

OBLIGATORY GIFTS: AN ESSAY ON FORGIVENESS

MARIO ATTIE-PICKER

Loyola University Chicago

The paper attempts to bridge a gap between two prevalent conceptions of forgiveness that are widely thought to be in opposition. On one side of things, forgiveness is often characterized as a gift. The image is an ever-present one, enduring in popular culture no less than in the sober prose of analytic philosophy. But we also talk of forgiveness as a moral imperative, an important, even vital aspect of our moral life. I argue that, contrary to what may at first appear, the two sides are not in tension, and each gets at something important about the nature of forgiveness. Forgiveness is indeed a gift but, much like actual gifts, it is one we are sometimes required to give.

1.

Your wife's 50th birthday is coming up. 'Fifty is no joke,' you think, 'I'd better get her something special.' She hasn't said anything, but she sure seemed excited about that watercolor painting you saw together a few weeks back. 'That's a perfect gift,' you say to yourself with a smile, 'she'll love it.' The day comes and your wife loves the gift. She thanks you, gives you a big hug, and tells you, looking at the new painting hanging at the wall, how perfect a gift you found.

Let me now tell a different story.

Your wife's 50th birthday is coming up. 'Fifty is no joke,' you think, 'I'd better get her something special.' Days pass, work is busy, and you sort of forget, or maybe just ignore, the whole gift thing. 'There's this watercolor painting she really liked,' you think at times, and yet you can't quite bring yourself to the gallery. The birthday comes and finds you empty-handed. At dinner, you sing 'Happy Birthday,' express how much you love her, and so on. But she is clearly upset. You know that look, that demeanor, the hint of accusation in her eyes. 'I'm really sorry,' you say all of a sudden, 'I should have gotten you something.'

Contact: Mario Attie-Picker <mattie@luc.edu>

I hope readers find both versions of the story utterly unremarkable. The stuff of ordinary life. But if we take a closer look at how the gift, or lack thereof, is received in each case, something worth remarking starts to emerge. What seems worth remarking is the co-existence of two seemingly opposite attitudes towards the gift.

Consider, first, the case where things go well. Here's the crucial point: your wife doesn't receive the gift as though it was something *owed*. Rather, she responds with gratitude—the gratitude of someone who got something she was *not* entitled to receive. To see what I mean, let's change the story again. Suppose you and your wife have made an agreement: she buys the house furniture, you buy the paintings. And suppose you both liked the watercolor painting for the living room. So you buy it and hang it up. How would she receive the painting? Or rather, how would she receive *your buying of the painting*? She'll simply acknowledge, I think, that you did your part, that you held your end of the deal. She might still thank you, of course. But such gratitude would be *very* different from the gratitude expressed when the painting is a gift. Indeed, I'm inclined to think that to speak of gratitude here is already a stretch. But call it gratitude if you like. The point is that your wife here presumes, in receiving the painting, to be receiving what is rightfully hers.¹ This lies in stark contrast to the manner in which she receives the painting at her birthday, where her response expresses (and is meant in part to express) that she does not see the gift as owed to her—as something she had the right to claim of you.

Your wife, we have seen, does not receive the gift as owed. One might think that this is because you don't owe her a gift. And one might conclude, reasonably enough, that if you don't owe her a gift, no obligation to give one exists. But that would be a mistake, even if a reasonable one. For your wife's reaction in the second version of the story—the version where things go bad—is hard to explain under the hypothesis that there is no such obligation. An obligation to give her something is revealed the moment you fail to comply with it. And what brings it to light is nothing other than your wife's response. It isn't only that she is disappointed. She is angry. And she is angry *with you*. The absence of a gift is not felt as an unfortunate event. She experiences it as a slight, as a lack of regard from your part. That's what that look in her eyes communicates. Not disappointment, or sadness, or annoyance—but resentment.² In other words, her response is a

1. In other words, under the conditions of this agreement—in contrast to the situation with her birthday!—your wife has the standing to demand that you buy the painting, so long as she has bought the furniture. Note also that under this agreement the painting would be a terrible gift. Why? Well, one feels like saying, because it wouldn't be a *gift*. You *had* to buy the painting. As will soon become clear, this way of expressing the dissatisfaction with the painting *qua* gift would not do.

2. On the important distinction between disappointment and resentment, see Mason (2014).

blaming response. And you, of course, understand it as such. For your reaction, in turn, is to apologize. This give-and-take is intelligible only under the supposition that your failure to give her something is indeed a failure to comply with an obligation. Or to put it differently: if there were no obligation, both her blame and your apologies would be unwarranted.

To summarize: gifts are usually received with the sort of gratitude that expresses one's understanding that what was given was not owed. But failure to give, on the other hand, may reveal an obligation lurking in the background all along. The takeaway, for now, is simply this: gifts are often obligatory and yet recipients—those to whom we are obligated—do not receive them as if they were owed. Gifts, therefore, embody a peculiar kind of obligation, one that I will try to adumbrate in this paper.

But this paper, I'm sorry to tell you, is not about gifts. Or rather, it's not about the kind of gifts I've been going on and on about. This paper is about forgiveness, which is often said to be a gift. My purpose is to show that the metaphor is a good one—indeed, that it is better than even its supporters think it is. For I'm going to argue that forgiveness is very much like the painting you gave, or failed to give, to your wife. Forgiveness often exhibits the peculiar sort of obligation that we just saw embodied in actual gifts. Or so I shall attempt to show.

2.

Let's then turn to forgiveness. My goal is to bridge a gap between two conceptions that are thought to be in opposition. On one side of things, forgiveness is often characterized as a gift. The image is an ever-present one, enduring in the self-help books at airport's stands no less than in the sober prose of analytic philosophy. But we also talk of forgiveness as a moral imperative, an important, even vital aspect of our moral life. So what is it, gift or obligation? The answer is both. My view is that both sides are getting at something important about the nature of forgiveness, and we would be wise to stop seeing them as mutually exclusive. Forgiveness is indeed a gift, but like actual gifts, it is one we are sometimes required to give.

I do mean sometimes. Forgiveness is very often supererogatory and any view that implies otherwise is one we should reject. So let me specify the kind of case I have in mind and will have in mind for the remainder of the essay. I wish to focus on wrongs that are not trivial but also not overly grave. In other words, the kind of wrongs we have all done and will (sadly) do again, most often in the context of close relationships. And I will focus on the subset of such cases in which the wrongdoer has made, or tried to make, proper amends (apologies, reparations,

etc.).³ It is here, but not elsewhere, that I shall advocate for the notion of forgiveness as an obligatory gift.⁴

To see whether forgiveness is really both gift and obligation, let's think through an ordinary example. I'll use a case introduced by Lucy Allais, one of the most sophisticated defenders of the gift conception of forgiveness. The case is as follows:

Suppose you lie to your partner. Perhaps she is jealous of your previous partner, so you lie about meeting up with your previous partner. Suppose that the lie is not motivated by wanting to get away with doing something wrong (you are not cheating on her), but you are wronging her, and when she finds out, she will be hurt and angry. (Allais 2008: 36)

Now suppose you soon regret the lie and come clean to your partner. You acknowledge the wrong, apologize sincerely, and promise to be honest even in uncomfortable situations. And suppose your partner, perhaps after a couple of days, does forgive you. How would you receive her forgiveness? With gratitude, I think. You would feel the kind of gratitude that marks the fact that you were given something that wasn't yours to claim. And you would make sure to express this attitude to your partner. In other words, you would receive her forgiveness as one receives a gift. Note that to respond in any other way would call into question the sincerity of your amends-making efforts and hence give your partner reasons to *retract* her forgiveness. That is, the wrongdoer must not merely understand but rather express to the victim that he sees her forgiveness as a gift—as something he is not entitled to receive or demand in advance.

The way forgiveness is received might lead one to conclude that there is no obligation to forgive. In other words, one might explain why wrongdoers receive forgiveness as something they aren't entitled to receive by positing its morally elective nature. This move is what philosophers usually have in mind when they

3. I don't wish to enter the dispute about the permissibility to forgive unrepentant wrongdoers. For the view that it is permissible, see, e.g., Allais (2008) and Garrard and McNaughton (2003). For the opposite view, see, e.g., Griswold (2007) and Kolnai (1973). It's worth noting that some authors use the gift metaphor to refer to forgiveness of this kind. Fricker (2019) uses 'gifted forgiveness' for cases of forgiveness in the absence of remorse and apology, and Helmreich (2020) follows her in that use. Though this is strictly a terminological issue, I find the label regrettable, for it assumes the opposition I am trying to resist.

4. Am I cheating by focusing on this type of case? I don't think so. I take this class of wrongs to be essential in characterizing forgiveness, as it is my view that most cases of forgiveness in our lives occur in the context of wrongs of this class. Maring (2020) makes the same point against similar worries. Of course, I don't wish to deny the importance, ethical and philosophical, of theorizing forgiveness in cases of grave wrongs. The point is simply that, as Maring puts it, "moderately serious wrongs in close relationships are just as important in understanding forgiveness as the cases of dramatic violence that captivate the imagination" (2020: 1105). I will follow Maring and refer to this class of wrongs as 'moderately serious wrongs' for the remainder of the essay.

invoke the metaphor of the gift. It is because there is no obligation to forgive, the argument goes, that victims grant, and wrongdoers receive, forgiveness as a gift. Here's Cheshire Calhoun:

Because forgiveness is an elective response to culpable wrongdoing, it is conceptually connected to supererogatory acts of generosity and charity. It is something we ask or hope, rather than demand, for ourselves and grant, rather than owe, to others. Forgiveness is a gift, not the paying of a debt. (1992: 81)

Allais (2013) makes a similar move. The following is her gloss on the notion that forgiveness is elective:

[T]he idea is that, whatever moral reasons there might be for forgiving, forgiveness (paradigmatically) does not involve giving a wrongdoer what is her due, or something to which she is entitled. One way this is often expressed is through the idea that forgiveness is in some sense a gift. Although this metaphor has some limitations, it captures the idea that forgiveness is not deserved or owed. It is something which the wrongdoer is not in a position to demand, something to which the wrongdoer does not have a right. (2013: 642)

Allais ties the claim that victims are not obligated to forgive—that forgiveness is elective—to the claim that forgiveness “is in some sense a gift.” That is, she ties it to the claim that what one gets in being forgiven is not something one can demand or is entitled to get. This is a plausible move. The supposed elective nature of forgiveness is indeed a reasonable explanation for why it is received as a gift. And yet, the metaphor should give us pause. For we have already seen that receiving something as a gift does not necessarily show it to be elective. We have seen that gifts themselves, actual gifts, are not always so. And, indeed, some have explicitly denied this alleged optionality. “If the same person sins against you seven times a day,” Luke has Jesus saying, “and turns back to you seven times and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive” (Luke 17: 4).

So let's follow the same strategy and ask what happens when forgiveness is not granted. Come back to Allais's case. Suppose, again, that you regret the lie and come clean to your partner. You acknowledge the wrong, apologize sincerely, and promise to be honest even in uncomfortable situations. But your partner does not forgive you. Weeks go by and it becomes clear she still holds it against you. You apologize again, but to no avail. She is set in her ways. Here's my intuition: as time passes, you will start to resent her and thereby to blame her. Her unforgiving attitude would start to feel gratuitous, a form of punishment designed to extract revenge. And deep

down—or not so deep down—she might recognize this. She might see her attitude as wrong (indeed as *wronging* you) and feel guilty about it. We can even imagine that she may later apologize for her refusal (or inability) to forgive you.⁵

The intuition that there is a point at which her refusal to forgive becomes a wrong—a point at which she ought, morally, to forgive you—has had its many adherents. Judaic tradition, for example, requires the wrongdoer to make various attempts at reconciliation. But “If he still does not wish [to grant forgiveness],” writes Maimonides of the victim, “one leaves him and goes his own way, and the person who would not forgive is himself the sinner” (quoted in Newman 1987: 160).⁶ My example, if at all realistic, shows, I think, that our experience conforms to Maimonides’s claim—that, as Berel Lang puts it, “the decision to forgive sometimes has the weight of moral obligation” (Lang 1994: 105).⁷

And so we reach the point we have reached before. On the one hand, forgiveness is indeed received like a gift. It cannot be demanded or accepted as something one has a right to. And yet forgiveness is also an obligation—an obligation victims have *to* wrongdoers (who have sufficiently made amends).⁸ The two con-

5. One might think that resentment or blame for an ‘unforgiving attitude’ is not warranted, insofar as the attitude is not under our voluntary control. For the same reason, it might seem that as long as we understand forgiveness to include an attitude that cannot be voluntarily entered into, talk of an obligation to forgive is misguided. Now, I myself think that there are obligations to have (and to refrain from having) certain attitudes, even when these are not under our voluntary control (see Attie-Picker 2022). But I don’t want the argument here to rest on accepting such a view. Even if there cannot be an obligation to forgive in the sense of having or lacking a certain mental state, there can still be an obligation to forgive in the sense of forgiveness that refers, for example, to a *process* or *commitment* that we can decide to initiate or to make. As Griswold writes, “‘I forgive’ is not necessarily a report of a warranted affective state (say, that resentment has disappeared, for the right reasons)—not, that is, of a completed achievement—but a report of a feeling (say, that resentment has been brought down to the proportionate level, for the right reasons), and an *expression of an ethical commitment* to see one’s relation to the wrong-doer in a light that leads resentment out the door. . . . ‘Forgiveness’ may either refer to that process or to the end-state. I am proposing that the former, ‘present participle’ sense is legitimate’ (2007: 42, emphasis mine). I have this sense of forgiveness in mind in using phrases such as ‘granting forgiveness’ or ‘refusing to forgive.’ See also Haber (1991), Horsbrugh (1974), Pettigrove (2004), Warmke (2016) for views of forgiveness that make it (at least in part) a voluntary undertaking. I thank Steve Darwall for discussion on this point.

6. For illuminating accounts of forgiveness in Judaic thought, see Newman (1987) and Schimmel (2002).

7. This thought finds many different expressions in the philosophical literature. Some follow Lang in using the language of an obligation (Maring 2020), duty (Gamlund 2010; Radzik 2003: 332–37) or requirement (Milam 2018) to forgive. Others say that it would be wrong (Richards 1988: 80; Smith 1997: 39), immoral (Bovens 2009: 231–32) or unreasonable (Bell 2012; Martin 2010: 547, fn. 27) to refuse to forgive in cases such as the one at hand.

8. That is, the obligation is a *directed* obligation. This follows if we agree, as I think we must, that a refusal to forgive often *wrongs* the wrongdoer. I argue this point in Section 5. Phrases like ‘victims are obligated to forgive’ are therefore shorthand for ‘victims are obligated to wrongdoers to forgive.’ For the normative import of directed obligation, see, e.g., Darwall (2012) and Jonker (2020). For a review, see May (2015).

ceptions exist together side by side and at the same time. When one forgives, the obligation is in some sense hidden, and forgiveness is received with the gratitude with which one receives a gift. But failure to forgive may reveal, both to victim and wrongdoer, that forgiveness is not elective after all. Supporters of the gift conception are absolutely right in emphasizing the way forgiveness is received. But they miss the fact that this feature (or cluster of features) is not incompatible with there being an obligation. Similarly, those who view forgiveness as a moral imperative are correct in pointing to an obligation to forgive, but they ought to recognize that we are dealing with a peculiar sort of obligation, one that cannot be demanded and, when respected, is received like a gift.

This special kind of obligation calls out for explanation. To that end we turn next.

3.

You are obligated to give your wife a birthday gift. And yet she accepts the gift with a gratitude that signals she was not entitled to the gift. Victims of moderately serious wrongs are (under some conditions) obligated to forgive. And yet wrongdoers accept forgiveness with a gratitude that signals they were not entitled to being forgiven. There thus seems to be a tension between the obligation and the way it is received by the obligee. What's going on here?

I want to consider two different approaches to the problem. One approach contends that there is indeed a tension between the obligation and the responses of the obligee. One can't, at the same time, view oneself as the recipient of a gift and that of an obligation: it is either one or the other. According to this first approach, therefore, insofar as one receives something as a gift, be it forgiveness or a watercolor painting, one cannot recognize or acknowledge that the other was obligated to give it to one. In other words, if a person is indeed receiving something as a gift, then she either literally *doesn't know* that an obligation exists, or she is *pretending* that she doesn't, or she is *ignoring* the obligation, or she is pretending that she is ignoring the obligation, and so on. The heart of the approach is the claim that the two sides—gift and obligation—are not, and cannot be, transparent to the same party at the same time.

A very different approach denies the seeming tension between the obligation and the responses of the obligee. One can receive something as a gift and still see oneself as the recipient of an obligation. On this approach, no party lacks access to the facts or is pretending or ignoring anything at all. The two sides—gift and obligation—are perfectly transparent to all parties at all times. Indeed, the central claim of this second approach is precisely that there is *nothing* in need of ignoring or pretending that it is otherwise.

The rest of this section is devoted to the first approach. My goal is to illustrate this approach by presenting two concrete views—two case studies, as I will call them—that exemplify its general strategy, albeit in very different ways. I argue that we should reject this approach.

Case Study 1: the apologetic stance

The first case study is offered by, or rather can be extracted from, Jeffrey Helmreich's (2015) rich and insightful theory of apologies. Helmreich's theory is motivated by a particular problem he identifies with wrongdoers' attempts at making amends. The problem is the following: in committing a wrong, the wrongdoer treats the victim as if he (the victim) can be treated that way.⁹ But Helmreich notes that one can keep treating the victim in this manner after the wrong is committed. One can, for example, do nothing. To do nothing after a wrong—to 'keep going' as if nothing has happened—is to behave, for the second time, as if the wrong was acceptable. So one needs to do something to reverse this treatment. One needs to make amends to stop behaving towards the victim as if the wrong was acceptable. How does one do so? One option is to offer some kind of compensation. But herein lies the problem. For offering compensation after the wrong is not enough to treat the victim as if *wronging him and then offering compensation* is unacceptable. Rather, as Helmreich points out, that is exactly what someone who thinks it is acceptable to wrong and then "pay up" does (2015: 93). And this, of course, generalizes to every attempt at making amends. To do *X* amends-making effort after the wrong is always compatible with treating someone as if wronging him and then doing *X* is an acceptable way of treating him.

Apologies solve this problem, argues Helmreich, by presenting themselves as insufficient to amend the wrong. In apologizing one takes a *stance*, that is, "one behave[s] or relate[s] to someone in accordance with a normative claim one accepts" (2015: 97).¹⁰ In taking the apologetic stance, one behaves towards the victim in accordance with the claim that any amends-making effort one attempts, including apologizing itself, is insufficient to make up for the wrong. Apologies ask to be accepted *despite* their insufficiency—despite the insufficiency with which they are explicitly offered.

What matters for our purposes is to observe how someone who is in the apologetic stance would receive forgiveness. Recall that a stance involves accepting a normative claim and treating someone as if the claim is true. Now, the claim that

9. As Helmreich observes, this is true regardless of what the wrongdoer actually believes or feels.

10. Helmreich defines a stance as constituted "by (a) one's acceptance of a normative claim *P* and (b) one's acting or being disposed to act as though *P*, (c) for the reason that *P*" (2015: 97–98).

constitutes the apologetic stance is none other than the claim that nothing one could do vis-à-vis the victim is enough to amend the wrong. It should be clear that someone who both accepts and behaves according to such a claim would receive forgiveness as a gift. For to be forgiven is, at least in some contexts, to be treated as if one has done enough to amend the wrong, something a wrongdoer in the apologetic stance *necessarily* rejects. Helmreich says as much: “[an] apology . . . treats the victim’s acceptance or forgiveness as something to which she is not entitled, not something due or owed to her” (2015: 97). Importantly, it is not only at the moment of the apology that wrongdoers accept the relevant claim. For what makes the apologetic stance a *stance* is precisely that it institutes a way of treating the victim that remains in place until the offer (the apology) is taken up: “the offer is made and left in place, unrescinded” (2015: 100). In sum, apologies resolve the delicate problem facing wrongdoers who want to make amends—namely, how to make amends without treating victims as if it is acceptable to wrong them and then make amends—by instituting a stance, a way to treat the victim, within which all attempts at amending the wrong are seen as insufficient. A wrongdoer in the apologetic stance, therefore, necessarily experiences forgiveness as a gift—as something she is not entitled to demand or receive.

Now, it is crucial to see that none of this shows that apologies are in fact always insufficient. In the context we care about, that of moderately serious wrongs within close relationships, they are *very often* perfectly sufficient. And nothing in Helmreich’s view implies otherwise.¹¹ As he says, “in many cases, it will follow that he ought to forgive her, even as the apologizer appropriately offered her moral repair as insufficient” (2015: 97). The claim constitutive of the apologetic stance is not a reflection of the facts as they objectively are, but is rather one the wrongdoer accepts in order to make amends, irrespective of the facts ‘outside’ the stance. So there might be an obligation to forgive—Helmreich’s position leaves this open—it’s just that wrongdoers in the apologetic stance *are not in a position to appreciate it*, since they do not see their amends-making efforts as sufficient.¹²

Here we arrive, finally, at the (alleged) explanation. Victims are obligated to forgive wrongdoers when they have made proper amends. And in order to make proper amends wrongdoers ought to take the apologetic stance, which

11. Indeed, it might be that they are sufficient *precisely* because they are offered as Helmreich suggests, namely, as insufficient.

12. Recall that the obligation to forgive is most at home in cases of moderately serious wrongs in which wrongdoers have made *sufficient* efforts at making amends. But the logic of apologies, according to Helmreich, implies that wrongdoers are not in a position to see their amends-making efforts as sufficient. This in turn implies that wrongdoers are not in a position to appreciate the victim’s obligation to forgive them.

means that the obligation to forgive is at force when wrongdoers are in the apologetic stance. But taking the stance involves seeing one's amends-making efforts as insufficient. Hence forgiveness is received as a gift even when there is an obligation to forgive. QED?

No. To see the problem, come back again to the case we have been discussing. Suppose that we agree that your amends-making attempts (your coming clean to your partner, sincere apologies, future commitment, etc.) are in fact sufficient to amend the wrong.¹³ Your attempts are sufficient and thus you don't owe her more than you can repay. These are the facts on the ground. Now, according to this view, her forgiveness is received like a gift because, being in the apologetic stance, you don't recognize the facts on the ground. That is, despite what is in fact true, and what others may recognize,¹⁴ you don't see your efforts as sufficient to amend the wrong. But recall an observation from the previous section: even though forgiveness is received with gratitude, failure to forgive is often received with resentment. And this means that wrongdoers (often) do see what everyone else sees, namely, that their amends-making efforts have been sufficient. And why wouldn't they? Nothing prevents them from recognizing what is in fact true. But this recognition implies that one is no longer in the apologetic stance, as it is constitutive of the stance not only to behave as if one's attempts at restitution are insufficient, but to actually accept this claim.¹⁵ And once we see that wrongdoers often are outside the apologetic stance before they are forgiven, we can no longer invoke the stance to explain what we wanted to explain: the fact that forgiveness is received like a gift.

One might think that there is no real objection here. For perhaps forgiveness is received in this way *only* when the wrongdoer is in the apologetic stance. The idea is that once wrongdoers see their own amends-making efforts as sufficient, forgiveness is not received as a gift but rather as just treatment, as something owed. The retort has some plausibility. To exaggerate, suppose your partner forgives you two years after the wrong. Your response would not be gratitude, to say the least. On the contrary, chances are you would not even accept her forgiveness. The claim is thus simple: when wrongdoers are in the apologetic stance, forgiveness is received like a gift. When they are not, it is not.

The objection has some plausibility, but not much. Again, suppose your amends-making efforts have been sufficient. And suppose you know this. You know that you have made up for the wrong. You are not, then, in the apologetic stance. But suppose it's only been a few weeks after the wrong, and given your

13. As long as you agree that apologies are sometimes sufficient, the details of this particular case are irrelevant. If the case does not elicit the relevant intuition, just think of one that does.

14. Your partner's feelings of guilt about her refusal to forgive, for example, are evidence that she recognizes that your efforts have been sufficient.

15. Helmreich understands acceptance as not only believing the normative claim that constitutes the stance, but also *internalizing* the values it embodies (see 2015: 98).

partner's disposition, you know it will take time for her to actually manage to forgive you. A few days later, she does—she forgives you. Would you receive her forgiveness as something owed? I think it's clear that you wouldn't. You would receive her forgiveness as a gift. And I don't think there's anything special about this case. It is an extremely common occurrence, I believe, to be outside the apologetic stance—to appreciate that one's apologies have been sufficient—and still receive forgiveness with the distinctive gratitude we have singled out. Helmreich's apologetic stance, therefore, can't do the explanatory work we need.¹⁶

Case Study 2: pretense

The second case study draws inspiration, once again, from actual gifts. Consider the following mundane example. You know you have to bring a wine bottle to a dinner party, and everyone else, implicitly or explicitly, knows this too, including the host. But the latter won't acknowledge the obligation: '*you didn't have to,*' he says instead when you show up with a bottle. An elaborate sort of pretense is involved here. It is common ground, to everyone involved, that you brought the bottle because you had to. So no one takes the host's remarks literally (not even the host). What his remark does, I think, is to attribute a different motive—and hence a different meaning—to your gesture of buying the wine. But the attribution is not a straightforward assertion. The host is rather enacting a *pretense* within which the wine is the result of generosity rather than of duty. The *function* of the interaction requires the parties to keep duty out of view. This basic setup, more or less, has a long history. In his treatise on gift-giving societies, Marcel Mauss describes the central dynamic thus: "Although the prestations

16. What should we make of Helmreich's original problem? If a wrongdoer is not in the apologetic stance, because she is aware that her amends-making efforts have been sufficient, how does she solve the problem of not behaving as if it is acceptable to wrong the victim and then make amends? One option, perhaps, is to say that wrongdoers in that position behave towards victims *as if* they were in the apologetic stance. They treat the victim, that is, as if any effort at making amends would be insufficient, even though they don't accept that claim. But that would not do. In order to solve the problem, one actually has to accept (read: believe and internalize the values of) the claim that one owes more than one can repair. Otherwise, one is acting exactly like one who thinks it is acceptable to wrong the victim and then *to pretend* that any attempt at making amends would be insufficient. So how is the problem to be solved? My view is that there is no clean solution. At least not when it is true that the wrongdoer has made sufficient attempts at making amends. The apologetic stance works as long as the claim that makes it up is true—that is, as long as it is true that no effort from the wrongdoer is, or could be, sufficient to amend the wrong. But when the claim is false, and the wrongdoer sees that it is false, no quick fix exists. The wrongdoer has to show, in her day-to-day treatment of the victim, that she does not think the wrong was acceptable behavior. But the possibility of interpreting her subsequent actions as the actions of one who thinks it is acceptable to wrong and then to act in those ways will always be present. There's no way around it. It is on the wrongdoer to keep providing evidence against such an interpretation.

and counter-prestations [gift-giving] take place under a voluntary guise they are in essence strictly obligatory, and their sanction is private or open warfare” (1925/2011: 3). Why the voluntary guise? Why the elaborate pretense? Because the function of the gifts, says Mauss, is to display the lush generosity of one’s group. The logic of the exchange, therefore, requires both parties to ignore, or rather pretend that they are ignoring, the real obligation structuring the interaction—an obligation that ends the pretense the moment it is flouted.

Might something like this be going on in the case of forgiveness? Consider these remarks by Howard McGary: “Although we do want to promote and encourage the virtue of forgiveness in people, we do not want to do so by requiring them to forgive. Forgiveness must remain supererogatory if it is to serve its function” (1989: 350). And these others by Trudy Govier: “There is no obligation to forgive and people should not press each other to forgive. The virtue of ‘forgivingness’ has its meaning and its point only if it is exercised freely” (2002: 45). Why shouldn’t we press, or require, others to forgive? Because, say McGary and Govier, we don’t want others to forgive *out of obligation*. Why not? The claim appears to be that to forgive out of duty is to grant an empty kind of forgiveness, incapable of having the meaning, and hence of playing the function, that both victim and wrongdoer want forgiveness to have and to play. Now, McGary and Govier seem to conclude, from this thought, that there is, *therefore*, no obligation to forgive. But that conclusion does not follow. What follows is only that the *motive of duty* should not be at the forefront when granting forgiveness. We shouldn’t press each other to forgive, that is, for the same reason that we shouldn’t press each other to bring wine to dinner parties. It defeats the point of the interaction.

On this view, there is an obligation to forgive, and yet the logic of forgiveness requires both victim and wrongdoer to behave as if there isn’t one. The proposal, then, is that just as the groups Mauss describes pretend that it is generosity—and not obligation—that drives gift-giving, victim and wrongdoer pretend that it is generosity (or love, or regard . . .) and not obligation, that drives forgiveness. And just as failure to gift results in public or private warfare, thereby revealing the obligatory nature of the gift, failure to forgive results in public or private warfare (in the form of resentment, guilt, and blame) thereby revealing the obligatory nature of forgiveness.

The view has a certain appeal, but it is based on a false analogy. Forgiveness is indeed received like a gift, but not like *that* kind of gift. After all, the host is not really grateful: he merely pretends that he is. He behaves *as if* he’s receiving a gift, but he doesn’t *actually* feel this way. The way he actually feels is closer to the way your wife feels when she receives the painting as part of an agreement.¹⁷

17. With the important difference that, in this case, the agreement is implicit and its function requires the parties to pretend that there is no agreement.

But to receive a gift like *this* is not to receive it *like a gift*. At least it isn't what we mean in saying that forgiveness is received like a gift. What we mean is that the experience of being forgiven is one of receiving something that was not owed. When forgiven, one does not need to pretend that one is grateful. One is grateful. This is an essential part of what needs explaining. What needs explaining, in other words, is not only one's behavior towards the victim, but what it really feels to be forgiven. And this the pretense model can't explain.

* * *

The two case studies I have detailed explain the problem by positing that one or both of the parties do not recognize the facts as they are. And both fail precisely for this reason. The crux of Case 1 is the view that the apologetic stance, the stance wrongdoers take in apologizing, involves accepting that one's amends-making efforts are insufficient even when they are *in fact* sufficient, and thus accepting that victims are not obligated to forgive even when *in fact* they are. The problem is that nothing *in* the stance itself forces the wrongdoer to this acceptance once her amends-making efforts have become sufficient. The stance becomes unstable, then, when it ceases to reflect the facts. Moreover, as Case 2 goes on to show, appealing to behavior that explicitly and purposely fails to reflect the facts can only take us so far. We want to explain the way forgiveness is received, and this includes both how wrongdoers behave *and* how they actually feel. But pretense behavior can only explain that: behavior.

In sum, the root of the failure lies in the general claim that, given the (alleged) tension between obligation and gift—between the obligation to forgive and the way forgiveness is received—the facts, as they are, can't be fully recognized and acknowledged by everyone involved. And that claim, as you may recall, is what characterizes the whole approach the two case studies were meant to illustrate. Of course, I have only presented two views, and someone may come up with one that actually works. But until someone does, we have good reason, I think, to turn our attention to the second approach.

4.

I have argued that forgiveness has both an obligatory side—victims are often obligated to forgive wrongdoers—and a gift-like side—wrongdoers often receive forgiveness like one receives a gift. The approach we have just canvassed sees a tension between the two sides. It then resolves the tension by positing that only one side is recognized or acknowledged by any one party at any one time. The approach I now turn to sees no need to resolve the tension. For it sees no tension

to begin with. On this approach, the two sides coexist in the light of day, in no need to be obscured in any way.

My position, ultimately, is that we need to appeal to the normative facts about forgiveness to fully account for its two sides. Before we get there, however, I want to present a view that charts a middle path between my position and the approach we canvassed in the previous section. According to this view, we don't need to ignore the normative facts or pretend that they are other than what they are. But we also need not appeal to them to explain what we want to explain. How forgiveness is received is accounted for by how it is granted, and there is no need to appeal to substantive facts about morality to understand this. Or so says this middle path. I will argue that this view, if not mistaken, is at least importantly incomplete. We need to go substantive—we need to face the normative facts head on—to complete the explanation.

This view starts by calling attention to the following platitude: the way something is received—a slap in the face, a birthday gift, anything at all—is a function both of the nature of what is given and of the motive with which it is given. Put differently, no matter what it is, we respond as much to facts about the *giving* of it as we do to facts about *it*. And so, if we want to understand the way forgiveness is received, we need to look beyond what is true of it—beyond the fact that it is often obligatory, for instance—and consider the reasons and motives behind it.

Why, then, is forgiveness granted? From what motives does it spring? This is no doubt an incredibly complicated question, and I won't attempt to answer it in any detail. But let's bring back the claim I attributed earlier to McGary and Govier, namely, that forgiveness has its proper meaning and point when it is *not* granted out of duty.¹⁸ Forgiveness matters, the claim goes, when victims forgive not because they are obligated to forgive but rather because, say, they value their relationship with the wrongdoer and think it's worth saving. Now, if this is the motive behind the victim's forgiveness, if this is why he forgives, then we should expect the wrongdoer's response to reflect this fact.

To illustrate the point, come back for a moment to your wife's 50th birthday. What's the motive behind the gift? Why did you give her the painting? Not, hopefully, because you had to, although you knew you did. You gave her the painting because you love her, and because it is her birthday, and birthday gifts serve the function of expressing such love. Your wife, in turn, accepted the gift as having this meaning. She received the painting, that is, *as* an expression of love. And the fitting response to love is gratitude. She knows you had to give her a gift, but she also knows that you didn't do so because you had to. Her response,

18. The claim, to be clear, is not that forgiveness always has its proper meaning when the motive of obligation is absent (other motives might be as damaging, as we will see). The claim is simply that its significance is undermined when it is.

to some extent, is a response to the motive behind your gift. And duty, we are imagining (as is she), had no part in it.

The same is true in most cases of forgiveness. Or at least in those cases in which it has its proper meaning and point. If the victim forgives because he values his relationship with the wrongdoer, or simply because she's his friend (the former being on occasions one thought too many), his forgiveness is, among other things, an expression of regard towards her. And gratitude, not entitlement, seems again like the appropriate response. This remains true even when both victim and wrongdoer recognize the underlying obligation. For, again, the wrongdoer's response, to a certain degree, is a response to the motive behind his forgiveness, and we are imagining (as is she) that duty played no part in it.

This, then, is the middle path: if forgiveness does not carry its full significance when granted out of duty, it follows that when things go well victims don't forgive because they are obligated to forgive, and wrongdoers, recognizing the victim's actual motive, do not receive it as such. Moreover, if forgiveness requires certain motives to serve its point, we can explain why wrongdoers can't demand forgiveness even when they must forgive. The idea is that to forgive because of a demand—to forgive out of compliance—is no better than to forgive out of duty (indeed, it's certainly worse). By demanding to be forgiven, therefore, the wrongdoer makes it impossible to get what she wants. For if the demand is heeded, if it succeeds *qua* demand, what she gets is an empty kind of forgiveness, or at least one without the import wrongdoers rightly seek in being forgiven. To demand forgiveness turns out to be self-defeating.

In this way, it seems, we explain why forgiveness is received like a gift even if there is an obligation to forgive. And we can do so without having to appeal to ignorance or pretense or any other sort of obfuscation of the facts, but also without appealing to substantive claims about the morality of forgiveness. Will this do? Does it account for all that needs accounting? I think not. The account leaves something essential out.

To see this, let's consider a case that conforms to this account and ask whether forgiveness behaves like that. Suppose that a friend promises to call you after a serious medical procedure to see how you feel. Given the promise, you are, I take it, entitled to the call. But would you receive the call as if you were entitled to it? Or would you receive it with gratitude, recognizing that she called because she cares about you (that that's why she made the promise in the first place)? Now suppose some days have passed and she still hasn't called. Can you demand of her to call you? You can—after all you are entitled to the call. But you won't—to do so would render the call meaningless. You want her to call out of concern, not out of compliance. The demand, in effect, makes it impossible to receive the object of the demand. So you are entitled to the call and thus to demand it, but its motive and significance make an attitude of entitlement utterly confused and

even self-defeating. What explains the response, therefore, are not the normative facts about the call but rather the motivation and meaning of her calling to check on you.

Is the analogous explanation successful in the case of forgiveness? No. For in contrast to the call, the mistake in receiving forgiveness as if one were entitled to it is not simply (or not only) the mistake of misconceiving the motives behind it. And the mistake in demanding to be forgiven is not simply (or not only) the mistake of making it impossible to receive what one wants. The entitled wrongdoer is not just getting in his own way. He's doing something more than that. To receive forgiveness with entitlement, or to demand to be forgiven, appears to instantiate a more robust, more serious, kind of mistake: *the mistake of presuming that one is entitled to the victim's forgiveness*. This is a substantive mistake about the moral facts. And therefore the middle path—and any other path that shies away from the substantive facts—cannot explain it. We need an account that can.

5.

So let me finally put my cards on the table. I believe there is often an obligation to forgive and that this obligation is directed: victims are obligated to wrongdoers to forgive them. I think this is evidenced by the attitudes and responses (blame, guilt, apologies and justifications, etc.) of both parties when forgiveness is not granted. And yet I think that victims don't *owe* wrongdoers forgiveness. Wrongdoers are not *entitled* to being forgiven and thus they lack the moral standing to demand it. Forgiveness is not received as owed not only because of the motive behind it—because of *why* it is given—but because it is not owed. The gratitude of the wrongdoer is a response both to the victim's motivations and to the substantive moral facts. In short, forgiveness is a full-blown obligation and a full-blown gift. It is received like a gift because it is a gift. Its absence is received with blame because it is an obligation. Our practices, therefore, not only don't eschew the facts but rather reflect them and are explained by them.

The key element of this picture is the conjunction of the claim that victims are obligated to forgive with the denial that wrongdoers are therefore entitled to be forgiven. What I need to do, then, is to convince you that to establish the existence of a directed obligation is not *yet* to establish that the obligee is entitled to what the obligor ought to do. I need to show that when the obligee is indeed entitled—when the obligor does *owe* the obligee—this is a further moral fact. And this further fact—my being entitled to X; your owing me X—is neither implied, nor its significance exhausted, by the fact of obligation—by your being obligated to me to X. Indeed, I need to persuade you that it matters greatly, if you are so obligated, whether I am also, in addition, entitled to X. It matters for the kind of

things I may or may not do if you don't deliver, and it matters for how I should comport myself—for example, what kind of attitudes I may adopt—if you do. In selling you this picture, my strategy is not so much to argue for these claims as it is to convince you that you already accept them. So I will present some cases of ordinary moral interactions with the hope that you see the picture at work in them.

Consider the following:

TUESDAY DINNER—You and your wife have the following agreement: you make dinner on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, while she does so on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays. Suppose it is Tuesday and your wife, a pediatrician, calls you from the hospital in the midst of an emergency. 'I'll have to stay late,' she says, 'can you make dinner tonight?'

AIRPORT RIDE—Your parents are coming to town for the weekend. They call some days in advance to ask if you can pick them up at the airport.

SANDWICH—On your way home you run into a homeless man. He looks at you, waives a hand, says he's hungry. 'Can I have something to eat?' he asks. You bought a sandwich in the morning and didn't eat it. You know you probably won't eat it.

My claim is that these cases all share the normative structure I laid out above. They are examples of directed obligation without entitlement, and so they share the features of forgiveness that make it both an obligation and a gift. As we go through these examples, I ask the reader to have forgiveness in mind. The hope is that my account of forgiveness would emerge as we explore our intuitions about these cases.

To start uncovering the relevant structure, let us first consider obligation. I take it that, other things being equal, you are obligated to make dinner, pick up your parents, and give your food to the homeless man. One way to see this is to ask whether it makes sense for them to blame you if you refuse to do what they ask. (Or, from the other direction, whether it makes sense for you to feel guilt about not doing so, or to apologize later on). Suppose you say to your parents, 'No, I won't pick you up. Take the shuttle outside the airport.' They might stay silent for a second, waiting to hear a justification for the refusal. If you don't say anything, if you just refuse, then I find it hard to believe that they won't resent you, or that they would not be justified if they did. Indeed, the fact that it's so natural to expect a justification after hearing your response already begins to reveal the standing obligation, for no such justification would be expected if

picking them up was merely supererogatory. The justification, moreover, is not only expected. It is needed. There is a normative expectation of you to *account* for your decision. We can put this by saying that you may be *held accountable* for your refusal to pick them up. This makes sense only if you are in fact obligated to do so.¹⁹ And the same applies, uncontroversially, I believe, to the other two cases.²⁰

Let's now ask whether the obligation is directed. Are you obligated *to* them to do as asked? Well, think again of the need to account for your refusal. Who ought you give account to? Not to the 'moral community' or the general public, I take it. Or at least not in the first instance. You ought to account—you are accountable—to your parents. It is to them that you ought to justify your refusal to pick them up. Or think instead of apologies. If you come to your senses, and realize that you were in the wrong, to whom should you apologize? The answer is so obvious as to make the question sound rhetorical. But this already shows that the obligation is directed. You should apologize to your parents because in leaving them to take the shuttle for no good reason you not only do wrong but you wrong them.²¹

So there is an obligation, and the obligation is directed. But does that mean your parents are entitled to your time? Or your wife to your work? Or the man to your food? Do you *owe* them these things? I think the answer is negative. Notice that in all three cases the obligee—your wife, your parents, the man—does not demand of you to do what you are in fact required to do but rather *asks* or *requests* that you do so. And this is not, I hope you agree, a contingent fact about the way I chose to write the vignettes. Your wife cannot call and demand that you make dinner. Not on a Tuesday. Not even if both believe that, given the circumstances, you are obligated to make dinner, and this is absolutely clear to the two of you. It is a significant moral fact that she still has to ask. Why? Why does she *have* to ask if you are obligated *to her* to make dinner? I believe it is because she is not entitled to the dinner. And I believe that she asks because it is important that she communicates this. In requesting, as opposed to demanding, she not only expresses that you don't owe her dinner on a Tuesday—that she is not entitled to it—but also, and crucially, that she is not presuming that she is. This feature is fundamental to the normative structure of these cases. Just think of how off-putting it would be for the man to say, 'Give me that sandwich!' or

19. For the link between accountability and obligation, see Darwall (2006) and Wallace (2019)

20. Imagine the following dialogue with the homeless man: 'Are you going to eat that sandwich?' 'Not really, I'll probably just throw it away when I get home.' 'In that case, can you give it to me? I'm hungry.' 'No.' I believe the normal response from his part would be to wait for a justification, and in the absence of it, to resent you. And, again, it is not only that he will in fact expect you to justify yourself. The point is that he can—that he is justified in expecting such an account from you.

21. I leave the reader to check their intuitions about the other two cases.

for your wife to command: ‘I’ll be late tonight on an emergency, cook me some dinner.’²² The sheer strangeness of these demands suggests that there is a gap between what we are obligated to do for others and what they can demand of us.²³ And this, I suggest, is due to the gap between obligation, even directed obligation, and entitlement.

The gap explains why the homeless man can’t demand your sandwich but can hold you accountable if you don’t give it to him. There is obligation without entitlement. But the gap also explains—and here we are at last closing in on the picture of forgiveness I painted above—how he would respond (or should respond) if you do give him your food. He would treat the sandwich like a gift. Or as we have been saying all along, he won’t receive it as if he were entitled to it. And this is, we can now see, because he isn’t. On one hand, then, to give him the sandwich is to comply with an obligation: and this implies the justifiability of blame, guilt, apologies, and the rest of the accountability practices. But it is also, on the other, to give him a gift: and this he acknowledges by receiving it with gratitude.²⁴

22. One almost feels like adding ‘would you?’ at the end: ‘I’ll be late tonight in an emergency, cook me some dinner *would you?*’ In other words, one feels the impulse to turn the command into a request (if an insistent one).

23. Adrienne Martin (2019) has recently argued for the existence of directed obligations without rights. Though the picture I am trying to develop has much in common with Martin’s account, here is where we part ways. For she argues that one of the key features of what she calls ‘personal bonds,’ obligations not ‘owed’ as a matter of right, is that only the obligee—and no one else—can demand the obligor to comply with the obligation. I’m trying to show, in contrast, that cases of obligation without entitlement are cases where no one—not even the obligee—can issue such demands. I have learned much from reading Martin’s thoughtful paper.

24. Note also that gratitude seems the natural response regardless of the motive behind it. You might give him the sandwich out of sympathy and concern, or you might be moved by a sense of duty. No matter. Gratitude remains the natural (and appropriate) response. This shows that the response is rooted in the normative facts themselves—in the fact that he is not entitled to your food; that what you are giving him is not his to claim. This is important because, as we noted in the previous section, one might think that the way forgiveness is received is entirely due to the motive with which it is given. One might think, we said, that gratitude is a response to the fact that forgiveness, especially within close relationships, is often given out of love or regard. And I said that there was more to it than that—that gratitude was not only a response to the victim’s motive, but also to the normative facts. The three cases on the table should help here. For, unlike the case of forgiveness, where its meaning seems to require the motive of duty to be absent, there is no problem at all with acting out of duty in the cases at hand. In other words, the point of the interaction is not messed up if you pick up your parents, or make dinner, because you have to. In fact, it’s quite plausible to imagine a scenario in which both you and your parents know that you are there out of duty (that you would rather be home watching a movie, for instance). And still they would not (or should not) act entitled when you show up at the airport. Gratitude remains the natural response regardless of motive. This suggests, again, that the response is explained by the fact that they are not entitled to your time. And so, insofar as forgiveness shares this structure—insofar as wrongdoers are not entitled to being forgiven—we can conclude the same. The gratitude of wrongdoers responds to the same lack of entitlement.

This, then, is the picture. This is it. Forgiveness is like the sandwich. To forgive wrongdoers of moderately serious wrongs who have made proper amends is like giving your sandwich to the man, or like making dinner on a Tuesday. It is something one must do. An obligation. A directed obligation. But it's also to give something wrongdoers are not entitled to. To give something one does not owe. To give a gift. A gift one can ask for but not demand. A gift that ought to be received with gratitude when it is granted, but may be resented when it is not. An obligatory gift.

Forgiveness turns out to be only one of many examples in which we do not owe *X* to others, and yet we are obligated to them to do *X*. One of many examples where directed obligation is not tied to entitlement, and so one of many examples in which we must do something but no one can demand that we do it. Of course, I have not given, or attempted to give, a principled explanation for the distinction. I don't have a theory of entitlement. Nor do I know why we are entitled to the things that we are and what those things are. My view, for what is worth, is that the number of things we are morally entitled to can be counted with one hand—that while our obligations toward others cast a very wide net, what we can rightfully demand of them is extremely limited. Morality is thus spacious in one sense and constricted in another. But I haven't tried to convince you of this. I have only tried to show that we recognize the distinction between obligation and entitlement in our moral lives. And that that distinction reveals forgiveness to be an obligation and a gift.

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