

A Place for Forgiveness in Reconciliation

This essay takes on two tasks. One, I defend Lucy Allais's account of forgiveness from arguments that forgiveness is impossible, and that attempting it is irrational. I show that Allais's distinctions between wrong and wrongdoer, and belief and affective attitude, allow her to offer a logically coherent account. Two, construed in this way, I defend the role of forgiveness in the process of political reconciliation against criticism from Cécile Fabre. I offer counter-arguments to Fabre's direct criticisms of the efficacy of forgiveness, and suggest that forgiveness is typically an integral part of the alternative processes Fabre proposes: empathy and trust.

Jacques Derrida held that forgiveness in its pure sense involves forgiving the unforgivable.¹ It is a contradiction: we cannot forgive, and yet we do. As such, Derrida concludes, the act is “a madness of the impossible”.²

There is of course more flesh to Derrida's argument, which I will discuss. I only raise his conclusion here in order to introduce an account of forgiveness I will defend throughout. Against Derrida, Lucy Allais advances an account of forgiveness that is intended to be logically coherent.³ The initial task of this essay, then, is to defend Allais's conception of forgiveness. From here, once we can say that it is possible and rational to forgive, our central task is to defend forgiveness against more recent criticisms from Cécile Fabre that the process of political reconciliation is best served by acts of empathy and trust, rather than forgiveness.

Forgiveness, as it is given by Allais, and as we will consider it here, involves a victim ceasing to hold justified feelings of resentment towards a wrongdoer whilst still maintaining a belief that the wrongdoer was (and still is) culpable for their wrongdoing. The forgiver dissociates their feelings towards the act from their feelings towards the wrongdoer – the former no longer informs the latter. Forgiveness is therefore a choice

¹ Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. Trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. London: Routledge, 2001. p.32.

² *Ibid.* p.45.

³ Allais, Lucy. “Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness”, in *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Winter, 2008), pp.33-68.

(although there some ambiguity surrounding to what extent forgiveness is volitional) on the part of the victim to see the wrongdoer in a better light than their action demands.

Allais's distinction between the wrong and the wrongdoer is the crux of her argument. It is a distinction not attempted by Derrida, thus allowing Allais to avoid Derrida's contradiction. When Derrida asserts that forgiveness involves forgiving the unforgivable, it is not clear whether he interprets the *act* to be unforgivable, or indeed the *perpetrator* to be unforgivable. An argument from Cécile Fabre provides a strong case that as persons are the appropriate objects of forgiveness, it is nonsensical to forgive an act.⁴ Our forgiveness is directed towards agents, not what they have done. I am therefore persuaded that we should be wary of speaking of unforgivable acts, and can give Derrida's argument its fairest hearing by interpreting him to mean that persons are unforgivable.

Yet even on this interpretation, Derrida's claim is too strong. Allais denies that Derrida – or indeed anyone else other than the victim – has the standing to decide whether the wrongdoer can be forgiven or not. One central tenet of Allais's case is that forgiveness is discretionary. If we accept that forgiveness involves the victim overcoming personal resentment they are entitled to hold, it seems sensible that they are to be the judge of whether that change of heart has taken place. It follows then that unless given evidence to the contrary, we should believe people when they say they have forgiven.

The poet Claudia Rankine has a similar understanding of forgiveness. Responding to the case of the Oklahoma bomber, Timothy McVeigh, Rankine characterizes forgiveness as “a dying down in the heart [...] It is a feeling of nothingness that cannot be communicated to another, an absence, a bottomless vacancy held by the living, beyond all that is hated or loved.”⁵ Where Allais might consider the resentment overcome, Rankine sees it retreating to a vanishing point. Either way, both agree that what Allais calls the “affective attitude”⁶ of resentment is no longer present. And on Rankine's

⁴ Fabre, Cécile. *Cosmopolitan Peace*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. p.254. (<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198786245.001.0001/acprof-9780198786245-chapter-9> - accessed 04/06/17.)

⁵ Rankine, Claudia. *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004. p.48.

⁶ Allais. p.53.

account of incommunicable forgiveness, victims themselves may not fully understand their own reasons for why they forgave. (Metaphors for forgiveness typically invoke the heart, not the rational mind.) But the victim will appreciate any reasons they do have and certainly understand their own attitudes better than anyone else. Consequently, on the grounds of standing, it would be an injustice to deny them their forgiveness.

As well as the distinction between wrong and wrongdoer, Allais also makes the distinction between belief and affective attitude. Our relationship to the wrong is one of belief – we either believe that the act can be justified, excused, or accepted, or we believe that the wrongdoer is culpable for the act. Our relation to the wrongdoer themselves, however, is one of feeling. We do not say their character was right or wrong, but rather, in Allais's language, have an affective attitude towards them. This attitude can encompass all manner of emotions and dispositions.

Without this distinction, Derrida's argument becomes more appealing. If we relate unilaterally to the wrong and the wrongdoer along the same channel, and maintain the culpability of the wrongdoer, it is difficult to overcome reactive attitudes, particularly if the injustice suffered is great. Derrida argues that forgiveness is impossible because it involves dropping our reactive attitudes. Yet here, on a unilateral level, that seems to imply dropping the culpability of the wrongdoer too, which of course would mean that there was nothing to forgive. This leads to Derrida's paradox that forgiveness can only occur where it is not needed.

Yet, with Allais's distinction the paradox evaporates. Allais does not require that a victim drop all of their reactive attitudes. She is more specific. She requires that in order to forgive, a victim must drop their reactive attitudes towards the wrongdoer detached from their act. This leaves open the possibility that a victim can still feel hurt or regret or anger about how they were treated – they can hold reactive attitudes toward the act, but not allow those attitudes to inform how they see the wrongdoer. There is no contradiction. It is logically coherent to forgive.

There are two immediate questions here. One, even if it is possible to forgive, why should we? Or why indeed do people forgive? It is of course possible to see someone in

a better light than their actions permit us, but why go against the evidence? Two, even if again we grant that forgiveness is a perfectly coherent act to undertake, what use is it? Will it make the wrongdoer less likely to commit that wrong again? Or is its only end the mental health of the victim who no longer wishes to be traumatized and eaten up with resentment? These are pressing questions, and I sense that an attempt to answer one will necessarily require an attempt to answer the other. For example, Margaret Holmgren suggests that people forgive because of an inherent respect for personhood and a desire to see people flourish in the future.⁷ Notice that this answer can be interpreted as a response to both questions. However, I am inclined to agree with Allais that sometimes reasons for forgiveness will remain unknown to us.⁸ We might never fully appreciate another's reasons for forgiveness, nor indeed may we understand our own when we forgive. (Remember here Rankine's notion of incommunicable forgiveness.) An answer to the first question therefore might necessarily remain mysterious in some cases. The relevant point is that we can rationally forgive. We can, however, make some good headway with the second question: what is the use of forgiveness?

The end of improved mental health does not provide a satisfactory answer. While victims do express a desire to escape the pain that retributive attitudes such as resentment foster, this can only be a happy corollary of forgiveness, not its end. The proper object of forgiveness is not ourselves nor our own mental state, but the wrongdoer and our attitude towards them. The point or use of forgiveness must then involve the two parties. Forgiveness is primarily not a form of therapy but the relationship between the wronged and the wrongdoer made new. Popular defenses of forgiveness therefore point to its forward-looking capacity to end cycles of reciprocal and escalating violence. It facilitates wiping the slate clean. For this reason, perhaps the area where the greatest advocates for forgiveness are to be found concerns the reconciliation of communities following war, genocide or other atrocities.

Recent work by Cécile Fabre has challenged the efficacy of forgiveness in this area. She offers two strong arguments against forgiveness and a third by way of suggesting an

⁷ Holmgren, Margaret R. *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. p.34.

⁸ Allais. p. 60.

alternative route to reconciliation. In the final section of this essay, I will seek to defend the place of forgiveness in the process of reconciliation.

Fabre's first argument⁹ is as follows: in conflicts there is typically an enormous amount of suffering caused by non-culpable rights violations. These cases, where no one is individually responsible for the suffering, Fabre argues, do not warrant any retributive reactive attitudes such as resentment. Therefore, they do not constitute forgiveness cases. Reconciliation is required here, and forgiveness is not a tool we can use to get there. I do not disagree with any of this. However, it seems to me where there is no culpability, either on an individual or institutional level, such acts are excusable. As long as it can be communicated, for example, that the harm was not intentional, the path to reconciliation looks to be straightforward. The more difficult cases are where there is culpability on the part of the wrongdoer and where the victim does hold justified resentment. These cases present a serious challenge to reconciliation, and it is in these cases that forgiveness can play a role.

Fabre's second argument¹⁰ is a stronger one. She holds that forgiveness can only be given by the victim to the wrongdoer. There is no possibility of vicarious forgiveness. We cannot forgive on the behalf of somebody else. (Fabre gives the example of an SS officer seeking forgiveness from a Jew – any Jew – for crimes he committed against many Jewish civilians.) As we ventured above, it must be for the victim and only the victim to determine if they have (and if they can) overcome their feelings of justified resentment. No one else has the standing to do so. This presents a real problem in cases of political reconciliation. Often, as with Fabre's example, victims are dead and therefore unable to forgive. In other instances, violence is directed against a group, race, religion, or state, as much as it is against individuals. Here, it is not clear who has the standing to forgive if forgiveness must operate between two individuals.

In response, I readily concede vicarious forgiveness is impossible. The dead cannot forgive, nor can third parties forgive on their behalf. The surviving perpetrators will have to cope with the prospect of remaining unforgiven. Yet secular reconciliation very much

⁹ Fabre. *Cosmopolitan Peace*. p.255.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.256.

operates in the realm of the living, so Fabre's challenge is not insurmountable. The task is to overcome resentment between parties still alive. Of course, family and friends of a dead victim may justifiably resent the perpetrator. Here, the perpetrator has committed a wrong, not just against the victim, but also indirectly against the victim's relations. I think if those relations are able to overcome their resentment, we can consider this a real and sincere form of forgiveness. They do not, nor can they, forgive on behalf of the original victim, but they can act towards eliminating any residual resentment.

When atrocities occur state against state, or race against race, Allais's conception of forgiveness restricted between two parties once again seems to demand that we either forgive vicariously – e.g. one citizen forgives on behalf of others – or not at all. In response, I submit that just as culpable wrongdoing occurs individual *qua* individual, it can also operate from state to state, or indeed between many other types of group. In post-conflict situations, victims may feel that violence was perpetrated against them because of what they represent, or because they belong to a certain group. For this reason there is certainly a case to be made that where an individual feels she can overcome her own personal resentment against her aggressor, she may want the group she belongs to, whether that is a race, religion or state, also to collectively cease to hold retributive feelings. This might, so to speak, complete the process of forgiveness.

Finally, Fabre argues that empathy¹¹ and trust¹² are better roads to reconciliation than forgiveness. She asserts that the greatest obstacle to peace and the greatest contributing factor to past conflicts restarting is a lack of trust. Here, trust is understood to mean the belief that when a party does something they will act out of concern and respect for another. Fabre further argues that in order for trust to take hold, some degree of empathy is required. Empathy provides us with reasons for trusting the other party because it allows us to take first-person and second-person perspectives simultaneously. We therefore understand what it might be like to be the other party. We might begin to appreciate how the victim feels, and thus wish to exhibit some remorse, or we might inhabit the mind of the wrongdoer, and perhaps realize that his actions were

¹¹ Fabre. <https://politicalphilosopher.net/2015/02/27/featured-philosop-her-cecil-fabre/>

¹² Fabre. *Cosmopolitan Peace*. p. 259.

likely caused, but not excused or justified, by legitimate grievances. Empathy, Fabre argues, may eventually yield trust. The two work in tandem.

Again, there is little that Fabre says which is disagreeable. Trust and empathy certainly do seem effective routes to reconciliation, and I am inclined to agree that forgiveness is not strictly necessary for reconciliation. Where I do disagree with Fabre is her implication that trust and empathy are distinct processes from forgiveness that operate on different planes. It seems to me that this is not a question of either/or. The three processes act in tandem. First, if we revisit Allais's conception of forgiveness, we see that for Allais, dissociating the perpetrator from his act partly constitutes what forgiveness is. An alternative account from Murphy and Hampton suggests that the dissociation only provides justification for forgiveness; forgiveness itself is the overcoming of reactive attitudes.¹³ Allais, on the other hand, forefronts the dissociation. It seems to me that it is much easier to empathize with an individual when we do not see their character as tarnished by their past actions. Presumably we are repulsed and find empathy difficult because the act is something we could never imagine undergoing ourselves. If we can forgive and consider the person aside from their wrongdoing, empathy appears a far more likely prospect.

Moreover, trust and forgiveness go hand in hand. If someone shows us the necessary respect and concern which trust demands, that will usually mean that if they have wronged us in the past, they are likely to now display repentance and actively seek our forgiveness. This, of course, does not oblige us to give it, but certainly makes the change of heart more likely. Trust and forgiveness also seem to share in the aspect that they look to the better selves of others – forgiveness that someone's past self does not reflect who they are now, and trust that their future self will adhere to our best conception of them. In choosing to forgive or trust, then, we do not tally up past wrongs and misdeeds. Rather, and curiously for a secular account of forgiveness, we perform a small act of faith.

¹³ Murphy, Jeffrie and Hampton, Jean. *Forgiveness and Mercy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

