Forgiveness: Personal and Political*

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Forgiveness is essential. Thought not always, or even often, the correct response to wrongdoing, the power to forgive is one we cannot do without. Imagine a relationship between friends, family, business partners, or co-authors in which forgiveness *could not* be exercised—it would be a toxic one, or at best a fragile one. Most of us get things wrong, we hurt others, we wrong and are wronged. And this wrongdoing has an enormous impact on our relationships. A world, or a particular relationship, deprived of the power of forgiveness would be one in which such wrongdoing held greater sway over our lives. Forgiveness, after all, offers a way past wrongdoing. It is not the only way to respond to wrongdoing; we might ignore, forget, condone, resent, or hold others to account. But it is a distinctive way of somehow putting a past wrong behind us without forgetting or condoning it. It is a way of confronting a past wrong head on *as wrong* while at the same time preventing that past wrong from defining the terms of one's relationship with the wrongdoer, or at least of limiting its effect. It is a way of redefining a relationship in the wake of wrongdoing, from one of wronged to wrongdoer to something else—friend to friend, daughter to mother, colleague to colleague, and even ex-(friend, lover, colleague) to ex. It is that power—to cordon off the normative effect of a past wrong, to limit (fully or partially) its ability to define the terms of a relationship—that makes it so essential to our interpersonal lives. At least so I'll argue.

Some have likewise suggested that forgiveness can play a similar role in politics—that the *power* of forgiveness to confront a past wrong and prevent it from define the terms of a relationship makes it an important tool in responding to political wrongdoing.

*For discussion of this material and often extensive commends and criticism, I am extremely grateful to Dimitrios Halikias, Leah Sarna, Emily Massey, Catherine McComic, Tamar Schapiro, Stephen Darwall, Shelly Kagan, Nathaniel Baron-Schmitt, Doni Bloomfield, Ela Leshem, members of my fall 2020 graduate seminar, and audiences at MIT, Yale, UNL, and Harvard; and especially to Kevin Dorst, without whose enormously generous efforts this paper would not exist.

In the waning months of South Africa's transitional government, its famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission struggled to complete its work before the transitional period ended. Then Deputy President, soon to be President, Thabo Mbeki expressed a sentiment widely shared by the framers of the new republic: that the TRC's work was essential and needed to be complete to pave the way for the establishment of regular democratic order. He characterized the work of the TRC as an act of political forgiveness, saying, "the TRC should conclude its work as quickly as possible so that we do indeed let bygones be bygones and allow the nation to forgive a past it nevertheless dare not to forget" (Tutu, 1999).[1] In response to racial political violence in the United States, Martin Luther King Jr. likewise saw forgiveness as imperative for Black Americans: "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend," and "he who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love" (King 1963/2010).[2] Mbeki and King each argue that in light of the distinctive political challenges they faced, forgiveness is an *essential* tool, and they see it (roughly) as an alternative to punishment, forgetting, condoning, or severing political ties all together.

One might question King's or Mbeki's political judgments—some argued against the compromises of the TRC[3] or against the non-violent civil rights movement.[4] But apart from that essentially political question, we can ask a metaphysical or conceptual one: are their politics instances of *forgiveness*? Or should we see them as speaking loosely—perhaps with a particular political savvy in calling upon a notion central to Christianity to persuade a predominantly Christian audience to take up an extraordinarily difficult political program? Virtually all philosophers who asked whether so-called "political forgiveness" is actual forgiveness have thought something like the latter. Even P.E. Digeser, the chief defender of "political forgiveness" as a coherent notion, concedes at the start of their book, *Political Forgiveness*, that their notion is *not* continuous with interpersonal forgiveness.[5] Where interpersonal forgiveness involves a change in *sentiment*—something

[1] FIND PRIMARY SOURCE.

[2] See also King 1958/2015b, 1959/2015a, 1963, Cherry (2019).

[3] Give some details

[4] CITE South African Critics!; Malcolm X (1965). The parallels here are striking—critics of both programs of political forgiveness argue for the need for the seizure of land and a politics of *independence* not reconciliation.

[5] The language of political forgiveness "runs headlong into ordinary usage of the word ['forgiveness']" (2001, p. 22).

like giving up one's resentment— political forgiveness isn't an matter of changing hearts so much as cancelling something like debt or punishment. Political and interpersonal forgiveness are distinct, bearing at best a kind of family resemblance, at least so the story typically goes.

But this story gets things wrong. Political forgiveness and interpersonal forgiveness are instances of the same phenomenon. A failure to appreciate this has led to a misunderstanding of both the metaphysics and ethics of forgiveness; or put positively, by seeing these phenomena as continuous, we can better understand both *what* forgiveness is and *why* we should forgive. I mean "why we should forgive" in two senses: first, what reasons does a particular agent (or perhaps a particular social group) have to offer or to withhold forgiveness? And second, why are we in the business of forgiving at all? That is, how can we understand the role that forgiveness plays in our lives, a role I will argue is essential and which Mbeki and King (rightly) saw as essential to politics as well?

I'll argue that to forgive is to waive the *entitlements* one has to hold a past wrong against a wrongdoer. Forgiveness is a kind of normative *tool* or *power*—in the same family as powers like promising and consenting.[6] And like any tool it should be understood in terms of its function: to shape the norms that constitute our relationships—personal, social and political—by dropping a past wrong as an ongoing basis for relating to another. Likewise, the *reasons* to forgive should be understood in the same way we understand the reasons to use any tool: by considering what ends we should aim at (here what kinds of relationships—interpersonal and political—we should establish), and whether this or some other tool is right for the job at hand.

This view—of forgiveness as a kind of normative power whose exercise should be understood in broadly instrumental terms—involves two departures from the overwhelmingly dominant tradition in the literature on forgiveness, what I'll characterize as a broadly sentimentalist approach (§1). First, it sees forgiveness not in terms of the withdrawal of *fitting attitudes*, like resentment or anger, but as the waiving of normative entitlements. As we'll go on to see, the view does recognize that the withdrawal of anger and resentment are important elements of *some* forgiveness, but they are not constitutive of it. And second, because it denies pride of place to moral sentiments like anger or resentment in

[6] In this I follow a small (but vocal!) minority of theorists including Twambley (1976), Hampton (1988), Warmke (2016b; 2016a; 2013, et al.), Bennett (2018), Nelkin (2013), and Owens (2014).

its analysis, it is a view which unifies what most see as distinct phenomena: political and interpersonal forgiveness.

That the normative power view sees political and personal forgiveness as essentially the same phenomenon will form the heart of this paper. Considering forgiveness at a social scale, blown up as it were, can allow us to see its elements and moving parts more clearly. As Plato's Socrates puts it:

> We should make this kind of investigation of it: if someone had, for example, ordered men who don't see very sharply to read little letters from afar and then also, but bigger and in a bigger place, I suppose it would look like a godsend to be able to consider the littler ones after having read these first, if, of course, they do happen to be the same. (Republic II, 368d)

That final "if" is crucial—this strategy of considering a social phenomenon in order to shed light on its smaller-scaled relative only works if the two do happen to be the same. So the plan will be this: to consider first political forgiveness and develop a novel account thereof; then to turn to interpersonal forgiveness and argue that the account given *already is* an account of interpersonal forgiveness, one superior to its sentimentalist rivals on three grounds: that it can countenance a broader range of occasions in which we forgive, that it can do justice to the fine-grained control we can exercise over the *conditions* and *limited scope* of forgiveness, and that it helps us better appreciate the essential role forgiveness plays in our lives. But first, I will briefly sketch the dominant approach to forgiveness that I'll take as a foil: sentimentalism.

1 Sentimentalism

"To forgive is, roughly, to forbear or withdraw resentment" (Darwall, 2006, p. 72). On at least that the overwheleming majority agrees: forgiveness centrally involves the withdrawal of a moral sentiment or emotion. While implementations of the standard approach can differ quite dramatically, they all think something like the following is roughly right: when one is wronged, distinctive moral sentiments are thereby made *fitting*—that I mistreated you makes something like anger or resentment apt, appropriate or warranted. Forgiveness somehow involves the withdrawal of that fitting sentiment. And therein lies

the philosophical puzzle to which various views offer solutions: how can one (rationally) forgo a sentiment made *fitting* by the fact that one was wronged without giving up the judgment that one was wronged.

Here's a way to bring this puzzle out a little further:[7] the sentiment that such theorists place at the center[8] of their account—resentment or anger or whatever exactly it might be, I'll just use "resentment" as the placeholder term—is responsive to reasons in a distinctive way. Resentment is made fitting, apt or warranted (take your normative notion of choice) exactly by the fact that one was wronged. Typically such reasons-responsive attitudes are only (rationally) given up when the fact that made them apt no longer obtains. We withdraw fear (roughly) when we no longer judge the feared thing to be a threat, admiration when we no longer judge the thing to be admirable, etc…. But that which makes resentment fitting—that one was wronged—is not subject to change! To give up the judgment that one was wronged would not be to forgive, but to excuse or justify or perhaps just forget. So how can one *maintain* the judgment that one was wronged while withdrawing the attitude that is made fitting by that judgment?

Driven by a need to resolve this tension, sentimentalist accounts build divergent, sometimes quite elaborate, theories of forgiveness on top of the their central commitment that forgiveness involves a withdrawal of resentment. They might draw finer grained distinctions in the *object* of resentment (the wrongful deed vs the doer),[9] build in additional conditions (e.g., that one see the wrongdoer in a particular light or replace resentment with positive emotions),[10] or otherwise argue that some considerations can make the withdrawal of forgiveness apt even in light of the fact one was wronged (e.g., the fact that the wrongdoer apologized or made reparation, or a recognition of his humanity of of one's shared human frailty).[11] I mention these in brief not to criticize any in particular view, but rather to bring out the central feature of the sentimentalist approach. The sen-

[7] See Hieronymi (2001) for the canonical statement of the problem in these terms.

[8] Some think of resentment as moralized anger Butler 1726/1740, "hostile feeling" (Garrard and McNaughton, 2010) a sentiment of "moral protest" against a threat (Hieronymi, 2001); some see it as essentially "vindictive" (MURPHY CITE) others disagree (Holmgren, 1993). Some think forgiveness involves the passage of all negative emotions Richards (1988). See also Hughes (1993, 1995, 2016).

[9] Roberts (1995); Allais (2008); Wolterstorff (2011); Ware (2014) (Wolterstorff complicated).

[10] Garrard and McNaughton require feelings of good will (2010), Kolnai trust (1974), Novitz compassion (CITE), Hampton re-approval (1988). Cf. Allais (2008).

[11] Garrard and McNaughton (2010)

timent whose withdrawal is a constitutive of forgiveness has *fittingness conditions*; so an account of forgiveness in terms of that fitting attitude must somehow confront that key fact.[12]

It is this very general feature of the dominant approach that I'll take issue with. And indeed, it is a feature shared with minority views that deny any central place to moral sentiments but maintain that forgiveness involves a change in one's *fitting attitudes* more broadly. Scanlon, for instance, sees forgiveness as the withdrawal of *blame*—a change in one's attitudes and behavior warranted by wrongdoing (2008). Here it is not moral emotions but a broader set of attitudes (e.g., withdrawal of trust, intimacy, certain intentions, etc.) that are warranted by wrongdoing and withdrawn by resentment. And while my discussion will focus on explicitly sentimentalist views for ease of presentation, the arguments against them will apply just as well to any fitting attitudes approach.

Thus, the central claim I'll take as my foil is that forgiveness essentially involves the withdrawal of a fitting sentiment. And with this metaphysical claim, its normative correlate: that reasons to forgive are considerations that *rationalize* the withdrawal of resentment (or some other fitting attitude.) I'll add to these one more claim, which while not entailed by these two often accompany them: that inasmuch as forgiveness has a *purpose*, it is the restoration of relationships hampered by the presence of resentment (or whatever fitting attitude is at stake). Relationships like friendship or collegiality require some good will or good feeling; resentment stands in tension with them; so we forgive *in order* to restore our relationships.[13]

Sentimentalism seems to best fit instances of serious, interpersonal wrongdoing. When we are betrayed by a friend, lied to by a coworker, hurt by a loved one, resentment is apt. And forgiving the wrongdoer does seem to paradigmatically involve a change of heart. (Indeed, explaining the intimate, though I'll argue non-essential, connection between forgiveness and resentment is a core task of §3.4).

[12] A commitment to some kind of sentimentalism cross-cuts a more commonly recognized divide in the literature between *conditional* and *unconditional* views of forgiveness, see Fricker (2019), Garrard and McNaughton (2011, 2010), Milam (2019); Allais (2019); Fricker (2018); Russell (2019); Pettigrove (2019); Tierney (2019); Queloz (2019) ARRANGE THIS AND ADD OTHERS.

[13] Walker (2006); Roberts (1995) CITE OTHERS

2 Political Forgiveness

Sentimentalism as an approach is committed to the idea that so-called instances of political forgiveness are not forgiveness at all. The mechanisms of political forgiveness, the reasons on offer, its function in politics—none of it fits. This is not an objection to sentimentalism *per se*; most sentimentalists who consider the question of political forgiveness embrace this conclusion. But before arguing against sentimentalism, we'll consider so-called political forgiveness on its own terms. I'll offer a brief case study and develop an account that sees political forgiveness as a normative tool or power, whose exercise waives the entitlements one has to hold a past wrongdoing against wrongdoers.

2.1 A Case Study: South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission

By "political forgiveness" I mean roughly those moments in politics when, as Mbeki puts it, a wronged group "lets bygones be bygones" while still *confronting* a past wrongdoing head-on—neither forgetting, justifying, nor excusing it. In the paradigm cases, political forgiveness is a kind of alternative to or temperance of more usual political responses to wrongdoing, like incarceration, exclusion from politics, violent resistance, or secession. Examples include truth and reconciliation commissions of various kinds, political pardons, and mechanisms of "restorative justice," like guided victim-offender meetings.

Because it is familiar and often cited as a model of political forgiveness, I will turn to South Africa's post-apartheid transition as a case study. Our highly abridged historical recap starts in the early 1990s, when anti-apartheid resistance successfully forced the National Party under F. W. de Klerk began serious negotiations with Nelson Mandela and other leaders. Central to the negotiations were questions both of how to transition from apartheid oligarchy (kakistocracy?) to democracy, and what was to be done with those who had perpetrated, carried out, or been complicit in the murder, torture, terrorizing of Black and other non-white South Africans.[14] De Klerk and other white South Africans sought a general amnesty by which the lives, property and political status of all those involved in apartheid would remain unmolested in exchange for loosening their grip on

[14] Apartheid laws created a number of non-white racial categories, meeting out differing degrees of political subjugation and violence depending on whether a South African was Black (or "native"), mixed race (or "coloured"), of Indian descent ("Asian") (CITE LAWS).

political power. Many fighting apartheid, by contrast, saw something like the Nuremberg proceedings as a goal; and the need for a thorough investigation into the many acts of political violence was seen as essential—both into perpetrators and the status (and resting place) of the many who had been disappeared.[15]

Through fits and starts, and often punctuated by serious violence, negotiations eventually settled on a compromise: South Africa would establish a transitional government with power sharing between the majority (ANC) and largest minority (white) parties. The democratically elected Government of National Unity would manage a five year transitional period under a power-sharing agreement. Central to the transition was a compromise between general amnesty and Nuremberg-style trials: the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The interim constitution set out its basic requirements:

> In order to advance…reconciliation and reconstruction, amnesty shall be granted in respect of acts, omissions and offenses associated with political objectives and committed in the course of the conflicts of the past…. (Interim Constitution of South Africa, Ch. 16)

The structure and proceedings of the TRC were then laid out in one of Parliament's early pieces of legislation: the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act. As the TRC's chair, Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it, the Commission offered a middle way between a Nuremberg-style proceedings and general amnesty. While amnesty *was* on offer, it was far from unconditional. Those applying for amnesty were required to disclose—fully—what they had done. If their testimony was complete, they were eligible for consideration.[16] Notably, the chartering documents of the TRC did *not* require contrition, remorse, or apology in applications for amnesty. As Tutu later reflects,

> Nothing was said in the law about remorse—an omission that upset many of us at first until we realized that the legislature had been a great deal wiser than we had at first thought. For if the applicant was effusive in his protestations about being sorry and repentant to satisfy such a requirement for remorse, then he would have been condemned for being totally insincere

[15] (ADD IN CITATIONS!!)

[16] There were additional requirements: the violence committed had to be political in nature, committed within a certain time frame (YEARS), and could not be disproportionate—an odd condition considering that no violence in defense of apartheid could really be proportionate.

> and just laying it one thick to impress the Amnesty Committee panel. If, on the other hand, he was somewhat abrupt and merely formal, he would have been accused of being callous and uncaring and not really repentant. It would have been a 'no-win' situation. As it happens, most applicants have in fact expressed at least remorse and asked for forgiveness from their victims. Whether their requests have stemmed from genuine contrition is obviously a moot point. (Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 50)

Note the contrast with interpersonal forgiveness: whether or not one thinks contrition is a necessary condition (metaphysical or normative) on forgiveness,[17] it is decidely *not* moot. Whatever is going on here has a different shape to it. In addition to hearing over 7000 amnesty applications,[18] the TRC was meant to establish an officially sanctioned record of the many acts of political violence that held up the apartheid government. The commission collected over 21,000 survivors' and bystanders' testimony, with about 2000 appearing at public hearings.[19]

The TRC was and remains controversial, especially for its amnesty provisions. Both during and after the TRC, Tutu was among its most ardent defenders. One might expect a bishop to call upon survivors of apartheid to forgive wrongdoers because forgiveness is a Christian virtue, because Jesus forgave, or because we are called upon to turn the other cheek. But Tutu's defense of the TRC, which he characterizes as a mechanism of forgiveness, is notably hard-nosed. He describes forgiveness as "a very high price to ask the victims to pay," and argues for it not via an appeal to Christian virtue but on the grounds that this price has "bought" something worth buying: freedom and stability (1999, p. 55). That was the goal—"reconciliation and reconstruction" as the Interim Constitution puts it. And in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Tutu gives four lines of argument that forgiveness (via the TRC's amnesty program) is a better means to that goal than something more like a "normal judicial process" (p. 19). First, that a trial wouldn't have been acceptable to the governing party (20). Second, that "they still controlled the guns" (p. 20). Third, that trying those responsible for and complicit in apartheid would have been just too expensive for a new state with massive problems and competing priorities (p.

[17] See §3.7

[18] CITE. EXPLAIN COMPLICATIONS

[19] Check for better CITE: https://www.usip.org/publications/1995/12/truth-commission-south-africa

23–26). And fourth, that it better allowed survivors to heal (p. 27).[20] (Interestingly, it is the concern with expense and the administrative burdens involved that Tutu discusses most.) (As we'll see below, King likewise makes a deeply *pragmatic* case for his politics of forgiveness, see §2.6).

In the wake of the TRC's proceedings, lawyers, philosophers, and diplomats have defended the TRC as a model response to mass violence for similarly instrumental reasons, i.e., by arguing a TRC-style response is a good *means* to a better politics. Common arguments are that in comparison to more traditional judicial proceeding, something like the TRC can better break cycles of violence, help establish a coherent national narrative, invite broad participation by wrongdoers and bystanders, and help survivors heal from individual and collective trauma.[21]

2.2 Sentimentalism and Political Forgiveness

Sentimentalism cannot make sense of the TRC as a moment of forgiveness or of the reasons on offer as good reasons to forgive. This is not news to sentimentalists, of course! Those who have considered the phenomenon of political forgiveness explicitly welcome and defend this result (Digeser, 2001). And it is clear why: in the first place what was happening in the TRC's hearings and considerations of amnesty wasn't essentially about any moral sentiments. While the TRC hearings were an occasion for survivors to withdraw resentment and anger—and indeed many, though far from all, famously did so—that wasn't what "forgiveness" amounted to here. Inasmuch as something like forgiveness was on offer, it was not something about sentiment but about legal amnesty—the work of the TRC which Mbeki saw as essential was legal: "the Commissions should complete the amnesty process, to ensure that the democratic state is not left with the responsibility of instituting criminal investigations and the possible prosecution for actions that took place during the period covered by the mandate of the TRC…" (CITE). The forgiveness Tutu defends is *not* that of individuals' personally forgoing their resentment, and in his own writing presents the TRC as intentionally making space for victims *not* to offer *personal* forgiveness (Tutu, 1999, get page). (In practice, commissioners often pressured victims

[20] Tutu also offers a virtue-theoretic argument: that the politics of forgiveness manifests the virtue of Ubuntu

[21] See for instance Minow (1998, 2000); Kiss (2000); Bhargava (2000).

to give up their anger; that they did so is itself deeply objectionable (Cherry, 2023). That said, victims' occasional *refusals* to themselves forgive their wrongdoers did not block the TRC's work—interpersonal forgiveness was not, by law or in practice, necessary for political forgiveness. More on this in §2.4.)

That this instance of "political forgiveness" did not essentially involve a shift in sentiment is no accident. Whether inappropriately so-called or not, political forgiveness had better not center on a shift of emotion. On dominant conceptions of modern politics, sentiment and emotion at least largely lie outside of the public domain. The elimination of resentment or the presence of genuine remorse (obviously) cannot be legislated; nor even should a public body like the TRC make such sentimental changes its mission. Politics is not soulcraft, and so if there is to be a distinctively political species of forgiveness that a commission like the TRC could accomplish, it cannot be thus understood.[22]

Moreover, the *reasons* to forgive offered by Tutu and later defenders just don't make sense on a sentimentalist picture: they are not considerations that warrant the withdrawal of something like resentment. That the apartheid government "controlled the guns" or found the prospect of a trial unacceptable are not considerations that make resentment any less fitting (or that make its withdrawal apt); if anything, they are all the *more* reason to resent! Even considerations like "political forgiveness can avoid cycles of violent recrimination" or "political forgiveness can help heal victims" seem like they would be the *wrong kind* of reasons on a sentimentalist view. They are not reasons that make resentment (or whatever other fitting response) any less *fitting* or *apt*.

This is all to say that on the sentimentalist picture, Tutu and Mbeki seem to be making a kind of conceptual error—or perhaps more realistically, they mean by "forgiveness" something distinct from interpersonal forgiveness.

2.3 The Normative Power Account of Political Forgiveness

Political forgiveness is the waiver of entitlements to hold past wrongs against wrongdoers; the TRC was a mechanism by which South Africans waived some (but not all) of the entitlements they held against those responsible for apartheid.

[22] Cite Griswold, Barghava. Arendt. DIGESER especially. This is all perhaps overstated—of course *part* of the cultural work the TRC does is try to change hearts and craft the souls of its citizenry. But my claim here is that there is this distinctively non-sentimental, essentially political phenomenon as well.

To unpack and defend that claim, let's begin with the end—the purpose—of the TRC. As explicitly set forth in the interim constitution (and later chartering documents of the TRC), that was the construction of a new democratic order premised on ideals of equal human dignity. José Zalaquett, a member of Chile's Truth Commission, described the goals of such initiatives as "put[ting] back in place a moral order that has broken down or has been severely undermined, or build[ing] up a just political order if none existed in human memory" (1995). That this was the ultimate goal of the TRC is also reflected in its inclusion in the basic law of the Republic and in the way that figures like Tutu and Mbeki talked about it: as an essential part of the construction of a new political order.

To state the obvious, the reality of apartheid posed an obvious problem for the realization of that goal. The toll exacted in human life, the destruction of communities, denial of education, and establishment of profound economic inequality all posed obvious obstacles to the establishment of genuinely equal political relations. But in addition to these obvious (and important) material obstacles were a distinct set of normative ones: the establishment of a set of moral *entitlements* survivors of apartheid held against those responsible.

By "entitlement" I mean something roughly like a "right": the genus of bipolar, deontic normative relations that includes claim rights and privileges.[23] I will soon make controversial claims about entitlements: that we can be entitled not just to actions but to other attitudes as well, including sentiments. But in making that claim, I want to remain neutral with respect to many other disputes about the nature of an entitlement. Apart from making this widely rejected extension, I take myself to be using the familiar notion: an entitlement is a normative relation that is tied to what is obligatory and permissible.[24] If I have an entitlement against you to ϕ, then (all else equal), I am permitted to ϕ. If I lack any entitlement to ϕ, then I am forbidden. Suppose you are no threat to me, so that I lack an entitlement to harm you—my harming you is impermissible. But if you attacked me, you would lose your entitlement against me that I not harm you (or I would *gain* an entitlement to defend myself). On one way of thinking, entitlements *just are* these normative

[23] As developed by Hohfeld (1923) and extended into non-legal domains by Hart, Raz, Thomson and others (1955; 1977; 1990).

[24] For various developments of the general idea, see Thomson (1990); Dougherty (2015, 2021); Raz (1977, 2022); Wallace (1994, 2019); Gilbert (2018); Owens (2014); Darwall (2006) OTHERS—as is, odd list.

relations that are connected in the right way to other deontic categories like obligation. We may also be cache them out in terms of reasons: my entitlement against you that you not ϕ is a requiring (or deontic) reason that you not ϕ;[25] entitlements generate *binding* reasons (perhaps which have the power to exclude or silence other reasons)[26] or reasons which can generate permissions in the face of contrary deontic reasons. A third model understands them in terms of interpersonal justification: to have an entitlement is to have a legitimate basis on which to justify myself to others;[27] my entitlement to self defense lets me *justify my violence to you* if you attack me.

Entitlements have three key features that will allow us to capture what the TRC is doing. First is the widely discussed phenomena of secondary entitlements:[28] A's wronging B generates a distinct set of entitlements that B enjoys against A. If I (wrongly) lie to you, you are permitted to hold me to account in ways that would otherwise be wrong, e.g., blaming me. Second, that we exercise a great deal of control over our entitlements. We can make new ones, by promising for example; and (crucially for our purposes) we can make them go away. For example, I have an entitlement against others that they not operate on me, but I can waived that entitlement with respect to my doctors (for specific reasons and on specific occasions). There are obviously limits on the control we can exercise (e.g., not being able to consent without sufficient competence, voluntariness, or information),[29] but the general point still stands. And third, that an entitlement to ϕ is *justificatory*; for A to be entitled against B to ϕ *justifies* A's ϕ-ing, all else equal. Put slightly more precisely, for A to be entitled against B to ϕ entails that B *lacks* an entitlement against A that A not-ϕ; and for someone to have an entitlement against A that A not ϕ is (normally) a decisive, deontic reason for A not to ϕ. Violating another's entitlements is wrong; to *be* entitled to an action (i.e., for no one to be entitled against you that you not do it) makes so acting permissible (all else equal).

In virtue of having been profoundly wronged, survivors of apartheid held a suite of entitlements against those who were responsible. They were entitled to violence—an entitlement to which many justifiably availed themselves. And while there is scope for

[25] Gert (2007, 2012); Tucker (2025); Little and Macnamara (2021); but see Berker (forthcoming).
[26] Raz
[27] This is in a Scanlonian spirit 1998.
[28] See, e.g., Thomson (1990); Hohfeld (1923); Bennett (2018) OTHERS
[29] CITE

disagreement about the kind and degree of violence justified in a given political situation,[30] it is obvious that violent resistance of some kind—even violent secession—was justified by apartheid. Likewise would Black and other non-white South Africans have been entitled to exclude (many if not most) white South Africans from politics.[31] So, too, would survivors have been morally entitled to imprison those responsible for apartheid or to seize (stolen) land and wealth *en masse*. Perhaps to avail themselves of these entitlements justifiably, Black and other non-white South Africans would need to establish certain just procedures, and the details here are (to say the least) complicated. But for our purposes we need only recognize that survivors were entitled to these and other forceful responses by the fact that they were wronged. We can also consider less *harsh* but still important responses to which survivors were entitled by the fact of the wrongdoing, like an entitlement to publicly condemn those responsible (perhaps in accordance with the degree of responsibility).

And it is not just actions to which survivors are entitled but certain kinds of attitude, especially *withholding trust*. The fact that someone (or some group) was responsible for your neighbors' torture or the political subjugation of you and your fellow countrymen *entitles* you not to trust them! While that last sentence is perfectly good English, one might worry it is philosophically confused; while one can be entitled to *do* things, one cannot be entitled or not-entitled to an *attitude* like trust. I offer two responses to this worry, one modest and one ambitious. The modest response concedes that strictly speaking, an (inner mental) attitude like trust cannot be the object of an entitlement, but insists that some of its *outward* dimensions can be. To trust another is, very roughly, to take their word as good reason for belief, to regard their intentions as straightforward, to be disposed to regard them with a kind of default of good will.[32] If these all have primarily inner dimensions, they have outward expressions, too. One can *manifest* one's distrust by publically calling into question another's word, questioning his intentions, etc. Where the fact that someone said that p is typically a reason that a group can take to believe that

[30] Perhaps some violence was too much. The TRC thought so, finding, for instance, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela "politically and morally accountable for…gross violations of human rights" on account of what they deemed to be excessive violence (Tutu et al., 1998, p. 581).

[31] cf. de-Ba'athification. CITE denazification.

[32] For much less rough accounts, see, among others: Williams (2002); Løgstrup (1956); White (2022) BAIER, DOMENUCCI, HOLTON, Heironymi, Marusic CITE.

p, one can manifest distrust by refusing to treat this testimony as a reason for a group to accept that *p*. (Or put another way: the public manifestation of mistrust is, very roughly, denying another's testimony its normal status as a reason to believe something.)[33] One can imagine various examples of such outward manifestation of distrust: "They say they want to allow a democracy; but we can't believe these people! They are liars and murders."

In the absence of wrongdoing, such outward manifestations of distrust would be wrong. If, for example, I withheld my trust in a duly elected legislator or president *without* good reason, I would be subject to criticism. Declaring that we can't trust the President' birth certificate, the results of the Electoral College, the testimony of civil servants—these are manifestations of political distrust that require justification, and in its absence warrant, they are wrong. Fellow citizens, the elected officials, etc., would have cause for a distinct kind complaint against me; they would have standing to *demand* that I stop calling the truth into question, etc. By contrast if the official I refused to trust had prevented me from voting, used fear and violence to keep me in line, etc., I might well be entitled to withhold my trust. I would be justified in so doing by the fact that I was so wronged.

This is the modest understanding of how wrongdoing can *entitle* the wronged to mistrust: understand the entitlements of Black and other non-white South Africans to withhold their trust in terms of the outward manifestations thereof. The more ambitious and controversial claim is that an (inner) attitude like distrust itself is something to which one be entitled or not. To accept this would be to countenance a notion of entitlement that is broader than typically allowed: to say that we are not just entitled (and not-entitled) to actions but to wholly "inner" attitudes. On this sort of picture, unwarranted mistrust would not *just* be unwarranted in a monadic sense; it would also violate a deonitic, bipolar normative relation, and on the basis of that violation, a wronged party could *demand* trust. That is, on this sort of picture, the President whose birth certificate I refuse to accept could legitimately demand not only that I cease my *public* displays of mistrust, but that I genuinely believe him. And in not believing him, I would be *wronging him*.[34]

[33] Cf. Fricker (2009). Anderson on group belief. CITE

[34] There are many, different, ways of developing this thought; cf. Fricker (2009); Basu and Schroeder (2019); Basu (2019); Moran (2018) and ensuing literature. ESKENS ms. My own picture does not require accepting that a mere belief can wrong; it might be other epistemic (or zetetic) activities are the content of entitlements.

However we understand the claim, a crucial entitlement generated by the wrongdoing of apartheid was an entitlement to *distrust* those responsible.

Alongside the more familiar (and horrific) results of apartheid, these normative entitlements in the wake of wrongdoing were themselves obstacles to the creation of new political relationships, both as a practical matter and in deeper (constitutive) ways. First the practical: that the newly empowered citizenry of South Africa could avail themselves of these entitlements was an obvious reason those who held power feared surrendering it. As Tutu said, a trial wouldn't have been acceptable to the National Party—so at least as he (and the framers of the interim constitution saw it)[35] saw it, giving up that entitlement was pragmatically necessary for the apartheid government to give up their control. So, too, was giving up the entitlement to imprison or ban from politics those responsible; even large scale redistribution of (stolen) wealth was seen as something that needed to be given up.[36] As a kind of *political necessity*, albeit an ugly, compromised one, politicians from Mandela to Tutu to Biko[37] judged that *giving up these entitlements* were necessary. (They *might* well have been wrong; whether or not you agree is not important to the argument I'm making about the nature and ethics of political forgiveness, see §2.)

Likewise was the entitlement to *distrust* an obstacle. Some kind of basic trust is one's fellow citizens and in legislators is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy. It seems like a prerequisite for consent—especially loser's consent. Consider the strain put on American democracy by (wrongful) mistrust. And now consider the *entitled* distrust a survivor of apartheid could bear towards a town, regional or national governmental official who was himself involved in the murder or torture of his neighbors and family and in perpetuating his own legal subjugation—it would be pretty hard to give the kind of loser's consent necessary for democratic politics while distrusting to the degree to which one was entitled. Put another way: if survivors were to base their attitudes of (dis)trust in white South Africans in part on the basis of the their involvement in apartheid, demo-

[35] DEETS on who

[36] The South African Bill of Rights has severely restricts attempts at land redistribution by forbidding "arbitrary deprivation" of property and requiring any expropriation be "for a public purpose" and "subject to compensation" (SAC, 1996, §25); led by the Economic Freedom Fighters Party, founded in large part out of frustration with these restrictions (CITE), the National Assembly voted to review that section of the constitution The Parliament of the Republic of South Africa (2018), but has since rejected proposed constitutional reform Cocks (2021).

[37] Note on Biko

cratic politics might not be possible.

Without suggesting that the framers of the new South Africa would have seen described it in these terms, I claim they identified a kind of Hobbesian problem. For Hobbes, the fundamental problem of the state of nature was that people have *too many rights* (1651/1994, Ch. 13–14)! The job of politics is to find a mechanism by which people can successfully give up their rights for the sake of peace (Ch. 14 ff.). So, too, did South Africans' *entitlements* pose an obstacle, practically and constitutively, to the creation of a new political order.[38] And in order to establish that new political order—a new kind of political relationship between all South Africans—they needed to give up some of those entitlements. (Or at least they judged that they did; again, whether they were *correct* to do so is a separate question.) The metaphysics of the TRC seems to be just this: it was a mechanism for waiving (conditionally and in a limited way) some entitlements in order to establish a new democratic relationship. Which entitlements? Those entitlements that survivors of wrongdoing had on the basis of having been wronged—to hold the wrong of apartheid against perpetrators via violence, punishment, wealth seizure, etc….[39]

Crucially, this waiving on entitlements was both conditional and limited in scope. Amnesty was granted only if the offenders' disclosure was deemed adequate.[40] And while *some* entitlements were waived, not all were—forgiveness's *scope* was limited: legal prosecution, wealth seizure, imprisonment, armed violence—these were forgone; an entitlement to public condemnation, however, was reserved, with its exercise built in the very structure of the TRC.[41] Entitlements to hold wrongdoers to account do not stand or fall

[38] Not an accident that Hobbes made an injunction to political forgiveness ("pardon") the sixth law of nature (Ch. 15).

[39] One might object: it was not the normative entitlement that mattered to the apartheid government. It was the possibility that Black and other non-white South Africans *would* pursue such policies that terrified them, not the fact that the legitimately *could* pursue them. What mattered and was politically necessary wasn't some genuine normative change but just a non-normative one: the likelihood of various outcomes. In building legal protections for wrongdoers, the framers were changing what was likely to happen, not what was normatively justified—the latter is irrelevant. But this would be to miss out on the fact that the way in which we bind our future activities is by effecting normative changes—by promising, writing contracts and laws, giving permission. The normative change (that we may not…) is key to the descriptive change (that we will not…). It was by normatively binding themselves (via a constitution, and statutory law, and the provisions of the TRC, and personal promises between politicians) that survivors of apartheid were able to *create* the conditions for the relationship they sought.

[40] See earlier fn on other conditions.

[41] Dumisa Ntsebeza, head of the investigations unit of the TRC, argues for the importance of public condemnation in his (2000).

together as an inseparable package. South Africans could be, and were, *selective* in choosing which entitlements they would waive.[42]

All this talk of entitlement waiving just is my account of political forgiveness: it is the (sometimes conditional and limited) waiving of entitlements of the wronged to hold a past wrongdoing against wrongdoers. To exercise political forgiveness is to effectively *cordon off* a past wrongdoing's normative effects: the past wrong once *justified* all kinds of response; *after* forgiveness, much of the past's justificatory upshot is done away with—in particular those justifications that ran by way of the entitlements generated by the wrongdoing. Another way of putting the same point: to exercise political forgiveness is to (more or less) eliminate a past wrong as a *basis* for ongoing relations. Once forgiven, a member of the apartheid government is not to be related to *as* wrongdoer (i.e., as one who may be imprisoned, have his punitively wealth seized, etc.). Having politically forgiven via the TRC (framed by democratically endorsed constitution and elected representatives), survivors transformed their political relationships with wrongdoers into something new, one no longer structured by those entitlements. (Of course, some entitlements remained—in particular that of public condemnation; more on that below.)

All this might seem puzzling: how could it be that what the normative effects of the past are eliminated or limited when the past wrong is and will always be *wrong*? Put another way, how could what was once justified by a past wrong not always be justified by that past wrong?[43] The answer lies in understanding things via *entitlements* in particular. On the picture here, past wrongs serve as a basis for relating to a wrongdoer *by way of* generating entitlements to certain forms of response; and entitlements are just the sort of thing we can exercise this kind of discretion over—we can make them go away. By way of waiving entitlements, one drops the past wrong as a basis for ongoing relations, even though the wrong itself has not changed *its* status as wrong. Again, we can understand this simply in terms of the normative relations: they are what are eliminated via political forgiveness. Or we can cache it out in terms of reasons: political forgiveness made it so that the past wrong was no longer a reason to hold the wrongdoer to account via punishement, seizure of wealth, etc. Or we can understand it in terms of justification to others: the past wrong no longer functions as a legitimate basis for justifying certain political

[42] Columbia—still punish, but lesser.

[43] This is a different version of the fittingness puzzle.

responses, e.g., imprisonment, land seizure, etc, because the TRC made it so.

It is by focusing on the waiving of entitlements, that the view explains what is so different between political forgiveness and *forgetting* of the kind Mbeki urged South Africa to avoid. Political forgetfulness might be something like the total elimination of the fact that some wrong has happened as an available reason or justification for political action of *any* kind. That was by no means what the TRC did. That apartheid happened was not to be forgotten or ignored in practical deliberation. That would be absurd—legislating and politics more generally would be impossible if one were forced into some ahistorical frame of mind in which the past was no longer taken to bear in any way on what to do. Political forgiveness does not strike a past from the record, but more particularly *the entitlements that arise from wrongdoing*. Post-forgiveness, a legislator could propose an affirmative action program on the basis that addressing the inequalities in education, employment, or wealth that stem from apartheid. But redistributing land or jobs or wealth on punitive grounds or on the grounds that Black South Africans are *entitled* to the land and wealth that was *stolen* from them is ruled out by the Constitution.[44] The difference is *how* the the fact of apartheid is figuring as the basis or reason in politics: as a basis for some kind of holding-to-account versus as a fact about the world that has bearing on what to do.

2.4 The Personal vs. The Political

Likewise was the *selective* nature of the entitlements waived reflected in the distinction between those entitlements the TRC was responsible for waiving and those that were not *its* to waive. Though individual commissioners sometimes did pressure victims to extend personal forgiveness, that was not something the TRC itself could do—indeed, the fact that some commissioners pressured victims to do so reflects the fact that some forgiveness was not the Commission could exercise itself. Whatever they were doing in granting amnesty was importantly distinct from the personal forgiveness that individual victims could offer or withhold. We can understand this distinction by attending to *which* entitlements are being waived. The TRC waived an entitlement to various punitive measures that the *state* and *body politic as a whole* could carry out as well as shape how the fact of apartheid could figure in public discourse. It did not waive many of the personal en-

[44] See n.36.

titlements *individuals* had in virtue of being wronged, e.g., to express their resentment, their anger, not to *personally* trust those involved in apartheid, etc. Thus, the work of political forgiveness made imprisoning someone who was responsible for apartheid (and granted amnesty) inappropriate; but an individual might still well be entitled to express her *personal* resentment at such a person, for instance by publically refusing to withdraw her own anger him, by shunning him, by refusing to keep any sort of social company with him. That is consistent with the wrongdoer not being subject to political sanction; that *political* entitlement can be waived without waiving those the victim herself still maintains.

So, too, is there a difference between the ways in which an entitlement to *distrust* was waived as a political matter, and the distrust that individuals could (and of course did) maintain. To see what I mean, consider the normative significance of a claim like "Wilhelm was responsible for the detention without trial of my neighbor." Political forgiveness notwithstanding, that is still a (very!) good reason not to *personally* trust someone; citing that fact would justify all kinds of manifestation of distrust—not wanting to associate with him, not wanting to open up, not believing his expressions of remorse, not wanting to leave him in your home with your kids unattended—or have him in your home at all. What South Africa's political forgiveness deprived that same claim its status as a legitimate reason in *public discourse* to distrust Wilhelm as a political matter (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1996). If someone cited that same claim as a reason, say, to withhold trust in the local office (or legislative committee or whatever) that he now heads, it would *not* be a legitimate reason; if someone cited the claim as a reason not to be willing to enter into political negotiations, or to recognize him as a possible partner in political compromise, that would be unwarranted. And indeed, this kind of division in the sort of *trust* extended to political figures qua *politician* vs. qua *private citizen* is commonplace.[45]

The distinction between the "political" and the "personal" need not be sharp or joint-carving to make sense on this picture. My point is just that the TRC saw some such distinction by its own lights, and that this account of political forgiveness can make sense of that by seeing the TRC as having waived some, but not other, entitlements: to trust wrongdoers in politics vs in their personal capacities. It can alse be distinguished by the normative *relations* at play. What the TRC shaped were the public, political relations be-

[45] Cf. White (2022).

tween citizens as such, not the personal relations that relate victims and wrongdoers just as individuals. Again, one might balk at that kind of essentially liberal distinction between the political and the private; the point remains that South Africa's politics draws this distinction.[46] The view of forgiveness on offer is neutral with respect to what the *right* way to conduct politics is—the point is that political forgiveness is a tool for reshaping normative relations by way of dropping the entitlements that arise from wrongdoing. Which normative relations can and should be shaped is not given by the account of the tool itself.

Along similar lines, one might complain think this is all a normative mistake, i.e., that having been involved in apartheid is *always* a good reason not to be trusted in politics as well as in one's personal capacity. That might be; while the architects of South Africa thought the compromise was worth it, one contemporary political party is committed to a rejection of elements of that compromise.[47] My view is not committed to their normative judgment being *correct* so much as it is to showing what they, as a matter of fact, *did*: that they really did waive these rights to distrust in the political sphere and that the notion of political forgiveness as the waiving of entitlements can explain how this could be done while respecting the gap between the TRC's did and what individuals could still choose to do—or not. So, too, one might complain political forgiveness *didn't work*.[48] But that is not an objection to the account—the claim is about *what* political forgiveness is and what it does, not whether, in a given instance, it was the right tool for the job.

This account of political forgiveness sees forgiveness in essentially instrumental terms. Normative assessment of political forgiveness involves two key questions: first, what political relations *should* be established? And second, is waiving the entiltements of past wrong-doing the right *means* to that end?

(WHERE TO PUT AN ISSUE OF REPRESENTATION: And the fact that the framers of the interim constitution were elected in landslide victories and those same duly elected legislators then drafted the particular terms of the TRC and the permanent constitution, means that their judgement was ratified ratified by survivors of apartheid in general.[49]. Tutu and churches? King? Salkin on informal representation.)

[46] And the South African constitution is a markedly *liberal* one.

[47] See below, §2.6.

[48] Cite evidence about current inequality, the total failure of prosecutions for those who didn't apply for amnesty and for those whose applications were explicitly rejected by the TRC.

[49] Deets. Questions of representation

2.5 Why truth? The Dangers of (Political) Forgiveness

Thus far, I have focused my account of what the TRC did on the entitlements it waived; but what of its role as a *truth* commission? If the purpose of the TRC was to create some kind of political relationship, why were public confessions and survivor testimonies a necessary means? In some sense the answers are obvious: because the public airing of wrongdoing and subsequent condemnation was a form of accountability that could be exercised; because so much of of the violence of the apartheid era was shrouded in mystery and it was a way of finding out just what happened; because it was a way of offering survivors a forum to legitimate their stories in an official forum—to be recognized by their government in a way they never had. But these answers all point to something deeper: political forgiveness is *dangerous*; truth commissions serve to *mitigate* the dangers inherent in an act of political forgiveness.

The dangers of political forgiveness are threefold. First is a risk of re-offense: one can be a lot more confident that someone who killed in service of racist subjugation won't kill again if he is locked up, killed himself, or exiled from the state. (There were significant fears of terrorism in the run-up to the '94 election.)[50] Maybe even more importantly, one can be a lot more sure that those who spent their political careers designing and maintaining systems of oppression won't continue to do so if they are banned from political office.

Second, to forgive in politics risks "normalizing" bad behavior, that is changing the norms around what was once forbidden behavior and making it acceptable. This might sound odd; but the phenomenon is (all too) familiar. Some political misdeeds are wrong entirely or in part because of contingent political norms; failure to *hold* a wrongdoer accountable runs the risk of changing those political norms, fixed as they are by little or nothing more than changeable attitudes and patterns of behavior. Wrongdoing, then, can make that which was once wrong no longer wrong or less severely wrong. Consider the many wrongdoings of President Trump and his administrations; the concern about that wrongdoing was not only for the concrete harm he inflicted on individuals lives, but also for the manner in which his behavior has and continues to *change* the office of the presidency. So many of institutional norms—that in virtue of which a President's action is

[50] CITE

made required, forbidden, supported by reason, etc.—are in place exactly because they *have been* followed.[51] Violate them enough and their precedential force is weakened; a pardon or failure to prosecute threatens to exacerbate this. It may be that in the absence of an institutional norm requiring one to ϕ, other reasons to ϕ remain—to do so would help others, would be prudent, etc.... But if an action's deontic status *as wrong* or *as required* is grounded in some (contingent) norm, then the norm's violation carries with it this threat of *normalizing* the wrong. And even if it does not so depend on a norm, some wrong action becoming normalized still constitutes a normative change for the worse: a reason not to do something has been lost.

Returning now to our case of South Africa, much of the wrongdoing that upheld apartheid *was* legal (although perhaps importantly, far from all of it); and virtually all of it was wrong regardless of any contingent political norms. But as the *new* state of South Africa was establishing itself, it was *politically* important to affirm not just as a matter of morality but of law and custom and that such actions were forbidden. Political forgiveness threatened that aim. Part of what constitutes the creation and upholding of such norms is enforcement. Not throwing murders, oppressors, torturers, and the architects of massive injustice into jail threatens to undermine—even if not completely—political norms that forbid such violence as a tool of politics. There is a tension between upholding norms of justice and failing to punish the grossest offenders.

Third, political forgiveness threatens to do violence to individuals in forcing them to let go of defining elements of their political identity. Writing in criticism of the social contract tradition—one which explicitly[52] takes a kind of *forgiveness* as a necessary for the establishment of a commonwealth—Sheldon Wolin argues that

> Forgetfulness is established as a condition, perhaps even a precondition, of a certain form of society…the self must renounce some part of itself or of its own experience if it wants to be accepted into political society. In the act of reconstituting the self into a civic self, forgetting becomes a rite of passage and as such a condition of membership. (1989, p. 36)[53]

[51] Amar (2012); cf. Valentini (2024).

[52] See n. 38.

[53] Immediately preceding his argument that pardon is the sixth law of nature, Hobbes analogies the construction of a commonwealth to the building of a stone wall; the stones need to be ground down to fit together—and those that "for the hardnesse, cannot be easily made plain, and thereby hindereth the

This Wolinian worry applies to the South African attempt to waive so many of the entitlements to hold apartheid against those responsible. If the TRC was an attempt to transform the relationship between wrongdoer and wronged into one not so deeply based on the fact of wrongdoing, into a new relationship of equal citizenship of in a genuine democracy, were not South Africans being asked to give up a part of themselves?

Without making any claim that the framers of the TRC thought in these terms, it is especially these latter two dangers to which they responded in establishing the truth commission. The testimony of twenty two thousand South Africans, in an official form, watched closely by so many, served to construct a national narrative. Political forgiveness presupposes that what was done was *wrong* inasmuch as the entitlements it waives arise out of wrongdoing; the confessions offered *as confession* accepted that presupposition; the survivor testimony affirmed its wrongness; and the participation of the nation as audience all served to affirm a moral narrative: that what happened was wrong, that violence is not to be tolerated in South African politics, and that this was to be a nation predicated on (racial) equality.[54] The truth commission offered a different route to resist the danger of normalization—not traditional punishment nor public condemnation alone, but a participatory forum in which the new nation could in some sense *get on the same page*.[55] The TRC avoided a Wolinian worry that survivors of apartheid would have to renounce their past to be citizens; it affirmed that past as a part of the new state's founding narrative.[56]

Pairing political forgiveness with truth was an attempt to do what seems impossible—on the hand to transform a relationship from that of wrongdoer and wronged, i.e., one whose normative structure is shaped by the entitlements of the wronged to hold the wrongdoer to account, into that of co-citizens of a new equal state; while on the other, *not* forgetting the wrong itself, and not asking those wronged to give it up. The TRC in the same political moment affirmed survivors' truth, including the profoundity of the wrong suffered, while *cordoning off* that same truth's normative effects. And again, seeing that as the waiving of an entitlement allows us to make perfect sense of it.

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building" should be "cast away as unprofitable, and troublesome" (1651/1994), Ch. 15.

[54] On the significance of third-party affirmation of a process of forgiveness, see, e.g., Hieronymi (2001); Walker (2006); on the centrality of this to restorative justice (a form of political forgiveness on this picture), see Dickey (1998), CITE Erin Kelly, others.

[55] Complications? Talk about in text?

[56] Maybe arendt on founding myth? check if anything helpful there

2.6 Political Forgiveness: A Tool

This has been an account of *what* political forgiveness. Political forgiveness is a kind of *tool*. It is a tool for reshaping political relationships. And on this view, the *ethics* of political forgiveness should be understood in broadly instrumental terms. It is not a good as such; it does not enjoy any status as the default or ideal response to wrongdoing.[57] Instead, it should be evaluated as the kind of thing that it is: it is a *way* of trying to achieve a certain political relationship. Whether to forgive is an essentially *political* question—one of political strategy and tactics, and so heavily context dependent. Maybe the framers of South Africa were *wrong* to think that a policy of forgiveness was the right political tool for the job at hand. One of the mainstay, minority parties in contemporary politics is the Economic Freedom Fighters, whose motivating political idea is a rejection of many of South Africa's instances of political forgiveness, especially the constitutional gaurantee that land would not be seized and redistributed; they think Mandela, Mbeki and Tutu's politics have failed—forgiveness doesn't work. For all I've said, they might be right! Who is right depends on our answer to two questions: first, what kind of political relationship *ought* to be established, and what are the right means to that end. One way to hear (part of) the EFF's contention is that forgiveness is a mistake *because* land redistribution is necessary political tool—trenchant inequality will remain a fixture of South African politics without it. Whether they are correct isn't up to a theory of forgiveness to adjudicate.

Or compare another debate over forgiveness's place in political life. Martin Luther King Jr. advocated for a politics of "forgiveness" that understood forgiveness to be a matter of forswearing vengeance and turning the other cheek (2010; 2015a; 2015b). It is tempting to read this as motivated solely by a Christian ideology—and indeed, he does cite Jesus's forgiveness and God's love for all as reasons Black Americans should forgive white oppressors. But he doesn't stop there. By his own telling, he was convinced to pursue non-violent politics (as I would put it: a politics in which one gives up one's entitlement to violence)[58] by the success of Gandhi (2015a; 2015b);[59] and in advocating for a

[57] See Cherry for an account of the *dangers* of valorizing forgiveness Cherry (2017).

[58] I am not claiming King would agree that we are entitled, in any sense, to violence.

[59] "Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The 'turn the other cheek' philosophy and the 'love your enemies' philosophy were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more relaistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly

politics of forgiveness, sees himself as making a deeply *pragmatic* argument—forgiveness *is an effective tool* for social change. That forgiveness is "*practical*" is one of the resounding themes of King's writing (King, 2010, esp. Ch. 4). And King articulates a theory of social change that makes sense of this: injustice is a product of (culpable) ignorance—wrongdoers "know not what they do" (2010, Ch. 5); people are, in some sense, essentially good. Loving forgiveness is able to "release those vast reservoirs of goodwill that have been blocked by impenetrable walls of hate" (ibid.). When arguing that one should forgive one's enemies, King writes that "the first reason is fairly obvious. Returning hate for hate multiplies hate.... the chain reaction of evil must be broken" (ibid.). This is, once again, a *pragmatic* reason to forgive—in light of his belief about the source of racial injustice and violence, he argues that forgiveness is the right *tool* to achieve the desired end: "to preserve and create community" (2015b).

When Malcolm X excoriates King's politics, he does so on the grounds that forgiveness is the *wrong tool* for the job at hand. The problem isn't a kind of ignorance that can be cured by love; nor is forgiveness the right tool for Black emancipation. Malcolm X rejects King's goal (a reconciled, racially unified, beloved community vs Black independence), and so saw a different necessary means (forgiveness vs revolution, especially the acquisition of *land*) (1965).

Or consider Orwell's criticism of Gandhi's politics of non-violence. Orwell is deeply sympathetic to Gandhi's political goals (independence, the establish of a liberal democratic order), but rejects an uncompromising commitment to non-violence. By Orwell's reckoning, non-violent resistance is only a viable maens to that end in a narrow range of political contexts: "it is difficult to see how Gandhi's methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard of again. Without a free press and the right of assembly," some *other* means are necessary (1949).

The theory on offer here doesn't tell us which is right; it tells us the terms in which to adjudicate the dispute: who has the right end, King or Malcolm X? Given the shared ends, is Gandhi's unconditional embrace of non-violence the right means? Or is Orwell right to see a profound limit to that kind of politics?

Examples of political forgiveness abound. Following the English Civil War, Parlia-

mistaken I was" 2015a.

ment passed *An Act of Free and Generall Pardon, Indemnity, and Oblivion* of 1660, which *mostly* dropped all political actions during the Interregnum as a basis for ongoing political relations; the Act carved out many exceptions, notably including for the Regicides who were perused to the Americas. Columbia, Ireland, Rwanda, and others have attempted to *waive* the entitlement to punish in the pursuit of functional political relations.[60] Some reformers and prison abolitionists defend the need for *restorative justice* as a response to wrongdoing; while some defend such models on the grounds that punishment is inherently unjustified,[61] one might just as well assess its viability on pragmatic grounds.[62] In each of these cases, the way to normatively assess political forgiveness is in instrumental/pragmatic terms: what kind of political relations should be established? And is entitlement-waiver the best means to that end?

(Mention coercion? or just another argument for the interpersonal: explains why can't be coerced.)

3 Interpersonal Forgiveness

The account of political forgiveness as a normative tool or power *just is* the account of forgiveness in interpersonal settings: to forgive is to exercise a normative power of waiving entitlements generated by past wrongdoing against the wrongdoer;[63] the *function* of this tool or power is to shape the norms that constitute our (interpersonal) relationships. (Among among the entitlements generated by wrongdoing is that to be *resentful*.)

Compared to sentimentalist approaches, this normative powers view can better:

1. Explain the (necessary) role forgiveness plays in a life.
2. Recognize the full range of cases in which we can forgive.
3. Explain the fine-grained agency we exercise over the *conditions* and *scope* of forgiveness.

[60] LOTS OF CITATIONS

[61] CITES

[62] Kelly.

[63] See also Bennett (2018); Warmke (2016c,a); Cornell (2017); Owens (2014) CITE OTHERS. Say all differences here? Or note where come up?

Having made these arguments, I'll consider the role of *apology*, which on this picture is parallel to the role that truth commissions can play: as something that can mitigate the inherent risks of forgiveness. Lastly, I'll consider an objection: that the view wrongly predicts absent a change of heart one can still have really *forgiven*.

3.1 The Role of Forgiveness in a Life: Wrongdoing and Relationships

3.2 Background: Relationships and their malleable norms

On a sentimentalist picture, the role of forgiveness is to eliminate resentment, which is in turn seen as incompatible with or at least in tension with certain special relationships. Many sentimentalists center relational repair of some kind or other in the development of their account, but the place of relationships is in a certain sense *derivative*: forgiveness is in the first place about feeling, and it only bears on relationships inasmuch as the feelings pose a problem for them. Seeing forgiveness in these terms is fails to accord with the ethical significance of interpersonal relationships and the way in which wrongdoing threatens their ability to shape our normative lives for the better.

Many of the obligations, prerogatives, and reasons that bear on our day-to-day decision making are affected by the special relationships we bear to others. There's a good reason that every trolley problem begins with the disclaimer that the people on the tracks are strangers to the agent near the lever (or on the footbridge or wherever); were they friends or family or even just acquaintances, that might make all the difference.[64] That it is a justifiable imposition to call a close friend to unburden our troubles and that we have special reason to take such calls in turn has everything to do with being friends.[65] That one has special reason to take time out of one's day to read a colleagues quarter-baked rough draft, and vice-versa, has everything to do with the nature of one's relationship to one's colleague.

And, to state the obvious, not every friendship or relationship between colleagues is the same. With some, a late night call in which one bears one's deepest troubles might very well be inappropriate—consider a friendship in which friends have kept things light, fun and casual (White, 2022). Likewise, we all have colleagues to whom we can send our

[64] SOME STUFF. Not least on acquaintances.

[65] Various conceptions. My view.

roughest work and those to whom doing so would be inappropriate (apologies to you, USC readers!!). These norms are constitutive of our relationships. That is, part of what is to be close colleagues just is that one has a special permission to send such work and special reason to read such work in return; part of what it is to be intimate with a friend is to be the sort of person one *can* call to share the most serious of one's troubles.[66]

That our relationships are in part constituted by such norms is (part of) why they are so important. Our special relationships play a crucial role in shaping the normative landscape we inhabit.[67] And inasmuch as we need people whom we may call in times of need, with whom we may share our roughest work, we need the relationships that induce such permissions. Entering into and shaping the norms of our relationships are among the most important tasks we face as agents—shaping the normative landscape we inhabit with special reasons, permissions and obligations vis-à-vis some special few. Interpersonal life is in that respect like politics: we have to build—and reshape—the structures (institutions, laws, relationships) that shape the normative landscape.

Far more often than not, our relationships and their attendant norms are entered into and shaped *implicitly*. Granted, we sometimes we make explicit arrangements with an "I do," "yes, I'll be your advisor," or "let's be friends!"[68] But often we enter into relationships just by doing the things that are typical of them, i.e., by acting in accordance with their norms. Consider, for instance, a friendship. Part of how people typically become friends is by spending time with one another, opening up about oneself, offering oneself as a resource in a time of need; that is, by doing the very things that one has special reason to do once one is friends. And having (for instance) inculcated a friendship by offering myself up in a time of need, I gain special reason to do so again in the future. The details are, of course, complicated;[69] but this roughly is true: one way of entering into a relationship can be by *doing* things which are typical of those in that relationship.

And so, too, for changing a relationship (getting closer, or getting more distant) or effectively ending one. If I stop reading your papers, we might well grow more *distant* as colleagues; if I stop answering the phone when my friend is in need—or at least if

[66] SEE STUFF

[67] See (among others) Owens (2014); Williams (1981); Keller (2013); Jeske (2008, 2024); Kolodny (2003); Scheffler (1997); White (2025b).

[68] McGowan (2019); Lance and Kukla (2013); Kukla and Lance (2009) and White (2025a).

[69] Sometimes social scripts for entering and exiting that are quite different! This isn't the only way.

I do that frequently enough or in a serious enough occasion—that might well *end* the friendship. Again, the details may be complicated (and involve things like a shift in one's mental states or dispositions because of the action in question) but the rough idea is this: by *violating* norms, one can *rupture* the relationship.[70] And in the newfound absence (or profound change) of the relationship, one can thereby lose the special reasons that used to attend it. Put another way: by violating a norm that gives me a special obligation (or reason) to act in a certain way, I can make it the case that in the future, I lack those special obligations (or reasons). After I blow my friend off for the umpteenth time, we just *aren't* friends anymore; the *next* time I fail to respond to his needs is not a *further* failure of friendship since we aren't friends.

That our relationships are in this way *malleable*, subject to change, reinforcement, or disruption by our acting in accordance with or in violation of the norms that constitute them makes *wrongdoing* dangerous. Wronging someone can "normalize" that wrongdoing. This is familiar in the political case; recall the above example of the concern that the Trump administrations' violations of norms are changing the nature of the Presidency's relationships to citizens (or other branches of government) by changing the norms themselves. While less often recognized in these terms, the very same thing happens all the time in interpersonal relationships. We wrong one another, and thereby threaten to or in fact change the norms that govern our behavior going forward. This poses a profound problem: we need special relationships and their attendant norms, but a primary means of constructing such special norms—our relationships—can be changed or destroyed by the mistakes we all too often make.

And not only does violating the norms of a relationship threaten to change them; it also generates new norms: *entitling* the wronged party to distinctive kinds of response. Just as in the political case, various entitlements are generated by an act of wrongdoing: that my friend *didn't* pick up the phone when he knew I needed him entitles me to change my attitudes and behavior towards him, e.g., to confront him with it, to demand an apology, to exclude him from my life, to suspend my trust, etc.[71] Of course what exactly is entitled depends on much: the norm violated, the context, the seriousness of the wrong, etc. The key point here is that *some* entitlements are generated. Central among those en-

[70] Less so in contractually constituted relationships.
[71] SCANLON on blame.

titlements in many contexts is an entitlement to *resent* the wrongdoer. One might object that one cannot, strictly speaking, have an *entitlement* to resent; I'll make my case that one can in a moment. But for now, my key claim is that the entitlements generated by interpersonal wrongdoing are many and include (in some way) resentment. In at least this way, wrongdoing does not threaten to but always changes a relationship: in making some responses appropriate that otherwise would not be. Resenting or distrusting my friend *for no reason* is not only unjustified—it lets *him* down as my friend.[72] But doing so because he's wronged me does not.

But we often have reason *not* to pursue those responses to which we are entitled. We might have all kinds of reason to not want to be resentful, to not suspend our trust, to not exclude the wrongdoer from our life. We might not want to have our relationship characterized by the such a norm.

To bring out these two ways wrongdoing reshapes the normative landscape, imagine Vinay and Lionel are partners and Lionel has told a significant lie—he's had cancer and kept it from his husband out a desire for a kind of privacy. What might such a lie do? For one, if Lionel keeps it up, he could effectively put distance between himself and his partner—if Lionel continues to keep Vinay *out* of his life, he can erode the intimacy of the relationship and eventually fracture it entirely. It would be no great surprise if in a year or two, Lionel didn't owe Vinay the truth at all because the relationship is broken or at least radically changed. Moreover, the wrong *entitles* Vinay to behavior which would otherwise be impermissible. He can distance himself, distrust Lionel, exclude Lionel from his life—all things that (given the nature of their commitment to one another) would be *otherwise* unjustified. Moreover, he can *resent* Lionel or bear other negatively valenced interpersonal sentiments (more on this below, §3.4).

What should Vinay do? One option is to more or less ignore the wrong—to live with the changes it has wrought. Another is take advantage of his entitlements and hold his partner to account. In doing so, he will at least mitigate the danger of the *first* kind of shift—to hold Lionel to account for his wrong is to a way of reinforcing the old normative order, to prevent the wrong from *normalizing* the behavior. But it leaves in place—and uses—the second normative change, the generation of entitlements to respond. Sometimes that will be the thing to do. But it is not the only option. Forgiveness is an option

[72] See n.77.

as well—it is a distincitve way of (re)shaping the normative landscape in the wake of wrongdoing.

3.3 The role of forgiveness

To forgive is to waive entitletments to hold a past wrongdoer to account; but to waive these entitlements presupposes that a wrong *really was* committed. (Consider how offensive—condescending and infuriating!—it is to be *forgiven* when one did nothing wrong.) In that way, it can deny wrongdoing *both* of its characteristic effects on the normative landscape, no longer allowing the wrong to be the *basis* for ongoing interpersonal relations.[73]

To forgive is to *forgoe the entitlement(s)* one has to respond in the distinctive ways justified by the wrong: resenting, suspending trust, condemning, confronting, etc. Let's return to the case of the partnership under threat by a grave wrong. Suppose that Vinay is considering what to do in the wake of the lie, a lie which made his relationship to Lionel one of victim to wrongdoer (among other things). Suppose further that Vinay and Lionel decide, with good reason, to try to salvage their relationship. If Vinay is to have a healthy partnership with Lionel, his newfound entitlements pose a problem. He needs to trust Lionel, not to exclude him from his life, and he wants to try and let go of the resentful anger he feels towards Lionel. As in the political case, it is not *just* whether or not Vinay does in fact suspend his trust in his husband, but the fact that he is *entitled* to that poses a problem for their continued intimate relationship. Consider the entitlement to *leave*. After the lie, Vinay is justified in breaking up. But to remain justified in leaving stands in tension with a certain kind of committed relationship—one in which the question of whether to stay or go has been taken off the table by the partners' mutual commitment to one another. They *can* remain partners of a kind if Vinay holds on to his entitlement to leave; but a certain *kind* of partnership—of open-ended commitment where each is normatively bound to the other—requires giving up the entitlement itself.

As in the political case, there should be no default presumption in favor of forgiveness. Whether Vinay should forgive depends on what kind of relationship he should seek and

[73] Cf. Arendt: "Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever" (1998).

whether the right *way* to get there is by waiving the entitlements he has in virtue of the wrongdoing. The ethics of forgiveness is in this sense *instrumental*.[74] (It is consistent with this view, however, to hold that some kind of loving union with others is always ideal (King, 2010); and if something like that is right, there will be an imperative to forgive. Separately, I have argued against the view that one should always manifest love for others (White, 2025b).)

3.4 Change of Heart

On this view, forgiveness is not essentially a matter of changing one's heart—of getting rid of resentment. To forgive is to give up one's *entitlement* to resent.

All of this points to a picture on which changes of heart *do* play an important role in the story without being the essence of forgiveness. A common thought is resentment and other sentiments are judgment sensitive: they arise and fade roughly in accordance with the judgments that rationalize them (Scanlon, 1998). Insofar as one is rational, one resents just inasmuch as one's judgments rationalize resentment. One way, then, to withdraw resentment is to withdraw the judgment that rationalizes it. Here we run into the initial puzzle to which sentimentalists set themselves: what change in Vinay's attitudes could rationalize the withdrawal of resentment other than the (irrational) abandonment of the judgment that he was wronged (or that he was lied to)? The entitlement-waiver view offers a clean answer which sidesteps the puzzle all together: Vinay can waive his *entitlement to resentment*, and thereby make it the case that he is no longer warranted in feeling that resentment. As long as resentment is sensitive to the judgement that one is entitled to resent (perhaps alongside other judgements), the waiver of entitlement becomes a way of exercising a kind of indirect, affective agency. Insofar as he is rational, the forgiver will judge that his resentment is no longer warranted, and in virtue of that judgment abandon his feeling. Even though resentment is not under the voluntary control of the will, entitlement waiving *is*; that's something Vinay can just *do*. And it can set off a process that, insofar as Vinay is rational, will lead him to withdraw his resentment. (So, too, for something like an attitude of distrust, which is perhaps also not under direct control of the will). This is how Vinay can cordone off the ripples of the past wrongdoing—by

[74] Watkins is one of the view who explicitly embraces intstrumental reasons to forgive (2005).

dropping the wrong as a normative basis not only for his behavior but his sentiments as well.

That "insofar as he is rational" phrase is crucial to understanding this process. Judging that resentment is no longer rational does not entail that one no longer resents; emotions and other complex attitudes can take time—agonizingly—to come into alignment with the judgments to which they are sensitive. And this is true to our experience: Vinay's forgiving Lionel might well be the start of a difficult emotional process. "I forgive you," he might say, "but it will take some time for me to work through all this."[75]

One might object to the idea of an entitlement to resent or feel any emotion at all. "It cannot be a strict duty to feel an emotion," claims Sidgwick, "so far as it is not directly within the power of the will to produce it at any given time" (CITE 3.4.1).[76] Sidgwick might be correct; reserve "right" for the kind of relation one cannot bear against another with respect to an emotion or sentiment. It might still be the case that there is a broader set of directed, bipolar normative phenomena of which rights are a special case.[77] Suppose that in the middle of class I start seething with resentment at one of my students—he had the temerity to *ask me a question*. The resentment is obvious—while I continue to recognize him and others in the course of discussion, the anger in the room is palpable. My anger is unjustified—it has no basis; but more than that, my student has a distinctive kind of personal complaint against me. He might express it as such: "Why on earth are you angry? I just asked a question!" Moreover, he might *himself* resent me for my unwarranted anger and do so warrantedly. Whether or not my emotion *wrongs him* is not really at issue;[78] my claim is that there is a distinctively relational defect I evince in feeling unwarranted anger. By contrast, if he is angry at me in turn, I have *no* such complaint; he has a basis for interpersonal justification: "I'm angry because you got angry at me—out of nowhere!" If anger isn't the right sentimental response to my inapproriate,

[75] Fn explaining disagreement with Bennett (2018) and Warmke (2016d,a)?

[76] In a similar vein, Darwall argues that a second-personal duty (and rights) are constitutively connected to *demand*, and because we cannot feel an emotion on the basis of a demand, we cannot have duties or rights with respect to emotions CITE 2PS. Or see Kant CITE.

[77] It is a matter of ongoing, lively debate, how exactly to understand these norms, e.g., Driver (1992); Calhoun (2016); Martin (2013); Harman (2016); Martin (2019, 2021); Lewis (2018, 2022); Kukla (2021); Fricker (2022); Telech and Katz (2022); Darwall (2024), XXXX.

[78] it might! it might not! I take no stand.

directed sentiment, maybe something else is: hurt feelings or disappointment,[79] or just a bare complaint—a complaint to which I have no justified response.

In this minimal sense, I claim that where I am *not* entitled to resent, he is. He can justify his resentment (or hurt feelings or complaint) to me; I cannot do so to him. We can cache this out in a number of different ways.[80] We might think that his forgiveness eliminates a bipolar relation in virtue of which his sentiment is rendered fitting; that he eliminates *reasons* to resent by way of his forgiveness; or that his forgiveness changes how we can justify our emotional responses to one another (whereas before he could resent, I can know cite his forgiveness as a basis for complaint about ongoing resentment).

In the example of a lie between intimate partners, I have supposed that in forgiving, Vinay is attempting to restore his marriage. He is waiving entitlements he has as a means to that end: both in eliminating the norms that are corrosive to intimacy (norms entitling Vinay to resentment, distrust, exclusion, repeated confrontation, etc.), and in bringing about a change in his attitudes via the accompanying shift in normative judgments. Forgiveness was a tool to his end: the re-establishment of the old relationship. Many sentimentalists have claimed that "the teleology of forgiveness is reconciliation—restoration or maintenance of a relationship" (Roberts, 1995).[81] But while some cases, like that of Vinay, do aim at reconciliation, that is not by any means the *aim* or *end* of forgiveness as such.

In the first place, forgiveness can take place in a relationship which is in no way worth restoring, like that of an abused child's relationship to her parent. (Here is a parallel to the South African case, where there is no prior political relationship worth restoring.) Moreover, we can forgive while at the same time fundamentally changing the terms of a relationship. Vinay might well forgive Lionel while maintaining a distance that wasn't present before. He might go so far as to divorce Lionel altogether. But there still remains all the difference in the world between versions of these scenarios in which forgiveness is and is not offered: contrast exes (ex-spouses, friends, etc) who continue to relate to one another as *wrongdoer and wronged* as opposed to just as strangers or cordial acquaintances *who*

[79] CITE PEOLPE

[80] XXXX

[81] Cf. Walker, who sees the restoration of relationships as an essential, but not necessary, feature of (a pluralist account of) forgiveness (2006).

have forgiven one another.[82] Vinay might well waive many of his entitlements—to bringing up the wrong, to public condemnation, to ongoing resentment and anger—without restoring a relationship. A relationship is *more* than the absence of those entitlements; so while forgiving is necessary for restoring a relationship, it is not sufficient; nor is it worth constraining our understanding of forgiveness's power to shape the normative landscape by seeing it as essentially restorative. That forgiveness without restoration is possible is essential.

The key is to see that forgiveness here is a kind of tool. Waiving various entitlements might well be put in service of restoration or of finding some *new* form of relation. Wrongdoing violates the terms that define who we are to one another ("but *partners* don't lie like that") and changes those terms—it changes who we are to one another. Forgiveness is a tool for reshaping the norms that define our relation; but it is not a tool essentially aimed at any one outcome. And as in the political case, it should not be seen as enjoying some kind of default status as a virtue or a good. Sometimes it is the tool that is called for; sometimes it isn't. It all depends on what forms of relationships are available in the wake of wrongdoing, what relationships we should establish, and whether entitlement waivers are the right means to that end.

Summing up what has come in the past few sections, the normative powers view of forgiveness makes sense of the *role* forgiveness plays in interpersonal life. Our relationships are central, and the norms that constitute our relationships are shaped *by wrongdoing* in two ways: by normalizing wrongful behavior and by generating a slew of entitlements. Forgiveness is a tool to cordone off the normative upshot of wrongdoing; it drops the wrong as a *basis* for ongoing relations by waiving the entitlements to hold the past wrong against the wrongdoer.

3.5 Forgiveness without Resentment

The normative powers view fits into the broader picture of wrongdoing and relationships that I've sketched above. But it also enjoys more quotidian advantages to sentimentalist accounts. First, it can better accommodate the range of occasions for forgiveness, including those where resentment does not play a part. A view on which forgiveness is some-

[82] Cf. Strabbing (2020).

thing like giving up one's resentment requires that the forgive *have resented* in the first place (Griswold, 2007). But one need not have resented (or felt any negative emotion) in order to forgive. Consider the following:

> You Just Don't Feel It An old friend from high school calls you to apologize; unbeknown to you, he had mocked you regularly behind your back to your mutual friends. You take this seriously; but as a matter of psychological fact you feel no resentment or anger.
>
> Small Infractions It's five minutes past the start time of a student meeting; your student runs in, saying "I'm so sorry I'm late".

You Just Don't Feel It is adapted from Roberts (1995), who maintains that forgiveness requires having and then giving up resentment but dismisses it as a "non-standard case," and so no threat to a sentimentalist account. But there is an important difference between a version of the case in which you do or do not extend forgiveness. We can imagine two ways the story might go. Your friend might ask "well, how do you feel about this? Are you angry?" You respond, "no. I'm not, although it was a pretty awful thing to do." Now imagine he asks "so, you forgive me then?" It seems like there is all the difference in the world between saying something like "yes; let's put this behind us" and "no; I may not be angry, but no, I don't forgive you." And it would be natural to cash out the latter as something like holding on to the entitlement one has *to be* resentful or angry, even one is not in fact. The actual presence of resentment matters; but so, too, does the mere fact of being entitled to it. And that importance is elided by views that are interested only in the presence or withdrawal of an actual sentiment; views that cannot make sense of the contrast between these two possible versions of the case.

Where You Just Don't Feel It is a case in which the relevant sentiment is warranted but not present, Small Infractions is a case in which resentment or something like it would be overblown. Such small infractions are commonplace, and in response to such occasions something akin to forgiveness in more serious cases seems both possible. In responses to such small infractions, the wrongdoer can apologize (or not); and we can see a contrast between the wronged party saying something like "oh don't worry about it, it's nothing,"[83] and offering a moderate moderate reprimand "it's

[83] On which, see White (2025a).

important that you not be late again; please keep to our agreed upon schedule." The former speech seems to express something that even a sentimentalist should concede is a lot *like* forgiveness: it is a response to an infraction, made all the more appropriate by something like an apology, in which the wronged party *let's go of something* to which they were entitled by the fact of the wrong.[84] But sentimentalists either have to reject it as a case of forgiveness proper or treat it as somehow deviant.

In their defense, they might appeal to the fact that saying something like "that's OK, I forgive you" in response to a minor infraction seems itself overblown, suggesting that one took the wrong far too seriously. But while the English words "I forgive you" might seem overblown, other paradigmatic expressions of forgiveness "that's alright," "I appreciate you saying so! but no worries," do seem apt. Moreover, we can see as similarity with other exercises of normative powers, like promising or consenting, where actually saying the English words "I promise" or "I consent" can seem overblown or overly formal even when that is exactly what is happening. Suppose you ask to borrow my pen to take notes during a seminar; my saying "sure thing!" or just handing you then pencil constitutes[85] my consent: I have waived a right to my property that, in the absence of my consent, would make your taking the pen wrong (albeit a small wrong!). But it would seem weird and overblown to actually say "I consent to your use of my pen," or even just "I consent." That doesn't mean the same kind of normative phenomenon takes place here as in more serious cases of consent.

Nor would it due to dismiss cases like Small Infraction as unimportant cases. Such minor wrongs are central to our lives, in a way that is often under appreciated. We—or at least most of us—make such minor mistakes all the time. Acknowledgment of such infractions *as infractions*—as violations of the *contingent* norms that govern us—is important to upkeep and maintain norms that might otherwise slowly fade away. Imagine, for instance, not saying anything to your student after she's late for her 20th meeting with you; at that point, you'd have lost the standing to complain! Yours would not be a relationship in which strict punctuality is required—and while that might be reset, it would take some kind of effort, e.g., calling out the problem and asserting it as such. The *special* reasons and obligations we have—those that are the a product of the relationships we

[84] Further evidence: it would be inappropriate to say "don't worry about it" and then bring it up later.
[85] Or just communicates, depending on your metaphysics.

craft—need tending to. And their violation has an effect. One way of attending to them and reinforcing them in light of violations would be responding in the (small) ways made appropriate by the wrong: calling the person out, softly rebuking them, etc. Forgiveness stands as an alternative that can cordon off the ripples of these small wrongdoings.

3.6 Fine-Grained Forgiveness

The final advantage over sentimentalist approaches is the normative powers view's ability to make sense of the fine-grained agency we can exercise in forgiving. As in the political case, interpersonal forgiveness can be both conditional and limited in scope. Consider:

> After Infidelity A cheated-on spouse says "I forgive you, *conditional* on your never speaking with her again. And while you don't need to sleep on the couch, don't think things are back to normal. You'll need to share your phone password with me."

Cases like this one are commonplace.[86] Two elements are worth highlighting: forgiveness can be *conditional* in extending only insofar as some condition is met: I will forgive you *only if* …. For that matter, sufficiency conditions also seem possible: I'll forgive you if you apologize. Moreover, forgiveness can involve waiving some but not all of the entitlements generated by wrongdoing: here, the spouse might well waive an entitlement to exclude his spouse from his life without wholly waiving the entitlement to distrust, etc. All this makes good sense on a normative powers view. That our exercise of normative powers can include conditions or be limited in scope is familiar: "I promise to help only if you…," "I consent only to your removing my appendix, not to any other bodily invasion."

A sentimentalist approach has a more awkward time handling cases like these. We don't exercise this kind of fine-grained control over our sentiments. Some sentimentalists make space for a kind of conditionality, most prominently thinking forgiveness can be (or even essentially is) conditional on something like an apology (perhaps with other things besides).[87] But such conditionality is (by design) constrained: forgiveness on such pictures can be (or essentially is) conditional on the considerations that could make resentment less fitting (or make its withdrawal apt). The conditions, on a sentimentalist

[86] Cf. Walker (2006); Wolterstorff (2011) on partial forgiveness.

[87] Cite folks. G the most extreme.

view, will be bound to the fittingness conditions of resentment. How else could one's not-resenting be conditional on it? But this is too narrow a conception of the agency we can exercise over forgiveness. The spouse in the above case isn't just reporting the conditions under which her resentment will not longer be appropriate; she is *setting* the terms and morevoer making clear the respects in which she continues to hold her spouse to account.[88]

The objection against sentimentalism is not so much an extensional one; maybe they can accomodate these cases. It is one about fitting the explananda to the theory. We don't excercise fine-grained control over our sentiments; we do over entitlements; inasmuch as we can forgive fine-grainedly (conditionally and partially), a normative powers view is a better fit.

3.7 Why Apology?

Thus far, I have given very little attention to *apology*. On some views necessary.[89] On other views a good reason to apologize.[90] I think it is something that makes forgiveness *less risky* in all the same ways that truth commissions did in the political case. Forgiveness presupposes that old norms were violate. But in not taking a strong stand, one nevertheless runs the risk that wrongdoers will persist. The parallel to the political, here, is tight.

Apology mitigates those risks in the same way truth comissionts do. They ensure everyone is on the same page—they are something that can be accepted or rejected by the victim. And a sincere, and accepted, apology, enshrines a kind of a shared understanding of the norms at issue. That said, apologies are not *necessary*, either metaphysically (as a condition of what it is to forgive)[91] or normatively (as a condition on forgiving correctly).[93]. Indeed, forgiveness sometimes *precedes* apology and inspires it.[94]

[88] cf. Warmke (2013).
[89] Corlett (2006); Griswold (2007); Wolterstorff (2011) (but griswold complicated).
[90] Hieronymi (2001) CITE MANY OTHERS. Bell's cool view (2012).
[91] [92]
[93] Heironymi; cf. Fricker and respondents
[94] Not to mention forgiveness that preceeds the wrongdoing itself, as in Cornell (2017).

3.8 An Objection: I claim you can forgive while resenting

On this view, one can truly said to have *forgiven* another while still remaining furious. Isn't this a decisive objection to the view? The possibility of having forgiven while remaining highly resentful seems to run against the basic intuitive desiderata of a theory of forgiveness.[95] Sentimentalists, by contrast, have a view which will (of course) deliver the right result. The objection, then, is that whatever other arguments I've made in its favor, a normative powers view just gets the phenomenon wrong. The phenomenon *essentially* involves a change in moral sentiment, and a view which treats affective change as the rational *consequence* of forgiveness is therein missing the point.

My first response is to point to all the cases that don't involve resentment. But set that aside—let's focus only on the ones that do. Is the objector right to complain I have relegated sentimental shifts too far to the periperphery of the account?

One possible response is to build some kind of sentimental conditions *back* into the view.[96] Maybe the power can only be felicitously exercised in interpersonal contexts after one's resentment has dissipated. One cannot, as it were, waive an entitlement one is *currently using*—there is something off about that. Compare a more classic case of normative powers that might have a similar structure: suppose you consent to my entering a large swath of land you own; I find myself in the middle of it, at least an hour walk to its border. You call me, a bit agitated, and I can see that you are upset that I am on your land, your earlier consent notwithstanding. So I *promise* to get off it within five minutes even though *both of us* know full well it is not possible for me to do so. Have I thereby changed the normative landscape and obligated myself? Maybe not—maybe committing myself in this way is not possible because I committed myself to something that wouldn't happen. I am *currently using* the privilege I have to walk on your land—that normative relation between us is *tied up* as it were. For me to *give it up* while in use might be impossible. Or consider a a twist on the case: suppose that your consent to my trespass is *revocable*, you can take it back whenever you'd like and regain your entitlement against me that I not be on your property. Again, I'm an hour away from the property line; having consented to

[95] Even Butler, who holds forgiveness involves only giving up *excess* resentment and is consistent with remaining somewhat angry, would balk at the possibility that one can *have forgiven* without moderating one's resentment at all (1726/2017). See also Cherry (2019; 2023).

[96] Owens (2014); Pettigrove (2012).

me being there, can you revoke that consent effective immdeiately? Maybe not. Maybe you cannot, as it were, pull the normative rug from under me while I'm standing on it.

Interpersonally forgiving while still fully resentful might be a lot like that. I am only *justified* in *resenting you* because I have the entitlement. In resenting you, I am standing on that entitlement—it's tied up. I can't give it up while still standing on it, there is something premature about that. This would be a view that sees the inability to pull the rug from under oneself as *bound up* the very nature of the normative power at issue; and in so doing, it would secure the sentimentalist desideratum that you cannot forgive while still resentful.

I think there really is something to this development of a normative powers view of forgiveness;[97] on this picture, forgiveness is like, having gotten of your land, giving up my right to come back. It is still a *powers*-based view—the presence of validity conditions on the exercise of the power doesn't change the basic metaphysics *or* the reasons to do it. Moreover, unlike sentimentalist views, this picture does not require resentment have been present in the first place—a *change* of heart isn't necessary; forgiveness only requires a change of heart inasmuch as one is already resenting.

But I think this view is too concessive as it robs us of the agency we have in forgiving others. We are not, I submit, hostage to present sentiment. What the political case illustrates so vividly is that the normative architecture of our relationships is *up to us*. How we *feel* in the wake of wrongdoing may be beyond our control; but what is in decidedly *ours to say* is how we *should* feel, act, and relate towards others. How might we respond to the worry about an still-resentful forgiver on this less concessive approach?

Let me open by conceding to the sentimentalist that there is something, call it "heartfelt forgiveness" which requires a change of heart.[98] But on the strength of the above arguments, we should also allow there is something else—call it "NP" (normative power) so as not to beg any questions—that one can do just by telling another person one forgives them. The objector, however, still insists that *forgiveness* just is heartfelt forgiveness, whereas I think forgiveness just is NP. But on much we agree. We can agree that there is something a resentful person can do which shifts the norms around his resentment (NP); there is a process of bringing one's feelings into line with the newly shifted norms—an

[97] It might be an advantage vis-a-vis Bennett's bc his involves commitment.
[98] drawing on new Darwall!

often very messy, time-consuming process; and there is the completion of that process. Our views are in a certain sense symmetrical. The objector can claim that NP is the way of committing to the process that results in forgiveness; I can claim that heartfelt forgiveness is the fulfillment of the normative changes one engenders in forgiving. And we can both agree that the middle stage—the work of heartfelt change—is of the utmost importance. The objector can point to the intuition that an angry person hasn't *really* forgiven; but I can point to the intelligibility (and commonality) of an expression like the following: "I really have forgiven you—I meant what I said and you don't need to carry this burden any longer; but it will still take me some time to get over the feelings I'm carrying. I ask you to be patient with me, and I'm sorry that I lashed out."

In light of all that, I don't really see any special reason to maintain that heartfelt forgiveness—what I think of as the heart's fulfillment of the commitments[99] one makes in forgiving—should be given pride of place as what *forgiveness proper* really amounts to.

None of this is to say that there isn't something *off* about forgiving while maintaining one's anger. But the diagnosis here is normative. To bring this out, consider two versions of a still-resentful forgiver. One is the speaker of that above sentence—someone who currently feels resentment but, having forgiven, makes clear she is working on it. The second is someone who gives up his entitlement but intransigently and unapologetically holds fast to his forgiveness. It is tempting to think the latter didn't *really* mean what he said—maybe he didn't really sincerely forgive. But that's consistent with thinking that forgiveness is a power, albeit once that can be exercised insincerely and (thereby) inappropriately.

4 Conclusion: Forgiveness and Agency

The key upshot: forgiveness is a manifestation of our *agency* over wrongdoing. It is a way of shaping who we are to others.

[99] Commitments by way of waiving entiltements to act, feel, and relate in ways that are otherwise—and are once again—unjustified.

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