-Handle Anger"; Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge."

circumstances of oppression compromise would-be forgivers in similar ways as would-be blamers. Moreover, as we shall see, potential forgivers can fail to receive uptake of their attempts at forgiveness.

4.3. Accounting

Oppression can affect how an offender accounts for their offense. The beliefs and attitudes that give rise to particular offenses will also shape responses to blame for those offenses. Moreover, as we just described, the victim's response, or lack thereof, to mistreatment may also influence whether and how an offender accounts for their offense. How they do so can undermine the ability of the victim to forgive. First, the offender may give the victim no reason to forgive. They may fail to recognize the victim's blame or fail to adequately respond to the victim's moral address. The offender may refuse or fail to apologize, apologize for a different offense, or give a partial or limited apology. For example, the Japanese government recently apologized for its treatment of Korean "comfort women" during World War II, but only for the "involvement of Japanese military authorities." They thereby failed to take responsibility for the misdeeds of others acting on their behalf.[59] Likewise, when American radio personality Rush Limbaugh apologized to Sandra Fluke, a Georgetown law student, for calling her a "slut" after she testified before Congress about access to contraception, his public statement was closer to an excuse rather than an apology.[60] In both cases, the victims could reasonably view themselves as having no reason at all to forgive.

People like Maria are likely to find themselves in this kind of position. Members of oppressed groups are more likely to be victimized in particular ways, but their blame is less likely to be recognized and accepted.[61] An oppressive society is one in which the anger one feels in response to mistreatment is more likely to be ignored, doubted, or criticized, both by the offender and by society. An offender's response to blame can be shaped by the circumstances of oppression,

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59 Tolbert, "Japan's Apology to South Korea Shows What Public Apologies Should (Not) Do."

60 For Limbaugh's public statement, see https://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/03/a_ statement_from_rush.

61 Members of otherwise privileged groups can be harmed in the same way. A man who has been sexually harassed may, as a result of sexist gender norms and stereotypes about male sexual desire, find himself unable to blame or forgive for the same reasons as an otherwise oppressed person. The offense may be minimized and his blame discounted or rejected. However, it is important to note that some dimensions of the harm will likely be absent for the otherwise privileged victim. For example, in the case of sexual harassment, the offense will not bear the weight of a history of sexual objectification and the experience of frequent harassment since adolescence. That said, intersectionality complicates this kind of case, too. Being a trans person or a male prisoner may increase a man's vulnerability to sexual harassment and to additional harms from it, including inability to blame or forgive.

especially (though not only) if the offender is comparatively privileged.[62] Ideally, Maria's blame would prompt a sincere and unequivocal apology. The police officer would acknowledge his wrongdoing, not downplay its nature or extent, apologize, show remorse, and try to make amends. In fact, though, he may be unapologetically hostile, deny wrongdoing entirely, or simply (but culpably) fail to recognize the nature and significance of his actions. Or, if the police department recognizes or anticipates public outrage, it may manage his apology, thereby obscuring its sincerity. These alternative scenarios are more likely in contexts structured by implicit and explicit racism and norms that legitimize police violence or minimize its significance. If the officer responds in these ways, Maria may have no reason to forgive him and thus be unable to do so.[63]

Moreover, inadequate responses can make it harder to forgive. As with the initial offense, even if she does have reason to forgive, the experience of being dismissed, discounted, or silenced may make forgiveness more difficult or emotionally burdensome.

4.4. Response

We have described how oppression can affect how Maria is treated, her experience of mistreatment, whether and how she blames, and how others respond to her blame. And we have suggested that, at each stage, the realities of an oppressive society can directly compromise Maria's ability to forgive—in particular, her ability to meet the internal conditions on forgiving. In this section, we focus on Maria's ability to forgive her arresting officer and argue that oppression directly affects her ability to obtain uptake of her attempts to forgive.

In the ideal case, Maria has good reasons of the right kind to forgive. The officer's remorse, apology, and willingness to make amends demonstrate a relevant change of heart. However, as we argued in section 3, this is not sufficient for successful forgiveness because one may fail to secure uptake. Maria may fail to secure uptake in two ways. First, because she is responding to an instance of wrongdoing that is perpetrated widely within her society, an instance of wrongdoing in which people typically lack good reasons to forgive, those in her community as well as privileged allies may mistakenly view her as condoning the police officer's actions. Even if she has good reasons, Maria's wider community—plagued by endemic police violence and social marginalization—may fail to recognize the reasons she has and thus fail to acknowledge her forgiveness as forgiveness.

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62 Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*.

63 She may still have reason to make room for forgiveness in the future—e.g., by explaining the extent and nature of the wrongdoing she suffered, or making it clear why the offender should have known better—but this is neither her responsibility nor a reason to forgive.

Second, others in comparatively privileged communities might recognize that she wants to forgive the officer, but reject her attempt as inappropriate. For example, privileged third parties may assume that police violence is justified or believe, on the basis of negative stereotypes of the criminality of black Americans, that in many cases police officers were justified. As a result, they may reject the possibility of situations in which it is reasonable to forgive a police officer for actions performed while on duty.

The same circumstances that impede uptake by others may also affect Maria's own attitude toward her forgiveness. Oppressed people often internalize inaccurate stereotypes of their character and social standing. They may also be burdened by frequent slights and signs of implicit prejudices, as well as by the struggles associated with pursuing their lives while being socially marginalized.[64] Claudia Card argues that, as a result:

> The oppressed are liable to low self-esteem, ingratiation, affiliation with abusers (for example so-called female masochism), as well as to a tendency to dissemble, fear of being conspicuous, and chameleonism—taking on the colours of our environment as protection against assault.[65]

Such factors may undermine Maria's confidence in how she relinquishes blame, even if she has good reasons to do so and is aware of those reasons. In other words, oppression might undermine self-uptake. One may express forgiveness but doubt whether one was right to do so; or one may excuse another's behavior only to question one's judgment in doing so. This uncertainty is distinct from, albeit potentially exacerbated by, failures of uptake within one's broader community. We might think that one could combat uncertainty through sustained consciousness raising and education, or by group activism, protest, and solidarity. However, the growing awareness of one's oppression can often spark doubt and doublethink rather than enhancing confidence.[66] One reason for this is that oppressed people are often blamed for their lack of standing and the wrongdoing they suffer.[67] Maria must not only weigh whether she has reasons to forgive,

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64 See, among others, W. E. B. Du Bois's description of "double consciousness" (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 8).

65 Card, *The Unnatural Lottery*, 53.

66 Maria might also experience what Sandra Bartky ("Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness") calls "double ontological shock," in which, for example, a woman may realize that sexism is pervasive, but remain unsure whether any particular behavior they experience is an instance of sexism.

67 Donovan, "To Blame or Not to Blame."

within a hostile context; she must also wrestle against the counter-narrative that she is responsible for her mistreatment and suffering at others' hands.

These narratives further complicate Maria's situation. She may have a good reason to relinquish blame and secure uptake from those around her, and yet still feel that the force of her interaction is somewhat diminished. In oppressive circumstances, wrongdoers need to do more when responding to blame and engaging with the victims' subsequent changing attitudes toward their blame than when the victim is not oppressed. The moral status of an oppressed victim is habitually called into question. Thus, while they may be able to blame and cease blaming for good and publicly accepted reasons, the responsiveness of wrongdoers can still seem inadequate unless they make special efforts to convey their understanding of the harms they have caused and remain sincere about making amends. For example, if it is likely that a normal apology will be interpreted as insincere, self-interested, or institutionally managed, the officer may need to apologize in a way that unequivocally accepts blame and expresses remorse.

We have shown how oppression can deprive individuals of reasons to forgive. Maria lives in a community that has been routinely exploited, marginalized, disempowered, and subjected to cultural domination by others, so she is likely to inherit strong social reasons to approach wrongdoing in certain ways. In particular, her victimization and the victimization of others like her, coupled with the experience of voicelessness—of being unable to secure the same political, cultural, or moral recognition as other groups—may give her reasons to let go rather than forgive. She may cease to blame simply in order to survive, as a mode of extended self-therapy. As we have shown, when offenders are not encouraged to think about their conduct toward members of socially disregarded groups, remorse, apology, and reasons to forgive will be rarer.

Finally, even if she is willing and able to forgive, oppression may also undermine its effectiveness. Her forgiveness may be ineffective or even counterproductive if her community believes that she has made a mistake or forgiven wrongfully. For example, Maria might misinterpret the significance of the officer's response. The officer may apologize, but do so in a superficial or equivocating way. Against a background of sustained oppression, such a tepid response may seem significant or even exceptional. In short, the significance of the officer's response to Maria's blame is likely to be distorted. Her assessment of his response and her response to it, in the concluding phase of the blame scenario, will be influenced by all of these factors and more, perhaps leading her to relinquish blame when she should not or in ways that others in her community would condemn or refuse to support.

Our previous points notwithstanding, we do not claim that people like Maria

are always irrevocably compromised in their ability or attempts to blame and cease blaming. Rather, we have argued that forgiving requires particular reasons and that oppression influences both the availability and significance of such reasons for members of some groups. As an oppressed person, Maria's life has been shaped by entrenched social norms and narratives about her marginal status. She has experienced frequent and persistent injustices and frustrations. A neglected dimension of this experience is that her attempts to participate in reason-guided practices of blaming and forgiving have often been significantly impeded. Moreover, because stereotypes and norms are often internalized, she may struggle to secure uptake from members of her own community and may even doubt herself. Finally, even when her reasons to relinquish blame are recognized, her actions may lack the force of comparable actions undertaken by the privileged. Her ability to respond to wrongdoing is compromised by the very norms and social structures that make her more likely to be a victim of wrongdoing in the first place.

5. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

We have argued that some people are systematically excluded from a variety of ceasing-to-blame practices, including forgiving. Before exploring the implications of this view, two objections demand attention. First, one might argue that, even if the circumstances of oppression can undermine some ways of ceasing to blame, forgiving is voluntary and personal and therefore open to anyone, irrespective of their social context. This objection says that whether a person forgives is genuinely up to her—that forgiveness is, by its nature, equally open to all.

   We think that this view fails to acknowledge the realities of our actual practices. There are two ways to interpret the idea that forgiveness is "up to us" and on neither interpretation is it entirely so. First, forgiveness must be voluntary; forced or coerced forgiveness is not forgiveness.[68] But forgiveness is not entirely voluntary. Important aspects of the practice are beyond our control. We have only partial control over the emotional dimension of our blame, e.g., how angry we get when wronged and how persistent our anger is. It is also beyond our control whether and how others respond to our blame, e.g., whether our anger is ignored or judged excessive or otherwise held to be inappropriate. Nor can we control the social forces that shape forgiveness norms and interfere with our attempts to forgive, e.g., the power of forgiveness depends on how it is likely to be perceived by the offender and the broader community. As we argued above, all this implies that we cannot control the reasons we have to forgive, how strong those reasons are, or how they will be received.

68   Griswold, *Forgiveness*; Allais, "Wiping the Slate Clean"; Pettigrove, *Forgiveness and Love*.

Nor is forgiveness a purely personal exercise. Consider the claim that, independent of its supposed voluntariness, forgiveness is the exercise of a "normative power."[69] On this view, an offender acquires an obligation to her victim simply in virtue of having wronged him and forgiveness is a purely personal choice whereby the victim releases the offender from that obligation. But this conception fails to capture how our practice really works and how this "power" can be affected by one's circumstances.[70] One cannot forgive, by fiat or not, unless one has the right sort of reason for doing so.

Moreover, the power of one's forgiveness to alter the normative landscape depends, in part, on whether and to what degree it is recognized. Implicit biases and the ideological undercurrents of oppressive societies can structure the outlook of the privileged so that oppressed individuals are expected to forgive—perhaps, in some cases, religious ideas provide the relevant social pressure.[71] A form of ceasing to blame that is seen as supererogatory for the privileged can be normalized for the oppressed. And the result is a less powerful practice, one less able to alter the normative landscape surrounding the victim and her offender. A society that expects forgiveness drains it of its power in the same way that a society of liars drains promises of their power. Indeed, the act of forgiveness may have no power at all if those to whom it is addressed continue to deny any wrongdoing. One can commit, by fiat, to forgive someone, but commitment is only a first step in the forgiveness practice.

One might respond that a philosophical account of forgiveness should admit of versions of the practice that are not sensitive to reasons—that one can forgive, for instance, simply when one wants to. But this approach only serves to glorify an idiosyncratic experience of forgiving, which, for many people in oppressive societies, may lack the aura of power, personal choice, and moral status attributed to it by the privileged—or have the aura of power but not the substance.

This suggests a second objection. One could argue that our approach is insufficiently critical because we are describing practices that have been formed and sustained in contexts of oppression. Are we not taking existing practices and norms for granted and ignoring or denying the possibility that oppressed people can shape or create their own? One response would be to note that our task is not prescriptive. Our aim has been to describe the contexts in which people blame and cease to blame. We would go further, though. While we discuss the nature of

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69 Warmke, "The Normative Power of Forgiveness."

70 MacLachlan, "Moral Powers and Forgivable Evils."

71 Moss and Watkins ("What Christians Get Wrong about Forgiveness") and Patton ("Black America Should Stop Forgiving White Racists") both point to instances of this phenomenon.

existing practices, we do not deny that oppressed people can shape these practices. Indeed, one way of opposing oppression is to resist cultural domination, one dimension of which is the inability to engage with the perspectives and forms of life of other groups.[72] It is a mistake to think that the ways people address blame, and the reasons they adduce to each other in the course of doing so, are immutable. And it would therefore be a mistake to suggest that the oppressed cannot acquire what the privileged already have—namely, full access to the variety of ceasing-to-blame practices, and especially to a truly powerful practice of forgiveness.

But it will not be easy. If we are right, then we have identified some of the ways oppression diminishes or distorts the ability of the oppressed to approach blame as the privileged do. They are hampered by social forces that shape the reasons available to them and the impact of those reasons on others in their society. Thus it is plausible to think that any attempt to reshape how people approach blame will itself be shaped by those same forces. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a context in which the attempt to forge new practices of dealing with blame— admitting new reasons to let go of blame, for instance—does not reinforce the divisions we have already described, thereby amplifying the assumptions and biases of the privileged, and making it less likely that they will recognize or accept attempts by oppressed individuals to forgive, excuse, justify, and let go. Consider the resistance to adopting traditionally plural pronouns to express gender neutrality or trans identity, e.g., "They [singular] went to the dance without a date."

It is nearly a truism that once a power imbalance is established it is easier to perpetuate the disparity than to reverse it. Power reproduces itself. Various instances of oppression support the hypothesis that it is typically easier to perpetuate the social institutions that oppress a group than to dismantle them, in part because the existing state of affairs is supported by a web of forces that are both entrenched and mutually reinforcing.

6. implications

We have argued that oppression shapes our ceasing-to-blame practices, especially forgiveness. Understanding this matters for how we perceive and perform them as well as for how we develop and reform them. We conclude by discussing two ways in which our analysis bears on our perception of and plans for the practice of forgiveness.

First, our analysis highlights a neglected dimension of oppression and the political contexts in which oppression is generated and maintained. Not only does

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72 For one account of how the circumstances of oppression can both undermine agency and create opportunities for novel exercises of agency, see Bierra, "Missing in Action."

oppression expose some groups to systematic forms of wrongdoing, it also compromises their ability to respond to such wrongdoing by blaming and forgiving.

Our analysis may seem trivial, a philosophical curiosity describing a single straw on the backs of the burdened, but it has an important practical consequence. If we are right that the various ways of ceasing to blame constitute a set of reason-guided practices, then those who aim to facilitate and develop ceasing-to-blame practices—especially those who advocate developing forgiveness institutions—must reassess their approach. For example, within the burgeoning literature on political forgiveness, theorists often discuss the possibility and usefulness of developing institutional frameworks to help foster forgiveness. Truth and reconciliation commissions and procedures aimed at interpersonal restorative or transformative justice are two such approaches.[73] These projects recognize the power of forgiveness and explore whether political forgiveness could enable a society to better address entrenched social conflicts and their related injustices.

Forgiveness can often be a powerful response to wrongdoing, including wrongdoing in an oppressive context. However, our argument suggests that attempts to develop forgiveness institutions may generate similar problems to the interpersonal ones we describe above. These attempts may amplify the effect of oppression by further exaggerating the distorting norms and ideologies that underpin privilege. It may be harder to secure uptake for other ways of ceasing to blaming if one is expected to forgive, and harder still if there is an institutional practice that disproportionately valorizes forgiveness.

More importantly, though, even if forgiveness institutions are not harmful in the ways we suggest, our argument implies that if we are truly interested in helping people forgive (or excuse, or justify, or let go), then we must address their wider ability and opportunities to relinquish blame. Someone is better placed to forgive if they can access other forms of redress. They must have access, in ways that many plausibly do not, to the wider nexus of institutions that the privileged utilize when evaluating blame and responsibility—e.g., the formal legal system—as well as informal blaming and ceasing-to-blame practices. Forgiveness is not a panacea, but it can be good and useful. The most effective forgiveness institution is a non-oppressive society in which everyone has adequate and equal ability and opportunity to blame and cease to blame when they suffer wrongdoing.

Second, our account illuminates a further parallel between forgiveness and other practices shaped by oppression. The practice of forgiveness is, among other things, a tool. It is a means by which a victim can resolve a moral conflict, just as blame is a means of protesting mistreatment and demanding due regard. And

73 Amstutz, *The Healing of Nations*; Johnstone, *Restorative Justice*; MacLachlan, "The Philosophical Controversy over Political Forgiveness."

those who forgive recognize its function and power. Indeed, we view it as a powerful response to those who have earned our blame. However, this tool has been blunted by oppression with the result that, for those who need it most, those most likely to be systematically victimized, it will be least effective.

The ability to grant or withhold forgiveness from those who mistreat them may appear to be one of the few forms of power and moral high ground not eroded by oppression. But this is not the case. Our account shows that even this most personal form of moral interaction can be compromised. Forgiveness is difficult in the best of circumstances—coming to see an offender as better than his wrongdoing warrants entails first seeing him as the person who chose to wrong you—and this burden is increased when combined with (on the one hand) prejudice and (on the other) norms that urge forgiveness. The result is that forgiveness can even be turned against those for whom it represents a significant exercise of moral agency.

This phenomenon is not unique to forgiveness. It is a familiar feature of oppression that the tools (i.e., concepts, norms, practices) employed by the privileged do not work for, and sometimes work against, the oppressed. Consider so-called feminine virtues like chastity, patience, and obedience. These virtues—separate from but supposedly equal to masculine virtues—were promoted and accepted as essential for the good life of a woman. In fact, valuing, instantiating, and policing the feminine virtues was and is, at least in a male-dominated world, a way of perpetuating the oppression of women.

The same can be said of freedom. Nominal freedom, of the sort delineated by a constitution or bill of rights, is equally available to all citizens, but the circumstances of oppression quickly show how material conditions determine the value and power of those freedoms.[74] The freedoms guaranteed to citizens by such documents do not serve all citizens equally well, as is made clear by the history of disenfranchisement, housing discrimination, and police violence suffered by blacks in the United States, the perpetuation of caste norms in India, and continuing struggles for equal rights by LGBTQ communities in many democracies. These freedoms are the tools with which the disadvantaged are expected to escape their material deprivation, but they are being asked to climb higher with a shorter ladder. The valorization of forgiveness involves a similar bait and switch. Forgiveness has an aura of power because, for the privileged, it is powerful. But for those living under oppression, what seems like a powerful tool—something with which to defend oneself and assert one's self-respect, virtue, and strength—is found to be inadequate. This mismatch between the ideal and reality is dangerous. It makes misuse and misunderstanding more likely.

74 Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development.*

Imagine an oppressed person, like Maria, considering whether to forgive a racist offender. Whether she recognizes it or not, her ability to forgive is likely to be compromised—perhaps the offender views his offense as insufficiently bad to warrant blame. If she does not recognize this, registering only a vague distaste about forgiving him, then she may unwittingly harm herself (e.g., by undermining the demand for respect signaled by her blame) and undermine the practice itself (e.g., by perpetuating the norm of forgiving the unrepentant). But even if she does recognize that she cannot forgive or that forgiving is somehow inappropriate and therefore likely to be less effective, she may try to forgive anyway simply because it drives her point home as powerfully as she can. The fact that it further undermines the power of the practice by distorting it is unfortunate but unavoidable. To turn a screw, one wants a screwdriver. Lacking one, a knife may do, but it is unlikely to sink the screw properly, and liable to chip or bend.

Forgiveness can seem like a powerful practice to which the oppressed, as regular victims of wrongdoing, have unimpeded access. In fact, the opposite is the case. The oppressed are less able to forgive and less able to do so successfully. Moreover, because of the mismatch between its perceived power and its actual effectiveness, forgiveness is likely to be misused by those who need it and misunderstood by those who "police" it, whether as recipients of forgiveness or bystanders to the practice. Rather than helping oppose oppression, forgiveness may stem from, reflect, and exacerbate it.[75]

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