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Forgetting to Un-Forgive*

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Abstract | Much of the literature on forgiveness is dedicated to understanding the reasons to forgive and what changes in attitude are required to do so. But philosophers have been much less attentive to what happens *after* agents forgive. This is a serious oversight, since the reasons to forgive do not always retain their force and it is not always possible, or advisable, to maintain the changes in attitudes that forgiveness requires. Fortunately, Monique Wonderly has begun to fill this lacuna in the literature with her recent work on *un-forgiveness*. According to the author, un-forgiveness involves altering our attitudes, by either reinhabiting an adversarial stance towards an agent for their wrongdoing and/or returning one's relationship with them to the state it was in prior to forgiveness taking place. While Wonderly's account of un-forgiveness is both novel and illuminating, it is incomplete. In this paper, we argue that one can also un-forgive by forgetting that the wrong in question occurred and/or that the previously forgiven agent was the perpetrator of the wrong. We contend that not only is it possible to un-forgive by forgetting, but doing so can be both justified and morally important. We defend our view by considering the objection that un-forgiveness by forgetting can negatively impact victims' relationships with wrongdoers as well as addressing the concern that agents cannot exercise their agency over their memories in order to un-forgive by forgetting.

Keywords | forgiveness; memory; relationships; un-forgiveness

Olvidar para *des*perdonar

Resumen | Gran parte de la literatura académica sobre el perdón se ha enfocado en comprender las razones para perdonar y los cambios de actitud necesarios para lograrlo. No obstante, los filósofos han prestado menos atención a lo que sucede *después* de que se perdona. Esta es una grave omisión, pues las razones para perdonar pueden debilitarse y no siempre es posible, ni recomendable, mantener los cambios de actitud que el perdón requiere. Por fortuna, Monique Wonderly ha comenzado a llenar este vacío en la literatura con su reciente investigación sobre el *desperdón*. Según la autora, este implica alterar nuestras actitudes, ya sea adoptando de nuevo una postura opuesta a la de un agente en razón de su ofensa o en el retorno de la relación con ese agente al estado en el que se encontraba antes de que ocurriera el perdón. Si bien la explicación que Wonderly ofrece del desperdón es novedosa y esclarecedora, aún está incompleta. En este artículo argumentamos que también se puede desperdonar si se olvida que el perjuicio en cuestión sucedió o que el agente anteriormente perdonado es el responsable. Así, sostenemos que desperdonar a partir del olvido no solo es posible, sino que hacerlo está justificado y es moralmente significativo. Para defender esta perspectiva, discutimos la postura

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que asevera que el desperdón a partir del olvido puede impactar de manera negativa la relación entre víctimas y victimarios, así como la que afirma que las personas no tienen agencia sobre sus recuerdos para desperdonar a partir del olvido.

Palabras clave | desperdón; memoria; perdón; relaciones

Esquecer para *des*perdoar

Resumo | Grande parte da literatura acadêmica sobre o perdão tem se concentrado em entender as razões para perdoar e as mudanças de atitude necessárias para alcançar isso. Entretanto, os filósofos têm dado menos atenção ao que acontece depois que o perdão ocorre. Essa é uma omissão grave, pois os motivos para o perdão podem se enfraquecer e nem sempre é possível ou aconselhável manter as mudanças de atitude que o perdão exige. Felizmente, Monique Wonderly começou a preencher essa lacuna na literatura com sua recente pesquisa sobre o *desperdão*. De acordo com a autora, isso envolve a alteração de nossas atitudes, seja adotando uma nova postura oposta à de um agente por causa de sua ofensa, seja no retorno do relacionamento com esse agente ao estado em que se encontrava antes do perdão. Embora a explicação de Wonderly sobre o desperdão seja nova e esclarecedora, ela ainda está incompleta. Neste artigo, argumentamos que também é possível desperdoar se a pessoa esquecer que o dano em questão aconteceu ou que o agente anteriormente perdoado é o responsável. Assim, argumentamos que o desperdão por meio do esquecimento não só é possível, mas também que fazê-lo é justificável e moralmente significativo. Para defender essa perspectiva, discutimos a posição que afirma que o desperdão pelo esquecimento pode afetar negativamente o relacionamento entre vítimas e perpetradores, bem como a posição que afirma que as pessoas não têm autonomia sobre suas memórias para desperdoar pelo esquecimento.

Palavras-chave | desperdão; memória; perdão; relacionamentos; relacionamentos

Introduction

The literature on forgiveness predominantly focuses on understanding the reasons to forgive and the necessary attitude changes required to do so. However, what happens *after* forgiveness occurs has received scant attention from philosophers, representing a serious oversight. The reasons to forgive may lose potency over time and the sustained changes in attitudes required for forgiveness may not always be feasible or advisable. Happily, Monique Wonderly (2021a; 2021b) has taken a step towards filling this void in the literature with her recent work on *un-forgiveness*.[1] Wonderly defines un-forgiveness as a shift in attitudes involving either reinstating an adversarial stance towards an agent for their wrongdoing and/or reverting one's relationship to its pre-forgiveness state (2021a, 4). On Wonderly's view, un-forgiveness is an active process that requires agents to respond to reasons. Furthermore, the act of un-forgiving can be both morally valuable and justified when motivated by a change in an offender's behavior and/or attitudes.

While Wonderly's account of un-forgiveness is both novel and illuminating, it remains incomplete. The state of offenders' attitudes and behavior is not the only reason to rescind forgiveness; the state of victims can play just as important a role. For example, if an offender's wrongdoing has significantly impacted a victim's mental health, this can be just as good a reason to un-forgive as the fact that an offender is not remorseful or intends to re-offend. Once we begin to consider victim-based reasons to rescind forgiveness, it becomes clear that reigniting resentment and/or re-altering relationships is only one way of un-forgiving. In this paper, we argue that un-forgiveness can also be achieved through intentional

1 For additional work on un-forgiveness, see Sicilia (unpublished manuscript).

forgetting of the wrongdoing and/or that the previously forgiven agent was the perpetrator of the wrong. We contend that un-forgiveness by forgetting is not only possible but can also be morally justified and significant, particularly in cases of mental health crises.

The paper is structured as follows: in Section 1, we present Wonderly's account of un-forgiveness. Then, in Section 2, we defend the conceptual possibility of un-forgiving by forgetting. Section 3 then explores the moral importance of un-forgiving by forgetting. In Section 4, we discuss the objection that un-forgiveness by forgetting can negatively impact victims' relationships with wrongdoers, and in Section 5, we address the concern that agents cannot exercise agency over their memories to un-forgive by forgetting.

1. Altering Attitudes, Forgiveness, and Un-Forgiveness

In order to understand what it means to un-forgive, we must first clarify what it means to forgive. Unsurprisingly, there is a great deal of disagreement on this matter in the literature. Wonderly attempts to take a neutral stance between two prominent models of how a victim V forgives an offender O for wrongdoing w:

> (F1) V had a shift in affective attitude such that her resentment (and/or other negative emotions) toward O for w has been eliminated or substantially reduced.
>
> (F2) V altered O's relationship status or normative position—e.g., by reaccepting O into a moral relationship or by releasing O from (certain) obligations to V on account of w. (2021a, 3)

While it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the nuances of each position, it is worth mentioning three important aspects of these two views.

First, both views take forgiveness to involve a change in attitude, either in terms of an agent's emotions and other affective states, or in terms of the dispositions, expectations, and judgments that constitute our relationships. Second, and in contrast, it is typically argued that not all changes in affective attitudes or relational position will constitute forgiveness. For example, Pamela Hieronymi argues that genuine forgiveness requires agents to overcome their resentment while maintaining the following three judgments:

> (1) The act in question was wrong; it was a serious offense, worthy of moral attention.
>
> (2) The wrongdoer is a legitimate member of the moral community who can be expected not to do such things. As such, she is someone to be held responsible and she is worth being upset by.
>
> (3) You, as the one wronged, ought not to be wronged. This sort of treatment stands as an offense to your person. (2001, 530)

So, if V's resentment towards O dissipates and/or they re-accept O into a moral relationship because V realized that w was not actually wrong or that O was not in fact the culprit, or simply forgot that w occurred, then V's shift in emotion and/or relationship would not constitute genuine forgiveness.

Third, on both F1 and F2, forgiveness is an active process that requires agency. Theorists often contrast forgiveness with processes like forgetting, which they take to be passive and something that "may just happen" (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 15). In contrast, philosophers often argue that forgiveness requires that a victim act for reasons to revise

their attitudes toward the offender.[2] There is much debate about what kinds of reasons can justify forgiveness. On one popular approach, an offender's remorse functions as a reason to forgive, either because it indicates that the offender's wrongdoing is no longer a threat to the victim (Hampton 1988; Hieronymi 2001), or that the offender and victim have aligned their moral understandings (Fricker 2018, 2021), or that the offender has had a change of heart (Milam 2019). Take, for example, the following case:

> **Remorseful Classmate:** Olivia and Emma are in the same Ph.D. program. Over the years, they've come to admire and respect one another and often seek the other's feedback on their work and turn to one another for professional advice. One day, Olivia gives Emma extremely harsh comments on a draft: she says that Emma's writing is similar to an undergraduate's and tells Emma to consider dropping out of the program. Olivia's feedback is mean-spirited and not at all constructive, and Emma is deeply hurt by the comments. Emma resents Olivia for being so harsh and decides to stop asking Olivia for advice or giving Olivia feedback on her own work. But a week later, Olivia reaches out to Emma to apologize for her behavior. She explains that she's been feeling insecure about her own writing and had taken this out on Emma. She expresses remorse for what she's done and promises to be a kinder and more constructive classmate going forward. Because Olivia seems sincerely remorseful, Emma decides to forgive her.

On many views of forgiveness, Emma has good reason to forgive Olivia, since she understands that what she did was wrong, feels remorse, and is committed to supporting Emma going forward. And according to defenders of both F1 and F2, in forgiving Olivia, Emma modifies her attitudes towards her. On F1, this could involve ceasing to resent Olivia (or at least taking steps to minimize her resentment), eliminating other negative emotions like contempt, and/or cultivating positive attitudes towards Olivia. On F2, this could involve Emma coming to trust Olivia again, either as a friend or colleague, and/or to no longer demand that Olivia make amends or apologize for what she did.

Much philosophical attention has been paid to cases like Remorseful Classmate, in an attempt to understand the kinds of reasons to which agents ought to respond when deciding to forgive and what changes in attitude are required in order to do so. But much less attention has been paid to what happens *after* an agent forgives. Wonderly argues that this is unfortunate, since the reasons to forgive do not always retain their force over time. Take, for example, one way the Remorseful Classmate case could evolve:

> **Competitive Classmate:** After Emma forgave Olivia, they went back to admiring and respecting one another and would often seek the other's advice on their work. But soon after, Emma overhears Olivia telling another classmate how she is planning to undermine Emma's confidence by harshly criticizing her work again. Olivia explains that because they work on similar topics, they will most likely be competing for many of the same jobs, and Olivia wants to gain an advantage over Emma on the job market by making her doubt herself. Shocked and hurt, Emma reflects on Olivia's previous attempt to undermine her confidence and the same resentment she felt towards Olivia swells within her and she decides to again sever their relationship.

2 Not all philosophers of forgiveness agree that agents must forgive for reasons. Dana Nelkin (2013), for example, argues that agents can forgive for any reason, or no reason at all. However, Nelkin still takes forgiveness to be an active process and importantly distinct from more passive processes like moving on or forgetting.

Because Emma has re-occupied the very same adversarial attitudes she had towards Olivia prior to forgiving her, and has once more severed their relationship, it would be natural to think that Emma has un-forgiven Olivia.[3] But what does it mean to un-forgive?

Wonderly, in two recent papers (2021a; 2021b), presents an account of un-forgiveness. Based on the two models of forgiveness, Wonderly presents two approaches to understanding how victim V can un-forgive offender O for wrongdoing w:

> (U1) V had a shift in affective attitude such that she has come to re-inhabit (roughly) the same resentful emotions toward O for w that characterized her blaming attitude prior to forgiving O for w.
>
> (U2) V returned O's relationship status or normative position to its (or a similar) state prior to forgiveness—e.g., by again displacing O from the relevant relationship with V on account of w or by reinstating certain of O's obligations to V on account of w. (2021a, 5)

U1 and U2 have much in common with F1 and F2. Like F1 and F2, both U1 and U2 take un-forgiveness to involve a change in attitude, either in terms of re-inhabiting one's previous emotions and affective states or in terms of altering the changes one made to the dispositions, expectations, and judgments that constitute relationships. However, just as not all changes in these attitudes will constitute forgiveness, not all reversals of these changes will count as un-forgiveness. If V stopped resenting O because they simply forgot that w occurred, and then came to resent O upon remembering w, this would not count as un-forgiveness. For Wonderly, un-forgiveness involves a change of attitude *in virtue of rescinding one's forgiveness*. She argues: "Just as forgiveness must be done while retaining the judgment that the offender's act constituted a wrongdoing, so, too, can a victim un-forgive only if she does so in full recognition of her earlier forgiveness" (2021a, 6).

Perhaps most importantly, un-forgiveness, like forgiveness, also requires agency. Just as agents forgive for reasons, they must also un-forgive for reasons. As Wonderly argues: "The attitudinal shift, if not *intentional*, should at least be in response to the victim's reasons" (2021a, 5, emphasis in original). But what kinds of reasons could justify un-forgiveness? Theories of forgiveness tend to focus on facts about offenders when determining the kinds of reasons that could justify forgiveness. These accounts take an offender's remorse, change of heart, and/or commitment to reform to be good reasons to forgive. So, when an offender no longer feels remorse, reverses their change of heart, and/or drops their commitment to reform, then these reasons no longer retain their force. This is why, on Wonderly's view, an offender taking an endorsive stance towards their previous behavior and intending to again engage in the same form of wrongdoing constitute good reasons to un-forgive (2021a, 5). So, in the Competitive Classmate case, the fact that Olivia is unremorseful and plans to harshly criticize Emma again gives Emma good reason to reinhabit her resentment towards Olivia and/or re-sever their relationship.

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3 One might argue that Emma does not un-forgive Olivia, but rather comes to blame her for a new wrong, or, alternatively, comes to realize that one of the conditions of her forgiveness was violated. It is beyond the scope of this essay to rule out these possibilities, but see Wonderly (2021a) and Sicilia (unpublished manuscript) who consider, and ultimately reject, these interpretations of similar cases in order to defend the intelligibility of un-forgiveness. For example, Wonderly presents a case between two sisters where one destroys a precious item of the other and after being forgiven, plots to reoffend. Wonderly argues that regardless of the incident that motivates the un-forgiveness, so long as the victim's blame is directed at the original transgression, it meets the criteria for un-forgiveness: "Mabel's attention is clearly redirected toward Jane's earlier act, she obviously seems to resent Jane for what she did back then, and it is that act for which she now demands amends" (Wonderly 2021a, 8).

Interestingly, on Wonderly's view, Emma's reasons to un-forgive Olivia can justify rescinding her forgiveness and blaming Olivia again even if, in initially forgiving Olivia, she made a commitment to refrain from blaming Olivia in the future.[4] This is because un-forgiveness can be a significant source of moral value, which can justify violating (defeasible) commitments to refrain from blame going forward. What is the moral importance of un-forgiveness? According to Wonderly, the value of un-forgiveness lies in the important role it can play in our moral relationships. Wonderly argues that our moral relationships are shaped both by the history of our treatment of one another as well as our responses to this history, which include attitudes like blame, praise, forgiveness, and, for Wonderly, *un-forgiveness.* She writes:

> [S]uppose that I wrong my friend, she responds with resentment, and I, with guilt and apology. She then forgives me, and I respond with gratitude. One might think the case closed, but she or I might later perform some act that re-opens this dialogue and creates intersecting ones. And as a result, she may then un-forgive me. Such responses thread the binding of our interpersonal histories, allowing us to navigate (and expand) the narrative dimensions of moral relationships and the shared values that constitute them. But they can only do so if we allow ourselves to engage sufficiently with the past. (2021b, 484)

By attending to how our relationships can evolve after forgiveness occurs, Wonderly is able to identify an underexplored way of engaging with our past that can enrich and deepen our relationships. We can represent Wonderly's account of the value of un-forgiveness in this way:

> (V1) When V un-forgives O for w by re-inhabiting the same resentful emotions towards O and/or by reverting their relationship with O to its state prior to forgiveness, V and O engage with their past and enrich their relationship.

Wonderly's work on un-forgiveness is both novel and illuminating, and has already pushed the literature on forgiveness in an interesting new direction. However, it can be expanded further. If un-forgiveness is an agential process that involves withdrawing one's forgiveness in response to reasons in a way that can be morally valuable, then Wonderly has articulated only one of potentially many ways to un-forgive. In the next section, we argue that the state of offenders' attitudes and intentions are not the only reasons for which agents might un-forgive. One can un-forgive in ways that do not involve re-engaging in the blaming emotions or re-severing our relationships, and the moral value of un-forgiveness does not lie solely in the way it allows agents to engage with the past.

2. Forgetting and Un-Forgiving

In the Competitive Student case, Emma likely justifiably un-forgives Olivia when she reinhabits her adversarial stance due to Olivia's lack of remorse and intention to re-offend. But offenders' attitudes and intentions are not the only reasons for which agents might un-forgive. Consider an alternative way the Remorseful Classmate case might have evolved:

> **Self-Critical Student:** After Emma forgave Olivia, they went back to admiring and respecting one another and would often seek the other's advice on their work. Still, Emma does not forget Olivia's comments and over time comes to ruminate on them. She loses the motivation to work on her dissertation and actively considers dropping

4 Though only if this commitment is defeasible. Thus, there is a tension between un-forgiveness and strong commitment views of forgiveness, according to which agents are bound to refrain from blaming those they forgive. However, Wonderly suggests that the moral value of un-forgiveness gives us good theoretical grounds to reject these strong commitment views and adopt more permissive views of justified un-forgiving.

> out. Olivia tries to assure Emma that her previous comments were off-base and encourages her to keep working. And while Emma no longer resents Olivia and is grateful for her support, the memory of her comments has created a serious roadblock that Emma cannot overcome.

In this case, Olivia does nothing to warrant un-forgiveness—she continues to feel remorse and actively works to rebuild Emma's trust. But there are facts about *Emma* that could constitute reasons to rescind forgiveness. Namely, the fact that it is incredibly painful for her to remember Olivia's comments. While not all victims experience this kind of pain upon forgiving offenders, many do. And the fact that forgiveness can impose costs, sometimes significant ones, on victims has not gone unnoticed in the literature. For example, in discussing the function of forgiveness, Hieronymi identifies two main functions of forgiveness: (1) the ratification of the offender's change of heart, and (2) the incorporation of the wrong into the victim's history. Regarding the latter, she writes:

> With forgiveness, the offended agrees to bear in her own person the cost of the wrongdoing and to incorporate the injury into her own life without further protest and without demand for retribution. (In some cases, forgiveness can be uncomfortably intimate: You must allow me to creatively incorporate the scars that bear your fingerprints into the permanent fabric of my life, and trust that I can do so). (2001, 551)

Even though a victim may be in a favorable position to forgive in order to fulfill one or both of these important moral functions at a given moment, this might not always be the case. For example, an offender could come to endorse their previous wrongs, or act in such a way as to reveal that they never actually had a change of heart. This could give the victim good reasons to un-forgive and rescind their ratification of the offender's change of heart, as in the Competitive Classmate case. Alternatively, it could become too difficult for a victim to bear the burden of the wrong, or their circumstances could make it impossible to fully incorporate the wrong into their lives. When this happens, we take it that the victim also has good reasons to un-forgive in order to offload the objectionably heavy burden that their forgiveness placed upon them.[5]

Thus, in the Self-Critical Student case, the fact that forgiving Olivia is incredibly painful for Emma can function as a good reason to un-forgive her. Notice, however, that if Emma were to un-forgive Olivia by reinhabiting an adversarial stance and/or re-severing their relationship, this would do nothing to relieve Emma's pain. In this version of the case, the reason to un-forgive is not the offender's failed change of heart, but rather the victim's pain in remembering the offender's wrongful behavior. And re-blaming Olivia would not make the memory of her harsh comments go away. If we consider the possibility of expanding the sphere of

5 Some may dispute the claim that the burdensomeness of forgiveness or the impossibility of incorporating the past wrong into one's life are valid reasons to un-forgive. On some views of forgiveness, only facts about the wrongdoer (or our judgments about the wrongdoer) can constitute reasons to forgive (Murphy 1982; Milam 2019). So, one could argue, only facts about the wrongdoer (or our judgments of the wrongdoer) constitute reasons to un-forgive as well. It is beyond the scope of this paper to reject these restrictive views of the reasons to forgive in favor of more inclusive accounts, although it is important to note that others have done so (Bennett 2003; Fricker 2021). But even if one adopts a restrictive view of the reasons to both forgive and un-forgive, while our account could not function as a form of un-forgiveness on this approach, it could still operate as an account of no longer forgiving or letting go of forgiveness. Per-Erik Milam and Luke Brunning (2022) present an account of letting go of blame, which they take to be different from forgiveness in important ways. On their view, the reasons to forgive are grounded in facts about the wrongdoer and/or their wrong (2022, 5), while one has reason to let go of blame when blaming is no longer "worth it" (2022, 9). Similarly, one could argue that when the burdens of forgiveness become too difficult to bear, forgiveness is no longer "worth it" for the victim and they have reason to let go of their forgiveness by forgetting. In this way, our view is able to capture an interesting and important moral phenomenon even when committed to a view according to which this phenomenon is not best described as "un-forgiveness." We would like to thank Anna-Bella Sicilia for discussion on this point.

reasons to un-forgive, then we will also have to reflect on other ways agents can un-forgive.[6] But what can an agent do to un-forgive beyond re-blaming the offender?

Adversarial stances and impaired relationships are not the only states of affairs that are incompatible with forgiveness. Most philosophical analyses of forgiveness also take forgetting to preclude forgiving. On these views, genuine forgiveness requires that agents overcome their resentment of a wrongdoer while also maintaining the judgment that the wrongdoer culpably wronged them (Hieronymi 2001). So, according to much of the philosophical work on forgiveness, familiar adages like "forgive and forget" are not just bad advice, they are incoherent. If a person is to forgive, then they must never forget the wrongs they have endured or the agents who have wronged them. As Hieronymi argues, "[f]orgiveness is not *simply* a revision in judgment or change in view or a wiping clean or a washing away or a making new. Someone will bear the cost in his or her own person. The wrong is less 'let go of' or washed away than it is digested or absorbed" (2001, 551, ft. 39).

If a victim forgives an offender, and then later comes to forget that the wrong in question occurred and/or that the previously forgiven agent was the perpetrator of the wrong, then they no longer forgive the offender. This gives rise to two novel paths a victim V could take to un-forgive offender O for wrongdoing w:

> (U3) After forgiving O for w, V undergoes a change in memory such that she comes to forget that w occurred.
>
> (U4) After forgiving O for w, V undergoes a change in memory such that she comes to forget that O performed w.

Importantly, not all changes in memory constitute un-forgiveness, just as not all changes in attitude constitute un-forgiveness. In order for forgetting to be a viable path to un-forgiveness, this change in memory must be the result of an exercise of agency aimed at un-forgiving as opposed to something that the victim passively undergoes or performs to fulfill some other goal. This is because un-forgiveness, like forgiveness, is a reasons-responsive process and one in which agents must deliberately engage. In order for a victim to un-forgive an offender for a wrong via forgetting, they must, in full recognition of their earlier forgiveness and with the intention to alter this state of affairs, exercise their will in coming to forget that the wrong occurred or that the offender was the agent who performed the wrongdoing. If the victim simply finds themselves no longer able to recall the wrong or offender in question, then this change in memory is not an act of un-forgiveness. Similarly, if the victim exercises their agency to forget the wrong and/or wrongdoer in question, not because they intend to reverse their forgiveness, but rather to fulfill some other goal, like turning over a new leaf or forgetting an entire period of their life, then this too would not constitute an act of un-forgiveness. In contrast, if the agent reflects on their reasons to un-incorporate the offender's wrong from their life and purposefully shifts their attention in ways that alter their memory of the wrong in question, then this could be classed as un-forgiving the offender by forgetting.[7]

In this way, while "forgiving and forgetting" may remain out of reach, it is possible to "forget to un-forgive." Take the Self-Critical Student case. If Emma forgives Olivia, but later comes to realize that forgiving Olivia has become too burdensome due to how heavily the memory of Olivia's comments weighs on her, then she can decide to un-forgive Olivia by

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6 This isn't to say that agents cannot have victim-based reasons to un-forgive by re-blaming as well. For example, an agent could have self-respect or self-esteem-related reasons to un-forgive by re-blaming a wrongdoer. We would like to thank members of the Davis Area Group in Ethics and Related Areas for raising this possibility.

7 One might argue that it is not possible to exercise one's agency in order to forget and is rather something that "may just happen" (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 15). We take up this challenge in Section 5.

working to forget her comments. In order to forget, Emma might begin a meditation practice in order to resist ruminating on Olivia's comments, with the goal of eventually coming to forget them altogether. She might also try to remove triggers of the memory from her environment. For example, she could throw away the draft with the offending comments, or delete the file from her computer. This will also likely require Emma to ask Olivia not to bring up the harsh comments or this difficult time in their friendship, since doing so would make it impossible for Emma to alter her memories.

Like the conversations that arise when a victim un-forgives an offender by attitude alteration, the conversations involved in un-forgiving via forgetting will also be difficult. Such discussions require the victim to reveal the full extent of her vulnerability and the offender to come to terms with the full extent to which her wrong has harmed someone she cares about. It is also possible that placing a previously forgiven wrong off-limits for future discussion runs afoul of some of the commitments that attend forgiveness, in the same way as un-forgiving via attitude alteration. One might think that once we forgive someone for wronging us, this can imply a commitment to no longer blame the offender or to demand further restitution, as well as not asking anything of the offender with regards to the wrong. It is easy to imagine Olivia being somewhat confused by Emma's request to stop bringing up the harsh comments, and responding: "Why can't I talk about those comments anymore? I thought you forgave me!"

Thus, un-forgiving via forgetting can be costly. It requires victims to undergo the effortful agentive process of altering their memories, which could involve having difficult and vulnerable conversations with offenders in which they ask something of the offenders, even though they had (possibly) previously committed to not making such requests.[8] Still, it can be advisable and justifiable for victims to undergo this process. We take this to be true of Emma in the Self-Critical Student case. The fact that Emma suffers significantly and can no longer work due to the memory of Olivia's harsh comments are not only reasons for Emma to un-forgive via forgetting, they are *good* reasons to do so. While Emma might have been able to successfully bear the burden of forgiving Olivia for a time, when it becomes too much, she can justifiably unshoulder it by forgetting. And, more generally, victims can be justified in un-forgiving by forgetting if they cannot, or should not, incorporate the wrong in question as a part of their lives.[9]

3. The Value of Un-forgiveness via Forgetting

Recall the value of un-forgiveness via attitude alteration (V1). According to Wonderly, the value of this process lies in the way it can deepen moral relationships, for it allows agents to engage with their shared history, especially as it re-opens discussion of past wrongdoing(s). In contrast, un-forgiving via forgetting would eliminate this possible dialogue as the victim would either forget that the offender committed the wrong, or forget that the wrong happened altogether. So, one might think that because un-forgiving via forgetting takes these backward-looking discussions off the table, un-forgiveness via forgetting cannot enrich relationships and thus lacks value (V1). In this section, we argue that while

8 We take such commitments, if they exist, to be defeasible, just as Wonderly argues that the commitment to withhold blame after forgiveness is likely defeasible (2021b, 486). Indeed, the commitment to refrain from asking anything of the offender with regards to the forgiven wrong is sure to be much weaker than the commitment to refrain from blaming the offender for the forgiven wrong, since blame involves much costlier impositions on the offender than the kinds of requests involved in un-forgiveness via forgetting.

9 Notice that being justified in un-forgiving a wrongdoer does not imply that the victim be mistaken in forgiving the wrongdoer in the past. It is possible to be justified both in forgiving a wrongdoer at an earlier time and justified in un-forgiving them at a later time, given the changes that the victim undergoes. And while we think it is possible that agents can be justified in un-forgiving via forgetting, we do not intend to argue that this is always the case. Just as agents can forgive for bad reasons, un-forgiveness can also lack value and fail to be justifiable. We explore a case of unjustified un-forgiveness via forgetting in Section 3.

un-forgiveness via forgetting does eliminate the possibility of engaging in certain backward-looking discussions, and is thus not a source for (V1), un-forgiveness via forgetting can enrich our moral relationships in other important ways, and can also be a source of value for agents themselves.[10]

While un-forgiveness via forgetting precludes the kind of backward-looking conversations that are characteristic of un-forgiveness via attitude adjustment, un-forgiveness via forgetting can enrich moral relationships in a *forward-looking* way by allowing relationships to evolve and deepen in ways that would remain unmanifested while the wrong is remembered. In the Self-Critical Student case, Emma is unable to cope with the pain incurred by remembering Olivia's harsh comments and has lost the ability and motivation to do research. Clearly, these facts about Emma impair her relationship with Olivia and could prevent it from flourishing to its full potential. Because Emma can no longer work, she won't be able to fully engage in many of the activities that she previously enjoyed doing with Olivia. She might struggle to give Olivia feedback on her writing, for example, and will have no writing of her own to share. Their conversations about their research will likely become shorter, as will their study sessions in libraries and coffee shops, since Emma is no longer motivated to do these things. Even though Olivia is supportive of Emma, and Emma no longer resents Olivia, their relationship cannot move forward. But if Emma un-forgives Olivia via forgetting, they could develop a deeper, closer connection. After forgetting Olivia's harsh comments, Emma will no longer be pained by them, and can regain her motivation and confidence to work. The two friends can return to reading each other's work, writing together, and discussing their research and professional goals. Over time, their relationship can develop into a lifelong friendship, one grounded in a mutual passion for their area of study and a deep understanding of the other's intellectual pursuits. But such a relationship would not be possible if Emma does not un-forgive Olivia by forgetting her harsh comments.

While unfortunate, it is perhaps not uncommon that the memory of a past wrong, although it is forgiven, can cause a relationship to stagnate. And un-forgiving via forgetting can allow these relationships to move forward in ways they could not if the memory of the wrong persisted. Thus, while un-forgiving via forgetting cannot enrich our relationships as described in (V1), it can serve as a distinct and valuable source of relationship enrichment, which we will call (V2):

> (V2) When V un-forgives O for w by coming to forget that w occurred and/or that O performed w, V and O's relationship progresses and is enriched.

Importantly, independent of the effect that un-forgiveness via forgetting can have on our moral relationships, it holds value for individuals in other ways. Un-forgiveness via forgetting can ease the suffering caused by remembering the past wrong, which can be extremely valuable for individuals on a personal level. We will call this form of victim-based value (V3):

> (V3) When V un-forgives O for w by coming to forget that w occurred and/or that O performed w, V's suffering in light of the memory of w is eased.

Notice that (V3) can justify un-forgiveness via forgetting even in cases where no benefit to relationships can be found. Take the following case:

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10 One could categorize these as other-directed values and self/victim-directed values. However, the former centers on the relationship between offender and victim, and crucially depends on the victim's attitudes and beliefs. For this reason, the former can be conceived as a relationship-based value, in contrast to the purely victim-based value of the latter.

> **Drunk Driver:** A reckless drunk driver causes a car accident with another vehicle, driven by Brynn. Brynn and the drunk driver meet for the first time when they exchange insurance information, and the drunk driver sincerely expresses remorse and a commitment to morally improve. Brynn forgives him, and the two never meet again. Months pass, and yet Brynn is still experiencing distress from the crash. She has flashbacks to the accident, is in constant fear every time she is in a vehicle, and has recurring nightmares. The side-effects of the crash are overwhelming Brynn, making it almost impossible for her to navigate daily life.

In this case, Brynn has neither backward-looking nor forward-looking relationship-based reasons to un-forgive the drunk driver. Un-forgiving, either by attitude adjustment or forgetting, would do nothing to enrich their relationship, as the two are strangers to each other and do not have any relationship to speak of. However, Brynn does have victim-based reasons to un-forgive the drunk driver by forgetting: forgiving the driver causes her to suffer significantly in that the memory of the accident makes it impossible to perform the necessary tasks of daily life. By un-forgiving the distressing event via forgetting that it occurred, Brynn can un-incorporate the previously forgiven wrong from her history, which will ease her suffering and release the burden that it imposed upon her.[11] Given the degree to which Brynn is suffering, we think it likely that she would be justified in un-forgiving via forgetting.

Of course, un-forgiving via forgetting is not always valuable or justifiable, just as un-forgiveness via attitude adjustment will not always be justified. There will be cases where an agent will fail to find reasons to un-forgive, and there will also be cases where these reasons are outweighed by more important moral considerations. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore each of these scenarios, it will be helpful to examine a case in which Emma would likely be unjustified in un-forgiving Olivia via forgetting.

> **Self-Important Student:** After Emma forgave Olivia, they went back to admiring and respecting one another and would often seek the other's advice on their work. But as the years pass, Emma and Olivia grow apart. Emma gets a job at a prestigious university and her work becomes increasingly influential, while Olivia's research is rarely cited and she eventually decides to leave the field. Over time, Emma becomes increasingly arrogant and begins to look down on Olivia. When she reflects on the memory of Olivia's harsh comments, she feels annoyed that someone like Olivia was able to hurt her so deeply in the past. So, Emma decides to forget that the whole thing ever happened. She works to never again think about Olivia's harsh comments, or how they made her feel.

In this scenario, Emma un-forgives Olivia via forgetting, but she does so for very bad reasons. Emma wants to elevate herself and spite Olivia by removing an important part of their history from her memory. In so doing, Emma attempts to re-cast Olivia as someone who has never been worthy of being upset by, and deny that their relationship was one in which she ever felt vulnerable. There is little moral value to be found in such an act of self-aggrandizement, and certainly not enough to outweigh the costs associated with furthering Emma's delusions of grandeur. And since Emma possesses no other victim-based or relationship-based reasons to un-forgive Olivia, it is likely she is unjustified in un-forgiving Olivia by forgetting her harsh comments.

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11 There may be concerns that it is impossible for an agent to forget a wrong, especially when the wrong is distressing in nature. We take up this concern in Section 5.

4. Forgetting and Friendship

Even if one grants that (V2) and (V3) are sources of value, one might be concerned that there are distinctive risks that come with un-forgiving via forgetting, particularly in the context of interpersonal relationships. One could argue that forgetting an important event that happened in the course of a friendship can objectionably impact how each friend navigates the friendship.[12] For example, by forgetting a friend's past poor treatment, the victim will be unable to stay alert for similar poor treatment in the future, which could render them objectionably vulnerable. Un-forgiveness via forgetting can also negatively impact the wrongdoer, since they will be unable to talk about, or even disclose, their past wrongs to the victim, rendering an important aspect of their history and character unknowable to their friend. One could even argue that these kinds of vulnerability, on behalf of the victim, and deliberate reticence, on behalf of the wrongdoer, are incompatible with a good and authentic friendship.

First, while we acknowledge that un-forgiveness via forgetting can make a victim vulnerable to future wrongdoing in various ways, vulnerabilities like these are not unique to this situation.[13] For example, forgiveness does not make victims immune to future poor treatment from those they have forgiven nor does it necessarily render them more alert to future slights and harms. It is just as possible, and no less likely, for a wrongdoer to harm a victim who has previously forgiven them than a victim who as un-forgiven them via forgetting. And, if one really has forgiven a wrongdoer, and fully absolved them of blame and/or repaired the relationship, it is not clear that a victim who forgives would be any more alert to future wrongdoing than a victim who un-forgives via forgetting.

Second, forgiveness and un-forgiveness via attitude alteration generate their own, sometimes distinctive, risks for victims. Because forgiveness involves a victim absorbing the wrongdoer's harm into their own moral fabric (Hieronymi 2001), the victim is rendered vulnerable to the psychological and emotional harms that these kinds of moral burdens can impose. Un-forgiveness via attitude alteration can also reveal how much a victim really cares about the wrongdoer's treatment, and how much it has hurt them, which can involve substantial risk. Whether we forgive, un-forgive via attitude alteration, or un-forgive via forgetting, we cannot eliminate the vulnerabilities that come with being in relationships with others and caring about how others treat us. The fact that un-forgiveness via forgetting can make a victim vulnerable should not render it unjustified when considering all aspects of the situation. Similarly, the vulnerability that attends forgiveness and un-forgiveness via attitude alteration does not preclude these situations from being morally justified.

When it comes to the negative impact that un-forgiveness via forgetting can impose on wrongdoers, we acknowledge that withholding information about one's past behavior can be unpleasant or uncomfortable. But we also maintain that reticence can be compatible with, and sometimes necessary for, healthy and meaningful friendships. Not only would it be impossible to tell our friends everything about ourselves, it is often inadvisable to do so. Take, for example, a case in which an agent does not like their friend's partner simply because they have very different music preferences. If the agent has entirely non-moral reasons for disliking the partner, it seems like the agent should not reveal their dislike of the partner to their friend *for the sake of* their friendship, not in spite of it. This is particularly true in cases where the friend, while holding these attitudes, does not endorse them,

12 We would like to thank Anna-Bella Sicilia for raising this concern.

13 Although, if the original instance of forgiveness was justified, then the wrongdoer likely experienced remorse and committed themselves to morally improving, which minimizes the risks of future poor treatment. For these same reasons, un-forgiveness via forgetting is unlikely to be confused with condoning the wrong. We would like to thank an anonymous referee for highlighting these points.

or even finds them morally suspect. Thus, reticence is not only compatible with meaningful and valuable relationships, it can also enhance them.[14]

One may argue that the above case indicates that reticence about minor matters is compatible with friendship, but this is not so for information about fundamental aspects of one's agency or identity. Withholding information of the latter kind is arguably what is required of wrongdoers in cases of un-forgiveness via forgetting. However, we maintain that it can also be justifiable to withhold information about one's identity for the sake of a relationship. Imagine two siblings who are very close, where the adult sibling identifies as transgender, but does not disclose this to their sister because they are not "out" to their parents. Aware of the fact that telling their sister about their gender identity would require their sister to constantly code switch things like pronouns around their parents, and could result in their accidental outing, the older sibling continues to keep their gender identity concealed from their sister. This is the kind of secret that concerns a fundamental feature of an agent's identity and requires robust maintenance—the older sibling has to remember to misgender themselves when with their sister, lie about attending trans-centered community events, refrain from telling their sister about distressing experiences they encounter as a transgender individual, etc. While difficult and painful to maintain, the older sibling chooses to keep this secret because it is necessary to safely maintain a meaningful relationship with their sibling. If the sister were to find out about their sibling's gender identity, then the older sibling would be forced to end, or significantly constrain, their relationship in order to remain safe. Thus, the only way the siblings can continue to have a relationship is if the older sibling keeps their gender identity from their sister. In this case, we take the older sibling to be justified in withholding this information, despite the difficulty they face in keeping it, *because* it allows their relationship with their sibling to continue.

We take the same to be true of wrongdoers who have been un-forgiven via forgetting. It may be difficult and even painful for wrongdoers to refrain from talking about their past wrongs with those who are trying to forget their actions, especially if the wrongdoer continues to feel remorse and/or thinks the past wrong is an important part of who they are. But doing so could be necessary for the continuation of their relationships. In the Self-Critical Student case, Emma cannot maintain a meaningful relationship with Olivia unless she is able to forget Olivia's harsh criticism. If Olivia values her relationship with Emma, and Emma's well-being more generally, she should accept the burden of her past wrong, heavy though it may be, and commit to refraining from addressing it when around Emma. In this way, un-forgiveness via forgetting removes the burden of incorporating the wrong into one's life from the victim's shoulders, and places it onto those of the wrongdoer.

Notice that in arguing that forgetting and secrecy can be necessary for the maintenance of a relationship, we are not denying that there are costs to both the victim and wrongdoer, and even to the relationship itself. It is possible that a relationship in which an agent must forget a past action of a friend, and that friend must withhold information about the past action from the agent, is not as authentic or healthy as a relationship between parties who have no need to forget or be reticent. Perhaps, in an ideal world, we would never have cause to forget the things our friends do and our friends would have no reason to withhold information from us. But we do not live in an ideal world and we are not all ideal agents. Given our non-ideal circumstances, there will be many cases where striving for perfect knowledge and honesty does not enhance our relationships and in fact destroys them. In such cases, choosing to forget, or withholding information, may be the best decision from the perspective of the victim, the wrongdoer, and for the relationship

14 For a more robust defense of the claim that friendship is compatible with, and sometimes requires, reticence, see Kant, as discussed by Dennis (2001), and Langton (1992).

between them. Thus, while un-forgiveness via forgetting may never be ideal, it can still be an important source of value for real-world agents and relationships.

5. Forgetting and Agency

One might worry that forgetting is not a sufficiently agential process to count as a form of un-forgiving. After all, many theorists highlight the active processes required for forgiveness by contrasting them with forgetting, which they understand as something that "just happens" (Murphy and Hampton 1988, 15). If forgetting is a purely passive process that agents cannot adequately control, then forgetting is different in important ways from the kinds of attitude adjustments involved in U1 and U2. So, one could argue, U3 and U4 cannot count as forms of un-forgiveness, since forgetting is not a reasons-responsive or agential process.

While it is true that our memories sometimes passively fade for no particular reason, we can also actively respond to reasons to forget. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find ourselves in situations where we have reasons not to remember. Take, for example, one of your coworkers accidentally sharing a secret regarding a colleague, negatively affecting your social situation at work, or a student who overshares when explaining why they missed class, crossing boundaries of privacy. Negative work environments and privacy concerns can constitute very good reasons to forget,[15] and when we attend to these reasons as such, we can exercise our agency to suppress the offending memories. Take the example of the coworker who accidentally lets a secret slip about your colleague. You might respond, as many do, "I am going to forget I ever heard that." And while you might not be able to automatically or effortlessly forget the secret upon making such a declaration, you can exert indirect control over your memories. In fact, the process of altering our memories takes a parallel shape to the process of shifting our attitudes in response to reasons to both forgive and un-forgive. Just as we cannot immediately eliminate our memories, we cannot directly change our attitudes at will. Thus, altering attitudes in the ways that are required for forgiveness and un-forgiveness requires agents to exercise indirect control. As Wonderly argues:

> On the view I favor, however, forgiveness centrally concerns a shift in affective attitude over which we lack the requisite control to simply enact at will. We can at most decide for reasons to try to forgive—e.g., take steps to facilitate the relevant attitudinal change. (2021b, 478)

We take the kind of control involved in altering one's attitudes to be analogous, and therefore relevantly similar to the kind of control involved in altering one's memories in order to un-forgive. While we may not be able to directly will ourselves to forget past wrongs, we can accept that there are reasons to forget them and therefore *try* to do so.

In fact, recent empirical work suggests that we have more control over what we forget than previously thought. For example, over six experiments, researchers found that groups who intended to forget lists of facts, including autobiographical details, were more likely to forget the information than those who did not have such intentions (Barnier *et al*. 2007). These results are particularly influential because they suggest that we can successfully forget without drastic external interference. Furthermore, the participants were able to intentionally forget within a very limited timeframe, which suggests that agents could be even more successful in altering their memories over longer timeframes. As Barnier *et al*. state:

15 Some even argue that reasons to forget can be so strong that we can have a duty to forget (Basu 2022).

> Our success in reliably inducing inhibition of recently recalled autobiographical memories in the laboratory with a simple, unrepeated procedure suggests that in everyday cognition, much more powerful effects might be present. Spontaneous and repeated use of a directed forgetting procedure on the same knowledge may induce much stronger and enduring inhibitory effects. (2007, 319)

The fact that we can recognize reasons to forget, try to forget, and succeed in doing so indicates that forgetting can be an agential, reasons-responsive process, just like the processes we can engage in to alter our attitudes. Thus, it is possible for agents to exercise their agency in order to un-forgive via forgetting, just as they can exercise their agency to un-forgive by altering their attitudes.

However, one might worry that the range of wrongs that can be successfully un-forgiven via forgetting will be limited. Above, we argued that un-forgiving via forgetting can be valuable because it reduces the suffering associated with remembering distressing wrongs. But painful experiences can be very difficult to forget. Recall the Drunk Driver case: will it really be possible for Brynn to forget the car accident simply by engaging in directed forgetting? If not, then one could argue that whenever un-forgiving via forgetting would be most valuable, it is not actually feasible.[16]

While victims of distressing incidents may have difficulty altering their memories with directed forgetting alone, there are interventions that could be performed to facilitate forgetting. The emergence of memory modification technologies like Molecular Memory Modification (MMM) could drastically increase agents' control over the elimination of distressing memories. Unlike drugs that merely *dampen* memory, like propranolol, which must be administered soon after a distressing event or used in conjunction with long-term therapy (Vaiva *et al*. 2003), recent studies indicate that MMM can effectively *eliminate* long-term memories (Hui and Fisher 2015).

MMM works by having the patient recall a particular long-term memory, which removes it from long-term storage and places it in an unstable, active state. When the retrieved memory is in this state, the production of molecule PKMζ is blocked. Studies have shown this molecule to be active in all different types of memory, and so its blocking interrupts reconsolidation. Though the development of MMM is in its early stages, execution of this process in animal trials indicates that it is possible to eliminate specific long-term memories without affecting other memories (Hui and Fisher 2015). And, because MMM is less invasive than competing techniques and requires patients' cooperation in order to be effective, Hui and Fisher (2015, 515) argue that it promises to be an effective and morally permissible practice. MMM could also be a particularly useful intervention for those who wish to un-forgive via forgetting. Agents must elect to undergo MMM and actively recall the memory they wish to modify, making it an active procedure that requires agency, and therefore well-suited for un-forgiveness via forgetting. Moreover, MMM has the potential to eliminate extremely painful memories, which can make it possible to un-forgive via forgetting when it would be particularly valuable to do so. In this way, MMM's potential role in un-forgiving via forgetting further justifies the development of this technology.

16 We acknowledge that sometimes forgetting a wrong will be impossible, perhaps especially when the wrong is serious. However, this is not unique to un-forgiving via forgetting. Many take forgiveness to require forswearing resentment or overcoming hard feelings, which agents are not always able to accomplish. A person may want to forgive, try to forswear resentment, but find it impossible. Like un-forgiving via forgetting, the difficulty in forgiving may increase with how serious the wrong is. And yet, this does not and should not deter us from theorizing about the value of forgiveness. We take the same to be true for un-forgiveness via forgetting.

Conclusion

Forgiveness can play an important role in our moral lives. The same is also true for un-forgiveness. In this paper, we have explored the different ways agents can un-forgive, the different reasons they may have for doing so, and the different kinds of value this process can contribute, both to individuals and to their relationships. We argued that agents can un-forgive not only by altering their attitudes, but also by altering their memories. We went on to explore the possible reasons for which agents could un-forgive via forgetting and how this process could meaningfully enhance victims' lives as well as their relationships. We concluded by examining the ways in which agents can exercise their agency to un-forgive via forgetting, and how developments in the neuroscience of memory could make it possible to forgive via forgetting even distressing and painful wrongs in the future. Undoubtedly, there is much more to explore on the topic of un-forgiveness via forgetting. We hope however to have successfully argued that any account of un-forgiveness will be incomplete if it ignores the ways we can un-forgive by exercising our agency to change our memories.

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