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Putting the Past into Perspective. Remembering, Reappraising, and Forgiving*

Christopher Jude McCarroll and Roy Dings

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Abstract | The process of forgiving seems to require that a person can remember a specific moment in their personal past in which they were harmed in some way. Forgiving, then, often requires episodic memory, which may be understood as memory of events or experiences in one's personal past. What is it that grounds acts of forgiveness? One of the most prominent ideas is that, fundamentally, forgiveness involves a change in emotion; it requires that negative emotions associated with the event are abandoned, withdrawn or overcome. In this paper, we outline one way in which the emotion and meaning of past events may be modulated. In particular, we suggest that by thinking more abstractly about an event we can shift our emotional response to it. We outline one way in which this form of more abstract thinking, which can help us distance ourselves from the negative emotion associated with a past wrongdoing, can show up in memory. We propose that emotionally distant memories, or memories in which the emotional content has undergone some change, may often be recalled from an observer perspective, in which the individual recalls the event from an external or detached point of view. Recalling a past wrongdoing from an observer memory may help put it into perspective and afford the emotional distancing required to facilitate forgiveness.

Keywords | Construal Level Theory; emotions; forgiveness; memory; observer perspective

Poner el pasado en perspectiva: recordar, reconsiderar y perdonar

Resumen | El proceso de perdonar aparentemente requiere que la persona pueda recordar un momento específico de su pasado durante el cual fue lastimada. Perdonar, entonces, precisa de una memoria episódica, entendida como el recuerdo de eventos o experiencias en el pasado personal de alguien. ¿Qué es lo que fundamenta los actos de perdón? Al respecto, una de las ideas que más se destaca es que, en esencia, el perdón implica un cambio en las emociones; esto es, abandonar, apartar o superar las emociones negativas relacionadas con el evento. En este artículo esbozamos una forma en la

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que la emoción y el significado de los eventos pasados lograrían regularse. En específico, proponemos que, al pensar de manera más abstracta sobre un evento, es posible modificar nuestra respuesta emocional hacia este. Así, explicamos la manera como una forma más abstracta de pensar, que nos ayude a establecer una distancia con la emoción negativa asociada a un daño en el pasado, puede manifestarse en la memoria. Planteamos que los recuerdos emocionalmente lejanos, o aquellos en los que el contenido emocional ha experimentado algún cambio, a menudo son rememorados desde el ángulo del observador, de modo que el individuo recuerda el evento desde un punto de vista externo e imparcial. Recordar un perjuicio del pasado a partir de la memoria del observador contribuiría a poner el evento en perspectiva y propiciar el distanciamiento emocional necesario para permitir el perdón.

Palabras clave | emociones; memoria; perdón; perspectiva del observador; teoría del nivel de representación

Colocando o passado em perspectiva: lembrar, reconsiderar e perdoar

Resumo | O processo de perdão aparentemente exige que a pessoa seja capaz de se lembrar de um momento específico em seu passado durante o qual foi magoada. O perdão, portanto, requer memória episódica, entendida como a lembrança de eventos ou experiências do passado pessoal de alguém. O que fundamenta os atos de perdão? A esse respeito, uma das ideias mais proeminentes é que, em essência, o perdão envolve uma mudança nas emoções, ou seja, abandonar, deixar de lado ou superar as emoções negativas relacionadas ao evento. Neste artigo, esboçamos uma maneira pela qual a emoção e o significado de eventos passados poderiam ser regulados. Especificamente, propomos que, ao pensar de forma mais abstrata sobre um evento, é possível modificar nossa resposta emocional a ele. Assim, explicamos como uma forma mais abstrata de pensar, que nos ajuda a estabelecer distância da emoção negativa associada a um dano passado, pode se manifestar na memória. Argumentamos que as lembranças emocionalmente distantes ou aquelas em que o conteúdo emocional sofreu alguma mudança geralmente são lembradas do ângulo do observador, do qual o indivíduo se lembra de um ponto de vista externo e imparcial. A lembrança de uma mágoa do passado a partir da memória do observador ajudaria a colocar o evento em perspectiva e proporcionaria o distanciamiento emocional necessário para permitir o perdão.

Palavras-chave | emoções; memória; perdão; perspectiva do observador; teoria do nível de representação

...the heart's memory eliminates the bad and magnifies the good, and [...] thanks to this artifice we manage to endure the burden of the past.

—Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

Introduction

Forgive and forget. This is a common refrain. It seems to suggest that forgiveness is somehow linked to the *lack* of memory, to forgetting a past event in which one was harmed. Yet forgiveness and forgetting can come apart. It is possible to forgive someone without forgetting the wrong done, and to forget the wrong done without forgiving it. Indeed, in typical cases, the very act of forgiving seems to *presuppose* memory: without memory we simply won't have the evidence for a wrongdoing, and hence no way in which we can engage in

an act of forgiveness.¹ Often, without memory, there would be no harm remembered, and hence nothing upon which to ground our forgiveness.² As Jeffrey Blustein notes,

forgiveness is not genuine forgiveness...if it merely results from forgetting the wrong that was done: in forgiving, one must retain a memory of what was done and continue to hold the original negative objection to the offense or wrong action. (2010, 583)³

The process of forgiving seems to require that individuals are able to remember a specific, harmful, moment in their personal past. Forgiving, then, requires episodic memory, which may be understood as memory for events or experiences in one's personal past (Tulving 1985; Michaelian 2016).

If forgiving involves memory, and if memory involves the reconstruction of past perceptual experiences, such that we retain evidence of the wrongdoing, what is it that grounds acts of forgiveness? One of the most prominent ideas is that, fundamentally, forgiveness involves a change in emotion. According to this approach, forgiveness "is primarily a matter of how I feel about you (not how I treat you)" (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 21; Murphy 2003).⁴ Provided that suffering a wrongdoing typically involves negative emotions or affect that is directed toward the event or the person that inflicted the injury, emotion-based accounts characterise forgiveness as negative emotions associated with the event having been abandoned, withdrawn or overcome:

to forgive is, roughly, to forbear or withdraw resentment. (Darwall 2006, 72)

the attitude of forgiveness is characterized by the presence of good will and by the lack of personal resentment for the injury. (Moore 1989, 184)

[to] forgive someone for having wronged one is to abandon all negative feelings based on the episode in question. (Richards 1988, 79)

Within the class of emotion-based accounts there are differences regarding (i) what theorists take to be the specific emotion or emotions that are integral to forgiveness and (ii) what we must do with these negative emotions—how we deal with them or overcome them—in order to forgive (Hughes and Warmke 2022). Turning to the question of the negative emotions that are inherent to forgiveness, the "set of emotions that victims might possess in response to being wronged by another agent...form a large and diverse landscape" (Hughes and Warmke 2022). Nonetheless, the emotions of resentment and anger feature prominently in many accounts (cf. Blustein 2014). We don't take a stand on the particular emotion or emotions that are involved in experiences of being wronged, or on which of them must be overcome in order to forgive; we simply assume that some negative emotions (e.g., anger, resentment) must be confronted in order to forgive.⁵ Instead, our focus is on the second issue. We look

1 See Noreen, Raynette, and MacLeod (2014) for an interesting discussion of the connections between forgiving and forgetting.

2 In this article we are mostly concerned with episodic memory and instances of forgiveness that involve an episode of wrongdoing in one's personal past. There may be difficult cases that do not rely so obviously on episodic memory. It seems that we might be able to forgive those who harmed us even though the wrongdoing wasn't part of our episodic autobiography. Nonetheless, even in these cases of indirect harming, we may remember events in our personal past in which the wrongdoing, even if directed at another person and not directly at us, impacted our lives. For the purposes of this paper, we leave these interesting issues aside to concentrate on episodes of wrongdoing in one individual's personal past.

3 Blustein (2014) in fact argues that forgiveness actually requires a kind of emotional change that is underpinned by a particular form of forgetting. We come back to this view in Section 2.

4 Other views include, for example, punishment-forbearance accounts, and reconciliation-based models of forgiveness. For a nice summary, see Hughes and Warmke (2022).

5 See Hughes and Warmke (2022) for a summary of various ways in which the negative emotion implicated in forgiving a wrongdoing may be characterised.

at a particular way in which we might deal with the negative emotions (whatever they might be) associated with a past wrongdoing in order to forgive.

To this end, we first outline some of the ways in which forgiveness is related to overcoming negative affect, and how this is achieved. We focus, in particular, on an account that suggests that forgiveness is underpinned by a process of emotional distancing (Amaya 2019). We then supplement this model by drawing on a way of thinking about cognition, and the ways in which events may be represented mentally, that has the potential to help explain how we might gain emotional distance. Specifically, by thinking more abstractly about an event we can shift our emotional response to it. Finally, we outline one way in which this form of more abstract thinking, which can help us distance ourselves from the negative emotion associated with a past wrongdoing, may show up in memory. We propose that emotionally distant memories, or memories in which the emotional content has undergone some change, may frequently be recalled from an observer perspective, in which the event is recalled from the outside, from an external or detached point of view. Recalling a past wrongdoing from an observer memory may help put it into perspective and afford the emotional distancing required to facilitate forgiveness.⁶

1. Forgiveness and Emotional Distancing

Forgiveness is often seen as an act in which we somehow deal with negative emotions that are associated with a past injustice. When we are harmed or wronged in some way, we may feel a range of negative emotions: hurt, fear, anger, sadness, resentment, spite, ill-will. Forgiveness, then, will involve dealing with these negative emotions in some way. Various suggestions have in fact been made about what precisely is involved in dealing with such negative affect. Some authors, for example, think that we need to *overcome* resentment, and other emotions (Murphy 2003; Hughes and Warmke 2022), others think that we need to *abandon* negative emotion (Richards 1988, 184), while others still think that forgiveness involves *letting go* of the resentment a person feels about being wronged (Griswold 2007, 40). What, precisely, though, are the mechanisms through which we make alterations to the affect associated with past injustice? How is it that we can change the emotions and hence engage in an act of forgiveness?

Emotion theories of forgiveness typically hold that there are at least two conditions that must be met in the alteration of an individual's emotions. First, the emotions must be overcome for certain motivational reasons, which might be moral in character (Murphy 2003). Luckily, eliminating resentment as if by a bump on the head is not the right kind of process, and nor is the case where "your resentment simply withered away over the years via a process outside of your control or ken" (Hughes and Warmke 2022). Second, it is believed that the process of overcoming resentment must involve some kind of effort on behalf of the forgiver (Adams 1991). Because it is typically thought to be a virtuous act, the process of forgiveness must unfold in the right way, for the right reasons (Roberts 1995).

In terms of the specific mechanisms of overcoming resentment, there are a number of ways of understanding how the affective change that underpins forgiving comes about. For example, adopting an empathic understanding of the wrongdoer's point of view may lead one to experience compassion or pity, helping override resentment (Novitz 1998). Or, forgiveness may involve a change in *doxastic attitude*: we revise our judgment of the person or wrongdoing (Hieronymi 2001). On this view, resentment is overcome because the judgment that rationally supports the negative emotion is revised, with the conclusion that the wrongdoer's past action is no longer a present threat.

6 As we show in Section 3, however, the picture is not so straightforward. In some cases, observer perspectives may lead to more ruminative thoughts and negative affect.

Another model suggests that in order to forgive, we don't need to revise our judgment about the person who committed the offence. To forgive, we need to distance ourselves from the emotions of the remembered wrongdoing: we modify the emotional rather than the cognitive content of the memories it provokes (Amaya 2019). We take Amaya's model as an interesting focal point. As discussed below, this approach recognises the inherently social nature both of emotions and forgiveness, while at the same time offering a way of thinking about emotion that need not involve revising one's judgement about the past. While Amaya is clear that he is not outlining the process of forgiveness in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, we think that his account has problems. Forgiveness, on his view, is about what happens in the present to change our emotions. We suggest that Amaya's account needs to be complemented by another, that recognises that we also need to reappraise the past event. We want to examine the relation between remembering and forgiving. First, we outline Amaya's view, and show where we think it is lacking. We then supplement it with an account of a way in which the content of memory may be reappraised to afford the kind of emotional distancing that seems to underpin forgiveness.⁷

According to Amaya, acts of forgiveness are underpinned by a form of emotional distancing, which may be understood as a process of motivational change:

When one forgives a person for having done something wrong one takes distance from the blaming emotions previously developed as a response to the wrongdoing. One does not forget the wrongdoing, or how one felt about it. One does not cease to believe either that the person did wrong or that one had reason to feel as one did. Still, as one forgives, the emotional aspect involved in thinking about the episode (the anger, resentment, etc.) changes in significant respects. (Amaya 2019, 8)

Crucially, for Amaya, emotions in general, including blaming emotions such as resentment, play a motivational role; emotions dispose us to act in certain ways, seek certain goals, and entertain certain thoughts: “[t]o resent someone, to feel angry at her, to be disappointed at what she did, insofar as these emotions embody attitudes of blame, make sense only to the extent that they motivate one in some way or another” (2019, 12).

When one distances oneself from a blaming emotion, one ceases to be in the motivational state associated with that emotion. This leads to the revision of the behaviour, and to dispositions to behave that are associated with that particular emotion. Forgiveness, then, involves this kind of emotional distancing and motivational change. Importantly, “the change can happen independently of there being any affective alteration in oneself or in how one thinks about the object. The motivational change, in other words, need not require a change in affect or appraisal” (Amaya 2019, 12). One can continue to feel that one was wronged, still feel anger or chagrin, or that the wrongdoer is a bad person, and yet still forgive. Nonetheless, it is not the case that any kind of emotional distancing suffices. If a person's emotions simply dissipate over time, then, Amaya recognises, this would not count as an appropriate form of emotional distancing capable of underpinning acts of forgiveness. Rather, forgiveness requires a rational change to one's emotions.

If forgiveness is to be thought of as a rational act, theorists frequently argue that it requires a change in a person's judgment (e.g., Hieronymi 2001). For Amaya, this is a mistake: one that lies in thinking that overcoming a blaming emotion is something that the individual does alone, such that overcoming resentment, say, is an inherently private thing. Yet,

⁷ According to another model, forgiving crucially involves a form of forgetting: we forget details about the past wrongdoing and this leads to a change in emotion (Blustein 2014). These ways of explaining the mechanisms of forgetting through emotional change focus broadly on the cognitive aspects of the phenomenon. We come back to Blustein's account below.

Amaya insists that when we think of emotions as essentially motivational, this affords the possibility for thinking of emotional change as a public or social event (Amaya 2019). A change in judgment about a wrongdoer or wrongdoing may be one way in which an individual revises their emotional states, but Amaya outlines a new and important way that this affective change can come about. Again, the key is to emphasise the interpersonal nature of emotions and of acts of forgiveness. According to Amaya, the way you (the wrongdoer) respond to my blaming emotions affords the opportunity of a rational change of these blaming emotions. I can overcome my resentment, not through any change in how I judge you or think differently about the past event but, rather, in response to the way you react to my hurt and resentment: “your feeling guilty, your resolve not to wrong me again, your desire that things had been different, and so on, are potentially, in and of themselves, reasons to forgive you” (Amaya 2019, 18). It is this interpersonal negotiation of emotions, rather than a change in judgment, that leads to forgiveness: “what often justifies a change of heart on my part, what makes it intelligible, is the way you respond to the emotions of blame I developed because of your wrongdoing” (Amaya 2019, 19).

There is much to like about Amaya’s account. We think that emphasising the interpersonal dimension of emotional change is important. However, there also appears to be an important gap in the explanation this emotional and motivational model provides of certain acts of forgiveness. We think that Amaya’s account is too *present*-focused: it centres on how the wrongdoer reacts in the present to one’s current blaming emotions. We don’t deny that such an affective change can occur in this way, as a response to the wrongdoer’s reactions to the victim’s blaming emotions. But we suggest that we also need to account for the way in which the past wrongdoing figures differently in one’s thoughts. Perhaps present reactions play a role in modulating the emotions one feels about a past event, but if one remembers the event in the *same* way, the same emotions are likely to arise as current emotional responses to the past event (Debus 2007; Trakas 2021; Arcangeli and Dokic 2018). Indeed, the account that we develop later in the paper may be seen as complementing and supplementing Amaya’s, and, as we show below (see footnote 16), his account complements our own. Amaya highlights the need for emotional distancing and he is aware that somehow that exercise of distancing must last, for it is not necessary to undergo the whole process of forgiveness anew every time one remembers or thinks about the wrongdoing. Our account seeks to flesh out a potential mechanism for the perdurance of this affective distancing.

Amaya is careful to stress that he is not articulating necessary and/or sufficient conditions for acts of forgiveness. Nonetheless, there appear to be cases of forgiveness in which the interpersonal aspect he emphasises is absent. This points to gaps in his account of the way in which emotional distancing can come about. Think of absent wrongdoers. Although the view is not universally accepted, some theorists think that it is possible to forgive wrongdoers who have died *before* repenting or showing appropriate reactions to our blaming emotions (Bell 2019; Griswold 2007). In such cases, there might be no opportunity to respond to the reactions of a wrongdoer and hence no *present* reason for overcoming resentment. The same is true of people who are unrepentant of their wrongs. The wrongdoer may still be present—an important figure even—in our lives, but they are unforthcoming in terms of the responses we (as victims) expect. They do not show the appropriate guilt or remorse that would prompt us to distance ourselves from our own negative blaming emotions. In this sense, we have no reasons to forgive.

Is this a problem? Perhaps we shouldn’t forgive the dead, or the unrepentant. Perhaps holding onto resentment and withholding forgiveness in these cases is rational or the most appropriate response. One worry about this is that it precludes the kind of unilateral forgiveness that many theorists think is important (Butler 1726/1846; Cowley 2000). On some views, we can and perhaps *should* overcome resentment and forgive the wrongdoer, even in those cases where repentance is not possible or forthcoming. Resentment may

distort how we think and act in the world, not only toward the person who inflicted the harm, but to other people. It may grow and become displaced (Enright 2012). An act of forgiveness, and the overcoming of resentment and anger that this involves, may have benefits for the victim. The key point—and this resonates with Amaya’s account—is that resentment is an emotion with a motivational element. Overcoming resentment, and finding ourselves in a new emotional state, may have important behavioural and psychological benefits (Enright 2012). Forgiveness and emotional distancing from one’s negative blaming emotions may be important even if we do not have present reasons for adopting these attitudes, in the form of reactions on the part of the wrongdoer to effect this affective shift.

Even if we reject the view that there may be genuine forgiveness without an interpersonal dimension, there also appear to be cases in which the interpersonal element may be present, but forgiveness is not forthcoming: cases in which the wrongdoer does repent, and shows the appropriate responses to our blaming emotions—responses that would give us reason to forgive—and yet we *fail* to do so. We can fail to forgive people in whom we see the relevant remorse and desire to make amends. Scenarios of this kind might unfold in two different ways. It might be that we simply don’t overcome our resentment even if you react in the appropriate way to our blaming emotions. Alternatively, I may overcome my resentment in response to your reactions to my blaming emotions, but this response is short-lived, and as soon as I remember the past event the negative emotions return. As Blustein notes, “a person may be able to disregard an injury for a short while, but be repeatedly and irresistibly drawn back to thinking about it” (2014, 114). Indeed, forgiveness seems more like a temporally extended process, where a person oscillates between feeling they can forgive and doubting the urge. Memory clearly plays a pivotal role in this dynamic. Crucially, we need to change the way we think about the *past* event, such that “the memories of being wronged must not reignite angry emotions if forgiveness is to be sustained” (Blustein 2014, 71).

Indeed, if our emotions are open to being changed by the reactions of others, we might also react to another person, other than the wrongdoer, in the present. Someone else—another victim of the same injustice, say—might convince me that, despite the wrongdoer’s guilt and repentance, I should not forgive him. I might witness the hurt and pain that this fellow victim is still suffering and, despite the wrongdoer’s guilt, remorse, or other appropriate feeling, fail to distance myself from my negative blaming emotions. Again, in this situation, it may be that the wrongdoer displays the appropriate reactions but that they are (perhaps appropriately) overridden by what someone else says. It is possible that negative blaming emotions will not dissipate unless I think about the actual past wrongdoing somewhat differently.⁸

Even if our negative emotions in response to an injustice may be modulated by the present reactions of others, to choose to forgive seems to require us to think differently about the past. Our negative emotions, such as anger and resentment, may indeed be modified in the present, but they are emotions that are at least partially past-directed. We need to reappraise the emotions that we feel toward a *past* wrongdoing, and hence to think differently about the remembered event. Even though we may not need to *judge* the previous wrongdoing differently, thinking differently about the past may allow us to reappraise it emotionally and begin the process of forgiving.

8 It could be argued that forgiveness is (in part) a choice. It is something that we decide to do (DiBlasio 1998). Forgiveness is something that we choose to give. If we simply respond to the reactions of others to our blaming emotions, then it might be that we lose some form of agency or control over our process of forgiving.

2. Reappraising the Past

Acts of forgiveness may be understood to involve a process of dealing with and overcoming the negative emotions experienced in response to wrongdoing. As we saw earlier, dealing with the emotions associated with a wrongdoing requires episodically remembering the past harm. It is not the case—indeed it cannot be—that in order to forgive we need to (entirely) forget the past. However, it might be the case that we need to remember the past differently: “[n]either wrongdoing nor wrongdoer is necessarily [totally] forgotten by the wronged party because she has forgiven him. What does change, however, is *how* she remembers them” (Blustein 2014, 71, emphasis in original).

There are a number of ways in which an individual might think differently about the past event, some of which do not presuppose a change in the way they judge either the event or the wrongdoer. For Blustein, forgiveness depends on a way of remembering the past event such that its distressing emotional impact is lessened or dampened, and one does not ruminate on it (Blustein 2014, 100). In Blustein’s view, this emotional regulation is crucially linked to forgetting:

this lessening affects the remembrance of wrongdoing: all of these methods of emotion regulation inhibit memory retrieval to some degree...in this sense, one may need to forget in order to be able to forgive, to disengage sufficiently from the past so that one can move forward with one’s life without being dominated by memories of ill-treatment. (Blustein 2014, 100)

This emotion regulation that underpins forgiveness may involve attentional deployment or cognitive reappraisal. Both strategies are linked to forgetting, because “the techniques that diminish the intensity of negative emotions are the same techniques as those that enable one to more readily forget” (Blustein 2014, 114). In slogan form, Blustein’s view is “forget and (or so that you can) forgive” (2014, 114).

According to Blustein, attentional deployment,

encompasses various processes for deploying one’s attention to lessen the emotional impact of negative events, including (a) selectively diverting one’s attention from aspects of a situation that arouse negative emotions or from the immediate situation altogether and (b) focusing one’s attention on one’s memories, thoughts, and emotions so as to render them less overwhelming or frightening. (2014, 123)

The strategy of cognitive reappraisal is important for our purposes. On this understanding, emotion regulation occurs through cognitive reappraisal because “it involves revising the story one tells about these events in ways that alter their meaning and significance for the storyteller” (Blustein 2014, 126). There are ways of cognitively reappraising the past that facilitate forgetting without (genuine) forgiveness, however, so Blustein is careful to articulate that cognitive reappraisal must not only assist forgetting, but do so in a way that facilitates forgiveness. One aspect of this is that “it must not have the result that the offender is not or not as blameworthy for his actions after all” (2014, 126). We still judge that the wrongdoer and the past act were (morally) blameworthy, but we blunt the emotional impact of the past through emotion regulation that results in forgetting and a lack of rumination.

What we want to suggest, with Blustein, is that we need to change how we *think* about the *past* event. Even if, as Amaya suggests, the way in which a wrongdoer responds to our negative blaming emotions in the present is one way of distancing ourselves from this negative affect, it can’t be the whole story. If we think of the past event in the *same* way, we run the risk of reliving and reinstating the negative affect that makes forgiveness

difficult. We now want to focus on another potential way that one can change the emotions and meaning that are generated by past wrongdoings and moderate how they are experienced. We offer a new way of understanding the cognitive reappraisal that might help underpin the process of forgetting.

A potential strategy for cognitively reappraising a past event, which facilitates the type of emotional distancing that may be required for forgiveness, is to *construe* the event in a different way. According to Construal Level Theory (CLT), events may be thought about, represented, and understood, more abstractly (high-level construals), or in terms of low-level construals, that is, more concrete and incidental details of the events (Trope and Liberman 2003). Moreover, it seems that in their everyday lives, people often shift from concrete to abstract construals, depending on the goal or task at hand. Indeed, different construals have different characteristics. As Trope and Liberman put it:

Moving from a concrete representation of an object to a more abstract representation involves retaining central features and omitting features that by the very act of abstraction are deemed incidental. For example, by moving from representing an object as a “cellular phone” to representing it as “a communication device”, we omit information about size; moving from representing an activity as “playing ball” to representing it as “having fun”, we omit the ball. Concrete representations typically lend themselves to multiple abstractions. For example, a cellular phone could be construed also as a “small object”, and “playing ball” could be construed as “exercising”. (2010, 2)

High-level construals are thought to involve psychological distance, in the sense that the event thought about is more removed from the reference point of the self in the here-and-now involved in immediate experience (Trope and Liberman 2010). When a subject increases the psychological distance between an event and the here-and-now, the mental representation of the event, and the way we construe it and give meaning to it, becomes higher or more abstract and less concrete. Again, the goal or task at hand may create a preference for such a high-level construal. Trope and Liberman provide the following example:

[T]he higher level goal to contact a friend is more stable over time than the more concrete goal to send her an e-mail, because an Internet connection might be unavailable when one is actually trying to contact the friend. From a temporally distant perspective, it is therefore more useful to construe this action in terms of the high-level goal rather than the low-level goal. (2010, 3)

There are thought to be four forms of psychological distance: temporal, social, hypothetical, and spatial.⁹

While it is important to keep in mind that construal level and emotionality are conceptually independent (Fujita and Carnevale 2012), the way in which we construe an event (more abstractly or more concretely) does have an impact on our emotions: “[e]motions are generally felt less intense with increased psychological distance to the emotion-eliciting event. Conversely, when people experience intense emotions, they typically perceive the emotion-eliciting event to be psychologically proximate” (Ejército *et al.* 2018). This is especially true in the case of ‘basic’ emotions such as anger, which is typically thought to be one of the negative emotions that should be overcome in order to arrive at

9 Each of these forms of psychological distance (social, hypothetical, temporal spatial) have an effect on how we experience and interact with objects: “For example, on a rainy day, it matters whether an umbrella one notices belongs to a friend or to a stranger (social distance); in the jungle, it is important whether a tiger is real or imaginary (hypotheticality); in making a financial investment, it is important whether a recession is anticipated in the near or distant future (temporal distance), here or somewhere else (spatial distance)” (Trope and Liberman 2010, 445).

forgiveness.¹⁰ Further, when one thinks more abstractly about an event, one is likely to link it to its broader meaning, in terms of one's life story, and link it to high-level information such as personal values and attitudes (see, e.g., Eyal, Liberman, and Trope 2009).

What we want to suggest is that representing the event at a high level of abstraction may help decrease some of the negative emotions associated with it (e.g., anger), and also enable a person to revise the story they tell about these events in ways that alter their meaning and significance for the storyteller (William, Stein, and Galguera 2014; McCarroll 2019a; Dings and Newen 2023). Construing the past event in which one was wronged more abstractly may make it easier to fit the event into one's broader life story and also diminish the (concrete) emotions associated with it.

This idea of abstracting away from the concrete (emotional) details of the past event by construing the event more abstractly is a distinct strategy of emotional regulation, but one that nonetheless resonates with Blustein's ideas about overcoming anger and resentment. Part of the reason why forgiveness can be difficult to achieve is that,

in remembering the wrongs done to them persons put themselves in the shoes of their former selves and feel again what they felt before. By empathically projecting themselves into an earlier situation as it was experienced by their former selves, persons may relive those emotions to such a degree that they are unable to forgive. Forgiveness becomes possible when, without forgetting the wrongs done to them and without thinking their earlier emotional responses were unwarranted, they are able to adopt a critical stance toward these responses and consider whether they are still warranted, given their present view of things. (Blustein 2014, 77)¹¹

It is by adopting a more psychologically distanced standpoint (originating in the present, rather than reliving the past moment), and construing the event more abstractly, that one may take an evaluative stance that helps put the past, and one's emotional responses to a past wrongdoing, into perspective. The emotions felt about the past event may change by reappraising them from one's present, psychologically distant, point of view.

In fact, CLT has already been implicated in forgiveness. Research has suggested that the passage of time, whereby the wrongdoing recedes into the distant past, may motivate victims to forgive (McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang 2003). One worry that might arise from this is that the process is a purely passive one. It is in the nature of our experience of time for events to recede into the past and become more temporally remote. This occurs without any direct control. Nevertheless, victims are also more likely to forgive when they are induced to subjectively perceive a transgression as having occurred in the distant rather than the recent past (Wohl and McGarth 2007). Drawing these findings together, Sana Rizvi and Ramona Bobocel tested whether the psychological mechanisms underpinning these effects of temporal distance on forgiveness are consistent with CLT. In a series of three experiments, they found that increasing psychological distance, in the form of temporal and physical distance from the present self, induced high-level construals of a transgression and facilitated forgiveness. Importantly, they found that "participants will perceive the transgression as less severe at higher levels of construal because concrete details will be less accessible and the negativity of the event will be reduced" (Rizvi and Bobocel 2016, 879). This leads the authors to conclude that "psychological distance from interpersonal transgressions induces a high-level construal, which in turn fosters victim forgiveness" (Rizvi and Bobocel 2016, 880).

¹⁰ For self-conscious emotions such as shame, the reverse may be true. A more abstract construal may increase these kinds of emotions (Eyal and Fishbach 2010; Katzir and Eyal 2013).

¹¹ See also Dings and McCarroll (2022) for work on how various aspects of the self may modulate the phenomenology of remembering.

Thinking about an event more abstractly means representing it at a high-level of construal, and this can have an impact not only on the meaning a person attributes to the event but also its emotional impact. Thinking more abstractly about the event may blunt the negative emotions such as anger that are associated with the past wrongdoing and incline the victim toward forgiveness. In effect, the process involves adopting a psychologically distanced perspective on the past event, and this may dampen the negative affect. Further, construing the event differently enables us to reduce emotionality in a way that simultaneously facilitates the event being reinterpreted in a way that fits with the new ‘forgiving’ narrative.¹²

When a past event is remembered, the ‘scenario’ that is constructed consists of at least three components, namely (i) associated conceptualization, (ii) associated affective state, including emotionality, and (iii) associated visual perspective (Dings and Newen 2023). Construal level shifts impact all of these components, and all have a relevant role aiding the process of forgiveness. It is the third component, visual perspective, that we explore in the next section. Viewing the past event from the perspective of an observer might be a further, important, mechanism in the process of changing or lessening the emotional impact of a past wrong and allowing it to be integrated into a narrative of forgiveness.

3. Observing a Past Wrong

Episodic remembering is reconstructive (Bartlett 1932; Schacter and Addis 2007). The way in which we recall past events may shift and change. When we recall events in our personal pasts, we may represent the event from the same point of view from which we originally experienced it. Yet, sometimes, for some people, we may represent the event from a detached point of view and visualize ourselves in the remembered scene, as if we were viewing another person. These points of view are known, respectively, as field and observer perspectives (Nigro and Neisser 1983). How might such points of view in memory relate to forgiveness? It is important in this context—given what we have said about the possible role of high-level construals of an event for acts of forgiveness—that observer perspectives are thought to be one way of representing an event more abstractly as a high-level construal and adopting a psychologically distanced perspective (Trope and Liberman 2010; McCarroll 2019b; Dings and Newen 2023). If observer perspectives involve adopting a psychologically distanced perspective, then their adoption might afford emotional distance from a past wrong, and make it easier to forgive the past transgression.

The different points of view appear to be related to representing different aspects, or distinct information about the past event (McCarroll 2018). Field perspectives involve a focus on concrete details, whereas observer perspectives involve a focus on the event in relation to the broader context of an individual’s life (Libby and Eibach 2011). Given that they generally involve thinking about an event in terms of the concrete details, field perspectives tend to involve more emotional content and psychological states, whereas observer perspectives—which involve more abstract thinking—tend to involve a greater amount of information about the appearance of the self and less affective content

12 A concern might be that this approach to understanding the way in which we might gain distance from the emotions of the past wrong, by construing the event in a different way, runs the risk of collapsing into a form of excusing the wrongdoer, rather than genuinely forgiving. Here we would like to emphasise that it is the meaning and emotion that might change rather than the judgment about the past wrong itself. By construing the event differently, one is thinking about the *same* event in a *different* way, focusing on different details for example, but one is *not* making a judgement about it that is explicitly different (e.g., this was not a wrong, or the person had no choice); in the latter kind of case, arguably the event would be thought about so differently that it would be considered not the same event but a different one (shifting from an unjust or immoral act to one that is not judged in this way). In our view, representing the event more abstractly is not to construe the event in order to mitigate blame, but to construe it so that the meaning and emotion associated with it are changed.

(McIsaac and Eich 2002; Fernández 2015). In addition, for memories of trauma, observer perspectives might involve less emotional content and operate “as a cognitive avoidance strategy that regulates emotional arousal” (McIsaac and Eich 2004, 252). As such, observer memories might be implicated in forgiveness by distancing the individual from the emotional content of the past event. Indeed, many people can intentionally switch perspectives (Nigro and Neisser 1983; Rice and Rubin 2009), and such a change from a field to an observer perspective may result in a decrease in felt emotion (Robinson and Swanson 1993). If forgiveness requires dampening one’s emotional response to a past injustice, so that one feels, for example, less anger about the past wrong, then adopting an observer perspective might perhaps facilitate forgiveness.

This would be a nice story. Unfortunately, things are not so simple (McCarroll 2017). Even though observer perspectives tend to involve less emotional content, the relation between emotion and visual perspective in memory is complex (McCarroll and Sutton 2017).¹³ Some emotions may in fact be enhanced by adopting an observer perspective (Libby and Eibach 2011; Finnbogadóttir and Berntsen 2014). Focusing on the emotion of regret, Valenti, Libby, and Eibach (2011) made a distinction between regret for actions and regret for inactions. Regret for actions tends to be painful because of the concrete features of the event, which are salient during the experience of the incident, whereas regret for inactions tends to be painful when considered in the broader context of one’s life (Valenti, Libby, and Eibach 2011). Manipulating the perspectives adopted by subjects for remembered regrets, these authors found that, compared to field perspective imagery, observer perspective imagery reduced regret for actions but increased regret for inactions. They suggest that visual perspective in memory may be considered a tool that modulates meaning-making and emotion.¹⁴

Despite the nuanced relation between observer memory and emotion, perspectives such as these may still play a role in facilitating forgiveness. John Sutton (2010) draws a distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ emotional perspectives, where an internal emotional perspective corresponds to the emotion involved at the time of the original experience, while an external emotional perspective reflects the emotion experienced at the time of recall.¹⁵ One’s external emotional perspective may involve a quite different emotional interpretation of the event. For Sutton, as for Goldie (2003), an external perspective on the past is important, “because of its utility for emotional re-evaluation of past actions and events. Only by responding emotionally from one’s present perspective ‘can one look the past in the eye’” (Sutton 2010, 35). Emotionally processing certain memories, of traumatic events for example, may involve successfully negotiating internal and external emotional perspectives. What one needs is emotional closure (Goldie 2003, 314). Furthermore, observer perspectives have been linked to emotional closure (Crawley 2010; Radvansky and Svob 2019).

Observer memory is one possible manifestation of this negotiation of internal and external emotional perspectives. Observer memory may reflect a change in the emotions that one now feels, compared to how one then felt (Goldie 2012). Indeed, thinking about instances of self-forgiveness, Goldie suggests that cases in which one forgives oneself for committing some moral transgression will more likely be recalled from an observer memory. One adopts an observer perspective because a gap—epistemic, evaluative or emotional—has opened up between the past and the present. In other words, what one *now*, in the present, knows, thinks, and feels, is different to what one *then*, in the past, knew, thought, and

13 Observer perspectives have also been correlated with rumination, depression, and other forms of maladaptive thinking (see, Finnbogadóttir and Berntsen 2014; Kuyken and Moulds 2009).

14 This modulation of regret may be important for acts of self-forgiveness (see below).

15 Sutton is here drawing on and developing the work of Peter Goldie (2003).

felt. Adopting an observer perspective can afford an individual the possibility of thinking differently about the past event, construing it more abstractly in terms of its broader meaning, and making it possible to adopt a new emotional perspective on the past. Distance may be achieved from old emotions associated with a past wrong, such as anger, or a person may be inclined to view the past in a new light and adopt a distinct emotional perspective.

Recalling the past from an observer perspective may help a person remember the past event in a different way, such that its emotional aspects are dampened or modified, enabling the event to be incorporated into their self-narrative (McCarroll 2019ab; Dings and Newen 2023). Recalling a past injustice from an observer memory may help bring about an emotional reappraisal of the event.¹⁶

Conclusion

The process of forgiveness seems to require reappraising the past wrong, such that the negative emotions and the meaning associated with the event are changed. A person's negative blaming emotions may be modulated in the present by the reactions of the wrongdoer (Amaya 2019). Nonetheless, this cannot be the whole story. If one's emotional reactions are only changed due to reactions in the present, there is a risk of reliving the past event and experiencing the same emotions (Blustein 2014). We have suggested a novel way of reappraising an event that might be important in the process of forgiving, which involves construing the event in a more abstract, psychologically distant, way. Forgiveness might be a temporally extended process, and switching perspectives and the way one construes the event might help in the process of forgiving. Recalling the past event from an observer perspective might make it easier to adopt a psychologically distant perspective. Recalling the past from an observer memory can help put it into perspective and facilitate the emotional regulation and meaning-making that might be required for forgiveness.

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¹⁶ It is important to note, here, that the account of how adopting an observer perspective might relate to forgiveness goes beyond the idea that we simply adopt an impartial point of view. The latter may be required for questions about justice more broadly rather than being important for forgiveness per se. In our view, the observer perspective does not involve the adoption of an impartial perspective, but is instead always linked to one's own point of view even if that point of view is now different (Goldie 2012). Forgiveness and judgments of morality and (in)justice are of course related, and so they may (partly) share underlying mechanisms, such as taking a detached point of view. Nevertheless, there might also be important differences between them. Forgiveness often requires more than just seeing the event from an abstract or impartial point of view, but might require certain motivating reasons. Here is where our account might complement and be complemented by Amaya's present-focused account. Rather than standing as impartial observers, we have motivating reasons (your reactions to our blaming emotions) to change how we react emotionally to the past event (adopting a detached perspective).

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